### Title of Lesson:
Individual Empowerment in the Face of Oppression

### Lesson By:
Geri Belle

### Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
Sixth grade Humanities

### Class Size:
20-25

### Time/ Duration of Lesson:
3-5 55 minute classes

### Goals/ Objectives of Lesson
- Students will be able to identify 5-10 situations in which an individual experiences powerlessness
- Students will be able to name and communicate alternative ways to deal with oppressive situations
- Students will create and perform vignettes in which an individual responds in an empowered way to an oppressive situation.

### Lesson Abstract
In this lesson, students will identify, wrestle with, and think about issues surrounding powerlessness. The class will examine oppressive situations in which individuals experience feeling hopeless, helpless and/or powerless. By examining situations like Gandhi’s response on the South African train, the class will learn about the inspiring and dignified ways or alternatives to feeling powerless. Students will show their understanding of this through writing vignettes and performing them for one another.

### Lesson Content
In this lesson, students will examine and reflect on responses to oppression. They will examine the experience and response of Mohandas Gandhi to being thrown off a train in South Africa because of his race, and the response an eleven year old girl has to an unreasonable teacher in the story “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros.

Sandra Cisneros is a Mexican American who was the only daughter in a family of six brothers. She moved around a lot as a child and frequently visited Mexico. Growing up, she didn’t really feel at ease in her school or her neighborhood. Writing was always an outlet for her. In high school, she wrote poetry, and was the literary magazine editor. It wasn’t until she had completed college and was getting a graduate degree at the University of Iowa Writer’s Workshop that she found her own unique voice as a working class Mexican American woman. This led her to write House on Mango Street, as well as other novels, books of short stories, and poetry. The story “Eleven” is imbued with this voice.

“Eleven” is a coming of age story about Rachel on the day of her eleventh birthday. On this day she reflects on how it is to be different ages. She notes “the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next one...”. Her teacher unjustly accuses her of leaving a ragged, dirty, smelly, red sweater in the coatroom, and insists that Rachel put it on. Rachel unsuccessfully tries to speak up and explain that the sweater isn’t even hers. Her frustration
builds, and finally out of frustration, she cries in front of the class. Soon after her tears, the real owner claims the sweater, and Rachel returns to contemplating what it means to age and to feel powerless.

Gandhi offers an alternative response to feeling oppressed. Mohandas K. Gandhi traveled to South Africa in 1893 to take a position as a barrister. A few days after his arrival, a train conductor asked him to leave the seat he occupied in first class. He insisted on keeping the seat since he had purchased a first class ticket. He was told that he could take a seat in the baggage compartment or a policeman would be called. He didn’t move. The policeman again offered him the baggage compartment, but he refused and was thrown off the train along with his baggage onto a train platform. At the station, the stationmaster confiscated his suitcase and his coat. He chose to sit in the station through the cold night meditating and mulling over his situation. He resolved to combat the issue of color prejudice in South Africa. Rather than staying for the year he had intended he remained in South Africa for 21 years and fought for civil rights as a lawyer and leader.

Creative problem solving as practiced by Gandhi provide inspiring alternatives to feeling powerless. Juxtaposing Gandhi’s response with the eleven year old’s response in the story will serve as a springboard for students to discuss their own experiences. Expressing oneself through all forms of art is another way the human spirit can respond to oppression in hopeful dignified ways during times of despair. (See digital story)

**State Content Standards**
All standards are listed in the Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Framework. Grade application proceeds the standard.

- Gr. 5-8 1.3 Apply understanding of agreed-upon rules and individual roles in order to make decisions
- Gr. 5-8 3.8 Give oral presentations for various purposes, showing appropriate changes in delivery (gestures, vocabulary, pace, visuals) and using language for dramatic effect
- Gr. 3-8 8.14 Make judgments about setting, characters, and events and support them with evidence from the text
- Gr. 5-8 19.14 Write stories or scripts containing the basic elements of fiction (characters, dialogue, setting, plot with a clear resolution).

**Guiding Questions**
- What are situations in which students feel oppressed?
- How did Gandhi respond in an empowering way to an oppressive situation?
- What are some possible ways for students to respond in empowering ways to situations of oppression?
- How can art and creative problem solving offer alternatives to feelings of powerlessness, frustration, and hopelessness?

**Materials Needed**
- Story “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros
- Paper, writing utensils
### Lesson Context
This lesson fits into a larger unit on how individuals, groups, and societies deal with oppression in empowering ways. The digital story will be shown at the end of this lesson, and before we look at how groups and societies deal with oppression.

### Teaching Activities
- Talk about situations in which students feel oppressed. After giving some examples, each student will list their own examples and then share aloud, generating a class list.
- Introduce background on Sandra Cisneros, and read the story “Eleven” together.
- Orally, introduce story of Gandhi on the train in South Africa (with possible clip from movie)
- Discussion about his response to oppression, and how he came to it.
- Talk about the power of Art
- Show the digital story.
- Discuss some of the situations and responses shown in the digital story
- Assign students to create a scene that could happen to an 11 year old at home or in school and ways in which an oppressed person might respond in an empowered way.
- Perform each of the scenes.
- Generate a class list on methods of empowerment

### Assessment/ Evaluation
Students will show their understanding by identifying and using oppressive situations and developing strategies that are conducive to combating feelings of powerlessness. Students will identify these strategies in the role plays they watch.

### Extension Activities/ Enrichment
Interview family members about responses to oppressive situations in which they have found themselves. If the response was feeling powerless, frustrated or angry have students think alone or with family members what alternatives might have been.

### Bibliography: