Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: “In the Palm of Our Hands”: Building Classroom Community

Lesson By: Nan Campbell, Carbondale Middle School, Carbondale, CO

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: Upper Elementary Grades 3-6

Duration of Lesson: 1+ week

Content Standards: Colorado State Standards

05.A.RWC.2.1.a Use pre-reading strategies such as identifying a purpose for reading, generating questions to answers while reading, previewing sections of text and activating prior knowledge.

05.B.RWC.1.2.b.i Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 5 topics and texts building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Lesson Abstract: This lesson is designed with two main learning outcomes. The first goal is for students to gain background knowledge on Gandhi’s life so that they can have a context to see the value and power of Swaraj in the classroom. The second learning goal is for students to evaluate the relationship between the individual and his or her community and how their actions affect the larger community.

Guiding Questions:

* What made Gandhi so powerful?
* What does Gandhi teach us about SELF RULE and how does it impact others?
* Who is in charge of making our school, community, world a great place to be?

Content Essay: In the Palm of Our Hands

The highest potential of a teacher’s job is to empower students and give them strategies to seek out truth in their lives. Studying the inspiring stories of Mohandas Gandhi and the role of the individual in society will help students to reflect on their lives and the world in which they live. The context of this unit will hopefully plant a seed of awareness that we are all capable of nonviolence, positive leadership among our peers, and that it is our responsibility to rule ourselves (even when the teacher is not looking). For, “If we are to teach real peace in this world, and if we are to carry on a real war against war, we shall have to begin with the children.” (Gandhi)

“Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.” (Gandhi)
A look into Gandhi’s life reveals a man whose power comes from the fact that his actions clearly reflect his words and philosophy. Through challenges and learning from mistakes Gandhi roots himself into a life of service, truth, and compassion. His stories can spark understanding, inspiration, and connections for students.

To begin, during his youth a friend persuaded him to eat meat, which was forbidden to him. The consequence of this incident was not the guilt that he ate meat but that he had to lie to his parents when he was too full to eat the food given to him because he had eaten the meat. In Dr. Tara Sethia’s book, *Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change*, she articulates that this conflict, “created a deep tension between the two things that Gandhi wanted to become: strong and truthful.” (Sethia 16) Gandhi, therefore vowed never to eat meat again while his parents were alive so that he could remain truthful. This is just a small example of Gandhi’s commitment to truth.

Next, it was not until he completed his study as a lawyer in England and lived in South Africa that he experienced racial injustice for the first time. As a twenty-four year old, he was literally thrown off the train for not being European when he refused to leave his first class cabin, for which he has a ticket. Later he is physically assaulted again on public transport because of the color of his skin. However, in both cases he did not seek any retaliation and instead, “Dug deeper to find its root cause in the wide spread problem of color prejudice in South Africa.” (Sethia 33) Gandhi spent time familiarizing himself with the condition of Indian immigrants in South Africa and devoted himself to serving this community and forcing change to anti-Indian racial laws.

During this time, Gandhi rooted his political and social consciousness in ahimsa, or nonviolence. He created a multi-racial, caste-free, ecologically sound communal living farm where he trained the residents in nonviolent resistance towards unjust laws. This evolved into the Satyagraha movement where followers must, “seek to live a life of truth, love, and integrity and be willing to sacrifice the self for the greater good.” (Sethia 64) Walking his talk, Gandhi lived modestly and believed that people in public service should live a simple life. He put this principle into action when he gave up wearing western-style clothing, which he associated with wealth and success and exchanged it for a dhoti woven with cotton he had spun. In this community setting Gandhi and his followers cultivated their “soul force” by not buying British goods, which in a way freed them from the British rule.

In 1930, at the age of 61, Gandhi’s use of Satyagraha urged civil disobedience by defying the unjust salt monopoly imposed by the British government. Gandhi left his ashram and headed to the sea to make salt free from British tax. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi makes it clear that humans should not simply submit to unjust manmade laws but rather use “soul force,” and instead of attacking the lawmakers, people should go against these laws and suffer the consequences. (Gandhi 89) Gandhi knew he and others would be jailed for this act, yet more and more people continued to join the march as it neared the sea. Because this act of Satyagraha focused on the commonality of salt it appealed to many Indians and got the attention of the world. Mass civil disobedience spread throughout India as millions broke the salt laws by making salt or buying it illegally. Although it was
another seventeen years before India claimed their independence from Britain, this was a pivotal point in the struggle and a real example of the power of nonviolent action.

