Ahimsa Center: K-12 Teacher Institute

| **Title of Lesson:** Harmony in the House: Gandhi’s Ashrams and Building a Classroom Community |
| **Lesson By:** Catie Griesdorn, Sunnyside Environmental School in Portland, OR |
| **Grade Level:** Kindergarten |
| **Duration of Lesson:** 5 thirty minute sessions over 1 week |

**Relevant State Standards:** Oregon
Social Sciences:
Understand personal and political rights of citizens in the United States.

SS.03.CG.02 Identify rights that people have in their communities

Understand participatory responsibilities of citizens in the community (voluntarism) and in the political process (becoming informed about public issues and candidates, joining political parties/interest groups/associations, communicating with public officials, voting, influencing lawmaking through such processes as petitions/initiatives).

SS.03.CG.03 Identify ways that people can participate in their communities and the responsibilities of participation.

**Lesson Abstract:** This lesson is an introduction to Gandhi’s principals of satyagraha, swaraj, and sarvodaya and how they were practiced in his ashrams in South Africa and India, and how these principles can be applied to the classroom community. These principles stress the importance of self, value of all work, and truth.

**Guiding Questions:**

- What are the principals on which Gandhi founded his communities, called ashrams, and how can we apply these to the classroom setting?

- What is the role of the individual in a well functioning community according to Gandhi and what could this look like in our classroom?

**Content Essay:**

“If there is light in the soul, there will be beauty in the person.
If there is beauty in the person, there will be harmony in the house.
If there is harmony in the house, there will be order in the nation.
If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.”

-Chinese Proverb
The Kindergarten classroom begins the year steeped in excitement, nerves, cleanliness, and a bit of chaos. Students often find this new community as their first experiences as independent beings that are part of a larger world. As the students and the teacher take the first couple weeks to get to know each other, the classroom, and the school, an organic discussion about community emerges. Community, defined by Jose Calderón, an American professor focused on history of social justice movements, is a “geographical, political, and spiritual body that is confronting inequality or trying to improve its quality of life” (90). For most students, their first thoughts about community are their home, brothers and sisters, parents, grandparents, and possibly roommates or other family members. Teachers ask students to stretch their thinking about community, where else do they “belong”? A list is made, and then referred to the next day to discuss it further. “What do all of these communities have in common?” or “What do they share?” are questions that teachers often begin this discussion with. Usually, there is a student or two who pipes up something along the lines of “rules!” It is standard practice at Sunnyside Environmental School to create a student-centered (though teacher prompted, negotiated, and finalized) list of agreements for our classroom community. However, this year will be different.

Mohandas Gandhi offered his readers a different idea of community in his books and nonviolence efforts. He describes in detail the various aspects of being a community member and what an ideal community is. The individual is rooted in satyagraha, “a method of securing rights by personal suffering” (xxiii), and dharma, the truth. These individuals comprise the greater community, which is founded in sarvodaya (the welfare of all) (Sethia 57). He even establishes several such communities in India and South Africa, the Gandhi Ashrams. Gandhi once described these ashrams as "group life lived in a religious spirit". The word "religious" was used here in the widest sense. The ashram did not enforce on its residents any theology or ritual, but only a few simple rules of personal conduct” (Gandhi’s Ashram Website). In incorporating Gandhi’s principles of satyagraha, dharma and sarvodaya, Gandhi created successful, meaningful, and cooperative communities where all members’ needs were satisfied, as well as those of the larger community. By understanding these principles and Ashrams, I can introduce and integrate them into my Kindergarten classroom to create a fair, organized, and empathic community of learners.

