

Colloquium

COMPOSITE IDENTITIES

Percorsi tra cinema, teatro, letteratura,
musica, scienze sociali e politiche

A cura di Anna Maria Chierici e Fulvio Orsitto

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Marsha Steinberg, *Open Space* (olio su tela, cm 225 × 170), 1975.

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The Meaning of Names: Why Can't You Pronounce My Name Right?

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THAT WHICH CEASES TO BE NAMED CEASES TO EXIST¹

Identity answers the most straightforward definition: who am I? Kanno defines identity as «A person's understanding of who they are» (Kanno 2000, p. 2). A name defines a person. «A child begins to understand who they are through their parents' accent, intonation and pronunciation of their name» (Kohli, Solórzano 2012, p. 4). Parents and families spend a great deal of time choosing a child's name, thus the given name may represent their culture, country of origin, or ancestors. The name is the first thing shared about someone when introduced to others. Throughout life, names are used to honor, recognize, and commemorate. The first word often learned by babies is their names.

Identity and self-concept are shaped by the repeated use of a child's name. «Students' names are indicative of the richness they bring with them to class, representing their diversity, cultural heritage, family hope, and dreams. This 'mark of identity' is a powerful symbol, and using students' names recognizes their individual worth» (O'Brien, Leiman, Duffy 2014, p. 118). Story after story recounts the lasting impact felt by children (now young adults or adults) caused by the mispronunciation or alteration of their names. Such an event can negate the identity of the child, it can impact the social-emotional well-being as well as their worldview.

During the first years of formal schooling, educators make sure students learn how to write their names and the letters in their names. It's one of the first things children recognize, one of the first words they know how to say. The name becomes the building block of literacy, but the name is also the

¹ These are the words of novelist Wendy Guerra, quoted by Anderson 2013.

building block of a student's identity, it's how the world identifies them. For students, especially the children of im/migrants² or Students of Color, a teacher who knows their name and can pronounce it correctly signals respect and marks a critical step in helping them adjust to school. But for many, a mispronounced name is often the first of many slights they experience in their formal education. Kohli and Solórzano say that «When a child goes to school and their name is mispronounced or changed, it can negate the thought, care, and significance of the name, and thus the identity of the child» (Kohli, Solórzano 2012, p. 4). Even though this may happen to a white child and non-white child, they point out that «this experience occurs within a context of historical and continued racism is what makes the negative impact... so powerful for Students of Color» (Kohli, Solórzano 2012, p. 4). Often unconsciously and unintentionally hurtful when these comments are made to Students of Color or im/migrants, they are layered insults that intersect with othering of race, ethnicity, language, and culture. According to Gonzalez, implicitly the message is «Your name is different. Foreign. Weird. It is not worth my time to get it right» (Gonzalez 2014, p. 4). The underlying message is «everyone else is 'normal', and they are not» (Gonzalez 2014, p. 6).

Kohli and Solórzano argued that Students of Color experience microaggressions when they hear their names mispronounced by their teachers³. Mispronouncing a student's name essentially renders that student invisible. The impact of racism does not end once the experience is over. It can sometimes be brushed off or forgotten, but it can also have a profound effect on the way individuals see themselves, their culture, their families, and the world around them⁴.

THE IMPACT OF RACISM IN SCHOOLS

In order to fully recognize the impact of the mispronunciation of a name it is paramount to view these acts in a historical context. The practice of racialized renaming is part of the history of the United States. The Americanization of schools in the eighteenth century was institutionalized to strip Native Ameri-

² I am purposefully using Arzubíaga, Nogueroń and Sullivan (2009) term im/migrant to represent those labeled im/migrant, migrant, and refugee, including the undocumented. As Arzubíaga, Nogueroń and Sullivan explain these identities are not mutually exclusive or permanent, but their distinction is paramount because it carries legal implications.

³ Microaggressions are subtle, brief, and commonplace, they may consist of verbal, behavioral, or visual slights or insults toward Students of Color. Pérez and Solórzano define microaggressions «a form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place» (Pérez, Solórzano 2015, p. 302). According to Sue *et al.*, microaggressions «whether intentional or unintentional», communicate «hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color» (Sue *et al.* 2007, p. 271).

⁴ See Steele 1997.

cans and Mexicans of their language and culture. The first Indian boarding school was established in 1860 on the Yakima Indian Reservation in the state of Washington. Students were forbidden to speak their language even among themselves. They were often physically punished for doing so and rewarded if refrained. Being a good American meant speaking English. The long braids worn by Native Americans were cut off. They were required to wear uniforms. Their names were replaced by 'white' names, their traditional foods were abandoned, and the children were forced to learn the food rites of the white society (e.g., the use of silverware, napkins, etc.).

In sum, English and Eurocentric cultural values were used as a civilizing influence. Many of the families saw boarding schools for what they were created to accomplish, the total destruction of the Indian culture. Others were concerned with their children's treatment and their health. However, the biggest recent came from what it accomplished, breaking the bond between parent-child (Program of Partnership with Native Americans 2022).

