

## **In Silence**

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*This case study depicts an actual incident and was prepared as a basis for discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an instructional situation. While the characters are real, names have been disguised to protect confidentiality.*

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*This case is best used with individuals who have had some level of classroom teaching experience. That experience will allow them to engage in a dialogue where they share ideas and meanings about initial assessments of first grade children and how those assessments might be acted upon with the support of a child's parents. The primary objective is for participants to reflect upon their own experiences and clarify their understandings of best practices in relation to assessment in early elementary classrooms. A second objective is to encourage participants to consult with colleagues as they encounter challenging situations in their own classroom.*

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“That doesn’t make sense,” Kathy Hansen said to no one in particular. She had just hung up the phone after calling Mrs. Washington about her son, Tremaine. “She doesn’t believe me,” Kathy thought. “What do we do with Tremaine now?”

### **Kathy Hansen**

Kathy Hansen had come to teaching in her late forties after the last of her four daughters had gone off to college. She completed her degree in elementary education and began teaching first grade in a predominately black urban public school in South Carolina. She chose the school because she felt that she could make a difference there and some of her student loan would be forgiven if she served in a high-need school. It was there that, for the first time, she saw first hand the real effects of poverty on the early education of children. This experience served only to strengthen her resolve to understand and help first-graders overcome their circumstances and get a successful start in school.

She had been teaching first grade for nine years. After six years she had moved to her present school, Pine Forest Elementary, about seventy miles from where she had begun teaching. The move had been necessary so that she would be closer to her aged parents in case they needed her help.

Her present school was much different from the first. The students were far more diverse. There were 23 students in her class this year. Seven were African American boys, four were African American girls, and the remaining 13 children were Caucasian, six of whom were boys.

### **Pine Forest Elementary School**

Pine Forest Elementary School enrolled about 475 children in kindergarten through fourth grade. The building was a rambling single story structure with a flat roof that looked just like so many schools built in the 1950's. About a year ago a new gymnasium and three classrooms were added to the building. This was the only updating the building had seen in more than forty years.

The Parent-Teacher Organization at Pine Forest was very active and successful in raising funds in excess of \$10,000 each year. The School Improvement Council was also active and the school was supported by a corps of parent and senior citizen volunteers who served in a variety of roles including mentors and lunch buddies.

The neighborhoods surrounding the school were a diverse mix of properties seemingly ungoverned by zoning laws. The school was located on a corner outside the city limits on what used to be farmland. The road in front of the school connected with the interstate some five miles away and was heavily traveled. The immediate area was covered with strip malls, apartment complexes, trailer parks, blue-collar housing and upscale suburban homes with no sidewalks or trees. The property directly beside the school was a tract of pine and oak forest. The property directly behind the school was a Freewill Baptist Church. There was a used car lot on the other side and directly across the street in front of the car lot was a community theater for performing arts. This congested, busy area, devoid of walkways, meant the students had to be bussed or driven to school since walking would be much too dangerous.

### **Tremaine Washington**

When Mrs. Hansen did an informal observational survey of her children during the first week of school, she found that Tremaine Washington did not do as well as the other children on vocabulary, letter sounds and identification, or dictation. Other children had problems to be sure. Jonathan, for instance, had been diagnosed ADHD and was on medication. His motor skills seemed delayed and he was slow to write.

Robert had repeated kindergarten and was still somewhat behind the others in the class. And William had been held back in first grade. His math skills were good, but he could not read. Tremaine, however, presented more of a challenge.

Tremaine was an identical twin. Mrs. Hansen recalled meeting Tremaine's mother on the first day of school and remembered how proud she was to be the mother of twins. She wanted Mrs. Hansen to know that she dressed the boys alike and to be sure that the right twin came back into her classroom after they had been playing together during recess. Mrs. Hansen understood completely since she herself was the mother of identical twin girls and had dealt with the issue of having her girls separated in school so that they might become more independent. That was the case with Tremaine and his brother, Jermaine. Jermaine was assigned to Mrs. Barton's class.

The difficulty with Tremaine was that he would not talk. Mrs. Hansen saw that he had difficulty writing especially in the spacing between words. He called a "t" a "d" and "d" an "a". On the sight vocabulary screening he got 3 out of 24. But, he was able to remember letter patterns because he would get 5 of 6 correct on his spelling test. He did not use picture clues well in reading. The biggest difficulty was getting him to talk. He would sit and make strange faces with his mouth as if he were trying to make sounds come out. But nothing happened. He didn't interact with other children in the class. And one evening when Mrs. Hansen ran into Tremaine in the grocery store with his father and twin brother Jermaine, she spoke to them but Tremaine would not talk. He only let out a grunt. His brother, Jermaine, who was even less verbal, remained silent.

Tremaine's father was a friendly man who brought his boys to school every day and always stuck his head in the classroom door with a cheerful, "Morning Ma'am." He was a student at the local university and drove a delivery truck as a part-time job. One morning he told Mrs. Hansen, "Learn him well in first grade because I want him to go to college. His uncle got a chance to go to UNC in Chapel Hill, but he didn't do well on tests so he had to go to the University of South Carolina. I don't want that to happen to Tremaine."

### **The Parent Conference**

Three weeks into the school year, Mrs. Hansen set up a conference with Tremaine's parents to discuss the problem. Tremaine's father came, his mother did not. Mrs. Hansen told him about the difficulty she had getting his son to talk. Mr. Washington was puzzled. "He talks all the time at home," he said.

Mrs. Hansen explained that she thought that Tremaine might be speech delayed and asked Mr. Washington if he would mind if Tremaine were given a speech evaluation by the speech pathologist at the school. He said, "It's ok with me, but let me run it by my wife."

That evening, Mrs. Hansen took it upon herself to call the Washingtons to see if they were in agreement with doing a speech evaluation. Mrs. Washington answered and during the conversation said that the public school where Tremaine attended kindergarten saw no problem with him. She was also concerned that Mrs. Hansen thought that Tremaine was behind. Mrs. Hansen responded, "I don't really know if he is behind because he won't talk."

Mrs. Washington ended the conversation by stating, "We just don't see that there is a problem."

Mrs. Hansen hung up the phone with a feeling of frustration. "What do we do with Tremaine now?" she muttered to herself.