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My Experience at Classic City High School as a Future educator

*All names of students have been changed for sake of anonymity

The Institution:

My first impression of Classic City High School was the casual environment that, in my opinion, enforces the student's autonomy. Although this could only be specific to my experience, I noticed that the students were often walking around the building, spending time in the front office or taking extended bathroom breaks. I felt as though the staff was aware of the freedom the students had no matter how it may affect their performance in the classroom. My high school for example, had security guards that regularly walked the hallways and if a student was caught roaming the halls during class they would be sent back or disciplined otherwise. I also noticed every time I attended Mrs. Kaiser's class there would be a different group of students each day. There is an attendance policy in place where if a student misses ten consecutive days then they are dropped from their classes, however that still allows them to attend class only some of the time.

My initial opinions on this were judgmental. Based on my background, I expected there to be a stricter policy on attendance and participation. I think it's fair to assume that a stricter policy would demand students to attend regularly, thus improving their performance. However, the relaxed culture of Classic City High School requires students to make the decision for

themselves. This reminds me much of the idea we talked about in class where that students are apathetic, when students *do* care and understand that their education affects their future.

Regarding the curriculum being taught at CCHS, I was also faced with a surprise. Mrs. Kaiser's English class covered works by James Baldwin, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Arthur Miller, etc. The work provided to these students was dense, philosophical and required critical thinking. To be honest, I expected the course work to be easier considering it was an alternative school. After working through these writings with students I began to really think about how difficult it must be for students to digest such works, but also how difficult it is to teach them. How can I make teenagers care about James Baldwin? How can I open their minds to social inequality? Furthermore, how can I instill this passion in them? In my other classes I've learned about culturally responsive teaching, but as a novice I took my time at Classic City to observe and consider all possible answers to these questions.

The effectiveness in how the curriculum was presented, however, was subpar in my opinion. My classroom struggled a lot with presenting things on the SmartBoard. Students had their own laptops provided by the school, but they were never a main resource during instruction. One day we were asked to read a condensed version of *The Great Gatsby,* however the version being read was only accessible through the SmartBoard. This required us to read off the screen to the rest of the class. I believe this was an awkward and ineffective way of presenting the information to the students. The students seemed engaged, however, but I questioned how it would have been different if they were given physical copies. Unfortunately, the time I spent at Classic City wasn't a great representation of how to effectively and properly use technology in the classroom.

Although I didn't find the technology to be entirely effective, I did enjoy the classroom organization of Mrs. Kaiser's class. Each desk sits at least two students to a table which encourages peer work and offers students the opportunity to help and teach each other. There was one student, Anna*, who was further ahead than most of the other students in the class. Often enough, when we would pose a question to the class, if someone didn't understand the question or answered incorrectly, she would offer another perspective or answer. Although in theory this classroom organization sounds conducive to group learning, often enough it invited rowdiness and distractions. It was hard to *keep* students engaged when they were sitting with friends who weren't interested in the course material. To maintain their interest, I would have to sit with them the entire class, but as I wasn't assigned to a specific student, I felt it necessary to visit with the whole class.

When I began at CCHS, Mrs. Kaiser was away on sick leave and the students were left with a substitute for two or three weeks. The first substitute had a more passive approach to classroom management. She would hand out the assignment and expect students to work at their own pace, but have it completed by the end of class. At this point in the semester I would approach each student offering my help or facilitate discussion about the assigned reading. The following week the students were assigned another substitute who I honestly didn't realize was in the room until thirty minutes after the students began their work. This substitute sat at a desk and listened as Shelby, another mentor, and I tried to complete the lessons Mrs. Kaiser left for the class. It felt unnatural for us to essentially teach the class, but for the most part, students were engaged and participating in class discussion. I never had the experience of losing a teacher during the school year, but I can only imagine how stress inducing the change in consistency

must be for students. Without their teacher, their mentor, it seemed they lost their motivation to do well in the class.

Teachers and Administration:

My experience at Classic City High School was unique and most of that is attributed to the involvement of the teachers and administration. As I mentioned earlier, Mrs. Kaiser was on sick leave and we were left with substitutes and our own devices for majority of the semester. In terms of how this affected me as a mentor, it invited both struggle and an enlightening experience. In terms of what this meant for the students, I would say it was discouraging.

In the beginning, the students still seemed aware that the work they were doing with the substitute was just as important as the work they would be doing with Mrs. Kaiser. I was worried about the presence of a substitute affecting their motivation because I remember as a teenager we inherently took the class less seriously if our usual teacher wasn't present. However, I and another mentor led class discussion a couple of different times and the students were participating and engaging.

