In this piece, a teacher educator and two secondary teachers describe how they implemented the Learners’ Lives as Curriculum model (Weinstein, 2004) with adolescent English language learners using a unit from a pilot secondary curriculum titled Lives Unfolding (Weinstein & Cloud, 2007). They discuss the development and adaptation of the Names unit and how their work around this theme transformed their classrooms into participatory communities of successful and highly motivated English learners.

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My parents named me after my grandfather. He died before I was born. My mother told me that my grandfather was good to everybody—so the people in the town told her to name me after him. My grandfather’s name was Abu Bamba so my mother said “Okay, now my son’s name is Abu Bamba.” I like my name so bad. I wish I was the only one on earth called Abu. I will never change my name! If my first child is a boy, I’ll name him Abu. Abu means somebody who never tells a lie. But I can’t tell the truth all the time! If I like a girl so bad, sometimes I lie a little bit,
sometimes I tell the truth a little bit. So grandfather I’m sorry I can’t be like you!
From the Lives Unfolding: Names Unit
Abu Bamba, Liberia

–Abu Bamba, Hope H.S., Providence RI

CHALLENGES FOR ADOLESCENT ELLS

Although most English language learners (ELLs) in the United States are elementary school–aged, a growing proportion are older students in middle and high school (Boyle, Taylor, Hurlburt, & Soga, 2010). Some of these adolescents have recently arrived; others have been educated in U.S. schools for a period of time but are still not achieving to standard. Because of this, they cannot be reclassified as fluent English proficient, and they continue to qualify for services as ELLs (Boyle et al., 2010). During the 1990s, the secondary school population of ELLs in the United States grew by 64%, compared with 46% growth at the elementary school level (Ramsey & O’Day, 2010). Adolescent ELLs face many challenges, such as earning needed credits and passing required tests to graduate from high school; learning academic English sufficient for success in secondary school; fitting in to the complex social environment of middle and high schools; and balancing the demands of school, home, and work so that they maintain regular school attendance (Cloud, Lakin, Leininger, & Maxwell, 2010).

One strategy that has proven key in improving outcomes for adolescents enrolled in middle and high schools is personalization (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2011;
Schools that cultivate supportive relationships among teachers and students, especially for dis-enfranchised groups, promote higher attendance levels, help students achieve at higher levels, experience fewer behavior problems, and have faculty who report a greater sense of satisfaction in their work (Schaps, 2003). Belonging has been associated with a host of positive effects, the most important of which are increases in motivation and academic achievement (Blum, 2005; Schaps, 2003). But even more important, maintaining a strong, positive ethnic identity is associated with high self-esteem, a commitment to doing well in school, a sense of purpose in life, confidence in one’s own efficacy, and high academic achievement (Violand-Sánchez & Hainer-Violand, 2006, p. 36). For all of these important reasons, we as educators need to ensure that adolescent immigrants feel that they belong without relinquishing or diminishing their linguistic or cultural identities (Violand-Sánchez & Hainer-Violand, 2006). Adolescents report that when they feel they belong and are cared about, they are motivated to invest in school. In fact, researchers report that high school dropouts’ most frequent explanation for leaving school is that no one cared. Conversely, students who remain in school credit meaningful relationships with adults who show an interest in them as people (Stipek, 2006).

It is this rationale that underlies the naming of personalization as a key component of secondary school reform. But all too often, personalization is realized through mechanistic means such as instructional periods called “advisory” in which students get academic and career counseling, rather than having personalization become more central to the high school experience by being embedded in the core curriculum. Secondary English as a second language (ESL) educators can do more—they can put learner-centered practice at the core of what they do with learners, and when they do so they can reap great benefits with learners. A learner-centered curriculum realizes far better than an advisory period all these desirable goals.

As Gail Weinstein and Janet Johnson assert in this issue of TESOL Journal, learner-centered teaching is a primary and powerful personalization strategy. It works because it builds on three important principles of learning: (1) to build on what students know, (2) to build community in the classroom by providing peer...
support and increasing motivation, and (3) to require ongoing inquiry that makes learning meaningful to learners. This article describes how several secondary ESL teachers, working in different geographic contexts with different groups of students, are using a learner-centered approach to create responsive instruction for adolescent ELLs.

