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### Categorical Presentation of Classic City High School Experiences

#### **Institution**

Classic City High School (CCHS) is a public school comparatively smaller than other educational institutions. I carried out my service hours in the central building which consists of the main office and about 6 to 9 academic classrooms. This set up is beneficial because it facilitates smooth class transitions and allows resource officers and administrators to easily and safely supervise school procedures. The facilities were kept fairly pristine, and I never noticed an area that needed to be cleaned. In the hallway, the walls were decorated with exemplary student work or other posters that promote education. For example, when students walk into the building, they are presented with the names of graduating seniors with the word “Congratulations” pasted over them; this display gives underclassmen something to work for which, in turn, encourages them to stay in school until they earn a high school diploma.

I carried out the entirety of my service hours in an English classroom with Ms. A (in the interest of confidentiality, I have changed her name as well as her students’). The room was average sized, allowing for a large set of computers lining the walls and a smart board near the front. Instead of individual desks, tables were assembled in two groups of three. In this way, students could sit together, facilitating group work and consultations. However, students were

not restricted to these seats; if they needed computer access, they could choose to sit at one of the computers. Ms. A positioned her desk in the front corner of the room, allowing for easy supervision of the class. In the corner, the teacher provided a supply station. Here, students could borrow pencils, pens, and paper; furthermore, the station housed simple hygiene products such as lotion, tissues, and hand sanitizer. The walls were filled with decorations pertaining to English. Colorful posters listing punctuation and grammar reminders were situated at the front of the room, allowing for quick reference. Instructional posters were hung on the left side wall and the back wall. These displays boasted information such as different types of poems and short biographies of multicultural authors and artists. On the right side wall, a bulletin board displayed standards/essential questions, login formulas for emails and other electronic sites, and additional CCHS information.

The technology used at Classic City High was more advanced than what I used in high school. As previously stated, the English classroom I was in had an entire set of computers; in addition, there was a computer lab and other academic rooms equipped with this technology. The classrooms also had smart boards; Ms. A used hers to display notes, watch instructional videos, or show other visual aids. Furthermore, she made all of her teaching materials available on Google Classroom, an online platform through which her students could view materials at their leisure. Every student in the classroom also had Chrome Books; these basic laptops allowed students to carry their work with them. The students I worked with found this to be a big advantage; for example, one of the units Ms. A planned involved a research paper on a

prominent historical Latino/x figure. With the help of their personal computers, students could quickly reference reputable websites and immediately compile their notes in a Word Document/Google Doc. The amount of technology available was surprising to me, and I think the students benefited greatly from it. A big theme I found throughout my time at CCHS was efficiency and accessibility, two things technology can provide.

Perhaps the largest difference between my high school and CCHS was the class size. The most students that showed up at one time for one class during my service work was about 6 to 8 individuals. When I was in high school, each of my classes boasted at least 20 students on any given day. Although I think larger class sizes allow students to be social with one another, the smaller sizes at Classic City High benefited its students. CCHS students are afforded more individualized instruction with their teachers. This is one area I think Ms. A excelled in. For example, following a mini-lesson on the structure of sonnets, students were instructed to complete a work session centered around analyzing three different sonnets. After working by themselves for five minutes, Ms. A and I checked on each of the students, reviewing their progress and asking if they needed any further help.

### **The Teachers and Administrators**

Overall, my experience with the faculty and staff at Class City High was enjoyable. Because I stayed in one classroom with one teacher for the duration of my service learning, I was able to work with the same teacher and group of students over the course of several months. Ms. A constantly talked to me about the assignments we would be helping the students with as well as their association with the curriculum. She had a very structured

teaching style. Every day, she listed for the students exactly what lesson she was going to teach, an activity associated with that lesson, and any homework that might result from their work.

Although I think this was beneficial in that it provided students with structure (many of whom did not receive structure at home), it also made the class slow and boring at times.

Furthermore, it did not give students very much choice when it came to assignments and creativity. I think Ms. A did a good job at mixing technology and traditional instruction. She often presented lessons on the smart board while students took hand-written notes; however, she would also post her notes on Google Classroom so students that preferred pre-prepared notes had that option. Ms. A administered mostly written assessments and tests. In her book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, Diane Ravitch argues that assessments should not be limited to multiple choice, standardized styles. I think Ms. A did a good job at balancing preparation for state tests and personal expression on classroom assessments. Each test had two parts, the former being a more traditional style while the latter was an essay, allowing students to express their understanding of the material in writing.

I did not interact much with the administration throughout the course of the semester. However, at the beginning of my service learning, the principal personally introduced herself to me and took the time to place me in a classroom that I would feel comfortable in while also maximizing my help as a student mentor. In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom, graduation was already an important subject, and both Ms. A and the principal took interest in the work of students. Ms. A constantly had conferences with her students while the principal reviewed lesson plans, insuring that the occurrences in the classroom maximized individuals' success.

## The Students

The small English classroom I worked in boasted a variety of bright young students. They were not afraid to ask for help, and they generally produced exemplary work. Although I had the opportunity to work with all the students, two in particular stood out to me, the former reflecting my attitude towards school while the latter approached school in a different manner (as previously stated, I have changed their names for the sake of confidentiality).

