Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson Plan

Title: Sowing the Seeds of Ahimsa

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: High School, 9-12/ Social Studies.

Duration of Lesson: 100 minutes.

Florida State Standards:
SS.912.C.2.8
Analyze the impact of citizen participation as a means of achieving political and social change (e.g. boycotts, blogs, protesting).

Teacher Standards
1.1. d. Understand and apply knowledge about the effects of racism, stereotyping, and discrimination in teaching and learning of ELLs from diverse backgrounds and at varying English proficiency levels.
2. Recognize the major differences and similarities among the different cultural groups in the United States.
13. Plan and evaluate instructional outcomes, recognizing the effects of race, gender.

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson aims to scaffold the meaning of violence and nonviolence and expose the tools of nonviolence to students as a means of achieving social change. Students learn the tools of nonviolence from the activities and the essay. The essay lists the characteristics of ahimsa as noted by Martin Luther King and illustrates these through stories from Gandhi’s life. It is hoped that the students learn not only to stand up for their rights, but also to bring about justice and transformation peacefully.

Guiding Questions
1. What is ahimsa and what are its characteristics?
2. Why is swaraj needed to achieve ahimsa?
3. What are some of the ways Gandhi achieved ahimsa?

Content Essay: The Path to Ahimsa

Mahatma Gandhi was aiming at getting independence from the British Raj or rule. However, there are several ways in which he led himself to that goal that were and still are quite unique. First was to free himself and the Indians of their own ills through swaraj or self rule, so that they could get rid of both the “tiger’s nature and the tiger” (Parel, 27). This meant not only freeing the oppressed from the oppressor but freeing the oppressed of its own ills also, so that a better society could be created. The second was to reach out to his community. This required freedom from hate or ahimsa, love for all (including his enemies) and the courage to stand up to the truth and justice “at any cost” (Parel, 26). In this way, he established the path for swaraj and freedom through ahimsa (nonviolence) and passive resistance. In fact he called passive resistance a “truth force.”
In describing Gandhi’s nonviolent ahimsa path, I have drawn heavily from Staughton Lynd’s chapter called *Martin Luther King Jr. “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence”* from his book *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History*. King himself chose the nonviolent path in the face of violent injustices. He writes, “I had come perilously close to resenting all white people” (Lynd, 380). Yet, he realizes soon that “the poor white were exploited just as much as the Negro” (Lynd, 380). Seeking a cure for injustice, and a way to deal with it, he started to critically read many philosophers. In his “intellectual odyssey to nonviolence” (Lynd, 86), he felt dissatisfied with “utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, the revolutionary methods of Marx and Lenin, the social contracts theory of Hobbes, the ‘back to nature’ optimism of Rousseau and the superman philosophy of Nietzsche” (Lynd, 386). He finally seemed to get some guidelines from Gandhi. He writes “I came to feel that this was the only morally and practically sound method open to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom” (Lynd, 386). He further writes, “As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my skepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished and I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform” (Lynd, 386). Here I outline the path and the characteristics of nonviolence as described by King. The stories shared here from Gandhi’s life are used to illustrate how he lived these characteristics. The stories are mostly collected from Tara Sethia’s book, *Gandhi: Pioneer of Noviolent Social Change*.

**Fearlessly Nonviolent**

King notes that the first characteristic of nonviolent nature is being fearless. He says, “nonviolent resistance is not a method for cowards.” (Lynd, 391). It is for the strong but strong in what way? Gandhi himself clarifies that being strong in the fight against evil, or injustice “does not require the training of an army; it needs no Jiu-jitsu. Control over the mind is alone necessary, and, when that is attained man is free like the king of the forest and his very glance withers the enemy” (Parel, 92). This is exemplified by two prominent stories that illustrate Gandhi’s fearless, yet actively nonviolent fight for his rights. The first one is when Gandhi arrives in South Africa for the first time as a visitor to help with a legal case. In his first day in the court, in addition to his western styled clothes, he wears an Indian turban, which in Indian culture is worn to show respect for others. When asked by the magistrate to take it off, Gandhi felt insulted and refused to take it off (Sethia, 32). In fact he got active about this sense of injustice and wrote in the local newspaper, the Natal Advertiser to express his views on this (Sethia, 32). In these acts he shows that he not only passively fighting injustice through non cooperation, but also actively writing about it in the journals. However, it is also interesting to note that when he returned to South Africa as a resident, he did not wear the turban any more, in order to show respect for the local norms. The difference in the two situations is that in one he held on to his rights as a *visitor*, and which meant that he did not need to go by the local norms. In the second, he showed his respect to local norms as a *resident* by giving up his own cultural norms. In this way, Gandhi was both fearless and self corrective to instill justice.

