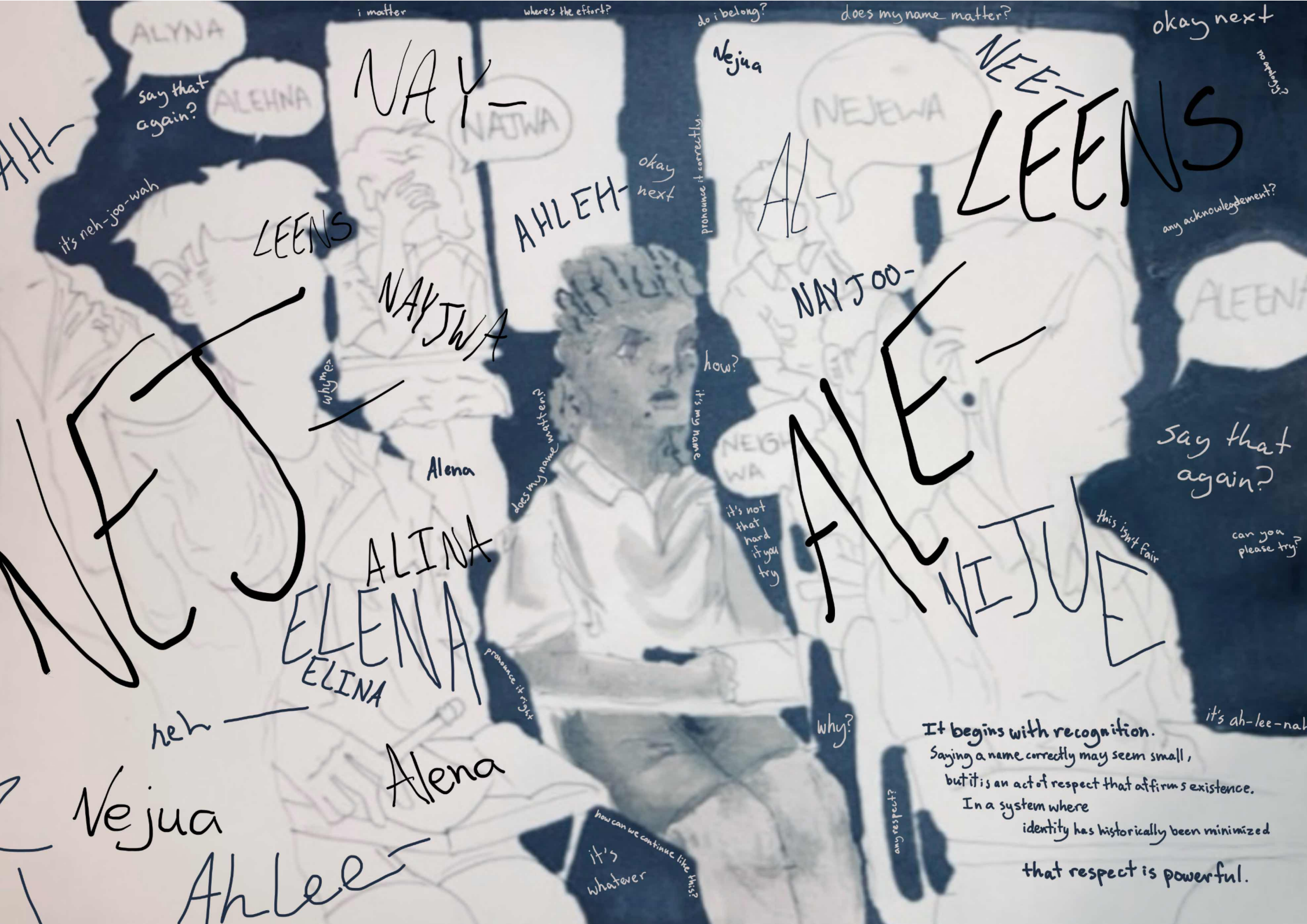

ALYNA
say that again?
ALEHNA
AH-
it's neh-joo-wah
i matter
where's the effort?
NAY-
NAJWA
LEENS
AHLEH-
okay next
NEJ-
why me?
NAYJWA
Alena
ALINA
ELENA
ELINA
does my name matter?
pronounce it correctly.
pronounce it right
neh
Nejua
Alena
Ahlee-
how can we continue like this?
it's whatever
do i belong?
Nejua
NEJEWA
AL-
NEE-
LEENS
NAYJOO-
how?
it's my name
it's not that hard if you try
why?
any respect?
AL-
NIJUE
this isn't fair
does my name matter?
okay next
no change on
any acknowledgement?
ALENA
say that again?
can you please try?
it's ah-lee-nah
It begins with recognition.
Saying a name correctly may seem small,
but it is an act of respect that affirms existence.
In a system where
identity has historically been minimized
that respect is powerful.