The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which officially ended the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) required Mexico to give up 55 percent of its territory, thus the Mexican population could relocate south of the new border or remain on the land and accept US sovereignty. Even though the treaty guaranteed Mexicans who decided to stay all the rights of US citizens, the rights were broken one by one and the Mexican community fell victim to racial and ethnic prejudices, class conflict, and violence (Maciel 1992, p. 95). Speaking Spanish was discouraged and linked to 'failure' in schools, and these perceptions led to school segregation and punishment for speaking Spanish (Hurtado, Rodríguez 1989). Later, even though Mexican-American students were racially classified as white they were not allowed to be in designated white spaces, including schools (San Miguel Jr., Donato 2009). Mexican-American students' last names were used to segregate students into Mexican classrooms and schools. Mexican-American students' names were also Anglicized by white teachers. In the animated StoryCorps story *Facundo the Great*⁵, Ramón 'Chunky' Sanchez recounts how his name was changed to Raymond, Maria became Mary, and Juanita's name became Jane. When a new Mexican-American student, Facundo, came to school, the teachers and administrators got together to decide how to rename him. However, since 'Fac' was the only shortened version they came up with, they decided not to use it because it sounded like a dirty word. Ramón hasn't forgotten that day because Facundo was the only Mexican-American student allowed to keep his name. This story provides a window into the painful practices carried out by teachers. However, these practices started much earlier. In the seventeenth through the nineteenth cen-

⁵ *Facundo the Great*, Ramón 'Chunky' Sanchez is part of the story collection in StoryCorps broadcast by National Public Radio (NPR) where people from all over the US can record their stories. The archives are housed at the Library of Congress. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIqiQ8Vz_ps.

turies, enslaved Africans were forced to shed their names – they were seen as property – thus they were named with their masters’ names (Facing History & Ourselves 2020). And as Hodge shares

the renaming of non-white people, particularly Black people, has long been a strategy of white power to suppress the marginalized and strip them of their humanity. And this matters because even though you may not see your small actions as harkening back to the days of slavery and Jim Crow, *your Black students might*. (Hodge 2020)

While forced re-naming practices have ended, the attitude that non-white names are an unwelcome inconvenience continues to be a sentiment in society. A clear example of this is during a House testimony on voter identification legislation in 2009, Betty Brown a North Texas legislator said «Asian-descent voters should adopt names that are easier for Americans to deal with» (Ratcliffe 2009). Then, she added, «Rather than everyone here having to learn Chinese – I understand it’s a rather difficult language – do you think that it would behoove you and your citizens to adopt a name that we could deal with more readily here» (Ratcliffe 2009). A fitting response to this is the advice given by Uzoamaka Aduba’s mom (shared in her viral speech⁶) when Uzoamaka asked her «Can you call me Zoe?», «Why...?» asked her mom. «Because no one can say Uzoamaka». «If they can learn how to say Tchaikovsky, and Michelangelo, and Dostoevsky, then they can learn to say Uzoamaka» was the mom’s response. Evident from this anecdote is that im/migrants and Students’ of Color names continue to be mispronounced or unintentionally changed, thus I argue that the cultural mismatch that guides this interaction is a racial microaggression.

HOW DOES THE MISPRONUNCIATION OF STUDENTS’ NAMES OR RE-NAMING AFFECT THEM?

A mispronunciation of Students of Color’ names (or re-naming) is one of the many ways in which their cultural heritage is devalued. When Youth of Color go to school, they bring with them a great deal of cultural wealth (Yosso 2006). That wealth comes in many forms including, language, customs, values, and even names. When students experience disrespect for the names their families gave them, it is disrespectful to both their family and their culture.

The cumulative impact of these microaggressions is a damaging form of racism. It can result in children shifting their self-perceptions and worldviews, and believing that their culture or aspects of their identity are an inconven-

⁶ In the *Uzo Aduba Never Liked her Name* viral speech, she shares with a group of teenagers the story behind her Nigerian name. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JTPC73SdRkA&t=95s>.

ience or inferior. In the study titled *Teachers, Please Learn Our Names! Racial Microaggressions and the K-12 Classroom*, Kohli and Solórzano found that when students' names were mispronounced, their viewpoint shifted and their social-emotional-well was damaged. Students shared how embarrassing it was that their name was 'hard' to pronounce. They also shined away from engaging with their native culture, languages, and dialects.

The experience of having names changed, butchered, or ignored impacted causes a great deal of anxiety, shame, or feelings of othering. The lasting impact these microaggressions have on adults is shared by Bhargavi Garimella⁷. She recounts how as an Indian American she was embarrassed by her lunch and vividly remembers how in fourth grade her teacher mispronounced her name throughout the entire year. The mispronunciation and re-naming made her embarrassed of her culture and pushed her to hide it from others. She goes on to explain why *The My Name, My Identity Initiative*⁸ was designed to promote empathy and respect for cultural identity, and why the breakdown of stereotypes is so important. The campaign encourages children to feel pride in their name and patiently correct others who mispronounce it. Ms. Garimella points out that the initiative is not only about the mispronunciation of names, it questions how students' cultural identity is treated in the classroom by not only the teacher but also by other students. The campaign asks educators to *Take the Pledge* to respect student names and as a result their culture.

