

# Voices: A Song for the Children

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The purpose of this essay is to express the significance and development of my song, “Voices.” The song lyrics are included with this essay, but if you would like to listen to the song, you may go [here](#). My song comes from my heart and experiences as a child and as an educator. From kindergarten through part of second grade, I was considered a select mute; communicating non-verbally to everyone except my family, who heard me speak. According to the Selective Mutism Foundation (2012b), “Select Mutism is a psychiatric disorder characterized by not speaking outside the home to select individuals or in select settings, which continues for more than 1 month” (para.1). Although I did not talk, I made myself understood with a different kind of voice, a non-verbal one. Fortunately, some teachers allowed me to be myself and provided me with a safe and comfortable environment accepting my non-verbal interactions; unfortunately, some did not.

## Teaching and Empathy

Two of my teachers did not make me feel good about school because they punished me for not talking. They made me sit in the hall and stay inside for recess. Consequently, my mom pulled me out of that school in the middle of first grade and placed me in a private school. In my new, private school, teachers allowed me to be myself and express ideas through a non-verbal language. They let me communicate in alternative ways; I acted out my vocabulary words and wrote notes to go to the restroom. These teachers accepted my differences, provided a space for me to be myself, incorporated various methods for me to demonstrate what I had learned, accommodated my alternative ways of communicating, and created a comfortable and safe environment for me. These examples show how these teachers attended to my individual needs, which suggests they created an equitable classroom. However, I still remember feeling stupid and frustrated because I understood topics and ideas but could not let the students or teacher know I understood. Language barriers often cause miscommunication within the classroom. I wondered how many students felt this way in school.

Looking back, I think the teachers who permitted me to communicate non-verbally practiced culturally responsive teaching. These teachers developed a relationship with me, treated me with respect, and by the end of second

grade, I started to talk at school. I believe the trust and empathy of some teachers helped me to finally talk. These teachers modified the everyday curriculum to meet my needs as a select mute. In this way, they included my unique way of communicating. I believe teachers should demonstrate sensitivity to the culture of the individual student not just based on the confines of racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, gender, or religious characteristics. For example, I was not an English Language Learner, but I illustrated diversity with aspects of linguistics, which was specific to my culture. Therefore, students' culture might include characteristics different than traditional definitions, such as race or gender, and also might consist of cultural characteristics that relate to personality, abilities, or interests.

Each student comes to school with individual experiences that are socially, culturally, economically, physically, and linguistically unique. I recognize that my experiences as a select mute heightened my awareness and sensitivity to individual differences and inspired my commitment to social justice. Because of this, I think educators must remember to be clear and considerate with their own voices and listen to students' voices. Language is multifaceted, and meaning is communicated with gestures and tone as well as with words. In fact, Blommaert (2005) claims language is sometimes hidden in gestures and tone. As an educator, I consider it my responsibility to prepare preservice teachers to hear their students' distinctive voices as important contributors of the community.

### **Empathy in My Teaching**

A few additional incidents in my early teaching years deepened my ability to empathize with and hear my students' voices. While teaching in elementary schools, I encountered three students, two in my own class and one in my colleague's class, who I considered select mutes. Their behavior was similar to my select mutism, and I believed I shared an understanding with them. I was patient with them and respected their individual culture. I truly believe my empathy helped them to trust me and feel comfortable talking with me. The three students, who appeared to be select mutes, although undiagnosed, talked more by the end of the year. The relationships I built with these three students illustrated culturally responsive teaching.

### **A Song Emerged From a Teacher Educator for Social Justice**

As I read, “Voice stands for the way in which people manage to make themselves understood or fail to do so” (Blommaert, 2005, p.4), I reflected back on to my select mute experiences as a child and educator, and I had an “ah-hah” moment. I knew at that instance I needed to write a song to express my passion. The song lyrics mirror my experiences but really speak to the social inequalities and injustices that I witnessed as an educator, as an individual within society.

I think the teachers and individuals, who truly accepted me and allowed me to be myself, and the challenges I faced as a select mute contributed greatly to me becoming a stronger, compassionate, and empathetic person. Why is this so important you might ask? The most significant thing of all, I became an educator. As many people do, I still have insecurities, but I do not let them hinder my life. However, some students may not be able to overcome certain experiences in life. For me, as Aoki (2005) would say, the thoughtfulness and watchfulness of teaching became embedded in “the oneness of the lived moment” (p.196). In the schools where I taught, I observed and developed relationships not only with my students but also with a large portion of the student body. I witnessed the “layers of voices in education” (Aoki, 2005, p.188), which Aoki describes. Education may not always be just about the academics but about social development as well. I need my preservice teachers to better understand the complexity of their students’ backgrounds and needs. Each student comes to school with unique, individual experiences: socially, culturally, economically, physically, and so on. As educators, we must remember to be clear with our voices and listen to the students’ voices. Sometimes language is hidden in gestures and tone, whether it be students, teachers, administrators or even parents. As an educator, I feel it is my responsibility to share the lived moments with my students, not apart from them.

Why did I feel the need, the urge, to write down my thoughts in a song? From my experiences as a child and educator, this song emerged. Now as a teacher educator, in particular literacy, I utilize this song to demonstrate various ideas. In my literacy and diversity courses, I play the guitar, sing the song, and provide the lyrics with no identification as to who wrote the song. I also make sure I have not told students my story. I have the students complete a quick/free write about what they think the song means and then discuss the meaning with a partner. After the partner talk, we come back to whole class discussion and unpack the multiple layers of the song and the

lesson. The students invariably think the song is about one of my elementary students, an English Language Learner, or me. From this one song, we discuss how I modeled a way to integrate music and literacy. We also have intense, constructive, and enlightening discussions and conversations about diversity and social justice issues. The preservice teachers become aware of select mutism, a rare disorder, and begin to recognize the complexity of diversity. Many preservice teachers share their experiences of students who they might think is a select mute and ask how should they help this student. A plethora of language barriers occur within classrooms and might happen for various reasons, such as students who experience physical communication challenges, are non-native English speakers, have limited prior experiences, have cultural differences, have limited understandings of academic language, or are select mute. I share with my preservice teachers how important it is not to criticize the student but build a relationship with support, praise, and care (Selective Mutism Foundation, Inc., 2012a). No matter what language barriers exist in the classroom, preservice teachers must break down the barriers and support the students in a respectful classroom community that values individual experiences and helps students “find their own voices” (Mays, 2008, p. 418).

My preservice teachers *begin* to learn how to empower their students, create more equitable environments, and develop techniques and methods to meet their students’ needs. I emphasize *begin* because one song or one course is not enough to develop complete understandings on how to become an expert on socially just pedagogies. Through music and literacy, I hope I can inspire, engage, and maybe even transform my preservice teachers to continue learn how to empower their students and hear their voices.

This song is dedicated to the children of the world in hopes that someone will listen to their unique voices.

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