Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Cesar Chavez as a Role Model for Creating Responsible Citizens and a Caring Community

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
K-2/Building Community

Duration of Lesson:
3- 5 Class periods

Content Standards:
TEKS113.11. Social Studies, Kindergarten
In Kindergarten, the study of the self, home, family, and classroom establishes the foundation for responsible citizenship in society.
(2) History. The student understands how historical figures, patriots, and good citizens helped shape the community, state, and nation.
The student is expected to:
   (B) Identify contributions of patriots and good citizens who have shaped the community.
(11) Culture. The student understands similarities and differences among people. The
   Student is expected to:
   (A) Identify similarities and differences among people such as physical
   characteristics kinship, laws, and religion; and
(12) Culture. The student understands the importance of family customs and traditions. The
   student is expected to:
   (A) Describe and explain the importance of family customs and traditions; and
   (B) Compare family customs and traditions

Lesson Abstract:
Students will be introduced to Cesar Chavez. Through stories and visual presentations they will learn how an ordinary boy grew into a man that made big changes to a great number of people relying on peaceful actions. Cesar affected significant changes in social justice for farm workers and brought an awareness of the plight of an even wider group of impoverished people to the eyes of the nation.

Guiding Questions:
• How did Cesar Chavez learn to be a responsible citizen and caring community member?
• What actions did Cesar Chavez take that show he was a responsible citizen and caring community member?
• What nonviolent actions can we take to show we are responsible citizens and caring community members?
Cesar Chavez was most recently honored on March 31, 2011 when President Obama signed a proclamation marking Chavez’s birthday as a national day of service. Eight states have established Cesar Chavez Day as a state holiday. Across the country perhaps those celebrating Cesar Chavez Day on March 31 recognize the greatness of the man and not just his accomplishments; but many Americans lack a deep understanding of him and his efforts to effect social justice for “the powerless...the poor, and the people who are discriminated against,” not just farm workers. (Ingram, 104) He is best remembered for co-founding the United Farm Workers Union, for his strikes, boycotts, and fasts. But what is known of his values and philosophies that enabled him to create the strong coalition of people that made these accomplishments possible? To what aspects of his life can we draw parallels to our own, so that we see his life as an example to emulate not just celebrate? Cesar Chavez was an ordinary man, dedicated to his belief in the dignity of human life. Through the example of his life he shows that an ordinary man is able to accomplish extraordinary things through nonviolent means.

In his successful campaign for president, Obama himself made effective use of Chavez’s slogan, “Si Se Puede,” translated to “Yes, We Can!” This attitude of “Yes, I Can!” should be the foundation of each child’s education. Realization of one’s worth and abilities and the recognition of one’s interconnectedness and responsibility to one’s community will serve the individual and humanity at large. Understanding the power of self-control as demonstrated by nonviolent actions can empower the individual while creating a peaceful and coherent community. This lesson is a beginning to establishing such a foundation in young students.

Cesar Chavez lived his life not just for himself, but to help and serve others. He learned the values of self-sacrifice, compassion, and service from his family. He was born in Yuma, Arizona, where he lived with his parents above their grocery store. His was a tightly knit family; his grandparents, uncles and aunts lived nearby on a ranch homesteaded by his grandfather. He helped with chores at his parents’ store and attended school. School was not an inviting place; he was faced with harsh prejudice because he spoke Spanish. But he loved learning and listened well to the religious stories his grandmother told him for his catechism and the dichos, Mexican proverbs, that his mother sprinkled in their conversations as she worked. These stories gave him a sense of his place in his family, of the traditions of his culture, and his strength through service to others.

Cesar learned from the actions and the words of his parents. His mother’s devotion to St. Eduvigis was carried out in her actions of fasting and serving the poor. (Orosco, 24) Cesar learned from her example, self-sacrifice and commitment to one’s beliefs. From his father, who farmed and ran his market, he learned the values of hard work and persistence, and respect for diversity. “Cesar’s father had always given jobs to migrant workers, telling his son “Some have different skin colors, some speak different languages; some are old, some young. But they have one thing in common – poverty.”(Ingram, 98)

At the age of ten, Cesar’s life changed dramatically, when his family lost their home and land. It was the Great Depression and like so many at that time, they loaded up their family car and headed to California to find work. There they joined the throngs of others displaced and desperate, becoming migrant workers, following the growing seasons of the crops of California. Cesar’s family was used to working hard and to farming, but they were not used to the horrible living and working conditions of migrant workers. Migrant workers suffered great indignities,
low wages, poor sanitation and inadequate housing. Workers toiled long hours in the fields, in heat or rain, whatever the weather. Frequently there was no water and if there was, they were charged for each ladle. There were no bathroom facilities, which embarrassing, but also unhealthy. Though sometimes housing of a sort was provided, shacks with no electricity or running water. More often families were forced to sleep in their cars and in tents. Cesar remembered having “more happy moments as a child than unhappy moments,” (Levy, 17) but “Cesar’s most vivid memories of his youth are … of crawling under twisted, scratchy vines for hard-to-reach bunches of grapes, choking on chemical sprays.” (Ingram, 98)

Cesar experienced prejudice in school, restaurants, and movie theaters, both in Arizona and later in California. At school he was punished for speaking Spanish, and when he and his sister wanted to go into town for ice cream, the place “didn’t let Mexicans eat. “ (Levy, 66) These harsh hateful actions of others did not match the values of compassion and tolerance that he had been taught and he was hurt and sometimes angry. Later in his life, he served in the Navy and was surprised that there too he was met with racial prejudice. While on a weekend leave, Chavez, fed up with the continual discrimination, attended a movie theater and purposefully sat in the “whites only” section. He was arrested and taken to jail. “There was nothing they could charge him with, so they let him go with a warning.” (Rodriguez, 32) This treatment made him angry, but it deepened his conviction that things must change, not just for himself, but for all those excluded from the mainstream of humanity.

