My Experiences at Classic City High School
Exploring Learning and Teaching
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I. INTRODUCTION:

This report will discuss my challenges, triumphs, and general experiences at Classic City High School in Athens, Georgia, from January to April 2019. For the sake of clarity and structure, this paper will be broken into four main subtopics (The Institution, The Teachers and Administrators, The Students, and My Role) so as to provide proper context and attention to each aspect. I will then summarize and dictate key takeaways I've realized from this illuminating experience.

II. THE INSTITUTION

<u>i. Curriculum Structure/Format</u>

In order to fully understand my individual experience at CCHS, it's important to understand my past educational experience, particularly my high school one. I went to a very expensive, very popular, private high school in College Park, GA called Woodward Academy. I went there from Kindergarten through 12th grade, so Woodward was all I ever knew. I had unlimited resources at my disposal, with unfettered access to some of the best teachers, minds, and information that I could come by. This was my only reality for the 13 years in which I grew as a person and a student. My high school seemed typical to me; we had 6 fifty-minute periods within a day. The periods would consist of English, math, science, foreign language, history/social studies, and either an art or physical education. Even more specifically, within each of those categories, there were three categories (college prep, enriched prep, honors prep) and in some cases, four categories with the inclusion of AP. College prep wasn't the standard like it is at most other schools; most on-track students took enriched prep and those who were

slower or needed more individualized or intensive help took college prep. Not only were there three/four levels to choose from in order to maximize and individualize one's performance and experience, there were a plethora of classes to fulfill each category. For science, one could take environmental science, chemistry, physics, botany, astronomy, anatomy, etc. For English, there were different literature classes and creative writing. A student could tailor their schedule to their own wants, interests, and skill level with ease. As for inside the classroom, pretty much all classes were lecture or discussion based. There was rarely a techonology-focused component– classes were spent interacting with other humans and exchanging ideas and concepts. If there were computers in the room, they were rarely used. If computers were to be used, the ones in the classroom still wouldn't be touched because pretty much every student had their own laptop. I really was so lucky to attend that school; I've only realized how lucky I was since leaving.

The structure and format of CCHS was very different from that of Woodward. I must confess that I spent pretty much all of my time within one classroom working with one teacher and a handful of students, so I wasn't able to fully grasp or understand CCHS in the way that I should. But off of the bat, I know that things were very different. Though the core requirements were relatively the same (English, math, science, history/social studies, art/foreign language), their options were severely limited compared to that of Woodward. Upon looking at the High School Graduation Requirements page on www.clarke.k12.ga.us, there were only a small handful of selections for each of those requirements. Furthermore, art and language were put together in the same category. Without a doubt Woodward had so many more diverse class options. Physical education classes included options for swimming, track/field, group games, etc. Art included sculpture, painting, jewelry making, video production, etc. Foreign language

included Latin, Spanish, French, German, Chinese, Japanese, etc. And according to this graduation document, those at CCHS get a fraction of those choices. Furthermore, the instruction inside the classroom was less engaging and advanced. This comment just stems from my personal experience in one classroom, but I feel that this comment could be expanded upon to describe other classrooms as well. Classes at CCHS were much more focused on technology and fulfilling requirements through it. Some periods were spent with all students on their own computer doing their own work while sometimes they would sit at the middle table and watch the teacher lecture. There was rarely any back-and-forth between teacher and students or even between students relating to school work.

The structure if CCHS is very unique. Upon first glance, I would think that the structure wouldn't benefit many students in their learning process. It's been my opinion that they less engaging a class is, especially with other students or the teacher, the less effective and enjoyable the working environment is. However, I can still speculate how the technology-focused or lecture-focused class could benefit a select number of students. First, if a student with accessibility issues due to a disability attended the school, having access to a computer could potentially benefit them. Also, if a student is looking quickly earn their degree through a program they can access at home via a computer, this school could work for them as well. The small class sizes could also benefit students by giving them more individualized access to the teacher and space.

In my experiences at CCHS, technology both helped and hurt students at different points. One of the most notable uses of technology for me was their use of the program Xello. Xello is a college/career preparation tool in which students can explore possible careers or schools

according to their aptitudes and interests. I found that this was such an invaluable tool that I wish

I had at my school. I sat with a few students when they were looking through the website and

although I could tell they didn't want to seem too interested, a few of them really became

interested in reading about the salary and job descriptions of some positions. This website helped

them learn more about themselves, their strengths, and in what places out in the real world they

could see themselves thriving. The access to computers also hindered students' learning a bit as

well. Access to the internet will always bring about a certain amount of baggage, and in this case

it provided a way for students to procrastinate or go off-topic to listen to music or read about

unrelated topics to the one at hand. Despite this, though, I hold to my belief that ultimately

technology is a good thing within a classroom environment; it's just important to use technology

smarter– as in making it work *for* the students' best interest and not enabling bad habits.

