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Names, Objects, Histories: Intercultural Learning in Action

Kinga Varga-Dobai with Ze Moua and Sarah Kelley Campbell

After several weeks of class, I ask my students, who are pre-service teachers, to share how they felt when they first saw my name on their class schedule. Some students say that my hyphenated name confuses them because they cannot place me in any “foreign name” category. Once a student confessed she was sure that I would have an accent and was worried she would not understand me.

I find this exercise useful because pre-service teachers are surrounded in their school placement classrooms by children who come from different cultural and racial backgrounds, or who have foreign names and accents, or parents who do not speak English. I find that verbalizing their thoughts brings awareness of the relevance of diversity in our schools and how we react when faced with the unfamiliar, often making assumptions about people who sound and look different than us before we really get to know them. Through the use of children's literature and reflective and critical writing activities, it has become important for me as a teacher educator to engage students in the exploration of culture, and to help them recognize how culture shapes their personal beliefs as well as their practice and perspectives as future educators.

Cultural Self Project: Name Stories

What I originally planned to use as a simple introduction turned into a series of activities called the *Cultural Self Project*. Pre-service teachers start these activities during the first class in an early childhood methods course and incorporate them throughout the semester in discussions around children's books, role play, and arts-based activities. All activities investigate the importance of cultural identity. The *Name Story* assignment that two students, Ze and Sarah, and I illustrate in this article relies on the use of children's literature as a conversation starter with a goal of engaging students in learning about culture.

Additionally, the *Name Story* provides an opportunity for students to become familiar with the theoretical concepts of *Other* and *Othering*, notions "that mirror the realities we create through our language, behavior and everyday interactions" (Varga-Dobai, 2009, p. 9). The concept of *Other* according to the postcolonial theorist Bhabha (1994/2004) is built on a strong binary opposition of the *I-Thou* within which the I is associated with the *Self*, and *You (Thou)* represents the *Other* who is different than the *I*.

The short story used in class as an inspiration for pre-service teachers to write our own stories is "My Name" by Cisneros (1991) from the collection of short stories *The House on Mango Street*. Cisneros' short story emphasizes the cultural relevance and connotations of a name and evocatively describes how a name can become a reason for *Othering*. By sharing the story of her name, the author shares important details about her family, and her cultural background. The story about the name becomes a critique on gender relations and cultural traditions, and on being different.

Students use Cisneros' story and our discussion about the story as an inspiration for the *Cultural Self Project*. I offer guiding questions: Who named you? What is the significance of your name? How does your name relate to other family members? What troubles or opportunities has your name afforded you? What are some of the names you almost had? What is your nickname or what are the names that you always wanted to be called? But I purposefully leave the project guidelines

vague, and encourage students to rely on their own creativity in putting together their stories.

This article shares three name stories and a reflective conversation between two of my students and myself on how this project engaged us in intercultural learning. Additionally, I include images of objects that relate to the history of our names.

Name Stories

Kinga Varga-Dobai

My grandparents gave me a vase on the day I was born (see Figure 1. Vase). The vase has a misspelled version of one of my last names and my first name engraved on it. Unfamiliar with the spelling of the Hungarian names Dobai and Kinga, the glassblower came up with a new name for me, Dobo and Keny.



My parents exchanged names when they got married so it was not only my mother who took my father's name, Varga, but my father also took my mother's name, Dobai. My sister and I inherited both names automatically with a dash. When I share this information, people usually think that my parents were making a statement about gender equality with this gesture of exchanging names.

According to my parents, exchanging names had nothing to do with a statement on gender equality. My mother wanted to keep her last name because it was a rare Hungarian last name. My father also had an appreciation for the uniqueness of the name, and took it on.

