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English, Please: A Reflection of Cultural Identity in Our School System

Welcome to the American education system, where mispronounced names are normal. Welcome to a system, where ELL students need to take the same English MCAS as those who have grown up speaking the language. Open the doors, and welcome a system that keeps windows to other cultures closed. When students of foreign cultures enter the American educational system, elements of cultures that do not reflect American society end up discarded. Languages are lost, traditions are trashed, and backgrounds are banished.

Structurally, American schools fully accentuate the make-up of a melting pot, disfiguring if not completely eliminating the unique constituents of individual cultures; in other words, the schools melt these distinctive cultures into one indistinguishable whole. Author Tina Zhu from Trinity College emphasizes this crisis. Highlighting the paradoxical nature of having the metaphor "used to represent the fusion of foreign cultures from immigrants and American culture," she points out that "schools [were] one of the vital 'tools' that many advocates promoted to 'melt' the immigrants' cultures and Americanize the foreign population" (Zhu 7). Schools are used to break down foreign cultures, homogenizing students so they can fit in. This is not done unintentionally– schools are made purely for this exact function. Through academics and social cues forcing a shift in culture, individuals end up losing vital parts of their core beliefs and customs. In my own experiences, from a lack of cultural variance in the food sold in the cafeteria to the unapologetically blatant focus on Western history—even in World History

classes—I can attest that I have been in touch with a culture that is not my own. I have met individuals who have lost key parts of their heritage, yet are so unaware that they do not know what they have lost.

On the other hand, one could incorrectly argue that the American culture is a blend of qualities from many unique cultures, allowing for a more streamlined, welcoming environment. Christina L. Lash makes a statement parallel to this sentiment in her *Making Americans: Schooling, Diversity, and Assimilation in the Twenty-First Century*, saying "...a social context emerges in which a 'true American' includes the cultural attributes of particular ethnic minority groups, facilitating the national identification of minority students and their definition of American in multicultural terms" (Lash 2). Although a fair point at first glance, even if schools preserve some qualities to define the American culture, other qualities are still discarded. The quote describes this situation as an acceptable event; in reality, not only do students end up confused about who they are, they lose key elements of where they came from.

For those who do end up keeping some unique aspects of their own culture, they become victims of their own values. To facilitate this, the school system uses another tactic: isolation. A seemingly harmless yet clear example viewed in many American schools would be what educator Alicia Huculak experienced when teaching. Reflecting, Huculak mentioned that "[i]n option classes I ask my students whom I only see twice a week to take off their hoods. I often scan the room for who has not yet done so and my eyes fall on the young Muslim girl wearing her hijab…she nervously awaits to see if I will ask her to remove it. I never do of course… but the fabric on her head always directs my eyes" (Huculak 1). Although Huculak did not make the Muslim girl take off her hijab, the split second of focus was all that was necessary for her to feel "othered". Albeit unintentional, some rules in school—such as the no-hood rule—end up

singling out those whose cultures “violate” said rules, only carving the demarcation further. This is a prime example of the enmity the school system holds for those not “American” enough. Rules and social cues like these only further drive students of foreign backgrounds from their cultures.

ELL students, fresh to the jaws of “Americanization,” experience this divide to an even greater degree. Said by student Jhosselin Guevara when interviewed by Ginger Thompson from the New York Times, “Maybe the teachers are trying to protect us,... there are people who do not want us here at all” (Thompson 5). The author quotes Guevara in response to the immigrant student experience in Cecil D. Hylton High School—having a completely separated curriculum, cleaved from the rest of the students—showing that students are aware of this isolation. People like Guevara accept and understand that this is because they are supposedly different from the rest. Admittedly, this interview took place ten years ago; however, although time has passed, the improvement of the situation is minimal. ELL students still take many separate classes, isolating them from the overall population. With students of different cultures being forced to either conform to American standards or detach themselves from their classmates entirely, they gravitate to the former option—after all, at least they would be able to make friends that way. Regardless, the divide is evident.

The effects of these circumstances do not only affect life at school; the environment at home is yet another victim. Author Jenny Liao unfortunately found herself in one such situation, “hav[ing] so much to say” to her parents in her language, “but the Cantonese words are just out of reach, [her] tongue unable to retrieve them after being neglected in favor of English for so long” (Liao 3). By being forced to speak English, students end up losing their own cultural language. Family life is harmed greatly this way—the author herself, although nauseated by the

circumstance, ends up accepting that she has lost the ability to speak the language she was raised with. Such situations are reflected in many immigrant and immigrant-descendant households across America. A Western focus on school has pushed those who cannot fit in to break apart the very values they hold and believe just to be identified by a standard—a standard only present in schools, not at home.

One may say that assimilation does happen, but the extent to which is highly oversold. "But can't you be American and still have your own distinct culture, even if it is from outside of the United States? Immigrants do assimilate in certain areas in order to adjust to the 'American way', but overall, they keep their cultural identity" (Melting Pot 4). Overall, the cultural identity would remain the same! The culture can remain distinct, even if it is not considered part of America! This point is objectively wrong. So many elements of culture are lost; Karina Zapata of the Calgary Journal even says that "studies show that mother tongues are often completely lost after the third generation of immigration, forcing children of immigrants to learn their heritage languages on their own" (Zapata 6). Is the loss of a language not harmful enough? With ethnic languages washed away by the tide of time, it is clear that maintaining cultural identity is an utter struggle.

The effect of the American school system on an individual of a foreign culture is an indisputable problem. However, with more awareness—from educators, parents, and immigrants—brought to the issue, hope for a fix glimmers bright, lighting a bleak void. With enough strength, maybe that closed window to other cultures will finally open up, giving a cool, welcoming breeze for anyone and everyone.

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