Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Using Gandhi’s “Talisman” and Glasser’s “Choice Theory” to move schools toward places of nonviolence.

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
High School/Social Studies Classes/World History/Psychology/ Discussions of violence in schools.

Duration of Lesson:
10-15  60 minute lessons

Content Standards:
Colorado High School World History Standard. Grade Level Expectations #3 (SS09-GR.HS.1-GLE.3) The significance of ideas as powerful forces throughout history.

Lesson Abstract:
What specifics could be learned from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. William Glasser to help move our schools towards places of nonviolence? Gandhi’s Talisman reminds us that schools should give priority to the needs the most marginalized students. Glasser’s Choice Theory explains why students sometimes choose violent behaviors, and it offers insight concerning how to decrease those behaviors. If we want our schools to be places of nonviolence, Gandhi’s Talisman and Glasser’s Choice Theory offer important ideas for educators.

Guiding Questions:
Why do people behave the way they do?
How can Gandhi’s Talisman be applied to schools?
How can Glasser’s Choice Theory be used to promote non violence in schools?

Content Essay:

Using Gandhi’s “Talisman” and Glasser’s “Choice Theory” to move schools toward places of nonviolence.

Violent behavior in our schools is nothing new. Some forms of violence on the part of students include fights, verbal assaults, bullying, and peer pressure. Teachers, administrators and the general school climate can also promote institutional violence in the form of coercion, control and fear. If schools want to move toward becoming places of nonviolence, what specifics could be learned from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. William Glasser? Gandhi’s Talisman gives us specific advice on making the necessary decisions to move schools toward places of nonviolence; and Glasser’s ideas of Choice Theory enable us to better
understand the needs of our students and the choices they make. The teachings of both Gandhi and Glasser could help move our schools toward becoming places of nonviolence, where more resources could be directed toward fostering learning and growth, and less energy wasted in dealing with reoccurring forms of violence.

Gandhi’s Talisman

So how do we make the decisions necessary to help transform our schools into places of nonviolence where basic needs of students can be met? Gandhi gave us a specific tool, a talisman to guide us in our decision making. The following lines are a direct quotation from Gandhi’s Talisman. In an attempt to keep the focus on decisions affecting schools, the word “student(s)” in non italics has been inserted on two occasions, along with a brief definition of swaraj:

Gandhi’s Talisman

I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man (student) whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to Swaraj (freedom) for the hungry and spiritually starving millions (students)?

Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away.

What a gift this is for educators. Having an actual human face in mind, the face of someone you know in need, can be a powerful influence on how we behave. In his article “Gandhi’s Talisman: A Guide for Living” Andrew Moss states: “the talisman remains today an extraordinarily compressed statement on Gandhian thought- and a guide for living for many people.” Imagine what our schools might be like if educators and administrators used this as a guide. Even if we could never fully achieve some nonviolent utopian dream, the Talisman gives us a wonderfully clear roadmap concerning how to move in that direction. By applying the Talisman to decision making, schools would move toward becoming places of equality and unity, where division would become less of a factor contributing to violence. The sense of power inherent in some teachers and administrators would greatly fall off. Gandhi spoke of sarvodaya, the well being of all. Students would feel less marginalized because the traditional hierarchy (with students on the bottom) would hopefully disappear.

Gandhi is clear that the way to get there for schools or countries is to focus on poorest and weakest, not letting them slip into any kind of lower status. If all students felt truly valued, if there was much less coercion, control and fear; the violence in our schools would have to greatly diminish. In short, Gandhi’s belief regarding a nation’s greatness can also apply to schools, a school’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest and most marginalized students.
The Talisman also includes the concept of *swaraj* or freedom. *Swaraj* also means self-rule. It can be viewed on two levels: self-rule regarding India’s independence, and self-rule of the individual practically and spiritually. “For Gandhi, *swaraj* did not just simply mean political liberation from colonial rule; it also meant the fulfillment of an individual’s highest potential through the mastery of one’s emotions and desires”(Moss, p.2). Gandhi might suggest that *swaraj* in schools involves the individual control of emotions and desires on the part of educators and students to reach their highest potential by acting nonviolently.

**Gandhi’s Examples of Nonviolence**

Nonviolence involves love, compassion, courage, forgiveness, gratitude, and trust. How Gandhi reacted to violence on the part of the British in South Africa and India gives us great examples of how schools can react to violence. In both countries, Gandhi led campaigns of nonviolence in reaction to violence. He sought common ground and negotiation with his adversaries. With nonviolent actions he was able to transform the roots of the conflict, and ultimately transform his adversaries. Gandhi’s main adversary in South Africa, General J.C. Smuts, reflected:

"It was my fate to be an antagonist of a man for whom even then I had the highest respect. He never forgot the human background of the situation, never lost his temper or succumbed to hate, and preserved his gentle humour even in the most trying circumstances”

(Sethia pg. 54).

