



*Mekay Mitchem*

## *My Classic City Experience*

*Monday 1/23/17*

Today was my first day mentoring at Classic City high school, and I walked in feeling hopeful that I would be paired with a student. I was assigned an English classroom with Ms. Johns as the teacher for fourth period. I was immediately surprised that it was an all online class. As I looked around the classroom I noticed that almost everyone was on their cellphones and everyone had headphones in listening to music. At this point I became nervous because I did not know how to approach anyone. I was intimidated because the students had headphones in jamming out to music. Ms. Johns was very happy to have me there, and she spent some time telling me about the program they were using. I was then introduced to a student by the alias name of Shawn. The student was alone at a table with a laptop and he was working on nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. Shawn seemed pretty frustrated with a matching part of his homework that required him to match certain parts of speech to the corresponding word part. He made a few comments saying, "You UGA tutors are always here man" and other comments expressing his disinterest for the UGA tutors. He asked if I would be here every Monday and I told him that I would be and if he needed help with anything he could always ask me. After twenty minutes of working he began to get off task again and he said, "I am just ready to go home I am tired of this". I replied, "Let's finish up this last homework assignment and in a few minutes you can go home and forget about parts of speech. Today started off very awkward and scary but ended on a good note by being able to tutor someone and help them finish an

assignment. Shawn's negative view of mentors struck me at the time, because it made me wonder why he had acquired that opinion. Christopher Emdin's book, *White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* puts into perspective how school is for urban students. According to the book *White Folks Who Teach in the Hood*, "In school urban youth are expected to leave their day-to-day experiences and emotions at the door and assimilate into the culture of schools" (Emdin). With this being the first day mentoring with Shawn it is hard to say what the root of his comments about mentors are coming from, but with this quote in mind I hope to gain insight in future sessions.

### *Monday 1/30/17*

*This week I have had the chance to read into my book further and an important point in the book actually came up through observation today. The book states, "Consider a common scenario in urban schools, and one I have witnessed often, where the teacher and student have different conceptions about what it means to be on time and prepared for class" (Emdin). I observed that many of the students were lingering around the door and Emdin describes this as being a common conception for urban students. I had hopes of mentoring with the same student but I did not have the chance to mentor anyone today. There were two other tutors mentoring other students in the classroom and no one left that wanted help today. The student I mentored last week got paired with a male tutor. Ms. Johns felt that he would make more progress with a male. I spent the class period observing and speaking with Ms. Johns. She never once sat down and she was running around a lot today tending to student questions and addressing behavioral issues. One of the students came in with a hood on his head and she spent a lot of time trying to get him to take it off and eventually had to have the principal come talk to him. This is the first time that I have seen the principal, and he seemed to be well respected by the students. The student would not listen to Ms. Johns but as soon as she called for the principal his attitude changed. Last week I got to see what it is like to be a student at Classic City and this week I got insight on the teacher's perspective. She explained to me that half of her classes are face to face classes, and the others including the one that I am mentoring in is online. The way that she plans for a class that is so diverse and unpredictable as far as attendance is admirable. You can just tell that she cares deeply for her students by the way that*

*she speaks to them. She is always patient despite the constantly changing environment of the classroom, and she always picks up on each student's attitude in the classroom. If she notices a student has been gone for a few days she will ask to catch up with them. She also provides small snacks to her students if they are hungry which tells me she goes above and beyond for her students.*

### *Monday 2/06/17*

*This class period I got placed with a girl named Kaya and I worked with her for the entire period. Today we worked on a lesson test for the entire period together. This was a test so I tried really hard to let her answer all the questions and help in a way that was not giving away the answers. I noticed that given the opportunity she would take advantage of me being there and be lazy with answering the question for herself. In the book Why Don't Students Like School writer Daniel Willingham states, "People are naturally curious, but we are not naturally good thinkers; unless cognitive conditions are right, we will avoid thinking" (page 25). She felt that she could avoid applying herself, because she thought I would answer for her. I chose to explain the question and then ask her what she thought was the best answer for the question. It also helped to first let her tell me her opinion of what she thought was the right answers and if there were multiple to narrow it down together. We also talked about the Falcons and Patriots game together and that seemed to help us bond over something.*