**ERIN’S STORY**

In the fall of 2007, I was involved in a learner-centered curriculum development project with Gail Weinstein and Nancy Cloud for adolescent ELLs as a part of a proposed curriculum series called Lives Unfolding. At that time, I was just about to begin an adapted unit of Sandra Cisneros’s (1984) *The House on Mango Street* with intermediate-level ELLs. Our high school intermediate and advanced ELL curricula loosely followed that of the 9th- and 10th-grade English curricula. The regular English 9 curriculum began with a unit on memoir through study of *The House on Mango Street*. The intermediate-level students I was teaching read only a handful of vignettes from the book, which I had selected for their length and accessibility of theme and language, thus making certain the vignettes would be accessible in language and content. Cisneros’s vignette titled “My Name” was a perfect text with which to begin the Names unit writing project.

At the time, I was teaching three intermediate ELL classes (a total of approximately 50 students). In our program, the students are grouped by proficiency level; therefore my classes consisted of Grade 9–12 students with intermediate proficiency. The majority of these students were Dominican, but I also had two Guatemalans, one Bolivian, two Cambodians, and three Liberian refugees. Although all students were at an intermediate proficiency level, there was a wide range of ability across the different language skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Some students, such as Abu (a refugee whose name story introduced this article) had advanced listening and speaking skills, but very low reading and writing skills. Other students, such as Chisel (a Dominican who was literate in Spanish), struggled with oral expression but felt comfortable reading and writing in English. Despite the range of strengths and challenges each student had, I was confident that the theme of the Names unit would offer all students a way to share
and express, in their new language, an important part of their evolving identities.

_The House on Mango Street_ was already part of the intermediate ELL curriculum, and the content and themes of the text—the Latino experience, adolescent struggle, economic struggle, identity—were easy for many of the students to identify with and relate to. For these reasons, I used the following vignettes from the book as the primary professional models for the Names unit: “House on Mango Street,” “Hairs,” “Boys and Girls,” “My Name,” “Our Good Day,” “Laughter,” and “Gil’s Furniture Bought and Sold.” Although not all of these vignettes deal directly with the topic of names, they do relate to the greater theme of identity and contain a variety of rich and fairly easily understandable examples of figurative language, particularly similes, metaphors, alliteration, and personification. Because the ESL teachers had determined that part of the adapted curriculum would involve teaching students to identify and use figurative language in their own writing, these texts provided ample exposure to such skillful language play.

To prepare students for the different types of figurative language they would encounter in the texts, I first explained each type of literary device we would be focusing on, offering a student-friendly definition that I had written for each device and providing simple examples that were easy for students to access quickly (e.g., _The room was as hot as an oven, Maria made muffins on Monday_). Next, I asked students to look at other simple examples of literary devices and identify them based on what they had learned. After this discussion and practice, we looked for examples of the same literary devices in Cisneros’s text, first as a class and then with a partner. Alliteration and simile were the literary devices that were easier for the students to identify, but personification and metaphor proved more challenging. Once students started to understand, they really enjoyed finding and thinking about the literary devices and the effects they had on the story.

**Creating the Names Unit**

In addition to published models of memoirs, I introduced the Lives Unfolding pilot unit, Names (Weinstein & Cloud, n.d.; to see the final unit, visit [http://online.sfsu.edu/~gailw/professional/](http://online.sfsu.edu/~gailw/professional/))
The purpose in teaching the pilot unit was to collect material that would become part of the final unit. The draft unit began with teacher modeling of telling stories about our own names. I told stories of my name—its origin and history—and anecdotes about different names I was given throughout my life. First, I told students how Erin is the phonetic spelling of the Irish word for Ireland, which is representative of my part-Irish heritage, and how, though I no longer affiliate with any organized religion, I chose my middle name, Elizabeth, on the day of my first communion. Little did I know that adding Elizabeth to my name would pave the way for a nickname started in high school and continued on throughout college: EEL.

In addition to the oral stories that I told the students, I also wrote vignettes about the nicknames I had acquired from family and friends, most notably the name that I am almost exclusively known by and called within my immediate family: Reen. When my younger brother first started talking, he had a hard time pronouncing Erin. He would drop the initial short e sound and occasionally add a long e sound to the end. This resulted in either Reen or Reenie. The nickname stuck, and I really can’t remember a time when either my parents or my brother has ever called me by my proper name.

