

Vaishnavi Harish

Ms. Kristen Small

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Success lies in Differences

People have made assumptions about those different to them ever since the Age of Exploration. During this era, colonialists would assume that the civilizations of the “Other World” were lesser than the Europeans, and would consider it their duty to “help” them by forcing them to conform to a European way of life. Sadly, this type of thinking has continued to the American school system, where authority figures make assumptions about their students’ abilities and personalities on no basis but their backgrounds. Would a child thrive in an environment where they are expected to act a certain way simply because of their background? In this way, conformity, or behavior in accordance with socially acceptable standards, is rooted in stereotypes. If a child is told by their peers that being popular makes them horrible, or a student is told by their teachers not to aim any higher than what is expected of someone of their race or background, more often than not they will mold themselves to this standard for the sake of social acceptance. Stereotypes and conformity limit a student’s potential and discourage them to aim outside of a set standard. In order to create a successful school system where students are free to explore their own identity and pursue their own interests, authority figures should dismantle these stereotypes and encourage students to do the same. There have been varying takes regarding assimilation and conformity in modern-day education, but I agree with the idea that a student’s conformity to social standards does not imply they will be successful. Henry Ward Beecher, a popular clergyman from the mid nineteenth century, states that assimilation is beneficial to the school system and creates a community of strong-willed, like-minded people. On the other hand, John Dewey, an education reformer, wrote that individuals should be free to develop their own skills without worrying about the skills of others or trying to obtain the skills of others. I believe that in order to create a successful school system, administration should function by the principle of the second author and not “reduce as many individuals as possible to

the same safe level,” as H.L. Mencken wrote, but encouraged the fostering of unique skills no matter a student’s background or social status.

Conformity is equally as dangerous when instigated by students. In an excerpt from *The Geeks Shall Inherit the Earth*, Alexandra Robbins introduces Whitney, a popular girl from a New York high school, and describes her daily routine. As part of her friend group, she joins them in harassing other students and labeling them on the basis of whether or not they fit a set of criteria to be deemed “cool,” while the teachers are mere bystanders. Labels, when imposed on a student by another, are harmful as the student’s sense of identity is compromised. Even more serious is the popular kids’ bullying of others who do not conform to their standards. These stereotypes do not just harm the unpopular kids, however. Whitney states in her interview that she is forced to act this way because if she “wasn’t like this, [she] wouldn’t have any friends” (Robbins). Because of the pressure to conform to their peers’ standards, students are given stereotypes based on who they associate with, and this results in a vicious cycle where students like Whitney feel trapped and “stuck... until graduation, no matter what” (Robbins). While I agree with Robbin’s criticism of societal pressure, I do not agree with her statement that the unpopular kids, or “cafeteria fringe,” will become successful later in life because of their nonconformity. Not only does this assign expectations to nonconformist students, therefore creating yet another stereotype, it also implies that popular kids will not succeed in life. While the popular kids’ potential is limited, it is because of statements like these that become stereotypes and add fuel to peer pressure and conformity. To break out of this cycle, students and teachers must work together and acknowledge each others’ differences instead of advocating for a certain social group, like how the teachers did in this excerpt and how Robbins does when she states that the geeks and nonconformists will “inherit the earth.” Schools need to foster and develop individual skills before assigning expectations based on their supposed group, because this will translate to students who will limit themselves.

A common critique of an individual-focused school system is also a critique used against Montessori schools, schools at which most of the focus of teachers is centered on individual development. I believe that a focus on improving an individual’s skills instead of suppressing them because of

inconvenience would be more beneficial to the student. In this way, a Montessori school system enables students to successfully integrate into an intellectually and emotionally diverse society. Some say that fostering a child's independent skills will isolate them from the rest of their peers. However, in Montessori schools, children often spend time together and complete group work, which is integral when raising a child to live in a world where there are so many different types of people. If students are raised to conform to a single mold, they will not gain the experience of interacting in a diverse society. Another critique of this schooling system is that students will have "too much freedom". While students are free to choose what to work on, teachers have a large role in structuring classes to guide and maximize student potential. A Montessori school system is not without disadvantages, but in many ways the school system fosters a unique mindset and encourages students to set goals for themselves instead of conforming to rules others set for them.

Unfortunately, teachers often indirectly elicit conformity from students when making assumptions about them. When an authority figure sets a rule for a child's behavior and etiquette based on nothing but their identity, it is a stereotype. According to a study from Betterhelp, teachers "[prefer] Asian-American over African-American and Latino students because of the stereotype that Asian- American students are more academically successful". This can discourage other students and cause resentment to build up against Asian-Americans. This is part of a phenomenon known as the "model minority" myth, which is the cultural expectation that all Asian-Americans are naturally gifted, docile, and hard-working (University of Texas). This places unreasonable expectations onto Asian-American students, and may pressure them into trying to "present a certain identity" to conform to this standard (Betterhelp). Teacher-placed stereotypes can go the other way as well. If a teacher assumes a student will not perform well, it is likely that the student will "become distracted and anxious and then underperform in a manner consistent to [a negative] stereotype" (Cornell University). If teachers hold expectations for students based on actions and not background or social status, more students would be encouraged to set reasonable goals for themselves. An account by Theodore Sizer describes his experience in a diverse classroom as a visiting teacher. He states, "My impressions of these kids... immediately evoked

stereotypes” despite the fact that he tried to maintain an unbiased view of the students (Sizer). After they began to work on the narrative assignment given by him, however, he states that “only [one child] proved true to form...”, implying that the others defied his “expectations” that he unconsciously set for them (Sizer). Sizer expresses that the children who couldn’t write English could create rich ideas, while the sole white girl struggled to organize her thoughts.

Stereotypes not only harm a student’s self esteem, but also demotivate and demoralize a whole demographic. Maya Angelou, an American memoirist, shares her experience with harmful stereotypes in her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where she explains how two white speakers at her graduation focused more on promoting their own campaign rather than celebrating the children. Their half-hearted assurance that the Black boys would follow in the footsteps of two prominent Black figures, ignoring the girls completely, showed their disregard for the true significance of the graduation. Angelou wrote that she felt trapped by their words, wondering who gave the white speakers the right to decide their future based on their race and gender. At that moment she felt as if “the accomplishment meant nothing...anything higher [than maids and farmers] that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous” (Angelou). When people, especially people in positions of authority, impose stereotypes onto children, they are demoralized and discouraged from aspiring to higher than what is expected of them, thus resulting in their conforming to “acceptable” social standards.

However, Angelou realizes that being different from society’s expectations does not mean that she will be unsuccessful. As Robbins says, it simply means she is a different kind of successful. More students and teachers need to see and encourage each other’s actions and achievements instead of adhering to their own prejudices and assumptions. People are so much more than just a stereotype. A school system that acknowledges its students’ differences, and encourages the students to develop their identity instead of subduing it, is a school system that will produce bright, unique individuals.

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