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LLED 3461S

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## **My Experiences Tutoring at Classic City High School**

[All of the CCHS employees and tutees names have been changed]

### **THE INSTITUTION**

Attending a school like Classic City High School (CCHS) provides the student with a unique educational experience. The students are allowed to work more at their own pace, they can work individually or in groups, and the teacher can lead much more individualized discussions. The Classic City High experience, in summary, provides the students with the chance to be independent workers and to work within their own mental confines.

When comparing these experiences at CCHS with my own experiences in high school education, I can come up with several comparisons and contrasts to be made considering my unique background. For my education, I attended Sneads High School which is a public school. Sneads High is located in a small rural area a few miles south of the Georgia border in Jackson County Florida. Wedged between the two Florida communities of Sneads and Grand Ridge, the school has about 570 students currently enrolled. My educational history runs through this town

as I also attended Sneads Elementary and spent my Middle School days at the High School due to it being for grades 6-12 at the time.

However what truly makes my experience distinctive is that during the last semester of my senior year of high school, I was sent to Jackson Alternative School or ACE (Alternative Choice Education) for reasons/mistakes that I won't go into detail about because I do not want them to define me. Located in the larger metropolitan area (yet still rural and relatively small) of Marianna, Florida; ACE is for "students in grades 6-12 who are referred because of chronic disruptive behavior and /or truancy." While I could not find any raw numbers on student size, from my experience and using basic math there are around ~70 students (give or take 10 students) enrolled in the program for one reason or another.

When comparing my time at CCHS with my time at Sneads High, there are few more contrasts to be made than comparisons. The biggest contrasts being that at CCHS a portion of the teachers are actually professors as they have obtained PhD degrees. If my memory serves me correctly (I graduated high school six years ago in 2010), the Sneads High faculty had only one doctor of philosophy teaching at the school and she was gone before I became a senior. CCHS gets a huge boost in teacher faculty because of their close proximity to the Atlanta area and the University of Georgia which churns out a plethora of qualified (and overqualified) educators each year. Sneads High does not receive these same benefits however being located in a minuscule rural area of North Florida where the nearest university (Florida State University) is ~75 minutes away in Tallahassee. So the draw for these doctors to come teach at Sneads compared to teaching even at an alternative school in Athens, Georgia is much greater.

Comparing my time at ACE with my time at CCHS conjures up more comparisons because of the fact that both of these schools are for alternative placement. However despite this they are both still quite different. The main dissimilarity that I immediately noticed was the varied levels of discipline and control in the schools. At CCHS, there was almost no visible discipline in the ways that I had come to expect in a classroom setting. The students were free to use obscene language and use their cell phones in class, both of which were actions that would have gotten me sent straight to the principal's office in my day. While I do not mind the use of obscene language to a degree (as long as it does not become too graphic and is not used in name-calling), the usage of cell phones in class is a major distraction. So much so that even while Dr. Levan [fake alias] was directly attempting to lecture a study as part of their assignment; the student would be texting or scrolling through Facebook, all while keeping a headphone ear bud in an ear. This is however in direct contrast with my time at ACE where they would start each day by confiscating our phones followed by full body pat down. We also were not allowed to leave the classroom without a teacher or paraprofessional with us and for the first two weeks the new students had to eat silent lunches. ACE was often compared to jail or prison which despite being hyperbole, is still an applicable comparison.

The way that Classic City High School operates has both its benefits and its detriments. The students benefit from the CCHS setup because of the more direct and personal manner in which the class functions. Students are allowed a greater amount of one-on-one time with the teacher since the curriculum specifically demands these discussions or talks to occur. This is not only helpful for the student but the teacher benefits as well. The teacher is aided because they no longer have to worry about reaching all of the students at one time with each lecture. Instead, the teacher is able to sharpen that focus towards smaller groups of students or individuals. This

equally allows the teacher to have a better grasp on each student's understanding of the material and what needs to be improved upon. Likewise with the work at your own pace paradigm in place at the school, students can take tests when they decide that they are ready and they do not have to worry about keeping up with the rest of the class. However, depending on the student that reason could also be considered a detriment. Some students need the structure and, maybe more importantly, the steady deadlines that come from a general, basic schooling. The openness of the CCHS class workload can have some students neglecting their work until the end of the semester where it may be too much at that point to overcome.

