

Immigrant Child

TH

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Reflections from the Author

I created the poem *Immigrant Child* with the intent to show the feelings and emotions that took place when I moved from Bulgaria to America as an 8-year-old girl. I was placed in the 3rd grade without knowing any English – not even a word. Having always been very shy and timid, I was too afraid to speak to anyone in English for a whole year. However, I quickly picked up on the language and would understand everything that was said to me and about me. The kids and teachers thought I was weird and did not like me much since I did not bond with them in any way. I felt like I was othered when I would hear them talk to each other about me in many inconsiderate ways. They never knew the truth about where I came from and who I was before I immigrated. Instead, I would hear everyone around me making assumptions about me, my country, and my culture. I felt as if my ethnicity had become stigmatized at my school, since everyone would just treat me strangely and talk about how I was Bulgarian and unfortunate. This took a toll on me, and after a year of not being able to blend in with my peers, I decided to start making changes.

During my second year in America, I went through behavioral acculturation. I began speaking English, became accustomed to American humor, learned how people like being treated and spoken to, and made friends. The more I changed my behavior to fit with the social norms of American culture, the more I became liked by my peers and my teachers. I went from being an unfortunate immigrant child to a bright and friendly young girl. I became one of them and was no longer othered as much as I used to be before my behavioral acculturation. As the years passed, I acculturated psychologically as well. I adopted progressive American ideologies about common controversial topics such as gender norms and standards. I complied with what should be considered ideal and frowned upon behaviors and beliefs – even if they conflicted with Bulgarian views.

I visited Bulgaria every summer and stayed with my grandparents up until the end of 7th grade. Every time I went back, I would experience strong enculturation and my connection to my ethnicity would spark up again and grow stronger after having weakened while in America. I became better at speaking, reading, and writing Bulgarian. I would fall in love with Bulgarian music and art all over again. I would want to stay home and felt like I belonged in ways that I could never in America. However, home had now become America as well, so I would return and lose the connection to Bulgarian culture and the feelings of belonging there quickly. I have not returned to my homeland in nearly 10 long years. During those 10 years, I have gradually lost touch with my Bulgarian culture and strengthened my American way of living life. I look forward to going back and going through the enculturation process again.

Keywords: Immigration, Enculturation, Acculturation, Child, Culture

Immigrant Child

I remember coming to America

I remember being scared

Not knowing English,

To speak, I never dared.

I was eight years old

I wanted to fit in, oh how much I cared

But the treatment from my teachers was so cold

They didn't like me because I was different.

Many eyes, lots of stares

I'd hear my peers talk about me like I wasn't even there

They thought I couldn't understand

They'd talk about how I come from a foreign land.

In their eyes I wasn't one of them,

I was someone strange

I knew I had to change

Acculturation was the key,

Instead of "me and them" it now became "we".

I started fitting in

Decided to embrace the culture on a whim

When my own I started to forget,

The more American I'd get.