Title of Lesson: Montessori Cosmic Education and Gandhi: Common Quests for Nonviolence

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 4th and 5th grades
Class Size: Any Class Size
Time/Duration of Lesson: 1 ½ hours (at the beginning of the school year)

Guiding Questions:
- What are the similarities between Gandhi's views on an individual's responsibilities to duty (or *dharma*) and Montessori's concept of “Cosmic Task?”
- What do you think is the purpose of education according to Gandhi and Montessori? What do you think is the purpose of education? How is education related to nonviolence?

Lesson Abstract:
Maria Montessori, an educational pioneer who created a method of teaching based on child development, developed an interdisciplinary approach called “Cosmic Education” that echoes many of Gandhi’s teachings. Montessori and Gandhi both believed that individuals have a responsibility to learn about the world (and universe), understand the interconnectedness of life, and then nonviolently take action against injustices when necessary. However, this nonviolent work, as well as academic work related to the academic curriculum, can be done effectively only after an individual has learned self-control, thus gaining personal freedom.

Content Introduction

Maria Montessori and Mahatma Gandhi were two great thinkers and activists who developed philosophies focusing on the importance of individual responsibility and action during the twentieth century. Some fundamental concepts they shared, which I will discuss throughout this content essay, include:

1) Personal Freedom Through Accepting Responsibility
2) The Interdependence of Life
3) Responsibility (or Duty/*Dharma*) to Take Nonviolent Action Against Injustices

Lesson Content:

Maria Montessori was a medical doctor and, later, an educational “pioneer” who was born in Italy in 1870 and died in 1952. She based her ideas about education and child development upon observing children in cultures around the world. She believed that the goal of education was “the development of a complete human being, oriented to the environment, and adapted to his or her time, place, and culture.” As Paula Polk Lillard states in Montessori Today, “This adaptation involves the capacity to meet new situations and then have the courage to transform them when change is needed” (Lillard, 3). This is a very Gandhian point of view, since Gandhi believed that human beings have a responsibility (*dharma*, or duty) to change what they see as unjust. Regarding patriotism, Gandhi once wrote in his newspaper *The Indian Opinion*, “A patriot's first duty is to know the state of his country. Having done so, his next duty is to search for a remedy. This done, his third duty is to give effect to the remedy” (Gandhi, [http](http://www.gandhiserve.org/cwmg/VOL012.PDF)). He also stated in Hind Swaraj that “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to
attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves” (Parel, 1997, p. 67). Maria Montessori felt that students learned to understand their duty (or “Cosmic Task”) as human beings and citizens through participating in Cosmic Education. Thus, both Gandhi and Montessori felt that human beings have a duty (dharma – as Gandhi would have said) to work towards positive change in the world.

Cosmic Education is a philosophy of education developed by Maria Montessori that looks at the universe and all creation as being interconnected. She developed this philosophy when she and her son Mario were interned in India during World War II and became inspired by the ideas of spiritual unity and harmony of the universe inherent in the religious traditions she encountered there. Through her observations and studies, Montessori discovered that children gain a sense of morality and purpose through learning about this interconnectedness and developing a sense of gratitude for all that came before them. As Michael and D’Neil Duffy state in their book Children of the Universe, “Cosmic Education is the foundation for the entire Montessori elementary curriculum” (Duffy & Duffy, 1).

The second plane of development as described by Maria Montessori takes place between the ages of 6 – 12 years old and is the period of time in which the elementary curriculum is taught. During this plane, children begin to move from exploring concrete concepts to abstract ideas and their focus “shifts from individual formation to development as social beings…” (Lillard, 44). In essence, they are “reaching out to the world.” This is also the period of time when “children have developed the higher brain function required for reasoning” and for grappling with ideas of morality and ethics (Lillard, 48). They are trying to decide what is right and what is wrong.