As a part of the pilot Names unit, students were asked to listen to my name stories, take notes, and ask questions to find out more. To build the unit for future use, the students were invited to tell stories about their names, first to a partner and then to the class, using my stories about my name as a model. The students’ spoken stories were converted into interesting short texts about their names, which we paired with digital photos. These short name stories would become texts that other adolescent ELLs would read when using the finished unit, designed to mirror social networking text mode as on Facebook or MySpace.

To take the theme into another genre, I modeled use of figurative and sensory language to describe my different names and then had students write cinquains about their names, using similes that represented their impressions and the personal meanings associated with their names. For example, Elaine wrote, “My name is so
Creating a Community Through Names

As the students and I read about the many aspects of names and naming—name origins; name meanings; nicknames; family names; first, middle, and last names; changing names—and began drafting our own name stories, we began to learn more and more about each other, our families, and the communities we came from and where we lived. This turned out to be an incredible experience for us all. As students wrote and talked about their names, they began to understand their names and the names of their peers in a broader cultural context, rather than simply from a personal or individual perspective. Their comments showed that they were starting to understand that though their names belonged to them, they were a product of their families and cultural backgrounds, but also followed similar traditions of naming that exist in other cultures. These insights helped them understand the deep commonalities that exist across many different cultures.

These conversations were powerful for me as well. I had taught a beginner ELL class the previous year, and many of the same students were now in my intermediate classes. Although I had known some of these students already, I learned so much more about their personal history during the Names unit than I had during the entire previous school year. Of course I knew the names of the students I had taught, and where they were from. I had even met many of their parents and extended families through school events and traveling to the Dominican Republic the previous summer to learn about the country, culture, and the students themselves. In many ways, I felt that I knew them pretty well, and maybe even better than the average teacher. But diving into the Names unit taught me even more about them all. Yes, everyone has a name that we share with the world, but there is so much more that our names reveal about us than simply what we are called.

Thinking, reading, writing, and talking about such a personal yet public notion as our names allowed us to investigate and reveal the unique histories of our names and to connect our past with our
present, cross cultural boundaries, and reveal our deepest feelings about our identities.

The more we read and talked, the more students shared. And the more they shared, the more sharing of stories and questions was triggered around the room. “You were named after a character in a book? So was I! What book did you get your name from?” one student exclaimed. “I was also named after my grandfather. It’s a tradition in my family. Is that how it is in your family?” another student asked. Not only were students learning about each other, they were making connections and experiencing a sense of belonging.

Writing the Names Stories
As was mentioned, we gradually turned our initial conversations and quick drafts about names into more detailed and organized pieces. A good amount of questioning and conferencing was needed to help students articulate what they automatically took for granted in terms of the significance and meaning of their names. For example, Abu Bamba came from, and at the time lived in, a family that is more of an extended community than the strict parent-and-child home we tend to think of as traditional in the United States. He was raised in a village and cared for by many, not only his immediate family. When he moved to the United States, he came to live with his aunt, but continued to be part of the larger Liberian community in his adopted city. So getting to the root of his name story, helping him clarify the ideas he wanted to share about his grandfather and himself, and at the same time ensuring that his piece maintained his voice and style involved many conversations and drafts. Although Abu loved to express himself through writing, revision and rewriting was often frustrating and difficult for him. Nevertheless, after many drafts, his final piece—though fairly short and simple—demonstrates a certain depth of Abu’s character and history. For publishing, we paired a photo of Abu with his story to represent both visually and textually his individual identity and personality.

Another student, Yeni, was initially quite shy about sharing intimate details about her names for this project. At first, she simply talked about her first and last names as well as her middle name, which “my mother gave me . . . because it was her mother’s name and she has the name also—Zucely. They didn’t want to lose the
tradition.’’ This was a good start, and I continued to encourage Yeni to share how she felt about her names and what it meant to her to continue on the family tradition, but she wasn’t particularly forthcoming. Finally, after more prodding and persuasion, Yeni began to talk about how she had two nicknames, one that her friends used but that her parents didn’t approve of, Hieler, and another that her mom called her but that she disliked, Oliva:

When I was younger my friends called me Hieler, which means ‘‘cooler/icebox’’ in English. Every time that my parents heard my nickname they got angry because in that time I was going to church and they said that it was inappropriate for me. I don’t like my second nickname that I got from my mother; Oliva. Oliva is Popeye’s girlfriend in the cartoon. She is skinny and funny like me and people always are laughing about my second nickname.

