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### Teachers, please learn our names!: racial microaggressions and the K-12 classroom

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## Teachers, please learn our names!: racial microaggressions and the K-12 classroom

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Many Students of Color have encountered cultural disrespect within their K-12 education in regards to their names. While the racial undertones to the mispronouncing of names in schools are often understated, when analyzed within a context of historical and current day racism, the authors argue that these incidents are racial microaggressions – subtle daily insults that, as a form of racism, support a racial and cultural hierarchy of minority inferiority. Furthermore, enduring these subtle experiences with racism can have a lasting impact on the self-perceptions and worldviews of a child. Using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework and qualitative data, this study was designed to explore the racial microaggressions and internalized racial microaggressions of Students of Color in K-12 settings in regards to their names. Black, Latina/o Asian American, Pacific Islander and mixed race participants were solicited through various education electronic mail lists, and data was collected through short answer questionnaires and interviews. Coded for emergent themes, the data is organized into three sections: (1) Racial microaggressions and names in school; (2) Internalized racial microaggressions; and (3) Addressing racial microaggressions and internalized microaggressions in schools. This article gives language to the racialized experiences many Students of Color endure. Additionally, it furthers our understanding of racial microaggressions by analyzing the complexity and impact from a multi-racial lens.

**Keywords:** Critical Race Theory; racial microaggressions; racism; internalized racism; K-12 schools; Students of Color; teachers

When we chose our daughters' names we wanted to give them something that they could carry with them, something that they could use as strength, as home, in a world that might not always nurture them as we would want it to. We gave them Nahuatl names. We gave them names that were hundreds of years old that carried with them the prayers of their great grandmothers. Names that represented their own spirits, but that also manifested the spirit of their people. We gave them names that we knew would be a challenge at times, and that might even feel like a burden when they just want to blend in.

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But we needed them to know that they come from somewhere and that this is their strength, their power, and the representation of our own hope for their futures, and for those of the children they will some day have. We gave them what we could, names that are truly theirs, Xóchitl (flower) and Citlali (Star). (Marcos Pizarro)

One of the authors, a Chicano, attended fifth grade in East Los Angeles in 1960. Most immigrant students at the school did not outwardly maintain an ethnic or linguistic identity with their countries of origin; however, one student named Freddie Galán<sup>1</sup> was different. His family was from Mexico, and he was raised to love the Spanish language and all of its manifestations, including the pronunciation of his name. Freddie felt comfortable speaking Spanish in public; he was the translator for his parents in school as well as other public spaces. He also insisted that his name was pronounced correctly. Young 10-year-olds can be hard on each other, and in order to push Freddie's buttons, his classmates would pronounce his name 'Gallon' – like a gallon of milk. This would drive Freddie crazy! He would always correct everyone with 'no, it's Galán.' In the Chicana/o movement of the 1960s and 1970s, correct Spanish pronunciation of names, terms, and foods was part of establishing a positive ethnic and linguistic identity. Freddie was ahead of his time and it is only now, as we write this article, that we realize how rare it is for a 10-year-old to stand up against his peers for something that his parents had raised him to honor – his name.

Unfortunately, most kids do not have the tools to defend themselves like Freddie. The other author, a South Asian woman, has a brother named Sharad (*shu-rudth*). Although his name is common in India, non-South Asians often struggle with the pronunciation. Growing up in the late seventies and eighties in predominantly white suburbs, Sharad had many uncomfortable incidents in regards to his name. He signed up for soccer when he was in second grade and when he arrived at practice he had been placed on the girl's team with the explanation, 'Oh! We thought it was Sharon.' When he was in the ninth grade, a teacher mispronounced his name as Sharub in front of a class of students. After that day, both the teacher and the students decided it was easier to call him Shrub, and this lasted for the rest of high school. These incidents may seem minor, but because of experiences like these, Sharad developed anxiety and even resentment around his name. While today he has grown to embrace it, the struggles he and many other children with non-Western names experience is real, and can have a deep impact on the way they see themselves and their culture.

In 2009, in a middle school classroom in California, a bright, spunky seventh grader was overheard saying to her friends, 'I'm Natália!' Later when she introduced herself, she said her name was Natalie. When questioned about having said Natalia earlier, she said 'Yeah, yeah. Teachers always say my name wrong. They say Na-tail-ia, and I hate it. It sounds so

ugly, so I tell them Natalie.’ To some, this incident may seem like a passing comment. However, based on teachers’ inability or unwillingness to correctly pronounce her name, Natália did not feel her culture was valued and thus, changed her name. For many Students of Color, a mispronunciation of their name is one of the many ways in which their cultural heritage is devalued.

Each of these children, in different school contexts over the last 50 years, encountered cultural disrespect in regards to their names. While the racial undertones to the mispronouncing of names in schools are often understated, we argue that these are racial microaggressions – subtle daily insults that, as a form of racism, support a racial and cultural hierarchy of minority inferiority (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2007). Using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework and qualitative data, this article highlights these racial microaggressions to further our understanding of the complexity of racism, as well as to give language to the experiences many Students of Color endure.

