Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title:
Following Chavez: “The Wrath of Grapes” Today

Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas:
3-5 Science, Sustainability

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

Washington State Content Standards:
Science: INQA Scientific investigations involve asking and answering questions and comparing the answers with evidence from the real world. INQB Scientists plan and conduct different kinds of investigations, depending on the questions they are trying to answer. LS2F People affect ecosystems both positively and negatively.

Environmental and Sustainability Education: Standard 1 Students develop knowledge of the interconnections and interdependency of ecological, social, and economic systems. They demonstrate understanding of how the health of these systems determines the sustainability of natural and human communities at local, regional, national, and global levels.

Lesson Abstract:
This is a follow up lesson after students have read biographies on Chavez and Gandhi. Students will explore Chavez’s “Wrath of Grapes” campaign and discuss its relevance today. After researching pesticide use and the effects on crops, workers, and consumers, students will design a questionnaire and survey pertinent stakeholders. Students will discuss what the survey results mean for them and identify nonviolent actions, grounded in the work of Gandhi and Chavez, which they can pursue to challenge social injustices.

Guiding Questions:
What was Chavez’s “Wrath of Grapes” campaign and does it have relevance today?
How can we find out if the foods we eat are safe?
Who is affected by pesticides on foods?
What can we do?

Content Essay:
Cesar Chavez, as a union organizer, was very interested in farm worker’s rights. Pesticides on crops were the focus of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) in the “Wrath of Grapes” nonviolent campaign which began in the 1980s. Background information to better understand Cesar Chavez, his methods of nonviolence, and his life’s work follows.

Cesar Chavez was born in Yuma, Arizona on March 31, 1927. Chavez’s family lost their farm when he was very young and became migrant workers, following the crops around California.
Chavez was aware of the farm workers’ plight from a very young age. After serving in the Navy for twenty-eight months, Chavez returned to California and married. Farm work was the only work he could find and they both worked in the fields, with work inconsistent and wages sometimes nonexistent. The plight of the farm workers had not improved, and Chavez searched for ways to protest the inadequate working conditions. 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 he continued to labor in the fields during the day.

After five years of full time work for the CSO, when they would not support his idea of forming a union, Chavez resigned and worked with small groups of farm workers, eventually forming a union, La Causa. Chavez continued to champion for farm workers rights using nonviolent protests, strikes, and fasts to advocate for better working conditions.

The use of pesticides on grapes became a major union concern in the 1980s and 1990s. Ingram wrote, “The poisons cling to the leaves and are absorbed through the skin. Some of these sprays are so toxic that they affect workers weeks after the spraying has occurred . . . Aside from the spraying of grapes, 300 million pounds of pesticides are used on food crops in California. Most of these residues cannot be completely washed off” (2003, p. 102). 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. The spray can land in water sources and leach into the ground depositing poisons everywhere it lands.

Chavez noted that the women and children were harmed the most by the pesticides because the less a person weighed, the more affected she/he was by the pesticides. Chavez stated in his interview with Ingram, “So it is children who are suffering the cancers and the birth defects. The number of miscarriages of women working with grapes is very high. We now see lots of cancer and lots of birth defects – terrible, terrible examples of birth defects – children born without arms or legs. Oh, it’s just horrible” (Ingram, 2003, p. 106).

Chavez’s group made and circulated a video, “The Wrath of Grapes,” detailing the plight of the farm workers and the use of pesticides on the grape crops of California. They wanted to inform the public of the injustices faced by the farm workers. Chavez pointed out that the consumer would also be affected by the pesticide use and the pests were becoming immune so it was taking greater amounts of pesticides to kill them. Chavez put it plainly, “My friends, the suffering must end. So many children are dying, so many babies are born without limbs and vital organs, so many workers are dying in the fields. We have no choice, we must stop the plague of pesticides” (Chavez, 2008, p. 165).

As with the grape boycott of the late 1960s, Chavez sought the public’s support in a nonviolent protest to actively choose not to buy grapes. He 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 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.
Chavez, like Gandhi, believed in the power of nonviolent social protest to solve injustices. Orosco, in *Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence*, stated, “For Chavez, the goal of a social justice movement is to challenge this myth of violence by showing that there are other ways to develop power and authority. He believed that the strength of *La Causa* lay in giving people the opportunity to learn nonviolent alternatives for hard work, discipline, and sacrifice” (2008, p. 39). One of Gandhi’s methods for nonviolent protests was choosing noncooperation. Chavez encouraged noncooperation through strikes and boycotts. For him and the farm workers, this was a powerful nonviolent action.

