

# No Difference in the Differences

*Kaizar H.*



*Photo by Fernando Butcher from Flickr. CC 2.0.*

**BEFORE YOU READ:** Share a time you felt different from others. Were you able to find common ground? If so, describe how.

## Feeling Different

Standing out from the crowd or being noticed always makes me distressed and uncomfortable. I wear neutral colors and blue jeans. Wearing a mask has helped me feel more comfortable. It hides my skin color, although not completely.

Sitting on a bench in Central Park is my refuge from the city. I look at the cherry blossoms, birds, and squirrels. I stay as long as I can to absorb the views. I remembered my first visit to Central Park. Was it the same feeling? No. During that first visit, I endured feelings of loneliness, frustration, confusion, and disillusionment.

## My First Experience

When I was growing up, I watched Hollywood movies, so visiting the iconic Central Park was my teenage dream. Unfortunately, my first visit

to Central Park disappointed me: I lost my way, had to walk for a long time, and felt tired and chilled. My teenage dream didn't run as smoothly as a movie. I didn't fall in love with the Big Apple right away. The dog poop and trash bags on the sidewalks always annoyed me. Moreover, the dark walls in the subway, the steep stairs, and the unfamiliar smell irritated me. I was worried about my safety when the Asian hate crimes started.

In addition, the unfamiliar pronunciation and tone of voice made me feel small and homesick. I lacked the confidence to socialize, so I changed from an extrovert to an introvert. I smiled politely or stayed silent when I couldn't understand somebody. I apologized or asked people to repeat words, and that got me down every day.

## A Step

When I started taking ESL classes, my friends asked me, "Won't ESL classes be a waste of time? Not for me! *I loved exploring the world through the window that was opened in my ESL classes.*

I had classmates from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds. Do you think that our differences define us or make a barrier between us? One of my classmates was elderly. She faced many difficulties with the technology of Zoom classes. For example, she had a hard time with the mute/unmute button. Sometimes we could hear a toilet flush in the background. But her persistence and resilience paid off. Within six months, she presented a PowerPoint about her country – including videos!

### Similar Struggles

We learned together to improve our English. We supported and encouraged each other. I noticed that many adult learners are women, and we have similar difficulties. We don't feel confident talking with other parents at our kids' schools. We are nervous about daily activities like doctor's appointments and grocery shopping. But in this class, we shared, we learned, and we grew together.

### We Rise by Lifting Each Other

Everyone learns at a different pace, but sometimes I got frustrated with my classmates. They asked my teacher to repeat the same thing over and over again. It was especially hard when we had to complete a group project within a time limit. I was so anxious for the slower learners to catch up. I was a little pushy.

One day in the small group, I explained something again and again to my classmate. She couldn't understand, and the other classmates gave up. Later, she asked me why we were in the same group most of the time. I responded with a question. I asked, "How do you like being in a group with me?" She didn't answer, but for some reason, we both laughed out loud. Our misunderstanding disappeared. I realized that we are mothers, we have dreams for our kids and families, and we make mistakes sometimes.

Even though there are many challenges and difficulties, we are committed to working hard and to being patient with each other. We are more



"Uplifting Staircase" in Takoma Park, MD. Photograph by muralist Nancy Caralyn Illman, of her artwork. CC 4.0.

similar than we are different. Learning not just English but also respect and patience united us, so we could be good friends together.

### No Difference in the Differences

Since then, whenever I go to Central Park, I can see that people who visit here come from different backgrounds with different intentions. Despite our differences, we have something in common: we want to have a beautiful moment in Central Park, as well as in our life. Our differences don't define us. In the end, our hard work will pay off.

#### AFTER YOU READ:

1. Explain the metaphor in the *bold italics* sentence (bottom of p. 16). What "window" does ESL class "open"?
2. Describe a time you have felt connected to others despite differences.

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