

*MY EXPERIENCE
AT CLASSIC CITY
HIGH SCHOOL*

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I. The Institution

The format of Classic City High School is quite different than anything I had previously experienced. From the very first minute of being in the classroom, I knew that these students' high school experience was much different than anything I had ever known. Each student seemed to have a different curriculum and set of things they were working on. I primarily tutored for the afterschool program, which I am sure is an even different experience than regular class, but I still found that the work the students were doing to be a little bit unorganized. Instead of them really working with the material and learning, it felt like more of a "to-do" list of miscellaneous tasks. For the time I was in the classroom during regular school hours, the students were preparing for their EOCs which is a standardized test that makes up a large portion of their final grade. I tried answering some of their practice packet questions and found myself stumped more often than not. Now, I know I am not an English major and I have never been great at standardized testing, but I figured, "How hard could it be?" The questions were rarely straight forward and oftentimes, there was more than one right answer. The test was looking for the "best" answer which in my opinion, may be different depending on the logic behind it. I found this especially true when it came to answering questions about poems.

Regardless of the time of day, most students are working independently on their school distributed laptops. When I was in high school, we rarely had

time for independent use of technology. For Classic City High School students, using a laptop is their main way of completing their work. While I think it is good for students to be familiar with technology, I do think it is important to recognize how many distractions can keep them from completing their work. For students that are intrinsically motivated and do not need much assistance, I think the independent learning style and testing on a computer can be quite beneficial because the student can set their own pace. On the other hand, I think working independently on a computer for hours can be quite uninspiring and extremely daunting. I can see how difficult it would be to focus when you have people yelling across the classroom, running around, side conversations, and cell phones out and ringing. One noticeable difference between the high school I went to and CCHS is the way the students spoke to their teachers and their open conversations throughout the class. I couldn't imagine cussing out loud or talking about drinking/drugs in front of my teachers but for these students, it is just a part of their daily lives. On the first day I mentored I was extremely nervous but deep down thought it would not be as bad as everyone said. Within 10 minutes of being there, a teacher called out a particular student to come with me for tutoring. As you can imagine, getting called out in front of your friends while you are hanging out would be embarrassing. This particular student instantly became enraged and threw his books on the ground. As they crashed to the floor, he punched the desk and began walking toward the door to exit the classroom. I awkwardly stood in front of the class, unsure of what to say or do. One thing I

did know for sure, I knew nothing about what these kids go through or how they are feeling. The student eventually cooled off, calmed down and agreed to work with me the next time I came to tutor. I remember thinking, “What have I gotten myself into?” I thought that after the first day, my anxiety about tutoring for CCHS would lessen but instead, it became greater. I wasn’t until I met Mrs. Johns that I realized it was possible to work with the students in a productive and meaningful way.

II. The Teachers and Administrators

During my time at Classic City High School, I mostly worked With Mrs. Johns and Mrs. Stagg. It was apparent from the first times that I worked with both of them, that they had an extreme love for their students and were truly invested in their success. Mrs. Stagg is very open about why she gets onto her students and followed up critiques with something positive like, “I want you to do this right because I care.” Time and time again, explained the love she has for her students. She sat at her desk grading papers but always seemed open to approach with any questions. It was obvious that even though her students did not necessarily want to be there, they had respect for her. The students had tests, quizzes, and homework on their laptops but after I talked with Mrs. Stagg she explained to me how important it was for her to get the students engaged in other ways. She showed me different activities she had planned for them. One of the activities was a scavenger hunt around the classroom that involved doing

math problems to get to the end. I thought this was super cool because it gets the students moving around. Mrs. Stagg was also constantly reminding her students of what they needed to complete in order to graduate and motivated them along the way.

Mrs. Johns also did an amazing job at encouraging her students throughout the class. I feel lucky to have been able to witness her in action the week before what some might say is the most stressful time of the year- standardized testing. Mrs. Johns brought a sort of calm to her students that isn't really describable. It is almost as if there is a tone shift as soon as they walk in the door. Her instruction is direct and she is about her business. With that said, she instructs in a way that the students feel comfortable opening up to her and asking questions. She does an extraordinary job of teaching an entire class all while walking around and giving each individual student one on one time. She uses technology in her classroom but also leads group discussions to work through problems all together. It is apparent that she values each student as an individual and their opinions. She gives them structure without telling them exactly what to do (although she would if she needed to/ they wanted her to). She is constantly reminding them that they are more than capable and gives them flexibility to work on whatever is at the top of their priority list. It is apparent to the students that she trusts them and that she really cares about them and their families. 1With all of the stress of graduation and testing coming up, she had meaningful conversations with multiple students about what else is

going on in their lives. I feel lucky to watch Mrs. Johns mentor and teach during such a busy time of the school year and it really gave me perspective on how to navigate preparing your students for big changes. Just because it is an important and stressful time, doesn't mean you need to escalate or apply more pressure that is already there. There is a way to get people to take things seriously without completely stressing them out. I feel like ultimately, the confidence she was instilling in them will have the biggest impact on their performance.