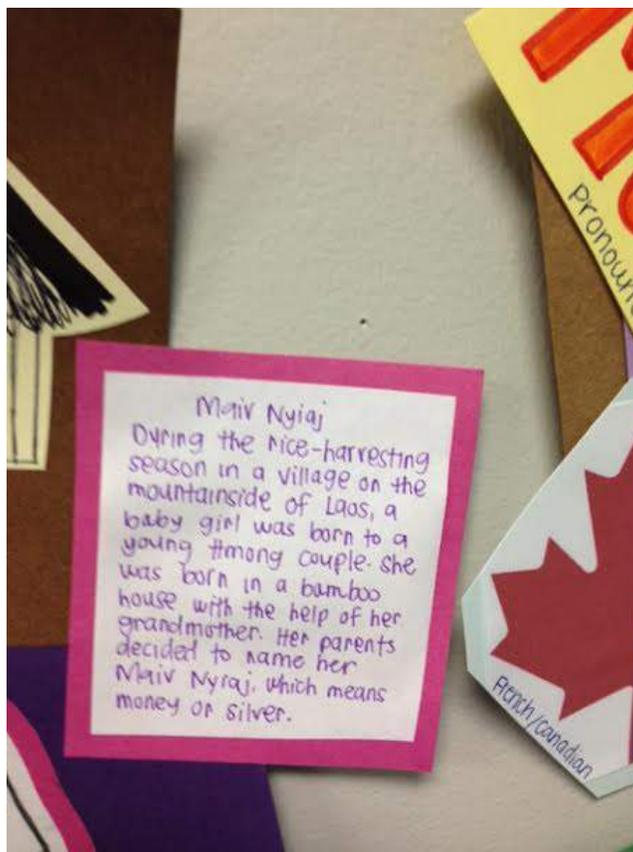
My parents named me Kinga because in the 1970s in communist Romania, choosing a name that did not have a Romanian variant was the easiest way to keep your ethnic identity. Kinga, as an ethnic Hungarian name, was not translatable and did not have variants in other languages. In my Hungarian culture, every first name has a day of celebration, and every morning the host of the public radio starts the day by announcing the name of the day with information about the origin and popularity. My name day is June 24. Nowadays, I often forget; my parents and their e-card in my inbox on every morning of June 24 help me remember.

Ze Moua

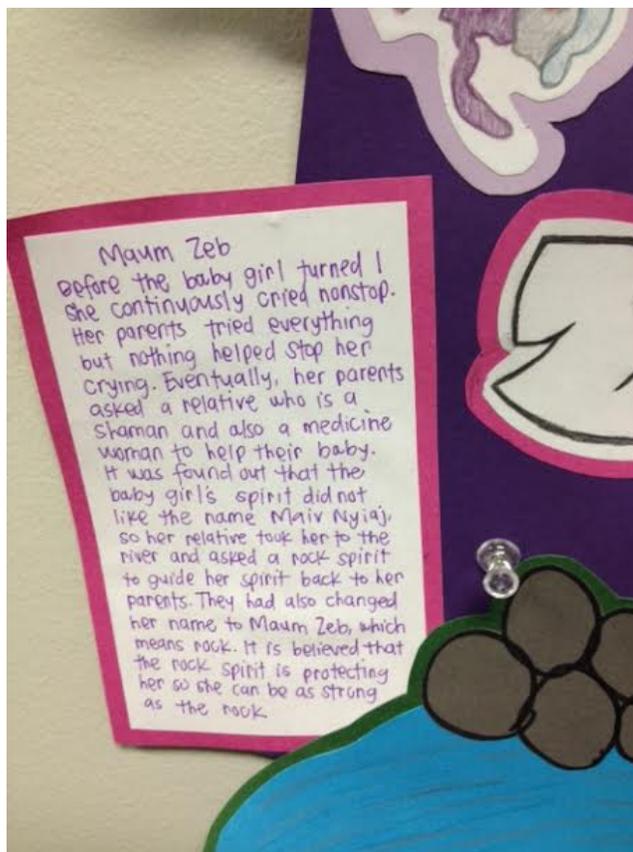
When the Hmong lost the Hmong-Chinese War in the early 1800's, their written language was burned by the Chinese Empire. The Hmong were forced to migrate to Southeast Asia, mainly into Laos. As time went by, they forgot their written language and their history prior to their migration to Laos. Therefore, the meaning or history behind the clan name Muas has been lost.



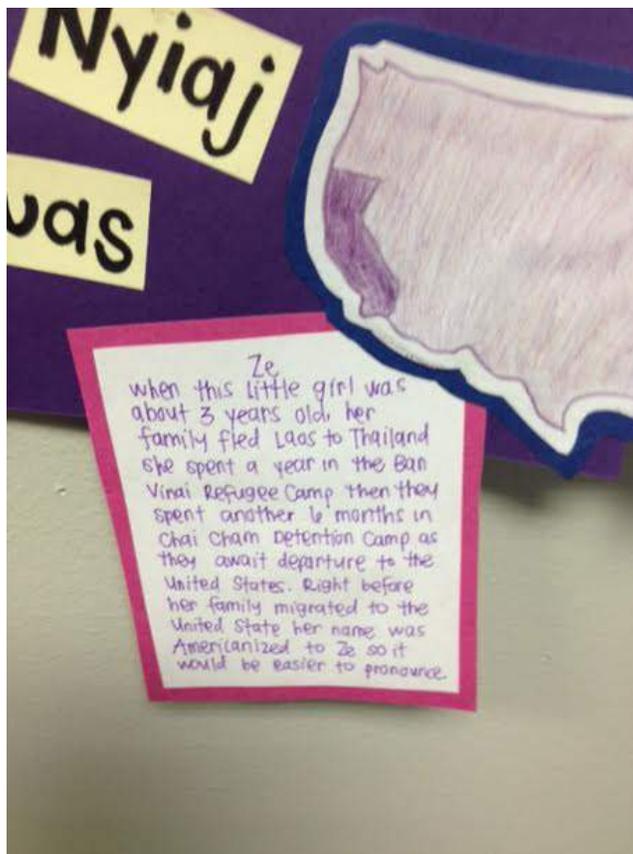
In the dark night of the rice-harvesting season on a mountain-side village of Laos, a baby girl was born to a poor young Hmong couple. She was born in a bamboo house with the help of her grandmother, her parents decided to name her Maiv Nyiaj which means money or silver.