### *Monday 2/13/17*

*Today I worked with Kaya again and I found our conversations to be a little bit easier together. We talked a little about how are weekend went and she asked me about my Valentine's day plans. We talked about scary movies and the movie that had just got released Split. After a few minutes of talking we got busy to work on a lesson pretest. It seemed like she was more eager to work today and we went through the test easily. As we were working another student next to us started asking me questions about the homework he was doing as well. After I helped him he seemed so grateful and explained to me his situation and some problems that he has with the way he has to learn. He explained that he had been out for a*

*week sick and that the computer system has put him way behind now. They cannot access their assignments at home because they have to have passcodes that are only given by the teacher. Kaya also talked with us about these issues and they said that the system is constantly running even on the weekends so on the weekends it counts them absent. They feel that they are already behind when they walk through the door on Monday mornings. It also shows their grade of completion and that grade goes home to their parents. Demetrius stated that he gets in trouble often with his parents for having a low grade on completion when he is making high grades on the assignments he has completed. Demetrius also opened up to me about his love for cooking and that he really wants to become a chef one day. I enjoyed today a lot and learning the flaws of the system directly from the students was an eye-opening experience. I feel that maybe the way I dressed today could have had an impact on the students to feel more comfortable with me. The past few weeks I have dressed very professional and today I dressed casual. I wore a long sleeve UGA shirt and nice jeans with converse. I cannot help but think that there is a correlation between the two.*

### *Monday 2/21/2017*

*During my tutoring session at Classic City High School today I worked with Kaya and the student that was next to Kaya and I during our last session. Kaya was working on comprehension of short stories while Dexter was working on themes of stories. I sat in the middle of the two and went between helping Kaya with her quiz on comprehension and helping Dexter with the themes of a short story. Kaya really struggled with the comprehension of these stories, because her basic vocabulary was lacking. She could not understand certain words being used in the phrasing of the questions, and this impacted the way she understood the story. I spent time explaining words to her in a way she could understand, and this seemed to make all the difference. For example, in one of the stories a word that Kaya did not understand was "irate". I related this to her own life in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the word. I asked her if she had ever been madder than mad about something. She replied, "At my old school a girl knocked my phone out of my hand and cracked the screen and I immediately lost it". I explained to her that irate means exactly that feeling that she had that day of being extremely angry. It was interesting to see the way that relating terms or other material to*

*experience helps these students comprehend and retain information faster. While I was helping Kaya I noticed that Dexter had fallen asleep, and I was instructed by Ms. Johns to try to get him to wake up. I tapped on his shoulder and he did not move and then I said his name and he still did not move. Ms. Johns said to leave him alone at that point, because he must be really tired. The way she handled this situation made me look back to my high school experience when students in class would fall asleep. Immediately teachers would assume that they were bored and abruptly wake the student up and sometimes embarrass them. Ms. Johns handled this differently by not pushing the student and simply understanding that he may have something more going on.*

### *Monday 2/27/17*

*Today at Classic City High School the atmosphere was different in the classroom and even in the halls. The students were a little louder than usual and off task more frequently. Everyone was talking about how spring break was next week, and what their plans would be. Ms. Johns tried to get the students on task but it seemed that the excitement was just too heightened. I immediately had pity on Ms. Johns because it was only Monday and the students were already excited. Before Kaya and I started on our classwork she talked to me about her family and that they were opening up a new restaurant in Athens. She explained that she was not excited for Spring Break because her grandparents were going to put her to work in the restaurant. Even though she said she was not excited I could tell that she was proud of her family and invited me to come out to eat there one day over spring break. I felt that this was an important step in my mentor relationship with Kaya, because she expressed trust in me by talking to me about her family. While everyone else was off task Kaya was focused on her class work, and working on lesson units in hopes of completing her targeted area online. Thinking back on this after our session I was just as excited as her to help her complete her goal before break. It really seemed like we were a team today.*