III. The Students

Throughout my time at Classic City High School, I worked with many different students with different personality traits and backgrounds. I will specifically talk about one student I feel opened up the most with me. To maintain anonymity, I will refer to him as George.

George was an extremely quiet kid with his gaze constantly directed toward the ground. He was tall, wore a denim vest, and sported a mohawk. He had a defined style compared to the other students but still blended in enough not to stick out in a crowd. You could find him in the corner of the classroom or in the back clicking away on either his phone or laptop. When I first approached him to help with his math homework he would barely look in my direction, let alone make eye contact with me. I quickly warned him that I was not the best at math, so I may not have all of the answers, but I assured him that we would get through it together. As we both fumbled our way through his online homework George's lack of confidence became apparent. I would say something like, "Oh

I'm not sure exactly how to do this but I bet we can figure it out if we just look it up!" George would respond with something like, "I have already tried, and I can't do it." As time went on I attempted to teach him how to solve certain problems. Anytime I would do anything but give him the exact answer, his ears would turn off. I decided to break out some mini white boards and had him follow along step by step with me. It was during this time that he knocked out the rest of his homework and we got some momentum. It took about 20 minutes before he actually started to ask me questions and really interact. Once we completely finished his homework, I began to make small talk about school and his favorite subject to which he replied that he loved to learn about history and war. He explained that he was part Lithuanian and part African American and he wanted to learn more about the culture of Lithuania. I was still kind of nervous and rambling about how cool that was when he abruptly cut me off and pointed to his computer screen. George pointed to his account login icon picture, which to my surprise was a small confederate flag. This was the first time he really looked me in the eyes and said, "I was raised by white people. They thought I was going to steal something so I am being raised by white people. I don't know why people think that all black people will steal something because it's not true." I quickly agreed that the stealing stereotype was not true but was not sure what to say next. I was completely thrown off guard and to be honest, I didn't feel prepared to have a conversation about the confederate flag. Luckily, he quickly began to talk about his white family (this was how he referred to them) and

showed me pictures of his brother. He expressed love for his family and talked about how he had to travel 25+ minutes to school. As he was scrolling through his iPhone photos he came across a picture of a guitar. For the first time, George's face lit up. He showed me pictures of all of his guitars and told me the stories of when/where he got them. We chatted about what he liked to listen to and who inspired him musically. We joked because he compared his singing voice to some of the greatest rockers of all time. George spoke about music with a sense of pride and confidence in his ability. Before I knew it, it was time to pack up. We said goodbye and Mrs. Stagg mentioned that she wanted me to work with him again. I never got the chance to because he wasn't in afterschool the days I came back but I still wonder what the confederate flag means to him and why it was his chosen picture icon for himself. I did feel hopeful that as he gets older, he will expand his self-identity through experiences and music.

IV. Me as a Mentor, Tutor and Future Educator

I learned so much during my time at Classic City High School and am beyond grateful for my experience. I believe that I was best utilized as a mentor and really just a listening ear. I became close with a few students' others wanted nothing to do with me. I am not sure if I really made a life changing impact on anyone, but I do think it is nice for the students to have someone they can just talk to. For some of the students, I think opening up may have even been easier because I was a familiar face, but I was not too close to them or the people they were talking about. The students I became closest with almost felt like friends or

a younger sibling. I genuinely wanted to catch up with them each time I saw them. With that said, I feel like I could have been of better service to the students if I came in smaller increments of time week by week as opposed to large chunks of time. As a tutor, I feel like I made progress with the students. For them, I feel like half of the battle is just starting and having the confidence that they can do it. I don't think I taught anyone specific concepts that they will remember forever but I would like to think that the "you may think this isn't fun, but we'll get through it" attitude may carryover onto them. I think that I could have been utilized more as a tutor but unfortunately during afterschool hours it is difficult to find any students that even need or want tutoring. I think that the duality of the mentor/tutor relationship is great because the student gets the chance to direct how they want the conversation to go. I think they need someone to talk to just as much as they may need a tutor.

As of now, I do not plan on becoming a future educator but my role at Classic City High School will most certainly impact the way I will work with people regardless of what profession I end up choosing. This experience has taught me to be more patient and how to work with people that going through things that I cannot even begin to understand or relate to. CCHS has opened my eyes to the way a large percentage of Americans are being educated and has made me have an immense respect for all of the educators that are truly invested in their students. If I were to become an educator, I would take a lot of notes from Mrs. Johns in the way she carries herself and sets the tone for her

classroom. She provides a sense of calm that was really amazing to watch. I think her individualized approach to educating may eliminate some of the stress her students face daily.