Abu’s and Yeni’s stories are examples of the powerful generative writing process that had blossomed in my classroom.

Outcomes of the Names Unit
Prior to this experience of sharing and talking about their names with classmates, very few of the students had actually used the names of classmates in class when addressing them. Most of the time, students would informally call out, ‘‘Hey’’ or ‘‘Excuse me,’’ but would rarely add the name of the student they were addressing. After the names discussions, I noticed students were using each other’s names more often, and I wholeheartedly encouraged such practice, adding that I too like to hear my full name, Ms. Leininger, much more than the shortened ‘‘Miss!’’ This helped forge even stronger personal connections among the students and me.

The entire experience of the Names unit—the reading, thinking, sharing, and writing—provided our class with a solid academic and social foundation that I believe helped set and encourage high standards for work as well as for attitudes throughout the year. Academically, I evaluated students’ communication, language, and literacy skills based on the learning activities from the unit. Students demonstrated their ability to read with a purpose (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007), to find out how different people got their names, to express how they felt about their names, and to ask other students about their names and how they got them. I assessed students’
understanding of key vocabulary from the unit, such as what we call our different names (e.g., nickname, screen name) and possessive nouns and pronouns. Students showed their familiarity with word play by creating their own similes about their names and showed that they could understand an author’s perspective when reading. On a social level, starting the year with a unit that enabled students to make a personal connection to their teacher and their peers, and to be successful writers in a new language, created a sense of community that helped students stay motivated and take risks with new and challenging material and assignments. The use of peer models generated interest and engagement in the unit because the students saw themselves in the pieces they read and saw narrative writing as interesting, significant, and possible. They were engaged like never before.

As a final result, after gathering the stories from my classroom, Nancy, Gail, and I revised the pilot unit to become the final unit, creating opportunities for future ELLs to build new vocabulary and language forms when reading our stories and to give them valuable language practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We added more activities as well, including freewriting about names; talking about types of names and how names are used online; and researching how schools, towns, or streets got their names. All of this showed me how to use learners’ lives to create curriculum, curriculum that has the power to transform classrooms into communities.

JUDAH’S STORY
I teach two Reading Support classes at a small charter school in California. The classes almost entirely consist of students who have been in the United States since childhood but are still not attaining proficiency, a growing population of concern to teachers of adolescents. One of my classes has 21 students, a combination of freshman and sophomores, whose reading abilities range from the fifth- to eighth-grade level, with the majority closer to fifth than eighth. The second class also contains a combination of freshman and sophomores, but these students’ reading abilities range from the second- to fifth-grade level. In total, there are 27 students in this class, the majority of whom were born in the United States but
whose parents immigrated here. Only two students do not speak another language—one African student and one African American student. The rest are predominantly Latino (their families came from Mexico and Central America) with the exception of one Eritrean student and two Chinese students. The two Chinese students were born in China and have been in the United States for roughly 2 years. There is only 1 Latino student who was actually born in Mexico, and he immigrated to the United States when he was in sixth grade.

Overall, the majority of these students attend classes in which the academic rigor and content is beyond their level. Their conversational fluency is high, because they have been in the United States their whole lives, but their academic literacies are extremely low, ranging from elementary to middle school levels. Additionally, although there is variation, the majority of the students are not engaged in school and highly dislike reading, often doing everything in their power to avoid it. Some of them do read independently, but material that is almost exclusively written in vernacular and contains urban themes, such as True to the Game, by Terry Woods (1999), or Addicted: A Novel, by Zane (2001). Although these books certainly have their place and it is great that these students are reading, I have been concerned that these books are not challenging them and that they are not increasing the students’ interest in and ability to read grade-level adolescent literature effectively or helping the students build academic vocabulary that they will need throughout school. With rare exception, when asked to read, they vehemently complain and almost always struggle. (For more on long-term ELLs, see Long-Term English Language Learner Project, 2008; Zehr, 2010.)

