Culturally responsive teaching: Exploring children's names and cultural identities.

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Culturally Responsive Teaching: Exploring Children’s Names and Cultural Identities

The following Ideas for the Classroom column was submitted by AnnMarie Alberton Gunn and Alejandro E. Brice at University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, and Barbara J. Peterson at University of South Florida, Tampa.

Alejandro’s Story

I was born with the name “Alejandro.” My parents shortened this to “Ale” (ah-leh) when calling me. However, upon becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen at age 7, my name was changed to “Alexander” or “Alex.” Part of this change could also have been the result of beginning school in the U.S. and my parents wanting me to “fit in” and become part of common American culture. I grew up as “Alex” to all my English-speaking teachers, and friends. However, I was still Alejandro or “Ale” at home with my family. I maintained a dual identity into adulthood. Upon entering my professional life, I reverted to using my given Spanish name, Alejandro, in all professional matters. I choose, as an adult, to regain my ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and personal identity.

Alejandro Brice (2013)

This vignette illustrates the many struggles children face today as they navigate two cultures while trying to maintain their cultural identities. The purpose of this article is to: 1) explore the significance of children’s names to their cultural identity and to culturally responsive teaching practices, including useful classroom strategies; 2) discuss the importance of names as a window into children’s emergent literacy development and how to maximize the use of names in the classroom; and 3) offer multicultural children’s literature that feature children’s names to build a classroom community focused on cross-cultural understanding.

Multicultural Nations

Many countries around the world are becoming more multicultural and multilingual, and this trend is expected to continue. In the United States, for example, Hispanics and Latinos comprise 16.3% of the total U.S. population and one in five individuals (19.7%) speaks another language other than English in the home. As this diversity increases, it is imperative that educators address the changing diversity in their classrooms so that all students learn and live as citizens of a global society.

Educating our students means embracing their cultural identities. This presents a challenge, as the large majority of teachers differs culturally from their students. For example, 87-90% of the teaching population in the United States consists of White females, with the majority of these women also being heterosexual, middle class, and monolingual. Culturally responsive teaching practices can address this cultural mismatch and foster a classroom community in which all children may feel comfortable and thrive.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Like Alejandro, many children are renamed by parents or teachers. In the United States, parents may hope that giving their child an “American” name may provide advantages. Parents or teachers may rename a child because they believe this will allow others to say the new name with more ease, lessen the chance the child may be singled out, or help them fit in better.

Culturally responsive teachers learn about their children’s cultures, embrace those cultures in the classroom, and use them to frame instruction. Teachers have opportunities to positively or negatively impact their students’ perceptions and cultural identities. Learning about children’s names should be one way to begin honoring children’s culture and identity in the classroom.

Importance of Names to Emergent Literacy

Highlighting Children’s Names. Name recognition and name writing have been shown to be significant predictors...
of children’s literacy achievement during school years. Children’s written representations of their own names may serve as a “window” into their developing base of emergent literacy knowledge. Across cultures, children commonly recognize their written names at a very young age, and often begin conventional writing by writing letters in their names. Educators frequently highlight children’s names within classroom environmental print and routines, such as on cubby labels, helper charts, sign-in lists, and children’s daily work.

**Using a Name Jar.** Early childhood educators can foster early literacy learning, and nurture children’s sense of personal and cultural identity through intentional planning of instructional activities that highlight children’s names. After reading *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003) or other stories that feature names, cards with children’s names can be placed in a large jar and children can take turns pulling cards from the jar to engage in phonological activities, such as clapping out syllables in names, initial letter and syllable sorts, or inserting names into songs and rhymes.

**Developing Cultural Awareness of Names Through Multicultural Literature**

Multicultural children’s literature is a wonderful vehicle through which teachers may validate cultural identities within the early childhood setting, as well as explore the diversity of families and children’s names in the classroom and from around the world. Educators can use such literacy tools as multicultural literature to challenge practices that marginalize children’s names, and to foster awareness of the importance of names as central to personal and cultural identity.

Reading multicultural literature can create opportunities for children and early childhood educators to learn about each other’s cultures. Multicultural literature offers possibilities for teachers and children to consider linguistically diverse names they might not yet have encountered in their own lives. Educators can navigate interactive conversations with children surrounding multicultural books, and focus on the culture and names of a particular story or character. While reading multicultural literature, teachers and children can practice pronunciation of names, such as those in *My Name Is Sangoel* (Williams & Mohammed, 2009), and discuss why a character’s name is so important to his connection to family and culture. The flow of discussion provides an opportunity for children and teachers to talk about and explore commonalities and differences among people from a variety of places.

**Recommended Children’s Multicultural Literature**

- **Choi, Y. (2003). *The name jar.* New York, NY: Dragonfly Books. 40 pp.** When Unhei starts a new school in America, she is uncomfortable with peers’ teasing about the sound of her Korean name. Abandoning cultural naming traditions, Unhei decides to choose a new American name. Her classmates fill a glass jar with name suggestions, but one peer’s persistence at learning about Unhei’s name and identity leads to self-acceptance and a budding cross-cultural friendship.
- **Colato Lainez, R. (1996). *René has two last names / René tiene dos apellidos.* Houston, TX: Arte Publico. (Bilingual edition). 32 pp.** As with many Latino children in America, René’s sense of personal and cultural identity is challenged when his teacher and classmates misunderstand the importance of his two last names. A family tree project offers René the opportunity to explain how his last names link to his father’s and mother’s families in El Salvador.
- **Cummings, M. (2006). *The three names of me.* Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Company. 40 pp.** A girl adopted from China explains that her three names—one from her birth mother, one given by caregivers at her orphanage, and one her American parents gave her—are each an important part of her identity.
- **EchoHawk, T. (2005). *Call me Little Echo Hawk.* Springville, UT: Cedar Fort. 24 pp.** A grandfather shares with his granddaughter the story about the origin of their Pawnee family name.
- **Williams, K. L., & Mohammed, K. (2009). *My name is Sangoel.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers. 36 pp.** As refugees from Sudan, Sangoel and his family face major adjustments to life in the United States. His Dinka name is a proud tie to his father and grandfather before him. Sangoel is distressed that no one seems to be able to pronounce his name and comes up with a solution to the problem.

**Conclusion**

It is hoped that using children’s names and multicultural
literature that features children's names will foster conversations, understandings, and respect for children's names through the ideas and strategies provided. In addition, it is anticipated that these conversations will facilitate efforts to bridge school and home cultures.

Resources


