

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Issues:

- What do names tell us about a person?
- How much of our identity is determined by our name?
- What is the effect of having your name spelt or pronounced wrong, or of being denied a name altogether?

Learning Objectives:

- Children will understand the importance of names as markers of personal identity.
- Children will understand the role of names as markers of cultural, ethnic and class identity.
- Children will be able to critically reflect on what happens when names are changed or denied.

Resources

Download the poem *Isn't my Name Magical?* by James Berry from the poetry archive at <http://www.poetryarchive.org/childrensarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=121>

Follow-up Activities

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| Activity 1 | Understanding the role and importance of names as markers of personal identity. |
| Activity 2 | Understand the role of names as markers of class, ethnic and cultural identity. |
| Activity 3 | Reflecting on the significance of your name. |
| Activity 4 | Exploring ethical implications. |
| Activity 5 | Creative exercise. |



Lesson plan

| Activity | Activity Content | Outcomes |
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| Introduction 5 mins | Begin by going around the circle asking each pupil to introduce themselves using their full name. Ask the class to consider where their name came from and if it has a special significance in their family and/or culture. | Noting the significance of proper names. |
| Poem Discussion 5-10 mins | Read the poem. Invite discussion on the way names are understood in each stanza. For instance, what does it mean to say that my name is 'inside me'? That it can 'shake me'? That it can 'switch me on...like human electricity'? That it 'demands my attention'? That it can 'touch me'? You can extend the discussion here by asking the class to consider how they feel when their name is spelled or pronounced incorrectly, or when someone mistakes them for another person. | Comprehension |
| Exercise 5-10 mins | Ask the class to describe what they think the following people are like, just from hearing their names: Crispin Parker-Bowles; Bronya Archischevska; Tim Smith Rasheed Singh; Samuel Cartwright; Zandra Seamist You may wish to replace this list with one of your own that better reflects the character of your class and their ability to identify names from different classes and cultures. Invite discussion as to the likely accuracy of these descriptions. Encourage pupils to think of examples where people have had particular expectations about them because of their names, and of how they feel about this. | Critical judgement and analysis |
| Small group work 10 mins | Organise the class into small groups and ask them to discuss and try to come to an answer to the questions below, (noting that these are open questions). Less experienced classes may find it easier to be introduced to the questions one at a time. Have the group elect a scribe to note down their answers. <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ How/would it change you to have a different name?○ What would it feel like to have no name? | Creative exploration |
| Feedback discussion 5-10 mins | Ask representatives from each group to report back. Use these observations to open a general discussion on the importance of our name for our sense of identity. | |
| Exercise 5-10 mins | A fun ending to this session is to note that nobody in the class got to choose their own name, but for the rest of the session/period/day, they may do so. Pupils may select their own name (one word only) and introduce themselves with their new name by going around the circle. Some time should be given to a consideration of the characteristics and values the group associate with these names that might have influenced the choice of them. You may also have them design name badges. | Inventive thinking |
| Optional Extended Activity | Assign each child a number instead of a name, to be used when addressing one another. If this is done earlier in the day, the class will have some experience of what it is like to 'lose' their identity before the session begins, and are likely to be able to think through the issue of identity on a deeper level. For older classes you can introduce the fact that numbers have been used 'de-humanise' people, for example in prisons and also in Nazi concentration camps. Open a discussion on the effects of being called by a number rather than a name. The feelings expressed in the poem can be used as a comparison. | Experimental thinking |

Notes and Suggestions

An alternative to the extended activity using numbers, and a more fun way to start this session is to assign each pupil a new name. This can be done by name-swapping with others in the class, or by making up a lucky dip of names devised by the children themselves.

Closing activity.

It is recommended that the '*Thinking Giraffe*' closing activity be used with this session, which can arouse deep feelings in some pupils that they may not be able to express in the general discussion

Key Concepts:

This session explores the topic of proper names (the name we use to pick out one, unique, individual person). Firstly: how important is our own proper name; secondly: how do we use the proper names of others (particularly people we have never met, such as long dead historical figures)? Do proper names really matter or could we get on very easily without them? In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare has Juliet suggest that the name is really not that important: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet"(II, ii); however, your discussions with the children might well show that proper names are not so easily dismissed, (our names matter to us). Philosophers have concentrated on the question of what the meaning of a proper name might be: what goes on in our mind, what do we think, when we hear and understand a proper name? This question becomes perplexing if we consider the example of proper names that refer to historical figures that none of us have met, or names that refer to fictional characters. In such cases it seems that each of us has his/her own, differing, picture of the named thing. But if that is correct it would have the consequence that there is no common meaning for proper names: we might use the same sound but we all associate a different meaning to it. J.S. Mill tried to deal with this problem by declaring that proper names have no meaning at all, they are just empty markers at the start of a sentence. Bertrand Russell defended the view that the meaning of a proper name is not some object in the world that the name supposedly refers to, but that the meaning is given by a complex of sensations and experiences that come into the individual's mind when they hear the name. In this way Russell, seemingly, provides an explanation of how we can use, with understanding, the names of long dead historical figures that none of us have met; but the solution seems to have the consequence that everyone has their own individual notion of what a proper name means.

Further Reading:

Mill, J.S (1843) *A System of Logic*, Book I, Chapter 2, §5.

Russell, Bertrand (1911), 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description'.

Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 'Names' <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/names>]