

“CHILDREN OF LONELINESS”: UNDERSTANDING THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Lesson plan for family education

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Immigration and Generations: Anzia Yezierska’s Children of Loneliness,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/apr07/>.

This lesson aims to help children and parents connect the Jewish immigrant experience to that of contemporary immigrants and to their personal family stories. It begins with a story about an American-born child of religious Russian-Jewish parents in the early 20th century, returning home from college to her family’s apartment on the Lower East Side of New York City and suddenly unable to bridge the distance between herself and her parents. Next, we will pretend to be new immigrant families for a simulation exercise. Finally, we will discuss what we have learned from the story and the simulation about what it is like to be an immigrant.

Prepare in Advance:

Purchase or borrow the book, *How I Found America: The Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York: Persea Books, 1991). Copy pages 178-183 or more from the story “Children of Loneliness.” Solicit volunteers to act out this first part of the story. (We suggest acting out Part I and the first four paragraphs of Part II, pp. 178-183. You can go further if you like.) Preferably sometime before the day of the activity, have your volunteer performers prepare their scene(s).

Note: If you cannot find a copy of *How I Found America*, you can also find the story in *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, ed. Jules Chametzky et al (New York: Norton, 2001), pp. 233-244. However, the page numbers referred to throughout the lesson are from *How I Found America*.

The simulation activity involves stations that represent various officials immigrants would have to interact with. You will need to solicit volunteers to staff these stations (teenagers would be ideal) for the simulation. To prepare for the simulation, set up booths to represent the following stations: bank, immigration or customs office, school office, doctor's office, landlord's office, job bureau, and grocery store. Booths could be as simple as a table or desk with a person behind it and a sign, or as complex as you choose, with pictures and appropriate objects for each type of location helping to bring the simulation to life.

Prepare signature card for each group with the name of each booth on it and a space for the booth leader to sign it. A sample version is included at the end of this lesson plan.

At the program:

1. Separate the parents from the children for the beginning of the session.

A) With the children and the volunteers who will be staffing booths later in the program, agree on an invented "play" language to use for this activity. It could be gibberish, pig Latin, or Ubbi Dubbi. See the following web pages for background on how to speak these languages:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gibberish_%28language_game%29

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubbi_Dubbi

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pig_Latin

Choose the language that will be easiest for everyone, since the activity itself may be challenging. Practice your chosen language with the children and volunteer staffers enough for everyone to feel comfortable both speaking and understanding it.

B) With the parents (except those staffing booths or performing), invite them to share stories of their families' immigrant experiences, to prime them for the next activity. Also ask them if they know any contemporary immigrants, or if they volunteer or work for any immigrant organizations. Ask them to share stories of what it is like to be a new immigrant and what they know about the experiences of immigrants' children.

C) Those who will be acting out the story can practice their skit during this time.

2. Bring the full group together and have the performers act out the first part of Anzia Yeziarska's story "Children of Loneliness" (Part I and the first four paragraphs of Part II pp. 178-183 or further as you have chosen.)

3. Invite responses from the group to the story or the play. You may want to ask the following trigger questions:

- Why does Rachel feel so embarrassed by her parents?
- What caused her to see them in this light?
- Is her response to them understandable? Have you ever felt this way about your parents?
- What should her parents do in response to her criticism? Have you ever been in a position similar to this?
- Do you feel sympathetic to Rachel? To her father? To her mother?
- What should happen when children want to be different from their parents?
- How do you imagine that America's attitude toward immigrants might have influenced Rachel's view of her parents?

4. Give everyone a short break (and a snack, if your program includes

food). You may use this time to set up the room for the immigration simulation activity. Be sure to prep all the booth leaders on their tasks, as enumerated below. **Booth leaders need to speak in the silly language you have chosen consistently throughout the simulation.**

5. Bring the group back together for the simulation. Tell everyone who is staffing a booth to head over to their booth. Then help the participants to break up into groups as family units. (Those with only one kid or one adult may wish to partner with another family.) Give each group a scorecard to be signed at each booth. Tell them they can circulate through the booths in whatever order they choose. Children will need to serve as translators for their parents throughout the program, but tell them that children are allowed to teach their parents the silly language rules if they want to, or not.

