

TANENBAUM

Religions in My Neighborhood

Teaching Curiosity
and Respect about
Religious Differences

Including: The Seven Principles for Inclusive Education



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in My

Neighborhood

Teaching Curiosity and Respect about
Religious Differences



Imagine...a more peaceful world that respects difference.
We are committed to making that vision a reality.

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Chapter II (Unit 1): A Garden of Questions and Answers about Beliefs

BIG IDEAS FOR II (1)

Beliefs respond to some of our questions about the “big” issues of life, such as: *How was life created? Where did we come from? What is the meaning of life? What are our responsibilities to each other and to the world around us?*

Responses to these questions may develop out of curiosity about the world around us, scientific investigation or what we learn about them from our families, friends, religious teachers, or from our various experiences.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR II (1)

- What are some of the “Big Questions” that have led to our various beliefs?
- What are some of the different beliefs that different people have about some of the “Big Questions”?

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR II (1)

- English Language Arts: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 11
- Social Studies: 1, 3, 4, 5

LESSON II (1): A GARDEN OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT BELIEFS

Rationale: Why teach this lesson?

A big part of affirming children's diverse experiences and teaching children to be empathetic of one another's differences involves their understanding that people may have many different beliefs. Some beliefs are rooted in religious frameworks and some are not. This lesson helps students recognize the wide range of beliefs that they may notice among other children and in their communities. This wide range of beliefs contributes to the rich diversity of society. As such, it encourages critical inquiry and curiosity.

By using the metaphor of a garden, students can take note of the human experience of questioning and appreciate how some questions are answered through religious understandings, some are answered through scientific understandings and some are answered with both religious and scientific perspectives. A garden grows from many seeds into many species of plants and vegetables and uses many different nutrients in the soil. Thus, this is a powerful metaphor to help cultivate the garden of ideas in your learning community. Using this garden metaphor, students can picture this wide range of perspectives living in a big metaphorical garden of human experience with lots from which to choose. Moreover, they can learn that some questions go unanswered.

Think ahead:

The students in your learning community may bring a wide range of perspectives to the act of questioning including scientific, religious, philosophical and more. This activity takes note of questioning and also of a range of diverse religious experiences. It does not cover every experience. One book or one lesson is never enough. This lesson can be used in connection with other lessons in this book.

It will be essential for the educator to affirm children who bring perspectives that may be unfamiliar to children from mainstream society or that may be unique within your learning community. When in doubt, it is useful to follow the Rules of Respect that you set up in Chapter One to serve as a guide. Consider the metaphor of a garden with many seeds, many species of plants and vegetables and many different nutrients in the soil as a way to help cultivate the garden of ideas in your learning community.

Objectives for this lesson – Students will:

- Think metaphorically with the garden as a metaphor for human diversity.
- Develop a “Community Garden Mural” with images of plants and written questions.
- Collectively brainstorm a list of Big Questions about life.
- Consider how to seek answers to Big Questions.
- Ponder whether or not all questions can be answered.
- Notice that some people bring religious perspectives to answering questions.
- Notice that some people bring scientific perspective to answering questions.
- Notice that some people bring both scientific and religious perspectives to their answers.
- Practice implementing your learning community’s Rules of Respect.

Materials needed:

- Books:
 - *Grandma’s Garden* by Mercer Mayer (2001).
 - *Faith* by Maya Ajmera, Magda Nakassis, & Cynthia Pon (2009).
 - *The Three Questions* by Jon J. Muth (2002).
- Chart paper and markers
- Roll of long craft paper
- Scissors and coloring materials such as markers, crayons or oil pastels

Time needed:

5–6 class meetings, 45 minutes each

Setting the lesson:

Welcome students into the new topic of “A garden of questions and answers about beliefs.” Ask students what they already know about gardens. Has anybody ever helped plant a garden? Harvest a garden? If yes, when and where? Has anybody ever visited a public garden, places like parks? What are some of the many different purposes of gardens? What are some of the many different plants that can be found in gardens?

Procedure for the lesson:

Day 1 & 2:

Read the book, *Grandma's Garden* by Mercer Mayer. Discuss the many different species of plants that go into Grandma's garden! Take note of the wide variety of vegetation that can grow in harmony and share the nutrients of Grandma's garden. This will serve as the foundation of the metaphor throughout the lesson.

