Title of Lesson: Mohandas Gandhi: Childhood Stories of Truth and Nonviolence

This lesson can be used as a foundation for the lesson on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (See: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Childhood Stories of Truth and Nonviolence by Michael Pinkava).

Lesson By: Michael Pinkava

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: Grade 5/ Social Studies

Class Size: 15-25 students

Time/Duration of Lesson: 4 Sessions/ 30-40 minutes

Guiding Questions:
• Who was Mohandas Gandhi?
• What childhood experiences influenced Gandhi’s sense of truth (satya) and nonviolence (ahimsa)?

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson, which can be used as a foundation for the lesson Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: Childhood Stories of Nonviolence by Michael Pinkava, encourages students to understand Mohandas Gandhi as a child and as a person who learned the power of “Satyagraha” through his life experiences. Students will have the opportunity to explore how they too are developing a sense of truth and nonviolence, and how they can be a leader of their own lives and their community.

Lesson Content:
Mohandas Gandhi was not always a bald old Indian man with glasses and a mustache who wore a loincloth. While this is a popular image of Gandhi, he like all people started his life as a vulnerable infant and a curious child. Indeed, Gandhi did become a most influential person in his time, accomplishing exceptional things most well known in the service of others. For this reason, how he came to be so well known and how as a person he became capable of such exceptional humanity is of incredible value to young children. Fostered in the childhood life of Gandhi were a sense of truth and nonviolence. His sense of truth and nonviolence developed in a way in which he was able to realize the power of these two entities. Now possibly more than ever, providing the opportunity for students to realize their experiences which foster a sense of the power of truth and nonviolence and how they continue to learn from these experiences under these guiding ideas is of the utmost relevance. Why should students seek truth? Why should students act nonviolently? Why should students believe that they could be agents of change in their own lives and the lives of others? The answers to these questions can be found in the childhood life of Gandhi and how truth and nonviolence led this person to not only discover himself but also to become a person who discovered a need to cultivate humanity through truth and nonviolence.

Mohandas Gandhi, though a servant to the impoverished and underserved for much of his life, was not born of such a background. Born on October 2, 1869 in the city of Porbandar, Gujrat, in western India, Gandhi’s father, Karamchand, was a prime minister, and held notable status in
the community. Gandhi’s mother, Putlibai, in contrast was a simple yet “devout, illiterate Hindu” woman (Fischer, p. 9). Through his father though, Gandhi, along with his 3 older siblings grew up in a family that owned several homes and wore gold, a sign of wealth on their bodies (Fischer, p. 9). Although Gandhi saw himself as a shy and at times mediocre student, his abilities, sense of duty, and privilege led him through a formal education which concluded with a law degree completed in England. His law degree as well his family’s connections to politics led him to practice law in South Africa. During this time, Gandhi went through several life-altering experiences that drew his attention to inequalities and injustices experienced by the people of color in the British colony. Possibly lesser known than Gandhi’s well documented nonviolent Salt March that led to the independence of India later in his life, Gandhi’s work in South Africa influenced him greatly and consumed over 20 years of his life’s service. In South Africa as he did later in India, Gandhi organized a people mistreated by the British system of colonial rule and led them to defeat a military presence with the weapon of nonviolence and truth. In his lifetime, Gandhi transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Indian people both in South African as well as India. While Gandhi was not always well received in his life, and his assassination on January 30, 1948 by a young Indian man points to this, Gandhi lived a life of truth and nonviolence that positively influenced so many people.

While the historical events that Gandhi influenced are significant for students to be aware of, how he developed a sense of truth and nonviolence, and realized their power, is of even greater importance. While there are many stories in Gandhi’s childhood that elucidate how Gandhi became the person he was, two in particular enlighten his sense of truth and his sense of nonviolence in way that young children can appreciate and understand.

Truth in Gandhi’s language of Gurajati is “Satya” (Gandhi, p. 319). According to Raghavan Iyer, as Gandhi developed he learned that “a constant awareness of the primacy and supremacy of Truth frees one from needless over-assertion of violent appropriation of any partial or particular truths (p.2).” In other words, truth is an ultimate not a belief; and a consciousness of what is true allows for greater self-control. A great example of a test of Gandhi’s self-control and consciousness of truth took place when he was in his first year of high school. In his autobiography, Gandhi relates this story:

“There is an incident which occurred at the examination during my first year at high school which is worth recording. Mr. Giles, the educational inspector, had come on a visit of inspection. He had set us five words to write as a spelling exercise. One of the words was “Kettle.” I had mis-spelt it. The teacher tried to prompt me with the point of his boot, but I would not be prompted. It was beyond me to see that he wanted me to copy the spelling from my neighbour’s slate, for I had thought that the teacher was there to supervise us against copying. The result was that all the boys, except myself, were found to have spelt every word correctly. Only I had been stupid. The teacher tried later to bring this stupidity home to me but without effect. I never could learn the art of ‘copying (p. 6)”

In this story, Gandhi realizes that his consciousness could not allow him to cheat because he would not be true to himself. He was more courageous in not getting a perfect score than in being seen as stupid because he knew that what he had done was a true reflection of him. In realizing this, Gandhi instilled in himself a sense of truth that would allow him to see more
sophisticated truths later in his life that fostered his ability to perform nonviolently in historical events.