6. Concluding Discussion: When the simulation is finished (either everyone has all the signatures, or they are getting bored with the activity), gather everyone together to process the experience. Ask the parents how it felt to not understand the language people were speaking. Ask the children what it was like to serve as translators. What did they think about how immigrants were treated? Ask the booth officials what it was like to be in a position of authority where they were set up to act superior and with insensitivity towards the immigrants.

Then ask what people found frustrating about the activity. Ask how this activity might be similar to the experiences of immigrants to America. Did their family members have similar experiences? In what ways do immigrants today face similar experiences to those faced by the Ravinsky family in the story? How do children and parents respond similarly or differently to the pressures of immigration? What are some of the contributions immigrants make to our country?

A note to Booth officials: This simulation is meant to educate people and to be fun. You are encouraged to enjoy acting out your role, but also to be sensitive to the families playing their roles. Be aware if some of the children get too frustrated; it may feel too real to them. Try to keep it light and funny, not mean and serious. Try to give respect to the children's roles as translators.

Instructions for School Office Official: Parents will be coming to you asking to register their children for school. Tell them they cannot register until their scorecard has a signature from the doctor's office showing that their children are immunized. They will also need to show proof of residence in the district by having the landlord's signature. Once they have these things, tell them you will need to test the children for language proficiency. Ask the kids to count to ten and to tell you to "have a nice day" and pretend to mark their proficiency on your forms alongside their names. You can pretend to have a hard time hearing and understanding their names well enough to write them down correctly. Once a kid has counted and told you to have a nice day, sign the group's scorecard, unless the other kids in the group also want to perform, in which case they are welcome to do so.

Instructions for Landlords: Tell people they need to have a job (with its signature) and a bank account (with its signature) before you will rent them an apartment. When they have these signatures, smile and tell them you still have a nice one bedroom apartment available. When they protest that they need a 2 or 3 bedroom place, apologize and say this is all you have left and they will have to make do if they want to get your signature.

Instructions for Customs officials: Interview people about why they are attempting to enter the country. If they say they are visiting as tourists, give them a red signature. If they say they are fleeing their former country for some reason, give them a yellow signature as refugees. If they say they are coming to America for economic reasons and plan to find jobs and stay for good, give them a green signature. Send them on to the job bureau where they can find a job.

Instructions for Bankers: Tell people they need to show proof of legal residence status in order to open an account. Then give them a form to fill out (form is included below). When they have finished filling out the form, open an account for them by signing their form.

Instructions for Health Care Workers: Ask for their health insurance cards. None of them will have a health insurance card, so ask for some money (verified by seeing their bank signature). If they tell you they don't have any money, tell them they are lucky to live in a country that offers free immunizations. Give each member of the family a pretend shot in their arm. Afterwards, sign their form verifying that they have all been immunized.

Job bureau officials: Ask the adults what their professions have been until now. Offer them much lower level jobs in the same fields if they are work-authorized from customs (i.e. if they have a green signature), or jobs as a house or office cleaner, delivery person or chauffeur, or fast-food service worker if they don't have a customs signature, or if they have a yellow or red customs signature. If they are upset, tell them you understand why they are upset, but this is all you can offer at this point and it is their choice to take it or leave it. Also tell them they will need to buy new clothes in order to look professional in their new workplaces. At the end of their visit, sign their scorecards.

Grocery store workers: When the immigrant customers ask for a particular food, look confused and say you've never heard of that kind of product. Ask the customer to try to describe it. Make wrong guesses about what it is. Suggest they look in the "foreign foods" section of the store. If they can't find it, say that you never heard of it and don't know where to order it from. Sign their scorecards.

Immigration Simulation Family Signature Card

Place	Signature
School Office	
Apartment Rental Office	
Customs	
Bank	
Health Care Office	
Job Bureau	
Grocery Store	

Welcome to the Landsmenschaft Bank. We are excited to do business with you. Before you can open an account, we will need you to answer a few questions.

Full Name of Adult 1

Signature of Adult 1

Full Name of Adult 2

Signature of Adult 2

Full name of child 1

Full name of child 2

Full name of child 3

Age of child 1 _____ Age of child 2 _____

Age of child 3 _____

Job title and employer Adult 1

Job title and employer Adult 2

Expected annual salary for family

Name of school child 1 will attend

Name of school child 2 will attend

Name of school child 3 will attend

Date form completed

We will let you know soon if your application is approved. In the meantime, welcome to America. Go forth and prosper!