Lesson Abstract: Young students have the opportunity to learn about the plight of the migrant farm workers and the early life of Cesar Chavez. They view a digital story and make a class book in order to understand Chavez’s commitment to nonviolence in his struggle to form a union and to help the farm workers demand better wages and working conditions. Throughout the lesson, they discover some similarities and differences between their own lives, and the life of Chavez.

Guiding Questions:
1. What enduring values did Chavez learn in his early life?
2. What hardships did the Mexican farm workers face prior to 1970?
3. How did Chavez use nonviolence to help the farm laborers demand better working conditions?

Content Essay: This essay is intended to provide K-2 teachers with the background information necessary to present each activity at each grade level. The concepts are presented in a way that is accessible to young students.

One way to help young students to understand Cesar Chavez’s conception of ahimsa (nonviolence), and his role as one of the greatest labor organizers of our time, is to consider his early life.

Cesar Chavez was born in 1927 on a 160-acre ranch in Yuma, Arizona. His parents, Librado and Juana, earned a living for the family by farming the land and growing vegetables. His family was of Mexican descent, and both of his parents were born and raised in Mexico. Cesar’s mother taught him some very important values. She would say, “No, its 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” (Stavans 223). Juana used this Mexican folk saying and others like it to teach Cesar to
avoid fighting as a way of solving conflicts. Although Cesar didn’t know it at the time, his mother had given him his first lesson in nonviolence. A person uses nonviolence when they use verbal communication or compromising instead of hitting, as a way of settling a disagreement.

At the age of 10, Cesar and his family were forced to leave their home because they couldn’t pay some of their bills. They traveled to California’s San Joaquin Valley, frequently finding work in a town called Delano. The San Joaquin Valley is made up of hot, dry land in the center of California were many crops are grown such as grapes, cotton, nuts, citrus fruits, and vegetables. The Chavez family was forced into the difficult life of migrant farm workers. A migrant farm worker labors in the fields planting seeds, caring for the plants, and picking the crops. The worker is hired to work only part of the year for very low wages. Cesar, like most children of migrant workers, was forced to work long hours picking grapes in a stooped position “breathing the hot dust of the fields as sweat poured into his eyes” (Ingram 98).

Cesar’s family lived and worked along side people who came from different parts of the world and had skin of different colors. Each family was extremely poor and often had to go without food. Yet, when Cesar’s family was in dire need of sustenance, another poor migrant family would give them food. Although one family might be Mexican, and another Filipino they often showed kindness and compassion toward one another.

Through these experiences, Cesar learned the value of living and working closely with people of other cultures.

Cesar continued to work in the fields of Delano, California as a teenager and as a young man. In 1948, he married his childhood sweetheart, Helen Fabela. The couple was poor because the work picking grapes and cotton was very unsteady. Frequently, there was no work at all. They dreamed of having a better life for themselves, and their families.

In 1952, Helen and Cesar moved to San Jose, California. Cesar met a man named Father Donald McDonnell who changed Cesar’s life in many important ways. Father Donald McDonnell was a priest and a labor organizer. A labor organizer helps people who are poor come together as a group, sometimes in houses and churches, and find ways to improve their housing and their communities. By reading, and by listening to the words of Father McDonnell, Cesar developed a great appreciation for nonviolence. Cesar learned that using nonviolence meant teaching people to work actively, to have patience, and to avoid hurting other human beings at all cost.

In 1962, Cesar moved back to Delano because he wanted to use nonviolent methods to help the migrant farm workers. He wanted to form a union. A union is a group of workers who join together to fight for better working conditions and more pay. Cesar met with the farm workers in the fields, and helped them to understand how joining the union could make their lives better. By 1963, his union had 1,000 members. In 1965 something special happened. Cesar’s union, consisting of Mexican farm workers, agreed to work together with a larger union consisting mainly of Filipino workers. The union members all agreed to strike (to stop working) as a way of asking grape growers in Delano for better pay and better working conditions. Cesar put his nonviolent organizing skills to work in 1966 by planning a very long march. The migrant farm workers marched 300 miles from Delano to the city of Sacramento. This way, people all over...
America could learn about the struggle of the migrant workers. 17 million people supported the farm workers by agreeing to stop purchasing and eating grapes. The grape growers lost a lot of money. The growers became very angry and sometimes they hit and beat the migrant workers in the fields. Cesar told the workers that they must not strike back against the growers. The strike lasted for five long years.

