

TANENBAUM

Religions in My Neighborhood

Teaching Curiosity
and Respect about
Religious Differences

Including: The Seven Principles for Inclusive Education



Religions 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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Religions in My Neighborhood

Teaching Curiosity and Respect about Religious Differences

AN OPEN LETTER TO FACILITATORS, TEACHERS, PARENTS AND OTHERS WHO USE THIS BOOK:

Religions in My Neighborhood: Teaching Curiosity and Respect about Religious Differences is designed to help children in learning communities (such as schools, after-school programs, weekend or vacation programs) understand the importance of social and cultural differences among the members of their living and learning communities. In particular, it enables them to feel comfortable noticing and talking about religious differences and to see religious differences as a normal, understandable and interesting part of other social and cultural differences they may have noticed – and wondered about.

Children notice differences among other children in their learning communities who may come from different faith traditions. They observe that the rituals or beliefs held by people they meet in everyday life are not always the same as the ones in their homes. And they see how the architecture of worship differs even in some of their neighborhoods and in the illustrations they see in picture books, on TV or in film and video. *Religions in My Neighborhood* helps children understand the world in which they live.

Religions in My Neighborhood can be used to supplement pre-existing curricula – or stand on its own for short-term or after-school programs. It is geared toward children in grades K–4, ages 5–9, although the units can be readily adapted for mixed age groups or older students. Its primary purpose is to help and inspire teachers/facilitators and their students to explore religious and cultural differences, and to develop respect for the diversity they encounter in their extended families, neighborhoods and learning communities.

To get started, teachers and facilitators may want to review the curriculum's useful introductory material. The section titled *Overview of Major World Religions* provides background information on the world's major belief systems and includes helpful citations for further inquiry. The overall *Six Goals for Student Learning Outcomes*, developed from Tanenbaum's *Six Behavioral Outcomes for Students*, guide the instructional units in each chapter. The section on *Meeting National Standards* shows teachers and facilitators

how *Religions in My Neighborhood* can be a useful tool for meeting national standards in Social Studies and English Language Arts. Finally, Tanenbaum's *Seven Principles for Inclusive Education* spell out the instructional, pedagogical approach taken in all the units throughout this book, suggesting important dimensions of inclusive education for teachers and facilitators to keep in mind.

The instructional units in each chapter are supplemented by further readings and other teacher/facilitator resources. For example, each chapter and every unit opens with explicit instructional objectives and key questions for use by instructors. Each chapter references the specific *Six Goals for Student Learning Outcomes* that have shaped that chapter. To aid educators in adapting curricular units to the standards that guide many school curricula, each unit is also preceded by the specific National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) standards that it addresses. There are also optional “extensions” for teachers and facilitators who want to develop additional curricular materials on their own, beyond the curricular units in any given chapter.

Teachers and facilitators will recognize that we have adapted the principles of “backward design” from Wiggins and McTighe (2005),¹ which involve working backwards from clear goals or student outcomes, to the specific student activities that will foster those goals and outcomes. Following the Wiggins and McTighe method, we clarify our “Big Ideas” and our “Essential Questions” for each chapter and for each instructional unit within each chapter, and we incorporate as curricular building blocks the six major facets of understanding (explanation, interpretation, application, perspective, empathy and self-knowledge) that anchor Wiggins and McTighe. These learning blocks are as important to a five-year-old as they are to a ten-year-old, and for that reason, we have developed this curriculum with a five-year age/grade range in mind.

We acknowledge how daunting and challenging it is to teach *about* religious differences, especially when many people think (wrongly) that it is not legal or appropriate to do so. How often do we hear that teachers/facilitators must not teach “about” religion, or that by teaching “about” religion, schools and programs are appropriating a role better left to the family? We respond to this challenge by raising a related challenge – namely, that the nearly 50 million children in today's U.S. schools (2010)² are the most diverse in our national history. Their various religious beliefs, faith traditions and practices form an important part of that diversity – sometimes visible, sometimes not. In many cases, and for many children, religion and faith constitute the most immediate and important dimension of their personal or family identity.

