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LLED 3461H

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April 26, 2019

My Experiences at Classic City

I imagine that my experiences at Classic City were a little different than most, but were extraordinarily educational. During my time at Classic City, I was lucky enough to be able to observe the work of some extraordinary teachers and staff members. Due to my personal class and work schedule, my time at Classic City was spent helping at the afterschool program, where I helped out in smaller classroom settings that offered a much more intimate and varied atmosphere than a normal classroom setting. Students came from varying grade levels needing help on various different things, and this more diverse group led me to gain some amazing experience. I was honored to tutor in the afterschool program for Mr. Graves and Ms. Stagg, and to also spend some time with Merida's Thursday book club. Through observation of these phenomenal role models and interactions with the students of the afterschool program, I learned many valuable lessons that will stick with me through all of my years as a teacher.

One of the first things I observed at Classic City's afterschool program was how amazing the relationships between the teachers, staff and students are. This was made clear to me within the first few minutes of being at Classic City, and was only emphasized with every interaction I

was lucky enough to be present for. The staff and teachers know all of the students at the afterschool program by name, and have really developed personal connections with each of the students. This is something that extends far beyond the afterschool program and into the everyday classroom setting, as I found out later on in the semester, when I was able to spend a class period in Ms. John's class. As for the afterschool program in specific, the relationships I saw between Mr. Graves and the students were nothing short of phenomenal. He knew them well enough to ask them how things were going in their lives, from basketball games to newfound interests in television shows. On days where conversation in the classroom got heavier- on days where the students shared stories of their encounters with prejudice, and how it felt to grow up dealing with racism- Mr. Graves was an open listener, and a supportive role model. He really connects with and sympathizes with his students, and I believe this is at the core of why he is such an effective role model and teacher for the students. His openness towards all of the emotions his students were feeling, and his understanding that not all days will be good days for the students allowed me to observe the ideas of my reading group's last book, *Against Happiness*, work in real life. By following the same sentiments presented in *Against Happiness* about encouraging the processing of all emotions, not just joy, Mr. Graves created such a welcoming environment in the afterschool setting. Watching Mr. Graves interact with the Classic City afterschool students taught me more than I ever thought I could learn about creating an encouraging and safe atmosphere within a classroom, and I will be forever grateful for the lessons I learned from him.

At the start, I definitely felt very out of place at the afterschool program. My feelings were akin to the feeling of being unwanted- although Mr. Graves and the rest of the Classic City staff were extremely welcoming to me and the other tutors, my initial thoughts were that the

students did not want us there. I realized later that this was more due to the fact that the arrival of tutors meant the necessity of getting work done than disliking the tutors on more personal reasons, which comforted me a bit. That being said, it was initially fairly difficult to connect with the students of Classic City, as we came from drastically different backgrounds. Although my parents were very poor when I was young and lived in an area remarkably similar to that of these students, we were not there for many years, and so I do not feel the effects of that environment as strongly at the students who have been living in a poorer area for most of their life. As the afterschool program let out on the first day, I listened as the students not only said goodbye to each other, but parted with the addition of a “be safe out there”. Every student- even those that didn’t get along with each other in the classroom- wished each other a safe walk home. It’s remarkable how much meaning a simple phrase- merely 4 words added onto a goodbye- can hold. I will never understand what it’s like to spend most of your life in an area where students feel it necessary to hope for each other’s safety to that extent and daily. I also, being white, have never felt the effects of racism on me directly. As my work with the afterschool program continued, I heard countless stories from the students about mistreatment from police officers, strangers on the street, and even teachers at other schools. Although racism is something I know and see my friends and family dealing with, I will never be able to fully understand what it is like to have to deal with that type of hatred and prejudice directly, and daily. This was another one of the reasons it was difficult to connect with the students at first.

