

Classic City High:
An Analysis
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The Institution

When arriving at Classic City High School, the first thing I noticed was that, out of four sets of double doors, only two individual doors were unlocked. Honestly, my initial reaction to the multiple doors locked was, "Isn't this a fire hazard?" However, when I noticed the front office overlooking the sets of doors, I realized that the open doors were most likely kept to a minimum to allow the office workers to see exactly who is entering the school and at what time, in order to both maintain safety and distribute late passes to students walking in past the bell. This immediately reminded me of the physical structure of my old high school. Although we had only one double door, only one door was unlocked at all times, and the front office was directly in front of that door. That way, there are no students unaccounted for or walking around the campus without a pass; with so many recent school shootings in America, it makes sense for schools to want to monitor who enters and leaves the school. However, as I was waiting for my first appoint in the office, I realized that a decent amount of students were coming in to get passes to class. I the heard an announcement: "The following students are eligible to play basketball during next Monday's lunch period," followed by a long list of student names. When I asked a student passing by why the students named were eligible for basketball, he explained that it was a reward for the students who were present in every period of every day during the previous week of school. I believe this strategy creates both positive structure and a positive environment in the school, because it provides incentive for students to make it to class each day and also gives the students to view school as a positive experience. In fact, Dr. Maudsley informed me that, out of 180 students, only about 85 make it to class each day. He noted that this way often due to illness or conflicting work schedules. This surprised me because at my high school, we had a solid average attendance rate, and multiple absences in classes often had negative implications on both your grade and your record (many teachers did not allow for make-up work for unexcused absences and absences were often punished by administrators). Unlike my high school, however, Dr. Maudsley noted that many of Classic City's absences were often due to illness or conflicting work schedules, as many of the students had to go to work

right before or after school. Therefore, the school structure offers opportunities for students to recover credits missed due to absences, rather than punishing the students. For example, Mr. Jones has an entire block devoted to credit recovery in English, where students are allowed to revise or make up missed assignments in order to raise their grades. The school is also open from 9 A.M. to 12 P.M. on Saturdays as optional opportunities for the students to come in and work online or meet with teachers to make up any missing work. The school is also structured to allow for time to work on online recovery courses for students who failed one or more classes in order to graduate. In fact, Classic City High even rents out laptops to the students in order to create equity amongst the students, as some do not have computers at home. This was surprising to me upon remembering my high school, where the media center computers could be used but never rented out. I believe this is likely because I came from a generally middle and upper-middle class area and therefore the school assumed that everyone had a computer at home. However, I believe Classic City's choice to allow students to borrow laptops creates a positive environment, because then there will be no students who will feel embarrassed or different because they do not have technology at home. It also allows for Classic City High School to employ class-wide online activities and online opportunities, such as the credit recovery courses mentioned previously. However, the encouraged use of technology is considered both positive and negative amongst teachers. For instance, in Dr. Maudsley's class, a majority of the lesson and activity required the students to use either computers around the room or their laptops and work directly through the "classroom" app on Google, which is similar to UGA'S eLC. Mrs. Scott's class, however, was quite different. She preferred the students to take notes via pencil and paper and performed instruction through lecture and using the whiteboard. Mrs. Scott noted that a problem within the school is how easily the students are distracted by their technology and how the laptops can be misused in class, which is why she prefers that laptops only be used during free periods or credit recovery periods. Similarly to what the teachers think about the widespread use of technology in the school, the student responses

are also positive and negative. One student I worked with, Ken, told me that, while he was thankful for the online classes' opportunity to pass and graduate, he also felt much less motivated to complete the courses due to their dull nature and the lack of a physical teacher for him to respond to. Therefore, I found the use of technology to be beneficial due to its credit recovery possibilities and equitable distribution, but believe the structure of the online courses needs to be reevaluated in order to make the students more motivated to participate. The structure of this school benefits students who are unable to succeed in traditional schools due to different backgrounds or situations that make the alternative school a better choice in order to achieve their goal of graduation. While I considered that some students who do not need credit recovery are not receiving any benefits from Classic City High School's alternative approach, I believe that the school's overall mission is made even more possible due to their structure.