### *Monday 3/13/17*

*Spending a whole week away from the high school for spring break made me realize that I really missed going. I was sincerely happy to return back to the school this Monday and mentor*

*with Kaya. I was a little taken back to see that more than half the class was not there on the Monday after spring break. Ms. Johns said that it was normal after breaks to have students lag back to class the whole week. Kaya seemed as excited as I was to see her and we shared how our spring breaks were. We both worked the whole spring break and expressed our mutual dislike to the fact that we did. Just listening around the room to the few students that were there it seemed like they spent their spring break the same way or did not go out of town. I contrasted the way it is at UGA to Classic City. When I was walking through the halls at UGA before spring break I heard people talking about extravagant vacations to different states and countries. In contrast at the high school students were talking about having to work or babysit. It really put into perspective the way that these students live and the differing responsibilities between UGA and Classic City. Kaya knowing that I also had to work gave us something to bond over and made me more relatable to her. Midway through class Dexter walked in, and I had noticed that more times than not he is late. Kaya actually commented on him being late and he opened up to me that he also goes to another school 45 minutes away. He was missing a lot of credits from his high school and had to come to Classic City to make up some classes. Kaya also shared that she was at Classic City, because she had missed to many classes. After six weeks of mentoring Kaya and Dexter let their guard down to tell me why they had come to Classic City.*

### *Monday 3/20/17*

*Today in Ms. Johns class it just worked out that most of the students including my mentees Kaya and Dexter were doing lessons with headphones in. I sat between them anyway and let them know they could ask me if they needed help. As the time passed neither asked for help, and I felt a bit awkward just watching over their shoulder. The other mentors were having a similar experience with their mentees. Besides the occasional outburst of song lyrics being sung from a student the class was mostly quiet. This is something I had not observed before in my time of mentoring until now. My mind wandered to the type of work they were all doing, and how effective it could really be. Each student is on the same program with the same questions and yet I have found most struggle with the material. *Why Don't Students Like School* by Daniel T Willingham states, *Students who have had different preparations, as well as different levels of support at home differ in their abilities, and it is self-defeating to give all**

students the same work" (Willingham). I found this excerpt applicable to Classic City, because these students could not possibly be learning effectively sitting in front of a screen. About 45 minutes into class Kaya started a lesson test and asked for my help. We then went into our pattern of breaking down the questions with each other and analyzing each answer. The class was still silent until five minutes before it was time to go, and everyone logged out and began to chat.

### *Monday 3/27/17*

While mentoring Kaya today we worked on the play *Romeo and Juliet*. I really enjoy *Romeo and Juliet* and was pleased to see that it was what we were working on today. Kaya was less than thrilled and discouraged that the play was so long. I have noticed a pattern with her that if a story or assignment is too long then she works herself up about the work that it will take. I tried to make it exciting by reading it with her and then summarizing each scene in terms that would engage her. We made jokes about how silly the characters were, and even got to analyze why Shakespeare wrote such a play. Dexter walked in about fifteen minutes late and logged into his classwork. He immediately was upset when an essay prompt popped up requiring him to write a persuasive essay. The prompt asked if he thought the world has become a better place or a worse. As soon as he read it he exclaimed that it had become a worse place. I asked him why he thought that and he said because of racism, the people in it, and gangs. I told him then that is what he should write about and he said that he did not know how to write an essay. I then walked him through how to plan an essay by suggesting an intro, main body, and a conclusion. He did not seem interested and got off task talking about why the world was a worse place with a student behind him. The whole class period he did not begin to write his paper, and he distracted another student from completing her work. Ms. Johns did not seem to notice this happening, and reflecting back now I wish I had redirected his attention back onto the assignment.