Artists: Nejua Tangon, Alena Malykhina
School: Victoria School of the Arts
Piece: Say My Name: Protecting Identity, Protecting Light
Medium: Pencil on paper and digital drawings

Artist Statement:

Systemic racism in schools is not always visible through extreme incidents. More often, it operates through small, repeated actions that communicate who belongs and who does not. One major by-product of systemic racial issues that can limit or even extinguish the *Light of Black youths* in a community is identity invalidation. In classrooms, this frequently appears through the consistent mispronunciation, misspelling, or alteration of culturally distinct names.

A name is deeply personal. It carries family history, language, migration stories, and cultural pride. When a teacher hesitates to say a name, shortens it without permission, repeatedly says it incorrectly, or avoids it altogether, the impact goes beyond embarrassment. It signals that the student's identity is unfamiliar, inconvenient, or not worth learning. Even when it is unintentional, the message can still be received as dismissal.

While this experience affects students from many racial and cultural backgrounds, it disproportionately affects Black youths and other students of color whose names fall outside Eurocentric norms. Schools were historically structured around Western standards, including language expectations. As a result, names that do not fit those norms are often treated as exceptions rather than equally valid identities. Over time, these small moments accumulate. A student may stop correcting teachers. They may begin to accept a nickname they do not identify with. They may participate less. These patterns slowly dim confidence and belonging.

The by-product is internalized silence. When identity is repeatedly altered or overlooked, students may begin to shrink themselves in order to feel accepted. For Black youths who may already face lowered academic expectations or stereotyping, this compounds existing systemic pressures. The classroom should be a place where students feel seen and affirmed. When something as foundational as a name is mishandled, that affirmation is weakened.

Our art piece visually represents this reality. At the center is a realistic portrait of a boy. He represents not only Black youths but all students whose identities are questioned or reshaped in subtle ways. Surrounding him are multiple variations of names, some misspelled, some shortened, and some phonetically distorted. The names overlap and crowd the space, creating visual tension. Among them are our own names, Nejua and Alena, to emphasize that identity-based invalidation crosses racial lines and affects individuals differently, yet powerfully.

The portrait is drawn in pen and pencil to emphasize realism and humanity. The digital overlays represent external systems that impose labels and assumptions. The contrast between the calm, detailed face at the center and the fragmented names around him symbolizes the internal

strength of identity versus the external pressure to conform. The artwork asks a simple but urgent question: What happens when a community repeatedly fails to say your name correctly?

Our Practical Solution: The Identity-Affirmation Protocol

We propose a school-wide Identity-Affirmation Protocol that can be implemented at the beginning of each semester.

Step One: During the first week of classes, every student completes a short digital Name and Identity Form. This includes phonetic spelling, an optional audio recording of pronunciation, and space to explain cultural significance if they choose. Teachers are expected to review and practice pronunciation before the second week of classes.

Step Two: Staff participate in a brief professional-development session specifically focused on identity-affirming practices. This session highlights the connection between name respect, belonging, and academic engagement. It also provides strategies for correcting mistakes respectfully and without drawing negative attention to the student.

Step Three: The school introduces a mid-semester anonymous check-in survey in which students indicate whether their names are being pronounced and spelled correctly. This creates accountability without targeting individual teachers publicly.

This solution is realistic and measurable. It requires minimal cost but shifts school culture in a meaningful way. When educators intentionally learn and respect names, they communicate that identity matters. That message strengthens belonging. Belonging strengthens participation. Participation strengthens confidence.

Protecting the Light of Black youths **and of all students begins with recognition. Saying a name correctly may seem small, but it is an act of respect that affirms existence. In a system where identity has historically been minimized, that respect is powerful.**


I'M SORRY
TO ONE WOMAN
TO THE WORLD