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### Service Learning Reflection

I can still feel the anxious look on my face walking into my Classic City classroom for the first time. I can feel that my students are receptive to my unconfident and nervous look. One young lady gave me a very quick smirk, and rolls her eyes and I look down at my feet. I'm from North Fulton, and I went to Alpharetta High school. I finally realize for possibly the first time that I attended one of the richer public high schools in Georgia. These students have no idea what I've had to go through to get to this point, but neither do I for them. The first day goes by and when the period ends I sit in my car and cry for a while. I don't know if I will be able to make a noticeable difference in the lives of these children or children similar to these.

My second week after I had gotten my feet wet, my group in LLED had begun reading *The Colors of Poverty*. Going to the school really began to take a hit to my heart when I delved deeper into the book. I began doing my own research and ended up discovering the politics that goes into a place like Athens. I learn what redlining is, the statistics of people of color owning a car versus white people, stories of people changing their ethnic names to white washed names on resumes, statistics of people of color being arrested versus whites, etc. I begin to really apply this lens to my students at the high school. My teacher at the high school preferred that I work with all of the students when they needed, since he had quite a few students with IEP's that could use the extra help. Students would then request for my help on an as need basis while I was in the

*\*The names in this reflection have been changed for confidentiality.*

class, and I would make my rounds and re-explain material that came across confusing. I made an extreme effort to get to know these students not only on an academic level, but on a personal level. This school appears to be something of a family. There are no cool kids and uncool kids; there is no popular crowd. These kids have all had to struggle in some form or fashion, and they are courageous- but they are children. As I mentor longer at this high school I realize even they do not understand or grasp that they are *just* children despite the adult circumstances they have been placed into.

The motivation to be in the classroom is dehydrated and detrimentally suffering for these students. They understand the disadvantages that have been placed onto them; many have not been raised in neighborhoods or settings with high values on education. Most of the students have jobs just to support themselves, and yet they are chastised by people who have the upper hand for not chasing an education in a culture that turns its head away from the strategic setbacks they face to even get one. I begin to really see the notations in *The Colors of Poverty* existing in my own classroom. The students eventually really begin to talk to me about the issues they face.

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> week, I'm learning about these students in ways that send me back to my college apartment wanting to give them everything I have at mentoring. Jose went years without seeing his father and he suffers from depression, but Jose really wants to be a history teacher. Isaiah tells me that he suffers from depression extremely and that his medicine helps, but now he feels fat. He's bisexual, feels judged, and feels that everyone is skinnier than he is. You would never know these internal battles he faces when he comes to class. He's always laughing, smiling, joking. Bre came to Classic City because she was bullied. She tells me she has finally found her family here at Classic City. She planned the school's first ever prom this year almost entirely by herself; she wants to start at community college and eventually transfer to

Appalachian State. She tells me that she feels like the playing field is more evened out on the social sector at Classic City, and everyone just supports each other. Jesse's family lives in Texas and she doesn't see them; she currently lives with a friend. She also is always smiling, and belly laughing. Janessa and Sara also don't live with their parents; they commute generally far, and attendance is a frequent problem for them. I overhear students murmuring that they are hanging out with the wrong crowd from another high school. Sandra is 17, and lives with her boyfriend. She tells me that her parents don't really care what she's doing at this point as long as she's not in jail. After she says this, about 6 students who over hear that statement agree that it relates to them as well. She hasn't lived at home in some time. Mason tells me that his childhood trauma has made him really hate everyone. He continues by telling me that he hates human nature innately, but that somehow he still wants to help people. Just wants to be a counselor. He tells me at least one incredible trivia fact or scientific joke every time I come to the school.

By my 5<sup>th</sup> time at the school, Mason tells me that he has struggled with the idea of a God and one night when he was very angry, he told this God that He had no power and was not real. That night, a lightning bolt hit power lines on his street, and his house was the only one to lose power. He told me that's when he started to think God's presence could be legitimate. We laughed together, and he continued to tell me about his love for fan fiction. Mason will most likely be his class' valedictorian, and tells me it really doesn't matter. His sister was valedictorian, and a lot of colleges still denied her acceptance, with the remark that Classic City is not considered a legitimized high school to a lot of universities.