NAMES ARE A REFLECTION OF LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 59)

Language has been a salient feature of rendering group membership and social identity. Ethnicity is defined as «the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition» (*The Belonging Project*). Thus, language defines what ethnic group you belong to, and your identity as a member of that ethnic group. Take for example the identity as language brokers forged by children of im/migrants. As language brokers⁹, they become

⁷ Her story title *Student Voice: Respecting the Name, Respecting the Identity* is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOipDe7lhYM>.

⁸ Launched in 2016 by the Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE) and the National Association for Bilingual Education, *The My Name, My Identity* initiative encourages schools to designate a week to learn students' names. The focus of the initiative is to develop a culture of respect, foster relationships and create a positive climate in the learning community. More information can be found at <https://www.mynamemyidentity.org/>.

⁹ «Children often acquire the new language at a faster pace than parents and are asked to then act as translators on behalf of the parents and family, a task called language brokering» (Weisskirch 2006, p. 68).

members of two groups, and position themselves in an ‘in-between space’. Their intermediary position allows them to provide modes of communication between their families and other communities. This process often starts in childhood, but it may continue all the way to emerging adulthood and even later. Parents and other adults lean on the linguistic knowledge of their youngsters to be able to make themselves understood and negotiate meaning. Thus, children are asked to be linguistic performers in linguistic contexts that are characterized by a complicated interplay between social contexts and identity that fuels the child’s actions (i.e., the identity of the child, identity as an interpreter, the identity of the knowledgeable one). An interplay that also affects parents who are often asked to choose between speaking to their child in their home language or in English – the language of the dominant social group. Choosing the latter may cause a disconnect between generations of language speakers, and a loss of family ties, and traditions because the students cannot fully communicate in the dominant language.

Elsewhere, I suggested that a learner’s imagined identity and hopes for the future will impact his or her investment in the language and literacy practices of a given classroom, and subsequent progress in language learning. A poignant example of this is the schooling identity constructed by im/migrants who are pursuing higher education in the US. A study conducted with 13 immigrants (Peralta 2020) revealed that many find it difficult to fit in due to language differences. Even though all of them had some form of formal education in their country, knew more than one language, had on average intermediate proficiency in English, and were academically proficient in their first language, language became the salient feature that defined their identity, as shared by a student:

Even though I was an English teacher in Eritrea, I struggled with English because most of the time I couldn’t understand what they [professors] were saying to me and sometimes they [other students] never understood what I was saying. Sometimes the pronunciation is hard to understand. (Peralta 2020)

Another student contributed by saying, «Language is hard... professors are not aware of what it means to learn a new language». One more added, «Every class [content] is a new language, and they [professors] don’t really care about you [us]. It’s painful. It’s really painful. I’m the only non-American person in the class. The lecture has 150 to 200 people». Even though this student felt exasperated, he questioned the underlying cultural norms that privilege native speakers’ linguistic capital and ignore the language learners’ multilingual competence.

Reflecting on the stories, it is evident that the instructors of the courses didn’t view students’ bilingualism as an asset or bother to utilize the language and communication strengths of the students. On the contrary, the fact that they were multilinguals was viewed as students’ problems. In these cases, the student is viewed through a deficit lens – because s/he doesn’t speak Eng-

lish well or has an accent-defining his/her social identity. Unfortunately, in the educational setting language is a tool to disconnect an individual from the communal identity (Baldwin 1979).

Despite the unsupportive educational environment, im/migrants are learning how to use their cultural wealth while understanding their role as newcomers forging an identity to belong to a larger global group of people who have left their homes not by choice. As a student so eloquently shared when talking about education, «I don't know if you can feel my feelings but, just imagine you are a bird in a cage and they open the cage [the right to education] and you are FREE». Or as another student stated «Going to school for myself [means] just to understand the world better».

THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMES: HONORING STUDENTS

To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the soul of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin [...]. (Hooks 1994, p. 3)

In *The Power of Naming: The Multifaceted Value of Learning Students' Names*, the authors suggest a «practical first step: *learn law students' names*» (O'Brien, Leiman, Duffy 2014, p. 116). They point out that law students are known for being at high risk of psychological distress, specifically during their first year at the university. Thus, knowing student names is the first step in developing a community and forging a sense of belonging. «Although it may sound naive or minimal, learning students' names has been called the 'single most important thing' a [law] teacher can do to create a positive climate in the classroom» (O'Brien, Leiman, Duffy 2014, p. 116). They further point out that when talking of and about students as an anonymous group there is a tendency «to view their teaching and learning interactions through a 'student deficit' lens, where all members of a class are seen as indistinguishable, and the failings or problems of particular students are effectively assigned to all others» (O'Brien, Leiman, Duffy 2014, p. 120).

Learning student names can help shift the teacher's 'student-deficit-model' lens to a perspective that every student is unique, with a specific personality and a way of learning. «Harnessing the power of 'naming' brings greater connectedness and is profoundly important in establishing learning relationships» (O'Brien, Leiman, Duffy 2014, p. 120).