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Language Doesn't Define Identity

“Why don’t you know Spanish?”, they asked me judgmentally. An overwhelming feeling of being unwelcome washed over me. I have never felt like such an outcast before. Many people that are part of Latino community tend to link how much someone knows a language to how much that person respects or how connected they are to their own heritage. A seemingly small assumption like this can create a harmful environment in communities and can only create a divide. On one hand, there have been strangers who have perceived me as someone who knew both English and Spanish. Which are usually those from Latin countries or have Latin descent. On the other hand, there's the great bunch of American people who assume that I only speak Spanish from first glance, though English is the only language I know fluently. I always knew that language was an amazing tool for communication, but I never felt inadequate for only knowing one language until I started getting questioned by my peers and community. They would take my lack of Spanish, try to dismiss my ethnicity and hardships, take a jab at my mom for “depriving” me, and create a barrier between me and my community.

I never knew that language would put me in an identity crisis until I started getting bullied for it. Before 7th grade, I was never asked if I knew Spanish or not. Others would just conclude that on their own. I went to a more diverse middle school for being in the suburbs, so I would have a history class that had a few other Latino kids like me. One day during class, some of my peers were having a conversation in Spanish and tried to include me, which resulted with me having a puzzled look on my face. The

realization hit them and said, “You don’t know Spanish?” in a critical tone. I couldn't comprehend why it was such a big deal, and I said, “I understand it, but I can’t speak it”. They proceeded to say, “You aren’t even Mexican then, you’re a white girl”. I would look at them and myself, we both had similar ethnic features and backgrounds. This conversation continued to replay in my mind and daunted me every time I saw them in class. After learning that I didn’t speak Spanish, it ended up being something they would hold over me. They used this new fun fact to pick on me for the rest of the year. It went on for so long that I ended up spiraling in an identity crisis. “Maybe I am not Mexican enough to call myself a person of color”, was what I thought.

It was 2016 around the time this personal crisis was happening, which made things even more confusing for me. There was a rising amount hatred toward the Latino community with the political campaigns going on. I faced a lot of racism and bigotry during this period of my life, people calling my parents drug dealers, saying that I don’t belong in America, and that they were going to build a wall to keep me away. Not only did I struggle with the racism from the political climate, but I was also constantly trying to prove that I am worth not giving up on in school. I had to make sure that I was always on top of my work and show extra interest to make sure that my teachers saw my potential. In class, I would get pulled out of nowhere to go through a humiliating reading test, only to prove that I did speak English fluently. I had to sit in a room with a teacher, who pointed at words so slowly for me to read, making it seem as if I hadn’t been reading since I was in kindergarten. Which I later found out was only happening to kids of color. These were all unique experiences that a majority of POC could potentially relate to in a way, but I didn’t feel that I had a right to confide in anyone because “I’m not Mexican enough”. I eventually realized that just because I didn’t know the language, doesn’t mean that my experiences and ethnicity are taken away all together. I went through hardships that white people may never be able to understand because I am a Mexican/Salvadoran American. Even though I have come to terms with the fact that I am just a Latina that doesn’t speak Spanish, there was still a sense of guilt that came with not being able to communicate with Spanish speakers.

Many people, including my own family, would assume that I was stripped from my own culture because I didn't speak Spanish fluently. In addition to assuming my disconnectedness, they would pin the blame on my mother. I would feel more shameful after each time someone would look at me pitifully when I told them my embarrassing "secret". I didn't know how to communicate fully with my extended family, which in time turned into a disgraceful thing. I noticed that my family members would ask my mother why she didn't teach me Spanish and look at me like I was not participating in all the traditions they do. Not only was I self-conscious with my family, but also total strangers.

Once I started working in customer service, being in uncomfortable situations became a frequent thing. Many people would ask why I didn't learn Spanish and think that my mom was a bad parent for not teaching me. After a while of hearing other people's opinions and assumptions, I would start to grow more resentful towards my mom. I went home crying one day after someone called me a "No Sabo kid" (I don't know kid), which is a derogatory term used to refer to kids of Latino descent that don't know or barely speak any Spanish. I asked my mom, "Why haven't you taught me Spanish?". She then answered, "I didn't want you to struggle like I did. Always being confused with both languages, and not being able to be fully proficient in both." She also explained that I always have the chance to learn later at my own pace. I still held a grudge even though my mom had explained why she raised me the way she did. As I grew a bit older, I was able to understand what my mom had said. I had a few more discussions with my mom about how she raised me throughout the years and my connection to culture. I now reflect on what my mom once said to me and can see why she made sure that I was fluent in one language first. She wanted me to be able to exceed in school and to feel confident when it came to my English because I did grow up in a predominantly white area. I regretted being so hard on my mom. I was being like everyone else who was looking down on her. This was her way of protecting me, which I am very grateful for now. I came to the conclusion that it isn't something to be ashamed of when you assimilate to a culture around you, and it doesn't make you any more distant from your roots. I still went to Quinceanera's, Day of the dead gatherings, and family functions every weekend. I would eat traditional Mexican foods, celebrate the

dead when someone has passed by giving offerings and participated in South American dances. These are things that people assumed I was “deprived” of, but the only difference between me and them was that we spoke different languages.

Though language is a part of culture and heritage, it doesn't make up your whole identity. The people who have judged me for not speaking my parents' native language fluently have created a barrier between my community and me, which also resulted in me distancing myself from my heritage. After so many humiliating interactions, I stopped going to family gatherings because I didn't like to see my mom being scrutinized. I stopped interacting with a lot of my community because of the fear that I was going to be looked down upon for not being Latina enough. I stopped trying. Every interaction in which I had to speak a little bit of Spanish brought so much anxiety because of my fear people seeing through my American accent. Language is something that I have always struggled with, especially when it came to my identity and community, but I'm glad that I have wrestled and came to peace with it. I have finally come to terms with the fact that I am happy with how my mom raised me because it is never too late to learn a new language. I have started to take on learning Spanish because I want to overcome the barrier that was built between my community and me. Next time you might have a seemingly harmless assumption about how connected someone is to their own culture by what languages they know, think about this. You don't have to check certain boxes to be able to talk about your experiences, ethnicity, or to be a part of a community.