Mohandas K Gandhi began his life in 1869 in Porbandar, India. Like other middle class children, he spent his childhood learning, playing, and testing boundaries. After finishing school, he decided to study law in England, which he imagined to be “the very center of civilization” thanks to the financial help of his brother (Sethia 18). Away from the comforts of home, Gandhi was increasingly passionate about learning about the wider world. He also was exposed to modern civilization and its increasing reliance on money, technology, and the desire for more. After a while, he made conscious choices about paring down comforts and led an increasingly simple life (Sethia 21). Gandhi read several books that confirmed his faith in the values of truth, compassion, and forgiveness, which he learned from his family and community in India. Once he secured his law degree and was offered a legal aid position in South Africa, Gandhi took these values with him to a
new country.

It was in South Africa that Gandhi noticed the oppression and violence of Indians living there. The values Gandhi held as supreme were the very values that South Africans and the British were condemning. Wanting to defend both himself and the Indians in South Africa, Gandhi sought to challenge modern civilization and create a new community. “His agenda was to rebuild a demoralized community into a civil society in which individuals driven by their sense of ‘duty’ would engage in constructive work” (Sethia 55). Community, as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, “is a unified body of individuals.” Gandhi saw anything but union among the Indians living South Africa, especially due to the caste system and varying religions. He began testing boundaries, establishing guidelines for nonviolence non-cooperation, and wrote his autobiography, “My Experiments with Truth”.

Gandhi purchased 100 acres of land in Phoenix, near Durban, South Africa, and established his first experimental self-sustaining community. Gandhi invited his family and his fellow Indians to live there, working to produce the Indian Opinion newspaper and live a sustainable life. Sethia summarizes the Ashram below:

Life-style of the farm was based on ideas that were unique for those times…multiracial, multicultural, and class-free . . . the lifestyle of the farm was not just marked by the space the residents shared of the resources they utilized, but also by the shared principles guiding their lives. These were the principles of welfare of all, simplicity, self-reliance, and dignity of labor. (58)

Therefore, Gandhi’s vision of living values became a reality, a self-supporting community based on truth, simplicity, and work for the greater good.

As Gandhi’s movement in nonviolence, truth, and equality for all Indians grew, he identified the need for another Ashram in which to “provide support to satyagrahi’s and their families, and to train them in both civil society and civil resistance” (Sethia 70). As the Phoenix ashram “experiment” proved successful and was thriving, Gandhi desired to create a new ashram in order to further spread the movement. Thus the foundation of the Tolstoy farm on May 30, 1910. Another self-sustaining community, carpentry, sandal making, and other crafts were undertaken and sold to friends to generate income for the satyagraha campaign. After 21 years in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India with ideas of satyagraha and self-rule. Throughout the rest of his life he established several ashrams with similar principles and ethics of responsibility, self-rule, simplicity, and active participation.

Satyagraha was the only way to live in the ashrams. Gandhi defines satyagraha as “a method of securing rights by personal suffering” (lxxiii). Though, rights used more liberally than the definition to which we are accustomed. The editor of Hind Swaraj, Anthony Parel, unpacks “rights” as to meaning that “to every right there is a corresponding duty” (lxxiv). It is also commonly defined as soul/truth force or insistence.
on truth. Individuals living in the ashrams followed this value as well as swadeshi, or self-sufficiency, in that they must pledge to sacrifice their individual comforts and desires for the needs of the whole community. Cooperatively producing a newspaper, cooking and eating meals together, and producing homemade cloth are all examples of letting go of individual comforts and undertaking personal responsibility for the greater good of the community. Satyagraha becomes imperative in the larger Indian community when Gandhi organized and led the protest in South Africa to defy the ordinance proposing mandatory registration and presentation of the registration. Gandhi sees the ordinance as dehumanizing and representative of the South Africans hatred of Indians. He asks the Indians in audience to “understand their individual responsibility of remaining true to the pledge (of defiance) before taking the oath” (62). Gandhi regards satyagraha as more powerful than the weapons of the violence. By being rooted in one’s inner strength, one is rooted in courage and truth. As Sethia says, “it was based on the integrity of the ends and means, as two sides of the same coin. Gandhi regarded means as important as the ends” (63). By insisting on truth as the only way, Gandhi and his followers built a strong foundation for their nonviolent practice.

Gandhi wholeheartedly believed that each individual should also practice dharma. Dharma is the concept of duty, and is directly related to sarvodaya, the well being of all. In fact, that it is essential to realize and awaken each individual’s own dharma in order to create a sustainable peaceful community. His vision of sarvodaya led to the creation of his first Ashram, and was present in both the ashrams and the nonviolent resistance against the British. Sarvodaya to Gandhi meant “the good of the individual was contained in the good of all; the equal dignity of all work—a lawyer’s work had the same value as a barber’s; and that a life of labor was a life worth living” (Sethia 57). Gandhi believed in the importance and equality of all work, and that self-restraint is imperative. Each person must be willing to practice sarvodaya in order to have a well functioning community based on equality, sharing, and success. Sethia explains, “to practice simplicity so that there may be enough resources for all” (84). In the classroom, students often sharpen pencils to their end, wasting a pencil, and do not think about their effect on all of the students. In practicing and talking about swadeshi and sarvodaya, students will feel a greater responsibility to the group, sacrificing their wants, and ultimately satisfying their essential needs. It is their duty to ensure that the well being of the group comes before the well being of the individual.

Satyagraha, dharma, and sarvodaya are underlying themes present in Gandhi’s quest for nonviolence and equality as well as foundations of the ashrams in India and South Africa. Desiring to form a classroom community based on transparency, responsibility, empathy, and courage, these principles are equally valuable in the classroom. Satyagraha and the idea of a fair means will ensure a fair end. In other words, integrity and awareness of intention will serve students well in participating in the classroom. As Sethia says, “satyagraha can be practiced by everyone and applied to every sphere of life” (p.94). To elicit thoughts about motivation, we will discuss questions such as “When you saw things that are hurtful, how does it make you feel?” and, “What do you think about yourself?” By discussing these values and their practical application in the classroom the
learning community will have their first opportunities to help each other. Through the foundation in these democratic conversations, it will ultimately lead to a democratic classroom. Hopefully, this will lay the groundwork for an entire democratic school community, where teachers and all learners will have an equal voice and stake in the school.

Bibliography:


Websites:


Teaching Activities:

- Class discussion on creating community using pictures and stories of Gandhi’s Ashrams in India and South Africa
- Discuss idea of consensus with regards to making class decisions. Discuss importance of compromise so that all values and opinions are heard and validated.
- Read aloud *The Little Red Hen* and discuss concepts of sarvodaya and dharma in the story. From Wikipedia: In the tale, *The Little Red Hen* finds a grain of wheat, and asks for help from the other farmyard animals to plant it. However, no animal will volunteer to help her.

  At each further stage (harvest, threshing, milling the wheat into flour, and baking the flour into bread), the hen again asks for help from the other animals, but again she gets no assistance.

  Finally, the hen has completed her task, and asks who will help her eat the bread. This time, all the previous non-participants eagerly volunteer. However, she declines their help, stating that no one aided her in the preparation work, and eats it with her chicks, leaving none for anyone else.

  The moral of this story is that those who show no willingness to contribute to an end product do not deserve to enjoy the end product: “if a man does not work, let him not eat.”
- Role-play different situations where students could try our virtues.
- Class discussion about which responsibilities are necessary for our community during the first week of school. Create a class list. Revise the list over the next week. Decide as a class what jobs are the most important and who should do them and
Ahimsa Center: K-12 Teacher Institute

when. Practice this for a week, and then re-evaluate feelings and outcomes. Reflect in a class write and graph about whether it felt like everything got done and if it was fair or not. Make changes that the class decides on democratically, through consensus (51%). Revisit the next week, and have a class group write and again graph if it felt like everything important was taken care of and if it was fair.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o Chart Paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Markers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Picture book: <em>The Little Red Hen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Pictures of class responsibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>