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Education Narrative

Tagged

*“This means dumb. If you don’t want this scenario to happen again, study as hard as you can. If you can’t totally understand the language of the country where you live, what is the difference between those people who are deaf, blind, and you?” --- Uncle Li*

*“My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America.” –Malcolm X*

When I walked into my ESL classroom at PS 131 in Lower Manhattan, I was 13 years old, in sixth grade. I had just come to America and got placed in a bilingual classroom for Chinese students who speak English as a Second Language (ESL). All the kids in the room were Chinese. I heard someone say “Ni hao” ( which means Hello ). I sat right next to him and tried to make friends with him because I’m new to this country. Instantly, I felt a sort of connection between me and the kid who was speaking my native language. In general, it's nervous because it was my first day at an American school.

The classroom was very crowded with many students seated in chairs. Since it was the first day, everyone was paying attention. It was quiet that I could hear the clock spinning on the top of the black board until my teacher started to announce an activity and distribute sticky notes. She wanted us to write down our name, age, and hobby, just so she could understand more about us. I felt stressed then I started sweating at that moment because of my poor English, but the kid that was sitting next to me translated for me. Later on, I asked him, “How do you say, ‘我不懂’’(I don’t know) in English?" I wrote down what I heard from him:  ‘I dong know'. This was the closest way I could write “I don’t know” in English. I couldn't identify the errors with my limited English language skills, but this looked correct to me. Then I handed in my work.

During the class lesson, I was looking down at my notebook because I couldn’t understand and I felt bored. My sight was constantly switching between the clock above the blackboard and the teacher. I was hoping the class would end soon. Suddenly, my classmates looked at me and laughed a little bit, and then I was confused. So I started laughing a little with them for no reason. Actually I don't have a clue what they were laughing at, but it was a moment I felt I belonged to a group.

After class, as soon as I walked out of the school. I felt other kids staring at me and laughing, but I didn’t know why. I kept turning my head back. I heard kids laughing behind me. I wondered what they were laughing at. Is it my shoes, sweatpants or hoodies ? Or my appearance? Do they want to bully me? These questions kept flushing into my mind. I felt the situation was kind of odd. The school kids were talking to me, but I didn’t understand what they were saying.

 I felt scared, so I just started running as fast as I could toward my apartment. My heart was beating, my sweat dripping down my jaw. My apartment is eight blocks away from my school. I had just arrived in the United States two months ago, so I couldn't find the exact way to go home. Fortunately, there is a church near my apartment, with a large cross on the top. The cross leads me to my home.

As I was running, my uncle Li saw me and shouted out my name, “Fan!” I recognized his voice; it felt like a relief from anxiety. “What is this?” he said. He grabbed me by the wrist and then peeled off sticky notes from my backpack. At that moment, I realized what all the laughing was about. I hadn’t felt anyone tapping my back. Somebody might have stuck it on my back with a soft touch.

Staring at the sticky note, my uncle understood right away. He said, “This word means ‘dumb.’ If you don’t want this scenario to happen again, study as hard as you can. If you can’t totally understand the language of a country that you are living in, what is the difference between people who are deaf, blind, and you?" At that moment, it didn’t hurt so much because I couldn't recognize the word “stupid.” That was the very first insult I learned in English. I felt depressed for learning something new in this way.

On the way home, I remained silent. I kept thinking about it until I closed my eyes while I was on my bed. Were they laughing at my skin color? Or my poor English? Therefore, I made some changes after that day by carrying an English- to- Chinese dictionary with me. The purpose of using a bilingual dictionary is I want to learn English in a direct way and strengthen my Chinese.

In high school, using my bilingual dictionary, I wrote Chinese definitions under every unfamiliar word. As my vocabulary increased, I began to understand more lessons in other classes. In my social studies class, I learned about stereotypes of Chinese in the 18 century: a skinny man with a half-bald skull and a long braid in his back, who often can’t properly speak English and earns the lowest hourly rate. Later in the 21 century, the Chinese stereotype changed and they became seen as intelligent in math but still, they lacked physical potential and power. Stereotypes make me, as well as other groups of people suffer.

