Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Chavez: His Early Influences

Lesson By: Lucy Willard, Cleveland HS, Portland, OR

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: HS/ Spanish, level 5 (Higher level International Baccalaureate)

Duration of Lesson: 180 minutes – two block classes

Content Standards:

Oregon Standards for Second Language

Writing: SL.IM.PW.01 Create/compose loosely connected sentences with some paragraph structure.

Reading: SL.IM.IR.01 Identify and understand main ideas and specific details from more complex text.
SL.IM.IR.02 Draw conclusions and support them with information from the text.

Lesson Abstract:
In this lesson students will examine some of the influences in the early life of Cesar Chavez, including his family, his faith, and his intellectual curiosity, that led him to devote his life to the cause of justice for agricultural workers and for other causes of social justice.

Guiding Questions:
1. What do students already know, or think they know, about the early life of Cesar Chavez?
2. Which events, influences, and attributes in the life of Cesar Chavez were instrumental in his choice to devote himself so completely to the cause of justice for agricultural workers?

Content Essay:
When we examine the lives of such people as Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Cesar Chavez, it is natural to wonder if these people had special gifts that permitted them to achieve their remarkable accomplishments in the advancement of justice. We recognize that they were human beings, but they all seem to have a touch of the saint in them. This is probably most evident in the life of Gandhi, who was able to bring about no less than the defeat of the great British Empire; however King and Chavez also faced previously insurmountable obstacles and were able to overcome them for the sake of justice.

Chavez stands out as perhaps the least likely to become the leader of a movement for social justice. While Gandhi and King were both highly educated men who had careers ahead of them, if they chose that path - the law or the clergy - Chavez only reached the eighth grade in school, and lived in poverty most of his life. As Carmen Bernier-Grand
says in her children’s book about the life of Chavez - who could tell? Who could have predicted that this man of humble beginnings would organize the first union for agricultural workers in the United States? The purpose of this paper will be to examine the role of his family, his faith, his intellectual curiosity, and his own experience of injustice as Mexican American living in the United States as important steps to his later accomplishments as a leader for social justice.

**Juana Estrada, mother of Cesar Chavez: moral compass**

Chavez indicates in many different writings and speeches the deep influence of his mother, Juana Estrada, on his decision to devote himself to the well being of others. Through her they learned about hard work, service, and even the concept of nonviolence, although they did not call it by that name at the time. Cesar recalls that his mother made a practice of taking care of people in need as part of her religious practice. (Orosco 35). People who came to her door to ask for help were not turned away empty handed, no matter how poor the Chavez family might have been at that time. Cesar recalled that not everyone was as kind as his mother. “We didn’t get anybody to help us like that in the beginning. That’s why we suffered so much, but my mother would tell us, “You always have to help the needy, and God will help you.” “ (Levy 70)

The eulogy Cesar delivered at the funeral of his mother was perhaps the most touching expression of his deep gratitude for all of her “sermons”, lessons, and *dichos* (sayings) throughout the life of the family. On this occasion as in many others he credited her with providing the basis of his belief in nonviolence as a way of life. “She taught her children to reject that part of a culture which too often tells its young men that you’re not a man if you don’t fight back…it takes two to fight, and one can’t do it alone.” (Stavans 223)

