



Left: 4th graders in character as immigrants arriving at “Ellis Island.” Above: The 3-D faces of the immigrant characters

WHO ARE THE U.S. AMERICANS?

Rebecca Plaskitt’s 4th graders study immigration through story

To the Catlin Gabel 4th grade, immigrants are not just odd people who speak funny languages—because the immigrant’s stories have become the students’ own stories. These students create characters from immigrant groups, then track them starting with their arrival in the U.S. and ending with their new lives as they establish themselves. By the end of the study, they care about their character, they understand the historical perspective of immigration, and they come to see the commonalities among all of us in this country—not only the differences.

The structure for this study comes from the Storyline method, in which teacher Rebecca Plaskitt is an international expert. “The basis of Storyline is that children learn through the power of story, with characters, settings, ways of life, incidents, and conclusions,” she says. “By making characters they are more likely to become emotionally involved in what happens and in their character’s experiences.”

Throughout the Storyline, students in both Rebecca’s and Mariam Higgins’s 4th grade classes pick an ethnic group and gender for the character they choose, based on whom they think has the best chance to make a life in a new country. They talk about the skills this person would need to get a job and get started, and they research their country of origin.

The students make 3-D faces for their characters, and dress them in the clothing they might have worn upon arrival in New York. In the next part of the Storyline, students are randomly assigned to roles as immigrants or workers at Ellis Island. As staffers, the students might work in security or baggage, or as doctors, psychiatrists, or money changers.

“We talk about the significance of feeling like they don’t have any choices,” says Rebecca. “We ask the kids playing immigrants how they feel about the workers who will make decisions

for them and maybe send them back home. We ask the workers to reflect on their role: do they like being able to control someone else?” And for one eagerly anticipated day, the inside and the outside of the classroom becomes Ellis Island, and each student plays a role in this tense chapter of immigration.

The drama begins when the costumed immigrants disembark outside with their bundles and carefully researched documents. The workers, equally prepared with official procedures and documentation, are anxious about what might happen during their shift, when they may admit or detain the immigrants.

The process includes lots of reflection about what they’ve been through. At the end, the students write and act out a script about their characters getting work and a new home. At a culminating presentation to parents, students share the immigrants’ story, including a narrated slideshow of the events at their Ellis Island and entries from journals they’ve kept for their character.

The Storyline experience engages the 4th graders in high-level thinking by asking them to build on new information and create something entirely new. And through the process, they also learn history, compassion, and understanding.



REBECCA PLASKITT

Rebecca Plaskitt, a Catlin Gabel teacher since 2004, has presented Storyline courses at conferences in Europe, and she was honored as outstanding student teacher of the year by Phi Delta Kappa after receiving her teaching degree. “I love being with kids and creating. I’ve never taught two years the same way. I really like how Catlin Gabel considers the whole child, not just academic ability but emotions, and confidence, and how the child fits in the group. Everyone is so willing to help, and everyone knows the kids so well. The one thing that’s different here from most other schools is that you can love the children here: it’s totally okay and a great part of teaching,” she says.