All of these psychological characteristics of children in the second plane of development are what make Cosmic Education such an integral part of the elementary curriculum and able to more fully contemplate the fundamental concepts of Gandhian philosophy. For example, Montessori’s Great Lessons (including The Creation Story, which is a science-based story of the origins of the universe, The Timeline of Life on Earth, The Coming of Humans, The History of Writing, and The History of Math) are designed be taught every year in order to give students a sense of gratitude for what was accomplished before they were born and humility in learning how relatively short a time human beings have been on Earth at all. In fact, Montessori told stories during her Great Lessons and encouraged stories to be used in all aspects of education in order to help students connect to the concepts involved. As Aline D. Wolf states in Nurturing the Spirit, by learning through these stories how everything in the universe came from the same source, children realize that “if we destroy nature or harm other living beings we might be ultimately destroying ourselves. This realization is an underlying principle for promoting peace, equality and care of the earth” (Wolf, 93). The concept of respecting and keeping from harm all living beings (nonviolence, or ahimsa) was shared by Gandhi, as well. The development of his philosophy was greatly influenced and guided by the Jain religion, of which the most fundamental value is nonviolence. Thus, it can be understood that both Montessori and Gandhi believed in helping others develop respect and gratitude for life through ahimsa, and, consequently, performing the dharma of taking nonviolent action to positively affect the world.

Another essential component of Cosmic Education is the importance of students gaining freedom through accepting responsibility. As Lillard points out, “In reality, to be free means to be in control of self, to be able to do what one chooses to do, not what one's feelings or illogical thoughts of the moment may dictate (Lillard, 23).” As quoted earlier, Gandhi also believed that, “To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves” (Parel, 1997, p. 67). Therefore, children in an elementary classroom should be provided with ways to keep track of their work and to be accountable for their activities and behavior. As such, an elementary teacher should also make a strong effort to provide students with a learning environment in which they are given the ability to make choices (within limits) and discover self-control (Lillard, 98). Through working towards freedom through responsibility, students are better able to discover what is
right and wrong and, as a result, take nonviolent action towards improving their local and global communities.

This concept of freedom with responsibility was a fundamental concept for Gandhi, as can be seen in his ideas about the path of duty in civilization. While Gandhi wasn’t a traditional educator, he devoted his life to teaching people about nonviolence and how to become nonviolent practitioners. Much like Maria Montessori, Gandhi believed that human beings are interdependent. The word Gandhi used for nonviolence was *ahimsa*, which, as Raghavan Iyer stated in “Truth and Nonviolence,” “…means a willingness to treat all beings as oneself” (Iyer, “Truth and Nonviolence, 6/8). He believed that *ahimsa* could be found in the search for *satya*, or truth. In searching for truth through nonviolence, individuals gain *swaraj*, or self-control. As stated earlier, Montessori was also a big proponent of self-control, and she and Gandhi both believed that it helps individuals gain personal freedom.

Gandhi made a strong connection between an individual’s personal freedom through *swaraj* and the freedom of humanity through interdependence. Much like Montessori, he believed that human beings needed gain *swaraj* in order to learn to control “the chaos of sense-impressions and conflicting desires.” Once achieved, this self-control leads to a “constant awareness of the primacy and supremacy of truth (*sat*)” which “frees one from needless over-assertion or violent appropriation of any partial truths” (Iyer, “Nonviolent Resistance and Social Transformation, 2/8). In essence, self-control of body and mind helps individuals recognize truth over outside influences and seek the power of nonviolence.

Gandhi’s concept of *swaraj* included gaining personal freedom through practicing moral authority over oneself, which has to be experienced by each person for him or herself (Gandhi, 73 and Sethia, 803). This freedom involves growth towards *satyagraha* (from the word *satya*) - “an active pursuit of truth through love and nonviolence” (Sethia, 1373), which is entirely selfless. He believed that *satyagraha* is the most effective and method of transforming civilization and creating social change. He stated, “A *satyagrahi* [person who practices *satyagraha*] enjoys a degree of freedom not possible for others, for he becomes a truly fearless person” (Iyer, “Nonviolent Resistance and Social Transformation, 2/5). This search for truth and personal freedom are insights that children gain through Montessori’ Cosmic Education.

Aline D. Wolf makes the argument that other essential insights, such as the importance of conservation, values, hope and openness, are inherent in the study of Cosmic Education. Consequently, this curriculum could be viewed as an educational imperative when faced with the mission of nonviolence. Montessori described this duty of promoting unity for the human race, all forms of life, and the entire universe as the “Cosmic Task.” It is any person’s unique contribution to the evolution of humanity, something that children begin to work towards during the second plane of development. By examining the questions of *who they are, where they come from, and why they are here*, children begin to focus their education on becoming their true selves as members of society and citizens of the world. This questioning on the part of children as to their Cosmic Task is an essential step in nonviolence and can be approached on the individual level and the species level. As Michael and D'Neil Duffy state in *Children of the Universe*, “Montessori education can be a catalyst for peace in the world and for the preservation of our species and our planet” (Duffy and Duffy, 2).