Over time, though, I began to feel more accepted by the students of the afterschool program. I think this was a combination of my being there frequently enough to get to know the students by name, and my connecting with the students about similar interests. As I got to know the students (this being made easier by the fact that the entire afterschool program is comprised

of less students than in a normal classroom setting), I was able to ask them for updates on projects we worked on together that they would present, and on shows they were watching. I didn't feel completely welcome there, however, until one day, as I was leaving, one of the girls who frequented the afterschool program (and who I had worked with on multiple occasions) thanked me for coming. Upon hearing this, one of the boys who was sat next to her (and one of the boys with the most frequent behavioral issues) thanked me as well, and told me that the presence of the tutors at Classic City really meant a lot to him. "If it was me," he told me, "I don't think I would do that. But you guys do. So, thanks." Although no part of why I want to be a teacher or why I was tutoring at Classic City was for the purpose of recognition, those two students thanking me for helping them showed me that our work as tutors really makes a difference in those students' lives, and let me know that my presence there was not as unwelcomed by the students as it had previously seemed. It reminded me of one of the lessons my book group learned in our book *Girl, Interrupted*, about how what somebody presents on the outside may not be how they actually feel. I think this experience will definitely help me in future situations as I work to connect with students who may at first seem hostile.

Later on, in my experience with the afterschool program, I was recruited by Ms. Stagg to work with a freshman student whenever he was present. While his reaction to this pairing was, to begin with, skeptical at best, he began to open up more each time we worked together, and my interactions with this specific student taught me many valuable lessons. One of the most valuable of these lessons was the level of self-doubt the students of schools like Classic City have. As I helped the student through his modules (he had just begun his first Shakespeare unit), I watched as he improved to the point of his average assignment scores being A's. Ms. Stagg spoke up about this at some point, speaking about how smart he is, which he automatically denied. When I

asked why he didn't feel smart, and pointed out that he was obviously doing very well in his schoolwork, he seemed confused by the question. It became apparent that he didn't have a solid answer as to why he felt so doubtful of his own skills, even in the face of obvious success. I know that everyday self-doubt can occur in anybody, but seeing it be so wholly ingrained in a student's spirit that they don't actually understand why they doubt themselves anymore is heartbreaking. I know now that doubt can become subconscious, almost a habit. Having these conversations with this student really opened my eyes to the full depth of which doubt runs amongst the students at Classic City, and my attitude within the afterschool program changed drastically. I became more encouraging than I was before, and my motivation to offer the best support and encouragement possible throughout my time at Classic City really took off. The things that student said to me about his doubt and believed worthlessness will stick with me forever, and will serve as a reminder in all of my upcoming teaching years to maintain an encouraging environment within the classroom.

One of the biggest things I noticed within my time at Classic City was the use of technology within the curriculum (although my observations are, again, fairly specific to the afterschool program). After helping various students work through some of the online modules for various subjects (mostly focused on English), I had the realization that their school experience has been *drastically* different than mine. This is something that, through our Monday classroom discussions, I had already known, but seeing the setup of the course material in person made it all the more real. Especially in regards to the English curriculum, I find online modules (that don't actually require any reading, as I found out through watching various students find ways to skip past those sections) somewhat detrimental to building motivation and interest within the students surrounding the subject. While technology can be a useful skill within the

classroom when balanced with other activities, doing online modules for all courses every day removes a significant portion of what makes school such an important building-block in peoples' lives: the social interaction, and learning alongside peers. This makes the relationships that the teachers and staff have formed with the students all the more valuable.

This is also another reason I was so grateful that I got to see Merida's afterschool book club in action on Thursdays. Merida encouraged each student at the table to choose a character to read aloud for from the comic book (she chose some of the *Black Panther* comic books), and the comics were talked about through group discussion. Especially for English subjects, I know that this group interaction is what helps the material make an impact, and I was so happy with how Merida had organized the book club. There was such a clear difference in the classroom attitude between the normal tutoring days and the book club days- something Merida may not be aware of, but should hear about and be proud of. The book club really eased the afterschool students out of their shells, and got them talking more amongst themselves and to Merida and Mr. Graves. It was always an uplifting experience to be present to help with book club. Even if the behavioral problems or outbursts didn't completely disappear, the higher level of participation and the reactions to the comics always left me feeling positive the students were taking something with them from the book club.

Overall, I learned many extremely valuable lessons, but perhaps the most important lesson I learned from my experiences at Classic City and from this class in general is that, just as students learn from educators, we also learn from them. One of the most important jobs of an educator is to create a classroom environment that encourages positive relationships amongst the students and between the students and teachers, and to realize that no two students are the same.

Every new interaction comes with a new experience, and it is by opening ourselves up to learning something new that we become better educators and, more importantly, better people.

Teaching is no small job, that's for certain- my experiences at Classic City reminded me of the monumental importance of educators, and the grand purposes behind what we do. I move forward from these experiences having gained so many valuable lessons, and some memories that I will keep with me throughout my entire teaching career.