### **History of racism in schools**

To understand the impact of something as seemingly minor as the mispronunciation of a name, it is important to view these acts within a larger context of racism in schools. Historically, our education system has transmitted a hierarchy that prioritizes and enforces majority culture (Woodson 1933; Nakanishi and Nishida 1995; Bell 2004). As early as the eighteenth century, Americanization schools for Native Americans and Mexicans worked to strip indigenous people of their language and culture, and replace it with English, European clothing and Eurocentric cultural values (Zitkala-sa 1921; Ferg-Cadima 2004). In the 1880s, segregated school settings were often sites for discarded curriculum from white schools, used to promote the dominant culture to African American, Latino and Asian American students (Woodson 1933; Nakanishi and Nishida 1995). With the Great Migration in the early twentieth century, urbanization prompted many Blacks to the north and immigrants to US cities (Lemann 1982; Berlin 2010). Anglo-Saxon Protestant whites were in power, and felt that the status quo could be best achieved through the standardization of education (Tyack 1974; Jacobson 1998, 2006; Gerstle 2001). Educators were encouraged to use curriculum and pedagogy to assimilate all students to white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideals (Kaestle 1983; Gerstle 2001).

As we move into the twenty-first century, assimilation and a racial hierarchy are still a part of the schooling process. While standardization is now used to hold districts accountable to providing quality and equal education (Liebman and Sabel 2003); because state standards are not truly multicultural, curriculum continues to promote predominantly Eurocentric, upper-class perspectives (Perez Huber, Johnson, and Kohli 2006). Poor and minority families are forced to send their children to schools that fre-

quently do not match their needs or belief systems. Instead, schools uphold the value system of the dominant culture in many ways, including an unequal distribution of resources, a lack of diversity in the teaching force, and limited representation of minority groups within the curriculum (Loewen 1996; Delpit 1995; Ladson-Billings 2001; Sleeter 2001, 2008). It is in this context of historical and continued racism that we must understand the issue of names and Youth of Color.

### **The importance of names**

As a baby, identity and self-concept are developed through a family's repeated use of a child's name (Sears and Sears 2003). A child begins to understand who they are through their parents' accent, intonation and pronunciation of their name. Additionally, names frequently carry cultural and family significance. Names can connect children to their ancestors, country of origin or ethnic group, and often have deep meaning or symbolism for parents and families. 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. This happens for white and non-white children alike. However, the fact that this experience occurs within a context of historical and continued racism is what makes the negative impact of this experience so powerful for Students of Color.

The practice of racialized re-naming has been ongoing in United States history. In the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, because they were seen as property, enslaved Africans were forced to shed their names, and were given the names of their masters (Dillard 1976; Irons 2002). The names of indigenous people were replaced with Anglo and Christian names until the 1920s (Zitkala-sa 1921). While forced re-naming practices have ended, the sentiment that non-white names are an unwelcome inconvenience persists within US society. In 2009, during House testimony on voter identification legislation, a Texas lawyer argued that voters of Asian-descent should adopt names that are 'easier for Americans to deal with' (Ratcliffe 2009).

Although not always as blatant as the examples above, racial minority youth continue to experience disrespect to their names within schools. Regardless of whether the name of a student is intentionally disregarded, or a teacher accidentally butchers the pronunciation during roll call, we argue that the cultural mismatch that guides this interaction is a racial microaggression. Using CRT, we frame this experience within a larger context of historical and current day racism.

### **Critical Race Theory**

CRT is used within this study to centralize our analysis of race and racism within education. The framework was developed in the 1970s amongst legal

scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberley Crenshaw and Richard Delgado to highlight race, racism, and its intersections with other forms of oppression. Over the last 10 years, CRT has extended into many disciplines, including education. It is used within this field to heighten awareness about racism and educational inequity. CRT scholars have developed the following five tenets to guide CRT research:

- (1) *Centrality of Race and Racism*. All CRT research within education must centralize race and racism, including intersections with other forms of subordination such as gender, class, and citizenship.
- (2) *Challenging the Dominant Perspective*. CRT research works to challenge to dominant narratives and re-center marginalized perspectives.
- (3) *Commitment to Social Justice*. CRT research must always be motivated by a social justice agenda.
- (4) *Valuing Experiential Knowledge*. CRT builds on the oral traditions of many indigenous Communities of Color around the world. CRT research centers the narratives of People of Color when attempting to understand social inequality.
- (5) *Being Interdisciplinary*. CRT scholars believe that the world is multi-dimensional, and similarly research about the world should reflect multiple perspectives (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001).

Guided by these five tenets, we use the collective narratives of People of Color to tell a counter-story. The dominant perspective narrates that mispronouncing or changing a child's name at school is a fairly benign experience. CRT allows us to examine these experiences in a larger context of race and racism and demonstrate how, as racial microaggressions, they can take their toll on Students of Color. If a child goes to school and reads textbooks that do not reference her culture, sees no teachers or administrators that looks like her, and perhaps does not hear her home language, the mispronunciation of her name is an additional example for that student that who they are and where they come from is not important. Furthermore, the cumulative impact of these subtle experiences with racism can have a lasting impact on the manner in which youth see themselves, their culture and the world around them. Thus, we write this article to name one of the many forms of racism that Students of Color experience in schools, as well as to urge teachers to prevent further similar experiences and create classrooms where all children feel safe, visible, valued and celebrated.

