

A Crevice in the American Educational System

Without thinking twice, the average American elementary student will chant along to the American Pledge of Allegiance. However, they may stumble when prompted to define a word such as “indivisible,” and even more so, to analyze the patriotically nuanced context of the Pledge of Allegiance. At best, all that they may gather from the pledge is the United States’ value of “liberty and justice for all”, rather than its true purpose of holding an individual responsible for unwavering loyalty to all aspects of the American state. Through days and months and years of repetition, the mandatory recitation of the pledge becomes an imperceptible barrier against a student’s pursuit of education. Despite its status as a longstanding American tradition, the expectation for students to adopt the Pledge of Allegiance inhibits students from questioning the authority of teachers, educational standards, and the American state, thereby revealing the educational system’s underlying value of adherence to authority.

In consequence of the rigid classroom setting under which they are expected to memorize the pledge, students are inherently discouraged from questioning the validity of their teacher’s authority. Normally, children are expected to adopt the pledge during their formative years upon entering the education system. For instance, memorizing the pledge was one of the first tasks I was assigned during my Kindergarten experience. I can recall years’ worth of following a teacher’s commands without question as I rose, placed my right hand over my heart, and read aloud the sentences printed upon a poster displayed by the American flag. I do not, however, remember any of my teachers justifying the validity of their commands, nor fostering an environment that would encourage students to question the legitimacy of their authority. Through the repeated subjection to my teacher’s commands, I not only learned the Pledge of Allegiance, but also to deliver my undivided obedience to a figure of authority. My character as a

young girl, as is the character of most other children, was impressionable and malleable; thus, the standard of adopting the pledge easily trained me to blindly abide by the authority of my teacher.

The educational system's authoritative values prevented me from questioning the need to recite the pledge throughout my entire Kindergarten experience and for many years to come. My classroom was not structured to engender the thought that perhaps I was subjecting myself to the commands of a figure simply because they held the title of "teacher", and not because they had justified their authority. Under the authority of my Kindergarten teacher, not once did I question their ability to reprehend a student for sitting through the pledge. Evidently, the structure of my learning environment implicitly kept me from wondering whether I truly had a moral obligation to abide by my teacher's cues. The reason for concern lies in the implication that a tradition of the educational system succeeded in compromising my freedom to question the commands of my instructor. Granted, in the context of reciting a patriotic statement, the jeopardization of my ability to question an authority was not life-threatening. Rather, it is the very existence of a practice that conditions an individual to blindly deliver compliance that exposes a tremendous flaw of the educational system. It is then clear to see how a student may develop a susceptibility to manipulation under the educational system's elusive demand of obedience through commonplace standards like the adoption of the pledge.

A vital piece of evidence that the memorization of the pledge correlates with the educational system's authoritative values lies in the fact that for years, I never felt inclined to question the necessity of learning the pledge. When I first began memorizing the pledge, my teacher instructed me to recite its patriotic content without explaining why it was mandatory to adopt it, nor offering the class an opportunity for such a discussion. This aspect of my experience scrapes at the surface of a deeper problem: the conditions under which I learned the pledge

imposed a limit upon my ability to question my instructor's authority and ask, "Why are you teaching me this?" Given that the adoption of the pledge is rooted in the obligation to abide by an instructor, students are deterred from probing at the pledge's content, and ultimately, from honing their critical thinking skills. Through expectations like the adoption of the pledge, students are led to believe that the value of the material they learn is grounded solely in the authority of their instructors, rather than within the content itself. The adoption of the pledge is a means by which the educational system generates students who blindly adhere to an instructor's teachings without examining their credibility or purpose.

The expectation of memorizing the pledge is also indicative of the authority that educational standards possess over a student's educational experience. Throughout my childhood, the word "indivisible" left me dumbfounded each morning I would recite the Pledge of Allegiance. I could barely enunciate the word, much less decipher its meaning or role in the pledge. As a result of my educational curriculum, I had yet to learn about the pivotal aspects of American history, such as the institution of slavery or the establishment of Japanese internment camps during the second World War. Nonetheless, I was expected to memorize a profound statement of loyalty revolving around a country's history of which I held minimal knowledge, simply because of American educational standards. My experience, and that of the numerous students who are obligated to adopt the pledge despite their inadequate knowledge of American history, is proof of the obtrusive authority that the educational system exerts upon a student's educational experience. The structure of American education is built such that higher authorities manufacture educational standards to mold a student's way of thought and understanding of the world. Because the rigid conditions of my classroom environment pushed me to develop a blind faith in educational standards, I was unconscious of the influence that their authority had upon

my own opinion of the content that I learned. My Kindergarten experience of being expected to adopt the Pledge of Allegiance, regardless of my limited background of American history, alludes to the pervasive authority that educational standards inflict upon the intellectual development of its students.

Yet another result of the educational system's authoritative values is the constraint that the American state imposes upon student identity through the expectation to adopt the pledge. While there are several classroom expectations, such as studying or displaying respect, that are reinforced by a teacher's authority, such standards exist to promote the well-being of students. Thus, these types of classroom rules are rightfully accepted as just and necessary. The requirement to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, on the other hand, forces a student to deliver a statement of loyalty binding them to the American state. Students are expected to adopt the pledge because the American institution commands them to do so, irrelevant of the student's personal beliefs. It is unfortunate that I cannot recall a single occasion upon which a teacher established or remotely suggested the possibility of the pledge conflicting with a student's identity. The educational standard of adopting the pledge is blatantly inconsiderate of students whose personal values do not align with Americanism. The standard's indifference towards the multidimensional backgrounds of students perpetuates a construct of conformity in learning environments. For example, a student whose moral values are compromised by the content of the pledge may feel pressured to recite it nonetheless, because rejecting the pledge often means alienation. Seeing how students are implicitly discouraged from challenging the notion of conformity in their classrooms, they are pressured to abide by the authority of the American institution at the expense of their identity. Clearly, the expectation to adhere by the authority of the pledge reflects how the educational system can violate a student's personal beliefs.

Having analyzed the ways in which the obligation to recite the Pledge of Allegiance subjects students to the authority of teachers, educational standards, and the American state, it is evident that the educational system upholds authoritative values. My argumentation is not to debate the legitimacy of the Pledge of Allegiance, but to assert that the expectation to adopt the pledge interferes with a student's ability to develop logical reasoning. Yet the obligation to adopt the Pledge of Allegiance is only a snippet of the expansive collection of educational norms that, upon a closer look, obtrude a student's pursuit of education. All things considered, the implications of this normative feature bear warning that an institution's deficiencies are inculcated within the crevices of its most obvious, yet simultaneously unobvious, taken-for-granted structures.