### Chan

Chan was a 16-year-old African American student. He was the only individual that was present *every* time I came to do my service learning. He seemed to grasp material quickly and easily and rarely asked for help; however, he seemed to enjoy being challenged when I pushed his work further. For example, during the sonnet assignment, he was filling out each blank accurately and at a fast pace. When I asked if he needed help, he responded with his usual “no,” but I did not let the conversation end there. On one of the yes/no questions (“Is this sonnet Shakespearian or Petrarchan?”), I asked him to explain why. His eyes lit up and he began referencing his notes, eager to provide me with an answer. Chan was also very skilled at technology. Typically, if anyone had questions about Google Classroom, Word documents, or the internet, Chan was quick to interject, providing a solution to any problems.

Chan was the student in the class that seemed most like how I was in high school. Attendance seemed very important to him, and he rarely missed any assignments. He took detailed notes and applied them to his homework. Some days, he even had spare time to work on assignments from another class. School was obviously important for Chan; he showed up in

clean clothes everyday, well rested and ready to begin. However, Chan did not have a job, so he might not be under as much pressure at home.

### Kabre

Kabre was an African American female student. She was present about every other time I visited the school, and she showed up about five minutes late on those days. She did not take notes unless specifically prompted by the teacher, and she often listened to music on loud volume during lessons; furthermore, she was reluctant to accept help, and if she did, it was rarely from me as she preferred Ms. A. Kabre liked to work alone, and she often completed her assignments while watching cooking videos on YouTube. As a way to begin a conversation with her, I asked if she watched them for fun or if she enjoys cooking at home. She said that she loved cooking, but she wasn't skilled at baking sweets, so she liked watching cake videos at school so she could learn.

Near the end of my time at CCHS, Kabre stopped appearing in Ms. A's class, but occasionally she would come in and ask for work from the teacher. During this period, Kabre attended class once, but was accompanied by another African American teacher. This teacher sat directly beside Kabre and supervised her work. Furthermore, she encouraged her to study during her free time. Kabre needed extra help in all of her classes, not just Ms. A's. From what I could gather (Ms. A wouldn't let me in on the entire situation), Kabre was having difficulty connecting with some of her teachers; this led to a few behavioral problems. This surprised me because I always thought of Kabre as a quiet girl that liked cake videos. I'm glad she was paired with a constant mentor that could connect with her on social and cultural levels.

### **Me as a Mentor, Tutor, and Future Educator**

Although I interacted with all students in Ms. A's class, I will reference only Chan and Kabre in this section as I feel I can more completely analyze personal impacts as well as institutional impacts. As a tutor, I circled the room while students completed work, making myself available for their use. With both Chan and Kabre, I usually had to interject myself into their work as smoothly as possible. In our second round of book discussions, my group and I chose *Why Don't Students Like School?* by Daniel Willingham. In it, he posits that learning a new subject must be accompanied "feedback from knowledgeable people" (193). With Chan, this manifested in the form of further challenges because Ms. A usually encountered Chan's correct answers and moved on. I felt I was useful to Chan in that I pushed his work ethic and creativity. I did not let him simply answer surface level questions; I genuinely tried to make him think about the material and analyze its presence in English. As a future educator, I learned from Chan that I will stay away from yes/no questions. From my short time at CCHS, I saw bright students like Chan passing with little effort by answering poorly thought out questions; because of Chan, I will seek to create assignments that spark conversation and interest rather than grades.

I did not interact as much with Kabre as I did with Chan, but I did learn a lot from her. Kabre had the *ability* to process and complete assignments, but she simply did not want to. Often, Ms. A would have to approach her and ask her to stop watching videos or take her headphones out. Eventually, Kabre would comply but complain. In these instances, I think Kabre felt what Francisco Cantu described in his novel, *The Line Becomes a River*. In class, my

book club presented how Cantu felt caught in the middle of two social and cultural battles; as a person of Hispanic descent, he often grappled with apprehending those of his own cultural background. This led to the discussion of the feeling of “outsider” in the classroom; students might not feel completely connected to their school work, but they also might not be completely immersed in their home lives, creating tension in the form of feeling like an “outsider.” It seems as if Kabre experienced this in her school work and her interactions with her teacher. Ms. A could not connect with Kabre; she did not seem to understand her personality or interests. The few conversations I had with Kabre about cooking demonstrated that she had high levels of intelligence and creativity; she described in detail various recipes and different cake decorations she would like to try. If Ms. A could have injected some of Kabre’s creativity into lessons or assignments, she might have had more success with the student. Because of Kabre, I will try my hardest to present my students with choice, allowing them to share pieces of their personality in their assignments.

### **Conclusion**

My time at Classic City High was unlike any service education experience I have had at the University of Georgia. Earlier this year, I spent time at Malcolm Bridge Middle School; here, I worked in an advanced 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classroom consisting mainly of white students. Furthermore, for two years, I have provided after school tutoring for two students living in an upper class family in the Bogart area. Working at CCHS has given me the opportunity to learn and grow with students not of my race or socio-economic status. This has definitely made me face my own privilege, something I had not done until this service learning. I interacted with



students who work full time or who care for siblings at home; of course, school becomes less of priority, and they do not have the time or energy to devote to school like I had in high school.

Because of Classic City High and its students, I have learned to be a more understanding teacher and citizen, a lesson I will carry in my own classroom as well as in my personal life.