According to Orosco, “Nonviolent direct action aims to destabilize a system of injustice, but it does not seek to harm intentionally the individuals within that system. Instead, it reaffirms a commitment to recognizing the humanity of the opposition” (2008, p. 50). Chavez did not intentionally want to harm the growers. His “Wrath of Grapes” campaign focused on the existing system and the injustices that the farm workers faced. The system needed changing, and that was what the workers were fighting for, nonviolently through strikes and boycotts.

Unfortunately, as Gottlieb and Joshi wrote, “Even as Chavez achieved near iconic status, however, the UFW was on the decline, in part because of the nearly impossible goal of effectively empowering farm workers through union organization, given the continuing exploitation based on immigration status and the difficulties associated with the transient nature and marginalized role of farm workers. Moreover, the UFW never managed to establish a viable presence outside California” (2010, p. 128). Gottlieb and Joshi recognized the work Chavez did to focus on the farm workers rights and to support the idea that food justice needs to encompass farm workers issues as well as food safety and the sustainability of how food is grown. The food justice movement recognizes that “...how food is grown begins in the fields, and that a resurgent farmworker organizing approach is a critical goal of any food justice movement” (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010, p. 133). Chavez’s work is playing a part in the current food justice movement as they plan ways to address farm workers injustices. Access to healthy, fresh, local, and just food for all is a major goal of the current food justice movement, along with fighting for farm workers rights.

How has the “Wrath of Grapes” campaign affected our lives today? There is an ever increasing movement toward organic produce, and consumers are growing their own foods and purchasing at farmer’s markets and from community gardens that do not use pesticides. Is our food safe today? Are pesticides that are dangerous to farm workers, consumers, and/or the environment being used on foods grown for sale and consumption? Are farm workers’ rights being violated?

Students can investigate these social justice issues and determine nonviolent methods to inform the public. Chavez stated that an act as simple as manning an information table is nonviolent direct action toward social change. Through research, surveys, and an action plan, students can have an active, powerful voice in nonviolent campaigning for social justice.

**Bibliography:**


**Materials Needed:**
- *Peace Begins with You* by Katherine Scholes (children’s book)
- “Viva La Causa,” free video available from the Teaching Tolerance website, www.tolerance.org
- Drawing paper, paper, pencils, watercolors, markers
- Access to computers

**Teaching Activities:**

**General Non-violent Social Change**

1) Read aloud *Peace Begins with You*. Discuss the choices people make and whether it brings about peace. Relate this discussion to the biographies of Cesar Chavez and Gandhi that students have already read. (If you haven’t read these biographies, you may need to provide them with some background information about the active choices Gandhi and Chavez made to live peacefully and to make nonviolent choices to resolve conflicts. You can read aloud a brief biography of Chavez and Gandhi or show some websites.)

2) Discuss things we can do for peace – make choices to solve problems by talking and compromising, take care of the earth, etc. Ask them specifically how they can take care of the earth. Students make an illustration of how Peace begins with them, (watercolor and outline with black marker) and the illustrations can be displayed with the heading “Peace Begins with Me.”

**Exploring Food Safety**

1) Show the Teaching Tolerance video “Viva La Causa” which is a reenactment of Chavez’s nonviolent social protests. Discuss Chavez and the protest about the use of pesticides by the farm workers. Explain the effects pesticides had on both the farm workers and the consumers. Students need to understand that they are consumers. See if anyone makes the connection and asks about food that we are eating now.

2) Present any other literature, background information, or websites you may find on food safety. Put students in partners or small groups and have them do computer research on pesticide use today and the effect this has on workers, the crops, the consumers. You can assign each group one of the categories, or you can let them choose which category they want to research – workers, crops, consumers. They should keep notes on what they discover. Each group writes a brief report about their findings. Present findings to the class. The research will identify the relationship between the pesticides and the crops,
workers, consumers, etc. Students will understand how the health of these systems affects other systems and the sustainability of communities.

3) As a class, develop a questionnaire about the safety of food for sale in grocery stores, available in the lunch room, grown in local gardens.

4) Survey parents, school food service, local stores, community gardens or farmer’s markets.

5) Present results to the class, compile results. Discuss the results of the survey and determine if anyone has a suggestion about things we can do individually or as a class.

6) Take a field trip to a local community garden or farmer’s market.

7) Assessment – Each student writes a paragraph answering the questions – Are you going to change your habits by making different food choices? How? Is there anything you think we, as a class, can do to address this issue?