

## 8<sup>th</sup> GRADE LESSON: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

### OVERVIEW:

Students consider the extent to which name-calling is a part of their lives and the damage that can be done by the names they use so casually. They are asked to complete written reflections about their experiences with name-calling and to read articles about the history and usage of common slurs. Students are challenged to rethink their own behavior and to consider ways to reduce name-calling in their communities.

### OBJECTIVES:

- To increase students' awareness about the impact of names and slurs in their lives
- To encourage students to reflect on their own experiences with name-calling
- To provide students with a greater understanding of the derivation and usage of common slurs
- To challenge students to consider ways that they can reduce name-calling in their communities

**TIME:** One class period

**MATERIALS:** Chart paper/markers; pens; Student handout: *Commonly Used Slurs*

### PROCEDURE:

#### PART 1—INTRODUCING THE ACTIVITY (5 MINUTES)

[Tell students at any point in this lesson that if they would like to discuss the content of the lesson further they should feel free to approach an adult in the building at any time.]

Ask students to take one minute to think of all the putdowns they hear on a daily basis. They should not say them aloud, just list them in their minds. After a minute of silent reflection, ask students how many they came up with—Ten? Twenty? More? Point out that the fact that there are so many tells us that putting others down is an all too common part of our lives. Ask students why they think that name-calling is such a regular and often accepted part of the way that young people relate to one another.

#### PART 2—REFLECTING ON EXPERIENCES WITH NAME-CALLING (10-15 MINUTES)

Ask students to take some time to write about their experiences with name-calling. One or more of the following questions can be used to guide their writing:

- Have you ever used a slur or called someone an insulting name? What made you use those words?
- Has a slur or insulting name ever been used against you? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?

When students are finished writing, ask for a few volunteers to read their reflections aloud and to receive feedback from the group.



### **PART 3— THE POWER OF NAMES (TIMES WILL VARY)**

Give some version of the following talk in order to set up the next part of the activity: “Today we will be learning the origins of two potentially harmful words that are commonly used as put downs. These words are *faggot* and *retard*.’ How many people have heard one or both of these words used?”

(pause for responses)

“Some people think these insults are used so generally and frequently that they have become meaningless, when in fact, these put downs shame and dehumanize people, spread prejudice, and create an unsafe environment. They may be used as so-called jokes, to get back at others, to go along with the crowd, and because of prejudice and fear of differences. But the names we carelessly toss around are often rooted in cruelty and have long histories of hate. Perhaps if we better understood how these names came to be and how they affect other people, we might think twice before using them? Today we are using these words in a particular context and it is okay to say them or use an alternative – like the f-word and the r-word.”

Show this public service announcement about put downs, focusing on “retard.” It features actors from the TV show Glee. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T549VoLca\\_Q&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T549VoLca_Q&feature=related)

### **Part 4: WHAT’S IN A NAME?**

During the next part of the activity, students are asked to read brief articles about the history and usage of common slurs and to reflect on the power these words hold to hurt others (see the handouts, *Commonly Used Slurs*). The words *faggot* and *retard* were selected for this lesson due to the frequency and thoughtlessness with which so many young people use them. The articles may be used in one or more of the following ways, which are listed in sequence from more to less structured/moderated experiences:

- Read one article together as a class and pose one or more of the questions below to process the reading. Collect the articles after the activity so that they will not be used inappropriately outside of class. Repeat this process with the other article.
- Have students read one of the articles to themselves. Ask them to respond to one or more of the questions below either in writing or through discussion with a partner. Bring the whole class together and ask for volunteers to share some of their reactions. Repeat this process with the other articles on subsequent days or as time allows.
- Divide the class into small groups of 4-6 students and distribute a different article to each group. Ask each group to read the article and discuss the questions below. Bring the whole class together and ask each group to present a summary of their reading and the key ideas that emerged during their discussions.
- Ask students to read the article that reflects language about which they are most concerned. Individually or in groups of students who have chosen the same article, have them do further research about the history and usage of the slur they have selected and/or other slurs. Students can then present what they have learned to the larger class.



**QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. What was the most surprising thing you learned from the article(s) you read?
2. Now that you know more about the history and usage of these words, how can you help stop their use?
3. What can you do to educate others about the meaning of slurs and to reduce name-calling in your school?

**PART 5 — PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT ABOUT THE WORD “RETARD”.**

If you have time, you may want to show the public service announcement again. It features actors from the TV show Glee.

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T549VoLca\\_Q&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T549VoLca_Q&feature=related)



## Reading #1: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

### COMMONLY USED SLURS: FAGGOT

Many people are aware that the word “faggot” – like the French *fagot* and Italian *fa(n)gotto* – refers to a bunch of sticks, herbs, or metal rods tied together into a bundle, but what’s the connection between a bundle of sticks and a modern-day insult?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word “faggot” has been used in a wide variety of ways since the 1300s. At first it was a neutral term, simply referring to a bundle of sticks or twigs that someone might gather for fuel. Eventually, however, it took on several different negative meanings. When heretics—people who opposed the teachings of the Catholic Church—were burned alive during the European Inquisitions, the fires used to burn them were built with a “faggot.” The expression “to fry a faggot” came to mean “to be burnt alive.”

