

"HIS NAME IS MICHAEL": A LESSON ON THE VOICES WE UNKNOWINGLY SILENCE

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To help our students grow and develop, we must get to know them as human beings. The first step in this process is often getting to know their names. How important is a person's name? Donna Marriott attempts to answer this question with a true story about one of her students who showed up at her classroom door with the school secretary. The student did not speak English, or if he could, was reticent to do so. "His name is Michael," the secretary announced. After several quiet weeks in her classroom, Michael moved away. Only after he was gone did Donna find out his real name was David. As you read this article, ask yourself, "How can we make our schools and classrooms more humane places for all students?"

Think About This . . .

1. In what ways did the educational system fail David? What can teachers do to prevent these failures?
2. What role did language play in David's problems? What can monolingual teachers do to address these problems?
3. What were some positive strategies that the teacher used to welcome David? What else could she have done?
4. What strategies will you use to acquaint yourself with the students you will teach?

This is a true story—one that both haunts and inspires me. I wish I could say that the names have been changed to protect the innocent. The names were changed, but, sadly, no one was protected.

I was teaching that year in a full-inclusion, multiage class. My teaching partner and I had 43 children ranging in age from 5 to 9, ranging in ability from average to labeled, ranging in experience from indulged to adequate. I boasted about being a progressive teacher—a teacher bent on changing the system. As I looked around my classroom, I could see evidence of all the latest and greatest in education: child-directed learning, meaning-driven curriculum, responsive teaching, authentic assessment. It took a little boy to show me what I couldn't see: Beneath this veneer of "best practice," there was a layer of fundamental ignorance.

He appeared at my classroom door in the middle of a busy morning gripping the hand of a harried school secretary. He was a tiny child with carefully combed hair, wearing a crisply pressed shirt, tightly clutching his lunch money. The secretary handed this child to me

and rattled off the institutional essentials: "His Name Is Michael. He is a bus rider. He doesn't speak English." Not much of an introduction, but that's how it happens in schools. New students appear in the office at times that make sense in their lives—not in our lives. These children are unceremoniously placed in whatever classroom has an extra chair. It's not very welcoming—but that's the drill.

We did all the usual new-kid things that day. We played the name game. The kid of the day gave him the grand tour of our room. He got to sit on the couch even though it wasn't really his turn. The children insisted that Michael have a buddy for absolutely everything—learning buddy, recess buddy, bathroom buddy, lunch buddy, cubby buddy, line buddy, water buddy, rug buddy, bus buddy. They thought it would be great if he

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had a sleepover buddy, too, but I was able to convince them otherwise. We were genuinely glad to have this youngster in our learning family. But Michael didn't become part of our family.

Michael existed marginally on the outside of the group. Sometimes he was on the outside looking in; sometimes he was on the outside looking out. I often saw him with his eyes closed—looking somewhere hidden. He was well-mannered, punctual, respectful, cute-as-a-button—but completely detached from me, from the children, and from the learning.

I met with the bilingual resource teacher to chat about concerns and possibilities. She told me she could come do an informal observation “a week from tomorrow.” It was a long wait, but that's how it is in schools. She came. She watched. She listened. On her way out she said, “You might have better results, dear, if you call him Miguel.”

I could not have been more embarrassed or confused. How could I have been calling this child the wrong name? I was a progressive teacher: How could I have made such a mistake? How could the school secretary have made such a mistake? Why hadn't the parents corrected her? Why hadn't the child corrected me?

Miguel didn't stay with us for long. His family moved on to follow their own calendar of opportunities. We didn't get to say goodbye, but that's how it happens in schools.

Miguel's paperwork arrived about three weeks after he had moved away. I was going through the folder, updating it for his next teacher, when I noticed something that made me catch my breath. His name wasn't Michael. It wasn't Miguel. His name was David.

I wondered how it was that this child could have been part of my classroom for more than a month, and in that entire time he never had enough personal power to tell me that his name was David. What was it about me, about the other children, about the school that made David feel he had to give up his name? No child should have to forfeit his identity to walk through our classroom doors. No child. Ever. It is much too high a price to pay.

I have to do a bit of guessing about what was going on in David's head. I am guessing that he was told to respect *la maestra*—to “be good” in school. I am

guessing that he thought if the teacher decided to change his name, well then . . . that was that. I am guessing that he didn't connect school to any known reality. He could be David at home, but at school he was expected to become someone else.

I don't have to do much guessing at my own complicity. It never occurred to me that his name would be anything other than Michael. In the entire breadth of my experience, people had called me by my given name. In those few instances when someone mispronounced my name, I would offer a polite but prompt correction. I was taught to speak up for myself. I was given the power to be me—in my school, in my neighborhood, in my life. I never considered checking in with David about his name. It was beyond the scope of my experience. It was beyond the lens of my culture.

Our power distance was huge. I had all the power. I was white; I was the teacher; I spoke English. David had no power. He was brown; he was a child; he spoke Spanish. Our sense of individualism clashed. I expected him to have a sense of himself—to stand up for himself, to speak up. He denied himself. David expected and accepted that he was “less than” in the culture of school. Our perception of reality was polarized. I trusted in the precision of the system. The name on the registration card just had to be correct. That's how it works in schools. David accepted the imprecision of the system. Having his name changed was just part of the whole befuddling experience.

I have learned many difficult lessons in the years since David sat submissively on the edge of my classroom. I have learned lessons about passive racism—the kind that we cannot see in ourselves, don't want to see in ourselves, and vehemently deny. I have learned lessons about implicit power and explicit powerlessness—about those voices we choose to hear and those voices we unknowingly silence. I have learned that being a good teacher is as much about rapport and relationships as it is about progressive curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

If I could go back to that day when the secretary brought in a little boy with carefully combed hair wearing a crisply pressed shirt, I would shake his hand and say, “Hello. My name is Mrs. Marriott. What's your name?” I believe that if I had simply asked him, he would have told me.