Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Food Chains

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

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: Upper Elementary Grades 4-6

Duration of Lesson: 3+ days

Content Standards: Colorado State Standards

05.RWC.1.1.a Describe a process and persuade an audience

05.RWC.4.1.a Conduct short research projects that uses several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

05.S.2.1.c Create and evaluate models of plant and/or animal systems or parts

Lesson Abstract: This lesson is designed to get kids thinking about where their food comes from and challenges them to think critically about the consequences of food they eat. By researching and evaluating the food industry and the conditions of farm workers, students can make more knowledgeable and compassionate dietary choices.

Guiding Questions:

* Where does your food come from?

* What do Gandhi and Chavez argue is wrong with our current food system?

* How can we eat in a nonviolent way?

Content Essay:

Food Chains

Year round in the United States, we can take our pick of a variety of reasonably priced produce. Few of us, however, realize where that food comes from, think about who grows it or what it takes to get it shined and stacked in our grocery stores. Unfortunately, the sweet taste from a Georgia peach would leave a bitter taste in anyone’s mouth if he or she knew about the conditions of the farm-workers who slaved away picking peaches for less than minimum wage in hazardous conditions. This deadly disconnection from Americans to our food has allowed the agribusiness and food industry to threaten the livelihood of our nation’s people, exploit farm-workers, and impact our environment in ways beyond repair. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Cesar Chavez devoted their lives to challenge the dehumanization of their nation’s people. Even though neither man could claim any
political authority, both built movements of nonviolence to fight against the oppressive Goliath like structures of the British Raj and corporate agricultural companies in the United States. Their activism based on communication and community shines light on both the problems and solutions facing us today.

To begin, in the fertile lands of the US, monstrous factory farms have taken over the smaller family farms. In fact farming is not even listed as an occupation on the U.S. census anymore. Large corporate growers make it difficult for smaller more sustainable farms to even compete. Where is our food coming from then? The average American meal travels over 1,500 miles before it is consumed. (Joshi August 2011) The once local and sustainable process of sowing and reaping has been replaced with the factory model of production for maximizing financial gain at any cost. The use of pesticides, child labor, and no concern for the health and safety of workers, are growing like weeds in the industry. The Migrant Health Promotion website states that, “farm workers in the United States face extreme occupational risks and exposures; suffer poorer than average health; and have a life expectancy significantly shorter than average.” It is this disregard for human life that both Gandhi and Chavez fought against.

In fact, the multi-billion dollar agribusiness industry is a clear manifestation of what Gandhi criticized about modern civilization. In her book, *Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change*, Tara Sethia sums up Gandhi’s critique: “Modern civilization held “bodily welfare” as the purpose of life. It measured progress solely in material terms, such as better houses, expanding infrastructure, luxurious life-style, increased reliance on machines (including mechanization of agriculture).” (Sethia 83) This new form of imperialism is rooted in personal gain and denies any ethical relationship between humans.

The solution to this uncivilized thinking is only possible if we are willing to make a paradigm shift which values sustainability and quality of life instead of consumption and greed. Gandhi’s idea of Swadeshi, begins to unfurl a new paradigm. Swadeshi is a call for self-reliance and was a strategy aimed at removing the British from power and giving economic opportunities to Indians. Gandhi urged people to by locally made clothing which ultimately boycotted the British products. Today as a form of Swadeshi, Americans can choose to buy produce and food from local farms to support community agriculture and bypass the corporate giants. It is argued that the impact of buying locally as opposed to organically is more sustainable. First, it keeps the money in the local economy. Second, it keeps small farms alive which generally adhere to organic and sustainable farming practices anyway. Finally, buying locally removes the dependency on oil to transport food across the country and even seas.