Heretics often were forced to carry the “faggot” to the fire being built for them, and those who took back their anti-Catholic beliefs to avoid execution were forced to wear the design of a faggot embroidered on their sleeve, to identify them as former heretics. “Faggot” therefore also came to mean something difficult to bear. This particular meaning grew as a sexist insult, often directed at women considered to be bad-tempered, tiresome, or not respectable.

“Faggot” first appeared in the U.S. during the early part of the 20th century as a slang term for men considered to be woman-like or flashy. The term grew more common and more hateful during the middle of the century, and by the 1960s had become one of the most common slurs used against gay men, or men perceived to be gay. It is unclear exactly when “faggot” came to be embraced as an all purpose insult, but that usage no doubt comes from the belief among some straight men that the greatest possible humiliation is to be identified as gay.

Other definitions for the noun “faggot” throughout history have included a type of meat pastry produced in the U.K.; a person temporarily employed to fill a shortage in a company or military regiment’s ranks; a type of vote in the British Parliament; and thinly sliced pieces or frayed edges. “Fag” is British slang for a cigarette.

The verb form of “faggot” meant to tie or bind up as in a “faggot” of sticks, but also was used to refer to fastening objects, ideas or people together. A rare use of the verb form of “faggot” referred to the act of setting the accused heretic on the fire for burning. “To faggot” also came to mean “to recant” or take back one’s statements, referring to the “faggot” design former heretics were forced to display on their clothing.

There have been many debates about the relationship of the definitions described above to anti-gay harassment in today’s world. Some people believe that current usage of the term “faggot” comes specifically from the history of burning heretics, suggesting that gay people or people perceived to be gay were included in the condemned, although there is no evidence to support this claim.

Others believe that the current usage of the term “faggot” comes from the history of abusing women, especially women considered less desirable. Either way, it is clear that “faggot” is the product of a long history of violence and sexism, and carries the pain of that history even when used as a general insult.



## Reading #2: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

### COMMONLY USED SLURS: RETARD

I was recently riding my skateboard one evening, trying to keep my mind off the scorching summer heat, when I was attacked by a group of teenagers. These misguided youths didn't have guns or knives or tight-clenched fists, but rather razor sharp insults. "Hey retard, you look retarded riding on that thing!," they yelled. I am not diagnosed with a developmental disability, but the comment still bothered me. I began to wonder how many other people in our community have suffered this same insult, disabled or not. What does it mean, I wondered, to be called "retarded"? Why is this word so insulting?

To answer these questions we must first examine the origin of the word. The original Latin is *retardare*, meaning "to delay," taken from the root word *tardus*, meaning "slow." When used as a verb, *retard* means "a slowing down or hindering of progress." In music the term refers to a "slacking of tempo." As an adjective the term implies "slow in mental, emotional or physical development."

As far as the U.S. health system is concerned, the term *mental retardation* refers to "below average intelligence that is less than an IQ of 70, is present from birth or infancy, and may be accompanied by abnormal development, learning difficulties, and problems in social adjustment." The dictionary also notes that, in common slang, when one calls another person a retard, it is often offensive in meaning.

Most of us probably think of the word *retarded* in terms of a mental disability. Unfortunately many people believe that all people with disabilities are "retarded." They don't know that it refers to a specific diagnosis used by doctors and psychiatrists. The term was never meant to apply to all people with disabilities. Many people with developmental and physical disabilities have an above average IQ. Some are even geniuses. The term was certainly never meant to be used as a slur.

I don't have a diagnosed disability, but I know people who do and are better at algebra than I am. Others I know with disabilities are gifted artists, musicians, computer operators, and statisticians. As we learn more about the human mind and brain function, we realize that intelligence can't be reduced to a number. There are many ways in which a person can be intelligent.

Psychiatrist Howard Gardner has suggested that there are actually seven forms of intelligence. Most of us are familiar with the verbal and mathematical forms, but others include kinesthetic (dance and rhythm), spatial (art), musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (the ability to understand oneself). We need to embrace each other's individual gifts instead of focusing on limitations.

A coach was recently overheard yelling at his athletes, "You guys play like a bunch of retards!" I wonder what he meant by that? When used in the wrong context, it simply implies a lack of awareness or sensitivity to the issues people with disabilities face. When used derogatively, the word becomes malicious; a dirty word born of the same ignorance that spawns racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual slurs. The use of the term in this manner cannot be tolerated in a society that believes that all people are equal.

As I reflect upon the evening that I was called a retard, I can't help but think that the world has got it all backwards. If retarded means "a slowing down or hindering of progress," I think that the bullies who are taunting me (and others) fit this description better than anyone I know with a disability. As most of us seek to realize our own potential as human beings, those who choose to belittle others, cut people down, and purposely hurt those who are in some way different are themselves really the ones who are experiencing a slow-down or a hindering of progress. Meanwhile the rest of us are busy sprouting roots and stretching our wings, eager to continue growing.

Recent Changes:

[President Barack Obama signed](#) into law [Rosa's Law](#), which changed references in federal law from *mental retardation* to *intellectual disability*, and references to *a mentally retarded individual* to *an individual with an intellectual disability*.

*This essay adapted from The Day I was Called a Retard by Tyler Osterhaus, at <http://www.oshkoshsupportgroup.homestead.com/thoughts2.html>, and reprinted with permission.*

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