

## Assimilation Simulation Lesson Plan

### **(2-3 min) – Introduce activity**

- Ask students to think about what culture means
  - How important it is to families and communities; had to leave Ireland because of push factors; in the United States because of pull factors BUT culture can make a new place feel more comfortable and maintain a connection to home - do not sacrifice it lightly
- Your group is your family - will be making choices today about difficult situations in the United States
  - None of these choices are easy
  - Going to have to discuss each one with you family

### **(5 min) – “Culture” word web**

- Students sit in ‘family groups’ by first color on their History Journal
- Groups have
- Each group discusses what culture means and why it is important

### **(5 min) - Introduce scenarios**

- Go over instructions
  - You will be presented with a series of choices
  - Expectation is that you will be thoughtful about your decisions and you will take 6-10 min to make a choice
  - There is no “right choice” - each choice that you make will have an outcome that is both positive and negative
  - Raise your hand when have made a decision and Heather or I will check in with you and give you a card that tells you what the outcome of your decision is

### **(25 min) – Discuss scenarios & make choices**

- Walk around, check in with groups
- Give cards when groups are ready to make a choice or move on to the next scenario
- When groups finished – have them work on Assimilation word web

### **(10-15min) – Debrief discussion**

- What does assimilation mean?
  - Draw on their choices – when did they assimilate? When did they not assimilate?
  - What were the positive outcomes of their choices?
  - What were the negative outcomes of their choices?
- Try to get to an understanding of assimilation
  - People assimilate for survival, to access power or security or privileges
  - Cost of assimilation is often cultural values and practices
  - Power dynamics – Who decides what culture is “ok”?

## ***Family Descriptions:***

### The Meehan Family

Welcome to the United States! You and your family just emigrated from Ireland and are settling into your new home. Though you had to leave Ireland, you miss it dearly and are trying to find an Irish community here in the Boston for support. Life is not easy and you are going to have to make some hard choices as a family to survive.

When you are making choices make sure that you:

- Listen to one another and work together
- Many people are working in this space – discuss your decisions quietly!
- Think about the potential benefits and potential sacrifices of each choice

## ***Scenario Descriptions, Choices & Outcomes:***

### **Scenario #1**

The father just got a job as a roofer's assistant. The pay is 85 cents every day, which is just enough to pay for the family's food and rent. To support the family, mother and the family's eldest daughter have to work as seamstresses earning 25 cents a day. There is opportunity to get a raise and a promotion if father works hard. But, his boss is Protestant and does not like Catholics. Father is worried that his will affect his chances of getting a promotion.

### **Scenario #1 Choices:**

Do you choose to:

Stay faithful to your religion and participate in the church. The Irish Catholic community is warm and welcoming. The children will sing in the choir and attend parochial school. If your boss finds out that your family is Catholic, father may not get a raise and could even get fired.

OR

Hide your religion to protect father's job and increase the chances that he will get a much needed raise and promotion. If you do not participate in the Catholic Church you may feel lonely with a community and lose parts of your cultural and religious identity.

Think about/discuss:

- What are the potential benefits of each choice?
- What are the potential sacrifices of each choice?
- How does being who you are at work/school impact your happiness and comfort?

### **Scenario #1 Outcomes:**

#### **You have decided to assimilate:**

Father hides his religious beliefs at work and gets a raise and promotion after 2 months. The increase in pay makes life much easier for the family and the family's eldest daughter can now

return to school. In order to hide the family's Catholic faith you do not attend church. Without the support of a community the family is lonely and isolated. Father and mother are worried that the children will grow up without faith and will be ashamed of their family's history and religion.

What did you expected would happen?  
What surprises you about this outcome?

**You have decided not to assimilate:**

You decide to stay faithful to your Catholic religion because it is important to who you are and makes your happy. Your family is involved in the Catholic Church and the community has been very important. The kids sing in the choir and attend parochial school - they are learning about and are proud of their Irish Catholic heritage. Father's boss finds out that you are Irish Catholic and reduces his pay to 75 cents a day. Mother and the eldest daughter have to take on more work as seamstresses. After another month, father is fired from his job and the family's future is very uncertain.

What did you expected would happen?  
What surprises you about this outcome?

**Scenario #2:**

One of the children in your family is being teased at school for bringing traditional Irish food for lunch. He is being called names because other students know that he is Irish and have been taught by their parents and society to discriminate against Irish folks. Your child is very unhappy and begs you to send him to school with non-traditional Irish food instead so he will have the same food as the other students.

**Scenario #2 Choices:**

Do you choose to:

Even though your child is being teased, you decided to send him to school with traditional Irish food. You tell him to be proud of his culture and heritage. Sometimes life can be hard and people can be mean but you should not change who you are to fit in.

OR

Send your child to school with bread and butter with the hope that he will no longer be teased by his classmates. The food cost more than the traditional Irish food that you buy.

Think about/Discuss:

- What are the potential benefits of each choice?
- What are the potential sacrifices of each choice?
- How important is food to your culture/cultural identity?

**Scenario #2 Outcomes:**

**You have decided to assimilate:**

The non-traditional food that you send with your child for lunch cost more. In order to buy the food, mother has to take on more work as a seamstress. Even though he has different food, your child still gets teased for being Irish. He eventually becomes ashamed of his cultural history and does not want to eat traditional Irish food at home or attend church.

What did you expected would happen?  
What surprises you about this outcome?

**You have decided not to assimilate:**

Your child continues to be teased for his traditional Irish food. He finds a group of friends at school who are also Irish and a few other students are not mean. The next year he attends a parochial school where most of the students are Irish Catholic. He is proud of his Irish history.

What did you expected would happen?  
What surprises you about this outcome?

**Scenario #3**

Father only makes 85 cents at his job which is just enough to pay for rent and food. He just heard that he might lose some of his wages or possibly lose his job because free Black folks are moving North and are willing to work for less wages. Father's friends in the Irish worker union are upset and want to vote to exclude Black workers from the union and try to prevent them from getting jobs. Your family knows what it is like to face hardship and be discriminated against but you are also worried for your family's well-being and security.

**Scenario #3 Choices:**

Do you choose to:

Do you let your Irish friends in the union that you are joining the abolitionist movement because you are against slavery? You believe that all people should have access to work and wages.

**OR**

Do you join your friends in the union to discriminate against Black workers? You can vote against allowing Black workers to join the union and try to prevent them from getting jobs in the mill. This may protect your wages and job to ensure that you can support your family.

Think about/Discuss:

- What are the potential benefits of each choice?
- What are the potential sacrifices of each choice?
- Why would Irish folks want to be considered "white" in the United States?

### **Scenario #3 Outcomes:**

#### **You have decided to assimilate:**

Your vote to exclude Black workers from the union protects your wages for now. The Irish union reminded management that they are white and should be hired over Black workers because America is a “country of whites”. By discriminating against Black workers your family and the union are supporting antiblack sentiments in the United States and are closer to being considered white. Eventually management decides to hire Black workers at lower wages. Because the Black workers are not unionized they cannot fight for fair wages and your wages are cut to match their lower wages.

What did you expected would happen?

What surprises you about this outcome?

#### **You decided not to assimilate:**

Your refusal to vote to discriminate against Black workers isolates you from many of your friends in the Irish union. You do not receive the benefits that they seem to get from discriminating against Black folks. You hope that in the future a joint union can form between Irish workers and Black workers and together you can fight for fair wages and safer work conditions.

What did you expected would happen?

What surprises you about this outcome?