



Identity and Diversity

In the youth novel *Bronx Masquerade*, by Nikki Grimes, Tyrone Bittings is a high school student who has come to believe that he has little chance for success in life:

“School ain’t nothin’ but a joke. My moms don’t want to hear that, but if it weren’t for Wesley and my other homeys, I wouldn’t even be here, aiight? These white folk talking ‘bout some future, telling me I need to be planning for some future—like I got one! And Raynard agreeing, like he’s smart enough to know. From what I hear, that boy can’t hardly read! Anyway, it’s them white folk that get me with this *future* mess. Like Steve, all hopped up about working on Broadway and telling me I should think about getting with it too. Asked me if I ever thought about writing plays. “Fool! What kinda question is that?” I said. He threw his hands up and backed off a few steps.”¹

How did Tyrone become a person who thought the idea that he would plan for a future was ridiculous? How did any of us get to be who we are? That is the question we ask ourselves in Perspective One as we examine our lives—where, how, and with whom we live, and how all of it shapes us. We will examine complex issues: how our individual cultures affect us, our personalities and preferences, our relationships with others, the decisions we make.

Much of who we are is shaped by the circumstances into which we were born and the influences around us as we grow. Many of those influences persist into adulthood. Our diversity shows up powerfully in American public schools. The variety of languages, colors, ethnicities, religions, gender identities, abilities, and sexual orientations in our schools can give rise to misunderstanding and fear, or it can inspire us to explore our differences and similarities, our traditions and hopes, our diverse histories, and the ways our histories affect our lives and learning.

Exploration clarifies and strengthens students’ ability to learn and educators’ ability to teach the wide variety of learners in today’s classrooms. Can it be done efficiently and effectively, even with enjoyment, in school schedules already pressed with federal and state requirements, standardized tests, and the developmental and behavioral challenges of adolescents? The advisory period provides a great opportunity. In advisory, students come face to face with each other for fifteen or twenty minutes several times weekly. These can become the best few minutes of the week for making friends, strengthening the school community, and building understanding amid diversity.

The advisory meetings in Perspective One invite discussion about all aspects of culture.

Some aspects have greater impact than others: three that strongly influence students' education are their family and friends, their socio-economic class, and their ethnicity/color. Advisories 3, 4, and 6 are among the meetings that consider these influences in Perspective One.

Mindsets

The mental framework through which we view our students, their families, and our tasks as educators determines in large part the way we teach each day. Three teacher mindsets (first described on pages 22-24) are extremely useful in helping adolescents learn and grow. *Face to Face Advisories* also develop these productive mindsets in students.

Growth mindset

Growth includes change, and often requires us to shift our point of view. A teacher or student with a growth mindset can cultivate the skill of looking from several points of view. This is a good way to avoid getting stuck in stereotypes. In the advisory meetings designed for these conversations, we take the perspectives of people within a culture as well as people outside it. We listen to scholars who have studied cultures in comparison to other cultures, and we listen to first-hand accounts of people immersed in their cultures. We pay attention to stories of the powerless and the powerful. In other words, we expand our perspective and guard against oversimplification by presenting stories from multiple sources. This allows us to listen and think in an open-minded way, and perhaps see familiar things in new ways.

Action and objective mindsets

Working with each other across cultures requires leadership that is both energetic and diplomatic, rooted in commitment to honor everyone equally. Along the way, someone may say something that offends another. As leaders, we must notice and correct any slips toward biased thinking, explicit or implicit. This becomes a powerful model for students to internalize.

ADVISORY 1 ► A+

Advisory goal: Gain insight into our group—what we think, like, trust, and wish for as a group made up of unique individuals

Greeting

Ball Toss Greeting: Select a student to begin and give her a ball (soft indoor ball, bean bag, or stuffed animal). She greets another student, then tosses that student the ball (model a safe, on-target, underhanded toss). The recipient of the ball returns the greeting, greets someone else, then tosses him the ball. This continues until all students have been greeted once and have received and tossed the ball. The last student greeted greets and tosses the ball to the student who went first.

Hello, Advisory Members!

Today we'll learn more about our group as a whole. Talking Cards will tell us, and they never prevaricate!

Activity

Talking Cards: Who are we? Students answer on index cards the questions below about themselves, one response per card (to save on resources, cut index cards in half for this activity). Students do *not* write their names on the cards, since the purpose of this activity is to see the range of answers in the group, not to learn about individual identities. But they do note the number of the question they are responding to on each card. Read each question, allow time for writing responses, collect and sort the cards by the question they address, and label each set with its question's number.

➡ Students will complete the step of answering the questions in this activity and continue with the Talking Cards exercise in the next advisory meeting. Match the number of questions the students can successfully complete to your allotted advisory time. For example, in 20-minute advisories students will likely be able to answer all the questions; shorter advisories may allow for only some of the twelve questions.

Talking Card questions for Who are we?

Adapted from *100 Ways to Enhance Self-Concept in the Classroom*, by Jack Canfield & Harold C. Wells²

1. I'm at my best when ...
2. People I trust are ...
3. I don't like people who ...
4. The best thing that could happen to me is ...
5. When I don't like something I've done, I ...
6. When I like something I've done, I ...
7. I'm very happy that ...
8. I wish my parents knew ...

9. In general, I think school is ...
10. I would like to ...
11. I hope that someday ...
12. The thing I like best about this group is ...

➡ Remember that the Talking Cards exercise is anonymous: it is meant not to reveal individual characteristics, but to reveal the variety of responses in the group. The responses can offer insight into the impact their cultures have had on students' lives.

Reflection

Reflection occurs in Advisory 2. See below for questions.

Keep in Mind

Definition of culture

In these conversations, we call the values, beliefs, attitudes, and practices—the sum effect of all the influences on us in the particular place, time, and environment in which we live—our culture (see page 24 for more about defining culture). Examining cultures provides insights into ourselves and each other, since our cultures strongly influence the choices we make and the direction of our lives.

Observing the answers students give to the Talking Cards *Who Are We* questions can reveal some of the ways they think both alike and differently, and students will begin to get a feeling for the variety of attitudes and values in the group. The activity is designed to begin a conversation about culture on a personal level, so students can talk about values and hopes and opinions in a non-judgmental, good-spirited way.

Ask yourself

What are your answers to the Talking Cards questions? Decide whether to participate in the activity by writing answers to the questions. Participating would show that you are with the group in this process.

[Order your copy of Face to Face Advisories: Bridging Cultural Gaps in Grades 5–9.](#)