

Student Names and Getting it Right

by Sweta Patel

“How do you say your name again?”

“It’s ‘Sweet-a.’”

“Oh, ok. I’ve heard others pronounce it differently.”

“Yeah, there’s an Indian way and then a non-Indian way. You can just call me ‘Sweet-a.’”

You might guess that this conversation played itself out over and over again throughout my school-age years. You’d be right. But the twist is that this particular conversation happened just yesterday between my tennis coach and myself.

I’d like to take you back to 1990 for a moment, when I entered second grade. I was seven years old, eager to fit in. And I was still “Svet-ta.” But that year, my teacher and classmates butchered my name enough times that I resolved to just change it to make it easier for them to pronounce. I was embarrassed each time anyone called me “Sweat-a” or strangely enough, “Sweat-er.” I started telling everyone (well, non-Indians) to call me “Sweet-a.”

The name that my seven year old self deemed as more culturally appropriate has continued to follow me into my 30s in all aspects of my life, from my workplace to the tennis courts... and most likely, will continue to stick for life.

My own experience with my name has made it a priority for me to get my students’ names right. With each new class, I wonder how many share a similar journey. But most of all, I emphasize that if I ever mispronounce their name, I want them to correct me rather than silently go along with it. I never want to be part of the reason why a student chooses some other name because they feel it’s easier for their teacher.

As I write this article, I’m forced to think deeply about why that moment in second grade hits such a nerve. Names are tightly connected to one’s identity. In

creating a new name, I feel I cemented an identity split between my Indian and Americanized self. Yes, people often choose to change their pronunciation of certain words in an effort to be understood. (I know this all too well after receiving some funny looks when I asked a teacher for a “bowel” to eat my snack in. It’s how I always heard my parents say it!). But in the case of adopting a new name because others couldn’t pronounce it easily, I feel it was a forced change... that my choice had been taken from me.

In the years that followed, I struggled with the yo-yoing back and forth between my two identities. I still remember an open house night during seventh grade. My mom was sitting next to me, listening to my choir teacher talk about the class and expectations. The teacher must have asked me a question, and I answered back with a soft voice. My mom turned to me afterwards and said, “What was that? Where’d your voice go? I’ve never heard you speak so quietly before.” You see, “Sweet-a” was soft-spoken, unsure of her voice and opinions. “Svet-ta” was confident. She spoke and laughed loudly.

A more telling moment happened in eighth grade when I passed a bathroom mirror at school. I remember a surreal moment where I was taken aback by the brown skin reflected back at me. I had come to feel very white in those school halls.

And now, years later, to my Indian friends, I’m still Svet-ta” - a popular Indian name that signifies “purity.” I cringe every time I have to introduce myself to a non-Indian in front of other Indians as “Sweet-a.” I feel overly American in those moments. I’ve tried to teach these same non-Indians the correct pronunciation, and they do try... but the continued butchering makes me cringe even more. So the two names have stuck.

I don’t know how much of these dual identity experiences and feelings are connected to the moment I adopted a more easily pronounced name. But I do wonder that had I been able to remain “Svet-ta” in school and at home, whether I would have felt more comfortable bringing my Indian self into the classroom. When we’re young, we’re eager to fit in and are quick to reject anything that gets in the way as ‘uncool.’ We try to scrap parts of us that others don’t accept as easily. As an adult, we know that one culture isn’t necessarily better than the

other. “Sweet-a” is a nagging reminder of how I shoved my Indian heritage down and hid it away. I regret the feelings of shame that contributed towards the divide.

With a new school year almost upon us, I hope that all staff are mindful of working hard to get student names right, the way the student is requesting that it’s pronounced. After one or two failed attempts, students generally just silently accept it. Instead, staff can double check with: “It’s really important to me to get your name right. Please tell me if I’m still missing it.” That statement can go a long way in preventing mispronounced names from sticking not just for that one class and for that one school year, but for the rest of their life.

So many in my extended family have similar stories: “Chirag” is “Shiraq.” “Hemant” is “Harry.” “Suresh” is “Sam.” “Roshan” is “Ro-shawn.” And on and on the newly created names go, in an effort to provide “easier” names. My cousin often tells the story of always running to class whenever she’d find out there would be a substitute teacher that day. She didn’t want the class to laugh when the sub would predictably mispronounce her name. So she’d walk up and quietly give her adopted name before her classmates arrived.

One idea that districts might adopt is having a place within their student management system (SMS) to include the phonetic pronunciation of students’ names. Imagine if each parent/guardian who registers their new Kindergarten student had a chance to write in how their student’s name is pronounced. This information could then be integrated into their student profile page.

Parents/Guardians of current elementary or middle school students might get a pop-up message when they access the SMS system to enter the phonetic pronunciation. Current high school students could enter the information on their own.

This change would allow staff a better chance of getting student names right on the first try. It would also help to lessen student anxiety and embarrassment around butchered names. And not to mention, graduation ceremonies would be a lot less painful for students and their families. I can still clearly recall last year’s ceremony: A student walked up to accept her certificate and told the staff member, “How did you get my name wrong? I’ve been here for four years. Really?”

To help our students know that we see them and that we hear them and that we value who they are as they stand before us, we can start with their name and take care to do our best to get it right.