### **Racial microaggressions**

Although racism is tied to race, it is not always acted out based on racial categories; it also enacted based on factors affiliated with race such as language, immigration status and culture (Kohli 2009). Many scholars have



well theorized the intersections of race with other forms of subordination in our society (Crenshaw et al. 1996; Dixson and Rousseau 2006). LeMoine (2007) has extensively tied race to language discrimination by documenting the differential treatment of White and Black French speakers. Scholars have demonstrated links between race and class discrimination, revealed the varied treatment of the first, predominantly wealthy and white wave and the second mostly poor and darker skinned wave of Cubans immigrants in the United States (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). When we analyze racism, it is important to acknowledge the complexity and intersectionality of its manifestations.

It is also important to understand racism beyond blatant or overt acts of discrimination. There are more subtle forms of racism that exist in daily life, which may be hard to pinpoint as racism, but cause harm nonetheless. CRT scholars have labeled this form of racism racial microaggressions (Author, 2007). To exemplify the concept, Davis (1989) takes readers on a brief elevator ride and describes the following incident:

The scene is a courthouse in Bronx, New York. A white assistant city attorney ‘takes the court elevator up to the ninth floor. At the fifth floor, the doors open. A black woman asks: “Going down?” “Up,” says [the city attorney]. And then, as the doors close: “You see? They can’t even tell up from down. I’m sorry, but it’s true” (1560–61).

Davis (1989) describes that there are many explanations for the black woman’s question, from the possibility that she was just being congenial, or perhaps the indicator was broken. However, the city attorney jumped to an assumption that the black woman was unintelligent. His comment was based on stereotypes, and as Davis (1989) interprets, was a microform of racism – that is, not just a personal slight, but an instance of racialized harm. Davis (1989) goes on to define microaggressions as ‘stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority’ (1576); she cites the origins of this concept within the work of Chester Pierce.

Starting with the term ‘offensive mechanisms’ in the 1960s, Pierce (1969, 1970) eventually reframed these offenses as racial microaggressions (Pierce 1974):

These [racial] assaults to black dignity and black hope are incessant and cumulative. Any single one may be gross. In fact, the major vehicle for racism in this country is offenses done to Blacks by Whites in this sort of gratuitous never-ending way. These offenses are microaggressions. Almost all black–white racial interactions are characterized by white put-downs, done in automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion. These minidisasters accumulate. It is the sum total of multiple microaggressions by whites to blacks that has pervasive effect to the stability and peace of this world (Pierce 1974, 515).

We borrow from the collective work of Pierce as we continue to define and understand racial microaggressions for not just African Americans, but for all People of Color. Through analysis of data from previous research, we have come to the realization that those who are racially marginalized often experience racism in both overt and covert ways (Allen and Solórzano 2001; Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2007; Solórzano 1998; Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll 2002; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2001; Yosso et al., in press). While we know that overt forms of racism still exist, we focus here on those covert or everyday forms of systemic racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place. Therefore we argue that racial microaggressions are:

- *Subtle verbal and non-verbal insults/assaults* directed toward People of Color, often carried out automatically or unconsciously;
- *Layered insults/assaults*, based on one's race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or name;
- *Cumulative insults/assaults* that take their toll on People of Color. In isolation, racial microaggressions may not have much meaning or impact; however, as repeated slights, the effect can be profound.

To understand racial microaggressions, it is important to explore four related areas. First, we must examine the different *types* of racial microaggressions that People of Color experience. Second, it is important to consider the various *contexts* in which racial microaggressions occur. Next, we need to understand the *effects* of racial microaggressions on the person on the receiving end. Finally, we need to know how People of Color *respond* to racial microaggressions. Figure 1 provides a visual rendering for understanding racial microaggressions:

In general, racial microaggressions can span from a passing comment on an elevator about the intellect of your racial community, to a friendly inquiry from a co-worker asking, 'Where are you really from?' For the purposes of this article, the types of racial microaggressions we are exploring involve the names of Youth of Color, and examine these racial slights in context of schools. We want to highlight the experiences of Students of

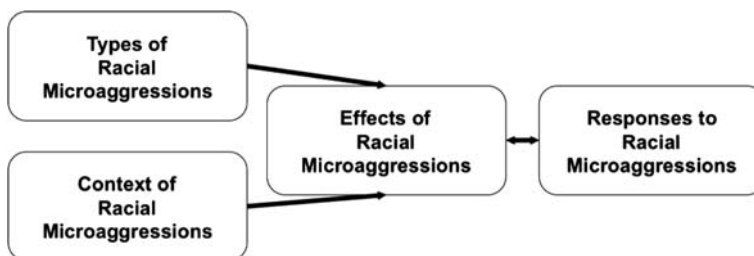


Figure 1. A model for understanding racial microaggressions.



Color, when they walk into first grade and their teacher says, ‘Ooh, this name is hard to say!’ or ‘Your name is very long, do you have a nickname?’ We are attempting to show how these subtle comments are actually racial slights. Often unconscious and unintentionally hurtful, when these comments are made to Students of Color, they are layered insults that intersect with an ‘othering’ of race, language and culture. By connecting the occurrences of multiple racial and ethnic communities, ages and geographic contexts in the US in the analysis of this article, our goal is to demonstrate the racialized nature of these occurrences, and gain a deeper understanding of the effect of these acts on students and their response to these events.

