Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Gandhi and Chavez: Milestones in Their Journeys to Nonviolence, Part 2 (Chavez)

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
3-5 Reading, Educational Technology
The lesson can be adapted to K-2 or 6-8 by using appropriate level biographies and expectations.

Duration of Lesson:
45 min/day, 2-3 weeks

Washington State Content Standards:
Reading: 1.3.1 Understand and apply new vocabulary; 2.1.3 Apply comprehension monitoring strategies during and after reading, determine importance using theme, main ideas, and supporting details; 2.1.7 Apply comprehension monitoring strategies during and after reading, summarize grade level text
Educational Technology: 1.1.1 Generate ideas and create original works for personal and group expression using a variety of digital tools; 1.2.1 Communicate and collaborate to learn with others

Lesson Abstract:
The milestones in Gandhi’s and Chavez’s journeys to nonviolence were quite different; however both men were passionate about nonviolent conflict resolution leading to social change. After reading a biography of either Gandhi or Chavez in a book club, students collaborate to create a timeline of the book’s important events in the life of Gandhi or Chavez, develop a digital story from the information, and present to the class. Class discussions center on nonviolent conflict resolution and the applicability to the students.

Guiding Questions:
What are the milestones in Gandhi’s and Chavez’s journeys to nonviolence?
How did these milestone events influence them?
What lessons can we learn from them?

Teacher Notes:
Although Gandhi and Chavez both pursued nonviolent methods, their life journeys were very different. Neither was politically involved or in a position of authority, however their methods and conceptions of nonviolence were adopted by many. Chavez found Gandhi’s writings and ideas fascinating and they greatly influenced his work with the Farm Workers Union.

The content essays present detailed biographical sketches on each man and each part could be used as a separate lesson, rather than taught together. Part 2, this document, presents biographical information on Chavez. Part 1 presents biographical information on Gandhi. The guiding
questions and activities are identical in both documents because this is meant to be one lesson, incorporating biographies of both Gandhi and Chavez. Milestones in their lives and important concepts are shown in bold.

**Content Essay: Part 2 – Chavez**

Gandhi’s stance on ahimsa, nonviolent conflict resolution, truth, self-sufficiency, and constructive work inspired many social justice movements. Cesar Chavez was one of the many organizers influenced by Gandhi’s life and work.

**Early Years – Migrant life and injustices**

Cesar Chavez’s early life was dramatically different from Gandhi’s. Chavez was born in Yuma, Arizona on March 31, 1927. The family lived on a 160 acre ranch that had been given to his grandfather. Chavez’s parents farmed fruits and vegetables, with grapes being their chief crop. Chavez’s father always gave migrant workers jobs, and told Cesar, “Some have different skin colors, some speak different languages; some are old, some young. But they have one thing in common – poverty” (Ingram, 2003, p. 98).

When Chavez was ten, his family lost the ranch through injustices and dishonest white people. Cesar, his four siblings, and his parents were now homeless. They became migrant workers, following the crops from southern California to central California and living in one room huts or their car. The wages were poverty level because of the surplus of field workers. Child labor laws were ignored and middlemen took a cut of the laborers’ pay. This was Chavez’s first experience with the injustices faced by farm workers.

Chavez attended school regularly before the family lost their farm. He did not enjoy school and experienced discrimination because he did not speak English and was not “white.” When the family became migratory, Chavez attended whatever school was available. After graduating from eighth grade, he dropped out of school to work full time in the fields and contribute to the family’s income. Although he no longer attended an organized school, he kept learning on his own, reading many types of books. According to Chavez, the most influential book he read was Gandhi’s autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Chavez was very interested in the power of ahimsa (nonviolent conflict resolution) for resolving conflicts both socially and politically.

**Young Adulthood – Beginning to organize**

When Chavez was eighteen, he was drafted into the Navy. In 1948, after serving twenty-eight months, he received an honorable discharge and returned home to marry Helen Fabel. Because of the lack of other types of work, they both worked in the fields, with work inconsistent and wages sometimes nonexistent. After the birth of their first child, Chavez was recruited to organize the farm workers into a local CSO (Community Services Organization) chapter. Chavez worked without pay for the CSO during the evening while continuing to labor in the fields during the day.

Chavez organized voter registration for the workers, provided education classes, and helped those who wanted it to establish residency rights to vote. After a year of volunteering his time in the evenings, Chavez was hired to work full time for the CSO. He organized sit-ins and pickets,
remembering Gandhi’s philosophy of ahimsa, nonviolent conflict resolution. After five years
of work, Chavez came to believe that the workers would get no further improvements in working
conditions without forming a union. The directors of the CSO vetoed this idea, and Chavez
decided he could no longer work for them.

La Causa – A union to support farm workers, nonviolent resistance
By this time Chavez and his wife had eight children and had to make many sacrifices. Chavez
followed Gandhi’s path of holding small meetings in homes, talking to workers and forming a
small community that supported his idea of a union. On September 30, 1962, Chavez and his
supportive community formed the National Farm Workers Association. His wife continued to
work in the fields while he recruited workers to the union. Although offered gifts of money,
Chavez declined because he didn’t want to owe anyone a vote or support in the future. He did
accept meals and help with activities. As the union grew, they offered him a small salary and he
started a small newspaper, again following Gandhi’s course of action.

The union became known as La Causa and was fighting small working conditions battles.
September 1965 was the beginning of La Causa’s first large strike. The farm workers’ union
supported the Filipino laborers who were striking the vineyards for better pay. For three years the
grape boycott was unsuccessful and had instances of violence, harassment, and intimidation.
Chavez undertook his first fast to focus the workers on their commitments to nonviolence. He
spoke with workers and continued to press his message of nonviolence from the cot he spent
most of his time upon. This fast, which lasted twenty-five days, seriously affected his health;
however the union was strong, determined, and proud.

