Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Empowering Students by Addressing the Root Cause of Prejudice

Lesson By: Kari Crum, Lake County High School, Leadville, CO

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: High School ESL, could be adapted for middle school and high school Social Studies, Language Arts

Duration of Lesson: 50 minutes, 5 days

Content Standards:
NJDOE Scaffolded Model Curriculum for English Language Learners (ELLs)
Based on WIDA English Language Development and Common Core

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Grade 9-10 Reading Literature and Narrative Writing</th>
<th>Student Learning Objective</th>
<th>Language Objective</th>
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<td>SLO 3. CCSS RL.9.2 WIDA 2 Reading</td>
<td>Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text.</td>
<td>Read and analyze the development of the theme in detail over the course of a text using a Short Story Graphic Organizer</td>
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<tr>
<th>Grade 9-10 Speaking and Listening</th>
<th>Student Learning Objective</th>
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<td>SLO 22. CCSS SL.9.1 WIDA 2-5 Speaking and Listening</td>
<td>Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 9 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</td>
<td>Participate in a cooperative discussion setting using notes from a graphic organizer.</td>
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Lesson Abstract:
In this lesson which is designed for recently arrived immigrants, students will have the opportunity to share their stories of the impact that cultural violence has had on them. By reading about Gandhi and his experience with racism in South Africa, students will discover the power of addressing the root cause, and the principles of ahimsa and satyagraha, enabling them to respond to racism in an empowering way. The lesson will culminate in an exchange with a Spanish class, in which students will participate in a discussion about how students treat each other in their school.

Guiding Questions:
❖ How did Gandhi respond to racism?
❖ What are the root causes of violence that manifest as racism?
❖ What is nonviolence and how can we use it to respond to violence in a healing and empowering way?
Content Essay:

Violence takes a variety of forms in today’s schools. Students are subjected to bullying, racial slurs, name calling, and other forms of mistreatment by their peers. The issues of our society at large find their way into our schools every day, and students suffer in ways that keep them from learning. All over the United States, recently arrived immigrants attend our schools and may experience cultural violence inflicted by their peers because of their perceived differences. By teaching immigrant students, or any student who is perceived as different in some way, about Gandhi’s principles of nonviolence, we can help students respond to violence in a way that heals and empowers them. Stories are a powerful way of illustrating simple truths, and Gandhi’s story is one of discovering a simple truth that served him throughout his lifelong quest for social change: the root cause must always be addressed.

When Mohandas Gandhi arrived in South Africa as a lawyer educated in England, he purchased a first class train ticket to Natal. However, the officers on the train insisted that, because he was “colored”, he should move to third class. They physically threw him off the train for refusing to move to a lower class seat. In Gandhi’s autobiography (1993/1995-28), he describes his frustration with not being allowed to sit in the seat he paid for, and his fear from being beaten by a passenger: “My heart was beating within my breast, and I was wondering whether I should ever reach my destination alive” (Gandhi, 1993/1925-28 p.114). Other Indians in South Africa at the time seemed to have accepted this treatment as a condition of living in that country. “I told them all that I had gone through. They were very sorry to hear it and comforted me by relating their own bitter experiences” (Gandhi, 1993/1925-28 p.114). At first, Gandhi thought of challenging the train company and the specific individuals who had offended him, but then he realized that this would not solve the problem. Only addressing the root cause of the problem would keep others from experiencing this violence. He decided then not to take it personally, but to work to eradicate the root cause: racism against Indians in South Africa. He was 24 years old and had only been in South Africa for a few days (Sethia, 2012, p. 25).

Students can relate to these feelings of fear and frustration as they recall their own experiences of prejudice and other forms of violence. Many students endure name calling, racial slurs, teasing about what they are wearing, who their friends are, what they like, where they live, their language and their skin color. In addition, they may be victims of systemic violence. They might watch as their peers receive opportunities, resources and attention that are not available to them. They must find their way in a school system that treats them as an afterthought. They go home to a segregated part of the community with inferior places to play, learn and grow. Their families endure challenges that other children may never be able to imagine. Often the temptation is to retaliate by stooping to the level of the person or institution that is inflicting violence. In fact, if students were to read about Gandhi’s treatment in South Africa, and then be asked what they would do in this situation, an expected answer might involve something violent because this can be the response by a person without other tools in unjust circumstances. We can teach students another way through the principles of ahimsa (nonviolence).

Prejudice, like all forms of violence, stems from the view that we are separate from others. In the ancient story of The Buddha and the Terrorist, told by Satish Kumar in his 2004 book, the Buddha offers a murderer his friendship. When the murderer, whose name is Angulimala, is offered the chance to tell his story, we learn that Angulimala is in pain himself. Everyone in his life has abandoned him, and killing people is, in his mind, a way of regaining some power in his life. When asked by the Buddha if this is making him happy, Angulimala
admits that it is not. Upon realizing that he has a choice between stopping or continuing on the path that is not making him happy, Angulima decides to stop. He gives up his life as a terrorist and chooses love. Self-understanding leads to his freedom and gives him the ability to choose a different path (Kumar, 2004, pp.7-31).

Once students understand that violence is caused by the perpetrator’s pain and fear, it is possible to stop taking this violence so personally. This gives students more power than does seeing themselves as victims. They know that they can only control themselves, and that someone has to have enough courage to stop the violence. By consciously choosing to have compassion for someone who is being cruel, understanding what is behind it, and then choosing to not participate in the cycle of violence, a student has taken a powerful step, one that may inspire other students to do the same. It is possible that a bully will lose interest when it is clear that their victim no longer participates as a victim.

As a way of spreading the awareness of the impact of cultural violence, it may be empowering to have students share stories of their experiences. There are a variety of ways this can be done, and ultimately it is important to help students share in a way that is comfortable for them. They could interview other students and simply exchange ideas with each other, write poetry or short stories, or create artwork to describe the impact that these experiences have had. Stories are a great way of building empathy and compassion. We can all relate to each other’s human experiences. Cultivating a feeling of oneness will go a long way toward peace.

Bibliography:

Teaching Activities
Day 1
• Read the chapters from Gandhi’s autobiography “On the Way to Pretoria” and “More Hardships”, pp. 109-117 and/or show the movie clip from the train scene
• Discuss Gandhi’s feelings as a result of being mistreated on the train. Relate to his experience by sharing personal stories
• What did Gandhi decide to do, and what would we have done?

Day 2
• Read Chapter 1 of the The Buddha and the Terrorist (pp. 7-31)
• Use a graphic organizer to analyze the theme: what is the root cause of violence

Day 3
• Relate the readings from days 1 and 2 to our own experiences. How does it feel to be treated unfairly because of prejudice?
• Define violence and nonviolence (ahimsa). Sort several scenarios into the two categories.
Day 4
• Reflect on the past 3 days’ lessons and write interview questions or stories to share with the other class. (or poems, artwork)

Day 5
• Interviews and/or presentations

Materials Needed
• Copies of excerpts from Gandhi’s *Autobiography* and *The Buddha and the Terrorist*
• Copies of a graphic organizer to go along with readings
• White board
• Markers
• Train scene clip from the film *Gandhi* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Y3tZpAdWTc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Y3tZpAdWTc)
• Voice recorders
• Student journals
• Art supplies