

**Lesson**

# Navigating Social Hierarchies

**Overview****About This Lesson**

Negotiating belonging can feel fraught in middle school. All too often, the pressure to fit in results in young people changing the way they dress, speak, and act (or choosing to remain silent), all in an effort to be part of an “in” group. As students learned in previous lessons, our strong desire to be included is an innate human trait, one that can lead individuals to conform to the norms of a group, even if it means compromising their values.

In this two-day lesson, students will apply what they have learned to the reading and analysis of a powerful short story by Misa Sugiura. The activities prompt close reading and discussion as students consider the ways our fears of being excluded can shape our choices and actions, even causing us to intentionally or unintentionally hurt others in an effort to secure our own belonging. In the end, students will consider how Sugiura’s story helps them think about ways to reduce the barriers to belonging in their class and school community.

**Essential Questions**

- What are the forces that shape belonging?
- How can we reduce barriers to belonging for ourselves and others?

**Guiding Questions**

- What role do visible and invisible borders play in determining who is “in” and “out” of a group or community? How do these borders influence our sense of who we are and where we belong?
- What are possible consequences when we prioritize our own sense of belonging over the well-being of others?

**Facing History Learning Outcomes**

*In order to deepen their understanding of the text, themselves, each other, and the world, students will . . .*

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- Engage with real and imagined stories that help them understand their own experiences and how others experience the world.
- Describe the factors that influence their moral development, such as their personal experiences, their interactions with others, and their surroundings, and reflect on how these factors influence their sense of right and wrong.
- Analyze the internal and external conflicts that characters face and the impact these conflicts can have on an individual's choices and actions, both in the text and in the real world.

### What's Included

This lesson uses the following texts and materials. Access materials and a lesson Plan-on-a-Page in this [Google Folder](#).

- **Reading:** "Where I'm From" by Misa Sugiura
- **Handout:** Analyzing Eriko's Sense of Belonging
- **Handout:** "Where I'm From" Big Paper Quotations

### Preparing to Teach

#### A Note to Teachers

##### 1. Pacing This Two-Day Lesson

The activities in this lesson are designed for two 50-minute class periods. Students should finish reading "Where I'm From" for homework after Day 1. If you are not able to assign this story for homework, you will need to add additional time to this text set so that students can read it in class.

##### 2. Addressing Japanese Language in the Text

In the YA short story "Where I'm From," author Misa Sugiura incorporates Japanese words and phrases into the text without English translations. Guided by her approach, we have chosen not to include translations or explanations. At times in the story, the protagonist herself struggles with understanding Japanese, as she grew up with English as her primary language.

Before discussing the text or reading any sections aloud, it is important to review your classroom contract and prepare students in advance to address the Japanese words and phrases in the text with intention and care. If you are reading sections out loud, we recommend using a strategy that invites students to process the Japanese words and phrases in silence. We view this silence as a form of respect for

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the language and culture reflected in the text. Furthermore, this approach helps to avoid instances where a student might choose to turn the read-aloud into a disrespectful performance.

For this strategy, when readers (students and teachers) encounter text in Japanese, they should pause a beat to scan the text to themselves. Then they can pick up again with the next English phrase or sentence. You can establish a respectful tone by explaining the purpose of the silence to your students and then modeling the strategy by reading a section you plan to discuss out loud. As a reminder, it is important not to single out any students who you believe may speak Japanese to serve as experts, although, of course, they may choose to volunteer and be excited to share what they know about the language and culture.

### 3. Modifying the “Analyzing Eriko’s Sense of Belonging” Handout

**Day 1, Activity 2** supports students’ close reading and invites them to analyze Eriko’s sense of belonging in the first half of the story. The activity includes an editable handout with pre-filled content that serves as a model and helps to ensure that students will have time to discuss the reading while also looking for evidence to support their thinking. You can tailor this handout to an appropriate challenge level for your students by adding or deleting examples in each column.

### 4. Preparing for the Big Paper Activity on Day 2

**Day 2, Activity 2** uses the [Big Paper](#) teaching strategy, which you should familiarize yourself with before teaching the lesson. We have provided quotations for this activity on the teacher handout “**Where I’m From” Big Paper Quotations**. Before class, affix each quotation to a large piece of paper so that students can annotate and write their ideas around the passage.

In order for students to have a totally silent conversation with the text and with each other, it is important that you provide clear and explicit instructions prior to the start of the activity and answer any questions in advance. To get a sense of the final product for a Big Paper activity, refer to this [Big Paper example](#) on Facing History’s website.

## Lesson Plan

### Activities

#### Day 1

##### 1. Share Homework Annotations for the First Half of the Story

Remind students that in the previous lesson, they discussed how it can be challenging to thrive when we don't feel like we belong. In this lesson, students will investigate what can happen when we are granted or denied access to groups based on aspects of our identity and how this can influence our sense of self, choices, and actions.

Explain to students that part of belonging is feeling like we are known and valued. Making an effort to correctly pronounce each other's names is an important step in this process. Names can be an extension of our identities, cultures, languages, and family histories. "Where I'm From" author Misa Sugiura shares the story of her name and provides tips for how to pronounce it correctly in this [40-second audio clip](#) from TeachingBooks. Before students discuss the story, play the clip to model the importance of respecting each other's names, even when we are not in the room to hear them.

Next, explain that in addition to the importance of accurate pronunciation when we say people's names, it is also important to take care when we encounter languages in texts other than the ones we already speak. As we discuss Sugiura's "Where I'm From," if we are reading aloud sections that include words or phrases in Japanese, it is best to pause a beat to scan the text to ourselves and then pick up again with the next English word or phrase. When there is any uncertainty about how to pronounce something correctly, reading silently instead of out loud is a gesture of respect for the languages and cultures reflected in the text.