Goals for Using a Learner-Centered Curriculum

In the spring of 2010, I decided to try a learner-centered curriculum in an attempt to engage students more in literacy. I adapted the previously described Names unit (Weinstein & Cloud, n.d.), which I was familiar with because it had been developed in an urban high school where I used to teach. My goals were threefold. The first was to connect the names theme to other texts so the students would read a variety of texts, student-written in addition to traditionally published. The second was to really stress the strategy of making
connections, such as text to self, text to text, and text to world (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007), which students in my classes struggled with throughout the year and which I knew to be an effective way to engage kids in reading. The third, hopefully accomplished through achieving the first two goals, was to build a community of learners that did not exist in my class previously and to help them understand how their voices are as powerful and meaningful as anything else they may read. It was important to me that I use this as an opportunity to build community around the sharing and reading of personal stories.

Incorporating Additional Texts
In terms of meeting the first goal, I found the following texts: *When My Name Was Keoko* (Park, 2004; Lexile 610), *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2004; Lexile 1210), *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984; Lexile 870), and *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003; Lexile 290). (See the Appendix for links to these texts.) With the exception of *The Name Jar*, a children’s book, we used only excerpts of the other books that specifically dealt with names. (For a full and detailed explanation of Lexiles, please visit http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/sri_reading_assessment/pdfs/SRI_ProfPaper_Lexiles.pdf.)

One valuable aspect of this unit was that by reading various texts on the broad theme of names, I was able to expose students to not only many different texts, but also many different forms of texts—transcripts, oral stories, novels, children’s books, and memoirs. These texts were not magically accessible given the students’ reading levels, but students were willing to struggle with them, because the students knew they contained information about names and because I worked to scaffold them appropriately.

Teaching the Unit
I started the unit with Abu’s story, in which we learned that Abu’s name came from his grandfather. I used this story as an opportunity to talk to students about West Africa and what it means to be a refugee.

Then I did a minipresentation on my own name. I explained where it came from, how it connected to my Jewish culture, and what it meant. The students enjoyed hearing me talk about being a little kid at
Hebrew School, which I attended three times a week—twice after regular school, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and on Sunday mornings. I told them that I always got excited in November, when we would study the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. This meant that for a few weeks we would talk about how Judah Maccabee and his brothers managed to beat the Syrians. I, along with my brothers, were heroes. This was the time of year that I was the most proud of my name.

After finishing my stories, I had the students brainstorm webs that contained information about their names—especially where their names came from. We did a Think-Pair-Share (Kagan, 1994) in which all of the students wrote about the importance of their names growing up, shared these with a partner, and then were responsible for reporting to the class what their peer had told them. In this way we got to hear everyone’s stories, and all students were practicing their active listening skills. (For more information on Think-Pair-Share, see Saskatoon Public Schools, 2004–2009: http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/think/.)

The classroom was transformed when the students shared. These students had always been talkative, and they had certainly been engaged before, but this was an environment I really had not experienced with them previously. Many of them loved having the opportunity to share stories about both their own names and their peer’s names, and those who were shy were encouraged by those who were not. Nancy’s partner shared first. She explained that Nancy’s middle name was Miroslava, which was what her father had wanted as her first name. Miroslava was the name of a famous actress that her father had been in love with all of his life. Right before Nancy was born, her father and mother had a fight and her mother said that she was going to name the baby. She chose Nancy but allowed Miroslava to be her middle name.

After this, we heard from other students who were named after famous movie stars or their parents’ ex-lovers; students whose names were an accident because their parents had been confused about their meaning; students who had two names: one for when their parents were pleased with them and one for when they were in trouble. We heard from students who were named by their mothers, grandmothers, fathers, or uncles. We heard from students with long stories about what their names meant and others who had
no idea of the meaning. We heard from students who loved their names and others who were embarrassed by them.

The discourse changed remarkably when learners had an opportunity to talk about themselves. For many, their affect was 180 degrees different than on any other day. I learned that these students, despite being only 14 and 15 years old, had amazing stories to tell about their names that connected to their cultures and still-forming identities. They learned about my Jewish heritage, my love of my name, and my family. All of a sudden we were connected in a new, personal, and intimate way. This kind of power—the power of a learner-centered curriculum (Weinstein, 2004)—is needed by teachers who work with struggling students. It can propel reluctant learners into meaningful and motivated reading, which in turn can create bridges to academic success.

For homework, the students had to answer a series of questions from the Names unit about name meanings, nicknames, and differences in names among languages. Each student wrote responses and created a cinquain about his or her name. In class they wrote their answers on large sticky notes that they posted around the room. In my smaller class each student did a minipresentation on his or her name, whereas in my bigger class we conducted a gallery walk to look at all of the information as it hung around the room. This activity prepared students for the more formal writing they would do at the end of the unit.

