

INTRODUCTION

Mix it Up is a nationwide campaign to help students identify, question and cross the boundaries that separate them from each other, and to empower youth to create and sustain change in their schools and community. Mix it Up Dialogues were created for middle and high school students by the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project and the Study Circles Resource Center to complement Teaching Tolerance's successful Mix It Up at Lunch Day initiative. The Mix It Up Dialogue Handbook is distributed through the Mix It Up website (www.mixitup.org) and provides instruction for the dialogue process and for each session. Supplemental guides on facilitation and organizing are available through the Study Circles website (www.studyircles.org).

METHODOLOGY

Three separate Mix Dialogue studies were completed during Spring 2004. The analyses were completed in Fall 2004. These studies begin to illustrate how Mix Dialogues are being implemented and what kinds of outcomes are occurring.

- Study 1 consisted of a series of eighteen telephone interviews with teachers and school staff from suburban, rural, and urban middle and high schools around the country.
- Study 2 was a survey of 119 teachers, school administrators and other adults, also in a variety of school settings.
- Study 3 was a post-Mix Dialogue survey of 464 students at two high schools in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

BASIC FINDINGS

In general, respondents were pleased with the materials and enthusiastic about the impact of the Dialogues. The Dialogues created an inward change in awareness and attitudes among individual students. They also laid the groundwork for potential for changes in individual behavior.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS: STUDENTS

An enthusiastic student stated "...this program was very helpful and it opened my eyes a lot...my generation will be the ones to mix it up...so I personally will take it upon myself to try and break boundaries every chance I get."

- Student respondents showed an increased knowledge of social boundaries and social climate in their schools as a result of Mix dialogues.
- They also reported learning more information from other students about social boundaries, and how stereotypes and labels affect their peers.
- Students felt more confident in engaging in actions to promote inclusiveness and reduce their own

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— Student Participant in Mix It Up Dialogues

prejudicial beliefs.

- Some students also reported feeling more confident when talking with someone who they didn't know very well, and while participating actively in classroom discussions.
- Students of color expressed more support for the action steps identified by participants in the last Dialogue session and had greater confidence that those collective steps could be realized.

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS: EDUCATORS

Educators were drawn to the Mix Dialogues as a way to address school climate concerns involving race and ethnicity, social cliques and socio-economic disparity.

- Educators found that the Mix Dialogues could help them meet school curriculum goals or advance the objectives of a diversity club or peer leadership initiative.
- Adult organizers most valued the benefits of face-to-face dialogue, including those “moments of recognition” when students found common ground with others “who normally wouldn't talk to each other.”
- Educators were more likely to report positive changes in individual students rather than in overall school climate.
- At the same time, schools that completed more of the recommended four sessions were also more likely to report decreased conflicts within their schools.
- Collective action projects identified by participants in the last Dialogue session were a low priority for educators.

TYPICAL CHALLENGES

Logistics. A number of organizers faced significant challenges when implementing Mix dialogues. The biggest challenges centered on the difficult logistics involved in scheduling the conversations during the school day.

School support. Respondents also spoke about the need to avoid interfering with teachers' already established curriculum, and a lack of support from school administration. Survey respondents who did not do Mix Dialogues felt less empowered and supported by school administrators than organizers who did establish the Dialogues.

Inconsistent process. Implementation of Mix Dialogues varied widely. Only one-quarter of the respondents reported completing all four of the recommended sessions. Those who completed all four sessions, however, experienced enhanced outcomes.

Inadequate facilitator training. In some cases, implementation issues such as a lack of adequate facilitator training adversely affected outcomes.

Adaptation. Early and middle grades educators had to adapt the Dialogue materials to meet students' developmental levels. In some cases, adaptation also occurred when high school educators' classrooms included students with learning disabilities,

HOW TO MAXIMIZE DIALOGUE SUCCESS

Honor the Mix Dialogue process.

Students, educators and schools can maximize the benefits of the Dialogues by engaging in all four sessions outlined in the Mix Dialogue Handbook. Mix Dialogues work best in high schools. If you are an early or middle grades educator and are interested in boundary-crossing activities for your students, please visit www.mixitup.org/teachers for age-appropriate activity ideas.

Organize properly.

One of the main ways you can garner administrative support for Dialogues is to share this report with the administration. If administrators care about improving school climate, this is a great process to help make that happen. A free guide about how to get students involved is also available: <http://www.studycircles.org/pages/issues/mixitup.html>

Identify the most convenient schedule for your school.

Do your homework to identify the best ways to get Dialogues going in your school. Perhaps your school has “free” periods, or maybe a group of civics teachers are willing to lend class time to support this process of civic engagement. Maybe this process would work best as an extracurricular project bringing together various school clubs. Ask everyone for input, raise awareness about Dialogues and garner administrative support.

Make time for facilitator training.

Whether students or teachers facilitate the Dialogues in your school, be sure to familiarize facilitators with the unique needs of the dialogue process. Free guidebooks are available at <http://www.studycircles.org/pages/issues/mixitup.html>

Commit to action.

The fourth session of the Mix Dialogue process asks participants to identify ways that they can work together to improve the climate of their school community. This assessment shows that these “action outcomes” are of particular importance to students of color. Make the commitment to complete the action projects at the beginning of the Dialogue process, and re-commit verbally or in writing during the final session. Schedule a follow-up meeting with students who make the commitment.

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