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Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

“First We Sit In a Circle” Exploring Immigrant Religion through Musical Theatre

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Abstract:

As a school with a large Middle Eastern immigrant population and a small population of army base students, the multiple realities of what it means to be American permeate our halls. In this project, students will be writing an original musical about what it means to be living in the United States today. This project will have a particular focus on the immigrant perspective of children in New York City, incorporating the lived religious experience of these individuals. In the process of crafting our musical, students will be asked to construct their own personal narratives, consider the personal narratives of family members, closely examine their worldviews, and respect and understand the worldviews, cultures, faiths, traditions and experiences of their peers. To help students further examine “American Narratives,” students will listen to and engage with speakers through carefully constructed panel discussions. In the specific lesson below, students will begin to think about their own worldviews as a preamble to examining the question “What does it mean to be American?”

Making Theatre Affirmations:

At the beginning of every rehearsal or lesson, students circle-up onstage to affirm their responsibility within the creative process at P.S. 264.¹ Students repeat out loud with agreed upon gestures the following:

- I have to give respect to get respect
- Have serious fun
- Everybody plays
- I am now at this moment, all that I need to be

¹ Affirmations combine phrases from [Disney Musicals in Our Schools](#) protocol and [Lovewell Institute for the Creative Arts](#) affirmations.

- I have a kind thought for everyone, may we create today in the spirit of cooperation and joy

Activity

Prior to this activity, students and parents of participating students will be asked to attend a meeting that outlines the process of writing the musical, the field experiences, as well as our research component. While the parents are getting the low-down on the nuts and bolts, the students will be working on their Identity Boxes. For homework, they will put 5 tangible things or representations of things that they believe express who they are inside their box. Teacher will have a model of a box to share.

- Students will sit in a circle onstage and will be asked to share their identity boxes.
- Teacher will model an example.
- They will each share their box with the person(s) next to them in the circle.
- Now ask them, if they could only choose one thing to introduce themselves from their box, what would they choose and why?
- Students will share with their partners the one they would choose and why.
- The students will then introduce their partners to everyone in the entire circle using their chosen object/thing.

At the end of the introductions, the teacher will ask the students “is possible to really explain ourselves with just 1 thing or 5 things?” Why or why not? Students will begin to discuss how complex and multifaceted we are.

Image Recognition and Living Museum ²

- Each student will be given an image of the Statue of Liberty. Under the image will be space for the children to write word associations that come to mind when they look at this image.
- The students will be given 3 minutes to write down as many words as possible that pop into their minds when they see this image of the Statue of Liberty.
- After 3 minutes, they will share their word associations with their neighbor in the circle. Students will discuss similarities and differences.
- After partner discussion, students will be asked to choose any word or two they would like to use in a movement activity.
- After their choice has been made, students will create their own statue/tableau with their physical body that they feel embodies this word. Students will stand and create their statue in the circle. The teacher will walk around the circle with her invisible spotlight. When the “spotlight” hits a student, they vocalize the word that inspired their statue while maintaining their frozen statue pose.

² Activity inspired by [Generation Global](#) and their dialogue activities.

- After everyone has shared, we will move into a discussion.

What does it mean to be American? Discussion.

- Teacher will ask the students if the words and statues they shared were all the same? Why were they not the same?
- Introduce worldview. Our ideas and opinions are not the same because we all have different worldviews (different ways of seeing and engaging with the world due to our personal experiences and background. Our worldviews affect our responses to many/most things).
- What is the Statue of Liberty? What does it represent? Where is it?
- Discuss brief history of the Statue of Liberty (being sure to touch on its relevance to the immigrant population)
- Why is this statue such an importance figure for Americans?
- What do you think it means to be American?
- Explain homework to students. They will be asked to fill out a “worldview worksheet” that helps them identify aspects of self that influence their worldviews.

Extension Field Trips and Guest Speakers

- Students will visit Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty
- Students will visit the Cathedral of St. John the Divine
- Students will be visited by a lay leader from the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge
- Students will observe and engage in panel discussions, carefully crafted and selected by Ms. Jones-McAdams once our early stages of identity work is completed
- Students will engage in a field research project focused on finding components of culture, faith, ritual, and tradition through walking around the blocks surrounding our school.

Additional Resources

- [Ellis Island and The Statue of Liberty](#)
- [Cathedral of St. John the Divine](#)
- *The Power of Community-Centered Education* by Michael Umphrey

For information about the Religious Worlds of New York

**summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching
on religious diversity, see: www.religiousworldsnyc.org.**

Name: _____ Grade: _____

**Please write down all of the words that come to your mind when you look at
the image below.**



Image from <http://libertyellisfoundation.org/photo-gallery>