Nonviolence in Gandhi’s language of Gurajati is “Ahimsa” (Gandhi, p.319). Iyer states that Ahimsa “in the widest sense, means a willingness to treat all beings as oneself (p.6).” This is a common virtue in many religious text, the golden rule, do on to others as you would want done onto you. Ahimsa does not stand alone. In order to be nonviolent, one must be conscious of truth. Through a challenging time in his teenage years, Gandhi came to realize the power of being conscious of truth and how it enables both parties on the side of conflict to act nonviolently. In his autobiography, Gandhi relates a story where he steals and then asks his father for forgiveness:

“… when I was fifteen … I stole a bit of gold out of my meat-eating brother’s armlet. This brother had run into a debt of about twenty-five rupees. He had on his arm an armlet of solid gold. It was not difficult to clip a bit out of it. Well, it was done, and the debt cleared. But this became more than I could bear. I resolved never to steal again. I also made up my mind to confess it to my father. … I wrote it on a slip of paper and handed it to him myself. In this note not only did I confess my guilt, but I asked adequate punishment for it, and closed with a request to him not to punish himself for my offence. … [When he] read it through … pearl-drops trickled down his cheeks, wetting the paper. For a moment he closed his eyes in thought and then tore up the note. … Those pearl-drops of love cleansed my heart, and washed my sin away. … This was, for me, an object-lesson of Ahimsa (p. 27-28).”

In this story, Gandhi learns that it took incredible self-restraint for his father to forgive him for such a terrible thing. He stole money from his brother. What allowed his father to act nonviolently against Gandhi, however, was the fact that Gandhi was truthful and openly admitted to that which he knew was wrong. In this sense, Gandhi realized that in many ways the truth sets you free. Furthermore, when you act nonviolently, it is more likely that the person you are in conflict with will realize the truth behind your action.

As an adult, Gandhi began to use the Gurajati word “Satyagraha” to describe a “Truth-Force,” a power of nonviolence driven by truth (Gandhi, p. 319). Gandhi’s tactics in challenging a British colonial system with the truth and acts of nonviolence was both original in its time and inspirational in history. Being conscious of the truth in oneself and in a situation allows a person to realize responses one may make both violent and nonviolent that will resolve both large and small serious conflicts. “Satyagraha,” “Satya,” and “Ahimsa” have a place in the lives of everyone, from teachers to students to the larger world. Fostering thoughts in the classroom around these principles is dearly needed and will have notable rewards for all just in being exposed to them. We should all strive to be capable of being “Satyagrahi,” people who act nonviolently and truthfully in conflict and in life.
New York State Content Standards:
Social Studies (Grade 5)

SS 5.1.4A: Respect the rights of others in discussions and classroom debates regardless of whether or not one agrees with their viewpoint.
SS 5.1.4B: Explain the role that civility plays in promoting effective citizenship in preserving democracy.
SS 5.1.4C: Participate in negotiation and compromise to resolve classroom, school, and community disagreements and problems.

Materials Needed:
- A picture book on Mohandas Gandhi, the anecdotes from Gandhi’s childhood contained in the content essay, digital storytelling video (see Ahimsa website), chart paper or a white board, markers, pens, pencils, construction paper, lined paper, and any other writing utensils and paper goods.

Suggested Teaching Activities:
The lesson is presented sequentially. The books and extension activities are clearly suggestions only. These activities can be integrated towards a culminating activity, none or some of the activities can be used towards an end activity, or no activity could be used other than the discussions. These activities may also be connected to those in the lesson on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.. If you care to brainstorm further, feel free to contact me at mpinkava@gmail.com.

- Read aloud a picture book on Mohandas Gandhi and familiarize the students with who he was and what he accomplished. Have a large class discussion on what the students also know about him and why they think he is important.
  - Examples of Books:
    - *Mohandas Gandhi: A Life of Integrity* by Sheila Rivera
    - *Gandhi* by Demi
    - *Our Gandhi: Child of Fear to Man of Freedom* by V. Malo Schaaf and Eknath Easwaran
- Focus the students on the childhood of Gandhi. The goal of this exploration is to get the students to realize the value of telling the truth. Have a brainstorming session on what “Truth” is. After jotting down some of the students’ ideas, share the story from the content essay in which Gandhi points to a time when he realized what truth was. Have the students share personal stories like when they lied or told the truth. Ask the students questions around moments when they’ve realized what truth is. Revisit the chart of ideas before the story and discussion. Allow the students to add to it.
  - Possible Extensions:
    - Cut out pictures from magazines and newspapers that remind the students of what truth is. Have the students write a few sentences or a story that relates to truth and the pictures. An example might be a person thinking, makes a student relate that to a person thinking about the truth.
    - Write a personal narrative about a time the student told the truth.
• Write a short reflection piece on what the students think truth is.
• Focus the students again on the childhood of Gandhi. Have a brainstorming session on what “Nonviolence” and/or “Violence” is. You can use a Venn diagram or simply make a thought-web. After jotting down some of the students’ ideas, share the story from the content essay in which Gandhi points to a time when he realized what nonviolence was. Ask students questions around times when they chose to act violently or nonviolently when they were in a conflict. Focus on the nonviolent responses and why the students felt they worked. Revisit the chart and add to it as needed. The goal of this exploration is to get the students to realize the value of a nonviolent response.

  • Possible Extensions:
    ▪ Cut out pictures from magazines and newspapers that remind the students of what nonviolence is. Have the students write a few sentences or a story that relates to nonviolence and the pictures.
    ▪ Write a personal narrative about a time the student was nonviolent in a conflict.
    ▪ Write a short reflection piece on what the students think nonviolence is.
• Revisit the main accomplishments of Gandhi. Introduce the word “Satyagraha.” Discuss why the students think that his knowledge of truth and nonviolence helped him accomplish his goals.
  • Possible Culminating activities:
    ▪ Create picture books that explore what “Satyagraha” is.
    ▪ Write short pieces on the power of nonviolence.
    ▪ Share a digital storytelling piece created by the teacher or class as a whole that demonstrates an understanding of “Satyagraha.”

Bibliography:

