

Session 2 – The Importance of Names

Materials:

- Agenda charted on the board or chart paper, or provided as a handout
- AV equipment to play videos: Facundo the Great, The Secret to Changing the World (Part 1) and The Importance of Learning Student Names

Explain that today you'll continue building on the session from last time about names and storytelling to further increase awareness about the importance of creating welcoming communities where all students feel they belong and are seen and valued for who they are.

Opening: Stardust

"If you rip up the letters of anyone's name into small enough pieces, you will find that you are handling stardust." - 11th grader, *Emily Mata*

Invite participants to contemplate Emily Mata's words and then make connections between this quote and their learnings/takeaways from the previous session.



Talk Participants Through Today's Agenda

- Opening: Stardust
- Check Agenda
- Video on Names: Facundo the Great
- Video on Names: The Secret to Changing the World, Part 1
- The Importance of Learning Student Names
- Closing: The Importance of Names Revisited

Video: Facundo the Great

Explain that we'll continue exploring stories about names. Then show the two-minute StoryCorps video of [Facundo the Great](#).

Invite a few volunteers to share out any connections, thoughts, or feelings that came up for them during their viewing. Have them consider their students and school community

in particular.

Make sure the following talking points are touched on:

- **Names are an important part of a person's identity.**
- **Honoring people's names, and how they want to be named, is important.**
- **Correct use of people's names impacts their sense of belonging and self-esteem. It shows that you respect them, you value them, you see them how they want to be seen.**
- **In the video, the students are Latino/a/x. The teachers are white and in a place of power and authority within an institution and system that privileges their voices.**
- **Altering names is a form of racism and a predictable pattern of white superiority**

Background: Students and staff with non-Anglo names used to have their names Anglicized, or otherwise changed, on a regular basis, to make the names easier to pronounce in a predominantly Anglo culture. In the video, Juan's name was changed to "John" and Ramon "Chunky" Sanchez to "Raymond."

Fortunately, these days, more people are aware of the importance of names as it relates to a person's sense of belonging and self-esteem. This is true for people who have non-Anglo names, but also for those who've chosen to take on different names, because their assigned names don't fit, affirm or reflect who they are.

Take transgender people, for whom undergoing a name change can be an important and affirming step in their transition. It can help them and the people around them begin to see them as the gender they know themselves to be. *Deadnaming* a trans person (i.e., referring to them by their old name) can not only feel invalidating, but it also causes a person to feel you don't respect them for who they are, that you don't support their transition, or that you don't want to make the effort to call them by what is known as their *affirmed name*.

Recent research shows that hearing our actual names pronounced correctly causes a chemical reaction in the brain, similar to patterns reported when individuals make judgments about themselves and their personal qualities. Dopamine and serotonin are released when we hear our name said out loud which "[makes people happy](#) and sends unconscious signals such as empathy, trust, and compassion to the unconscious brain." (Anna K. Gallagher)

Therefore, making a concerted effort to use people's actual names and say them correctly, is important. Educational leader and coach, [Dionne Grayman writes](#):

“Whenever teachers mispronounced my name, it made me feel they had taken a shortcut and that the added step of learning the correct pronunciation wasn't worth the effort. Which meant, to some degree, that I wasn't worth the effort. I returned the favor by not participating in class or doing just enough to pass.”

The Secret to Changing the World, Part 1

Show the start of Lee Mun Wah's video: [The Secret to Changing the World](#) (from 0:00-2:34 min).

In the clip, Lee (pronounced Lay) Mun Wah touches on the powerful ways on what it is like to not be part of the mainstream and how that is reflected in “a story of HIS name.”

Explain that we'll come back to the rest of this TED Talk in a later session. For now, we're going to reflect on these first few minutes.