A few weeks ago in my college English class, I was reading Malcolm X’s “Prison Studies.” This brought me back to that day when I was a 13 year old kid in middle school. Malcolm X’s words are related to me because they remind me of every step in my educational journey.

From Malcolm X's thoughts I understand how being unable to read and write hurts his people. *“My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America.” –Malcolm X*

I felt the same hurt when I saw people in my Chinese community being kept behind by their lack of English speaking skills. In my Chinese neighbors, I see the pain of being illiterate in America. They often work in the back of the kitchen. They had a blank resume. They know a few words but can't combine them into sentences. Also, I see the pain of being “deaf, blind,” in my own mother’s life in America because her language was limited. I must take her around on the subway, read mail for her, and I answer calls for her.

I am the victim of this stereotype. People think I’m good at math for no reason. So a math teacher will have high expectations of Chinese students, but I actually have average math abilities, and I am an average math student, doing normally in every other subject like an average student is supposed to do.

PART TWO

*“Do you want to go to college? Because you didn't pass your test there will be fewer options of course for you. Or do you want to spend one more year in another program called CUNY Start? !” - Ms. R*

*“Where else but in prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely, sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day” - Malcolm X.*

Ten years later, I have now graduated from International High School at Union Square. I am in Brooklyn, in another City Tech building attending the CLIP (the CUNY Language Immersion Program). The CLIP environment is like a battlefield with people from different ethnicities. Students study eight hours per day. Their classwork is their trenches and their pens are their weapons, to kill every essay. Students must complete one essay each week, 1000 words.

Every day was so busy that I couldn't even bite my sandwich in a 15-minute break. I couldn’t see the lights of my future. I didn’t even know the purpose of doing classwork because I just wanted to take the final test, which I had not passed in the previous fall. At first, I found the classwork helpful, but then it got boring and I felt like I was reading constantly. I often fall asleep somehow during the class process. I can’t leave and I am not interested in it but I have to be there. It seems like a jail to me. Due to the lack of studying even though I thought I was prepared, in fact, I am not. I still had problems with punctuation and sentence structure.

I took the test at the end of the semester, and I was waiting for the result from Ms.R. She spoke to me, and I was expecting good news. Instead what I heard was *“Do you want to go to college? Because you didn't pass your test. There will be fewer options. Do you want to spend one more year in another program called CUNY Start? ”*

 At that moment. I consider myself a piece of rotten wood, without spirit, but her words ignited me. My teacher told me she’s doubling my potential in handling college work, by asking me these questions but I was in a hurry to pass the test. Her words ignited rotten wood in my mind and it made me want to prove myself. So I participate in one more semester, by doing homework and classwork and I study a lot about writing a long article. I work so hard because I really want to pass the test. I appreciate her for motivating me. As a result, I passed the writing test.

 Just like Malcolm said, *“Where else but in prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day” In* my situation, Clip was my prison. It's a perfect environment for me to adjust my attitude towards work. This is a large progress in my educational journey. I changed my dictionary to an English dictionary. It's a proof of my vocabulary advance by reading the definition of the words.

In “Prison Studies” by Malcolm X, he states that the prison environment helped him to be more focused on his studies. In the last sentence, he said *“Where else but in prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day”* which proves he appreciated being able to study in jail.

 In this case, his knowledge expands by self studying in prison. He saw many negative parts of black history. He said, *“My homemade education gave me, with every additional book that I read, a little bit more sensitivity to the deafness, dumbness, and blindness that was afflicting the black race in America.”* The stereotype was limiting our possibilities. For example, from my own observation fewer Chinese students were participating in writing courses. As I read articles I can feel how important it is to read, listen and think. Even though the image I gathered from my class was a fabricated Asian impression, I can see the impact on Asian students. They were tagged.