Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute

Title of Lesson: Youth Participation in Nonviolence

Lesson By: Henry Seton

| Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 9-12 | Class Size: 20 (plus/minus) | Time/Duration of Lesson: Anywhere from one 90-minute lesson to a multi-week unit |

Guiding Questions:
- Are the protests led by South African high school students in 1976 the only significant example of youth being involved in nonviolent struggle? Are there examples of this phenomenon in recent US history?
- What did two nonviolent luminaries, Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, think about youth involvement with nonviolence?

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson seeks to bring to light examples of youth participation in nonviolence resistance beyond the historic 1976 protests of South African high school students. In particular, it highlights the role of black high school students in the 1950/60s black freedom struggles in the southern US. Finally, this lesson explores the attitudes of Gandhi and King towards youth participation in nonviolence.

Lesson Content:

INTRODUCTION

In June 16th, 1976, the high school students of Soweto in South Africa grabbed the attention of the globe by means of their brave example of nonviolence. In the thousands, these youth boycotted their schools and marched into the center of the township in order to protest a recent educational decree which required that schools use the Afrikaans language as the language of instruction. Afrikaans, a Dutch creole, was widely considered the language of the oppressive apartheid government, so these youth took it upon themselves to organize and carry out their own nonviolent protest. This protest, along with the violent backlash by apartheid police, captured international headlines. The powerful photograph of 12-year-old Hector Pieterson, carried lifeless in the arms of another youth who was walking beside Hector’s sister, appeared on the front page of newspapers around the world. (Apartheid Museum Website, 2009)

In the estimation of historians of the anti-apartheid struggle, this day—more than any other day—marked the beginning of the end of apartheid. Although the apartheid system did not officially fall until the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994, the nonviolent protests of the youth on June 16th, 1976 played an unprecedented role in the resistance to the apartheid regime. The youth’s courageous efforts served both to alert the world to the cruel injustices taking place in South Africa and to encourage their parents, grandparents, and other elders to stand up and play a greater role in the fight for freedom.
Is this epic example of youth participation in nonviolence an aberration in the annals of nonviolence? Is nonviolence resistance otherwise only an adult phenomenon? Is nonviolence in the end only supposed to be for “grown ups”?

This essay wishes to draw attention to other little-known examples of youth participation in nonviolence from our own nation’s history as well as explore the attitudes of two important adults, Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, on nonviolent participation by young people.

**YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN NONVIOLENCE IN THE HISTORY OF THE US**

**Desegregating Schools:** Before welder Oliver Brown from Kansas was convinced by the NAACP to bring the condition of his daughter’s schooling to the Supreme Court, a high school student in Virginia decided to take school segregation matters into her own hands. Barbara Johns, a sixteen-year old student in Farmville, cleverly organized a massive student walkout and boycott to protest the savage inequalities between the facilities at her black high school and the nearby school for whites. As the boycott of the school system continued for weeks, Johns received death threats but managed in the end to enlist legal support from the NAACP. This legal case was eventually combined with the Kansas case and others in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling by the Supreme Court in 1954 (Carson and Lapansky-Werner, 2005, 85-86).

**Desegregating Transportation:** Virtually everyone knows about Rosa Parks’s famous arrest for refusing to give up her seat on a segregated Montgomery bus in December 1955. However, very few people know that she was not the first person to be arrested for such a charge in Montgomery. Earlier, in March of that year, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year-old Montgomery high school student, found herself under arrest for the same reason. Full of anger about a black classmate who had falsely been convicted of raping a white woman, she refused numerous requests to give up her seat to whites on her bus. Although her case did not receive the same publicity as Parks, it is important to note that it was a young person who first protested segregated busing in that crucial city of the black freedom struggle (Levine, 1993, 87).

**Desegregating an Entire City:** In the classic Birmingham desegregation struggle of 1963, youth played arguably the critical role in bringing about its success. Several months into the struggle, the movement’s leaders realized that they, in the words of one, had “scraped the bottom of the barrel” of adults willing to go to jail for the struggle (Cook and Racine, 82-83, 2009). Thus, the struggle’s leaders controversially decided to recruit the participation of local youth in special church-based sessions. The response of the Birmingham youth was overwhelming. Thousands of them signed up to march and protest. Over 2500 students spent time in jails as part of their nonviolent protests. In the face of police dogs, fire hoses, and threats of expulsion from Birmingham schools, these youth courageously stood up for justice and, in the view of many historians of the movement, served as the crucial tipping point in the Birmingham struggle (Carson, 1998, 208).

**THE ETHICS OF YOUTH INVOLVEMENT IN NONVIOLENCE**

Despite these significant instances of youth involvement in nonviolence, it remains the
norm for youth to remain observers of rather than participants in such resistance. Is this because experts in nonviolence would consider most youth too immature to participate in nonviolent resistance?