Pair Share

In pairs, invite participants to discuss Lee Mun Wah's “story of his name” and what it brought up for them. Have them reflect upon some of the questions Mun Wah poses in the video:

- Why did his parents put “Gary” on his birth certificate after taking two months to find his name Lee Mun Wah (he who writes)?
- What would it take for us to notice that Lee Mun Wah didn't laugh when the audience did?
- What would it take to ask: “Why didn't you laugh?” and “What came up for you?”
- What would it take to change the world to become more conscious of how we respond to the marginalization of other cultures?
- Better yet, what would it take to change the world to *stop* the marginalization of other cultures?
- Does anyone know what Lee Mun Wah's given name is? Ask if anyone knows what Lee Mun Wah's given name is. What about his family? (Explain that in Chinese culture, the family name is stated first, followed by the given name. So, in this case, Lee is the family name, Mun Wah his given name.)

Invite participants to pair up. Have pairs decide who will speak first and who will listen.

Explain that each person will get 90 seconds to share while their partner practices wholehearted listening. After 90 seconds, partners will switch roles: listeners become speakers and speakers become listeners. Cue partners to switch using a timer, bell, or another auditory signal of your choosing.

The Importance of Learning Students' Names

Distribute the article, [The Importance of Learning Students' Names](#) by Tamara Glenz, which in addition to emphasizing the importance of learning students' names, provides tips and pointers on how to do so.

Pair Share

In the same pairs, invite participants to discuss the article and how it relates to them and their classrooms in particular.

Large Group Share

Invite participants to share any learnings from the pair shares based on the Lee Mun Wah video and/or the Tamara Glenz article.

Closing: The Importance of Names Revisited

Warsan Shire's advice about names:

"Give your daughters difficult names. Give your daughters names that command the full use of tongue. My name makes you want to tell me the truth. My name doesn't allow me to trust anyone that cannot pronounce it right."

Uzoamaka Nwanneka Aduba adds:

"My family is from Nigeria, and my full name is Uzoamaka, which means "The road is good." Quick lesson: My tribe is Igbo, and you name your kid something that tells your history and hopefully predicts your future. So anyway, in grade school, because my last name started with an A, I was the first in roll call, and nobody ever knew how to pronounce it. So, I went home and asked my mother if I could be called Zoe. I remember she was cooking, and in her Nigerian accent she said, "Why?" I said, "Nobody can pronounce it." Without missing a beat, she said, "If they can learn to say Tchaikovsky and Michelangelo and Dostoyevsky, they can learn to say Uzoamaka."

Consider having Uzoamaka tell her story herself by playing the following two-minute video clip: [Uzo Aduba never liked her name](#).

Have participants reflect upon and then consider what they can do to learn their students' (and colleagues) names correctly and remember them. Invite a few volunteers to share out before closing this session.

Note on Quote Sources:

Warsan Shire is a Somali British writer and poet.

Uzoamaka Nwanneka Aduba is a film, television, and stage actress. People may know her by her (shortened) stage name Uzo Aduba, possibly for some of the reasons she describes in the quote and video clip.

Additional Resources: Session 2

Additional Written Resources:

[“How Stories Connect And Persuade Us: Unleashing The Brain Power Of Narrative”](#) by Elena Renken

[“What Can the Chinese Character for “Listen” Teach Us?”](#) by [simonendr](#)

[“Names That Are Unfamiliar to You Aren't Hard, They're Unpracticed”](#) by N'Jameh Camara, *Teen Vogue*

[“Why Hearing Your Own Name Might Just Be the Sweetest Sound, Ever!”](#) by Anna K. Gallagher, [hustlefromtheheart.com](#)

[“My Teachers Mispronounced My Name. Decades Later It Still Stings, and Influences the Way I Coach Educators”](#) by Dionne Grayman, *Chalkbeat*

[“Pronouncing Students Names Should be a Big Deal”](#) by Punita Chhabra Rice

[“The Importance of Learning Students' Names”](#) by Tamara Glenz

[“What is Deadnaming and Why Is It Harmful”](#) by Ariane Resnick

[“Deadnaming: What Is It and Why Is It Harmful?”](#) by KC Clements

Additional Video Resources | TED Talks:

[Getting It Right: Why pronouncing names correctly matters | Gerardo Ochoa | TEDxMcMinnville](#)

[Your Name is the Key! | Huda Essa | TEDxUofM](#)