EXPLORING THE CONTEXT

Who am I? Where do I belong? What things have shaped me into the person I am today? How have they done so? In the Context Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging, you will consider many issues related to questions of a sense of self and how we gain the feeling of belonging to a family, group, place or community.

What makes a sense of self? Each of us is an individual with our own talents and tastes and a unique outlook on the world. Some of the factors that define us are outside our control, such as our race and culture and the family we are born into. These factors also determine a secondary level of circumstances, for example the religion, the school and the socio-economic conditions we experience in our early years. However, identity is not just a simple matter of external circumstances, or of genetics: even identical twins, born and raised in the same environment, will differ from each other in their responses to the world and the personalities they develop.

One human quality that we all share, despite our individual identities, is the need to belong. It is a paradox that we long to be free to be who we truly are and yet we yearn to belong to some kind of community. The warmth of a loving family, supportive friends or a group of people with a common cause sustains us and helps us to develop our own sense of self. However, the cost of belonging can be substantial. Families, for example, may have expectations of us that conflict with our own ambitions. Groups may demand unquestioning obedience and conformity. It is painful to be an outsider but there is often a price to pay for belonging. It can be difficult to balance these conflicting impulses, to be both independently ourselves and to belong to a wider community.

The title of this Context gives equal emphasis to identity and belonging, suggesting that each is related to the other. The groups we choose to belong to and the ways we connect with others help to form our own identity. Together, these issues go to the heart of who we are and how we present ourselves to the world.
Below are some associated words and phrases. Start with these. How many other words and phrases can you think of?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Ideology</th>
<th>Identical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Ego</td>
<td>Connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfhood</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td>Loneliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuality</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Rebellion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quotations

Other people’s viewpoints can stimulate and expand your thinking. Use the internet to find relevant quotations. Search for quotes about both identity and belonging. These will help expand your word bank and also the ideas that you associate with the Context. The quotes can also be used as starting points for discussion or writing topics.

Who am I?

What does an identity consist of? If you were to lose your memory, what information would you need to learn about yourself in order to find out who you are?

- In the classroom, view scenes 1–8 of The Bourne Identity (2002). Jason Bourne has lost his identity and, with no memory of his past, sets about trying to uncover who he is. After you have viewed the scenes, break up into small groups and explore the following questions:
  - Where does Jason Bourne start looking for answers to who he is?
  - Does he pay attention to his instincts and feelings or does he only seek answers in facts?
  - Is 'who am I?' a question Jason can answer alone? What role do other people play in telling us who we are?
- How do we define ourselves? How are we defined by others? Create a mind map like the one below detailing a number of important things about yourself. Include both external and internal factors. External factors will include things such as your age, gender, ethnic background and physical appearance. Internal factors (not visible to others) may include your relationships with family and friends, hobbies, interests, beliefs, your feelings about yourself, the choices you make and how you communicate with others. After you have completed the map, consider whether external or internal factors reveal the most about who you are. What does this map not tell people about you?

- Is identity just a collection of roles we play? Can one person have several identities? Keep notes in your Context file of the ways in which you represent yourself differently depending on where you are and who you are with. Consider how this impacts on your interactions with others. Do you think that people know the real you?
Where do I belong?

What is the connection between our sense of belonging to people, places or ideas and our sense of self? Belonging is, in many ways, a paradox. Belonging helps provide a connection to others and a feeling of acceptance. Conforming to the needs of a group can, however, stifle or compromise your sense of individuality. Belonging can have both positive and negative aspects. Consider these paradoxes as you do the following short activities.

- Make a list of all the groups to which you belong, including family, ethnic group, peer groups or sporting groups. Arrange your list in order of those that are most important to you. From this list, consider both the positives and negatives of belonging to these groups.

- Belonging is not always desirable. Write a brief piece about a time when you felt pressure to belong. Did you do or say things you normally would not in order to be accepted? Did your need to belong challenge your sense of who you are?

- Write an open letter to the school community to be published in the principal’s newsletter presenting the argument that school rules are designed to enforce conformity at the expense of individual identity.

- In small groups, discuss a place to which you feel a strong sense of belonging. Describe it and explain what makes it more meaningful than other places in your life. Has this place impacted on the way you see yourself? For example, if you had never been there, do you think you would be a different person? Think carefully about the kind of connection you have to this place.