### THE TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

During my time at CCHS, I was unfortunately only able to interact with three of the members of the faculty: Dr. Larry Levan (Anatomy & Physiology professor), Mrs. Jean Knight (Graduation Coach), and Mrs. Cheryl Lynn (the receptionist). My interactions with Mrs. Knight and Mrs. Lynn were brief, however, from these interactions I can tell that they have a passion for their jobs that is to be aspired towards. Mrs. Lynn would always greet me on my way in and out of tutoring with delightful conversation that went beyond simple small talk. While these instances were momentary, I still got the feeling that she honestly cared about my well-being and I can easily see how beneficial she is to the school. As for Mrs. Knight, I saw her even more infrequently than Mrs. Lynn but every time that we did cross paths she would stop to say hello to me. I am under the impression that she does her job quite well as I never heard anyone utter anything negative about her.

Easily the faculty member that I was in contact with the most was Dr. Levan whose Anatomy and Physiology class I tutored at twice a week. My experiences with him were fantastic! Dr. Levan is incredibly knowledgeable about the subject matter that includes an intensely rich history in studying and researching environmental sciences across the United States. As much as I learned from my tutees, I learned even more from watching Dr. Levan lead discussions in class (albeit mostly about human anatomy, but still). I was in an interesting case compared to some of my fellow tutors since I was placed in a Science course rather than an English course. However with my background in the subject (I never took A&P in high school but I did take it for a semester and a half at UGA) and Dr. Levan's guidance I was able to overcome this disadvantage. Similarly, you could say that one of my main issues as a tutor was that at times I would be too into intently listening to Dr. Levan's little lectures on the human body to keep my tutee completely engaged in the subject that they were working on. Dr. Levan also did a tremendous job at treating me as if I was one of his peers, which was substantially rewarding for me. In the near future, people like these three examples are actually going to become my peers so gaining these familiarities in interacting with people older and wiser than me are going to help facilitate these future relationships in the workplace.

When it comes to Dr. Levan's relationship with his students however he has more difficult time relating the material to the students (at least in my short experience). From what I could tell about half of the students were not actively engaged in the work at hand and did not seem to show an interest in subject matter. While Dr. Levan could work on better reaching every student in his class, this is a tall task to ask any teacher since a majority of the responsibility of learning must come from the student. If they do not want to learn than it is going to be an uphill battle throughout the duration of the semester for them. In cases where it seemed like the

students were at school to do work, Dr. Levan performed his job admirably. He was enormously well-versed in the material and was able to provide the students with applicable examples to each topic discussion to better enable their understanding. Some more positives about Dr. Levan's relationships with his students is that he is always available to answer any question that the students may have, and they had plenty of questions for him. Likewise Dr. Levan seemed to have an honest compassion for his job and the well-being of his students. At points, to me, it appeared as if he was more concerned with the student's progress than the actual students. Reviewing the "big board," a poster tracking the students' path over the eleven chapters of A&P, became a pre-class ritual for the two of us. During these times was when I believe his love his profession and his students shown through the most.

Probably the signal best decision made by Dr. Levan and the rest of the brain-train at CCHS was utilizing the hybrid model of teaching that uses both direct instruction and technological techniques. In my experience taking these types of courses in college, they can do wonders in facilitating the learning process with various multimedia along with direct human contact. Both sides of the model offer diverse positives and negatives. The positives of using technology are vast and ample in today's day and age. Advances in technology are happening at a constant rate so it is a part of our job as educators to incorporate these developments as we deem fit. In Dr. Levan's class, he incorporates a blog that gives each student a list of assignments to complete before they can take the corresponding chapter test. Included in these assignments are links to power-points uploaded to YouTube, professional lecture videos (also found on YouTube), and games or puzzles that reinforce key chapter terms. Another positive about incorporating technology into the classroom, and specifically the type of tech that Dr. Levan has incorporated, is that it makes it available not only at the school but also in the home setting. This

availability allows the eager students to work a head or the fallen-behind student to catch up without having to worry about fitting it all into a scheduled school day.

However the negatives behind the use of technology (again specifically the blog template used by Dr. Levan) in the classroom are that computers are still not advanced enough to handle all the complications that comes with having a human brain. Since students vary from one another, not everyone is going to find the online material enlightening. Which is why having that complementary human aspect in the hybrid courses such a significant facet to its overall functioning. Some students are going to thrive better when they are face-to-face with an actual person instead of face-to-screen with a YouTube presentation. The teacher in this scenario can out preform the computer because it can better comprehend the plight of the student. The teacher can read the situation and apply relatable material to the struggling student until that student reaches an understanding of the matter. Nevertheless like I said earlier, Dr. Levan does not use these two forces against one another but instead, he uses them congruently to assist learning in the classroom.