Teachers and Administrators

I found that the teachers and administrators at Classic City High School are kind, dedicated, and understanding. The first adult I met at the school, Ms. Mimi, is an exceptional example of what it means to be committed to the students and their well-being. As a graduation coach, Ms. Mimi takes pride in getting to know the students, not only learning about their goals for school but also their worries and anxieties about their success. Ms. Mimi, along with the teachers, serve as the primary motivators for many students who may have no one else in their lives to support their goals and ambitions. I believe the students respond so well to Ms. Mimi because she does not look down on them or treat them differently in any way. In fact, Ms. Mimi expects wonderful things out of each of the students, regardless of the way they look or behave in instances of stress. It appears that Ms. Mimi may be so understanding of her students because she asks herself questions that are vital for an educator's success and maintenance of their teacher efficacy. As noted by Christopher Emdin, author of *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education*, teachers who are unbiased

and supportive ask themselves of the student, “How do we get disinterested students to care about themselves and their education? Why are our students not excited about learning? Why aren’t they adjusting well to the rules of school? Why are they underperforming academically?”

(Emd

in 54). The students can tell that Ms. Mimi does not fault the students’ personality or background for their occasions of underperformance or misbehavior, but rather takes into consideration the stress or outside situations that students at Classic City High must often face and how these outside factors can affect their motivation for participation in class. As Susanna Kaysen says, “an observer can’t tell if a person is silent and still because inner life has stalled or because inner life is transfixingly busy” (Kaysen 102). The students admire greatly and respond extremely well to Ms. Mimi, likely because students are very perceptive and are able to tell when someone truly believes in them. When Ms. Mimi passed me and Ken’s tutoring session, he stopped the activity we were on to make a comment on how Ms. Mimi has affected his life. To paraphrase, Ken explained that Ms. Mimi was one of the only people who believed in him when he failed his first class. He noted that Ms. Mimi’s persistent motivation encouraged him to succeed in his credit recovery classes because it made him feel as if someone was cheering him on and he did not want to let that person down. Students did not just gain support from Ms. Mimi, however. The teachers at Classic City High School also display high levels of dedication and faith in their students. For instance, every time I walk into Mr. Jones’s class, he is at a computer or a desk helping students revise their work or giving constructive feedback on assignments. Another example is Dr. Maudsley’s willingness to use his own funds and planning periods to come up with creative, fun, and engaging activities, even if that means supplying the resources for the students himself. Mr. Jones, Mrs. Stagg, Dr. Maudsley, and other teachers also demonstrate their care and support for the students by coming to optional Saturday school on their weekends off in order to help students who need a little extra help in their classes. One of my students, Taija, benefits greatly from said Saturday school opportunities. When helping

her with an essay during a Saturday school session, Taija explained that Saturday school was the time when she got the most done because the sessions had a positive environment with more opportunities to receive assistance from the teachers. The teachers' willingness to open up the campus on their off days to allow students more time to complete their assignments proves to be beneficial to students at the alternative institution. Not to mention that the teachers take special care to make the environment positive during the weekend work sessions by providing donuts and juices for breakfast. Overall, the staff's understanding of the differing needs and goals of the students and their determination to help each student succeed is a large part of what resonated with me most about my time spent at Classic City High School.

The Students: Taija

Although I assisted multiple students while volunteering at Classic City High School, one student who I feel I affected most and who I was most affected by was Taija. I assist Taija in completing English requirements in both her current Literature classes and online recovery credit courses to make up for previously failed Literature courses. Taija is a 12th grade student. She is very shy and quiet at first encounter. It doesn't take long to realize that Taija is a reserved young lady who prefers calm environments, which is most likely why she succeeds in the less hectic Saturday school sessions. Being more quiet, I believe Taija enjoys the aspects of Classic City High that emphasize individual work, such as online courses and credit recovery blocks, yet struggles with the school's collaborative culture within the classroom. Although Taija doesn't tell me much about her hobbies, it is visually clear that she enjoys styling, as her fashion, make-up, and hair styling choices are exceedingly tasteful. I believe that Taija responded so well to me because she got a sense that we have similar personalities. I, too, am rather shy upon first introductions. I also take great pride in the way I present myself at the institution, so I tried to take Christopher Emdin's advice from For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education and wear clothes that