### **Internalized racial microaggressions**

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 an individual sees themselves, their culture and the world around them (Steele 1997). Internalized racism is a concept that has been widely theorized throughout the years amongst activist Scholars of Color (Woodson 1933; Haley and Malcolm X 1964; hooks 2001); however, empirical research on internalized racism is very limited, particularly in the field of education (Cross 1971; Cokely 2002). Perez Huber, Johnson and Kohli (2006) define internalized racism as the conscious and unconscious acceptance of a racial hierarchy. Internalized racism goes beyond the internalization of stereotypes about People of Color, but rather is the internalization of the beliefs, values, and worldviews of the dominant culture.

In addition to highlighting the disrespect of names in the schooling experiences of Students of Color as a racial microaggression in this study, we also demonstrate the lasting impact this racism can have on the students who endure it. By linking research on racial microaggressions and internalized racism, we are furthering the field by drawing attention to the damage People of Color experience when they begin to accept subtle, daily, racialized insults as reality. Our working label of this form of internalized racism is internalized racial microaggressions. Because racial microaggressions are often commonplace and so rarely diagnosed as an affirmation of dominant racial and cultural power, the ability for this form of racism to penetrate the psyche is profound. Growing up, we have heard comments such as, ‘Wow, you speak English so well!’ or ‘You don’t have an accent at all!’ It may seem easy to dismiss these comments as ignorant. However, the cumulative effect of hearing these comments repeated again and again, and coupled with numerous, similar comments or ‘jokes’ such as ‘Affirmative action must still be in place,’ or ‘You’re not a terrorist are you?’ we begin to hear a message that we do not belong. It is unjust when People of Color are forced to endure these statements based on phenotype or culture. However, these racial microaggressions present the

greatest danger when the victims start to believe the message, and begin to doubt their place or cultural worth in US society. This can impact their aspirations, motivation, and love for their culture and themselves. This article begins to conceptualize internalized racial microaggressions through the example of names and K-12 schooling.

## **Methods**

This qualitative study was designed to explore the racial microaggressions and internalized racial microaggressions of Students of Color in K-12 schools, as it relates to their names. Participants were solicited through five education related electronic mail lists ranging from 150 to 1000 members, and retrospective narratives were collected through individual interviews and electronic mail short answer questionnaires. Participant parameters were individuals who identified as Black, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Indigenous, Middle Eastern or mixed race, who attended US K-12 schools, and had a story about the mispronunciation or changing of their name in the context of their education. The protocol contained 10 short answer questions:

- (1) How do you identify racially or ethnically?
- (2) What is your age?
- (3) What is your given name, or the name your family called you growing up?
- (4) How did you get your name? If any, what is the meaning, significance or sentiment attached to your name?
- (5) In what city did you go to school?
- (6) Describe any incidents that involve the mispronouncing, changing or disrespect of your name as it relates to school?
- (7) How did this experience make you feel about your name, your family, or your culture?
- (8) Has this experience affected you in any lasting way?
- (9) What name do you go by currently?
- (10) If you are open to being contacted further or interviewed, please include email address and/or phone number.

We chose to use electronic mail for data collection because we were looking for a very specific experience, and we wanted to cast a wide net for self-selection of participants. We received 49 responses, and 41 of the respondents matched our criterion for participation. Thirty-one participants were women and 10 were men; they were racially diverse, mostly Asian American and Latina/o. Most participants were in their twenties and thirties, but they ranged in age from late teens to late forties (See Tables 1 and 2). 17 were from the West Coast (mostly California), 14 from the East Coast

Table 1.

Race/Ethnicity	Female	Male	Total
Asian American (Asian, Chinese, Pilipina, South Asian)	11	7	18
Black (Black, African American, Nigerian)	5	1	6
Latina/o (Chicano, Costa Rican, Latina/o Native/European, Mexican American, Salvadorian)	12	1	13
Mixed race (Native Hawaiian/multi-ethnic, Puerto Rican/West Indian)	2	0	2
White teachers sharing stories of others (Chinese, South Asian)	1	1	2
Total	31	10	41

Table 2.

Age	Participants
Late Teens (18–19)	3
20s	14
30s	16
40s	5
No Answer	3

(mostly New York City), six from the South/Southwest, and four from the mid-west. Because of the sensitive nature of the reflection, we chose to pursue this topic through retrospective reflections, rather than focus on the experiences of current K-12 students.

In the data collection process, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and offered consent for the use of their stories. Names have been changed to pseudonyms, omitted, or used with participant permission. While qualitative research generally calls for change to any identifiable information relating to participants (Flick 2009), because this article is about names, in particular circumstances the retention of either first or last names was critical to understanding participant's experiences. In those cases, however, any additional identifying information such as occupation, age, and location has been changed or concealed.

While we were able to better understand the complexity of racial micro-aggressions as they relate to names and schooling through this type of data collection, there were also several limitations. Our hypothesis is that this experience is common within all racial and ethnic minority communities; however, because we solicited through education-based electronic mail lists, the self-selected and snowball nature of the participants resulted in an imbalance of age, race/ethnicity, gender and locality of participants. Additionally, even though the call for participation was forwarded beyond the electronic mail lists, because the majority of the members of education related elec-

tronic mail lists are women in their twenties and thirties from California and New York City, there was an over-representation of this demographic. There also was an under-representation of Black participants, possibly because this experience is not as common for African Americans or Africans, but also possibly because of the networks in which we solicited. Additionally, because data collection was through electronic mail, we were unable to probe for deeper or more directed explanations. Despite the limitations, the data clearly demonstrates the cross-racial and multi-generational impact of this issue.