## THE STUDENTS

*Personality:* I was ecstatic when I was assigned to be Taana's primary tutor to finish out the course. We immediately clicked as tutor and tutee. She was driven to graduate in May 2016 so she was typically on task since she came to CCHS late and had quite a bit of catching up to do in order to reach her goals. From what I know of her; she was easy-going, intelligent, and humorous. She was interested in television shows like The Bad Girls Club and The Walking Dead, caring for animals, and generally hanging out with her family, friends, and boyfriend. She

seemed to possess a fine balance between being family-(home)-oriented and just as outgoing. Equally she is passionate about the relationships in her life with her mother, brother, best friend, boyfriend, and dog. Her personality contrasts with mine in the way that she values staying close to home to be close with those relationships mentioned above. This is an opposite value of mine (for better or for worse), I left home as soon as I got accepted into the University of Georgia and I do not plan on returning to settle down there at any point in life. I value my individual freedom more than the family collective. Also Taana and I do not see eye to eye on our television choices where she prefers reality T.V. drama, popular adventure series, and Family Guy; I prefer political satire, critically acclaimed dramas, and The Simpsons. However we do share some traits including a deep respect for the importance of relationships in our life and the basic traits mentioned in the fourth sentence (easy-going, intelligent, and humorous).

*Cultural Background:* Taana is a straight, African-American woman from a lower socio-economic status and a single-parent household. While Taana's cultural background does not define her as a person, it has had a profound effect on her way of viewing and acting in the world. How could it not? Americans are so obsessed with the categories of race, class, and gender that these things often become our central characteristics even before we have had the chance to define ourselves. Taana is aware of these check boxes that people use to quantify other individuals and she is equally aware of the challenges she will have to face as a poor, black woman in the Southern United States.

When discussing what television shows we watch, Taana mentioned that my shows were so white and that her shows were black. While this black and white view on the world is incredibly problematic, it can also be fostered into something beneficial. It is no use trying to ignore the fact that African-Americans have established a distinct culture separate from white



Americans. Instead these variances in cultures should be celebrated and promoted in school. This is relatable to a point made in Bronwen E. Low's 2011 book *Slam School: Learning Through Conflict in the Hip-Hop and Spoken Word Classroom* about reaching students who come from a totally different background than herself (This is your reminder that Low is a white woman from Canada trying to teach an American class about hip-hop culture). She said that she "approached [her] work at the high school as a facilitator rather than as a teacher" and that her partner in this discourse "Tim also approached many of the course materials as a learner, which was pedagogically productive" (Preface, p. x). It is important for teachers to sometimes flip the script and become the learners in the classroom. This can have immense effects on your students by boosting their self-worth and giving them a voice. It can also have the inverse effect of making your students better learners since this might make them feel that they have more of a position in the learning process. In fact I probably spent more time inquiring and listening to my tutees than I did actually tutoring them.

*Educational Experiences:* Taana has a turbulent educational experience. When at Clarke Central High she made so-so grades that comprised of a few A's, some C's and a majority of B's with one or two failed courses as well. She was not placed on a high-ability placement track and did not take any honors or college level courses in high school. However talking to her for a minute will allow you to see the potential in her, including that maybe if she was placed on a higher placement track she would have excelled. She has a tremendous amount of applicable common sense, she keeps her criticisms internally rather than pointed towards the teachers or institution, and she understands her strengths and weaknesses. All are traits of the typical makeup of an honor student. Also despite her placement track and the hardships in life she still holds a positive view of education and the power it holds. This is seen in her desire to pursue a

higher education either at Athens Technical College or at Savannah State University, where she was recently accepted into, with an eye towards eventually attending classes at the University of Georgia (her dream school).