### *Monday 4/7/17*

This week the day I usually mentor was a teacher work day so they were off on Monday. I moved some things around in my schedule to come and mentor on Friday. It was a little

*different today as far as the classroom environment goes. There was a noticeably less amount of students in the classroom today. I also noticed that Ms. Johns was not as enthusiastic as she usually is. Perhaps, this is due to a long week that has worn her patience down. There were many mentors on hand today but I was lucky enough to get to work with the same student that I had been mentoring. Kaya and I worked on some quizzes today and we were able to get 2 done today. Kaya was excited about her progress and she shared with me her class details. She has two more units and a comprehensive exam until she is done with the class. It was so nice to see how excited she is and that I have been able to be a part of her progress. Just from my observations in the classroom by far Kaya is one of the only students that is consistently on task and she is never on her phone or head phones.*

### *Monday 4/11/17*

*This week's session was different because I worked in another teacher's classroom. Kaya the student that I usually mentor had to go with another teacher to work on testing. Ms. Johns sent me down to another teacher's classroom that needed some mentoring help. As I walked to the new teacher's class I could not help but be nervous. I had built a relationship with the student I had been with for weeks and I was not sure who I would be paired with today. As I walked in the class a girl immediately pointed to me and said, "I want her to help me". I walked to the seat next to her and sat down and introduced myself, and she introduced herself as Latrice. Latrice was working on analyzing a short story. As we are going through breaking down the character's and components of the story I noticed that she has a hard time reading and spelling. Through every word I am patient with her and help her pronounce words she does not know in the story. Even though she was slow with the reading and writing aspects of the assignment's I could tell that she understands the material. She explained her understanding of the reading in comparison to her own life. One of the characters was a little boy that was outgoing and a dare-devil, and the other character was a shy boy that followed the rules. She compared the sibling pair to herself and her sister. Latrice explained that she is like the older boy outgoing and always wanting to try new things while her sister is more reserved. A book by Ron Suskind, A Life Animated focuses on autistic children. This book also exhibits themes important for our experience at Classic City high school. It would be easy to assume that Latrice was not*



*intelligent because she could not read or write proficiently. This statement would not be true, because she is intelligent in her individual way that she learns. Latrice understands the material and expresses it through her personal experiences and learns the material in this way. Ron Suskind recalls his son being kicked out of school and the teacher stating, "Look, not picking up social cues is just too great a burden. They can't engage with teachers or peers with enough ease, enough capacity, to push themselves forward" (149). For these urban students that have ended up in this school it makes me wonder if they had teachers in their traditional school that gave up on them too solely because they were not ideal students.*

## Reflection

*It's hard to believe that I started this experience at Classic City high school four months ago. This opportunity has taught me a lot about the students, faculty, and myself through mentoring at Classic City high school. In the beginning I was nervous to go back each week but as the weeks went on that changed. I found myself missing being in the classroom and talking to Kaya about what she has done throughout the week. I have formed an incredible bond with Kaya, and I am truly sad that our time is coming to an end. Being in this environment I learned that expecting students to learn the same way is not effective. Kaya and Dexter both expressed disinterest in learning solely on the computer and other students in the classroom consistently struggled with staying engaged. Through observing Ms. Johns I have learned what it takes to be a teacher in a diverse setting. Ms. Johns showed that it requires patience, compassion, and adaptability to work in an urban school. As a teacher at any school I hope to have all the traits that I observed from Ms. Johns in my future career. I have realized the importance of getting to know your students in the classroom through my time with Kaya. Kaya has taught me that it takes patience to build a bond with someone, but once you build that bond you can learn so*

*much about a student. Through working with Kaya I learned how she processes information, what her goals were, and about her family. Knowing this information as a teacher could be helpful in teaching lessons, inspiring your students, and also getting the family involved.*

*Working at Classic City has been a blessing for me as a future teacher, and I have been moved to mentor there for an extended amount of time.*

## References

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