In the second incidence in South Africa, Gandhi was rudely thrown out of a train for sitting in first class, though he had his ticket. This was because a white passenger came in and did not want him there (Sethia, 33). This was extremely insulting for Gandhi, who had never been treated this way. Yet it was this incident that transformed him. He made an important choice as is depicted below:
He deeply disliked the idea of earning his livelihood at the cost of his self-respect and began to think of his “duty.” Gandhi found himself on “the horns of dilemma.” He debated his options. Should he return to his native country? Should he press his rights and seek justice for his unfair treatment? Should he proceed to Pretoria to pursue his assignment without paying attention to what had just happened? Would it not be an act of cowardice to return to India without completing the assignment? Such questions kept on haunting him all night. He resolved his dilemma, in the end. Instead of taking the incident as a personal assault and humiliation, he dug deeper to find its root cause in the wide-spread problem of color prejudice in South Africa. He resolved to address the problem of color prejudice and endure suffering in the process (Sethia, 33).

About reacting to violence Gandhi said “nature has implanted in the human breast ability to cope with any difficulty or suffering that may come to man unprovoked” (Parel, 96). The stories above show how Gandhi struggled internally to set aside the insults, fears and even the ego, in order to make a choice for establishing truth, which was to find out why he was treated in this way. In this process, Gandhi started his own journey to satyagraha (truth force) and ahimsa.

It may be further noted that the self must be so aware and strong so as not to be blown away by the “majority” or the bigger community. In Gandhi’s own words “it is a superstition and an ungodly thing to believe that an act of a majority binds a minority. Many examples can be given in which acts of majorities will be found to have been wrong, and those of minorities to have been right.” (Parel, 90). Hence he establishes the fact that in order to be truly a free person, one must be aware of what is right and wrong, and not just follow the masses in a mindless manner. This is almost sinful to him. In fact according to Gandhi, “passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness. Those alone can follow the path of passive resistance who are free from fear, whether as to their possessions, false honor, their relatives, the government, bodily injuries, death” (Parel, 96).

**Develop an understanding rather than humiliating.**

The above incidents also clearly illustrate King’s second characteristic of ahimsa. That is to understand and develop friendship with the oppressor, rather than humiliate them. In the face of such insults, he could have turned bitter, acted violently himself out of anger and injury, but instead “he dug deeper to find its root cause in the wide-spread problem of color prejudice in South Africa” (Sethia, 33).

**Attack the system, not the person.**

King notes that another characteristic of ahimsa is that the “attack is directed against forces of evil rather than against persons who happen to be doing the evil” (Lynd, 391). In Gandhi’s own words, “it is quite proper to resist and attack a system, but to resist and attack its author is tantamount to resisting and attacking oneself… for we are all tarred with the same brush, and are children of one and the same Creator and as such the divine powers within us are infinite. To slight a human being is to slight those divine powers and thus to harm not only that being but with him the whole world” (Gandhi, 276). This is how deep Gandhi’s connection was to all of other creation. While he fought against the ills of society, he never condemned the individual. In South Africa, while he was quite disturbed by unjust system imposed by the British and was himself a victim of it, he never condemned any person. Instead he fought tirelessly researching, collaborating, mobilizing, sacrificing in order to cause a transformation. In India, he took it to a higher level, by fasting, and marching in order to show non cooperation and to establish truth and justice. He worked from a place of love, rather than hate, (which is the meaning of ahimsa). This is further illustrated in the way he signed his letter to Hitler as “your
friend”, despite Hitler’s atrocious crimes against the Jews. This level of detachment from the emotions of the self, and this level of attachment to truth, and mankind take much self discipline and self purification, without which a nonviolent way is not quite possible.