In 1970, when the public became involved and stopped buying grapes, the growers negotiated
contracts with the workers that provided better wages, improved working conditions, and
recognized the union. The National Farm Workers Association was then renamed the United
Farm Workers (UFW).

Chavez continued to champion for farm workers rights and used nonviolent protests, strikes,
and fasts to advocate for better working conditions. The use of pesticides on grapes, and other
crops, was a major union concern. The poisons in pesticides cling to the crops and are absorbed
into them. Even washing the food does not eliminate the toxins from the pesticides. The spray
spreads for miles and affects the workers who not only get it on their skins through picking the
crops, but they also breathe the air that is polluted with the spray.

Chavez began his longest fast in July 1988. This fast lasted thirty-six days, raised awareness of
pesticide use, and for Chavez was an act of penance for those aware of the problem that did
nothing. Chavez spent the last years of his life on this movement, which he termed “the Wrath
of Grapes,” campaigning against pesticide use both to protect the farm workers and the
consumers who ate the grapes. Chavez died in his sleep on April 23, 1993 in Arizona where he
was involved in protecting the UFW union from a grower’s lawsuit.

Gandhi and Chavez
Chavez, like Gandhi, lived his beliefs. They were both soft-spoken reflective men who
passionately believed in ahimsa – nonviolent conflict resolution. Their lives were examples to
the people around them. Gandhi and Chavez suffered personal sacrifices but stood firmly for truth, human rights, social justice, self-sufficiency, compassion, and “a culture of peace.” Chavez stated it well when he said, “Our power is with the people. That’s where our power is. People – all shapes, all colors, all sizes, all religions” (Ingram, 2003, p. 109). Gandhi and Chavez had the ability to organize the people and gather support from many different constituencies.

Students should be able to identify the lessons of compassion, empathy, ahimsa, nonviolent conflict resolution, and sustainability. The class discussions will center on the lessons learned, the choices Gandhi and Chavez made in response to their experiences, and how these lessons can be used in the classroom.

**Bibliography:**


**Materials Needed:**
- A variety of biographies at different reading levels on Gandhi and Chavez (I would have a total of 12 – 15 books available with approximately half of the books on each man.)
- See a list of possible biographies after the teaching activities.
- Chart paper
- Markers, pencils
- Access to computers
- Digital story on Gandhi and Chavez for introduction

**Teaching Activities:**
1) Show students the digital story created as a brief introduction to Gandhi and Chavez. Introduce the lesson to the students.
2) Introduce vocabulary students may find in their readings (ahimsa, nonviolence, ashram, boycott, turban, Indian, etc.). You may need to meet with each group as they read to discuss vocabulary that may appear in each group’s biography.
3) Give book talks on the variety of biographies you have available. Point out the differences in reading level, text size, illustrations, etc. Form book clubs of 2 – 3 students per biography, giving them some choice. I have them list on a post it note at least 3 books they would be interested in. I collect the notes and arrange the groups with a strong reader in each group and taking into account students who work well with each other and those who have difficulties with others.
4) Assign groups and give students time to read. You can have them take turns or you can allow one person to do all the reading. A fluent reader will keep the attention of the group. Comprehension is the target, not word decoding. It may take several days for all groups to finish their book. Check in with each group as they are reading – watching their
progress, answering any questions they may have, and discussing vocabulary they are unfamiliar with. Students will use comprehension monitoring strategies as they read, identifying the main ideas (milestones) in the life of either Gandhi or Chavez.

5) When finished reading, each group creates a timeline of the important events that appeared in their biography. They can take notes on a piece of paper and then make their final timeline on chart paper. This skill involves summarizing, as well as identifying main ideas.

6) Discuss the timelines of the groups that read about Gandhi, then the groups that read about Chavez. Because of the variety of texts and reading levels, some timelines may have more information than others.

7) Create one class timeline from all the Gandhi books and one class timeline from all the Chavez books. You can do this on chart paper so it is posted in the room as a visual that is always available and/or you can create the timelines electronically. These timelines identify the milestones in Gandhi’s and Chavez’s lives and will provide discussion points for their nonviolent journeys and how students can adapt these ideas/concepts to their own lives.

8) Each book club group collaborates to create a digital story, using their biography and timeline as references. They can use a movie maker program (imovie or windows movie maker), or you can have them create a slide show using a PowerPoint program, a SMARTBoard program, or other technology programs that you have available. Again, students are identifying the main ideas and summarizing what they have read and incorporating new vocabulary.

9) Groups present their digital story to the class.

10) Have class discussion about the nonviolent conflict resolution that each man implemented. Discuss how their lives reflected their beliefs. Refer to lessons from their mothers’ on compassion and service, nonviolent resistance and the ways they achieved this through strikes, fasts, boycotts, etc. Ask students what lessons they learned from Gandhi and Chavez, and brainstorm ideas on implementing nonviolent conflict resolution in the classroom, at recess, or at home.

11) Assessment – Each student writes a paragraph reflecting on the life of Gandhi and/or Chavez and how the student can apply what he/she has learned in his/her own life.

Possible Biographies:

**Chavez**


Eddy, S. (2003). *Cesar Chavez (Rookie Biographies).* NY: Scholastic. 31 pages, ages 5-8

48 pages, picture book, ages 5-8

80 pages, grades 3-5

48 pages, grades 2-4