

# Name Stories

Learning about and understanding each other's names sends the message that who you are and what you bring to the class matters to you and the community. When we invite children to tell the story of their names we recognize the knowledge, traditions, and ideas they bring with them from their families and communities, and expand the whole class's knowledge and appreciation of each other.

Name stories explain the meaning, origin, and history of a person's name or names. They can be shared orally, in a sentence or two, or over the course of a paragraph or more, depending on the age of the writer. Used widely across the elementary grades, name stories are a much-loved tradition in many schools, where children have a chance to illustrate, share, read, and display their finished stories.

## Why we tell and write name stories...

We tell and write name stories in the beginning of the year to help us get to know children, help them get to know each other, and to celebrate and honor the cultures, identities and backgrounds of children in the class. When children write about their names they celebrate their own identity and culture, and when they listen to or read their classmate's name stories they celebrate others' identities and cultures.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy "supports linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic processes of education" (Kelly et al., 2020). Name stories, with their foregrounding of each child's own language and cultural background, very much fits into the practice of culturally sustaining pedagogy, as it is related to the fostering of pluralism in the classroom.

## How we tell and write name stories...

At the beginning of the year, write and tell name stories to help children get to know each other, build community, and honor each other's identities.

1. Start by reading aloud a variety of picture books on the beauty, origin, and meaning of names. Some examples include:
  - Helen Recorvits, *My Name is Yoon*, Square Fish, 2014
  - Jorge Lujan, *Seven Pablos*, Enchanted Lion Books, 2018
  - Juana Martinez-Neal, *Alma and How She Got Her Name*, Candlewick, 2018
  - Karen Williams, *My Name is Sangoel*, Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2009
  - Kevin Henkes, *Chrysanthemum*, Mulberry Books, 2008
  - Yangsook Choi, *The Name Jar*, Dragonfly Books, 2003
2. Model the activity by creating and sharing your own name story. Create a short, illustrated book about your own name to read to children.
3. Have children interview their families about their names. Together as a class, brainstorm questions they could ask. Some questions might be:
  - Tell me about my name.
  - Who named me?

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- Why do I have this name?
- Do you have any memories or stories about my name?
- What does my name mean?
- Was I named after someone in my family?

Next, children orally share what they learned about their names with a partner before writing and illustrating their name stories, which we often bind together into a class book the children can choose to read during independent reading time, or that the teacher reads to the children.

### Tips to Keep in Mind

- Be sensitive to how children feel about their names. Avoid pressuring them to share names they are not comfortable with.
- Not all children like their names, or are comfortable with the history behind them. Let children choose which names or nicknames they want to write and talk about.
- Some children may use names they have chosen themselves.
- Children may have complicated relationship to their name and name history, including experiences with adoption, foster care, chosen gender identity, and immigration that make name stories a challenging or upsetting activity. Therefore, it is important to offer options, such as writing about the names of pets, loved ones, friends, favorite characters, and names they would choose for themselves, or even a wholly different topic, such as doing a “word story” about their favorite word and how they came to love a particular word.
- Throughout the process of exploring and writing name stories with children we remain aware of and respect the fact that some children may not, for whatever reason, want to participate in parts or all of this activity. As with any school activity that connects a child’s school life and their personal life, we let the child take the lead, and do not force them to talk or write about their name if they do not wish to.

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### Works Cited and Further Reading:

Long, Susi, et al. “‘We’ve been doing it your way long enough’: Syncretism as a critical process.” *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy* 13.3 (2013): 418-439.

Souto-Manning, Mariana, et al. No more culturally irrelevant teaching. Heinemann, 2018.

Souto-Manning, Mariana, and Jessica Martell. Reading, writing, and talk: Inclusive teaching strategies for diverse learners, K–2. Teachers College Press, 2016.

Souto-Manning, Mariana. “Honoring children’s names and, therefore, their identities.” *School Talk* 12.3 (2007): 1-2.