ii. School/Classroom Environment

I was in Mrs. Johns' classroom. I was able to glance around at other classrooms, but I

found that hers was definitely the most colorful, bright, and engaging. The first thing I noticed

around the classroom were all of the posters. All of them were educational of some kind. Since

she taught English/language arts, most had grammar rules or vocabulary. There were a few

posters, however, that really intrigued me. She had a back corner filled with writers, artists,

inventors, and famous people of color. Every single one was either black or Hispanic. This was

especially notable to me because around 95% of her classes were black or Hispanic. I probably

only saw two to three white students in all of my time at CCHS. I believe that these posters are

incredibly important because Mrs. Johns knew who her audience was and who she would be

influencing. By having those posters hung up year-round, students were constantly getting

exposed to good role models of people who look like them or come from a similar background. Success stories and knowledge of successful people of color is crucial to the empowerment of minoritized identities with a history of being systematically oppressed. Though these posters were a great addition to the classroom, I felt that the classroom honestly felt like a computer lab with the option of makeshift desks if needed. There were no static, consistent seating placements– everyone tried to crowd in around a table if needed. The lack of consistency was intriguing to me.

I found another notable decoration– this time outside of the classroom and in a bathroom. Near the sinks in the girls' bathroom, there was a poster that tackled the problem of depression and mental health. It stated that students were not alone and there were always places to go if one needed help. There's always been a stigma attached to mental health, but disproportionately so in communities of color. This small sign was a tiny but revolutionary step in normalizing mental health problems and asking for help. I was surprised but so glad to see this poster in the bathroom– I hope that posters like this one can make their way out of bathrooms and into other areas as well.

iii. Impressions

I had never once been in any school other than my high school, nor any any other capacity other than being a student. I also didn't have enough prior knowledge to really understand the concept of alternative schools and how they differ from the traditional school format. I went into this experience relatively blind. I could go on for pages about how CCHS changed and created a complex relationship with my expectations, but I found that there was one consistent question I was asking myself throughout this whole process. The kids at this school

are the ones who need the most help, love, nurturing, and stimulation. Why is it that they're given the least? With all of the pretty posters and friendly teachers in the room, why are these students pushed into computers, forced to teach themselves business and physics, and made to check off boxes left and right in order to pass certain guidelines? I found myself becoming sad when I would see the creativity and passions of the students squandered on some stilted powerpoint slides or strictly structured grammar lesson. If these are the students that leave the regular school system because of an issue, why are they put in a place that seems to be filled with roadblocks on the road to success? I have no doubt in my mind that this issue lies with the state of the American education system– not with the fault of CCHS. CCHS is simply a symptom of an education system that values numbers over people and success over happiness. (Though I believe that the teachers and administrators at CCHS are doing amazing work and there are students there greatly benefiting from their continued efforts).

III. THE TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

    <u>i. Interactions with Faculty and Staff</u>

    My interactions with the faculty and staff of CCHS were nothing but pleasant. I'm terrible with names, but the woman at the front desk in which I signed in every morning was always so warm and sweet. Ms. Hamilton was helpful and accessible, and Mrs. Johns went above and beyond to make my stay at CCHS as comfortable and welcoming as possible. I definitely interacted with Mrs. Johns the most of any faculty. It was interesting to see how our relationship grew and developed the more I attended the school. She guided me on how to help each student, gave me copies of the assignments they were working on so I could follow along, and generally was a warm, motivating, and positive presence in the classroom.

ii. Teacher's Utilization of Technology vs Direct Instruction

Mrs. Johns basically oscillated between two methods of instruction: direct lecture and technology. Based on how I interpreted each day, I noticed that most of the time when students were on the computer, they were working on individualized work and work for other classes. When it came to the subject matter Mrs. Johns was teaching, she opted to stand in front of the class and try to have an engaging conversation. She supplemented her lectures with handouts– rarely did she just speak to the class and expect them to take notes. She was a very active presence in the classroom; when she wasn't teaching she was walking around and individually checking on each student and helping them with their work. I definitely believe that the direct instruction method was way more effective in spurring academic engagement and class enjoyment. When technology was used in the form of computers, students became cut off from one another and sequestered to opposite sides of the room. While using Google Slides to make powerpoints could help students retain information and synthesize concepts in more effective ways, ultimately I believe that an over-emphasis of technology could hinder any sort of reciprocal learning students could achieve by interacting with each other and the concepts hands-on.