**Suffering and Service Instead of Retaliating**

Martin Luther King states that that the fourth characteristic of ahimsa is to choose to suffer rather than retaliate. This is depicted once again in the injustice he experienced in South Africa. While traveling on a stage coach, he once again had a first class ticket, but he was refused the permission to sit on his seat and was forced to sit on the footboard. “Gandhi could not bear the insult. However, struggling to keep his anger contained, he gathered the strength to refuse to sit on the footboard stating that he had paid the fare for a proper place in the coach. This was not the response the conductor was accustomed to. Gandhi was dragged out of the stagecoach and was assaulted physically by the conductor until some passengers inside the coach intervened. When Gandhi finally got to Pretoria from Charleston, he was refused a hotel because of his color” (Sethia, 34). While Gandhi suffered the blows, he did not retaliate violently. Instead, his suffering of “the wrongs inflicted by the Europeans on the Indians” (Sethia, 35), he went on a spiritual search. The result was that he found his tool or armament from the Bhagavad Gita and this was equanimity. Eventually “he began to prepare himself to dedicate his free time to community service. In serving his community, Gandhi focused on three aspects: learning about the history of Indian immigration in South Africa and the causes of color prejudice there; working on the Indian community; and working for the Indian community” (Sethia, 36). Such stories of suffering and service continue even in India in his effort to fight injustice in the Indian society and to re-establish truth and freedom there.

**Selfless Love for Others**

The fifth characteristic of ahimsa is selfless love for others even in the face of violence. In King’s own words, “The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love. The nonviolent resister would contend that in the struggle for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter or indulging in hate campaigns. To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe” (Lynd, 393). The ultimate expression of Gandhi’s selfless love is the way Gandhi gave up his tailored clothes to wearing just a loin cloth in order to empathize with the poor in India.

**Faith**

King notes that the sixth characteristic of ahimsa is the “faith that the universe is on the side of justice” (Lynd, 395). Faith is an antithesis to fear, hence making Gandhi and his likes fearless in the fight for truth.

**Conclusion**

On the whole we see then that according to Gandhi, a well centered self, rooted in truth is the true warrior to fight social ills needed to re-establish justice and truth. This path was followed by King and Chavez (the nonviolent warrior for the rights of Hispanic farm workers in the US), to fight their battles in a nonviolent way. This takes a lot of self correction, self purification, dedication and discipline. If we truly want to get rid of violence, we have to be dedicated to first rid ourselves of all forms of hate and discrimination, and then be fearless to stand up for these in the larger public arena. As Gandhi said, “be the change you want to see.” So the first step is to work on our own selves through the tools of ahimsa established in this essay.
Bibliography:


Teaching Activities:

**Scaffolding Activities**
Start the class by screening different forms of violence on the screen and ask them to answer the two questions below for each slide.
- Is the picture depicting violence?
- What form of violence do you see?

1. Break the class into groups of four and have them share the answers to the above questions. Then share as a class.
2. In the same groups, have the students discuss and write down the answers to the following questions:
   - How do you define violence?
   - What is being done about it?
   - What forms of injustice do you see in everyday life including school?
   - What leads to injustice?
   - What leads to violence?
   - What have you ever done to create justice or peace?
   - What does the community do about creating peace and justice?
   - List one situation when justice was established peacefully.

3. Convene as a class and discuss the answers.
4. Ask students if they know about Gandhi’s role in nonviolent conflict resolution? After hearing a few answers, distribute copies of the Essay: *Tools for Nonviolence and Path to Ahimsa.*
5. Have the students answer the following questions as a group:
   - What are the characteristics of ahimsa?
   - Check the ones you can relate to or think you have that characteristic. Share and explain with your group why you think so.

6. Share the answers as a class and hear any reflections on the reading.
7. Have the students discuss the following as a group. Give each group one construction paper.
   - List disparities that exist in this class community? in your society?
   - What action can you give to either understand that disparity or give a service to correct it? How are you following the characteristics of ahimsa as discussed by ML King.
   - As a group develop one visual of the list of needs in your group and list who can help with each of these needs?

8. Share the answers. Post the list of needs and services on the bulletin board for the rest of the year.

**Conclusion**
Screen the poem, *Making Peace*, by Denise Levertov (1923-1997). Ask the students to share the meaning of the poem and how it links to the concept of ahimsa.

**Homework:** Reflection essay: Describe your personal journey that you had in this class today. Did it open any new doors, and where does this take you?

**Extension Activities/ Enrichment (1 class)**
Have students read Fireflies by Yoko Ota and Truman’s Statement and answer the following questions as a group:
   - The view points of each, and have them give their reflections on each.
   - What is the impact of violence, are the costs too high? Is it worth it? Is Truman justified in his action?
   - What was the real reason for the bombing?

Discuss the questions as a class and have them write a letter to Truman discussing the situation from a nonviolent angle.
Share the stories.

**Materials Needed:**
   - Construction Paper;
   - Content Essay in Student Version
   - Digital Story: Broken Bridge (with pictures of violence)
   - Copies of Poem- *Making Peace*, by Denise Levertov
   - Fireflies by Yoko Ota
   - Truman’s Speech