Title of Lesson: Continuing Gandhi’s Legacy of Cross-Cultural Understanding: Central Asia and the Middle East

Lesson By: Susan Milan

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: K-3

Class Size:
Whole class
Could do literature circles with different books, with older kids reading to younger

Time/Duration of Lesson:
30 min. background on Gandhi; subsequent 2-3+ days, 30 minutes per book

Guiding Questions:
• How did Gandhi foster understanding between people from different cultures?
• What do we share and how are we different from people in or from the Middle East and Central Asia (Pakistan and Afghanistan)?

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson will introduce Gandhi to children, focusing on his vision of unity and mutual respect. Students will develop awareness of children from Middle Eastern and Central Asian backgrounds through a variety of stories using authentic children’s literature. Students will notice and discuss similarities and differences between the story characters and themselves.

Lesson Content:
Mohandas Gandhi was a major influence on many people around the world, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He inspired people to choose nonviolence as a powerful tool to work for change. Gandhi was born in India on October 2, 1869. As a child, he learned meaningful lessons about truth and respecting others from his parents and a special story called Harishchandra, in which the main character is confronted with the challenge of telling the truth. These early experiences helped form his strong character and concern for others.

When Gandhi was 19-years-old, he studied in England to become a lawyer, after which he went to work in South Africa. In South Africa he experienced racial discrimination because he was not white. When he sat in the “white” section on the train, he was told he was not allowed to. His only option was to ride in the section with the suitcases, which he refused to do. Instead, he chose to stay off the train, much like Rosa Parks, years later. Later, while he was walking with a friend, a soldier told him he was not allowed to use the sidewalk because he was not white and proceeded to push him off. Gandhi was not angry at the soldier because he understood that the soldier was acting on orders, and was not the one to blame. He knew that the laws were not fair and that the soldier was just doing his job.

Gandhi had a deep understanding that in order to make things better, he needed to find a way to stand up for what he knew was right. He worked hard, using truth and caring for others as his guides, and did not give up. In this way, he was able to show that there was power in doing the right thing. This power was even stronger than using physical force, which he refused to do because that would lead to more hatred and violence. Although he had only planned on staying
in South Africa for one month, he was compelled to stay and challenge the laws and policies
that made people behave so unkindly. Through his actions and dedication, he inspired many
people to join him in this struggle to help make things better. He stayed in South Africa for 21
years, working for truth and fairness through nonviolent action (satyagraha). Large numbers of
people marched for their rights and were willing to get arrested rather than obeying laws that
were unfair. Nonviolence in thought and action (ahimsa) became the means for a powerful
movement that helped people work together to regain their dignity through courage, trust,
boldness, and compassion. He used kindness and love to fight injustice and hate, serving as a
model and teacher for Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many others around the world.

When Gandhi returned to India in 1915, it was a British colony, not yet an independent country.
He saw that relationships between people of different backgrounds and religions, Hindu and
Moslem, were causing many disagreements and could easily lead to violence. He knew that the
future of India depended on bringing these people together in friendship and said, “No question
is more important and more pressing.” (Fischer, 1982, p. 74) “Amity (friendship or good
relations) is possible, he said, ‘because I believe it is so natural, so necessary for both and
because I believe in human nature.’” (Fischer, 1982, p.75) Gandhi worked hard to bring people
together to create an independent country where everyone would be respected. He appealed to
them to use their hearts to see one another’s commonalities as people, rather than focus on the
differences that separate and lead to mistrust and possibly violence. “The need of the moment,”
he said, “is not one religion but mutual respect and tolerance of the devotees (followers) of
different religions.” This was his plea for “unity in diversity” meaning that he knew all people
needed to unite and feel connected to one another, and respect the different ideas and beliefs
they had. Gandhi went on extremely long, difficult walks to visit the people in small, remote
villages and towns from different backgrounds. His hope was to create awareness,
understanding, and trust between cultures. He describes his vision as follows:

“In this picture every religion has its full and equal place. We are all leaves of
a majestic tree whose trunk cannot be shaken off its roots which are deep down
in…the earth. The mightiest wind cannot move it.” (Parel, 1997, p.190)

Although Gandhi made progress towards creating friendship between the Hindus and Moslems,
they were not able to agree and unite as one country. In 1947, two independent countries were
formed, India and Pakistan. A year later, in 1948, “‘Gandhi …died with a broken heart,
because that nation that he wanted to unite ended up being divided between India and Pakistan
as a result of the conflict between the Hindus and the Moslems.’” (King, in Carson, 1998, p.
356). Gandhi was heartbroken that the people chose separateness. They did not unite and
respect one another’s differences. Sadly, disagreements and fighting between the two countries
continue to this day.

