

Name Poems

Chalese Potts

Grade level: Elementary and Junior High

Time frame: 1 hour, but can be shortened

Objectives: To give students the opportunity to take an introspective look at themselves, their names and all the inheritance that comes in a name. To create a space that allows creativity and curiosity to lead students to better understandings and appreciation of themselves while instilling tools to navigate their worlds' better. Even if it is just for a moment.

Prior knowledge and skills: None

Required materials: Starburst candies, hat or bowl, pencils, paper, two large sticky note pads, marker, a written poem about your name to share with the students

Literary Model: Poem written by instructor

Sequence of activities:

Prep (before class)

Take one large sticky note pad and write down the colors of the Starbursts. Then assign each color with a community-building question. For example:

- Pink: Tell me about your favorite meal
- Orange: Tell me about a time you were embarrassed
- Red: Tell me about the funniest thing you saw today (not talking about people)

Ice Breaker (5 minutes)

Place all of the Starburst in an easily visible and accessible container, like a hat or bowl. Tell the students to pick one and save it for later instructions.

Once the students have all selected one Starburst they will introduce themselves by name, pronoun (if appropriate) and the community building question associated with the color of Starburst that they chose. For example: "My name is Chalese Potts, my pronouns are she/her/hers. The funniest thing I saw today was a tick-tock of a dog wearing different hats as the song Mr. Sandman plays in the background." (The teaching artist/teacher should also participate in this introduction.)

Rules of Engagement/Community Guidelines (5 minutes)

After this ice breaker, I decided to take the community-building efforts further and talk briefly about some group expectations. Since this was the first session with students it was important to set the standard and implement some structure on how we interact with one another. Creating these expectations with students allows them to hold themselves accountable.

To set this up you will need to pull out the other large sticky note, and follow these steps:

1. Write at the top of the paper nice and big: "Rules of engagement"
2. Take five minutes to explain to students what that is, why it is important.
3. Create two rules with students, and have students explain what each one means to the group. Write them down.
4. Make clarifying statements about each rule if students explained it incorrectly. Provide affirmations and restate definitions for the students who explain it correctly.
5. Create 2-3 rules you feel are important to manage the class. Write them down.

Discussion (5-10 minutes)

At this time, you can start a discussion with the students about their names. I ask questions like:

- Raise your hand if you ever had your name mispronounced.
- What do they call you, what is your name?
- How do you feel when people say your name incorrectly?
- Raise your hand if you know where your name comes from, or if it has an important meaning.
- What if you got to choose what your name means, what would that be like? Where do you think it comes from?

Read Poem (5 minutes)

After the discussion, you can transition by saying "I'm going to read you a poem about my name." Take up to 5 minutes to read the poem you have prepared using the writing prompt (see below). The second option would be to show a video clip of a name poem from YouTube no longer than 5 minutes. I prefer to apply the same pressure to myself and write to the same prompt so that the students can see that it is achievable.

This is an example of the poem I wrote:

Potts

My name was given to me from my mother's father,
His namesake held to the highest degree of respect
even when he did not value the weight of its responsibility.

My grandfather only birthed daughters.
I only spent the first five years with each.

Until he adopted a son.
My “uncle” was 10 years younger than me.
Holds his title like a weight over my head.
Tells me to say mercy when I do not call him by name.

I do not beg.
I only run.
First, with my legs.
With age, my mouth.

I wonder now, what entitlement carries with the ones who have the ability to pass things on?

The men in my family claim me to be theirs.
Even after I say, I am no one’s daughter.
My father did not give me his name.
Did not claim me to be his.
My father, only spent the first 5 years of my life with me.
The gag to all things namesake.
The joke everyone forgot to laugh about.
The generational curses a mirror looking back.

Maybe one day he will have a son
That will demand me to call him brother.
Demand my children to call him uncle
Until we
all
beg
for
mercy.

Brainstorming & Writing Poems (5-10 minutes)

After you read the poem, you will provide the students with some more thought-provoking questions. It may be best to write these questions on the bottom of the sticky note with the Starburst colors, or a whiteboard. If your students use tablets and office teams, it would be ideal to have the questions already posted in their folders so they can simply click on it and begin writing.

Pass out pen and paper, or allow students to turn on their tablets. Begin with the writing brainstorm. The brainstorm prompt goes as follows:

- Where do you think your name comes from?
- Who gave you your name?
- What does it mean to you?
- Use a metaphor to describe your name and how you got it
- How does it feel to hold that name?

As students are brainstorming their poems, walk around to see if they are stuck in the writing process. Ask clarifying questions to prompt further thought.

Revise Poem (5 minutes)

Note to students as they are writing and revising: These questions and prompts are just ways to guide you to your poem. Sometimes your poem may find a new way to emerge. That's ok too. Let it happen.

Spend the remainder of your time reading and providing feedback to students' poems