Move students into groups of three or four to share a heart or emoji annotation from their homework, reading and annotating the first half of the short story "Where I'm From," and explain their reasoning. Then have them spend a few minutes discussing places in the first half of the story where they felt confused and examples of evidence they found that helps them understand Eriko's sense of belonging and desire to fit in at different points in her young adult life. Circulate to

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get a sense of students' understanding of the text and to address any comprehension issues.

### 2. Work in Groups to Analyze Eriko's Sense of Belonging

While they are still working in their groups, let students know that they will be using evidence from the text and their own understanding of the world to analyze Eriko's sense of belonging in the first part of the story.

Take a few minutes to review the concept of *perspective*, the lens through which readers experience a text. In this story, secondary characters and events are described from Eriko's perspective. The ways in which Eriko, our narrator, views other characters (like Miho) and experiences events (like starting college) can reveal important information about who she is, what she values, and her sense of belonging in the world. For example, Eriko is often cruel to Miho because she herself feels insecure about aspects of her identity. We can ask ourselves why the author included this perspective and what it can teach us about the text, ourselves, and the world around us.

Next, pass out the handout **Analyzing Eriko's Sense of Belonging**. Explain that some sections of the handout have already been completed to help students understand what they are being asked to do. For each section, they should skim the text and then complete the row on the handout with a quotation, summary, or description of Eriko's sense of belonging in the first part of the story. Then they can move to the next part of the handout and plot their ideas onto a line graph.

### 3. Discuss the First Half of "Where I'm From" as a Class

Facilitate a class discussion of the following questions. Prompt students to support their ideas with evidence from their handouts and the text.

- For Eriko, what are the potential dangers of being outside the boundaries of her peer group in eighth grade? How do these potential dangers shape her choices and actions?
- In your opinion, when does Eriko feel the strongest sense of belonging in the first part of the story? Who or what contributes to her feeling this way?
- What are some of the barriers to belonging that Eriko faces in the first part of the story? What kinds of choices does she make as she tries to negotiate these barriers?

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- At this point in the story, why do you think Sugiura titled the story “Where I’m From”? What makes you say that?

### 4. Assign the Second Part of “Where I’m From” for Homework

Instruct students to read and annotate the second half of the story (see the “Homework” section below). You may have taught specific annotation strategies that you want your students to use, or they can use the ones suggested in the assignment.

## Day 2

### 1. Warm Up with a Paired Discussion

Have students sit in pairs and share a heart or emoji annotation from their homework and explain their reasoning. Then have them spend a few minutes discussing places where they felt confused and examples of evidence they found that helps them understand Eriko’s sense of belonging and desire to fit in at different points in her young adult life. Circulate to get a sense of students’ understanding of the text and to address any comprehension issues.

### 2. Big Paper: Silent Discussion of “Where I’m From”

Combine the pairs to create groups of four. Explain to students that they will use the [Big Paper](#) silent discussion strategy to consider the following questions, which you should project or write on the board so that students can see them throughout the activity.

- What does this passage reveal about Eriko’s character: her values, how she views others, and how she views the world around her?
- In “Where I’m From,” what role do visible and invisible borders play in determining who is “in” and “out” of a group or community? How do these borders influence Eriko’s sense of who she is and where she belongs in this scene?
- What are possible consequences when we prioritize our own sense of belonging over the well-being of others? How does this passage from “Where I’m From” help you answer this question?

Explain that groups will spend five minutes at each paper. You will tell them when to rotate. The written conversation should start with students’ responses to the two questions, but it can continue wherever students wish to take it. Students should feel free to annotate the text. If someone in the group writes a question, another

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member of the group can answer it. Students can draw lines connecting a comment to a particular question. Make sure students know that they can all write on the paper at the same time.

For each rotation, students should first read the document and the written conversation on that paper. Then they can add new comments and questions. The activity ends when each group has had a chance to interact with each paper/passage.

### 3. Facilitate a Closing Discussion of “Where I’m From”

Conclude the lesson with a class discussion of the following questions:

- What are some ways in which Eriko’s strong desire to belong leads her to exclude others? What are possible consequences when we prioritize our own sense of belonging over the well-being of others?
- Why do you think Eriko sometimes makes decisions that are not aligned with her values? How does she feel in these moments?
- Eriko’s answer to the question “Where are you really from?” changes over the course of the story. Who or what shapes Eriko’s beliefs about who she is and where she belongs?

### 4. Reflect on New Understanding

Have students respond to the following questions in their [journals](#). If time allows, you might ask volunteers to share an idea from their response with the class.

- Why do you think Misa Sugiura wrote this story? What lessons can you take from it that might help to reduce the barriers to belonging at your school?

## Day 1 Homework: Finish Reading “Where I’m From”

Have students read the second half of the short story **“Where I’m From” by Misa Sugiura** before Day 2 of this lesson. This section includes the following short “chapters”: “Chopsticks, Age 14,” “History,” “Chopsticks, Age 12,” “We,” “Fear,” “Hint,” “Bon-Odori,” and “Where Are You Really From?”

As they read, students should jot down the following annotations in the margin:

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- **Place a heart (♥)** by moments in the story that resonate with you, perhaps because of who you are or your experiences in the world.
- **Place a question mark (?)** in places where you feel confused, perhaps because you don't understand a word or the author assumes you know something that you don't know.
- **Place an emoji** (smiling, frowning, angry, etc.) by moments where you have an emotional response.
- **Underline** places where you see Eriko, the narrator, trying to fit in, feeling like she belongs, or feeling like she doesn't belong.