Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Superhero Power

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 about Gandhi’s philosophy of ahimsa, and the power that ahimsa gives to everyone who chooses to follow it. Through a digital story, class discussions and writing, students will learn about Gandhi’s ideas of satyagraha and swaraj

Guiding Questions:
- What kinds of power do superheroes have?
- How does Gandhi’s idea of nonviolence give someone power?
- How are superheroes’ power and Gandhian power different from each other?

Content Essay:
Kids are always searching for the next cool superhero and the trend of who is more popular is always changing, usually based around whose movie is most recently out. Teachers over the last 10-15 years have seen it shift from Superman to Spiderman, Batman to Ironman, and most recently, Green Lantern to Captain America. The appeal of a superhero to today’s youth is understandable – they are big and strong, they have powers that humans don’t, they’re popular, and their goal is to save the world. Who wouldn’t be attracted to all that glamour? There is growing concern that while these fictitious heroes are splash all over the place, our kids are being sold on a myth and ultimately, on powers that will never come to be. But what if we were to educate kids on real-life human heroes? What if we were to not only teach them about these heroes, but also tell them that they possess the same power within themselves? Raghavan Iyer wrote, “Heroism is a quality of the heart, free of every trace of fear and anger, determined to exact instant atonement for every breach of honor. More than any rule-governed morality,
heroism can enable a person to stand alone in times of trial and isolation. It can also establish a deep concord between like-minded men and women loyal to their conscience” (4). Using his definition of heroism, it would seem that unlike the modern-day superheroes, the characteristics of a true hero are accessible to everyone.

When people think of Gandhi, they don’t necessarily think of him as a “superhero”, but when you look at his legacy and what he did, it would seem an appropriate title for him. While he didn’t have the ability to fly, wrap people up in webs, or transform into another object, he had the ultimate power – the power of soul-force. A founding principle of Gandhi’s philosophy is the idea of satyagraha. In Sanskrit, satya means “truth”, the equivalent of love (both relate to the soul); and agraha is “force or firmness”. Thus, satyagraha is “soul force” (Fischer, 35). It was also described by Gandhi as the love-force and this was his new movement: “the force of love is the same as the force of the soul or truth” (Parel, 89). Soul-force is what drives a person to do the right thing by all means necessary. Oftentimes this requires a degree of personal suffering, even to the point of the sacrifice of the self. Gandhi used this method of suffering through his fasting and marches, and numerous times he went to prison because he showed his personal strength of standing up for what he believed was right or truth and acted accordingly. “Everybody admits that sacrifice of self is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others” (91). Thus, when he disagreed with certain laws, he did not submit to the laws by disobeying and as a result, was arrested. This truth-force is what is also referred to as passive resistance.

One of the appeals of superheroes is the assumed power they have. Superman and Batman can fly, Spider man can leap to buildings in a single bound and capture villains in his secret webs, and Ironman is seemingly indestructible when he puts on his armor of iron. All of these superheroes do indeed have power, but one could argue that at times, they use this power haphazardly with the end result of seeking accolades for their power and bravery. They usually use this power to be better and stronger than their opponent and to ultimately “win” a battle. Gandhi’s belief was that in satyagraha, one attempted to win an opponent over rather than dominate them. He wanted mutual respect to be present in negotiations with all parties involved, looking to compromise, so that all that were involved would be satisfied. This type of negotiation would require self-discipline and thoughtfulness at all times.

If Gandhi were alive today, he would instruct these fictitious superheroes, who are only concerned with battling evil and saving that which is good, to start using the power within themselves. Gandhi was very specific about his ideas of swaraj, and Anthony Parel cites in his introduction to Hind Swaraj “the most striking aspect of spiritual swaraj is its experiential character” (xx). Gandhi wrote,

“And in this thought you have a definition of Swaraj. It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands. Do not consider this Swaraj to be a dream. The Swaraj that I wish to picture before you and me is such that, after we have once realised it, we will endeavor to the end our lifetime to persuade others to do likewise. But such Swaraj has to be experienced by each one for himself” (Parel 71).
Gandhi goes on to say that only those who have experienced ‘the force of the soul within themselves would be able to enjoy full swaraj, and liberate themselves completely (Parel114). In Gandhi’s writing he shows us how accessible swaraj is for each person. It’s not in a cape or a suit of iron or secret webs, but rather it already exists in each of us, we just need to find it and nurture it. Gandhi’s approach to nurturing this power is contradictory to what we would expect. According to Iyer “…for Gandhi, the greatest obstacle to the incarnation of the heroic ideal in society is, paradoxically, the absence of humility….whilst heroism is cultivated skill in action (karma yoga), humility is the virtue of effortlessness (buddhi yoga)” (4). What it seems Gandhi is saying here is that humility is an essential attribute of a real hero.

One of the most empowering things about Gandhi’s “soul-force” is that not only do we each possess it, but it is a weapon that never breaks down, runs out of ammo, doesn’t run on batteries, and stands the test of time, battle after battle. Gandhi explains, “love-force, soul-force…this force is indestructible…The force of arms is powerless when matched against the force of love or the soul.” (83). Gandhi himself describes it as the most powerful and simultaneously least destructive ammunition that exists, and all the while is thinking about how using it would affect others. Gandhi shows this when he says “Passive resistance is an all-sided sword; it can be used anyhow; it blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used. Without drawing a drop of blood, it produces far-reaching results. It never rusts, and cannot be stolen.” (Parel, 92). Gandhi goes on to say that nothing is as powerful as soul-force – that not even the mightiest physical strength stands up to it. It is explained by Gandhi as, “Passive resistance, that is, soul-force, is matchless. It is superior to the force of arms…Physical-force men are strangers to the courage that is requisite in a passive resister.” (Parel 91). For many, the most appealing aspect of soul-force is that it’s untouchable by anyone else. Badshah Khan, a contemporary of Gandhi explains "I am going to give you such a weapon that the police and army will not be able to stand against it. That weapon is patience and righteousness. No power on earth can stand against it…”

As students read about Gandhi and his life-long journey with ahimsa, it will become clear that he viewed soul-force not merely as having power, but as an innate part of who we are. Our challenge to students should be to have them pursue lives which will allow them to grow and develop their soul-force – that they would learn and understand the practice of compassion, truth, fearlessness, courage, self restraint, trust, forgiveness, and service. In understanding the meaning of swaraj as self-rule and the quest for self-improvement, they will begin to see the power of the soul-force within themselves.

Bibliography:

Teaching Activities/Materials Needed:
• Show the digital story “The Superhero in You”. Have students compare and contrast the different types of heroes in the videos. Ask about similarities and differences between the fictitious ones and the human heroes.
- Ask students to work in groups to think about what the word “power” means. Have the groups share out their ideas to the class (verbally, on a poster, etc.)
- Using the video, have a discussion about what it means when Gandhi, Chavez, Huerta, MLK used the **power** of their “words” and “belief in peace” to make the world a better place. Ask students what they think that means, and write down their ideas.
- Introduce the concept of ahimsa, and using the Gandhi quote “love-force, soul-force…this force is indestructible…The force of arms is powerless when matched against the force of love or the soul”, talk with students about what this soul-force would like in the classroom and/or at school.
- Have students work individually to draw themselves a hero with the power of “soul-force”. They can create a visual (poster, illustration, clay figurine, etc.) of themselves as a hero.