



## LESSON PLAN: ARE YOU PART OF THE IN-CROWD?

**OVERVIEW:** Students think about the impact of group labels and social hierarchies on their sense of identity, self-esteem, and the way they socialize with others. Through discussion, poetry and personal narrative, students explore ways to bridge the social boundaries at their school. They learn about Mix It Up, a project that challenges students to move beyond cliques by socializing with people from a variety of groups, and plan a Mix It Up event for their school.

### OBJECTIVES:

- Students will be able to describe group names and labels can be negative social forces at school
- Students will be able to communicate their reflection on the impact of social hierarchies and boundaries and ways to address these issues
- Students will be able to develop and implement a plan for reducing social boundaries in school

**AGE/EXPERIENCE LEVEL:** Grades 6-8

**TIME:** At least 90 minutes or two class periods

**MATERIALS:** Chart paper/markers; pens; Student handouts: A Day in the Life of a Popular Person, Don't Talk to Her, and Mix It Up

### PROCEDURE:

#### PART 1—INTRODUCING THE ACTIVITY (15 MINUTES)

Pose the following question to students: We all know that name-calling aimed at individuals can be cruel and hurtful, but what about names directed at an entire group of students? Ask them what names are used at their school to label certain groups (e.g., geeks, nerds, jocks, popular, cool) and list them on the board. Ask students what criteria or characteristics are most commonly used to name these groups. Is it appearance, personality, ability, interests? Ask how they feel about these categories and how such labels might affect their sense of individual identity, self-esteem, and the way they socialize with others?

#### PART 2—EXPLORING SOCIAL HIERARCHY (30 MINUTES FOR EACH READING)

Follow up the discussion above with the readings below and attached, which are written by students struggling with social boundaries at their schools. Each reading is accompanied by questions that can be answered in written form or through small or large group discussion in



class. The readings can be introduced in successive class sessions, assigned as homework, or used in both ways.

### **A Day in the Life of a Popular Person by Brandon Barnett**

In this poem, a student questions the social hierarchy at his school and explores the pressure and guilt he feels as a “popular” person.

### **Don’t Talk to Her by Dane Pennerman**

In this essay, a middle school student struggles with the growing social boundaries that divide his friends into separate cliques.

### **PART 3—MIXING IT UP (TIME WILL VARY)**

After discussing the above readings, challenge students to identify ways to bridge the social boundaries that exist at school. In small groups or as a whole class, have them share their ideas for concrete ways to de-emphasize cliques and encourage socialization across groups. Record their ideas on chart paper so that they can be discussed and put into action over time.

Tell the class about Mix It Up, a project that challenges students to move beyond artificial labels and exclusive cliques by socializing with students from a variety of groups and backgrounds. Mix It Up is a project of Tolerance.org, Teaching Tolerance, and the Study Circles Resource Center. Every year on Mix It Up at Lunch Day, hundreds of thousands of students across the country sit in the cafeteria with students from different groups and backgrounds as a way to diminish social boundaries and stimulate ongoing dialogue about this issue. Visit [www.mixitup.org](http://www.mixitup.org) to find out more about the project and the date of the next Mix It Up Day, but don’t wait until then to get started! The handout, Mix It Up, provides students with action steps for planning their own Mix It Up event at school, including how to organize, publicize, and follow up on their Mix It Up Day. Engage your whole class in planning an event or solicit a small group of volunteers who are interested in working with you to put a plan into action in your school.



### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A POPULAR PERSON

Read the poem below by Brandon Barnett, a student who explores what it means to be part of the “popular” crowd. Answer the accompanying questions and discuss your responses with your classmates.

### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A POPULAR PERSON

Walking down the hallway you see them,  
The popular people,  
Your friends.  
You know you're one of them,  
Some people would kill to be you.  
Yet you never felt that you're one of them,  
How are you any different from the people you put down?

You play football,  
You're smart,  
And you wear the right clothes,  
Is that all that matters?

But you should forget that now,  
It doesn't matter how you treat other people.  
You are better than them,  
You will always be popular,  
Won't you?

People envy you,  
Their mere lives hang on every word you say.  
They mean nothing to you,  
But you live on a wire,  
If you fall you'll be one of the lesser kids, you'll be a loser.

If you displease one of the cooler kids,  
Even just once,  
You will fall,  
Never to recover,  
You will live in shame.

You know everyone is the same,  
But why should you care.  
You're on the right side.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- In the poem, Brandon ponders, “You play football, you’re smart, and you wear the right clothes. Is this all that matters?” What “matters” most at your school? What do you think about this?
- Brandon talks about living on “a wire,” falling and never recovering. What does he mean? What pressure do you feel to be part of a certain group or to avoid associating with another group?
- Brandon asks himself how he is any different from the people he puts down. How do group labels or cliques serve to divide people and lead to name-calling?
- Brandon describes never feeling like he was “one of them.” Have you ever felt like this? How does it feel to be part of a group (whether you want to be or others just consider you to be)? Or how does it feel to not be associated with any group, if this is the case for you?
- How does “group name-calling” affect your personal sense of identity and your feelings about yourself?
- How does “group name-calling” affect your social options at school (who your friends are, what activities you do, etc.)?
- What do you think it would take to eliminate “group name-calling” at your school? What step could you take in this direction?