The living and learning communities inhabited by our children – in their schools, after-school programs, neighborhoods, and extended families, and on TV or in other media – present them with differences of religious belief, ritual, tradition and form of worship on a daily basis. These differences include children whose families may be secular, non-observant, and/or non-religious, with beliefs that are often puzzling to children from more religious or observant backgrounds.

Our challenge is this: If we avoid noticing and talking about differences based on religion, including differences based on secular and non-religious family beliefs, while focusing our attention on differences

1 Wiggins, G., & J. McTighe, *Understanding by Design, expanded 2nd edition*, The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (2005).

2 National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372> (2010)

based on race, ethnicity, class and gender, we are by our very silence and omission suggesting one of two things. We imply that religion is not worthy of inquiry and attention, or that it is somehow secret or frightening. In either case, this silence or omission is insulting to children for whom religion is important, and it perpetuates stereotypes based on misinformation, bias and ignorance.

The avoidance of these discussions in schools and after-school programs is sometimes based on the fear, in publicly-funded programs, of violating the “separation of church and state.” It also occurs due to lack of teacher preparedness, or worry that children or their parents will object to any discussion “about” religion in school, based on a concern that it could involve favoring specific religious beliefs.

We agree that it is important that teachers and facilitators have clearly established and appropriate objectives for teaching *about* religious differences and that the instructional activities meet those goals. *Religions in My Neighborhood: Teaching Curiosity and Respect about Religious Differences* provides the goals, key questions, frameworks and instructional activities that will help novice as well as experienced teachers facilitate discussions about religious differences – without fear *and* without endorsing any specific religious perspective.

It is helpful to know that the National Council for the Social Studies makes clear that “knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity.”³ According to the American Academy of Religion, “illiteracy regarding religion 1) is widespread, 2) fuels prejudice and antagonism, and 3) can be diminished by teaching about religion in public schools using a non-devotional, academic perspective.”⁴ Increasingly, there are models of school and after-school curricula that teach *about* religion so that students can learn how to be respectful and knowledgeable about the religious differences presented by other students, their families, and, as they grow older, the religious differences they will experience in their neighborhoods and workplaces.

To meet the challenge of teacher preparedness, we include resources for teachers and facilitators who are interested in learning “the how” of teaching *about* religions and religious differences, while also respectfully negotiating differences in student beliefs and faith traditions. These resources appear at the end of this open letter.

Religions in My Neighborhood: Teaching Curiosity and Respect about Religious Differences is the result of a collaborative project of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding. This curriculum is a product of Tanenbaum’s *Education* Program and is co-authored by Patty Bode, Maurianne Adams and Rita Hardiman. Tanenbaum is a secular, non-sectarian, not-for-profit organization that combats religious prejudice and builds respect for religious diversity by training professionals in schools, workplaces and healthcare facilities and by supporting the work of religious peacemakers in areas of armed conflict. Our programs help to prevent and reduce hatred and religious ignorance. Tanenbaum’s *Education* program is based on the principle that multicultural education should no longer stop at the threshold of religion. In its intensive educator training programs, workshops and curricula, Tanenbaum works to ensure that today’s teachers

3 Study about religion in the social studies curriculum, National Council for Social Studies, <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/religion/> (1998).

4 AAR Religion in the Schools Task Force, *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*, American Academy of Religion, http://www.aarweb.org/Publications/Online_Publications/Curriculum_Guidelines/AARK-12Curriculum_Guidelines.pdf (2010).

and facilitators develop the skills to help children recognize, respect and negotiate religious differences. When our children become adults, Tanenbaum's program and its materials will have prepared them to engage the full range of the world's diversity, including religious diversity.