looked professional but also had a youthful spirit to them in order to appeal to the students' tastes (Emdin 92). Taija and I bonded by complimenting each other's styling choices, so I believe that my mindfulness of my clothing options affected the way the students responded to me. However, I believe Taija's positive response to me was due to factors beyond similar personalities and fashion choices. Mr. Jones, Taija's English teacher, explained to me that Taija rarely responded to his instruction, yet seemed to respond well to me. I believe this may be due to Taija's demographic aspects. For one, Taija and I are both females. As a woman, I typically feel more comfortable working with other females rather than men. Taija and I are also similar in age; with me being only two years older than her, I believe Taija feels more comfortable speaking to me in a casual tone and feels that I remember the "struggle" of senior year. However, our cultural demographics are also different in some ways. For example, Taija is African American, while I am Cuban American. I noticed this difference between us when assisting Taija on her writing assignments. In one session with Taija, I helped her write a creative narrative based on the play *The Crucible*. When giving the characters dialogue, she opted to use dialect that represented her culture, such as "finna" (meaning "fixing to" or "planning to") and references to the cultural aspects of her church. Remembering the discussion I led on [For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and the Rest of Y'all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education](#), I recalled how Edwin encouraged the use of dialect and representation of culture other than only white Eurocentric cultural language in schools. As an English major, I also respect the use of dialect as part of the literary tradition of America. Therefore, I chose not to edit these parts out of the essay. I found it easy to work with Taija because, even though it was apparent that she struggled with aspects of English literature such as grammar, she always puts forward her best attempt and remains focused the entire time that we are working together, even if working for hours. In Classic City High School, like any high school, the students are often distracted by cell phones or class shenanigans; however, Taija recognizes that she is in "crunch time" before graduation and remains on task in order to achieve her goal.

The Students: Ken

Ken is a senior at Classic City High School. I assist Ken with English Literature 9 and English Literature 12 (both online credit recovery). Ken is an easy-going person who smiles and laughs often. Ken can always be found with headphones in-- that is, if he is at school that day. While Ken has a bright disposition, he struggles with anxiety towards graduation and his future. Therefore, Ken sometimes avoids school. Ken finds comfort for his worries through music; in fact, Ken's main hobby and aspiration in life is producing music. Having picked out the name "UnKnxwn" to represent himself as an artist, Ken often hurries home after school to work on his beats or have a jam-session with friends. I recognized an opportunity to use Ken's passion as motivation to complete school amidst his anxieties over post-graduation plans. Ken asked me, unprompted, about what college is like and if it is exactly like high school. I explained to Ken that college is much different because the schedules are often lighter, which would allow him more time on his music. I also told Ken anecdotes about how many of my friends who enjoy producing music go to the university to study their techniques, and that Ken could choose courses that would help him achieve his goals as a musician. This made Ken smile, and he was showing genuine interest, so I could tell that he had began considering the options I was presenting to him. I plan to continue exploring Ken's college options with him as I assist him throughout the rest of the school year. Ken also took the time to tell me a personal story of his experiences in the Clarke County school system so far. Ken expressed that, in middle school, he was tracked into the lowest-track courses and that it made him feel like no one had any expectations of him. The effect tracking had on Ken's motivation reminded me of the discussion I led on "Tracking Inequality: Stratification and Mobility in American High Schools," in which the class considered how being tracked in the "low" tracks can make a student feel less inclined to participate or succeed (Lucas). Although I am unaware of Ken's middle school situation, it is also possible that he was tracked in a low track due to his socio-economic status or race, as

