

Interpreting the Impact of Cesar Chavez's Early Years

Overview: In this immigration lesson plan, students will understand how Cesar Chavez's adolescence as a migrant farm worker influenced his later achievements. First, students will analyze how an artist and biographer have interpreted Chavez's legacy. Then by reading excerpts from Chavez's autobiography, students will draw connections between how his early years shaped his later beliefs and achievements around organized labor, social justice, and humane treatment of individuals. Once students have read and critically thought about these connections, they will write a response supported with evidence from the text to answer the investigative question on the impact of Chavez's early years and development.

Extensions and adaptations are available for English Language Learners and readers at multiple levels.

Objectives: *Students will be able to...*

- analyze a primary biographical account in order to understand how events in adolescence influence later notable achievements
- write an argument supported with evidence to explain how Chavez's early life shaped his achievements as an adult

Essential Questions: How did Chavez's early life experiences impact his later achievements? How does one's childhood shape who we become?

Common Core Standards:

Middle School

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6-8.1](#)

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-8.1](#)

Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

High School

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1](#)

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1](#)

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-12.1](#)

Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

C3 Framework:*Middle School*

[D2.His.5.6-8](#). Explain how and why perspectives of people have changed over time.

[D4.1.6-8](#). Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging the strengths and limitations of the arguments.

High School

[D2.His.5.9-12](#). Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

[D4.1.9-12](#). Construct arguments using precise and knowledgeable claims, with evidence from multiple sources, while acknowledging counterclaims and evidentiary weaknesses.

Grades: 6-8 or 9-12 (adapted as appropriate)

Texts & Materials:

- [“Cesar Chavez, Portrait of La Causa”](#) by Octavio Paz via [PBS A Fight in the Fields](#)
- [Mini-Bio: Cesar Chavez](#) (YouTube video 3:59)
- [Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa](#) by Jacques Levy (PDF) via [California State Dept. of Education](#)
- [“Dichos y Consejos”](#) (excerpt from [Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa](#)) (PDF)
- [“A Trail of Crops”](#) (excerpt from [Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa](#)) (PDF)
- [Library of Congress Analyzing Photographs & Prints](#) handout (PDF)
- [Deciphering the Meaning of Proverbs](#) handout (optional)

Preparation:

- Make copies of excerpts per student and determine whether everyone reads the same excerpts or if you will differentiate (see [adaptation](#) recommendations)
- Make copies of Library of Congress Analyzing Photographs & Prints & “Cesar Chavez, Portrait of La Causa” per student or one per table group.

Procedure:**Cesar Chavez's legacy as told by others**

- 1) Ask students what they know about Cesar Chavez. Have they heard of him? In what context?
- 2) Project the [artist's portrait of Cesar Chavez](#) and/or pass handouts of the portrait and the [Library of Congress Analyzing Photographs & Prints](#) for individual students or table groups of students. Encourage students to go back and forth between observing, questioning, and reflecting. Share out answers. Draw students to answer this question: *Based on what you observed, questioned, and reflected on, what can you now infer about Cesar Chavez?*
- 3) Have students watch [Mini-Bio: Cesar Chavez](#) (YouTube video 3:59 minutes). *If your school does not have access to YouTube, you can download the video using a free program such as [ClipConverter](#).* Ask students what were some of Chavez's major achievements? (Answers may include: grape boycott, founding to the United Farmworkers Union, Presidential Medal of Freedom.) What methods is Chavez remembered for in order to make those achievements? (Answers may include: nonviolence, boycotts, organizing people.) Finally, how does this short film of Chavez's life connect with the artist's portrait of him?

Cesar Chavez's early years in his own words

- 4) Have students read on their own, in pairs, or in groups one or both of the excerpts taken from Jacques Levy's [Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa](#). See the adaptations below for differentiation. The teacher can use the questions provided for each excerpt to build student understanding. Encourage students to identify the answers from the text.

For "Dichos y Consejos"

- What did Chavez learn from his father?
- What did Chavez learn from his mother?
- How do you think his mother's "dichos" and "consejos" influenced his later years?

