Lesson Abstract:
This lesson will encourage students to reflect on their own education as it relates to personal self-rule. They will be introduced to Gandhi’s ideas about education and its purposes within the historical context of swaraj for India. Students will identify their self-chosen purpose for their education, and have the opportunity to commit to their own goals for themselves in a powerful way.

Guiding Questions:
- How are Gandhi’s ideas about education relevant to our students today?
- What role does education play in helping us to achieve personal self-rule?

Content Essay:
In our community and all over the United States, we have seen a rise in recent years in the number of immigrant students in our schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), English learners make up a tenth of students nationwide, and up to thirty percent in some western states. Many students who arrive in the United States later in their school years have a great challenge to overcome: learning English while trying to keep up
academically, and hopefully, graduate high school. For too many, this can feel like an almost hopeless proposition, especially in a system that was not and is not prepared to meet their needs. The path to language proficiency is a difficult one, and in schools that do not have resources to support these students, they all too often fall through the cracks. The social, political and economic climate is largely not tuned to support these students. They are the forgotten ones on the fringe, and our system is failing them. It is possible to draw parallels between the oppressed Indian people in South Africa during the time of Gandhi’s work there (Sethia, 2012, p.28) and these new members of our society. Likewise, it can be said that Gandhi’s ideas on education may well be transformational if implemented in today’s education system, especially for these students as individuals. Gandhi believed in change beginning with the individual’s own self-rule. Exploring how this applies to education can lead our struggling students to their own personal swaraj, one that empowers them to take what they can from the experience of being in school.

Most relevant to our time, Gandhi believed that education should be based on practical skills, in contrast with concentrating solely on book learning. Gandhi reasoned that education should be holistic, and that learning about a handicraft would involve naturally learning math, science, history and language. For example, a student in India at that time might have practiced a trade or handicraft like takli (a spindle). By counting the number of threads he was learning math. He learned about the history of cotton and the British Empire. While he was working he sang songs and developed language skills. By producing goods that enabled villages to be self-reliant, the child was participating in the struggle for a free India (Sadgopal, 2013, p.5). Similarly, a student in the 21st century United States might work on the relevant issues of our time by involving herself in projects for social change while learning a practical skill, such as the use of technology, social media, or sustainable practices. The Common Core Standards have attempted to emphasize project-based learning and 21st Century skills such as creativity and collaboration, with the hope of better preparing our students for today’s economy. We can take this a step further by transforming our classrooms into places where students are working toward real solutions to our vexing issues. In his discussion of the pedagogical relevance of Nai Taleem (new education) in India today, Anil Sadgopal (2013) alludes to the issues worth integrating into the curriculum:

Capitalism is experiencing an unprecedented crisis of climate change and global warming, unsustainable development and over-consumerism. There is concomitant unforeseen erosion of human values, alarming rise in militarism and frequent cycles of almost suicidal economic recession. All this has rekindled faith that the balance of logic of history may still be on the side of Gandhian common sense, experience and intuition. (p. 16)

While this work is practical and relevant, one challenge might be that students may see themselves as unable to make a difference as just one person. As part of their education, students should be exposed to many examples of people throughout history who have taken action and changed the world. Gandhi, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was influenced by him, are two examples that immediately come to mind. Throughout history, there are examples of individuals who made their life their message and changed the world for the better. It is individual swaraj and soul-force that make this possible for an individual. Swaraj means self-rule or freedom (Sethia). In this context, when students have taken responsibility for their education and have developed self-discipline, they are free. They are in control of their lives.

As teachers, we can facilitate ways for students to get what they can from a system that wasn’t designed for them, and at the same time, work for change from where they are. Taking
the challenges mentioned above, the teacher can challenge students to design their own learning projects around environmental or social causes. Each classroom involved in such a project could determine its community’s unique challenges and design a project appropriate to their context.

As educators, we know that making learning relevant for students is always a goal. What could be more relevant, and better, empowering, than working to change your own situation for the better, while gaining the benefit of knowing that you are helping others at the same time? That will feel a lot better to both students and teachers than trying to fit them into a mold that was never meant for them in the first place. Under this model, students would be the co-creators of a challenging, rigorous curriculum that meets them right where they are in the most natural way possible. Once this motivational model is in place, it is not difficult to imagine struggling students not only meeting, but exceeding our expectations.

Because it is important within any framework to meet students where they are, I would begin with asking students some basic questions that are usually not posed to them: What is the purpose, and what are the goals, of education? Who decides and why? What freedoms are we afforded within this system? Within those freedoms, what do we want to gain from coming to school every day? What will make it worth it, since we are here anyway? How can we take control of our own lives (find swaraj) here? Perhaps most importantly, what can others gain from our work here? Students must understand that giving up or just passing the time is not an attractive option, because it only creates more of the same, for themselves and others after them. Teachers and students working together and learning from each other can change the system from the inside out. It may be the only way to truly reform our education system.

By exploring the idea that education does not have to mean sitting in a classroom and reading a book, students and teachers can work together to design curriculum that is at once engaging, practical, challenging, action-oriented and inspiring. Students who are already struggling may have great ideas on what can be done to make things better, but someone has to ask them.

Bibliography:


Teaching Activities
• Hold a discussion with students about the purposes of education.
• Have students journal about their challenges, share with a partner, and then share out what they are willing to share. Write what was shared on the board.
• Take each challenge and discuss what students think could be done for improvement.
• Present a PowerPoint on Gandhi’s struggle for swaraj in India (this will follow a previous lesson on Gandhi and his work in South Africa, so students will have some background knowledge.
• Present Gandhi’s ideas on education and some of the ways they might be applied today.
• Give students a set amount of time, perhaps a weekend, to reflect on a project they could do to address an issue in our community or our world.
• Use these ideas to identify ways of meeting learning objectives and to set goals for the school term.

Materials Needed
• PowerPoint presentation (teacher-created)
• White board
• Markers
• Student journals