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**The Challenge of Immigrant Youth**

“I got tired of repeating that same dialogue with different people, so I chose living in my shell. It’s sometimes really sad looking other classmates playing together, but I can’t just not be involved, I feel like I don’t belong to this country”, said a twelve-year-old girl, whose family just immigrated from Vietnam for over nine months. I met her in the Seattle World School, where I am doing the service learning every Saturday, helping immigrant students from over 20 different countries to increase their skills in core subjects like math, science and English. This is an optional program besides the school, with students come from different school districts in Seattle.

The girl was extremely happy after figuring out that I am Vietnamese too. She told me that “How are you? What’s your name? How old are you?” are the phrases that she had already learned by heart, after repeating them like a robot whenever she meets a stranger. And the thing is when the conversations go beyond those questions, she doesn’t know how to continue the conversation. One time, she tried to stick with a group of American classmates but then she had to give up since she cannot understand what they were talking because they talked too fast, and she didn’t dare to ask back. She revealed that she desperately wanted to participate in school activities, joined other girl group in class, or hang out with them after class but she has never been invited to any party like other girl has been nor she didn’t dare to join school clubs or organization because she was afraid no one could understand her English, which happen most of the time. And so she motivated herself to be immerged in studying. I immediately thought about the “front stage, back stage” concept from “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” of Erving Goffman when I was listening to her sharing her feelings about everything occurring in school. In front of everybody, this girl acts like she is a hard-working person and doesn’t care about any other activities outside school. She said she had never been like that when she was in Vietnam, not to mention that she was an active and outgoing person. But everything had changed since she’s been to the United States. She is afraid everyone would get mad at her if they don’t understand what she says. She even asked her older brother to pick her up after class and pretended to other classmates as if he was her boyfriend, and that she is not a nerd as they think.

Not only English inefficiency prevents immigrant students from making friends and being involved in school activities, culture background also plays an important role as well. Another Vietnamese girl in the Seattle World School complained with me how other girl friends in class always discuss about their boyfriends, and if it’s not about their boyfriends then it would definitely be sport, which are both not her favorite field. It may be normal here to have a boyfriend while in high school, or even in middle school, but in Vietnam, it’s like a phenomenon. Especially with that girl who is from country side, where people tend to be more conservative than people in big city. She also told me that during the Super Bowl Game, she could not find any topic rather than just about Seahawks. Then she asked me if I have any American friend, and if yes, what topic I usually talk with them about to maintain our friendship. As Howard S.Becker stated in “Culture: A Sociological View”, culture helps people to act collectively because they have ideas about how a certain kind of activity might be carried on, it could be easily understand why she found it hard to join her classmates’ conversations, simply because she lived in different culture.

As we have gone over the “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital” by Putnam, he describes social capital as the benefits that come from social organizations, such as networking, norms, and a generalized trust. He also says societies in which members are civically engaged are far more successful in fields like education, unemployment, crime, drug abuse and healthcare, and that life for member in these communities is much easier. A study from “Growing up American: The Challenge Confronting Immigrant Children and Children of Immigrant”(Min Zhou) about Vietnamese youth in New Orleans has showed that “Vietnamese high school students who reported strong orientations toward traditional family values of obedience, industriousness, and helping others were more likely to do well in school than those who did not”. From what I witnessed during my service learning work with the Vietnamese Friendship Association, many Vietnamese families when decide to immigrate, either because they already have relatives in the American or they are the first to immigrate, leaving closely related members left behind in Vietnam and once they settle down, they will try to bring other family members to the American, create an active circle of kin relations here. And through some talks with some Vietnamese immigrant girls while working with them here, I got to know that most of them have been working really in order to achieve high results in education, some of them even work outside besides the school (in restaurants, help parents with their works,…) with the hope that they could reunite with other family members left behind in Vietnam soon.

It did not surprise me when the immigrant students at the Seattle World School told me that they feel more comfortable, connected and self-confident here, when they have friends that have same immigrant background, same challenges despite of differences in race, religion or country of origin. Though they have to encounter many difficulties, they both share the same dream: going to college. And I am feel happy more than ever to have these students fulfill their dreams.

***References***

Erving Goffman, “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”

Howard Becker, “Culture: A sociological view”

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Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital”