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A Semester Experience at Classic City High School

When this semester first began, I came into this class with no knowledge of Classic City High School, the students that attended it, or what a semester of mentoring there would teach me. Due to a heavy course load and my over-involved schedule, I ended up mentoring at the night school, giving me a completely different experience than I was anticipating. Mentoring this semester pushed and challenged me in my ambitions as a future teacher, testing both my patience and my determination at times, but ultimately reaffirmed my desire to become an educator and my irrefutable passion for teaching.

The first aspect of Classic City that I had to adjust to was the structure of the school. At the night school, students worked independently on computers. They would take notes, do activities, and take pre and post tests all on their own, emphasizing the large benefit of technology in the classroom. The other aspect about classic city that was unusual to me was the fact that students could pick and choose which subject they wanted to go to. They had a choice of math, science, social studies, or English, and they could go to only one subject, all four, or anything in between during the evening. The structure of the night school largely contrasted with that of my own high school, where we went to all seven classes every day, and teachers gave us direct instruction in each class. However, the structure of classic city is able to benefit a wider range of students. A lot of the students I mentored with worked multiple jobs during the day or took care of their younger siblings while their parents were at work. Classic city offering a night

school and incorporating a format in which students can work at their own pace ultimately allowed for these students, and many others, to still get a high school diploma. However, this format sometimes did not benefit all students. Many of the kids in the classroom I was in had major trouble staying on task and attaining a good work ethic. Towards the end of the semester, this aspect became even more noticeable as some students buckled down in determination to graduate this semester, but others fell even more behind, often distracting other students as well. Because there was no direct instruction, the teachers in the classroom I mentored in often just sat at desks and graded papers instead of actively observing students, allowing them to easily be distracted by their cell phones and other students.

As a whole, all the teachers and administrators I met at Classic City were extremely nice and had obvious dedication to their students. If any students requested help on an assignment, all the teachers seemed more than willing to help them. I also noticed in my time at Classic City the unique relationships students had with the administrators and teachers at the school. Most of the students were a lot closer with their teachers than I was with mine in high school, and most of the teachers seemed to know their students on a personal level as well. During one of my first nights mentoring at Classic City, I proof read a student's essay she had been working on for a writing competition. After class, Ms. Mullins, the English teacher whose class I worked in at the night school, told me about this student and how she had come such a long way and made such large progress. However, Ms. Mullins also mentioned things about the student accomplishing so much and being the first person in her family who was going to graduate high school. It was this discussion that showed me how much the teachers at Classic City truly cared for their students and wanted them to do well. In regard to the teacher's decision to rely on technology instead of direct instruction, however, I think may have hurt more students than helped them. Although the

use of technology allowed students flexibility in their learning progress, the lack of direct instruction forced students to rely on themselves to learn the material by taking notes and completing the modules. I think if the students had gotten direct instruction as well as direct feedback from their teachers, they would more easily see how much their teachers believed in them, possibly motivating them to work harder and graduate with potentially less difficulty. As a mentor however, I think many of the students I worked with truly benefitted from having some direct instruction. I noticed that many of the students struggled not because they didn't understand the material, but more so because they didn't know how to be good test takers or how to apply their knowledge properly.

During my time mentoring at Classic City, I worked with different students almost every day I was there. Many of these students had varying personalities, but many shared a few common characteristics. Most of the students I worked with realized the importance of the work they were doing, but had very little self-confidence and self-assurance. They didn't believe in themselves to the point where they would make comments about not being smart or good at school. Many of these kids were African American or Hispanic and came from lower social classes. I think that these factors combined with their parents not placing a large emphasis on school or education put the students I worked with at a disadvantage. Because they had no real educational background or support from their parents about school, they didn't think they "fit in" to a learning environment or had the personal strength to get a diploma. Many of my students worked multiple jobs, placing school as their second priority in their lives. This was a complete contrast to my own high school experience, as my parents continuously supported me and emphasized the importance of education. However, many of my interactions with the students reminded me of the books I read for my book club in class. Our first book, My Age of Anxiety,

dealt with anxiety and related disorders, something in which I noticed a good amount of the kids at Classic City dealt with. Our second book, Boys will be Boys, discussed the literacy gap between males and females, which was also a large characteristic of Classic City. Most of the girls in the English class I mentored in took very detailed notes and took their work very seriously, something not as common among the boys of the class. Finally, my group's third book, Adolescent Lives in Transition, detailed students transitioning to a new school and dealing with socioeconomic status and ability grouping, something that was extremely relevant to many of the students at Classic City. I was honestly extremely glad we had read these books in my book club as they ultimately made me more aware of these topics and how to address them in the classroom.

As a whole in my time at Classic City, I feel I truly did reach my students as various levels. I had one student that I worked with multiple times during the semester that showed really large progress over the course of my visits to the high school. When I started working with him, he had really great potential to succeed on his own, but didn't know how to take tests well and had little confidence in himself. However, after working with him multiple times and showing that I believed in him, he started showing a large increase in his test scores on his own. Although I didn't have as close of a mentor-student relationship with many other students, I think I did help other students during the semester as well. There was one other student I worked with at the end of my time at Classic City who I had a long conversation with about graduating and how important it was and how big of an accomplishment it was, as he was right on the borderline of possibly graduating this semester or not. After our conversation, he seemed a good bit more determined and slacking off less during class. Both of these experiences made me feel extremely proud of the students and just as glad that I am studying to become a teacher. I feel like my

experience at Classic City has made me not only a better, more open person, but also a stronger future teacher. Although I didn't make an impact on every student I worked with, seeing such large progress in a few students made my whole mentoring experience worth it. Going to Classic City made me understand the challenges of being at an alternative high school, but also the huge reward you can get from truly dedicating yourself to the students and the school. Through this experience I learned that teaching situations may not always be easy or ideal, but if you're truly passionate about being an educator and immerse yourself in your teaching, it will always be worthwhile.