Cosmic education can be an essential component of any educational environment, not just Montessori classrooms. This is especially important considering the fact that our Western culture so highly values individualism. Western civilization – especially in American society – is one that often esteems comfort and ease over compassion. However, as Maria Montessori wrote in *To Educate the Human Potential*, through studying the cosmic curriculum, children will ask, “Do we merely live here for ourselves, or is there something more for us to do?” (Montessori, 9) Montessori believed that learning to view all beings and all aspects of the universe as being connected can help children to
develop empathy for others, to come to understand that they are not alone, and to feel that they have a responsibility to take care of each other. This concept is inherently Gandhian in nature in that he also put great effort into helping others understand, appreciate, and take positive action (dharma) regarding the interdependence of humans.

Interestingly, in October of 1931, Gandhi spoke at the Montessori Training College in London where he and Maria Montessori are reported to have had the following conversation:

Gandhiji greeting her, said, “We are members of the same family.”.
“I bring you the greetings of children,” said Madame Montessori.

GANDHIJI: If you have children I have children, too. Friends in India ask me to imitate you. I say to them, no, I should not imitate you but should assimilate you and the fundamental truth underlying your method.

MADAME MONTESSORI: As I am asking my own children to assimilate the heart of Gandhiji. I know that feeling for me over there in your part of the world is deeper than here.

GANDHIJI: Yes, you have the largest number of adherents in India outside Europe.”
(Source: http://www.peace.ca/montessoriandgandhi.htm)

In Conclusion

Some fundamental concepts that Montessori’s Cosmic Education and Gandhi’s philosophy have in common are:

4) Personal Freedom Through Accepting Responsibility
5) The Interdependence of Life
6) Responsibility (or Duty/Dharma) to Take Nonviolent Action Against Injustices

State Content Standards:

Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Frameworks
Language Strand, General Standard 1: Students will use agreed upon rules for informal and formal discussions in small and large groups.
Language Strand, General Standard 2: Students will pose questions, listen to the ideas of others, and contribute their own information or ideas in group discussions or interviews in order to acquire new knowledge.

Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework
Civics and Government, 8: Define and use correctly words related to government: citizen, suffrage, rights, representation, federal, state, county, and municipal.

Massachusetts Arts Curriculum Framework
Visual Arts, Standard 3 – Observation, Abstraction, Invention, and Expression:
Students will demonstrate their powers of observation, abstraction, invention, and expression in a variety of media, materials, and techniques

Materials Needed:
• Children's biographical literature on Gandhi and Maria Montessori (perhaps Gandhi:
Peaceful Warrior, by Rae Bains and Maria Montessori: A Biography for Children, by Rayma S. Hayes

- Easel pad and markers (or dry erase board, or equivalent...)
- Blank paper and art supplies (i.e. colored pencils, watercolors, pastels, crayons, etc.)
- Pencils

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**

1. Create a KWL chart about Gandhi and Maria Montessori (K = What you already know, W = What you want to know, L = What you want to learn.)
2. Read biographical literature about Gandhi and Maria Montessori to the students (or have them read this literature individually).
3. Compare and contrast Gandhi and Maria Montessori – specifically their childhoods, careers, education, philosophies, and fundamental views. This can be done with a graphic organizer (such as a Venn Diagram) on the easel pad.
4. Discuss the idea of a Cosmic Task (i.e. What do you feel your individual contribution to the universe is or should be? For instance, a student might say that she feels her contribution to the universe is to be kind and compassionate to others) and the definition of the word citizen. Ask the students what they believe their Cosmic Task is. Also ask them what they think are their responsibilities as a citizen. Ask how having a Cosmic Task is different from their responsibilities as a citizen. Take into account the fact that not all students are necessarily citizens of the United States. However, the concept of being a citizen of a country can still be compared to the idea of an individual human being having a Cosmic Task.
5. Give out a blank piece of white paper to each student. On one side, each student should write a statement about what he or she believe is his or her Cosmic Task. On the other side, have the students create an artistic representation of their Cosmic Tasks. This can be done with any kind of art supplies you have available: colored pencils, watercolors, pastels, crayons, etc.
6. Save time at the end of the session for the students to join back together and share both their Cosmic Task statements and their artistic creations. Ask the students how they plan to work towards their cosmic task. Also, ask how they plan to make contributions as citizens (or residents).
7. Post the students' illustrations in the classroom (or somewhere in the school) and refer to them throughout the year to see how they are progressing in working towards their Cosmic Tasks.

**Bibliography:**