Furthermore, Swadeshi is meant to create a state where the life of all citizens is to be considered. The Food Freedom website quotes Gandhi as it urges people to adopt more sustainable food practices, “My definition of Swadeshi is well-known: I must not serve my distant neighbor at the expense of the nearest.” A conscious boycott of agribusiness products that perpetuate unethical treatment of people is a nonviolent action citizens can take. We can only do this however if we know where our food is actually coming from.
One part of Gandhi’s Swadeshi movement that kept people connected with their food was to create ashrams. These communal living environments were purposeful in honoring both the body and spirit of the residents. The ashrams were mostly self-sustaining systems which created and consumed only what was needed for everyone in the community. Within in the ashram everybody had a role to contribute. People of all ages farmed, spun cotton and participated in other constructive labor. In the ashrams people created sustainable relationships with each other, things, and the environment. (Sethia 107-108) In a lecture on sustainability, Nirmal Sethia explained that it is violence in these relationships mentioned above that cause oppression, over consumption and environmental damage. (August 2011) Gandhi’s ashrams remained free from these harms. Ideally school communities could adapt some part of this mentality. For example, schools could prioritize conserving resources, growing, cooking, and serving food, and giving students tasks that benefit the whole group. Although we cannot all live in an ashram like setting, we can all become more involved in our communities to help minimize the damages of structural violence.

The labor activist and organizer of the United Farm Workers union, Cesar Chavez, sought to defeat the structural violence that was abusing California farm workers. The conditions that these people worked in were totally unjust. The work was demanding and physically exhausting in the hot California climate. Pesticides where sprayed with no warning. There were no bathrooms or source of water in the fields. Children lost their childhoods working in the fields, and the pay was so meager that it was difficult for people to feed their own families. As Jose-Antonio Orosco points out in his book, Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence, structural violence, like the chains of corporate farming, “damages people’s lives because it creates barriers that effectively deny people voice in the decisions that affect them.” (Orosco 73) Chavez worked to organize people together so that they had a voice. The union did succeed in getting bathrooms and water in the fields, a minimal increase in wages, and the right to organize as unions. However, still today farm workers continue to be some of the most marginalized people in the world. The Migrant Health Promotion website states that, “Farm work is considered to be second only to mining in the rating of most hazardous occupations. There is a high exposure to pesticides…resulting in the highest rate of toxic chemical injuries of any group in the United States. Farm injuries, exposure to heat and sun, and poor sanitation in the fields are other factors that contribute to the dangers of this work.”

Cesar Chavez and the members of United Farm Workers, spoke out against the unfair treatment of farm workers and the dangers of using pesticides on the crops. This led to the “Wrath of Grapes” which was a countrywide boycott on grapes. Once citizens were educated in the plight of the farm workers millions responded by joining this nonviolent movement. As grapes began to rot on the shelves, growers realized that they must listen to their workers. Most of America did not and still does not know about the unjust treatment of farm workers. We must educate our nation and try to cut the binding food chains to the agribusiness companies.
In conclusion, if we make a conscious effort on an individual level to become more aware of where our food comes from we can take back our power as the consumer. We can stop the supply and demand of food that is picked by the hands of oppressed people. This concept is easier typed than executed, but we have to start somewhere. For in the words of Cesar Chavez, “Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducated the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore.” (Orosco, 23)

**Bibliography:**


**Lesson Activities/ Materials:**

Activity 1: Plant the Seed
  - Pose the question: Where does food come from? Collect responses.
  - Then explain that most food come from seeds. Share images of seeds, farms, wheat, and plants.
  - Plant seeds (tomato, lettuce, pepper, basil) and watch them grow.
  - Graph and record results each week.
  - Harvest and eat!

Activity 2: How far does our food travel?
  - Collect stickers off produce from the grocery store.
  - On a world map pinpoint to origins of the different foods.
  - Have groups calculate the distances that the food traveled.

Activity 3: Research the journey of food from field to plate.
  - Divide class into groups to research the following topics:
• Farm worker conditions in the USA.
• How seeds develop into plants.
• What makes food organic?
• How is food transported?
• Local farms
• Agribusiness
• Cesar Chavez
• Gandhi’s Ashrams

Each group creates a poster or PowerPoint to share with the rest of the class. Students draw a timeline, make a comic strip, or write a story of a vegetable from seed to plate.

**Extension Activities:**
- Go to a farmer’s market or farm, or bring in a farmer.
- Cook healthy and sustainable food for a class reward.
- Make a class cookbook of simple and healthy recipes as a gift.
- Brainstorm healthy snack options with kids.