We sorted through the responses and systematically coded the data for emergent themes through a method of pattern matching. While there were many reoccurring themes, we chose to share those that highlight experiences of diverse participants with racial microaggressions and internalized racial microaggressions. The article is organized in the following sections: (1) Racial microaggressions and names in school; (2) Internalized racial microaggressions; and (3) Addressing racial microaggressions and internalized microaggressions in schools.

### **Racial microaggressions and names in school**

Respondents of many races, ethnicities and cultures had experiences of racial microaggressions in schooling in regards to their names. Sometimes these experiences were overt and other times more subtle, but overall, the actions and attitudes they experienced in K-12 schools highlight a type of cultural ‘othering’ that contradicts our goals for multicultural school environments. Teachers played an especially significant role in this type of racism. Whether being culturally disrespectful, unaware of their actions, or even just stumbling over a name they had never seen before, the tone set by a teacher about a student’s name was something significant that participants have remembered for many years.

Nitin, a South Asian<sup>2</sup> man, shared an example from middle school. Rather than learning a name outside his cultural comfort zone, a teacher decided to change this young student’s name to his own. He explained:

When I was in the seventh grade, I missed my first day of class. One of my teachers was calling roll and couldn’t pronounce my name – Nitin. As a joke, he crossed my name out of the gradebook and told the class he was renaming me ‘[Frank]’....after himself. Everyone thought it was pretty funny and the next day at school, everyone kept calling me ‘[Frank].’ I soon grew used to the name and within a few months, I was introducing myself as ‘[Frank].’ I went to that school for six years - seventh through twelfth grade. By the time I graduated, I firmly thought of myself as ‘[Frank],’ so much so that at college, I introduced myself as ‘[Frank]’ to everyone, including other South Asians.

Names are very personal and cultural, and often carry a great deal of meaning for families. Nitin is a Hindu name that means *right path* in Sanskrit. With little regard to the religious or cultural significance, the teacher in this example did not attempt to learn a name outside his comfort zone. However, not only did he not put in effort to learn his student's name, he re-named the student after himself. This teacher was probably unaware of the long history of slavery and Americanization efforts in which the racist practice of changing names is embedded (Zitkala-sa 1921; Irons 2002). He was probably also unaware that this action would result in Nitin shedding an ethnic marker and changing his self-perception throughout his education and into his career. While most teachers are not as intentional with their disregard of students' names as this teacher was, when we frame the experience and its impact within a larger context of historical racism, it becomes clear how renaming a Student of Color is a racial microaggression.

A South Asian woman, Nirupama, shared an experience when her teacher made a cultural joke about her name that led to her peers teasing her. She explains:

I went to a high school... where there were very few South Asians. Most students were either East Asian or Latino. On my first day of the tenth grade, my biology teacher did a roll call, and when he got to my name, he asked me pronounce it very slowly. I did, and then he said, 'Thanks, because I wouldn't want to call you "Gandhi" by accident or something.' The whole class laughed, and I felt humiliated. For the rest of that year, my classmates kept calling me 'Gandhi.'

Already a minority in her school, the teacher exacerbated Nirupama's racial isolation by comparing her identity to Gandhi, one of few Indians referenced in US textbooks. The racial tokenization of this South Asian student by the teacher was not only a racial microaggression that resulted in a feeling of humiliation, but also encouraged microaggressions from her peers, which lasted throughout the school year. It is important to note that despite the fact that her peers were non-white and possibly have encountered racial slights within their own schooling, by following the cues of their teacher, they contributed to her alienation (Kohli and Solórzano 2011).

While not always as obviously problematic as the examples above, covert racialized incidents in regards to names have repeatedly occurred in K-12 schools to Students of Color of varying ethnicities. A Pilipina American shared an experience in elementary school when a teacher's laughing reaction to her mother's maiden name, fostered an environment of cultural disrespect. She shared:

In elementary school, a teacher asked me to provide my mother's maiden name for an application form. I vividly recall him laughing at my response once I told him, 'Her maiden name is Sandel.' Her name seemed so 'foreign'

to him that he could only comprehend and pronounce her name when he compared it to an object. His confused response was, 'Like a sandal?' I didn't find that comparison humorous the way he did (or the rest of the class who began laughing too), but I definitely felt it was demeaning being ridiculed in front of my classmates.

Whether or not the teacher had any mal-intentions, a simple behavior like laughter in response to a name from her culture, felt demeaning to this young Pilipina student. Additionally, not only was the teacher's response unprofessional, but also it was a cue to the rest of students in the class that laughing at this name was acceptable. When students are taught to tease the unfamiliar, rather than embrace or celebrate an exposure to something new, it can create a climate of racial hostility for those who are not part of the majority.

