

Name: _____ Date: _____

THEY DIDN'T KNOW; THEY DIDN'T ASK

WHAT TO DO:

Read the excerpt below, then discuss the questions that follow in pairs or small groups.

We moved, in the middle of the fourth grade, to a... safer, mostly white... neighborhood, and I almost immediately went from being an outgoing, popular girl to a withdrawn, shy, almost invisible girl. I don't know for sure why I stopped talking, why I would not speak up for myself and did not learn to do so again until I was in college, but it seems likely that it had to do with the way I was judged in the new school without my even opening up my mouth once...

In the new school, I was placed in a regular classroom although I'd been in accelerated classrooms since first grade. The violin I had been given in first grade was taken away. The French I had studied also since first grade was discontinued. New teachers and principals did not know that I had been selected for private instruction... beyond the once-a-week music lessons in my school. New teachers and principals did not know that I was thinking about becoming a concert violinist. I can't get past how fulfillment of a dream was so easily fractured by assumptions that a little black girl was somehow not as capable as paler children being educated in a better, more affluent public school. They did not know; they did not ask. I did not tell them that in second grade I had given an oral report on Susan B. Anthony for which I made protest signs and had girls march around the classroom dressed in old clothes... with only the flashlights they held for illumination.... They didn't know, didn't ask, and I didn't tell them just how much thunder was in my voice as I spoke about equality for women. A seven-year-old girl in the inner city did this, a girl believing she could make anything happen until she moved to a better place and found out how utterly ordinary she was.

—Thylia Moss, collected in the book *Going Where I'm Coming From*, edited by Anne Mazer (Persea Books)

QUESTIONS:

1. In the story, why does the author stop talking in class?

2. How does her silence affect her beyond the fourth grade?

3. What do the new teachers and principal "not know"?

4. Identify the *stereotype* in this story. What does this story teach you about how stereotypes deny an individual his or her identity? What does this story teach you about the *consequences* of stereotypes?

5. What choices or actions could the people in the school have taken to help the author?

6. Based on what you've previously learned, how would the actions you identified in question 5 make life fairer for an *individual*? How would they benefit and be more fair to the school *community*?
