



Kamala Harris Deserves to Have Her Name Pronounced Correctly and So Do Your Students

By Educator Barnes – August 17, 2020

Even if you are a prominent person in society, like Kamala Harris, you can still be subjected to people carelessly mispronouncing your name. A person's name is part of their identity. It is important, no matter how difficult a name appears or whether the name doesn't follow standard English pronunciation rules, that an effort—a commitment—is made to pronounce a person's name correctly. Anything less shows a lack of care and suggests that you believe a person is unimportant.

I know all too well the sting of having my first name butchered. It has happened my entire life. It has happened most during school, both as a student and as an educator.

Why Did I Have to Have the Black Name?

In elementary school, I would become visibly frustrated when my name was mispronounced, especially after I had already told an adult—on more than one occasion—how to say my name correctly. My art teacher told me I could change my name to be spelled differently when I was an adult. When I asked her what I should change it to, she said I could change “Shawnta” to “Shawntay.”

So, “Shawntay” is how I spelled my name on artwork I had displayed in a festival at school. My parents attended and were upset to see my name written like that. They hunted down the art teacher. Because my parents didn’t believe children should be in grown folks’ business, I was sent to stand by another exhibit with my sisters while they talked. Based on what I saw, it was clear I would not be writing my name like that anymore.

The experience left me upset. I wondered why I had to have the Black name. My dad’s name is James. My mom’s name is Lisa. My sister’s names are Alice and Sherry. Why did I get Shawnta? The middle names are the same. My parents and sisters have nice and simple middle names that are easy to pronounce, but not me. I grew to dislike my name.

Seventh grade social studies was my worst experience. My social studies teacher was a veteran white educator who appeared as though she would be retiring soon. She told me that the pronunciation of my name was wrong. If the pronunciation was correct, then my mother misspelled my name. She would add an accent to the second ‘a’ in my name so my name would appear as Shawntá on my papers when she returned them.

Based on how my parents reacted in elementary school, I was not trying to have another situation. I hid my school work from my parents so they wouldn’t see how the teacher was ‘correcting’ my name. Then, my parents noticed I wasn’t bringing home work from that class so they threatened to call the teacher if I didn’t show them my work.

When I gave my mother my social studies folder, she pointed to my name and said, “What is this about?” After explaining to my mom what was happening, she said she would handle it. She talked to the teacher on the phone. The next day, the teacher changed my seat to the back of the class and never called on me for the rest of the school year. I was supposed to sit closer to the front to help me see the board better. She didn’t care. She was mad that she had to stop “correcting” my name on my papers.

I've had unpleasant experiences as an educator, too. I shared one of those experiences in "[Why This Black Teacher Quit Brownsburg Community School Corporation.](#)"

When I came to school before school started to obtain my teaching supplies and my new employee gift bag from the school secretary, she mispronounced my first name. Of course, I corrected her. She mumbled, "You people always have ..." and I interjected, "Excuse me?" My guess is that the rest of that sentence was "difficult names." For the rest of the school year, she seemed genuinely annoyed by my presence anytime I asked her for anything. All I did was tell her how to say my name correctly.

I've had colleagues, whom I worked with for years, repeatedly mispronounce my first name. If they can't be bothered to pronounce their colleagues' names correctly, what about the students?



The image is a screenshot of a tweet from the account "Late Night with Seth Meyers" (@LateNightSeth). The tweet text reads: ".@uzoaduba's mom knew what she was talking about. bit.ly/1z3Oj9Q #OITNB #LNSM". Below the text are two video frames. The first frame shows Seth Meyers asking Uzo Aduba, "You wanted to change your name when you were young?" and Uzo Aduba responding, "My full name is Uzoamaka. I came home one day and said, 'Mommy, can you call me Zoe?'" The second frame shows Uzo Aduba saying, "Without skipping a beat, she said, 'If they can learn to say Tchaikovsky, Dostoyevsky and Michelangelo, they can learn to say Uzoamaka.'" The tweet is timestamped "1:01 PM · Dec 19, 2014 from Manhattan, NY" and has 611 likes and 461 retweets.

It is unacceptable to not learn how to say a student's name correctly. When actress Uzo Aduba was a guest on "Late Night with Seth Meyers," she made it clear how her mother taught her why there should be no excuses for not pronouncing her name correctly.

Teachers should learn to say names without side comments or feedback. Don't tell the student that their name is hard. Don't laugh about it. Don't tell the student their name is not spelled correctly according to standard English. Just learn how to say their name.

Over time, I learned not to dislike my first name, but I don't want any student to have my experience or to dislike themselves or their name because of a negative experience at school.