The first outside text we used that matched our theme was “My Name,” from The House on Mango Street (Cisneros, 1984). The vignette discusses the name Esperanza and what it feels like to grow up with that name. With this story, I explored a grammar point and introduced figurative language, which would later be a required feature in their own “My Name” texts.

First, we read “My Name” as a class. To aid comprehension, I retyped the text using 14-point font and double-spaced formatting, glossed it (Otto, White, & Camperell, 1980), and provided extra-large margins for students to write down the meanings of key vocabulary words and other important notes. As we read the text together, we discussed issues such as how names can mean different things in different languages, how names connect you to different members of your family, and what it feels like to have your name mispronounced in school. Because students could identify with all these issues, and felt
strongly about them, they actively participated in the conversation, confident in their ability to contribute meaningfully to the class.

For language practice, we reviewed the main verb tenses in the piece through our reading, using a graphic organizer I had created. The chart had six columns with these headings: Regular/Irregular, Verb (Infinitive), Simple Present, Present Perfect, Present Continuous, and Simple Past. We then read the first half of the text a second time, stopping at every verb to decide its tense and list it in the appropriate place in the chart. We then filled in the remaining columns, with some of the work assigned as homework. Throughout the unit we identified these tenses in other readings and practiced using them when writing sentences.

Finally, we utilized “My Name” to discuss figurative language—specifically, the simile. Students were largely familiar with similes, having reviewed them in their English class earlier in the year, but I still did a brief introduction. Then, armed with highlighters, students reread the passage for a third time, underlining all of the similes. And to really stress how similes help elicit visual images, students drew pictures of the similes to create sensory or mental images (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). We came back to similes later in the unit, when the students were writing their own “My Name” stories, and we did a simile workshop to fine-tune our similes so the students could include similes in their stories.

Our next text was a 20-page excerpt from When My Name Was Keoko, by Linda Sue Park (2004), who writes the story from the perspective of two young Korean siblings, a brother and a sister, living under Japanese rule in the 1940s. The part of the book we read explains that all of the Koreans had to change their names to Japanese names. The students were to read and annotate the text over the weekend. They had struggled to annotate texts all year, but were slowly making progress, moving beyond simple underlining and highlighting. Additionally, I front-loaded important vocabulary, supplied historical background information, and previewed the text structure (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007) because there are two narrators and students could get lost as to which one was telling the story at any given time.

To strengthen their comprehension after reading, we held several class discussions and used graphic organizers to plot the
multiple narratives and deal with some additional terms and cultural concepts so that I could be sure the students understood the gist of the story (Reis, 2008). Because of this, they all understood the importance of names in the story and how the Japanese had stripped Koreans of their names. This understanding allowed us to have both small-group and large-group discussions about how names, language, culture, and power sometimes intersect.

Our third text consisted of two excerpts from *The Namesake* (Lahiri, 2004). In one a Bengali family attempts to follow their traditions in naming a child but encounters some difficulties being in the United States, and in the second that same child, now grown up, struggles with his name and attempts to legally change it. I again front-loaded vocabulary and identified the text structure to aid in comprehension (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2009). And again, students read and annotated the text on their own. If they were confused, they asked questions and we explored the text together in class. Because none of us were Bengali, having a discussion as a class helped us sort out the naming process described in *The Namesake*. Additionally, several of the students who disliked their names were intrigued by Gogol (the protagonist) who wants to change his name because he doesn’t like it. Reading about his step-by-step process gave some of them hope that they too, when adults, could change their name. This opened up a particularly lively discussion about what names we preferred and why some of us might choose to change ours.

The fourth text we read was *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003), about a young Korean girl who is embarrassed by her name and the fact that none of her peers can pronounce it. Because of this, she proceeds to pick a new American name. I read it aloud to the students, and we discussed the themes that were consistent with our other texts: mispronunciation, comfort, culture, and the changing of names. I chose it to connect with two recent East Asian immigrants in my class.

