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Course Project

Classic City High School could really not be more different from how I experienced my own school. I went to West Laurens High School, a county school in rural middle Georgia. Since coming to UGA, I have worked almost exclusively in elementary aged after school programs. As such, I was not fully prepared for just how different Classic City was going to be. The example that comes to mind most immediately, for whatever reason, is that the students were allowed to go pick up food for lunch from Cook Out, just down the road. I would have had to sneak out of school, and risk In School Suspension at least, if I wanted to get anything that wasn't lunchroom food.

This is a pretty trivial difference, but it's one of many that I couldn't help noticing. I went to a public school, but I was in Honors and AP classes my entire high school career. The only exceptions were Spanish and extracurriculars like band or computer applications, none of which had an honors level equivalent. In those non-honors courses, I will freely admit that there were times I wanted to poke my eyes out in frustration, because the people in those classes were not creating the same environment that I was used to, in fact they created environments much closer to what I experienced at Classic City. Unwillingness to learn and not wanting to do work that students cannot see the purpose of turn out to be pretty common factors among high schoolers.

However, I *was* in honors classes so these unhappy environments were just not something I had to deal with for most of the time I was in high school. When there were disturbances in my

school's classrooms, the teachers there were able to be a little bit freer with what I would consider the biggest difference I experienced, discipline. I did not get placed into an actual classroom at Classic City until about the sixth week I was there. Up to that point, I had been working one-on-one with a girl, who I was later told was on the autism spectrum, helping her with her English class. After she decided she no longer needed my help, I was placed in a Health Sciences classroom. This was the first time I had spent any time with more than one kid at a time, though I was still working mostly one-on-one, I was still in the same room as the rest of the class.

This opened up a whole new world of craziness for me. Students on their phones, cursing periodically, talking about fairly inappropriate subject matter, all while the teacher does what is probably her best to control them. But they don't want to be controlled and she doesn't want to be the one that writes the slip that is the last straw, that gets them kicked out of this school that is a last resort for many of them. So they go unpunished, and the students know about her unwillingness to punish them. Most of the kids that I worked with aren't even interested in the subject matter, they were just placed in the class so they could fill a requirement. I know that feeling, having been placed in a calculus class my senior year of high school. The difference there lies in the fact that I did everything I could to do well in that math class because I could not let my GPA drop much, if at all, and still have a hope of getting into UGA.

Very few of the students at Classic City had similar goals that kept them going, at least not that they would tell me. As such, they would often refuse to do their work simply because they did not feel like doing it at the time. I would do my best to encourage them but I could not always make a difference. A classic example occurred on my last day there. I was attempting to work with a student, he said he didn't want to work. I looked through the packet and told him

that most of the answers did not even have to be looked for, as they were definitions, so he just had to copy the words off the page. He still refused and eventually the teacher came over to ask him why he wouldn't work. "You're not my parent, you can't make me do anything." He told his teacher defiantly. She argued with him some more, then left. Eventually a cousin he had in the class convinced him to do the work as long as he could sit with the rest of the class instead of me, which I allowed him to do.

The thing is, I never would have been able to do that in any of my high school classrooms. I never felt the inclination truly, but I would have been sent to the principal's office for creating a disturbance probably well before I ever got to the yelling at a teacher portion. And yet, this teacher did nothing. She threatened him with bad grades, which I had hoped he would care about since he told me he was trying to graduate soon. I would have gotten ISS at the least at my high school. It just got more and more difficult as this semester has gone on to see almost every obvious infraction go unpunished. There are definitely times when it's not worth it to punish a kid, or maybe he/she is just having a bad day and, as a teacher, you need to follow up with them and talk to the student later that day. But, at the same time, you can lose control of a classroom very quickly if you never give the students a reason to listen to you and learn, rather than causing constant interruptions so you can never get anything done.

