Title: Nonviolence, Food, and Farm Workers

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

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: High School, Spanish 4th or 5th year

Duration of Lesson: (4-5 90-minute block periods)

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:
The big business of agriculture in our country depends on structural violence. Human beings who plant, cultivate and harvest the labor-intensive crops that are a daily part of our diet are suffering because of cruel and inhumane working conditions. This lesson will focus on some aspects of how food is produced in our country, how the people who produce food are directly affected, and how we can gain awareness of these issues, which may lead to action.

Guiding Questions:
1. How can we connect the concept of nonviolence with the production of food in our country?
2. What are some life-threatening hazards for people who produce our food?
3. How can we be more aware of the real cost of the food we eat?

Content Essay:
The business of agriculture as it exists today is steeped in structural violence that affects millions of people who cultivate and harvest labor-intensive crops. The purpose of this paper is to examine the inherent violence in the structures that support agribusiness, to look at the actual conditions for people who work in this area, and to consider some ways to increase awareness of the real cost of the food we eat each day.

Dangerous work
The Bracero Program, which was in effect from the forties to the sixties, provided cheap labor for agribusiness in a situation that was not that different from slavery. Initially instated to provide labor during World War II, “The Bracero Program was notable for its large size and because it established a type of linked legal, semi-legal, and illegal status for farm workers that could be used to keep wages low, allow for abuses, break any organizing or strike effort, and take advantage of the fear of deportation to maintain
control.” (Gottlieb 30) The Bracero Program had some rules and regulations regarding how workers were to be treated, and it also had hiring quotas. When those quotas were met, some workers entered the country illegally to find work outside the program. Growers quickly realized that the illegal workers were less expensive for them, since they did not have to follow the rules set out by the program. They were able to pay lower wages, and provide fewer services to illegal workers, who were then at the mercy of the growers. Even at that, workers who were not surviving in Mexico were still attracted to the possibility of work north of the border. (“The Bracero Program”)

Since then, workers from Mexico and other countries have continued to come to the United States looking for work. The struggle for the rights of these workers to unionize and to have fair working conditions required immense sacrifice, and even though the progress was important, in many cases, it has not significantly changed conditions for workers. Federal laws still in place today prevent farm workers from organizing effectively to demand decent working conditions. The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), enacted in 1933, “cut out farm workers by presidential decree. Cannery and packinghouse workers, who were usually white, were deemed industrial workers with collective bargaining rights, but fieldworkers, who were far more likely to be people of color, were not.” (Thompson 73)

Without the ability to organize and demand fair working conditions, agricultural workers are trapped in dangerous jobs for low pay. The physically demanding conditions for all migrant agricultural workers, regardless of age, are sobering. “Agricultural work is among the most hazardous occupations in the United States, and farm worker health remains a considerable concern. Farm workers face exposure to pesticides, risk of heat exhaustion and heat stroke, inadequate sanitary facilities, and obstacles in obtaining health care due to high costs and language barriers.” (Kandel 7) Workers are often reluctant to take rest breaks because doing so puts their employment at risk: growers might fire them for the simple act of taking a rest break. There is often no shade in the immense agricultural fields. For all intents and purposes, farm workers are treated more as farm implements than as human beings. There are many long-term as well as immediate health hazards for people who work in the fields, and a much higher incidence of death as a result of fieldwork than in other occupations. “In 2007, for every 100,000 agricultural workers in the U.S. there were 25.7 occupational deaths in agriculture. This compares to an average rate of 3.7 deaths for every 100,000 workers in all other industries during this same year.” (“Worker Health Chartbook”)

_Invisible suffering_

If more people were more conscious of the very real violence that occurs in the process of providing food for the table, they might reconsider food choices, or demand changes from government agencies regarding how food production is regulated, or demand more justice for workers who provide our food at great personal risk every day. It is in the best interest of agribusiness, however, to keep these human costs hidden from consumers. “When food is purchased for home consumption or ordered at a restaurant, the conditions experienced by the farm workers are not a visible part of the consumer’s experience.”
When consumers purchase food and look for the best bargain for their money, they may not be aware of the very human cost for those lower prices.

...Too few consumers have learned what human misery and struggle their food represents, and sadly, consumer ignorance is bliss for food corporations. Therefore, while food is plentiful for consumers and profits for food corporations are high, farm workers go without proper nutrition themselves. U.S. consumers on average spend less than 15 percent of their income for food and can applaud the freedom this gives them to spend more of their money otherwise. (Thompson xxxiv)

Part of this lack of awareness is the fact that farm workers, because of the migratory nature of the work they do, are themselves often not visible in our communities. It is often said, “it takes a village to raise a child”; however,

How can a village that is distributed across a thousand miles of landscape raise a migrant child? How can even the most willing of villagers reach out to help children who are here today and gone tomorrow, whose parents often speak an unfamiliar language, and whose customs are easily misunderstood? Willing villagers are not the norm. Migrant families typically are strangers in whatever village they inhabit, tolerated because of the economic significance of their work but only infrequently welcomed into the civic and social fabric of the community. (Thompson 202)

Certainly the irregularity of school attendance also contributes greatly to this problem. Sometimes the school setting is the most important place for families facing poverty or health issues; there may be help through school agencies, there may be a school health center, and certainly some kind of food assistance available. But, since families move so often, they are not permitted even this basic sense of connection to community that is provided by involvement in a public school. There are efforts to help educate kids in migrant families, among them the federally funded Migrant Education Program. However, given the current economy, it is likely that programs such as these will not receive funding adequate to meet the needs of the hundreds of thousands of kids who work in the fields each year. (Coursen-Neff 4) The most tragic aspect of the lack of education for children in migrant families is that there is a very good chance that their own children and future generations will remain trapped in a cycle of poverty.