Cesar received an honorable discharge from the Navy after about two years of service and returned to his family and work in the fields. He was ready now to start his own family and he married Helen, who he had known since he was fifteen. She remained his lifelong companion and together they had eight children. They all too worked together in the fields and later as he began to organize the workers. Living in Sal Se Puede, Cesar met Father McDonnell. Cesar had only been able to attend school sporadically, and had finally had to quit for good in order to support his family, when his father was injured in an accident. But he loved learning and continued on this own. When still a boy, while at a movie he had seen a clip of a “half-naked man” who had defeated the British Empire without a gun. How he wanted to know? This “half-naked man” was Mohandas Gandhi and he asked his teacher about him. From a friend of the teacher, he received “a little book on Gandhi. As I grew up, I started learning more, and ever since then, I have made a life project of reading about Gandhi and his message. (Ingram, 114) Gandhi’s message was ahimsa, nonviolence. Father McDonnell fueled this fire, offering books on St. Francis of Assisi and Gandhi. To those reading Cesar added works from Martin Luther King. As he read these, he came to realize “his formative understanding of nonviolence stemmed from his Mexican traditions, particularly those that he had learned from his mother.”(Orosco, 24)

“She taught her children to reject that part of a culture which too often tells its our men that you’re not a man if you don’t fight back. She would say ‘No, it best to turn the other cheek. God gave you senses like eyes and mind and tongue and you can get out of anything. It takes two to fight and one can’t do it alone.” (Orosco, 24)

Chavez embraced the power that nonviolence offered and lived his life according to its moral principals. Under the tutelage of Father McDonnell and later Fred Ross at the Community Services Organization, Cesar honed his organizing skills and learned the economics of agribusiness. Starting out as a volunteer for CSO, registering voters and teaching reading, English, and citizenship classes, he rose to become a national director earning a good income for his family. But it was clear that the changes he sought for the farm workers could only be accomplished through a farm workers union. Chavez gave up his post to do what he knew must
be done. With only $1,200 he and his family moved back to Delano to achieve his dream. He could not be satisfied with his own success and leave so many like him ad his family behind locked in poverty.

Cesar began his work in support of La Causa. His purpose was more than just securing better working conditions for the farm workers. He went on to cofound the United Farm Workers Association in 1962. His determination and adherence to nonviolent principles allowed the union to successfully negotiate a contract with grape growers after a five-year long strike. His nonviolent methods included strikes, marches, boycotts, and fasts. This proved that nonviolent means could result in positive change. Humans working together for a common cause can accomplish remarkable achievements.

Bibliography:


Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:

Lesson One
- Read Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez, by Kathleen Krull and Yuyi Morales
- Then watch the following video http://chavez.cde.ca.gov/ModelCurriculum/Teachers/Lessons/Resources/Biographies/K-2_Bio.aspx Biography with pictures of Cesar Chavez
- Lead a discussion on what new information you saw, what was the same.
- List things Cesar did that made life better for his family or others.
- Ask and list what students can do that can make things better. Create lists for At Home and At School.

Lesson Two
- Go out to the garden and set the timer for 10-15 min. and have children work, picking up trash, pulling weeds and watering. (Activities will vary according to the season)
- Have children draw pictures of themselves in the garden.
- Talk about how long we worked in the garden compared with Cesar who would have worked the length of our school day or longer. List the conditions and feeling they encountered on chart paper. How did you feel? Did you start to hurt anywhere? What was the weather like today? Compare their feelings and experiences to Chavez’s as a child and workers today.
• Talk about violence in relation to these experiences. What if you weren’t allowed to get a
drink of water? What if there were no bathroom facilities? What if even when you were
hot and tired you had to keep working?

Lesson Three
• Watch the Digital story, What is nonviolence?
• After viewing show students selected “violent” pictures from the video one at a time.
• Talk about what they see. What do they think happened before?
• Have students act out what they think happened before. Now have those students or
different students act out a different way that thing could happen in a nonviolent way.
• On a chart list violent and nonviolent actions. Discuss which actions make a happier
healthier community. What does it take from each person?

Lesson Four
• Read Tomas and the Library Lady, by Pat Mora and discuss how Tomas and Cesar were
alike and different. Talk about ways their family’s were the same and different. Make a
Venn diagram.
• Discuss the library as a community place, just like the garden. It belongs to all of us and
requires that we all work together to care for it. (I am a library and classes are held in the
library)
• Make a list of what it means to care for books and the library.
• Ask the students what kind of books they what to read. Record their requests.

Lesson Five
• Talk about how stories are important to all of us.

• Have a collection of books out according to the students choices recorded yesterday. Give
them time to look at the books and encourage them to share stories from the books.
Tell students we are going to make a class book of our families’ stories. Ask the students
if they have a story to share. Ask what kinds of things they do with their families, make
and eat meals together, go to the park, play games, and celebrate together.
• Then have each student draw a picture of herself with her family. Fourth grade students
will join us for the last 15-20 min. to take dictation from the child about what the family
is doing together in the picture.
• This will be compiled into a class book by the teacher/librarian and this book will be
added to the library collection.

Additional Resources
Mexican proverbs