“A man is but the product of his thoughts what he thinks, he becomes.” (Gandhi)

After sharing with students a few remarkable ways that Gandhi manifested his beliefs into action, the next step is take a look at his concept of Swaraj, or self-rule as it pertains to the individual. In *Hind Swaraj* Gandhi reiterated that national self-rule can only be acquired through moral regeneration of its people. He warned that without this transformation India would only replace British Raj with Indian Raj or, “the tiger’s nature, not the tiger.” (Gandhi 27) to remedy this he said, “It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is therefore in the palm of our hands.” (Gandhi 71) Through manual labor, self-realization, truthfulness, and freedom from greed, this Swaraj is attainable. In Anthony Parel’s introduction to *Hind Swaraj* he connects the four canonical aims of life, or purusharthas, with swaraj. These principles of self-rule have a place in the classroom. First, one needs to uphold their dharma. This ethical consciousness leads one to fulfill their duty and contribute something to the common good. In the classroom this could be translated into the responsibility students must take for their learning and behavior. Second, humans pursue wealth and political power (artha), which could align with the idea of academic achievement or power in school. The next aim of life is pleasure (kama) and hopefully students find enjoyment in school. Finally there is moksha, or full realization of human potential. In a school setting this could loosely be translated into respect for all. (Parel xxi) It is only when these aims are in balance and no one goal outweighs the other that a free civilization can develop.

“A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.” “in other words, true self-government requires persons who rule themselves.” (Gandhi)

Generally a classroom is a microcosm society and should therefore be a place where self-rule is cultivated. Furthermore, the ultimate mission of building a classroom community is for students to see that each individual must contribute to a safe, productive, and respectful classroom. This follows the model of Gandhi’s oceanic circles where the individual supports the village, which could be represented by a small peer group in a class, the village supports the other villages or groups, all the villages support the class community until, “at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the ocean circle of which they are integral units.” (Gandhi 182) This model for the structure of a civilization opposes the image of a pyramid where a powerful few rest heavily on the marginalized bottom group. The image of the concentric circles brings to mind the idea of the ripple effect and how an individual’s actions, violent or nonviolent affect the communities in which they live. In conclusion, the editor’s introduction to *Hind Swaraj* sums up Gandhi’s vision for a society. It is one that will, “contribute towards the reduction of political violence, moderation of greed, the increase of compassion, the advent of economic prosperity and the spiritual integration of the individual.” (Parel lxv) As educators, if we believe this is type of society is possible, we must teach its ideals.
**Bibliography:**


**Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:**

Day 1: Introduction

1. Pose the question: What do you want our classroom/school to be like?

2. Discuss: Students can start in small groups and end in a share out with the whole class.

3. Discuss: How can we make it that way?

4. Pass out a small prepared slip of paper to each student that says, “Be the Change you want to See . . .” Put it in each students palm and don’t have them look at the slip.

5. Pose the questions once more, “How can we make our classroom/school the place we want it to be? It is in the palm of your hands?

6. Students read slips of paper. “Be the change you want to see in the world.” - Gandhi

7. Debrief why this is the answer.

8. Watch “My Own Two Hands” Digital Story

Day 2: Gandhi’s Story

1. “I want us to learn more about Gandhi so that we could use some of his ideas in our classroom this year.”

2. Guiding question: What made Gandhi so powerful?

3. Share Gandhi’s story orally or with grade appropriate text.

4. Students take notes or highlight parts in the text that show why he is powerful.

5. Class discussion: develop a list of characteristics describing Gandhi.
6. Reflection: Write or whip around the room: “Which characteristic would you like to develop more in yourself?”

Day 3: Impacts of Violence and Non Violence

1. Draw spectrum line.

violent________________________________________nonviolent

2. Give groups of students a list of words to put somewhere on the continuum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wasting food</th>
<th>Compassion</th>
<th>Persuasion</th>
<th>Self discipline</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lunch room</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>Boycott</td>
<td>Classroom</td>
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<td>Eating Hot</td>
<td>Eating meat</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>Playing video</td>
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<td>Recycling</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Love</td>
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<td>Buying food</td>
<td>Throwing</td>
<td>Taking more</td>
<td>Letting</td>
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Telling a lie

Day 3: What is SELF-RULE and How Does it Impact Others?

1. Refer back to discussion from Day 1 “What do we want our classroom to be like?”

2. The goal today is to come up with rules that we will give ourselves in this classroom.

3. Brainstorm the rules and expectations for the classroom.

4. See how all the ideas can fit under the four aims mentioned by Gandhi:

* Duty (dharma) = responsibility

* Power (artha) = achievement

* Pleasure (kama) = fun

* Spirit (moshka) = respect
5. We need all of these in school to be our best. They need to be balanced. What would happen if we focused only on achievement and left out respect? Or what happens if all you focus on is fun and leave out responsibility?

6. Students respond in writing how they can seek each aim.

Day 4: Who Makes Sure We Follow These rules?

1. Show a visual of the pyramid and oceanic concentric circles ruling structures. Describe their function.

2. Discuss which ruling structure they think we have in school, homes, the USA.

3. Read the story *Yertle the Turtle* by Dr. Seuss.

4. Questions for response:

Which ruling system is described in the story?

What are some problems with it?

How could our classroom use the concentric circles as a structure?

5. Pass out images of concentric circles to each student. Have them label the self, family, classroom, school, community, state, country, and world.

6. Remember at the center is the individual who needs responsibility, achievement, fun, respect. How does violence and nonviolence affect the parallel rings?