If a school were to move toward nonviolence, students facing consequences for their violent behavior would have to feel like they were treated with respect, dignity and love.

Prior to Gandi’s famous “Salt March” to protest the British tax on salt, Gandhi wrote to the British Viceroy, trying to negotiate. While the content of his letter was clearly critical of the inequality of situation, (“you [Viceroy] are getting much over five thousand times India’s average income”), Gandhi chose language conveying the utmost respect for the Viceroy as a person: “Dear Friend; On bended knee I ask you to ponder over this phenomenon; I have too great a regard for you”(Sethia, pg 111-112). As educators, there is much we can learn from Gandhi in choosing our language, and maintaining respect when dealing with students.

**Glasser’s Choice Theory**

On the website for the William Glasser Institute, there is the following quote from Gandhi: "As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world--that is the myth of the atomic age--as in being able to remake ourselves.” The inclusion of this quote appears to link Gandhi’s idea of individual *swaraj* with Glasser’s theory involving individual choice.

In William Glasser’s 1998 book, *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*, he attempts to explain why people behave the way they do. Choice theory states that:

- **all we do is behave,**
- **almost all behavior is chosen,** and
- we are driven by our genes to satisfy five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun.

With this theory in mind, let’s think of our schools; why is there violence? How can our responses to violence become more nonviolent?

Take the example of a student yelling at teacher. The underlying cause is most likely not the result of anything relating to teacher. We teachers generally know this, and we often try to dismiss such an incident with something like: “Boy that student has problems, more than I’ll ever know about.” But Glasser’s approach simplifies the situation for teachers. We don’t need to know all their problems to understand their behavior. The student in the example is choosing this behavior to satisfy one of his or her basic needs. We don’t even need to know which one. The question becomes: Can we help establish an environment at school where students can get some of their basic needs met? Can I as a teacher do anything in my relationship with this student to help them meet their needs?

Examining our schools through the lens of meeting basic needs would lead us toward making our schools more nonviolent places. The key questions, aside from if a school is meeting basic survival needs such as food, water and shelter become: Do our schools offer students a sense of love and belonging? Do students feel like they have any power in our classrooms and hallways? Are they getting their need for freedom met during the school day? Are they having any fun?

If violence at schools is commonplace because students are not getting their basic needs met in their lives, then we have to try to make schools into places where students can fulfill some of those needs. This is not rocket science. It involves creating school environments based on the nonviolent principles espoused by Gandhi: love, compassion, courage, forgiveness, gratitude, and trust; and the basic needs theory of Glasser: people will behave in order to meet their needs for love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun.

Gandhi and Glasser would appear to agree that the path to creating nonviolent schools begins by looking inward. Glasser states that the only thing we can control is our own behavior, and every behavior (both good and bad) is chosen. We cannot control the behavior of others, but we can choose nonviolence in how we behave toward others. People will have make their own choice concerning their response to our behavior. Similarly, Gandhi believed in the idea of controlling one’s own mind. Controlling one’s own mind, both emotions and desires, leads to ethical thinking, ethical thinking leads to ethical behavior, which is ultimately everyone’s duty.

Conclusion
If schools want to move toward becoming places of nonviolence, much could be learned from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. William Glasser. Gandhi’s Talisman can be applied when making school related decisions, remembering to keep the most marginalized students in mind. Glasser’s ideas of Choice Theory teaches us that students will choose behaviors (sometimes violent ones) to meet their basic needs. If schools can develop climates where students feel a sense of love and belonging, power, freedom and fun; incidents of violence
will greatly decrease. Both Gandhi and Glasser give us important insight into human behavior and what is truly needed in education to move our schools toward nonviolence.

**Bibliography:**

**Possible Teaching Activities**
- Discussion centered on Choice Theory and William Glasser’s ideas of 5 basic needs.
- Free writing activities on Choice Theory
- Lecture/Discussion on Nonviolence Gandhi’s lessons of Nonviolence
- View Film: *Salt March* from *A Force More Powerful* series
- View Film: *Gandhi*
  - Many “discussion questions” relating to the film can be found online. One list of possible film questions can be found at:
  - Another interesting website with numerous lesson plan ideas and discussion questions relating to the film can be viewed at:
  - [http://www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/gandhi.html](http://www.teachwithmovies.org/guides/gandhi.html)
- Free Writing activities on Gandhi’s Talisman
- Assessment of our school, are we meeting our basic needs?
- Essay Choice:
  - How would our school be different if we all took the teachings of the *Talisman* to heart?
  - What could we change at our school to better meet our basic needs?

**Materials Needed**
*Choice Theory* by William Glasser
Handout of 5 basic needs.
Free Writing activity on Choice Theory
Notes on Nonviolence and Gandhi’s lessons of Nonviolence
Film: *Salt March*
Film: *Gandhi*
Free Writing activities on Gandhi’s Talisman by Andrew Moss