Later in the semester, I attended when Mrs. Kaiser had returned. I could feel a shift in the room once I returned. She seemed pleased to be back but didn't seem pressured to make sure the students were completing their work. If students weren't paying attention, or if they had their heads down, she would continue with the curriculum and work with the students that were participating. I found this odd at first. When I was mentoring without her, I was looking forward to having her back in the classroom to help with classroom management, yet she seemed unbothered.

It wasn't until even later in the semester that I understood her approach. I came back a couple weeks later and Mrs. Kaiser had left her position at Classic City High School due to her illness. My first impression that day was noticing she had removed all her personal items, which left us with a shell of a classroom. Due to her absence, the graduation coach and our point person, Mrs. Hamilton took over for the rest of the semester. I spent the entire day with Mrs. Hamilton and in every class, she demanded the students pay attention, but also relayed to me that she isn't going to "hold their hands". I thought to myself that this may have also been Mrs. Kaiser's approach in allowing students to leave their work unfinished. While it is important that students complete their work for a grade, they must want to do it for themselves. Personally, I question this method in its effectiveness regarding student achievement.

Mrs. Hamilton was also much stricter regarding the cell phone usage in class which I respected. In my time mentoring under the substitute's supervision, the students were extremely distracted by their cell phones which made it very difficult to keep them engaged. Her demand for respect and obedience was usually well received by students, which I think could be due to their relationship outside of the classroom. Mrs. Hamilton kept referring to a meeting she had with Farrah* about attendance, to which Farrah smiled and started talking about how close she is to graduating. Although I understand working both jobs simultaneously is not a reality, Mrs. Hamilton's role in the classroom greatly impacted their participation and productivity. I felt like the students started to take their work more seriously and personally than before. I also think it is worth mentioning that Mrs. Kasier's classes were predominantly black. Furthermore, it is important that Mrs. Kaiser is white, and Mrs. Hamilton is black. In class we often discussed how to approach these racial barriers in the classroom and how to navigate them. At CCHS, I was

able to witness these dynamics and their effects first hand. This is not to say that racial barriers are the *only* factor affecting student behavior, but important, nonetheless.

One day Rachel*, a student in British Literature, took note of the fact that Mrs. Kaiser wasn't returning and asked of Mrs. Hamilton and the paraprofessional, "When are we going to get a real teacher back?" I thought this moment was very significant because, although she didn't realize it, her comment undermined both authority figures in the room. Also, it was saddening to think that these students possibly felt abandonment by their teacher.

The Students:

Luckily, in my time at CCHS I was able to work with a myriad of students. Because Mrs. Kaiser's presence wasn't consistent, I was never assigned to a specific student. Rather, each day I attended I worked with the entire class. I consistently made myself available to each student and was able to experience an array of different personalities, learning methods and personal growths. Before my mentorship at CCHS, I questioned how difficult it could really be to relate to teenagers considering I'm not too much older than them. I quickly realized that their perception of me is that of a much older, more unapproachable figure. The battle of dismantling that perception so I could bond with and help these students was half the job. In the interest of this paper, I will focus on Steven*, a student in Mrs. Kaiser's first period I ultimately created a strong bond with.

Steven's personality wasn't easy to asses in the beginning. When speaking to me, he was closed off. However, when speaking to his classmates he was funny, easy-going and likeable. Steven is eighteen, so he possessed a level of maturity that some of the other students did not. He

also works at Chuck E. Cheese and, I believe, in the financial aid department at Athens Technical College. I could relate a lot to Steven in this nature because I also worked during high school but seemed to lose track of my studies because of it. Steven's personality contrasted with mine in that I'm usually very outgoing and confident about meeting new people, and I think this could have been a source of hesitation when we first started working together.

Steven's attitude towards school was a bit puzzling. There were several instances where he didn't seem to put in any effort into his course work but there were also times when he was incredibly motivated and pleased with himself once he completed his work. For example, one of my first days in the class they were taking an online exam. The exam was several short answer questions about the passages provided. As I walked around the room, I noticed that Steven, along with a few other classmates, had not even answered the first question. Once class had ended, I asked Steven what happened, and he just laughed it off and said, "I'm not graduating this semester anyways, I'll just take this class again next year." However, later in the semester when the students were studying for some sort of benchmark exam, I sat with Steven and we worked through the packet together and he did incredibly well. He was comprehending the passages and answering majority of the questions correctly. This day proved to me that Steven can do very well in school, he just needs someone to give him a little push.

