

Breaking Down Invisible Walls

What social boundaries exist between different identity groups at my school and how can I cross those boundaries?

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:

<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/activity/breaking-down-invisible-walls/>

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

Students draw social boundary maps showing the divisions that exist in their school and discuss ways to cross them.

DIRECTIONS

1. Explore ways we are similar and different.

Take students into the hall and mark off a line about 12 meters (40 feet) long. Say: *This end is “1,” and this end is “10.”* Encourage students not to talk during this exercise, but to keep their eyes open. Say: *I’m going to name some concepts, items, or titles. I want you to move to an area based on how you rate each one. For instance, if you like something a great deal, move to the “7” or “8” area. If you really love it, move to “10.” If you really dislike something, move to the “1” or “2” area, and so on.* Then, read a list of five to ten items that students will have differing feelings about, but also that are not particularly sensitive or controversial. Create a list that is relevant to your students’ cultures and community. Some ideas could include:

- Ice cream
- Broccoli
- Swimming
- Dogs
- Scary movies

After each item is read, allow students time to move and look at where their peers moved. With each new topic, expect a lot of movement, a lot of looking around, some laughter, and a few comments.

2. Discuss how our differences sometimes divide us and other times do not.

Return to the classroom and ask students: *Was there a time in the hallway when you and one of your friends felt differently about an item I named?* Invite volunteers to share. Explore with students the idea that we don’t have to like all of the same things, or share the same views, to be friends. We can be divided about our taste in ice cream but united by our shared interest in music.

Say: *The city of Jerusalem is considered holy by followers of three of the world’s major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The city’s Jews, Christians, and Muslims live side by side in separate quarters—each in their “own” Jerusalem. They share a heritage and love for the land, but rather than being united by their*

similarities, they have been in conflict for much of history. I'm going to show you three clips from the film *Jerusalem*. The film is about three teenage girls who live in Jerusalem—one Jewish, one Christian, and one Muslim—and their feelings about the city and its religious diversity.

After playing the clips, have students consider how the similarities and differences between Farah, Revital, and Nadia impact the girls' lives and city. Say: *In the film, Christian teenager Nadia describes life in Jerusalem by saying, "The Old City is very small and the four quarters do not communicate a lot... Although we live in the same area, we don't know a lot about each other." It's like there are invisible walls between them. Do invisible walls exist between students at our school? What are some of the things that divide us?* Invite volunteers to share.

3. Create social boundary maps to show the divisions that exist between students and groups of students.

Photocopy or create a map of your school, including the school grounds and cafeteria. Then have students identify and label areas where they believe cliques or self-segregating groups gather. Have students draw lines between these areas, marking the invisible walls. Identify as many such places as possible. Every student will bring his or her personal and unique school experience to this activity. To reflect a diversity of perspectives about the school community, each student should create his or her own social boundary map.

4. Students make observations and collect data about their school community to add to their maps.

Have students spend one day to one week observing the school's hallways, common areas, cafeteria, and classroom seating arrangements, paying attention to how students are grouped. Instruct students to take notes and mark their observations on the map, using a distinct color or symbol to signify their own social patterns and movement in addition to those they observe in others. Explain that students should gather their data around the following research questions:

- What factors do students use to separate themselves into these groups?
- What happens when someone tries to cross one of the invisible walls? Can some students cross the walls more easily than others? Why or why not?
- How do students, especially new or younger students, learn about these boundaries and invisible walls?
- What forces keep the walls in place? What forces, if any, are trying to bring down the walls?

5. Report back and discuss what students observed about themselves and their peers.

Once students have completed their research, have volunteers share their findings. Then lead a discussion around the four research questions listed in Step 4. Compile a list on the board of all the "groups" represented by student maps. Explain that identity groups often include, but are not limited to, shared characteristics based on gender, race and ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, ability, appearance, or economic status. Next, have students list as many similarities between the groups as they can think of. Ask: *Do people pay more attention to differences than to similarities? Why or why not?* Have students make connections by writing a short response to the prompt: *In the film Jerusalem, Muslim teen Farah says, "We think we're so different, but we have more in common than we realize." In what ways does this quote relate to our school?*

6. Students reflect on how they can cross boundaries and look beyond the invisible walls at school.

In the film *Jerusalem*, Christian teen Nadia states, "We live in this small area and I know we all love it. We all love Jerusalem.... You know, I hope one day we can have the courage to meet the people who are living right next to us." Write this quote on the board. Have students work in groups to come up with specific ways they will be courageous and cross social boundaries at school. Ask each student to commit to moving beyond an invisible wall in the coming week. Post student maps in the classroom. Have students revise their maps periodically with arrows showing how they moved into new groups or areas and out of their comfort zones. Revisit this conversation throughout the school year.

