Lesson: Gandhi’s Self-Rule and Democracy in the Classroom

Kristy Smith, Mariemont Elementary, Sacramento, CA.
5th-6th grade, Self-Contained Classroom
Duration of Lesson: 60 minutes, 4-5 days

Lesson Abstract:
In this unit, we will first look at Gandhi’s teachings and belief in “self-rule” or swaraj, and “self-sufficiency” or swadeshi. Students will find ways they can apply this to themselves in their own lives within personal responsibility at school, home, and in relationships with others. Students will connect this with the U.S. constitution and write their own personal constitution with their commitment to values. Students will write a whole class constitution embodying how they want our classroom to run, including their own personal responsibility within it.

Guiding Questions:

- How can the concepts of Gandhi’s self-rule and swaraj be applicable to student’s daily lives in the classroom and beyond?
- How can Gandhi’s concepts of commitment to vows, swadeshi, and his idea of self-sustaining communities be incorporated into the idea of creating a classroom community?
- How can we move this towards creating and forming a more democratic classroom?

 Relevant State/National Standards:
CSTP: Teachers establish a climate that promotes fairness and respect. Teachers promote social development and responsibility. Teachers establish and maintain standards for student behavior.

CA 5th grade Language Arts
3.0 Literary Response and Analysis
Students read and respond to historically or culturally significant works of literature. They begin to find ways to clarify the ideas and make connections between literary works.

Narrative Analysis
3.3 Contrast the actions, motives (e.g., loyalty, selfishness, conscientiousness), and appearances of characters in a work of fiction and discuss the importance of the contrasts to the plot or theme.
3.4 Understand that theme refers to the meaning or moral of a selection and recognize themes (whether implied or stated directly) in sample works.

CA 5th grade Social Studies
5.7.3 Understand the fundamental principles of American constitutional democracy, including how the government derives its power from the people and the primacy of individual liberty.
Content Essay:

“We must have a proper picture of what we want, before we can have something approaching it.”  -Gandhi, Hind Swaraj

Classrooms in which teachers impose classroom expectations or rules are not nearly as effective as students taking ownership of these, and have input in creating. In developing a classroom management program where students have more ownership, a goal is to have them create their own classroom “norms” or way they want their class to run. The final product will be a class “constitution,” in which students will make a vow or commitment in striving to follow. In doing this, Gandhi’s philosophies of “swaraj” in the context of self-rule, as well as “swadeshi” or self-sufficiency will be used as the foundation. Students will internalize these concepts, and apply them to their own lives, as well as within the classroom. This will enable students to have more ownership, and have the ability to form a more democratic classroom.

Swaraj

“It is swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands.”  
- Gandhi, Hind Swaraj

Gandhi had strong values and presented them to the public in what he professed, but also in how he lived his life as an outward expression of these inner qualities. He was a strong advocate for the value of all work, and didn’t believe that some professions were more valuable than others. He believed in the values that each individual had a responsibility to themselves, but also to all other humans and animals.

Gandhi used the word “swaraj” in different contexts to describe freedom at individual and national levels (Sethia). Swaraj can generally mean “self-rule” or self-governance, not by hierarchical rule, but by one of self-governance through individuals and community building. In this lesson I want to show students how individual “self-rule” is the building block to forming a classroom of personal responsibility and one where we look out and help one another. Gandhi’s vision of swaraj was one that encompassed being an active citizen along with exercising qualities of self-control, self-discipline, and self-restraint, over characteristics such as greed and aggression. These values were encompassed in internal swaraj, and must first be accomplished from within.

In the book Conquest of Violence: The Gandian Philosophy of Conflict by Joan Bondurant mentions this idea: “Swaraj for Gandhi is more than an object of research; it is something that has to be experienced internally, giving rise to an internal moral transformation of the individual. Without such an experience, swaraj would remain a mere theory or doctrine; it would never become an internal principle of action in the external political sphere.” Gandhi believed that internal swaraj must first be understood and accomplished, before pursuing outward swaraj.
Swadeshi
Another important concept to Gandhi was “swadeshi” within his movement. The word “swadeshi” generally meaning “self sufficiency” derives from Sanskrit, with “swa” meaning “self or own.”

India being self-reliant, especially in terms of not being reliant on England, was extremely valuable to Gandhi. For example, in terms of economics, this involved the boycott of British imports. One of the most effective and important examples of swadeshi for Gandhi was “khadi”, or hand spun fabric. He says that it was “the symbol of unity of Indian humanity, of its economic freedom and equality.” He believed that all parts of the process in making this, the Indians must be able to do on their own, with the goal of being self-reliant. Gandhi had a habit of spinning daily, and his charkha (spinning wheel) would become an important symbol of swaraj and economic self-reliance for India. He believed that this word applied to oneself meant reliance on one’s own strength. This means relying on your own body, mind, and soul. Tied together with swadeshi, is the term dharma, or duty and moral obligation. Swadeshi in this sense is tied to patriotism, or a sense of service and duty for the welfare of all.

In this lesson, students learn about swaraj and swadeshi, and develop what this means to them, and how they can demonstrate these character traits themselves in the context of their daily life. What does swaraj and swadeshi look like and can be demonstrated to students within the classroom, playground, with their friends, family, and themselves? Discussing this, and the commitment to a vow or striving towards an ideal will also be a topic to discuss. This will lead up to the writing of their own personal commitments or “constitution,” and lead to the collective class constitution.

Bibliography:


References for Students:

Teaching Activities:

1. Since many students may not come with much prior knowledge, first begin with a K-W-L chart to draw out what students know already about Gandhi, along with what they want to know.

2. Next, to give students an overview background on Gandhi’s life, read Gandhi, by Demi. Afterward, finish filling in the K-W-L chart about what we learned and discuss his life and history.

3. Next, bring into the discussion the two key concepts of “swaraj” and “swadeshi”. Give
students background on the meanings of these two words through discussion, and presentation. I also plan to use the imovie video created to expose students to these terms. Then brainstorm ways students can individually demonstrate these, and write on a web labeled “self-rule.”

4. From here, students will write their own personal self-constitution that encompasses the qualities that they want to embrace in order to have “self-rule”. It is important to stress that Gandhi said that individual’s must first focus on this, before we can move onto external swaraj, or the classroom as a whole. They will make their vow, or commitment to this by signing their name at the bottom. Next, students will type these up, and share with the class.

5. The next phase is moving onto a “whole class” constitution. Begin by brainstorming a vision of how students want our class to run, including how people treat one another, what that looks like in detail, and what each person’s individual responsibility is within the context of a classroom. After this discussion, students will now have the opportunity to write their version of what they think the class constitution should sound like. “We the students of Ms. Smith’s 5th grade class promise to…”

6. Next, after these are completed, assign each person to a group of 3. Within this group they are to share their version of the class constitution. Working together by collaborating with their group, they will use their ideas to write a constitution together, agreeing on what they want to include. They will present this final version to the class as a presentation.

7. Finally, take each group’s final class constitutions, and using their words and ideas, create a final class constitution, weaving in their key ideas and commitments. This will be put on large construction paper, and each student will sign their name on it- making their commitment or vow to doing their best to uphold this.

This poster will go up in class on the front wall, and each student will have to memorize the constitution within a certain time frame and rehearse it in front of the class. As a class, chorally say it 2-3 times a week at the beginning of the day (maybe after the pledge of allegiance), to keep reinforcing their ideals and commitment throughout the year.

Materials needed:
-Book: Gandhi, by Demi
-Bulletin board, Prometheum board, or Overhead
-Paper
-Overhead pens
-Overhead clear sheets