

ECONOMICS INSTRUCTION IN FIRST GRADE?

by

**Micah Krusenstjerna
First-Grade Teacher
Clive Elementary School
West Des Moines Community Schools**

**Donna Wilkin, Ph.D.
Associate Executive Director for the Educational Services
West Des Moines Community Schools**

Introduction

In 1990, the West Des Moines Community School District began an elementary social studies curriculum revision process. The district's chairpersons, drawn from the ranks of classroom teachers, chose to build the new program around five key concepts:

DEMOCRATIC IDEAL
CULTURAL DIVERSITY
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE
PARTICIPATORY CITIZENSHIP

Because teachers believed students were capable of independently investigating meaningful topics when given appropriate time and resources, a child-centered philosophy provided the basis for curriculum development. Based upon this philosophy and the conceptual framework, teams of teachers developed from four to six thematic units for each grade level.

Economic Concepts and the First Grader

While demand by six-year-olds might not supply instruction, district first graders found activities based on concepts of economic development to be inviting and meaningful.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT was defined in the curriculum as "the understanding of supply and demand relating to goods, services, wants and needs of individuals and societies." This concepts was tied into three of the four thematic units in the first grade curriculum:

CHOICES: IT'S UP TO YOU

CHANGES: FROM WAGON WHEELS TO AUTOMOBILES

AFRICA: FROM ZULU TO YOU

RED, WHITE AND BLUE FOR ME AND FOR YOU

The balance of this article will focus on teaching concepts related to **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT** from the first grade unit on Africa. Of the 24 pieces of children's literature incorporated into the unit, four titles related directly to concepts of **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**. The following discussion is organized around these titles and the activities which grew from them.

BOOK SUMMARY: *A Country Far Away*, Nigel Gray

This books captures the story of two boys living the same story--in two worlds; Africa and a western country. The reader can't help but relate to the similar needs and wants of the boys. The families in the book work, play, shop, cook, and travel in both similar and different ways. These family activities stimulate the reader's thinking and imagination which lead them into interesting activities.

Activities

Students chart the needs of the people in the book and narrow this focus to the three primary economic needs. Using student developed sentence strips, they contrast how these needs are met in Africa and the U.S.A. These strips are organized onto a T-chart to classify the needs of the two boys.

The same procedure is followed for exploring the wants of people in these countries. Mixing the sentence strips generated by the students in the two activities and then regrouping them onto a needs and wants T-chart reinforces the differences between needs and wants.

BOOK SUMMARY: *Galimoto*, Karen Lynn Williams

Galimoto means "car" in Chichewa, the national language of Malawi in Africa. It is also the name for a type of push toy made by children. In this story Kondi, a young boy, collects pieces of wire to make a Galimoto. He learns to

collect, trade, and sort through garbage to acquire the wire needed to create his toy. After completion, he dreams of recycling the toy into other Galimoto.

Activities

While reading and discussing the book, students may add to the T-chart made during the reading of *A Country Far Away*.

After completing the book, students generate a list of useable wire and bendable material. They discuss how to collect this material in their own environment. After gathering the wire (hangers, telephone wire, etc.) they children recycle it by creating Galimoto.

BOOK SUMMARY: *Houses and Homes*, Ann Morris

This photographic book of houses around the world provides the children a view of many cultures and customs. It enables them to compare and contrast how various peoples meet the economic need for shelter.

Activities

Students journal about why people have different kinds of houses. Choosing one type of house, students research as individuals or small groups. They may generate research questions such as: "How are these houses made?"; "Where do the raw materials come from?"; and "How is life different in these homes?"

BOOK SUMMARY: *Learning to Swim in Swaziland*, Nila K. Leigh

Nila Leigh is a young American girl living in the southern African country of Swaziland. She has written a child's-eye view of her adopted land. Nila discusses and illustrates the language, clothing, customs, children's chores, entertainment, school, family life, food and animals of her new land. From her description, students gain an appreciate of the unique economic situation in southern Africa--a place with few materials luxuries, but abundant beauty and adventure.

Activities

Utilizing this book and a variety of others from the African theme, children select clothing or costumes that appeal to them and create ensembles for paper dolls. Sharing these dolls, the children describe what they have learned. When displayed, the children may compare and contrast the models, predict the tribe or location of the people, and dramatize interactions between the people.

While reading and discussing the book, students may add to the T-charts made during the reading of *A Country Far Away*.

BOOK SUMMARY: *The Day of Ahmed's Secret*, Heide and Gilliland

An Egyptian boy's visit to an outdoor market is told through his voice. While Ahmed delivers butane fuel to his customers, he observes and interacts with the other shoppers and vendors.

Activities

After reading the book to the children, discuss the sights and sounds of the marketplace, various needs and wants, differences between goods and services, Ahmed's responsibilities and pride and the concept of bartering.

Based upon an understanding of these concepts, students create a classroom marketplace. They research to determine the needs and wants of the classroom community. Each child selects a service or commodity to offer or sell at the market and prepares their booth or wagon. The stalls are set up in the classroom or other available area and the children are free to sell, buy or barter to acquire a good or service. As a follow-up to the activity, the children record with pictures and writing what they bought and sold at the market. They may want to include the bartering process and whether the purchase was a good or service. These can be assembled into a big book and included in the class's Local Author's Library.

Conclusion

By discovering challenging topics and designing sophisticated yet child-centered learning opportunities, West Des Moines teachers have fostered classrooms where children feel free to pursue their own learning in a myriad of areas including the unlikely study of economics.

References

Grey, Nigel (1988). *A Country Far Away*, New York, New York: Orchard Books.

Williams, Karen Lynn (1990). *Galimoto*, New York, New York: The Trumpet Club.

Morris, Ann (1992). *Houses and Homes*, New York, New York: Lathrop, Lee and Shephard Books.

Leigh, Nila K. (1993). *Learning to Swim in Swaziland*, New York New York: Scholastic.

Heide, Florence Parry and Judith Heide Gilliland (1990). *The Day of Ahmed's Secret*, New York, New York: Scholastic.