MODIFICATION

Ideally, students complete this activity in two 50-minute sessions with time devoted outside of class for students to gather data. Steps 1-3 are to be completed in the first session. Step 4 is completed outside of class. Steps 5-6 are to be completed in the second session. Step 7 can be completed at a future date.

TIP

Obtain copies of your school's floor plan in advance of this activity. Provide these as templates for students to complete their social boundary maps.

INFORMAL ASSESSMENT

Assess student engagement and progress through their participation in class discussion and their response to the writing prompt. Use the social boundary maps and the revisions students make to assess the social emotional goals of this activity.

EXTENDING THE LEARNING

Host a Mix it Up at Lunch Day at your school. A national campaign launched by Teaching Tolerance a decade ago, Mix It Up encourages students to identify, question, and cross social boundaries. Students have identified the cafeteria as the place where divisions are most clearly drawn. So on one day—in October each school year—ask students to move out of their comfort zones and connect with someone new over lunch. It's a simple act with profound implications. Studies have shown that interactions across group lines can help reduce prejudice. When students interact with those who are different from them, biases and misperceptions can fall away.

Visit www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix to get started planning your Mix it Up at Lunch Day. There you will find an array of free online resources designed to help school groups and classroom teachers explore the issue of social boundaries. These activities can be used as ice-breakers during the planning process to get the group geared up for the event, or they can be used as classroom activities by teacher allies seeking to support the Mix It Up effort.

OBJECTIVES

SUBJECTS & DISCIPLINES

Informal Education

- Community service/Leadership/Team-building

Social Studies

- Human behavior
- Human relations
- Sociology

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Identify ways they are similar to and different from their peers
- Explain how similarities and differences can unite and divide people
- Locate the social boundaries that exist in their daily lives and analyze their impact
- Identify ways they will cross social boundaries in their daily lives

TEACHING APPROACH

- Constructivist
- Inquiry-based learning
- Learning-for-use
- Project-based learning

TEACHING METHODS

- Discovery learning
- Discussions
- Experiential learning
- Hands-on learning
- Reflection
- Research
- Self-directed learning

SKILLS SUMMARY

This activity targets the following skills:

21st Century Skills

Learning and Innovation Skills

- Communication and Collaboration

Life and Career Skills

- Social and Cross-Cultural Skills

21st Century Themes

- Civic Literacy
- Global Awareness

Critical Thinking Skills

- Analyzing
- Creating
- Evaluating

CONNECTIONS TO NATIONAL STANDARDS

National Council for Social Studies Curriculum Standards

- Theme 1: Culture
- Theme 3: People, Places, and Environments
- Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity
- Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

National Geography Standards

- Standard 18: How to apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future
- Standard 2: How to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments in a spatial context

PREPARATION

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Materials You Provide

- Paper
- Copies of school floor plan
- Pencils, pens
- Tape

Required Technology

- Internet Access: Optional

Physical Space

- Classroom
- Other

Grouping

- Heterogeneous grouping
- Large-group instruction

Other Notes

This activity connects to Teaching Tolerance's Anti-bias Education Framework:

- Diversity 6: Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people.
- Diversity 9: Students will respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding, and connection.

Resources Provided: Audio & Video

- Jewish Quarter
- Christian and Armenian Quarter
- Muslim Quarter

BACKGROUND & VOCABULARY

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Studies have shown that interactions across group lines can help reduce prejudice. When students interact with those who are different from them, biases and misperceptions can fall away.

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

- Overview of Jerusalem's cultural and religious diversity

RECOMMENDED PRIOR ACTIVITIES

- None

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
identity	<i>noun</i>	how a person defines themselves, or how others define them.
segregate	<i>verb</i>	to separate or set apart.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Websites

- The Southern Poverty Law Center: Teaching Tolerance



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