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Abstract

I watched my 6-year-old hover around the periphery of the table, unable to find somewhere to sit. The cafeteria was a cacophony of little voices, Spanish and English, tumbling over each other, her classmates sitting close and waiting to be dismissed to homeroom.

I couldn't help but notice how different Noelle looked from most of the children, with her liquid blond hair and saucerlike blue eyes. [*excerpt*]

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Unwrapping the Comfort of Sameness With Spanish Immersion Elementary School

By Christin Taylor

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I watched my 6-year-old hover around the periphery of the table, unable to find somewhere to sit. The cafeteria was a cacophony of little voices, Spanish and English, tumbling over each other, her classmates sitting close and waiting to be dismissed to homeroom.

I couldn't help but notice how different Noelle looked from most of the children, with her liquid blond hair and saucerlike blue eyes.

This was the first day of first grade at her new school — a Spanish immersion elementary just around the corner from our house. We live in rural Pennsylvania, which boasts a vibrant network of farms that, in turn, support an equally thriving community of Latino immigrants.

“I think I'm going to cry,” my husband whispered as we watched. I cut my way across the room, placed my hand on another girl's back and asked, “Can Noelle sit with you?” She nodded.

“Let's go,” I said to Dwayne. We left like two people jumping from a plane. At some point, you just have to do it, but when you do, there's no looking back.

I thought choosing to send Noelle to a Spanish immersion school would

be easy. Especially considering my background and my husband's background.

We're both missionary's kids. Both of us grew up overseas, speaking languages not our own and playing with children who didn't look like us.

When I was Noelle's age I ran barefoot in the dirt, chasing chickens in Haiti. My two best friends were Chantal and Reet, who lived just over the jagged fence in a small mud shack.

Every morning, I ran out and sang at the top of my lungs: "Chantal! Reet! Ka ou vini jwe!"

I snacked on the marrow of boiled chicken bones, and ran scared from the tarantulas hanging like ornaments on the walls of our playhouse.

Chantal and Reet called my sister and me poupe blan — white dolls. Once they asked my mother in all seriousness, "Do they poop white, too?"

Decades after my life in the sun and dirt of Haiti, my husband and I have settled in a lush landscape of homogeny. Sometimes, I watch my daughter running through the grass, playing with the neighbor girl who also has blond hair and blue eyes, and I feel that I will never see the world as Noelle does. Or rather, that she will never see the world as I do. How can she when all her life is wrapped in the comfort of sameness?

Don't get me wrong, it is a beautiful life here in small-town Pennsylvania. There's hardly a summer morning when I don't see my ripening tomatoes, or watch my children on the rope swing in the late afternoon light, that I don't feel I am living some version of heaven.

But at the same time, Noelle met a little girl with kinky black hair and caramel skin. "I don't want to play with her," she told me.

"Why not?" I asked, alarmed.

“Because her hair is different than mine.” I was mortified.

This is how I arrived in the middle of drop-off at a strange new school, watching Noelle hover. I was stunned by the shard of regret that shot through my gut.

The truth is, as much as I extol the virtues of cultural immersion, I had forgotten the sacrifice that comes with it: being the outsider.

I remember the feeling of constantly navigating the differences between myself and the culture around me; adapting, and camouflaging, so I could survive adolescence: Make friends quickly, create a social network and find a home.

Watching Noelle struck a nerve I thought I had long buried. I wondered if sending her to an immersion program was worth the inevitable struggle. Wouldn't it be easier to send her to the local public school where she could stay with her friends from kindergarten, all English-speaking girls with light hair and light eyes, all with parents who do the same things my husband and I do?

After her first week, Noelle came home and announced, “Mommy, I know how to say ‘give me five!’”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Dame cinco!” She smiled, a hand lifted to the sky.

This week, I decided not to walk Noelle into the cafeteria for drop-off. Instead, I hugged and kissed her at the front doors. I watched as she slid behind the glass, pivoted tentatively between right and left, then upon locating the direction of the cafeteria, tucked her thumbs beneath the straps of her backpack and moved forward.

Christin Taylor is the author of “Shipwrecked in LA,” about the faith shipwreck she hit while working in Hollywood during her twenties. She teaches writing at

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