After reading and discussing the story, lead an art activity to make a garden mural on long craft paper. Each student makes one item for the garden on a piece of construction paper by drawing, coloring and cutting out a vegetable, plant or flower. You may want to have a general description of the vegetables, plants or flowers that you are giving to the students. After students make their construction paper vegetable, plant or flower, they describe their plant, vegetable or flower to the class and then they bring it to the large Community Garden Mural to attach it to the "garden" with glue, staples or push-pins.

Lead the class in a discussion about the range of diversity in the garden. Notice that all the plants share the soil, sun and the water, but each has something different to offer including different colors, shapes, smells, sizes.

Have fun with the students, completing the garden with details such as sun, rain, soil, insects, various textures for dirt, etc.

Day 3:

Study the Community Garden Mural. Lead a discussion with questions and thoughts such as: How can a garden be like the many different questions in our learning community? If each plant, each vegetable and each flower had a question to ask, what would the garden look like and sound like?

Read aloud the book *The Three Questions* by Jon J. Muth. Scholastic Inc. (2002).

Discuss the book and how Nikolai asks, "When is the best time to do things? Who is the most important one? What is the right thing to do?"⁴⁶

We all bring Big Questions to the world, but we answer them in different ways. Use chart paper to brainstorm some "really big questions" about life. Note the questions on chart paper. Start with Nikolai's questions:

- When is the best time to do things?
- Who is the most important one?
- What is the right thing to do?

⁴⁶ This material is reproduced in this curriculum with permission from Scholastic Inc.

Here are some other Big Questions that may arise:

- How did life begin?
- How are people different from other mammals?
- Why does anything exist?
- Where was I before I was born?
- What happens after people die?
- What am I supposed to do while I am alive?
- How can I be a good person?
- Why do bad things happen?

Also provide an anonymous message box for questions that students want to address but prefer to do so anonymously. For pre-writers, provide an opportunity to talk privately with educators about a range of issues and where they can then raise questions privately.

Day 4:

Revisit the list of questions from the previous class meeting. Invite students to think of one Big Question they would like to know more about. It can be from the chart paper list or it can be a new question.

Give each student a paper with a cartoon word bubble on it, so they can write their questions.

Each student writes their question in the word bubble (or dictates it to an adult) and cuts out the word bubble. Each student adds the word bubble to the garden mural.

Study the Community Garden Mural with the questions on it. Lead a discussion about the community garden of plants and questions. Think about the many factors that help plants grow: sun, water, atmosphere, insects and, for some plants, shade. Think about the many factors that help people answer questions.

Day 5:

Read aloud the book *Faith* by Maya Ajmera, Magda Nakassis, & Cynthia Pon (2009). Make a chart paper list of all the various religions represented in the book.

In a review of the book *Faith* for Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier, Inc. (2009), Margaret R. Tassia of Millersville University, Pennsylvania wrote:

This book explores through full-color photographs the many ways in which the world celebrates and practices religious belief, highlighting the common threads—praying and meditating, chants and songs, holy books, cleansing, holy places, holidays and festivals, important events, dress, food and drink and helping others. Spare text accompanies the pictures of children and identifies the specific religion and practices. Concluding notes for adults to share with youngsters provide more information on each one. The excellent photographs are clear and colorful and invite careful observation. A world map showing

the various homes of the children depicted is included. As stated in the book, “Faith highlights the common threads that bring people together in reverence and joy.”

Lead a discussion about the book *Faith* while studying the community garden of plants and questions.

Closure for the lesson:

Think again about the many factors that help plants grow: sun, water, atmosphere and insects, shade (for some plants), etc. Think about the many factors that help people answer questions. Notice that there may be some questions that are answered by religions, some by science, some by both religion and science and some that go unanswered.

Assessment for the lesson:

- Can students explain that our questions and answers are like a growing garden—that many different plants grow from different seeds and yet they can share the same soil, nutrients and atmosphere?
- Did students reveal self-knowledge about their own questions—that they do have Big Questions of their own?
- Can students apply basic skills of listening attentively, questioning respectfully, and participating thoughtfully?
- Do students see in perspective different points of view on where different questions come from and how religious beliefs may respond to some of these questions?

Chapter II (1) Extensions

1. Have students choose 1 or 2 questions that they did not write from the garden. Ask them to keep a journal and write their answers to the question(s) over the course of one school week (Monday-Friday). Invite those who would like to share the questions they chose and their answers and how they came up with the answer.
2. Have students research the geographical origin of a flower or vegetable that is in the garden.