



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Where do Conversations about Lived Religion Belong in the Classroom?

Elizabeth Markham, Stevens Cooperative School, Jersey City, NJ

Abstract

This project is designed to broaden conversations about equity and encourage discussions of religious diversity within a non-sectarian independent school. It builds upon prior grant work to document and facilitate sharing of religious practices and cultures within our student population. Using the structure of a faculty meeting presentation, this project supports and encourages teachers to consider where conversations about religion (students' religious worlds and the lived religions in our community) fit into the existing academic and social-emotional curriculum.

In addition to outlining a presentation/workshop for faculty, the project includes sample lessons for a range of grade levels, to provide my colleagues with ideas for age-appropriate ways to embrace these conversations.

Curricular Connections and Community Context

Stevens Cooperative School is a PreK-8 non-sectarian independent school with campuses in Jersey City, NJ and Hoboken, NJ. We have many international families, and many different ethnic and religious groups represented in our population. As a progressive school, there is a great deal of flexibility in our curriculum to meet the interests of our students and create intentional units that address issues of social justice and diversity. There is a strong focus on character development and community building is built into each classroom's schedule weekly.

The ongoing equity work at Stevens Cooperative School includes four equity sub-committees (admissions, faculty recruitment & retention, curriculum, and school climate). There is ongoing work to include diverse voices in our literature selections, and to provide multiple perspectives in our social studies curriculum.

In addition, I was part of creating a grant-funded website was created in 2016-17 addressing the question, *How can we cultivate a school culture where students and families feel their traditions are not only acknowledged but also open for discussion and inquiry?* Our work channels students' natural curiosity into opportunities to teach them to respond respectfully to holiday traditions, cultural dietary restrictions, religious clothing, and other visible & invisible issues of cultural and religious diversity.

The pedagogic goal of this presentation is to empower teachers to feel confident engaging in conversations about the religious lives of their students, and to fold in conversations about religious diversity where it can enrich the current curriculum. This presentation is designed to happen within 50 minutes during a typical faculty meeting.

The Workshop for Faculty

Introduction to constitutionally-sound education about religions (10 minutes)

The first amendment, Abington School District v. Schempp

“No establishment” and neutrality

“Free exercise” and voluntary participation

A review of definitions, including "lived religion" (10 minutes)

Examples of ways this is already happening

Review of the social and ethical impact comparative religion

Post-it response prompt 1:

“Why should we make the time to let our students discuss lived religion?”

Sample answers:

- Foster compassion, tolerance, and appreciation for different customs and practices
- Develop language for respectful curiosity
- Prepare to engage with our neighbors and our communities
- Prepare to be global citizens
- Empower our minority students
- Explore different ways to think about cultures and religion

Post-it response prompt 2:

“What are some examples of how lived religion relates to our curriculum and classroom conversations? Where is it already coming up?”

What does "lived religion" look like in the Stevens community?

- Jewish families have different ways to honor the Saturday sabbath.
- Muslim students differ in their practice with daily prayers and may or may not follow dietary restrictions.
- Christian students find differences in their family practices and church attendance.
- Within a group of Hindu students, there is wide variation in which holidays are celebrated, by what name, and on what date.
- Atheist, agnostic, or secular families often maintain "cultural" religion, including celebrating religious holidays or eating certain foods.

Age appropriate conversations about religious diversity (5 minutes)

Adapted from research on the stages of children's development of racial identity

- PreK/K - Aware of holidays celebrated by their students, teachers ask guiding questions during morning meeting, snack, and other community building times such as, “Is anyone celebrating anything this week?”
- 1st/2nd - Teachers select read-alouds about holidays that are celebrated within the classroom or community, and discuss places of worship as they come up in community studies and neighborhood explorations.
- 3rd/4th - Teachers intentionally begin to highlight diverse beliefs into the social studies curriculum, and discuss the role of religion in societal changes.
- 5th/6th - Students study the role of religion in history, highlighting the internal diversity where possible. Religious diversity is intentionally included and explicitly discussed in literature. In addition, teachers encourage students to reflect on their own beliefs and values (secular or religious).
- 7th/8th - Discussions of faith are embedded in humanities. Modern and historical inter-religious diversity is highlighted. Students begin to engage in and study interfaith dialogue, locally and globally.

Samples of lessons fitting into current curriculum maps (10 minutes)

Sample lessons for each grade level were created with the permission of the grade-level teams and based on adaptations of the 2016-17 curriculum. The lessons are outlined below.

- 1st grade science
- 3rd/4th grade writers workshop
- 7th grade humanities

Next steps (10 minutes)

Guiding questions given for teachers to discuss in divisional teams To be documented and used for future planning

- How can we welcome students to share about the religious and cultural practices happening at home? How can we model respectful curiosity with our students? What do we need to do to support students during discussions of lived religion and/or faith?
- Where can we highlight inter-group religious diversity to teach tolerance, understanding, and democratic citizenship?
- How can we introduce the "lived religion" lens to the study of religion when it occurs in the curriculum, both in literature and history?
- What professional development is needed for teachers to feel comfortable responding to questions and facilitating dialogue about religious life?
- What resources do families want to help them initiate and model conversations about lived religion at home?

Closing (5 minutes)

Share out of big ideas, inspirations, or concerns/wonderings

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.

Appendix 1: Suggested First Grade Unit

Current unit:

Students study the cycle of the moon over the course of a month. This is based on the Next Generation Science Standards unit: *Students can use observations of the sun, moon, and stars to describe patterns that can be predicted.*

Every student has a turn to take the class “moon journal” home and respond in writing and drawing about the way the moon looks during their watch. Through observation, students identify the cycles of the moon.