Ken is African American and the tracking of minorities is one of the main problems we discussed on the topic of tracking. Ken's outlook on school all changed when he came to Classic City High, though. Ken mentioned several times that he liked Classic City High School because the administrators and teachers, especially Ms. Mimi, consistently encourage him to succeed. While he felt no one had any expectations of him in his traditional middle school, Ken now has many supporters within the school. Mrs. Stagg and Ms. Mimi have expressed to me multiple times that Ken is one of their kindest and brightest students, showing me that their support for him is truly genuine. As a perceptive person, Ken picked up on this genuine care for his success and wishes to succeed in order to meet his educators' expectations. While Ken has a solid support system behind him at the school, he still lets his anxieties get in the way of his motivation from time to time. This may be because he struggles to respond well to the online credit recovery courses which make up much of his workload. Ken expressed to me, "I don't think the work is that hard, but it's hard for me to care when there's no teacher to watch me do the work or tell me what to do." Though Ken needs to recover credits in order to graduate, he does not benefit from the online method of doing so because he performs best when given direct, face-to-face instruction. Therefore, I believe I play a critical role to Ken's next steps towards graduation, because I provide face-to-face instruction on the online courses as we work through them together. After spending a whole day on online credit recovery courses, Ken told me, "Wow, that was the most [online work] I've ever done in a day. Usually I don't want to do it, but since you're here I want to help give you something to do." I, of course, am more than happy to provide Ken with company and instruction through the remainder of his online courses if it means that it will help inspire him to complete his work and get his diploma. Therefore, I have agreed to help Ken with his online courses until his graduation in either May or July.

Reflection

Overall, I was surprised at how well Ken and Taija responded to me. I was initially nervous that the students would find me condescending because of my status as a University student; however, my young age definitely helped the students to see me as friend rather than foe. Though Taija is quiet, I feel that her main struggles in school are not with motivation or distractions but rather with her difficulties in understanding English as a subject. As a future educator of English and Literature, I recognize that many of my students will find the subject to be daunting or confounded. By working with Taija, I have discovered methods of explaining grammar, such as parallel structure, in a way that comes across easier to students with more math and science-gearred minds. In these ways, I felt I succeeded with my role as a tutor to Taija, because I feel she genuinely has a better understanding of English after the time we have spent together. With Ken, I feel we connected a lot based on his outgoing nature and our similar struggles with school anxiety. While Ken clearly demonstrates an understanding of English subject matter (he completed his online tests with ease), he lacks the motivation to read required passages or complete online coursework in his down time. As a future educator, I realize that some students may lack motivation in certain areas of school. However, I am going to follow Mrs. Stagg, Ms. Mimi, Mr. Jones, and Mr. Maudsley's lead by not assuming that this lack of motivation is an attribute of the child's personality, but rather by considering the outside forces that affect the student's life and how valuable a little genuine support can be. Overall, as a mentor, I felt I especially succeeded with Ken by showing him that there are more options to him post-graduation than he originally considered. I also felt my genuine interest in his musical passion allowed me to reach Ken in a unique and special way. Taking what I have learned at Classic City High School in terms of structure, I hope to be able to set up an optional Saturday school program in my future institution because I realized how vital those extra hours can be to students who feel they are falling behind. I also noted how the distribution of laptops created a technological equity between students, so I intend to campaign for a similar program in my future school. The lessons I learned at Classic City High School as a mentor, tutor, and future

educator will always remain with me and serve as an inspiration for my future endeavors.

Because I have learned so much in the time I've already spent in Classic City High School, I intend to return each Friday and Saturday throughout the remainder of the school year in order to help Taija and Ken reach their goals of graduation and possible college decisions. It makes me feel much joy to hear that Ken and Taija have asked Ms. Mimi and Mr. Jones about when I'm coming in next and how much they anticipate seeing me because it makes me realize how greatly I can impact the lives of students just by showing my support and interest in their lives. Classic City High School was a completely new experience to me because I studied in a traditional school, but after my experiences I am highly considering going into a future career as a graduation coach and educator at an alternative school rather than a traditional school.

Works Cited

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