Of course, I was only there one day a week, so maybe there was more discipline going on when I wasn't there. However, based on my interactions with the teacher I got paired with, I would have to say this wasn't the case. In the case I described earlier, about the boy who refused to do his work, the teacher threatened him with bad grades. When this didn't work she walked away, only coming back to where I was after he was back with the rest of the class. From there she began to complain about the student to me, saying that he was supposed to be on some

medication but his mother didn't think he needed it or maybe she just let him do whatever he wanted. This wasn't the first time she had talked about one of her students to me in this way, in fact the first day I was in her classroom she was telling me about the student she wanted me to work with, saying that he has a heart condition and therefore his family and basically everyone else "babied" him and didn't hold him to high expectations because they didn't want to put stress on him. That was all okay, even if it did make me a little uncomfortable but then she said, "I don't even know if he can read." After working with the kid, I have to say that he can definitely read, he just gets easily distracted. However, the interaction colored my conversations with the teacher from that point on.

How could she possibly be convinced that her student could not read? How is she able to spend so little time with him, in a fairly small class, that his literacy would come into question? It might have been a throwaway comment on her part, but I should not have been the person she threw it to if that were the case. I was uncomfortable being confided in in such a way and I didn't think the students deserved it. I never felt like she got to know some of the students because she felt like they were hopeless or...I don't even know. On the subject of discipline, her ideas seemed to stretch from giving bad grades to yelling, not extending very far past those in either direction. I remember her saying to me, "I have to be hard on them, because I care." That's fine, good even for some of the kids. But she rarely showed them how much she cared while I was there, apart from being hard on them which...high schoolers just don't respond to that.

She is basically the only staff member I interacted with. However, based on my peers' stories, I know that not all the teachers at Classic City are this way. I also don't want to make it seem like I hated the teacher I worked with. She was a genuinely nice woman to me and she is a

recent cancer survivor, so maybe some of her frustration is justified. I just...there are some things that I would change about the way the school is run, in a perfect world.

But, the idealistic changes that are barely formed in my mind would probably not work at all or they would have been put into place already by people who are much smarter than me who work there. A large reason that changes I would want to make would not work is that the students would probably not be perfect and cooperative. Don't get me wrong, there are students who are there for reasons unknown to me but they sat there with me, did their work, told me about their aspirations in life. One girl told me all about how she was trying to decide between going to school to be a lawyer or a veterinarian. But there were just as many kids I worked with who were unresponsive and impassive, just getting their work done or playing with their phone.

That isn't to say that I did not love working with the students, because I did. It was a new experience, working with high schoolers, and I really enjoyed getting to know the students in that classroom. I was...affectionately exasperated most days that I was there, but I still looked forward to being there, as much as I could look forward to going to a high school at 9 o'clock in the morning. The whole experience really helped focus me on what I was planning to do with my life. I've known, abstractly, that I was going to be a high school teacher when I got out of college. However, this is the first time I've been able to experience what that will mean. Like I said, I have been working with basically exclusively elementary school kids, because those are the easiest programs to find and volunteer for in Athens. But working with high schoolers, who are so very different from me in culture and race, some of them with significantly less work ethic, some who had some extranormalities but were dealing with in the classroom, it was such a different experience for me.

This was way more realistic to what I will be doing in my actual career than anything else I've done and I feel like it has helped shape my idea of what teaching will be. It took my rose-tinted glasses and...it didn't smash them or anything but it made them a little less rosy, which is definitely not a bad thing. This experience was a bit of a wake-up call for me, letting me know that teaching is not a cake walk, I will get stressed, I will get angry, I will probably want to tell people things about my students that they maybe don't need to know, because I will be just so frustrated. But there is so much good still there. I got to talk to kids who are very nearly adults, encourage and help them. I was able to tell people who are getting so close to having to make big decisions and I got to tell them that their dreams are valid, that they have to try really hard, but that they can do so much good if they put the work in.

Recognizing that that all sounds pretty idealistic still, I know that being an actual teacher is going to be more difficult than I can currently imagine. I won't be able to "save" every kid that walks into my classroom, but I'm going to want to. I can't get every idea or theory across to every student, but I will do my best. I can't be the perfect teacher to every student. What I can do is take the experiences I have gained and do my best to take that information and use it to make myself better. To learn what I didn't like about what a certain teacher did, what I did like about another and use that to give my future students the best education in English that I am capable of giving them. I can't ask from myself more than that, this volunteer experience and the classroom discussion among my peers has helped me realize that. I'll never be the perfect educator because that person doesn't exist. I can only make my classroom welcoming for my students, do my best to communicate the information they need to know and then be there to help them with an open mind whenever they need me. And, to quote the last episode of *The Office*, "isn't that kind of the point?"