If we examine the writings of both Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr, it appears that neither luminary seemed particularly opposed to youth participation in nonviolence. Writing in his landmark text of 1909 Hind Swaraj (or Indian Self-Rule), Gandhi highlighted the inclusiveness of his approach, in that “both men and women can indulge in” nonviolence. Unlike most violent methods of resistance, nonviolence “does not require the training of an army; it needs no jujitsu.” According to Gandhi, “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, 1997, 94). With such a definition of nonviolence, there appears little reason why Gandhi would deplore youth involvement in nonviolence as long as the youth demonstrated the requisite self-awareness to choose to participate and the requisite self-restraint to participate in a disciplined fashion.

King, due to his involvement in the Birmingham Children’s Crusade, had to speak to the issue of youth and nonviolence more directly. Many leaders, both white and black, were disapproving towards the participation of high school students in the often violent confrontations with police. Malcolm X famously chastised King for these encounters, insisting that “real men don’t put their children on the firing line” (Cook and Racine, 82-83, 2009). A chorus of critics assailed King and other leaders in Birmingham for “using” the youth as part of their larger, adult struggles.

King, however, did not back away from such criticism but instead adamantly defended the active participation of the youth in the Birmingham struggle. In response to the large number of letters that the movement was receiving, King asked, “Where had these writers been, we wondered, during the centuries when our segregated social system had been misusing and abusing Negro children?” King challenged the hypocrisy of such critics whose apparent indignation on behalf of the youth only surfaced when their oppression made the nightly news. Where were these supposed advocates of black youth, King asked, when “Negro infants were born into ghettos, taking their first breath of life in a social atmosphere where the fresh air of freedom was crowded out by the stench of discrimination?” (Carson, 1998, 207).

King went so far as to argue that not only was such youth involvement in the movement justified, but that it played a salutary effect in the youth’s development as human beings. By taking risks to fight for a better future for themselves, the youth of Birmingham, King wrote, were able to cultivate “a sense of their own stake in freedom and justice” (Cook and Racine, 82-83, 2009). This critical participation by youth not only encouraged their elders to take a greater role in the movement but also increased the likelihood that these youth would continue to take the lead in nonviolent resistance to injustice when they became “grown-ups” themselves.

**Conclusion**

As this essay hopefully makes clear, the involvement of youth in nonviolent resistance is hardly a rare phenomenon, and if we look carefully, we can find examples akin to the 1976 South African example within our own recent history as US citizens. Thus, it is the responsibility of educators to share such examples with students as well as the writings of Gandhi and King which give explicit and implicit support to such resistance by youth. Students have a right to learn about the struggles of youth in the past. Our students may very well be our only hope in the fights for justice looming in our future.
Massachusetts State Content Standards:
- WHII.44 Explain the reasons for the fall of apartheid in South Africa, including the influence and ideas of Nelson Mandela.
- USII.25 Analyze the origins, goals, and key events of the Civil Rights movement.

Materials Needed:
- Overhead Projector
- Handouts/Transparencies (to accompany below activities)
- *King and Global Liberation* curriculum guide (Ed. by Carson, Spero, & Mohnot)

Suggested Teaching Activities:
- **Image Close Reading Hook:**
  - Have students examine images of the South African student protests of 1976.
  - Have them record observations, inferences, and questions on the accompanying handout.
  - Discuss their responses to the images before giving a mini-lecture on the events that the photos of 1976 record.
- **Activities from the *King and Global Liberation* Curriculum Guide**
  - Do any of the activities about youth involvement in the black freedom struggles in the 1950s/60s in this wonderful guide. Especially see 76-89 for great activities to get your students reading, writing, discussing.
- **Guest Speakers**
  - Invite local youth activists to your school to talk about local issues of injustice with your students.
- **Contemporary Youth Nonviolence**
  - Have students research contemporary examples of youth participation in nonviolent resistance. Examples include the following:
    - Young People’s Project (http://www.typp.org/)
    - Vietnamese American Young Leaders Association of New Orleans (http://www.vayla-no.org/)
    - Abahlali baseMjondolo – The Residents of the Shacks (http://www.abahlali.org/)
- **A Force More Powerful**
  - This moving documentary and book (by Ackerman and Duvall) brings to life how many youth today in South Africa are grappling with issues of nonviolence as well as with the related and relevant concept of forgiveness.
- **Injustice Speeches**
  - Have students research a local issue of injustice and develop their own speeches around this injustice. Speeches could include rhetorical devices, specific plans for nonviolent resistance, etc.

Bibliography:


(Supplementary lesson documents on the following pages)
**IMAGE RESPONSE HANDOUT**
Look closely at the four images on your handout and then fill in the table below. For each image, write at least 5 observations (details you see), at least 3 hunches (based on your observations), and at least 3 questions.

Feel free to jot down specific notes rather than write full sentences. Space for Images C & D is on the back.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I see/observe...</th>
<th>I have a hunch/educated guess that...</th>
<th>I wonder...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I see/observe...</td>
<td>I have a hunch/educated guess that...</td>
<td>I wonder...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>