A teacher educator from Oregon shared a story of a Chinese American teacher that he worked with that also demonstrates the dangers of a simple reaction like laughter to the name of a Student of Color. With a traditional Chinese name, this teacher had terrible experiences with her own teachers mispronouncing her name. At the Honor's ceremony for her high school graduation, the administrator mispronounced her name and laughed at his mistake, causing others in the audience to laugh with him. This experience was so embarrassing to the student that she did not get up to receive her award, did not attend graduation, and eventually changed her name. The teacher educator relayed the story:

Every teacher she ever had mispronounced her name. She dreaded daily attendance, never raised her hand, and tried to remain inconspicuous and anonymous in the classroom. She graduated from one of Portland's high schools with honors. At the honors ceremony prior to graduation, a vice principal walked to the podium to present the student with a prestigious award. He butchered her name mercilessly, shaking his head and laughing as others laughed along. The student slumped in her seat and hid behind the person seated in front of her. She did not go onstage to receive her award and did not attend graduation the next night. As soon she was able to, the student changed her name to 'Anita.'

Because of her experiences with teacher mispronunciation, this Asian American woman felt the need to become invisible in the classroom. Additionally, at her graduation, an experience with the mispronunciation of her name resulted in the invisibility of her accomplishments, and even prompted her to change her name. When the administrator laughed at his own mistake, he probably never considered the consequences of his actions. It is likely he did not intend malice, and his laughter was a natural reaction to making a mistake. But because this student had endured years of subtle racial slights, her cumulative experience with the fumbling of her name led her to feel humiliated by his action and see her culture as inferior.



Chiamaka is a Nigerian name meaning *God is beautiful*. In school, Chiamaka faced a great deal of avoidance in regards to her name. She recalled:

I always tried to go up to a new teacher or substitute before class to tell them my name since I was always the first or second person on the roster. If I didn't go up there, during roll call I would hear a long pause, sigh or 'sorry if I can't pronounce your name' without even an attempt to say my name. If I was lucky my last name would be called. I often wished I had an English first and last name to avoid being laughed at by my peers when my name was not said or butchered...

Rather than taking the time to learn how to say the name Chiamaka, teachers would instead avoid attempting to pronounce it. While this may not seem overtly like racism, would teachers act similarly with a Western name? How often are Elizabeths or Christinas avoided by educators in a school? When teachers avoid names they feel are unfamiliar or difficult to say, it can cause a student to feel invisible or that their culture is less important or inferior. Due to racialized schooling experiences, Chiamake used to wish away her culturally meaningful name when she was young.

In addition to Chiamaka's avoidance by teachers, she also had issues with peers in regards to her name. She and another Nigerian American participant who lived across the country, Oyekunle, both shared that they experienced severe teasing of their names, with peers calling them 'African Booty Scratcher' with rare intervention from teachers. Students will often take the cue of fearing or celebrating difference from the climate set up by teachers. When you consider the avoidance that teachers display with names outside their comfort zone, as demonstrated with Chiamaka, it is not hard to conceive of students showing intolerance towards names and cultures they see as unfamiliar.

Elaine, a Latina enrolled in a teacher education program, observed a teacher who would consistently mispronounce the names of her recent immigrant first and second graders. The Spanish-speaking students would not recognize their skewed names, and thus would not respond. This left the teacher angry and yelling at them. Elaine shared an example:

The teacher called someone whose name is Fidel, 'Fiddle, Fiddle,' and the student did not respond because that's not his name. You're not going to respond to your name if you don't recognize it. And then she berated him, yelled at him like, 'Why aren't you answering me? Why aren't you answering me?' and of course imagine how confused [he was]. It was clear that [he was thinking]... 'This teacher is yelling at me because I'm doing something wrong. I don't know what I'm doing, but I'm being bad.'

In an interview, Elaine argued that the teacher was not sensitive to the students' names, their recent arrival in the US, or their limited English skills. While the teacher in this example did not intentionally mispronounce Fidel's

name, or even realize that she was doing so, the frustration she exerted on the young immigrant child was due to her lack of cultural knowledge. Because of the impact this episode had on the child, this action, regardless of the teacher's intentions, was a racial microaggression.

When Youth of Color go to school, they bring with them a great deal of cultural wealth (Yosso 2005). That wealth comes in many forms including, language, customs, values, and even their names. Teachers have a responsibility to honor and celebrate these aspects of their students, but that does not always happen. When students experience disrespect to the names their families gave them, it is disrespect to both their family and their culture. These experiences may be subtle, but the cumulative impact of these slights are a damaging form of racism that we must begin to acknowledge and address.

### **Internalized racial microaggressions**

While individual racial microaggressions may not seem significant, there can be a negative impact from cumulative experiences with this covert form of racism. It can result in children shifting their self-perceptions and world-views, and believing that their culture or aspects of their identity are an inconvenience or are inferior. Many participants shared that the issues they experienced with their names in school caused them a great deal of anxiety, shame or feelings of 'othering.' Based on multiple experiences of feeling invisible or different, people explained that as young children they internalized the racial microaggressions and often confused the racism with a burden of their culture.

A Latina named Maythee (pronounced *My - TE* with stress on second syllable) had many bad experiences in school with teachers and the pronunciation of her name. She shared:

Since kindergarten I've had my name anglicized to May-ThE.... I did have one bad experience in high school when a biology teacher spent the whole year calling me *Maitai!* I just never had the nerve to correct him until the end when a bunch of students told him. I've always known that no one remembers my name so I have to make it a point of repeating it frequently. It's definitely always made me feel like an outsider. Since I come from an immigrant family, it was always yet another way that I knew I was not American. As a child, I used to try to anticipate when teachers were going down the list so I could say my name out loud before they had a chance to mispronounce it.