We also read short *StoryCorps* stories ([http://storycorps.org/](http://storycorps.org/)) in class (from transcriptions of the oral stories). In one of these, Ramon “Chunky” Sánchez (n.d.) talked about all the Latino students having their names changed in primary school to more easy-to-pronounce American names. He tells of one boy, Facundo, whose name the teachers could not figure out how to Americanize, and their funny
attempts to do so. Ultimately, they were left with Facundo. We read another story about a West African woman who chooses to change her name because she doesn’t feel that the meaning of her name befits her personality (Masani & Hairston, n.d.). Both stories allowed us to discuss deeper questions such as “Do you think it is OK for teachers to change students’ names?”, “Do we have a right to change our name?”, and “Should we be in charge of choosing our name?” As was true throughout this unit, the students had a great deal to say on these topics and were always bringing in their own experiences to connect with our readings, furthering our goal of making meaningful connections while we read.

To work on our unit’s reading strategy, making connections (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007), I used graphic organizers provided by Florida’s Online Reading Professional Development (http://sites.google.com/a/alaska.edu/diane-kardash/Home/making-connections) to help students write text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. Students struggled to complete these as we read our initial texts. They often had inaccurate connections. Their errors were varied, but usually their mistake occurred because they had misunderstood something in the text. Sometimes they invented something that was not in the text so that they could connect it to their own lives. They were also confused about the difference between self and world. Often, they would not make a connection but rather make a simple comment about either the text or their own lives without providing an actual connection between two things. It took several class periods of analyzing connections to get them doing this with ease. Students wrote their connections on white boards and then, as a class, we went through each response and analyzed whether they were correct and complete (i.e., included either text and world, text and self, or text and text). After many examples, the students became adept at assessing whether their peers’ connections were correctly done, although less so with their own, which is often the case when students are learning a new strategy. After several periods of undergoing this process, and then working as a class to create model connections, the students were ready to read the stories in the Names unit and make connections. All of the connections up to this point had been done using the other texts that we had read for this unit.
Over a school break, the students were to read all nine stories from the Names unit and use graphic organizers to create three types of connections for each story. Every time they wrote a statement about a connection they had made, they needed to box the part of their statement that referred to a particular text, label it as “text,” then box the part of their statement that showed the type of connection they made, and label that as “world,” “other text,” or “self.” This created a visual clue as to when they were missing something and increased the quality and types of connections they made. Some students still had significant struggles, but overall the connections were much better than they had been before our work.

In reading their connections, two aspects stood out. First, the students did a very good job of connecting the Names unit texts to the other texts we had read. For example, when reading Jenny’s text (from the original Names unit), one student wrote, “This is different from The Name Jar [Choi, 2003] because she was trying to get a new name from her friends because they couldn’t pronounce it, whereas Jenny got her name from her grandfather, and everyone could pronounce it.” In making these connections, it allowed us to revisit those texts and served as another opportunity to discuss the more difficult texts and ultimately build comprehension for all students. Second, the students made many astute and genuine connections between texts. When reading Ambioris’s text from the Names unit, one student wrote, “This reminds me of ‘Strength and Softness’ [another story in the Names unit] because her name is special for her just like Ambioris, because he doesn’t want his name to change.” Originally, the students were hesitant to consider student-written texts as “texts,” but after a little while Abu, Yeni, and Chisel (authors of Names unit stories) were viewed as legitimate authors, just like Cisneros, Lahiri, Park, and Choi. The students made wonderful connections to the National Public Radio stories we had listened to, as well as to texts they were reading independently. One student, reading Miracle’s Boys (Woodson, 2000; a Hampton Brown high interest–low level In-Zone reader; www.ngsp.com/tabid/92/Default.aspx), commented about Sergio’s story from the Names unit: “This reminds me of The Miracle’s Boys because Lafayette likes his name similar to Sergio.” It was great to see oral histories, students’ stories, independent reading, and canonic literature all discussed and revered in the same space. This is one of the
great advantages to incorporating learners’ stories into the curriculum—it gives legitimacy to their stories in a way that otherwise would not be possible. The varied types of text were viewed similarly by the students as legitimate text for analysis and enjoyment. This is the power of a learner-centered curriculum; it has the ability to transform students into achievers, doers, and experts (Ada & Campoy, 2003). See Table 1 for suggestions on how to develop this type of curriculum.