Before the baby girl turned 1, she continuously cried. Her parents tried everything in their power, but nothing helped stop her crying. Eventually, her parents asked a relative who was a Shaman, and also a medicine woman to help their baby. It was found out that the baby girl's spirit did not like the name Maiv Nyiaj, so her relative took her to the river and asked a rock spirit to guide her spirit back to her parents. They also changed her name to Maum Zeb, which means Rock. It was believed that the rock spirit protected her so she would be as strong as the rock.

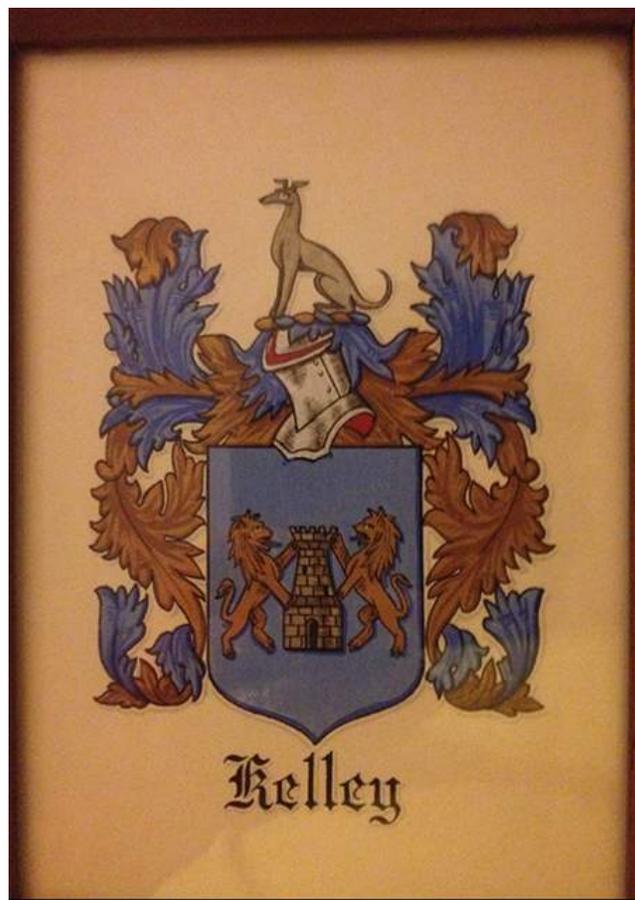


When the little girl was about 3, her family fled Laos to Thailand, she spent a year in the Ban Vinai refugee camp, then they spent another 6 months in Chai Cham retention camp as they awaited departure to the United States. Right before her family migrated to the US her name was changed—Americanized—to Ze (see Figure 6), because they believed it would be easier to pronounce.



Sarah Kelley Campbell:

I have a very close family; all my siblings and our parents live within five minutes of each other. Because of this strong family bond, it came natural to me to keep my maiden name, Kelley, when I got married. Going into this project, I already had some information about my family's Irish heritage, but I never thought that I would be learning so much about history and culture, language, and education by simply researching the story behind my name.



My fathers' full name is Daniel Claude Kelley IV. Upon asking him about our name, he handed me a large binder and said, "Read this; it has some of the Kelley family in it." The oldest documentation that I have found of the Kelley family history is an Amos Newton Kelley whose father was also Amos Kelley, from Galway, Ireland. My grandfather, Daniel Claude Kelley III, did some research on his own. In his journal he talks about Amos Newton Kelley and his father sharing a name. My great great great-grandfather, Dr. Giles Sanford Kelley was a physician in Lawrenceville during the days when doctors accepted things other than money for their service. My dad has a picture of him with a horse and buggy as his car. His son, my great great-grandfather Dr. Daniel Claude Kelley Sr., was also a physician in Lawrenceville. His office was on the square along with two other doctors. I am assuming one of them was his father. His physician building is now the Stark Kelley Plaza on the square, and is still owned by my fathers' family. There is a plaque on the building naming it the Kelley Building.