**Religious roots**

The deep religious faith of the family, especially that of his mother and grandmother, sustained Cesar through the struggle for justice for farm workers and shaped the way the movement carried out its mission. Cesar’s fasts were not hunger strikes aimed at pressuring others to give in to a certain position, at least not overtly. He characterized these fasts as expressions of penitence. Marches were not protests but religious processions, something woven into the fabric of Mexican culture and instantly understandable to Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and other people from Spanish-speaking cultures. Cesar knew these actions would resonate with the farm workers, but his deepest motives were spiritual. Reflecting on his life later he said: “Today I don’t think that I could base my will to struggle on cold economics or on some political doctrine. I don’t think there would be enough to sustain me. For me the base must be faith.” (Levy 6) He recognized that some people were motivated to fight for justice without a religious foundation, but asserted that for himself, his faith was what gave him strength. “For me, Christianity happens to be a natural source of faith. I have read what Christ said when he was here. He was very clear in what he meant and knew exactly what he was after. He was extremely radical, and he was for social change.” (Levy 6) Chavez faced what some might call impossible odds in the struggle for justice for agricultural workers; it is clear that his religious faith was his mainstay in continuing the fight with such discipline throughout his life.
Intellectual curiosity
Chavez was a self-educated man. He has commented that he didn’t like school as much as his sister, Rita. Since students were not allowed to speak Spanish in school, this put all Spanish-speaking kids at a disadvantage both culturally and educationally. He did learn to love reading, however, and became a life-long avid reader. He notes that his uncle Ramón was the one who taught him how to read Spanish about the time he was also learning how to read English. “I would go to his home after school so he could teach me…I found reading Spanish a lot easier than trying to learn English in school.” (Levy 4) Chavez continued to be a self-taught man and an avid reader, up until the moment he died in his sleep with a book on Native American artifacts. (Chavez, Rita). Visitors to Chavez’s office at the Chavez center at Forty Acres note the bookshelves filled with all kinds of books, including the complete works of Mohandas Gandhi. (Sugata Dasgupta, Joint Director of the Gandhian Institute of Studies, presented many of the books in Chavez’s collection to Chavez after a visit to Cesar Chavez during a world tour focusing on the influence of Gandhi in the west in 1968. The tour included visits to universities, government officials, philosophers and others.) (Dasgupta) Although Cesar only completed the eighth grade of regular education, his insatiable reading habit provided him with a wealth of knowledge about many subjects. The mental power which resulted from his self education helped him to analyze difficult situations, strategize, and use creative means to tackle problems facing the movement later on.

Librado Chavez, father of Cesar Chavez: responding to injustice
Cesar’s father, Librado, was able to purchase land, buy a business, and even become postmaster in an area not far from his parents’ homestead near Yuma when Cesar was a young child. Even during the early years of the depression, the family was able to manage for a few years because they produced their own food on their farm, and had farm animals to help them survive; but eventually a series of events including a dishonest business deal deprived them even of their own land. (Levy 34) Later, when the family moved to California to attempt to make a living through farm work, Cesar got exposure early to unions and labor movements. Librado was very supportive of efforts to organize workers when they faced unfair working conditions. “I don’t want to suggest we were that radical, but I know we were probably one of the strikingest families in California, the first ones to leave the fields if anybody shouted “Huelga! - Which is Spanish for “strike”.” (Levy 78) Cesar recalls that he was very interested when any kind of strike was going on, and followed the progress of the United Auto Workers and the campaign of Walter Reuther for the presidency of the CIO in the newspaper on a daily basis. (Levy 80) Having learned to respond to injustice from an early age, Cesar put that value into practice through his later efforts with the United Farmworkers and other organizations.

Many people and events influenced Cesar Chavez as he developed into one of the most important champions of justice for agricultural workers in our country’s history. This paper describes only a few of the important attributes and experiences that shaped Chavez and prepared him for a life of service and nonviolent resistance to injustice. His humble beginnings make his later accomplishments that much more remarkable, and they also help us to see that any one of us, with the help of or in spite of our early life, might use our lives to change the world for the better. Cesar Chavez himself did not wish to be
idolized or lionized as a super human being or a saint, but most of all wished to organize and inspire others to act for justice.

**Works Cited**


Orosco, José-Antonio. Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2008. Print

**Teaching Activities / Materials Needed:**

This lesson is intended for a 4th or 5th year Spanish class. All readings and class discussions will be in Spanish. This lesson is intended as a segment of a larger unit devoted to Cesar Chavez and his work for justice.

1. Begin with a survey about what students already know about Cesar Chavez. This can be open ended or more concrete, in the form of a pre-test. Students may respond to the survey or the pre-test individually, or it might be useful for this to be a paired activity. Share responses with a partner, share with the class. The same survey or pre-test might be used later as a post-reading activity as well.

2. Read “César E. Chávez, Biografía para la enseñanza media” available at <http://chavez.cde.ca.gov/ModelCurriculum/Teachers/Lessons/Resources/Biographies/Middle_Level_Biography_ES.aspx>

Students will start reading in class, and finish reading at home for the next class period.
3. As students read, they should look for examples of specific influences in the early life of Cesar Chavez as well as particular attributes or qualities. This also may be done in an open-ended way, or the teacher might provide a graphic organizer as a guide.

4. After reading, discuss if any pre-conceived ideas about Cesar Chavez were accurate or not. Discuss new information that was gained by reading about Cesar Chavez’s early life.

5. Final activity: Select one writing activity: 150 – 200 words
   a. Write a personal reflection about what influenced you most in your early life, and what talents or attributes were evident in you as a young person (age 0-12 or so).
   b. Compare your childhood to that of Cesar Chavez. Consider family, challenges, and positive as well as negative influences.