Lyle has grown up in a racist home, and makes racist remarks that he doesn't even realize are hurtful. He tells me that everyone in his class are his friends, and that they know he's joking- but the students are often angered by his comments. He tells me that he used to have a boyfriend

but that he's not gay anymore. Students have often teased him in the past for his sexual orientation. Jakobi loves to draw, and comes to class with an anime picture for me. He is extremely talented, and wants to pursue some form of illustration. Sam is a very small and pretty young lady, but about 5 weeks in I notice she has scars on her thighs from where she has clearly self-harmed in the past. She tells me they are old and she wishes they would disappear, and that she has grown a lot since then. Her and Gaby are huge feminists and hate "slut shaming". They are very passionate about the empowerment of women from other women. They miss class often, and other students tell me they smoke marijuana too much for their own good, but that they are extremely intelligent girls.

Through-out the course of working at this school, I began to really understand the pages of the books I was reading: *White Lies*, *The Colors of Poverty*, and *Why Literature Matters to Girls* but through my students. I felt like I was reading the books but that my students were teaching the material to me without even meaning to. Sam and Gaby taught me about why women need to encourage each other in order to be more represented in our culture. We are allowed to be sexual beings, and simultaneously demand respect. We are not everything that the media makes us. We now have the potential to identify ourselves, our bodies, and our minds. I learn about the struggles of depression, PTSD, and anxiety not only from a first-hand experience, and from books in college courses, but I hear the struggles from the voices of my students. I am finally able to practice skills of constant positive reinforcement and praise to provide motivation for my students. I learn from Mikayla and many others the struggles of poverty. The frustration of seeing her mother work at a UGA café for white middle class students who treat her with disrespect, and have more than they can ever understand. Sam tells me that it infuriates her to see

preppy white students walk around Athens, when they are blissfully unaware that the majority of the people who live here are extremely poor.

Once the students had begun to really open up to me about issues they individually face, I was able to start working teaching techniques into my mentor relationship with the students. Constant positive reinforcement, reminding the students of their intelligence and worth, providing personal insight as to why education may be a struggle but how it can benefit them, etc. I was able to connect with my students on music artists that talk about the issues they face, and point out that a lot of these artists have taken the time to educate themselves on the social sciences that formulaically created their disadvantaged situation. I often discover my specific teacher struggles with behavior management due to the fact that this safe space is one of the very few places that these kids are able to simply be the adolescent people that they are without having to fully focus on the setbacks they constantly see. They are able to socially interact, and laugh. The teacher utilizes group work and instruction, and keeps the classroom active. He takes the students out to a butterfly garden, and has them harvest honey from bee hives. Dr. Maudsley provides first hand instruction, while also giving the students the ability to bond and interact. I don't remember a single class where my instructor lectured for the whole period. The students remark to me about Dr. Maudsley and make comments like "you can tell this is what he loves to do" and "he is the happiest man I have ever met". Working with this instructor has benefitted me in ways I don't deserve, and I have gotten to see teaching strategies I learn about in EPSY and SPED classes played out in real time. This service learning experience encompassed huge topics and approaches to teaching that were addressed in my education classes and especially my once loved sociology class without the students' intention or even their knowledge that it was happening.

I have included bit and pieces of each of the students I worked with this semester because many of their voices are beautiful, broken, intelligent, and urgent. They each burst in my heart, and scream in my mind when I have to leave that school each week. I feel as though I've done not nearly enough for these beautiful people, and that they have given me more perspective and insight than I could have ever found in a college classroom or lecture hall. This experience is not something you find at an Ivy League school, North Fulton high schools, or even just solely at UGA. The hidden gem that is Classic City high school is one of my very favorite places, and I hope with everything in my heart that these students are able to really tune into their specific talents and craft them to a degree that I know they are able to attain.