Tanenbaum's *Education* staff is always available to hear any questions, ideas, concerns and stories you may have, as users of this book, about these issues. We encourage you to contact us for any support that you may need in implementing this curriculum. You may always reach us by email at education@tanenbaum.org or by phone at 212.967.7707.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK:

- Remember that teaching about religion and religious understanding does not – and must not – include teaching or recommending any specific religion or religious beliefs. It is important that the teacher or facilitator adopt a pedagogy stance aligned with *The Seven Principles* (pages 33–42) that helps children notice and discuss religious differences, without communicating the facilitator's personal religious beliefs.
- The five chapters in this curriculum follow an intended sequence of topics.
 - Chapter 1 starts with building a learning community that includes all of the children and acknowledges their families, their homes and neighborhood communities, and their understanding of differences. The units in Chapter 1 focus on their identity within the learning community, and their responsibilities toward each other as they participate in their learning community.
 - Chapter 2 broadens out to ask about different life-questions, different beliefs that address those questions, and the stories that different religions tell to convey their beliefs.
 - Chapter 3 looks at some of the commonalities among different religions, such as the emphasis on caring for each other, for the environment, and for one's community.
 - Chapter 4 draws attention to different rituals and traditions as they involve holidays focused on the seasons, as they involve prayer and meditation, and as they involve renewal, resources and light.
 - Chapter 5 brings attention back to the learning community itself, as the children reflect upon learning “about” religious differences and what they have learned “from” religious differences.
- Teachers and facilitators may want to follow the sequence laid out in this book, or they may want to build a different curricular sequence from the units in each of the chapters. For example, units may be built around seasonal change and associated holidays, such as the different beliefs and rituals associated with Thanksgiving and the harvest, with the religious or secular holidays that take place in the winter, and the religious and secular activities of renewal associated with spring. However, whatever curricular sequence that teachers and facilitators decide to follow, we stress the importance of dedicating time up front, in the beginning, to building an interactive and participatory learning community.

- We have developed only one activity for each unit, with each chapter having several units (18 units in total). Each activity is followed by “extensions” which provide additional ideas and resources to help teachers and facilitators develop their own units.
- The *Six Goals for Student Learning Outcomes* and the *Seven Principles for Inclusive Education* provide criteria for the creation of additional units, or for the adaptation of materials in this curriculum to a range of ages, grade levels, or educational settings and contexts.
- Several of the citations that follow are especially useful for teachers and facilitators who may want further guidance for teaching about religion in public schools. The materials from Tanenbaum and The First Amendment Center are especially helpful in this regard.

RESOURCES:

Tanenbaum:

Education Program, <https://www.tanenbaum.org/programs/education>

The Golden Rule, <https://www.tanenbaum.org/resources/golden-rule>

Shared Visions, <https://www.tanenbaum.org/resources/shared-visions> (Excerpts from holy texts showing the common threads weaving between different faith communities)

Books:

Salili, F. & R. Hoosain (Eds.), *Religion in Multicultural Education* (2006).

Haynes, C.C., S. Chaltain, J.E. Ferguson, Jr., D.L. Hudson, Jr., & O. Thomas, *The First Amendment in Schools: A Guide from the First Amendment Center* (2003).

Diamond, M.R., *Encountering Faith in the Classroom: Turning Difficult Discussions into Constructive Engagement* (2008).

Websites:

American Academy of Religion,
http://www.aarweb.org/Public_Affairs/Religion_in_the_Schools/default.asp

Anti-Defamation League, http://www.adl.org/main_Education/default.htm

The First Amendment Center, <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org>
(Visit section on Lesson Plans)

Facing History and Ourselves, <http://www.facinghistory.org>

The Pluralism Project, <http://www.pluralism.org/resources>

Teaching Tolerance, <http://www.tolerance.org>

We consider it a particular opportunity to share this curriculum and our collaboration with you. This curriculum provides you with the resources to embark on preparing your students as global citizens. We are proud to present it to you.

Tanenbaum

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CHAPTER II

Big Questions with Many Answers

GOALS FOR STUDENT LEARNING IN CHAPTER II: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6

BIG IDEAS FOR CHAPTER II

- There are many Big Questions and lots of ways of trying to answer them.
- Our beliefs sometimes provide answers to our Big Questions.
- Our beliefs sometimes grow out of what we learn from our families, from our experiences, and how we understand our experiences.
- Our beliefs may also develop out of spiritual curiosity, scientific investigation or other experiences.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER II

- What are some of our Big Questions?
- What is a belief?

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.