In 1969, Cesar wrote a letter to a man named E.L. Barr Jr., who was the president of a grape growers association. Mr. Barr had accused Cesar’s union of using violence to achieve success in the grape boycott. In his letter, Cesar told Mr. Barr that if his accusation was true, Cesar would consider himself a “failure and should withdraw from the struggle” (Chavez 61). Here Cesar showed that his commitment to using nonviolent methods of resistance was so strong that he would end the boycott if he discovered that violence was being used.

Finally the grape growers agreed to talk with Cesar and the other union organizers. The growers promised to give the farm workers higher wages (pay for their work), and access to fresh water and toilets in the fields. By being patient, listening to Cesar, and using nonviolent methods, the farm workers had won their first major victory!

Teaching Activities:

**Materials Needed:** Digital story, pictures of Cesar Chavez and the migrant workers (attached in appendix) White construction paper, ½ inch wide construction paper strips, Pencils, crayons, and dark color magic markers.

**Preparation:** For activity 2, grades K-1, you will need to prepare pages for a class book on Chavez’s early life. (Refer to the content essay.) Write one or two sentences on each piece of construction paper. You will need 10-15 pages depending on the size of your class.

**Preparation:** For activity 3, Copy the folk saying that Chavez’s mother told him on to white construction paper. Use a black pen. Use strips of colored construction paper to put a frame around the folk saying.

**Activity 1:** 1 Day

View the digital story “Cesar Chavez and the Farm Workers.” Use the following questions to help the students understand the story.

1. What were some of the problems that the Mexican farm workers faced when they worked in the fields?
2. How did Cesar Chavez help the farm workers?
3. How do you feel when you eat a dinner with a friend?
4. How did Cesar Chavez give the farm workers hope?

Define the essential vocabulary words, such as migrant, union, and nonviolence. (Students in grades 1 and 2 could receive additional words to use as their content vocabulary words on their weekly homework.)

**Activity 2:** 2 Days

Use the attached pictures (See Appendix A) and the content essay to give the students a basic understanding of the early life of Cesar Chavez and the Delano Grape Strike.
Grades K-1
Tell the students that they will be creating a class book about Chavez’s life. Read each page of the book (that you have written) aloud to the students. Divide the class into partner groups. Each group will illustrate one page of the book. Reread the book in class or share it with a neighbor.

Grade 2
Tell the students that they will write a class book about the many ways that Chavez helped the Mexican farm workers to fight for their rights. Brainstorm a list. Divide the class into partner groups. Each group will write and illustrate one page of the book. Read the book in class, and then add it to the class library.

Activity 3: 1 Day
Review the Mexican folk saying that Chavez’s mother recited to him. Help the students to understand that Chavez’s mother used this folk saying to help Chavez develop nonviolence as a character trait. Are there any special songs that the students’ mothers sing, or poems that they recite? Have the students write (or dictate to you) these songs, poems, or sayings on construction paper. Then, the students can use colored construction paper strips to frame these sayings. Explain that the students will be making a bulleted board that will show their mothers’ poems and sayings, along with Chavez’s mother’s folk saying. Hang all of the framed sayings, with Chavez’s mothers’ saying at the top. Compare and contrast the sayings.

Bibliography:


Appendix A: (Pictures to be used with activity 2)

Cesar Chavez outside his home in Yuma, Arizona

Cesar Chavez with his sister dressed for their first Holy Communion
Cesar Chavez with his Wife Helen and their 6 Children

Cesar Chavez working with other members of the Community Service Organization