When I think about my relationship with Steven, *Beyond College for All: Career Paths for the Forgotten Half* comes to mind. After getting to know Steven on a deeper level, I asked him why he wasn't in a rush to graduate. He simply shrugged his shoulders and just said he was on track to graduate in December and he didn't mind taking his time. He said, with an ounce of hope in his voice, "I would *like* to go to college..." but ultimately he retreated from the conversation. As a middle to low class, Hispanic male, I question if his hesitations about

graduating have to do with the fact that he will be forced to deal with the reality of an oppressive society. At CCHS, things are routine, simple, predictable. He works two jobs, goes to school and listens to music. The world outside of high school makes no promises, and maybe that scares Steven. I also reflected on whether or not Steven had the confidence and self-assurance to envision himself attending college, or if the nature of such an oppressive society forces himself to assume a lower position in society.

Steven doesn't have a problem with authority, he gets along with his peers and is proud of the work he does. I think an issue where the education system failed Steven is his inability to relate to the subject material. The subject matter taught in the Literature classes at CCHS seemed entirely composed of perennial works such as *The Great Gatsby, The Crucible,* etc. I personally felt most of the subject material is outdated and disinteresting to the students. There were multiple works regarding the oppression of African Americans in the United States. However, I didn't encounter any works inclusive of Latinx authors. So, aside from the works being unappealing, through the lens of a student like Steven, it also didn't seem entirely inclusive.

Myself as a Mentor, Teacher, and Future educator:

Unfortunately, I didn't feel that my role as a mentor was as present in the classroom as I would have liked it to be. The small moments where I got to talk to Steven about his goals were moving, and I wish that there had been more of those moments. In terms of being a mentor, I felt like if I had tried harder at breaking down barriers with the students so I seemed more approachable then maybe I could have had a more profound experience. I felt like the most mentorship I gave to the students was motivating them to complete their work, because typically

they would just give up immediately. Whether or not they realized it, I felt like I was making a difference by showing them there was a reason to put forth a strong effort in the classroom. Also, I felt like I improved their confidence in completing their coursework. When students opt to not do the assignment, it was usually because they thought it to be too hard before even trying. So, I wanted to put my attention towards showing them that they *were* capable and hopefully instilling confidence in them.

Surprisingly, I felt like my role as a tutor was a lot stronger than my role as a mentor. Originally, I was worried about my ability to teach material that I wasn't prepared for. However, I quickly remembered the subject matter from my own high school experience and felt confident teaching the rest of the students. When we were focused on the coursework, I felt confident that I was genuinely helping the students. They usually seemed appreciative of my help and I always walked away from a consult feeling accomplished. I would definitely say that my role as a tutor got in the way of building relationships with the students. I think that they only saw me as a tutor and would thus associate me with more work. I made several attempts to include myself in conversations about music, tattoos, or just funny stories. Ultimately, however, I felt that they only wanted to converse amongst themselves which was a bit discouraging.

After my time at CCHS, I only feel more excited about becoming an English teacher. This experience was a mere glimpse into what it would be like to have my own classroom and what that entails. Mentoring at a place like CCHS is great because we get to work with the students that the mainstream public education system didn't benefit. This is important as a future educator because I see it our mission to enter the workforce with a progressive mindset. CCHS was not only an opportunity to experience the daily life in a classroom, but also was a chance to witness where the education system is possibly failing these students. By being exposed to such

realities, I can be aware of it during my first years as a professional teacher. Specifically, I feel there should be more of an importance on culturally responsive teaching so I can ensure that *all* of my students feel heard, valued and capable. I also think it is important to enter the profession without preconceived notions of how students are going to behave. By innately holding students to a higher standard, I think they will naturally want to fulfill that standard.

Conclusion:

This course in general has taught me a lot about different teaching methods, balancing mentorship with education and the importance of maintaining a holistic and empathetic world view to better reach my students. My experience at CCHS showed me the actuality of building relationships with students, but simultaneously trying to ensure their success. Also, the structure of this course was a great example of the benefits of student-centered teaching. When I first learned about student-centered teaching, I was skeptical. I feared that the students wouldn't learn the material correctly or thoroughly, however this course has proven otherwise. I fully believe that this course and my time at CCHS has greatly impacted me as a teacher, and I can't wait to implement the ideas and practices I've learned in my own classroom one day.