I also learned that the original spelling of the name Kelley was O Ceallaih which is Gaelic. The Kelley surname is conjecturally descended from the King Colla da Crioch who died in 357 A.D. I learned that my ancestors received land and nobility from Queen Elizabeth during her reign for dropping the *O* in our name. This is evident in their coat of arms that has towers on it symbolizing nobility. There is documentation that I found on a website associated with *Ancestry.com* that states that a Cola O'Kelley was the seventh lord of Screen from 1601 A.D. and was actually granted land and rights by Queen Elizabeth I for dropping the *O* in his surname and thus abandoning his

Irish customs. As I found out from my research, this was common for Queen Elizabeth to do during her reign. Some time before my family migrated to America they got into a conflict with a Scottish Clan and they lost ownership over some of their lands. They were allowed to stay on the land but as tenants and farmers. As the Irish were persecuted the family migrated to Virginia where our family first became established in the Americas.

Through this research, I also learned about some very educated women in my family history, for example, my great great great aunt, Louisa Wickliffe Inzer was among one of the first females to graduate from college in the South or even the nation in 1855 from the Masonic Institute. I learned about family members through this assignment, and am so proud that my heritage is full of freethinkers. These are character traits that my parents have always expected my siblings and me to have and now I know that it comes from who we are as a family. So in the end, that's what my name comes back to, family.

Intercultural Learning in Action

After pre-service teachers present their Name Stories, I ask them to find a partner and share their thoughts about the project and the process they went through to gather information. I also ask them to reflect on this assignment as an intercultural learning experience, specifically how the Name Stories provided them with an opportunity to get to know each other better and learn about a culture that may be different than theirs, and how those stories provided an opportunity to explore the impact of cultural beliefs and traditions on naming and ultimately one's identity. The following dialogue—a transcript of a recorded conversation between Ze, Sarah and I—is an example of a reflective conversation in which we attempt to make connections among our stories while we investigate theoretical concepts such as *Other*, culture and identity, and living on the borderlands of cultures, as well as issues of stereotyping, and discrimination.

Kinga: What is interesting to me is that by simply listening to the stories behind our names, I learned so much about how culture shapes our choices, our interactions and values. Diversity approaches in education often rely on what Short (2009) described as a tourist perspective, one that does not go beyond surface-level information about another culture. I think that by researching the story of our names, we were able to move deeper into this idea of how culture functions and how complex it really is. For example, my name story is also a story about how *Othering* (Bhabha, 2004) works. My parents' decision to name me Kinga was definitely a statement about the value they placed on their ethnic identity in a time and country where they were an *Other*. Choosing an ethnic name for me was a way to ensure that I would keep that ethnic identity. When I first moved to the United States, and as people were trying to make sense of who I was, the fact that I had a hyphenated name, and two last names neither of which was my husband's was unusual. I immediately became an *Other*, as very politely, people would

ask questions about why I chose not to take my husband's American last name and whether keeping my maiden name was a tradition in my country. I usually explained that it was not really a tradition, but giving up my name seemed a little bit like giving up my culture and my language. In order to answer that question, there was always a mini-lecture on history connected to my name. Even today, when I am traveling within the United States, I can never do the self-check in at the airport, because the machine does not recognize the hyphen in my name, or the possibility of two last names. So, that tells you how traditions shape the systems within a culture creating or denying what is possible and what is not.

Sarah: Right, and *Othering* was also there in the way my Irish ancestors were treated because of their difference.

Ze: Yes, and that's also a great story about how domination works. They received land, but in exchange they had to give up their Irish name and heritage, in other words, they had to give up what was different, to blend in.

Kinga: Yes, and you may also call domination a form of *Power*.

Ze: I honestly have never had much thought about this. My name was changed too when I came to this country. During this time, I would introduce myself as Ze. I never thought about why I had negative feelings about my name as a child or a teenager, but it probably had something to do with the fact that I always felt like an *Other*. As a future educator, I would never want a child to feel that way about her foreign-sounding name.

Sarah: I read this article years ago about a woman in Texas somewhere, a lawmaker, who suggested that people of Asian origin change their names, and adopt American names so they would make the process of voting, if I remember it correctly, easier. As a child, you do not necessarily understand that difference is great unless you really are taught to appreciate it. The only way to go against this bias is by empowering the difference and not diminishing it.

