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“Then Why Do You Go To School?”

“Entonces para qué vas a la escuela.” The sound of my mother’s firm voice was as clear as daylight playing over and over in my mind. This was my mother’s infamous phrase that I had heard and been lectured on a multitude of times when I did not meet their academic expectations. I felt my heart thump as I knew I would be in big trouble once I got home. Today was the day; the day that semester report cards were mailed home. I was still a block away from my house. I dragged my feet through the gravel alongside the road in an effort to prolong my way back home.

Upon arrival home, I scrambled through my backpack searching for my keys in hopes I would be able to make my way to my bedroom with no interaction from my mother. On the other side of the door as I turned the knob, my mother awaited. Sure enough, the first sentence I hear is “entonces para qué vas a la escuela” meaning “then why do you go to school” followed by a series of questions as to why my grade in my AP English Language and Composition class was a D.

I did not like the feeling of disappointing my parents, understanding that their academic expectations for my two brothers and I derived from their personal experience as immigrants in the United States. The importance of an education was stressed in my family as my parents were unable to fulfill their dream of going to school in the United States. They were compelled to work laborious jobs in the scorching high temperatures of the Central Valley to aid their families in making ends meet. Their hard work allowed my siblings and I the opportunity to be able receive a high school diploma and have the choice to pursue a higher education.

Furthermore, my personal background affected my educational experiences. My past reading and writing experiences in school were not always the most pleasant memories. From the day I learned to read and write in English, I knew my educational journey would not be the same as my other peers. My English and Spanish knowledge was a jumbled piece of mess that cluttered my brain. I would not be able to go home and ask my parents for help on trying to decipher the meaning of a question or the definition of a word as they only spoke Spanish and their highest level of education was grade school. My lack of resources at home and the pressure to excel

academically kept me up late at night under my covers with a small flashlight illuminating me as I secretly worked on homework even after my mother had repeatedly asked me to go to sleep. Keeping me awake on school nights as my eyes battled to stay open was a condescending voice engraved in the back of mind instilling the fear of not receiving the “perfect” grades. My experience in my English courses ranging from primary school to high school was one of uneasiness every time I was asked to read aloud or to share my writing with others. When reading aloud, I choked up struggling to breathe as the sound of my voice quavered on the verge of tears due to the risk of being judged or laughed at for the mispronunciation of a word. I was filled with doubt due to my constant confusion between two languages. When sharing my writing with others, my body would tense up as I waited for feedback with the thought of others thinking I was stupid.

Correspondingly to the detrimental experiences in my early education with reading and writing, my involvement with AP English mirrored the mortifying memories of embarrassment when it came to sharing or working on my reading and writing material. Although I had taken and successfully completed English honors my first two years of high school, AP English Language and Composition was my first AP English course. By taking on honor courses from the start of my high school education, I knew the rigor of the courses would exceed in comparison to what was expected from the standard prep courses. Preconceived ideas of AP English with Mr. Chavez, the course instructor, raised a certain fear of doubt on whether I was capable of succeeding in this class. Chatter from the halls described Mr. Chavez’s class as the most difficult class on campus with a very low passing rate on the end of the year AP exam. This did not help my nerves taking his class. A sense of fear and panic filled my body everyday at the sound of the second period bell ricochet in my ears. The second period bell meant I had to sit through a gruesome fifty minutes of class. Throughout my junior year of high, those fifty minutes of second period consisted of receiving a multitude of low, barely passing essay scores.

Other times, those fifty minutes consisted of failing multiple choice practice exams. On days where there were socratic seminars to critically analyze readings, the fifty minutes seemed to prolong for longer than usual as I was astonished by the way my peers detailed their analysis of the material. Discouragement and hopelessness of passing my AP Exam continued up until the exam day. In an effort to ease the stress I was feeling, I reminded myself: “What’s the worst thing that can happen? If I fail, I’ll still be alive.”

My heart started to race as I looked down on my phone screen and read a notification saying “AP Exam score released!” After I had completed the AP Exam, I had not given much thought to the class as it had been a

source of much of my stress for the school year. To my complete surprise, I had received a passing score on the AP exam. I refreshed the college board website to make sure I was actually seeing a passing score on the exam I had dreaded for so long. This experience served as a contribution to my sense of belonging in an education system where I have felt incapable of succeeding in. I was able to pass an exam that consisted of difficult reading passages and a writing portion. I was able to accomplish this with the realization that I did not have to produce “perfect” papers or get “perfect” scores to show my ability as a student. To answer why I go to school, I've had to take a step back from the pressure to excel academically to appreciate the significance in receiving an education. School is meant to be a place to learn and develop as a person. Although I may fail or not perform as well as I strived to on a task, there is always room for improvement.