IV. THE STUDENT(S)

i. Diana (name changed for privacy)

Personality

Though I wasn't able to fully get to know Diana, she was one of the students that continued to amaze me with her level of drive and her consistent good attitude. Often, she was the only student to respond to and interact with Mrs. Johns when she was asking a question. She

seemed very compassionate in all of her interactions, whether they be with fellow students, Mrs. Johns, or myself. One day, when I was feeling particularly awkward because no students needed help, she called me over and asked for some help so I could act like I was doing something useful. Also, one day I came in late and she went out of her way to offer for me to look at her work so I could understand the assignment the class was completing. She had aspirations. Unlike many of her peers, who didn't care to think about their future or were just never encouraged to, she dreamed big of becoming a doctor.

I can't remember exactly what class she was in, but I believe she was in 10th grade. I think back to my attitude and passions in 10th grade and can't help but be blown away at her poise and consistency in the classroom. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life when I was her age and frankly, I was too busy moping about a breakup and struggling with mental health issues to really focus in school. Granted, I know nothing of Diana's private personal life, something I know can be easy to hide, but her general interest in school was notable to me.

Cultural Background

Based off of appearance, Diana is black. I know nothing of her ethnicity or sexual orientation, and I can only speculate about her social class, which I'm guessing is lower than mine. All of these identities intersect and contribute to many different things in a person's life. Clearly, something in her life contributed to her attending CCHS, though I don't have insight as to what. Each of these classifications and situations can contribute to the way in which people act within and interact with the world. Diana seemed to transcend a lot of the terms in which she's growing up in, or at least uses them as fuel in her drive to become successful.

Educational Experiences

Though she's surrounded by some kids who are uninspired and distracted during class, Diana had a steadfast attitude and persevered through her assignments. I really didn't have the opportunity to ask her about her opinions of school, teachers, and education in general. However, I believe that she exuded her values through her actions. As stated, she was compassionate to everyone in class and seemed to have the utmost respect for Mrs. Johns. I think I even remember her calling a student out for saying "retarded" once. If I had to guess, Diana and I share some of the same beliefs about education. We both see its value and work hard to take advantage of the opportunities we're given, though she seems more precocious than I was at her age. Granted, she had her moments of disinterest and hesitance in the classroom, but we all do. The difference with her is that she always managed to get herself back on track.

I didn't have much insight into her grades or performance in school, but that doesn't worry me too much because I know that with her attitude and work ethic, she will get far, even if it takes her longer than others or she goes about it in an unconventional way. She shared the struggle that other students had with remedial grammar knowledge and at times limited critical thinking skills, but with her motivation she still managed to excel in the classroom. My time with Diana was something special and I was truly sad to say goodbye to her. On my last day, I managed to pull her to the side and mention to her how amazed I was at her motivation and to keep it up on her journey of becoming a doctor. I assured her that if she kept her same attitude, she'd make it. I believe that.

V. MYSELF AS A MENTOR, TUTOR, AND FUTURE EDUCATOR

i. My Role as a Mentor

Reflecting on my experience at CCHS, I found that at first I was a little hesitant to take on any role, whether that be as a mentor or tutor. I actually felt most comfortable taking on the mentor role, because I felt closer to the level the students were on. I didn't want to be too far above them, creating a distance between us. I wanted to communicate that though I'm an upper/middle class white girl who had a very different high school experience, I still had my share of struggles and lessons that come from them. I still hated reading "The Bells" by Edgar Allan Poe. I, too, struggled to stay awake in class sometimes. There were days I was off my game and performed poorly on assignments. There were times I snuck my phone under the table to text. I've been there. Though the vast majority of our lives may be different, I wanted to give the kids little glimpses at our similarities, to offer a sort of kinship that would naturally position me in a mentor role. I believe that in order to be a mentor, one has to earn it. One must reach out a hand of friendship in order to be seen as someone with something to say that is worth listening to.

I believe that I accomplished what I wanted to in this arena. It took me a bit to get some of the students to warm up to me, but that's how it is with every sort of relationship. These kids saw different tutors every day– change was a constant for them. They probably became disillusioned with the addition of new white people every day and I don't blame them; we all probably blur together. But with consistent, friendly, individualized contact, relationships were established and advice was given. As discussed above, I ultimately connected with two girls: Diana and Lila. I had the occasional good conversation with other students and began to build rapport with them as well, but I focused on deepening the connection I had with the relationships I had already established.

ii. My Role as a Tutor

I believe my role as a tutor came with its own hesitations as well. One of the main things I had to reconcile with at the beginning of working at CCHS was the level at which these students were performing. I know that if I compared my reading comprehension and academic performance with those at the same level at CCHS, the disparity would be huge. This was something I struggled with at the beginning, because I found myself wanting to over-correct their papers and work with them on their grammar and spelling. But I found that if I mentioned every single thing I would want to help them with, nothing would really get accomplished. This is something I believe Mrs. Johns probably struggles with as well. She needs to get through her assignments and lesson plans for the day and she can't stop and help every student relearn proper syntax and formatting. I found that I emulated Mrs. Johns in a lot of ways when it came to being a tutor to these students. I pointed out and helped with glaring mistakes on their projects, and let the small things slide. It was all about finding the balance and choosing your battles. *Which battles would ultimately lead to this student being the most successful student they can be? Is it correcting their spelling of "tomorrow" constantly, annoying them until they push you away, or helping them identify and expand upon concepts they're passionate about, incorporating them into their papers and ultimately providing them with appreciation for the subject at hand?* These were the questions I constantly asked myself when helping students.

I do believe that I made progress with my students. I taught them new, innovative ways to use Google Slides (some methods that Mrs. Johns wasn't even aware of!) and helped them with the completion of their assignments. I believe that my work with them could help inspire them to continue to work hard in the classroom– especially Diana. I encouraged work while also

reassuring them that they weren't alone in their disdain for a lot of it. Letting them know that they're walking the road I and many others have walked before could help them with motivation and inspiration.

In my opinion, my relationship with them as a tutor went hand-in-hand with being their mentor. This may be a surprising comment, but I believe that my being a college student (and one who still vividly remembers my high school days at that) positions me in a unique place of influence. I'm not a middle aged teacher who grew up in a different world, who seems so far removed from any of the students' problems. I straddle both of those worlds. I have the experience and empathy for what they're going through (generally) and also have just enough insight in the "adult" world outside of high school. There were a few moments when I knew I couldn't be too friendly with them (like discussing drinking or partying), but I was generally able to balance my two positions effectively.

iii. My Role as a Future Educator

Like most other people, I don't consider myself too naive. I know that there are many, many people less fortunate than me in many, many different ways. I know that my high school experience is far from typical. I know that one's upbringing greatly affects their growth as a human and their performance in the classroom. I knew all of those things– but it was something else to *experience* it. I'm not saying this in a hollow display of pity, but as an expression of the compassionate fire that this experience has lit within me in regards to affordable, accessible, and comprehensive education. Just off of a cursory glance over the 2018-2020 CCHS School Growth Plan, I can see how much poverty and lack of education can continue perpetuating this vicious cycle. These kids are smart. They're talented. They're passionate. And they deserve to be living

up to their full potential, one that I believe has been significantly impacted due to the circumstances in which they were born. Whether that be into poverty, as a member of the disabled community, or a member of minoritized identities, these classifications can stack the odds significantly against these students' favors. Education should remove these shackles and historically, it has made revolutionary changes in communities around the globe.

This experience has been incredibly eye-opening. In the past, when I envisioned myself as an educator, I imagined being within the pristine campus of Woodward, surrounded by mostly privileged students and esteemed colleagues. The atmosphere at CCHS isn't any worse or better, but showed me how incredibly different and diverse the role of educator could be. Now, when I envision myself as a teacher, I can still see myself at Woodward, but I can also begin to imagine myself at a local public school, a local Montessori school, or even an alternative school like this one. There is clearly so much work to be done in any educational atmosphere, and I'm grateful to CCHS for opening up my eyes to the many possibilities of my future. This is noble and important work, whether one works at a private or alternative school.

VI. CONCLUSION

I grew a lot during time at Classic City High School. Not only did I grow as a future educator, but I grew as a person. I was so honored to have access to a classroom in which I could watch, observe, and interact as much as I wanted. This access proved to be invaluable because I found that while I was studying student-teacher interactions, methods of lecture, and even the posters on the walls, my synapses were firing and so many ideas and aspirations went through my head. I'm sure these starry-eyed thoughts cross the minds of all future educators. I know

public education in America is often a brutal world that's can be designed to break and wear down good-hearted people, but during my time I let myself bask in and explore my blind optimism for what I could achieve in the classroom. When it comes to my specific teaching style or how I will be different from my former teachers, I don't have a concrete plan yet. What I do know is that I hope to embody what it means to be compassionate. I want to exude a love and passion for life and learning that I've unfortunately found absent in most of my teachers in the past. I'm a firm believer in doing well in school, but also equally believe in cultivating out-of-school interests. I want to find the perfect balance between teacher and mentor by providing my students a role model to look up to as well as confide in. I want to encourage my students to take care of their mental health, physical health, and family, even if it means a slight dip in their school performance. I want to emphasize the importance of diligence and discipline, but equally or moreso, love and compassion. I believe teachers can make or break a student. Even though I've experienced too much of the latter, I can't help but remember my incredible experiences with the former with which I hope to join ranks, and this continues to motivate me every day.