

# What's in a name? Lots of negative stereotypes

## Economist: Names can harm black kids' future

By Teresa Mask  
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A young lady named LaQuenya was valedictorian at Detroit's Central High School this year. Nakeisha was ranked No. 2. And Thornisha, Qualisha and Demario also received top honors at their schools.

But recently released research suggests these students weren't likely to be so successful academically.

While previous studies have indicated that names play a role in whether some black people get a job interview or are promoted, this new one argues that names — particularly those given to black children — are one reason for the minority achievement gap.

The work by University of Florida economist David Figlio reveals a child's name could, in some cases, be linked to poor performance in reading and math.

"My initial reaction was that's probably a little bit of nonsense," said Percy Bates, a professor of education at the University of Michigan.

Mr. Figlio's work is extensive and involves siblings — one with a European-sounding name and the other with a more creative name. The one with a traditional name nearly always fared better academically, he said. His research was based on 24,298 families with two or more children in one Florida school district.

**Some teachers take black-sounding names to mean the parents aren't educated.**

The study, done from 1994-95 to 2000-01, was published in March in the *National Bureau of Economic Research*.

It's not the name itself that causes poor grades, Mr. Figlio said. It's the impression it gives educators who — biased by the names' uniqueness and their own stereotypes about parents who would bestow such names on a child — don't set high goals for the children.

Mr. Figlio said some teachers internalize black-sounding names to mean parents aren't educated and as a result are poor. He used a formula measuring names, poverty level and academic work, and his research attributes at least 15 percent of the black-white student achievement gap to low expectations from teachers based on names.

Mr. Figlio wouldn't provide names as part of an agreement with the district whose students he sampled. But he said names in question often begin with prefixes such as "lo-" "ta-" and "qua-" or end with suffixes like "-isha" and "-ious."

But he said: "I view this creative naming tradition as a really interesting and beautiful outgrowth of a longstanding African-American tradition of improvisation — the same traditions that spawned R&B and jazz."

But not everyone embraces the creative effort, he said.

"I've talked to teacher friends and small focus groups and to teachers. Every one of them either immediately or later on said, 'I've had a student in my class, and I was thinking to myself, 'What was the parent thinking?' And, 'What do you expect with a name like that?'" Mr. Figlio said.

Teachers are exposed to students with very nontraditional names on a regular basis. "I had a student last year whose name was Courvoisier," said William Gardner, a teacher at Malcolm X Academy in Detroit, referring to a brand name of a cognac. "But academically he did well."

Jermia Jardin, a 16-year-old B-student at Detroit's Cass Tech, said she's never felt discriminated against because of her name. "I think it all has to do with your personality," she said, adding that her name was derived from her mother's desire to stick with "J" names. Her older brothers are Jermaine and Jeremy.

The desire to be creative is what drives most people to give kids nontraditional names, said names expert Cleveland Kent Evans, who teaches psychology at Nebraska's Bellevue University.

He said for black people, the movement was most recognized in the 1960s, though it had started earlier.

"They started to search out real African-language names instead of just created names," he said.

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