

The Value of Identity from the Start

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By the first hour of my first day of kindergarten, I had heard “Say ‘hi,’ Sienna” from my mom about a hundred times.

I stood behind my teacher when she introduced me to the class. I ducked my head, stared at my shining, coruscant ballet flats, and whispered as feebly as possible, “Hello.”

That was the only word I knew in English.

I saw that some of my classmates snickered and very audibly attempted to imitate how I spoke. Others whispered and pointed their fingers at me, as if my Asian “exoticism” was a foreign contaminant that could somehow infect the class.

For the next two years, I made a silent resolve to avoid socializing altogether. I didn’t want kids mimicking how I spoke, and it gave me the excuse to not be obligated to answer the unfiltered questions I knew everyone wanted to ask me.

By the third grade, groups of girls were impersonating me by blabbering gibberish as my Mandarin, and pulling at the corners of their eyes behind my back.

Thus, I forced a stoic, protective facade over my true identity, shrinking back into a silent reticence of social evasion.

This does still linger with me to the present day, for I do have a more indrawn nature and very often prefer solitude over intimacy.

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This is not to say that I am solely a victim of prejudice and acts of hate. There was once a very apprehensive, timid Black girl in my second grade class. Many times, when our teacher was not paying attention, a group of White girls would pour scorn on her for trivial matters.

Knowing that I was quiet and docile as well, they told me to do the same. I did feel inclined to, because it was one of the few opportunities I had for societal acceptance.

Yet, I knew that there was a fundamental insecurity that the girls were projecting onto the timid girl. I was young and didn't exactly know what it was, but I knew that demoralization was wrong.

She was exactly like me. She never spoke a word, but I knew we had so much in common. We were both afraid to speak out because we were different. We feared that saying something would get us further rejected and criticized.

So, I decided to befriend her. What would it hurt? I didn't have any other friends and, if anything, we could come out of our shells together.

In the end it didn't matter, and our friendship didn't last, because she didn't last very long. She and her family subsequently left the town or moved schools—I don't know where life took her. I don't think I ever will.

Already, as a young child, I knew that the community had an ingrained difficulty accepting people like me of a minority race. With White being the majority race, it was an inexorable curiosity that the youth would eventually weigh up: Was there room for kids who were "different"? Did we even belong here?

Young children may just be curious, but they are much more susceptible to bias or oppose those from various ethnic backgrounds, or those that are visibly different from everyone else. Neutrality is not always in their disposition.

Although, I will say, hate, bullying, and prejudice happen to be much less prevalent in the higher grades. The reason for this might be higher stakes that have been implemented to breaking rules of conduct against discrimination of race, religion, sexuality, etc.

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However, we must not forget that growing our youth properly is vital for the flourishing of the individuals and young adults that we will become.

From the start when a child feels out of place, it molds their personality and their perspectives on their individual lives differently. Almost invariably, being shunned at a young age by peers can have a lasting residue on one's dignity and inherent qualities.

To prevent the silence of minority voices, we must raise them from the beginning. Children that enter kindergarten or new schools are often shy and unsure of themselves, which is a rational fear. Cliques start to be made after introductions—especially those who are inherently a bit more extroverted than others.

Coming from someone who, as a child, just missed the train to be in any closely-knit clique, this is probably the most essential part about a kindergartener's experience.

Bonding activities can be administered to implement more inclusivity. For instance, random pairing with a buddy, class matching activities for similarity, and writing notes to classmates that compliment their unique and likeable qualities can all build rapport over time.

Besides classroom engagement, primary schools can have guest speakers discuss the benefits of inclusivity and how to speak up from identity-based bullying or bias.

The community in general can also practice accepting unique qualities as special and welcome. This may contribute to more meaningful and sustainable connections, which is indispensable for our town's youth.

Each person in this town deserves to get their voice heard. Those that have contrasting races, religions, or identity orientations are distinct, but not incompatible—we just need to be more accepting and see the different as people we can thrive and grow our youth with.

As I have grown into an adolescent, nevertheless, my morale has been augmented so that I can be the individual I am today. I take pride in the fact that I get to live with so many perspectives to ultimately mold me into an empathetic and discerning adult. I'm looking forward to the day where I can call myself that.

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I am, of course, proud to be part of this community with exceptional education and boundless opportunities. I just do wish I could go back in time and adjust my younger self to be a more confident being.

I wish I could tell that girl with the shining, coruscant ballet flats and a dimpled, cheeky smile that everything you have to say is valued and the world is waiting for your worth to shine through.