The stories in the collection by Francisco Jiménez, Cajas de Cartón, illustrate the hardships faced by migrant agricultural workers, from the point of view of a child. The author poignantly portrays the hardships of a migrant life, the lack of stability, and the devastating effects of poverty, based on his own experience growing up in a family of migrant workers in the fifties and sixties. The suffering is not only about physical hardships; Jimenez illustrates the emotional pain experienced by a young boy living in a precarious world. From the death of a beloved parrot, to the loss of a treasured rare penny, to withstanding the emotional ravages of parents who were beyond exhaustion.
with the heavy load of providing for a family, the stories bring the reader to a more complete understanding of the difficulties of the migrant life, especially for children. Sadly, the life portrayed in these stories written about the mid-twentieth century are still all too relevant today. One of the saddest aspects of the current situation of agricultural workers is that despite the sacrifices of many, including activists like Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, there has been little improvement over the years. In a report published by Human Rights Watch in 2010, working conditions for farm workers, government regulations for growers and enforcement of those regulations were found to be practically unchanged since the previous report in the year 2000. (Coursen-Neff 8).

_Growing awareness_

Consumers have shown that they are concerned about foods containing pesticides or that have been genetically altered; if they were more aware of the real cost to the humans who produce this food, they might be inclined to modify their buying habits. A new film, “The Harvest/La Cosecha”, documents in vivid, personal detail what life is like for migrant families, from the point of view of children who are working in the fields alongside their parents. Albie Hecht, one of the producers of the film, asserts: “Many of us pay more for organic produce because we’re concerned about chemicals and want assurances that the food we eat is healthy. I’d like us all to add how our food was picked to our list of concerns.” (Hecht)

If one were to ask a group of one hundred people if they would be willing to participate in a system of slave labor, it is more than likely that most of those people would respond “absolutely not!” This brief paper has touched on only a few of the aspects of the life of agricultural workers. Even at that, it is not difficult to compare their situation to that of slaves. There was a time in our country when many people asserted that the national economy could not survive without slave labor; and yet, at least in terms of the slavery we associate with the old South, that system was abolished as immoral and inhumane. With increased awareness of the truth of how food we consume in our homes and in restaurants is produced, and with pressure by aware and concerned consumers, the agriculture business can be led to more moral and humane practices.

Works Cited


Teaching activities / materials needed

Materials:

Film: The Harvest/La Cosecha. Dir. U. Roberto Romano. Shine Global, 2011. Film. This film will be available on DVD later in 2011. In English and Spanish, with subtitles.

Teaching activities:
Students in Spanish 5 will have already read the title story of the collection Cajas de cartón; for the purposes of this lesson they will read two other stories from the collection. The teacher can select which stories seem most appropriate for the class. In my case I will probably select the stories “El costal de algodón” and “Tener y retener”. All of the stories in the collection provide poignant vignettes about the life of a migrant worker through the eyes of a child, during the late fifties and early sixties.

“El costal de algodón”
The theme of this story is one of coming of age; or in this case, the discovery by the narrator that he is not quite ready to take on the burdens of being an adult, quite literally. He wants to be given a large canvas bag for picking cotton, like the ones his older brothers and his father use, but he finds he is not able to carry it yet.

“Tener y retener”
This story relates how difficult it is for the main character, Panchito, to lose his most prized possessions: two pennies, which have special significance for him, and his spiral notebook, where he keeps track of his thoughts, ideas, and new words he had learned.
Activities with the stories:
1. Students will read one story at a time; they will read the first story as homework before class, and then we will read the story together in class as well. The focus for the reading will be on the following themes. These will be focus questions for oral discussion in the class, in pairs, small groups, and as a full group.

   What can you observe about Panchito’s relationships with other people in his family?
   In what ways is Panchito resourceful?
   In what ways, in your opinion, is Panchito disadvantaged or in need?
   In what ways, in your opinion, is Panchito rich?

2. Further discussion: compare Panchito’s experience with what we read about Cesar Chavez’s early life. What are some similarities or differences?

3. Writing activity: Create a storyboard that illustrates part of one of the stories read. Create illustrations and text, either as titles below the illustration, or as dialog being spoken by the characters. Select a segment of the story that you find particularly compelling. Your storyboard should have at least three frames. Be prepared to share and discuss your storyboards in class.

Activities with the film:
After reading both of the stories students will view the film “The Harvest/La Cosecha.” The film is about 90 minutes in length. We will devote two block periods to the film, viewing half of the film in each class, and using the other half of the class for discussion and activities regarding the film. The film is very relevant because it relates the life of migrant workers as it is today, rather than how it was 40 or 50 years ago. (Sadly, there is not much improvement.) Students will see kids their own age talking about how it is to live the life of a migrant farm worker.

Before viewing the film:
   Explain to students that the film is about migrant farm worker families today. Ask them to think/pair/share about how the lives of these kids might be the same or different from the life of Panchito in the stories they read.

   As students view the film: Ask students to take down two or three quotes from the movie that stand out to them as particularly important, moving, or surprising. If the person was speaking English, they can take down the quote in English, however the discussion will be in Spanish.

After viewing the film:
   Ask students to share their quotes in small groups. Then ask each group to decide upon one quote. The group will share the quote and why they chose it with the rest of the class.

As homework, ask students to note at least five questions the film brings to mind for them. They should bring the questions to the next class period. At that point the class will determine possible next steps. If there are questions about how to change this
situation, about how to shop for food or question retailers about the origins of foods, about how to help kids who find themselves trapped in the migrant work cycle, we will brainstorm ways to act on this. I am reluctant to plan this segment out in advance; rather I would like to see what evolves with the students themselves.