Ze: Yes, but what does empowering mean? I think in schools when we celebrate diversity, we often end up talking about specific food items, or even cultural traditions, but more often these approaches reinforce stereotypes, and they only allow for a very narrow understanding of that culture. So, if you grow up learning about culture and diversity in this very narrow way, you will be stuck with those stereotypes and biases because you never have a chance to look into the complexities, rich stories.

Sarah: I think that this assignment about my name and my Irish heritage helped me understand what a rich story is. It really helped me learn about how culture is a part of your name; or even what researching a culture means. I became a little bit of a detective... I spent

hours reading old documents, I emailed people that I did not know, I got in touch with old family members that I last saw when I was a child because this project made me curious.

Ze: I agree, I think that personal connection—or should I say that authentic connection—matters when you learn about culture and yourself as a cultural being. What is hard, however, is to recognize what an authentic connection is. This really changed when I was about 14 years old, and I was able to find that connection or link that helped me see myself as part of the culture. I received a package with a recorded tape in it from the relative who changed my name. In the tape she called me by Me Maub Zeb, Sweet Little Rock. Around the same time, my uncle visited Laos and brought back a video recording of another aunt calling me Me Maiv Nyiaj, Sweet Little Silver. That was when it suddenly hit me that the story behind my name is real, and my aunt who renamed me is a real person who remembers me, thinks about me. Those recordings helped me think about my connection with my own name and my family in a very new way. I felt ashamed that I never appreciated the richness of the naming tradition, and that I felt inferior, less Western, because of them. But, I really needed that connection, my aunt's voice, I guess, to be able to become a part of that story.

I never really shared my name story before this assignment. This assignment actually gave me the courage to talk about my identity and my culture. I know that not many people will understand my story about Shamans and Spirits because it is so different from the western way of life, but it is also who I am. I'm learning to embrace my differences and I'm learning that stories like mine are unique and that I should be proud of it. Although people may not be able to understand or connect with me, they now know my story. They now know that I have a beautiful story behind my name and I am not just that Asian girl, but I am that Hmong girl who was born in Laos, who had to have her name changed so that for one, she could stop crying and for two, she could enter the United States.

Sarah. I wish I had done this research years ago because it might have helped give me more drive to finish my education quicker. My family has had a history of giving back to their community, so I too want to continue this by creating my own classroom community, and by educating kids about the value of serving others and being kind.

Implications

Pedagogies and practices that recognize the impact of culture on teaching and learning support interculturalism (Allan, 2003; Boran, 2001; Rizvi, 2009; Short, 2009), an attitude that enables us to switch perspectives and understand value systems that are different than ours. As Bennett (1986) and Rizvi (2009) argued, however, the understanding of the Other must always begin with the understanding of the Self, and interculturalism cultivates this kind of awareness. The *Name*

Story as a form of storytelling is a powerful and creative tool to delve into such explorations. Additionally, the follow-up conversation--where students analyzed the information they gathered for their project and made connections among their stories through talk--turned this assignment into a more complete and compelling way to examine Culture and Self. The Name Story connected the concept of Self and Culture, and follow-up reflective conversations that I illustrated above helped investigate the various ways in which culture shaped identities.

Although in this particular vignette, the *Name Story* assignment was conducted among pre-service teachers, similar activities could also be used with young children in elementary or early childhood classrooms. In addition to *My Name*, the short story by Sandra Cisneros (1991), picture books that discuss the importance of a naming would be excellent discussion starters on the topic of culture and self and cultural interactions. Picture book recommendations include: [*The Name Jar*](#) (Choi, 2003), [*My Name is Sangoel*](#) (Williams, 2009), [*Three Names of Me*](#) (Cummings, 2006), or [*My Name is Maria Isabel*](#) (Ada, 1995).

Literacy activities such as the *Name Story* provide opportunities to explore culture, and gain a better understanding of how everyday values and points of view are informed by and embedded in cultural interactions—and ultimately help recognize our role in making the world a more just and equitable place.

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Teaching through Story: Using Narratives in a Graduate Ethnicity Course

Michele Ebersole, Huihui Kanahel-Mossman, Alice Kawakami

As instructors of a graduate course on ethnicity and education at a small rural university in Hawai'i, we wanted to share meaningful and relevant discussions of diversity with teachers. Our initial goal was for teachers to understand and implement culturally relevant instructional practices. We realized a broad set of teaching strategies are needed for working with diverse children and so one of the major course assignments was a "Culturally Responsive Teaching Plan." The plan involved teachers collecting information on the ethnicity of their students and teaching strategies that addressed the diversity of students' cultural experiences.

At the end of the course we were disappointed when we analyzed the course assignments and