Because the teachers and peers within Maythee's schools did not learn how to correctly say her name, it reinforced the belief to her that she was an outsider. Because of their power and authority in a classroom space, when teachers disregard the names of immigrant children, it subtly reinforces a hierarchy of non-white inferiority. This form of racial microaggression can be damaging to youth. In this case, Maythee internalized this racism as her

own burden. Rather than seeing the teachers at fault, she instead subscribed to the belief that she was not American.

While the United States is comprised of people from many racial and ethnic groups from around the world, being ‘American’ is often a label reserved for the white majority. Not being seen as an accepted member of the country in which you reside can feel very alienating for young children. Subini Elizabeth was adopted from India into a white family in the mid-west. The name Subini was given to her by her social worker in India, and her adopted parents gave her the middle name Elizabeth. Like Maythee, many teachers mispronounced Subini’s name at the beginning of the year, which resulted in feelings of shame and dread, and even caused her to use her middle name because it seemed more acceptable within her predominantly white community. Subini shared:

My teachers always said my name wrong at the beginning of the year. I was ashamed for years. For starters, I was adopted so no one else in my family had a ‘different’ name. Second, people always laughed when someone said it wrong – it was constant. In third grade, I started going by my middle name Lizzie – can you get any more American? It wasn’t until high school that I was comfortable with [Subini]. I embraced my name and originality in high school and haven’t looked back. However, I still dread starting a new job or a new class because I know that the teacher is going to say it wrong and everyone is going to say it wrong as a joke.

Subini internalized the racism she experienced in school against her name in the form of shame. This internalized racial microaggression impacted her to the point that she disregarded her Indian name, and began to identify with what she saw as an ‘American’ name. While she has moved past many of these feelings and has reclaimed her Indian name, as an adult, Subini continues to feel dread that she and her name will be treated as a joke.

A Latina named Marina explained that the slights she faced in regards to her names led to feelings of embarrassment. Marina explained:

My name is properly pronounced in Spanish with a roll of the ‘r’.... Over the years, I became ‘Marina’ pronounced in English, like a boat harbor (which is what I say now when people freak out not knowing how to read my name).... As a child, I felt embarrassed. I wished I had a common name like Jessica or Vanessa. I felt like my parents weren’t as ‘Americanized’ as I wished they were.

Although as an adult, Marina has come to love her name and embrace her culture, as a child she was embarrassed of her identity. She wished for a more ‘common’ name and that her parents were more ‘Americanized.’ Her experiences in school led for her to internalize a negative perception of herself, her culture and her parents. The simple act of not rolling the r in her name led to Marina believing that more ‘common’ and more ‘American’ was superior to her Latina/o roots.

A Sri Lankan American man named Ahilan explained that his first grade teacher's mispronunciation of his name stuck with him all the way through college. This experience, plus the struggles teachers and peers expressed over saying his Tamil last name, led to embarrassment and feelings of his name being a burden. Ahilan shared:

Ahilan was mispronounced brutally by my first grade teacher, leading me to adopt that mispronunciation and use it all through high school and college.... To this day it causes confusion and embarrassment for me with my friends and others.... My last name was (and is) mispronounced or not even attempted on a daily basis. Numerous people asked me to shorten it, or just shortened it for me. I couldn't talk about that for a long time. It made me feel that it was an imposition on others for them to learn my name; it made me feel embarrassed to have it.

Young children often do not have the tools to defend themselves or stand strong against slights against their culture. The fact that a mispronunciation by a teacher in first grade resulted in Ahilan misrepresenting his own name for his entire K-16 education highlights the power that educators carry, and the care they must enact. It is doubtful that this teacher was intentional or malicious in this situation, more than likely the teacher has also not thought about this since then. However, his or her actions led Ahilan to internalize that his culturally rooted name was an imposition on others. Mispronouncing a name may seem benign, but for this young Child of Color, it was a racial microaggression that was internalized and lasted for many years.

Unfortunately, the experience of othering based on cultural names is not unique to first or second-generation immigrant children. Several African American participants shared experiences of teachers stumbling over their names. Names are often an important way for African American families to reclaim African roots, and/or disconnect themselves from the ancestry of white slave owners (Dillard 1976; Kaplan and Bernay 1997). Shaquana, a Swahili name meaning conqueror or leader, was constantly mispronounced which led her to feel uncomfortable with her name for many years. The teachers' mispronunciation led Shaquana to feel uncomfortable with a name meant to be empowering. Dajanee insisted to one of her teachers that she should be called D. because she 'hates that teachers say it wrong' and 'hates her name.' A teacher's mispronunciation of a name may seem so insignificant. However, when analyzed through historical racism, the cumulative effect of mis-saying a name intended to instill dignity can diminish its power.

Ku'ulani identifies as native Hawaiian and multi-ethnic. Her great grandmother passed this first name to her mother, and then onto her. Based on severe mispronunciation by teachers, she dreaded roll call. She shared:

I used to always get nervous and dread the roll call, because especially at the beginning of the school year or when we had subs, there would always be a pause before my name while the teacher tried to figure out how to say it. Then they'd butcher it. It's pronounced 'Koo-oo-luh-nee.' They would say 'Koolawnee' or 'Kaeoolawnee' or 'Kalawnee.' Most times, they'd never ask, 'Is that how you pronounce it?' or 'How do you pronounce it?'