TABLE 1. How to Implement Learner-Centered Instruction Using Learner Stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Determine a meaningful theme, such as belonging, names, first day of school, journey to the United States.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>See if a unit for this theme has already been created and has materials that you can use. If there is one, review the unit and choose the materials, lessons, and activities that you can use or adapt for your own classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>Search through adolescent literature that students in your class can relate to. Search the Internet, ask your colleagues, visit your local library. Do your best to try to find myriad readings that match the diversity of your classroom in terms of proficiency level, literacy level, ethnic backgrounds, and life experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>Read the literature you have chosen. Then check local, state, and national standards, and decide on what grammar, vocabulary, and literary analysis you can logically teach through these readings that aligns with standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>Write out the skills that you would like students to gain by participating in the unit. These should include oral language/communication skills, literacy skills (reading and writing), and nonlinguistic outcomes such as establishing a learning community; validating learner experiences; strengthening intergenerational relationships in families through understanding; navigating the school, community, and larger world; and so on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 6</td>
<td>Identify your standards (district, state, national) that you will be meeting in your unit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 7</td>
<td>Include the following in your unit: brainstorming, language activities, vocabulary activities, grammar activities, active reading strategies, scaffolded and guided writing activities, activities that help students learn about and share information with one another, formative and summative assessments, and reflective exercises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 8</td>
<td>Pilot the unit, and make changes as needed to foster learner engagement and strengthen learning outcomes.</td>
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Writing and Publishing
The unit concluded with the writing of the students’ own “My Name” assignment. We started by holding a simile workshop so that their written pieces on their names could include several good similes. First, we reviewed the definition of a simile and looked over any similes that had appeared in the texts we had read. Students wrote similes about their own names, and as a class, if needed, we rewrote them. Some of my favorite similes were “My name is original and fresh like a Subway sandwich” and “My name is like a link in a chain, it connects me to my entire family.”

After perfecting our similes, it was time to start writing our drafts. From our discussions throughout the unit, the mini-presentations/gallery walk, and all of their text-to-self connections, I knew the students had plenty to say. I provided them with an assignment sheet as well as a rubric and asked them to use all of their materials to create a rough draft. Using Lakeshore Learning’s Flip-to-Learn: Revising and Editing Guide (n.d.; http://bit.ly/fkAhB0), I had students peer revise and edit their first drafts. First, they looked for commonly misspelled words. Second, they looked for bland words and tried to replace them with more exciting words. Third, they looked for grammatical mistakes and corrected them using the appropriate symbols. The students then created a second draft at home that was handed in to me. I carefully read each draft, making corrections and asking for more information in certain places. Students then wrote a third draft, and handed all three of them in together.

I brought the unit to a close by having a publishing party. The students brought in their final drafts and a little food, and they dressed up so that I could take their pictures. In my larger class each student read a portion of his or her story, and in my smaller class each student read the entire story. It was truly amazing to see two classes, full of students who generally disliked school and did not do very well academically, stand up confidently and read pieces that they had written and that were deeply personal. They were all very respectful as their peers shared their stories. I saw students choke up as they discussed wanting to get rid of their last names because they connected them to fathers who did not raise them, or laugh as they talked about their mothers getting back at their fathers.
by naming them what they wanted to name them, or stand proudly as they talked of how their first name reminded them of their grandmother who was always there for them. It was a gift to hear these profoundly personal stories all at once, in such an inviting and respectful environment. My classroom had truly been transformed.

The Names unit, as modified for the students in my classes, definitely reflected the principles of a learner-centered curriculum, and that is the reason that it worked so well with these learners. They were treated as knowledge makers—valued sources of information—and authors, editors, and reviewers of text. They formed a community that had not existed prior to the unit, crossing cultural and linguistic and experiential boundaries in the process. I was a learner too and was inspired by the journey we undertook together around this theme, in the process sharing something so intimate as the story of our names and the feelings and experiences that are attached to our names.

CONCLUSION

In an era of educational standards, personalization is frequently only paid lip service through cursory advisory periods with prescribed protocols focused on academic and career goals. Through the use of a learner-centered curriculum, teachers can harness the real power of personalization and create meaningful learning experiences that support and motivate adolescent ELLs with varied proficiency levels, literacy levels, and cultural characteristics. Such practices stand in stark contrast to scripted curriculum and produce far better outcomes. With learner-centered curriculum at the core, we have a real chance to help learners develop skills and strategies that lead to meeting state and national standards, while making schooling much more meaningful and thus keeping learners in schools where they feel they belong and can contribute.

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