This science unit currently occurs in November/December, and includes discussions about the seasons. Discussions about seasonal holidays often occur, depending on what the children bring up during the unit.

Extension:

In addition to the moon journal, families can be invited to share if the moon plays a role in any of their holidays, beliefs, or traditions. This is also a place to highlight indigenous cultures or discuss non-Gregorian calendars, using age-appropriate language and based on the makeup of the class.

In your family, religion, or culture, are there any special activities or stories that have to do with the moon?
--

Honoring the spirit of the first amendment “free exercise” clause, acceptable responses might be:

- “No”
- Secular traditions - wishing on a full moon, bad spirits (“it must be a full moon”)
- Lunar new year traditions, including but not exclusive to Chinese New Year
- Lunar calendar holidays in the Abrahamic traditions (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, Easter, etc.)
- Horoscope associations with the moon in some secular and Hindu faiths
- Native American and other types of lunar calendars
- Folktales, myths, and other stories about the personified moon (“the man in the moon”)

As students bring up holidays or traditions, read-alouds can validate and expand on student’s traditions. Suggestions for first grade books that explore moon traditions from a secular/academic perspective are:

- *Thirteen Moons on Turtle’s Back* by Joseph Bruach is a beautiful book featuring poetry and paintings representing diverse Native American stories about the moon
- *A Full Moon is Rising* by Marilyn Singer uses poetry to explore full moon celebrations and customs from India, Israel, Morocco, China, Australia, and many more places.
- *Rashad’s Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr* by Lisa Bullard & *The Night of the Moon : a Muslim holiday story* by Hena Khan are both good short introductions to the month-long cycle of Ramadan as it relates to the moon.
- *Chelsea’s Chinese New Year* by Lisa Bullard & *This Next New Year* by Janet S. Wong discuss celebrations of Lunar New Year from multiple Asian traditions.

Appendix 2: Suggested Third/Fourth Grade Unit

Current unit:

At Stevens Cooperative School, third and fourth grades are together in a vertical classroom. The writers' workshop model is used. In September, personal narratives are written an introductory writing unit. Students write primarily wrote about experiences from their summer, and take their writing through the full writing process.

Adaptation:

The third/fourth grade personal narrative unit can become exploration of identity through tradition. The prompt should allows for a wide range of responses. Many students may think of religious holidays, but others may think of secular holidays such as July 4th or Halloween, or personal special days such as birthdays.

“What is a celebration or yearly tradition that your family does? Of all the times you’ve celebrated this special event, do you have a favorite?”

To further support the students and continue the inclusion of diverse voices in the classroom, mentor texts can be thoughtfully chosen. By choosing mentor texts that feature religious and secular traditions, students can feel comfortable sharing about traditions that might otherwise feel intimate or taboo. For example, *The Best Eid Ever* by Asma Mobin-Uddin uses non-English words within an English story, especially for names of family members and holiday-specific vocabulary. *Mei Mei's Lucky Birthday Noodles* by Shan Shan Chen is a good example of voice and step-by-step detailed descriptions of traditions. *Chicken Sunday* by Patricia Polacco is a wonderful example of descriptive writing for character development.

Appendix 3: Suggested Seventh Grade Unit

Curriculum:

The year-long theme of seventh grade humanities is World Religions. Students use a variety of resources, including *World Religions* by John Bowker.

Extension of the Christianity unit:

In addition learning about the history and doctrine of Christianity from their textbooks and other assigned readings, students will study churches in the community and will transition from discussing “who is Christian” to “what are the Christianities”. As a historic majority religion in the United States, most students have a basic understanding there are many types of Christianity. By placing this community exploration in the Christianity unit, it can help students maintain this perspective about internal diversity as they learn about other, possibly less familiar, religions.

In Jersey City, there is a huge variety of Christian churches, many of which maintain English-language websites. This allows students to explore the diversity of faiths in their neighborhood without needing chaperones for multiple small group trips. Instead, students can work in teams to study some of the following churches: Evangelical Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Contemporary Christian, Episcopal, Seventh Day Adventist, Roman Catholic Church, United Reformed, Baptist Church, and Jehovah's Witness.

Each group will be responsible for responding in writing to the following questions:

What is the mission statement of this church?	
How often does the church have religious services? When?	
What does this church do? What are its services for its church community? Does this church serve any role in the community that is not “religious”?	
What do you notice about the language used on this website?	
Who or what are in the photographs used?	
Do the images or photographs seem “religious”?	
Do you learn anything more by exploring with Google Street View or Google Earth to see the outside of the building or the neighborhood?	

Following this research, a group discussion is key to help students process and understand their findings. Students should be reminded to be thoughtful about their word choice and any stereotypes or bias that they may be bringing to the conversation. Some guiding questions can be:

What did you expect to be the same about all these churches? Was it?
How do these churches serve their members? What about for the broader community?
What did this remind you about from our reading on Christianity? Did anything seem to be missing?
Did anything seem unexpected based on our reading about Christianity?
Do you have questions for the church you researched? For the people who attend, or for the people who work there?

By beginning these conversations in the classroom, it is a safe space for students to question, learn, and challenge their own understandings. As a culminating activity, students can contact faith or lay leaders from these communities, or can apply these same skills to some of the other places of worship in Jersey City, including but not exclusive to: a reform Judaism temple, an orthodox Judaism temple, Hindu mandirs, a Sikh Gurdwara, and Muslim mosques.