Ku'ulani has a name of cultural and family significance. She would have preferred for teachers to ask her how to pronounce it. However, because new teachers would consistently say her name incorrectly without asking for help, she developed an anxiety rather than pride around the introduction of her name.

Emelda was from a Mexican American family who had lived in the United States for several generations. Based on an experience in school, her parents changed her name. Emelda recalled:

My mom used to call me Eme when she wanted me. When I went to kindergarten my teacher could not pronounce my name so my Mom changed it to 'Amy.' It sounded like Eme and it was much easier to pronounce. I went through grade school and high school being called Amy.

To accommodate the teacher's inability to correctly pronounce Emelda's name, her parents felt pressure to change their daughter's name. This experience reinforced a racial hierarchy for Emelda. She shared that she felt embarrassed around her given name, and actually embraced what she saw as a more 'American' name. Since then, she has made peace with this experience and has gone back to using the name Emelda, but it is unfortunate that a child would have to take on the burden of racism as Emelda did.

### ***Addressing racial microaggressions and internalized racial microaggressions in school***

Although of different races, classes and contexts, these People of Color all experienced racial microaggressions in their K-12 schooling related to their names. There are many reasons why this happens so often to our children. Some teachers are culturally insensitive, disrespectful or even lazy in their attempts to learn names outside of their comfort zone; however, these teachers are probably in the minority. The majority of racial microaggressions in regards to names likely occurs because of unawareness to the issue, or even a phonetic limitation in a teacher's ability to say a particular sound. Even so, the consequences of these subtle racial experiences are real and can have a lasting impact on the wellbeing and self-perceptions of youth. For this reason, to prevent internalized racism, teachers must own this issue regardless of the cause of a mispronunciation and be transparent about their limitations.

When considering the harm that can occur through something as simple as saying a name incorrectly in class, it becomes important for educators to reflect on several aspects of their practice. First, it is essential to *recognize Eurocentric bias in the classroom*. With state mandated standards and prescribed curriculum, the school may already be promoting a racial hierarchy that prioritizes white and upper-class history, values and perspectives (Perez Huber, Johnson and Kohli 2006). Teachers can proactively prevent or minimize the incidents and harm of racial microaggressions by acknowledging places in the school or classroom that overlook the experiences and cultures of racial minority youth. Educators can also utilize methods of culturally relevant pedagogy and validate students' cultures through true models of multi-cultural education (Ladson-Billings 2001; Nieto 1994), as well as speak frankly about racism and internalized racism with youth.

Second, it is also fundamental that *teachers both identify and expand their cultural limits*. We all come from a particular cultural and linguistic background, and as educators, we may have never rolled an r, or seen the letters *ngy* together in a name, and thus we may not say a student's name correctly when we see it for the first time. However, it is important to not give up in our efforts and change or shorten a name, but rather ask for help and remind the class that this is our limitation, not any fault of the student. It is essential to do our best to learn the names of our students, no matter how long it takes or how far it is outside our comfort zone. If we create classrooms that celebrate differences and reciprocal learning between the teacher and students, youth of any race or ethnicity should both retain and develop pride in their culture.

Lastly, it is important to *honor the power that teachers carry to influence a student's sense of self and worldview*. A confused or frustrated look or a laugh of embarrassment may be common responses when a person encounters something new and challenging. However, as demonstrated in this article, when teachers react in these ways to the names of their students, it can have a lasting impact on the way that child sees themselves and their culture. Teachers carry a great deal of responsibility in shaping the minds of their students, and it is fundamental that they treat that power with care. In addition to these pedagogical suggestions, there are resources that can be used to bring awareness to the issue of names and schooling, as well as to teach children a love for their names and their culture.<sup>3</sup>

Students of Color encounter many forms of racism within their schooling. Some of this racism is blatant, and other times it is more subtle or covert. No matter the form, however, it can be damaging to the way students see themselves, their culture and their family. We write this article to heighten awareness of the impact of racial microaggressions on Youth of Color with the hope of improving the racial climate and conditions of K-12 schools. Acknowledging that racial inequality is a structural problem within the US, teachers are not the originators, nor the root cause of institutional-



ized racism within schools. Even so, educators are in a unique position to shape the perceptions of their students. They can create classrooms that replicate social inequality, or create classrooms that are positive affirming spaces. We feel that Students of Color deserve to experience education within a space that validates their culture and identity, and we hope that this article will raise consciousness and motivate educators to be mindful of something as simple and significant as learning the names of their students.

## Notes

1. Names have been changed to pseudonyms, omitted, or used with participant permission.
2. All racial and ethnic markers are self-designated by participants.
3. Here are several book suggestions from participants of children's books that address this topic and can be used to encourage youth recognize the power and beauty of their names: Alam Flor Ada, 1996, *My Name is Maria Isabel/Mi Nombre es Maria Isabel*, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing; Seema Imam and Ibrahim Imam, 2007, *I Am Listening*, Lucent Interpretations LLC; Santha Rama Rau, 1961, "By Any Other Name," *Gifts of Passage*, ed. V. Gollancz; Sandra Yamate, 1992, *Ashok by Any Other Name*, Polychrome Publishing Corporation.

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