Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Courage in Action

Lesson by: Rachel Moo, Neighborhood House Charter School, Boston MA

Grade Level/Subject Area: Grade 2/Social Studies, Character Development

Duration of Lesson: 45 minutes per lesson, 4-5 lessons total

Content Standards: (MA State Social Studies/History Frameworks)
2.C.6 Define and give examples of some of the rights and responsibilities that students as citizens have in the school (e.g., students have the right to vote in a class election and have the responsibility to follow school rules).

2.C.7 Give examples of fictional characters or real people in the school or community who were good leaders and good citizens, and explain the qualities that made them admirable (e.g., honesty, dependability, modesty, trustworthiness, courage). (C)

H.2.10 After reading or listening to a variety of true stories about individuals recognized for their achievements, describe and compare different ways people have achieved great distinction (e.g. scientific, professional, political, religious, commercial, military, athletic, or artistic). (H)

Lesson Abstract: Students in second grade will learn how courage is an essential characteristic of nonviolence efforts. Students will gain a greater understanding of the “courage in action” and that these actions may not be match what they think courage means. The class will explore why courage is one of the values that Neighborhood House Charter School expects students to live by.

Guiding Questions:
- How does Cesar Chavez demonstrate courage throughout his journey of nonviolence?
- How can we learn from Chavez’s example of courage?

Content Essay:
“When we are all really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belong to us. So it is how we use our lives that determines what kind of men we are. It is my deepest belief that only by giving our lives do we find it. I am convinced that the truest act of courage, the strongest act of manliness is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice. To be a man is to suffer for others.” - Cesar Chavez (Orosco, 91)

When someone looks at the life of Cesar Chavez, there are endless examples of how he showed courage throughout his journey of nonviolence. It is especially evident when you look at the three facets that Jose-Antonio Orosco describes as Chavez’s “logic of nonviolence” (Orosco, 41). One facet this logic was his use of pilgrimage, such as the Farmworker March to Sacramento. Chavez saw this march as a religious pilgrimage that
they had to make - a journey to empower through a spirit of sacrifice, which requires courage. In his belief of *penitence*, he saw this as a time for workers to model the idea of penance, or suffering for some greater cause. Chavez used the method of hunger fasts as a personal act of penance in which he hoped to clear his mind and as a symbol to remind the farmworkers that La Causa was a sacrifice of self for the greater good. Chavez believed that if you see someone suffering, it pierces your heart and motivates you to listen and help the person who is suffering. It was also used as a moral political strategy. It took courage for him to put self-inflicted suffering on himself in order to help see justice in a new way. And in his belief of *revolution*, it took courage to convince the other farmworkers to put themselves in solidarity with all people in oppression. This kind of courage can be hard to have when it seems like you are making a choice that goes against the majority.

Chavez also demonstrated a lot of courage when he took his approach towards refusing to be macho. Peace theorist Johan Galtung introduces the notion of cultural violence and states it involves using some aspect of a society’s culture to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence (Orosco, 74) The Chicanos view ‘machismo’ as having to be watchful, protective, and dominant over Chicanas in a society that is generally hostile to their culture. However, Rosalie Flores advised in a 1975 Chicano Journal, “the macho male is truly a larger man if he can free his sister from the petty hang-ups and attack the real issues. He can liberate his female and still remain ‘macho’ – for that desirous trait lies within oneself and his self esteem” (Orosco, p. 87) Chavez considered machismo to be something like a form of cultural violence and actively attempted to decenter machismo as a political principle for La Causa. “By refusing to be a macho, Chavez also made room for the redefinition of masculinity and the consideration of different styles of leadership that are more in line with feminist notions of decision making and empowerment.” (Orosco, 89) The challenge Chavez set for himself was to create an alternative to patriarchal masculinity as a whole in order to create a culture of peace. He recommended an interpretation of man as someone who is willing to put aside his own needs or interests to care for another (Orosco, 91-92).

Chavez saw the idea of machismo as standing in the way of building a culture of peace. In place of the traditional notion it held, he wanted the interpretation of a man to be someone who was willing to put aside his own needs or interests to care for another. Orosco states that Chavez wants a man to be someone who is willing to sacrifice himself and his well-being for the benefit of others, not by fighting or using physical strength but by taking the pain of others upon himself, feeling it, through nonviolent practices and discipline (Orosco, 91). He goes on to say that developing this kind of masculinity as an alternative is not only important in order to achieve social justice and reduce forms of violence in the world; Chavez suggests that it is also necessary for the personal fulfillment of men (Orosco, 94).

A reporter once suggested that Chavez sounded like a fanatic. “I am,” Chavez replied, “Those are the only ones who get things done.” (Ingram, p. 103) Being a fanatic would also explain his willingness to die for *la causa*. Chavez said “Nonviolence is action…if you really want to do something, be willing to die for it.” (Ingram, 103) Chavez showed time and time again that he was willing to make sacrifices without knowing the end results, in the name of *la causa*. In Ingram’s interview with Chavez, she notes all the sacrifices he and his family made for the cause: there were times when they
were so poor they couldn’t buy food, his family watched him be put in prison, and there were times while his children were growing up that he had to leave at crucial moments. Chavez responded, “You don’t have to present to spend time with them when you engage in the same struggle, because you are together when you engage in the same project. I think the strength in our family comes because it’s always been directed away from ourselves.” (Ingram, p. 107)

There is a widely-help misconception on what courage really means. Most often, it is associated with being brave, and that results in assumptions of being tough or macho. There is a notion that courage requires physical action, such as fighting back to defend yourself. Courage does in fact, require a tremendous amount of action, but those actions are not necessarily what are typically seen as courageous ones. Brute strength and force are not the only characteristics of having courage. Chavez would argue that the greatest demonstration of courage would be to take responsibility for your own life and actions, to promote nonviolence. Standing behind his tactics of the logic of nonviolence, taking what some would call a “radical” stance on masculinity in the face of a very dominant Chicano culture, making family sacrifices, and being willing to die for la causa, all took a lot of courage on the part of Cesar Chavez. If he were alive today, he would challenge society’s current definition of courage. Instead of saying having courage means being brave, he would say something more like, “Courage is doing the right thing when the wrong thing seems to produce better results,” or “Courage is looking past your personal goals and dedicating your life for the betterment of mankind.”

**Bibliography:**
Ingram, Catherine. *In the Footsteps of Gandhi.* Parallax Press, May 1990

**Teaching Activities/Materials Needed:**
- Begin a class conversation with asking students think the word “courage” means. Do certain things or people come to mind when you hear this word? Write down student ideas as they are shared.
- Ask students what kind of actions they think of when they hear the word courage. Why do they think of those actions.
- Introduce who Cesar Chavez was and his importance by reading *Harvesting Hope,* by Kathleen Krull and Yuyi Morales.
- Have students work in pairs or small groups to identify character traits of Chavez, and use a graphic organizer to write down their ideas.
- Talk to students about the “actions” one could take to show courage. Emphasize that it’s not always going to be physical traits. When using nonviolent methods like the ones Chavez used, it doesn’t require physical harm to anyone else.
- Using a series of teacher-created scenarios, have students compare and contrast solutions, and which one would require the most courage.
- Have students work in pairs or small groups to create a visual to add to a class poster of “Courage in Action”. Have the poster accessible in the classroom so students can add new ideas as the year continues.