Today, our country is involved in conflicts in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. These
conflicts have resulted in much fear and mistrust of people from these countries, as we often
have little or no understanding of their cultures. Although there are some people in these
countries that are doing terrible things, we need to create an awareness that there are many,
many people who share the same basic qualities as we do. There are children who sing, laugh,
and play just like us. There are people who have fear and jealousy to overcome, just like us.
There are people working, farming, and caring for their families, just like us. When we can look beyond political boundaries and connect as people to people, we can be guided by the love and compassion in our hearts, as Gandhi did, rather than be guided by fear and mistrust. In this way, continuing Gandhi’s legacy, we can build an understanding that we are all part of a greater humanity, or global community.

In the primary grades, an effective means for building cultural awareness is through sharing children’s stories. There is a growing body of authentic children’s literature that portrays stories of children of Middle Eastern and Central Asian backgrounds (see annotated bibliography for suggestions). The children in these stories experience love, fear, kindness, jealousy, generosity, caring, insecurity, happiness, and sadness in the context of their cultures. As we share these stories with our students, they can connect to the characters and develop a consciousness that there are basic human characteristics that we share. As we notice and discuss differences between cultures, many teaching opportunities arise. How do geography, climate, and resources affect clothing, food, and shelter? What different customs and celebrations do people take part in? Rather than addressing differences as issues that separate us, we can explore and appreciate the richness of diversity. In this way, we can instill in our students the concept of “unity in diversity” and cultivate compassion. We can develop an understanding that our human commonalities are core to who we are, while our differences are more peripheral. Our students can begin to feel connected and have a sense of belonging to a global community where caring and kindness can flourish.

**Washington State Content Standards:**
Washington State-Reading: 3.4.1. Understand different perspectives of family, friendship, culture, and traditions found in literature.

Washington State-Social Studies: 3.2.1 Understands that the way families live is shaped by the environment.

**Materials Needed:**
- Variety of books about children from Middle Eastern and Central Asian backgrounds. It is suggested that at least 3-4 books be presented, to offer a broader view. Ideally, several books would be shared, representing more diversity of cultures and experiences, to avoid creating stereotypes. A suggested list is provided in the annotated bibliography.
- World map to reference countries.
- Internet access, projector: For further background on Pakistan and Afghanistan, including maps, videos, lessons, and fact sheets, visit Pennies for Peace, [http://www.penniesforpeace.org/](http://www.penniesforpeace.org/)
- Chart paper/white board/document camera to create class Venn Diagram.

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**

1. **Background on Gandhi**
   Introduce Gandhi and give a brief overview of his life, focusing on his vision of unity and mutual respect. The lesson will be most effective after the study of MLK, including tolerance and diversity, in order to build on those understandings. Questions: What did MLK learn from Gandhi? How are they the same? How did Gandhi try to get people who disagreed to come together and understand each other?

2. **Sharing Children’s Books**
Show cover and ask, What do you notice that’s the same as you or where you live? What’s different? How would it feel to live there?
Introduce character, and point out the country or region where the character lives (or family comes from) on the map.
Read through story, stopping every 3-4 pages to ask for similarities and differences, recording responses on a Venn Diagram.
After completing, ask for text –to-self connections, and allow children to share several. If time, allow them to record these through drawing and/or writing.

3. **Extension: Cross Cultural Exchange**—pen pals, art exchange program

4. **Extension: Art response projects**—collage, painting, depicting characters from favorite story shared.

5. **Extension: Service Learning**—Pennies for Peace (see website for details to participate in helping build skills in Pakistan and Afghanistan). This is Greg Mortenson’s project, author of *Listen to the Wind*, the children’s version of *Three Cups of Tea*.

6. **Extension:** Integrate music, art, and foods of Middle East and Central Asia.

**Bibliography:**


**Annotated Bibliography of Children’s Literature: Middle East and Central Asia**
Farah, a Muslim immigrant, feels very different from her classmates and feels very alone. She begins to discover some ways they are the same.

Nadia, a Pakistani-American girl, is preparing to be the flower girl at her aunt’s traditional wedding. She has her hands decorated with henna for the occasion, and is very worried about what her friends at school will think. She learns to feel proud of this beautiful tradition.

Ahmed lives in Cairo and spends the day delivering butane, leading his donkey cart through the crowded streets filled with market stalls, cars, and camels. He saves his very important secret for his family when he returns home.

Not recommended for very young or sensitive readers due to disturbing images. A young refugee dealing with loss and memories of bombings and violence finds solace in weaving rugs and finds inner strength to hope for the future.

Saba faces her fear of chickens and snakes and is able to overcome it using self-reliance and resourcefulness. The story setting is rural Pakistan.

Young Rani is jealous of the attention her mother gives Bibi, a special chicken, until Bibi goes missing and Rani finds out that she, too, can care very much for a chicken. The story setting is rural Pakistan.

Aneesa’s grandmother tries to cheer her up with beautiful clothes and special foods since her parents are gone during the holiday. Aneesa is moved to give these to two refugee girls who have recently fled their country due to war.

The children’s version of the story of Greg Mortenson’s first building project of a school in rural Pakistan.

Mona, who lives in the United States, visits her grandmother who lives in a small Palestinian village and discovers their connections.

A story of two girls living in a refugee camp who become close friends through sharing one pair of sandals.