*If students need assistance interpreting proverbs, use the graphic organizer [Deciphering the Meaning of Proverbs](#) and adapt for this lesson. Teachers can model with students how to unlock the meaning of proverbs and gradually release them to complete on their own.

For “A Trail of Crops”

- Why did Chavez not make it to high school? How do economic pressures affect students today?
- Describe the work Chavez did in the fields. Why does he call it a “man-killer”?
- Why does the act of thinning lettuce resonate with Chavez? Why does he compare it to being “nailed to a cross”?
- What details does Chavez use to show that this labor was inhumane?
- How does he see the agricultural system changing?
- Does Chavez support the automation of labor? How do you know?
- What skills did Chavez learn working on farms?
- How did he communicate with fellow workers?
- Why does he describe his family as “ducks”? How is migratory labor unfair?
- How did his experiences, including skills learned, influence his later years?
- What allusion is made when the author titles this chapter “A Trail of Crops”? Why do you think the author is making this comparison?

Synthesis and assessment:

- 5) Have students discuss in table groups or as a class what they know now about Chavez’s early life. How might his years of hardships paved the way for greater achievements? What was more valuable in shaping his understanding of the world – his family or his work?
- 6) Using evidence from the text, students should be able to write a constructed response or brief essay to the following question: *How did Chavez’s early life inspire his later achievements?* Students should cite multiple examples from the text and explain how they connect to the question. (Student can post their writings and comment on other student writing via our [padlet](#), an interactive online bulletin board).

Extensions:

- Read [How Inaction on Immigration Impacts the Agricultural Economy](#) (American Immigration Council) and [What happens when more than half of migrant workers are undocumented](#) (Michigan Radio) What is the status of migrant labor today in the US? How much has changed and stayed the same since Chavez’s early childhood?
- Chavez wrote in “A Trail of Crops,” “Every time I see lettuce, that’s the first thing I think of, some human being had to thin it.” Ask students to make a list of all the fresh fruits and vegetables they’ve eaten in one day. Ask them to imagine someone picking that fruit or vegetable and describe it mimicking the writing

style used by Chavez. How does it affect their understanding of where their food comes from?

- Watch [“The Hands That Feed Us: A Migrant Farm Workers Service Project.”](#) where middle school students in Fellsmere, FL have written and produced a short news broadcast highlighting the labor practices and strenuous conditions of farmers who pick oranges in their community. (Their teachers were winners of the [American Immigration Council’s 2014 community grants](#) which helped to fund this service-learning opportunity). Their project culminates with a school-wide donation drive for materials sorely needed for transient immigrant laborers. The video demonstrates the injustice of a food supply system that relies upon immigrant labor, but does not provide protections to treat workers humanely. After watching, ask students how present labor conditions compare to those described by Chavez. *Are there migrant workers in their community? What unfair labor practices for immigrants have they noticed? What action steps can students do to recognize this injustice in your community?*
- Read [“Interview with a Crab Picker”](#) from the Public Welfare Foundation and explore what it is like to apply for U.S. jobs while residing in the home country. Pair this reading with the short film about a [Public Welfare Foundation grantee: Centro De Los Derechos Del Migrante, Inc.](#) available on their [website](#). Ask students: *How do these recent interviews and stories compare and contrast with the conditions facing Chavez and his family? What are some current unfair labor practices? How are some individuals in home countries benefitting from sending migrant workers to the U.S.?*

Adaptations:

Students do not need to read both the excerpts in order to answer the question: *How did Chavez’s early life inspire his later achievements?*

- Students with special needs or English language learners may benefit from a close reading of “Dichos y Consejos” in pairs, small groups, or with assistance.
- Students with a moderate level of reading ability may do best reading “A Trail of Crops” with some assistance if needed.
- Students with a high level of reading ability may be able to read both “A Trail of Crops” and “Dichos y Consejos” on their own with encouragement to connect both pieces.

- Middle school students may benefit from a close read of “Dichos y Consejos” only.

Excerpts of [Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa](#) are available in several languages including Spanish and Cantonese among others:

<http://chavez.cde.ca.gov/ModelCurriculum/Intro.aspx>