A Day in the Life of a Popular Person is from Tolerance.org at <http://www.tolerance.org/teens/stories/article.jsp?p=0&ar=55>.

## DON'T TALK TO HER

Read the reflection below by Dane Pennerman, a student struggling with the social boundaries that exist in his middle school. Answer the accompanying questions and discuss your responses with your classmates.

As Roberto and I entered the cafeteria, I saw my friend Melissa.

“What’s up, Melissa?”

Roberto punched me and said, “Don’t speak to her.”

“Why?”

“She’s a Rocker.”

“Roberto, she’s still my friend.”

As Roberto and I proceeded to the lunch line, I saw my buddy Hakeem.

“Hey Dane, come sit with us?” Hakeem offered.

“Go ahead, Dane, I’ll catch you later,” Roberto said, looking at me blankly.

“No, Roberto you can come to!”

Roberto looked at Hakeem’s table, and said to me, “I’ll just see you after school, Dane.”

All these people were some of my best friends in elementary school. What happened? When did I miss this? When did these boundaries go up around me? And more important, why hadn’t I noticed them? Was I trying to pretend that they didn’t exist?

The close friendships I had cultivated in elementary school were disappearing. All of my friends were now in their own “cliques.”

The school cafeteria was now divided into Rockers, African Americans, Hispanics, and the Popular Kids. Why couldn’t we all hang out together? Why does Hakeem call me “white boy” when he sees me talking to my Caucasian friends? Why does Roberto only know me between classes?

How am I supposed to handle this?

I view Hakeem, Melissa, and Roberto as friends, equally. How can I look beyond appearances, when it’s the main focus of everyone around me? Am I wrong for not participating in the boundaries my friends create?

Sometimes I try to discuss the issues my friends have with each other. Is there really any basis for the ill feelings? I feel their dislike for each other is unwarranted.



I have yet to hear valid reasons from anyone. I remember talking to Hakeem. He told me Roberto's not really my friend: "Just because the two of you have a class together and walk in the halls together means nothing. When his Spanish friends come around, he doesn't know you, Dane."

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- As the author reflects on the cliques that exist at his school, he asks, "When did these boundaries go up around me?" Have you noticed such boundaries at your school? When and why do you think they surfaced?
- The author notes that his school cafeteria is divided into "Rockers, African Americans, Hispanics, and the Popular Kids." What "crowds" exist at your school? Do students socialize across these groups? What encourages or discourages them from doing so?
- The author says that "social boundaries are a way to avoid the things we are afraid of, things we may not understand about others." Do you agree? What differences keep people in your school apart?
- The author wonders how he can look beyond appearances when it's the main focus of everyone around him. What can individuals do to get beyond appearances and change some of the social patterns that exist in school?



## MIX IT UP

Mix It Up supports the efforts of student activists who are willing to take on the challenge of identifying, questioning and crossing social boundaries. Mix It Up is a project of Tolerance.org, Teaching Tolerance, and the Study Circles Resource Center. Visit <http://www.mixitup.org> for more information.

### HOW TO MIX IT UP

At many schools around the country, the cafeteria at lunchtime is a social map of the whole school. A map crisscrossed with boundaries. These boundaries exist for many reasons — habit, friendship, status, fear, prejudice. The simple space of a cafeteria table is, for many of us, a comfort zone where we can be our-selves with those who know us best. Touch base. Regroup. Let down the guard that classroom pressures often require of us. For others, the lunchroom with all its boundaries is a world with its own pressures — a world of familiar strangers and rigid expectations. But each year students across the country stir things up in their school cafeterias. And you can do it, too. Here are some ideas to help you Mix It Up at lunch.

### REACH OUT

All it takes is one person venturing outside the comfort zone to stir things up, but on Mix It Up Day, why not have a whole crowd sitting someplace new? Ask your friends to join in. Pitch the idea to the clubs, sports teams and other groups you belong to. Invite other clubs to participate. Get teachers and administrators on board. Publicize the event with posters, stickers, raps and t-shirts.

### PLAN

How are you going to “do the day?” Here are 5 ways to mix up lunchroom seating.:

- Create a “calendar” out of 12 tables and sit by birth month or by Zodiac signs.
- Number several tables and draw your seat assignment from a hat.
- Draw colored candies out of a bag and sit with the matching tablecloth.
- Find a table where you don’t know more than two people.
- Give each person a “ticket” that matches the color tag on a chair

### ACT

The day has arrived and you’re sitting at a new table staring at a bunch of people you don’t know. What now? Here are 5 ideas to jump-start the conversation:

- What’s the last CD you bought?



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- Imagine you rule the world. What's the first law you'd make?
- What's the craziest thing you ever did in public?
- You're signing autographs. What are you famous for?
- You're the principal. What's the first class you drop—and what class do you add?

### **DIG DEEPER**

How'd it go? What worked? What didn't? What did you enjoy? Does your school need to look more closely at social boundaries? Start a Mix It Up Dialogue—visit <http://www.mixitup.org> to learn how.

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