When discussing what she disliked about her educational experiences she touched on a few points that reverberated throughout Daniel Willingham's 2009 book, *Why Don't Students Like School?* Taana said that she did not like school, specifically science classes, because it was a lot of times too hard and confusing for her. She stated that the science teachers that she had at Clarke Central were too demanding in what they expected their students to accomplish and comprehend, all without caring if they students were falling the subject matter or not. For these teachers it was an if you do not get it than that is on you type of teaching. This method is something that Willingham speaks out against in his book where he warns readers that teachers must walk that fine line between making their material too easy or too hard. He explains that if it is too hard than the majority of students would most likely give up in frustration compared to if the teacher makes it too easy where they student is at risk of losing interest out of lack of intellectual stimulation. Because of the variance among student's intellectual ranks in the classroom, the key to avoid losing your students due to these factors is to maintain variety in the levels of difficulty that you assign.

### YOU AS A MENTOR, TUTOR, AND FUTURE EDUCATOR

*Reflect on your role as a mentor:* Looking back at my experience at CCHS, I would say that I felt more comfortable in my role as a mentor than in my role as a tutor. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know and listening to every student that I conversed with. They had so much

to share and I had so much to learn. Whenever applicable I even tried to teach the students little life lessons but mainly I wanted the students to learn from me by example. This is how I carried myself when tutoring Jasmine. I did not want to judge her or push my morals on her but I imagine it would be somewhat beneficial for her to have an older (relative to her age), college educated male be a model for her. I tried to impart my knowledge on her whenever called upon like encouraging her to do what I did which was get my core college classes out of the way first at a smaller institution. Likewise I tried to encourage her to step out of her comfort zone to try new foods and experience new places. I can say with confidence that the mentoring that comes along with being a teacher is one of the aspects that I am most looking forward to since that is a main reason why I want to be a teacher in the first place.

*Reflect on your role as a tutor:* This is the hardest part of this paper, looking inward and criticizing myself. Mainly because I know that I am not where I want to be as an educator. My skills are not nearly refined enough yet and I struggle with discipline and keeping the students on track. Hopefully this will improve once I become a full-fledged teacher and age but I might be too low-key about things. Every time when the tutee did not feel like doing work for that day, I obliged without any fuss. Instead of tutoring, I was content to chit-chat the hour away with my tutee about random topics (albeit these topics would often drift towards schooling and future aspirations). What worries me is that I may be too of an easy going teacher but my hopes that this will change, to a degree, once my paycheck is on the line.

*Reflect on your position as a future educator:* First off, I hope my future students think of me as one of the cool teachers who are different than the rest. As a student I always enjoyed these types of teachers who were somehow “too cool for school” yet still became a teacher for whatever reason. These teachers were always the ones I looked up to the most and inspired to be

like; which is a major reason why I decided to become a teacher. I guess being the cool teacher would be considered a mission statement of mine but another one would be that I want to nurture the things that make each student an individual. Hopefully my classroom will be a safe place where kids can learn without fear of being prosecuted for being different than others. Likewise I aspire to build a relationship with all my students, no matter how small or how large a relationship that might be. Everyone is different so understanding what makes them different can only help me reach them as a future educator. Lastly, I just want to touch on an issue that worries me about becoming a future educator and that is the politics behind the scenes. Each state and each county value education differently so finding the right fit for me is important. As a liberal atheist I worry that teaching in the public sector in the south may possess some future headaches, especially with the people over my head. I do not want to move out of the south since I want to stay close to my parents but it may be too much trouble to not move to a blue state where they value the importance of education as much as I do. I am not a confrontational person but my biggest stressor about my future in education is that I end up butting heads with my bosses and the state government.

## Conclusion

My experiences in this course and tutoring at CCHS have been amazing to say the least. I feel like I have matured a ton as a teacher thanks to this course. The freedom that this course allows has morphed my ideals of what it means to be a teacher. Instead of going up in front of the class every day to spout out facts, I now realize that a teacher's job is to facilitate learning. In this way teachers are like gardeners and the kids are like the plants that need nurturing in order to

reach their highest potential. This course also helped me to become more aware of a range of topics including everything from feminism to bullying to fan-fiction. This course has been one of the most beneficial classes (if not THE most) that I have ever taken, in any level of education. Likewise my time at CCHS has done similar good things to my skills as a teacher. My time there has given me valuable time with a demographic of people that I do not often get to converse with. I am now looking anxiously towards the next chapter of my life, where I can fill that role as a mentor and model for young students. I cannot wait for the opportunity to foster relationships with my future students and I owe a lot of this excitement to you, Dr. Smagorinsky. Like you said at the beginning of the semester, "This course is what you make it," and I have made it into something special for myself.