

Teaching Elementary Economics Using Children's Literature

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Abstract

Teaching economics to elementary aged children can be a challenge for classroom teachers. Using popular children's literature is an engaging and fun way to involve students in learning important economic lessons while integrating the content with language arts standards. This article will describe how to use children's books to teach economic ideas and it provides the reader with numerous examples of popular literature that can be employed to effectively teach concepts like opportunity cost, scarcity, and resources. Additionally, recommendations for using the books and how to find appropriate texts by grade level using existing on-line databases are included.

Teaching economic concepts in elementary classrooms is a task that teachers may find intimidating due to common misconceptions about economics. Teachers may think of economics on a national or global scale, dealing with large amounts of money, numbers, and complicated mathematical processes, however the reality of what should be taught in elementary is very different from this. When conceptualizing economics in terms of college level economics or the newscaster's reports on the nation's economic state teachers might wonder, "How can I possibly explain these ideas to my 3rd graders?" First, teachers must look at the social studies standards set by their state to really understand what is expected at each grade level. The content is not difficult for students to understand if teachers are able to make the concepts more concrete and applicable to the personal lives of their students. As Dr. Yana van der Meulen Rodgers from Rutgers University states in Newman's (2010) article:

"Decades of research in economics, education, and early-childhood development have shown that young children enter the primary grades with an experience-based knowledge of economics and that they are quite capable of learning basic economics during the primary grades (para. 1)."

This should be encouraging for teachers as they strive to connect economic content to the lives of young children. One way to make this link is through the use of children's literature to teach economic concepts. Many teachers have a routine in place of reading literature aloud to students, so it is an easy transition to move from making literacy-based connections such as phonics, vocabulary, character studies, or context clues alone to also include content connections to social studies concepts like economics (Newman, 2010). The key is for the teacher to begin to look at books through an interdisciplinary lens. Some books have an obvious connection to economics, while others may not be as apparent. The purpose of this article is to provide some examples of literature that can be used to teach a variety of economic concepts to elementary students in order to engage young learners in meaningful learning.

Economics in Children's Literature

Obvious Connections

Many popular children's books have concepts that can be tied to social studies content while at the same time meeting Common Core literacy standards. This cross-curricular or integrative process is beneficial for students and teachers alike. As previously mentioned, some book titles immediately tell the reader that the main idea of a book is likely to have an economic connection. For example, Alexander Who used to be Rich Last Sunday by Judith Viorst is obviously about money and the choices the character Alexander makes in the book. This title is a fun book to use to teach about the choices involved when spending and saving money. The concept of spending and saving money starts in the primary grades and is repeated almost yearly, so this book could be used at many grade levels. Spending and saving is likely something students can relate to as they may obtain a weekly allowance (or other gift of money) like Alexander in the book. Teachers can challenge students in many ways to make text-to-self connections while reading the book, while also connecting Common Core literacy concepts such as character traits, plot, and problem/solution to the text. This cross-curricular use of one text is not only a valuable time saver, but also full of meaningful lessons that relate to real life circumstances of students.

Hidden Connections

Other book titles may not be such an obvious connection to economics upon first glance. The book Thanksgiving at the Tappletons' by Eileen Spinelli would probably be overlooked at first, however if viewed through a lens of economics it is an entertaining story full of economic choices a family makes while preparing for Thanksgiving dinner. These choices do not always have to involve money to be economic related. The book is a great tool to teach the concept of opportunity cost in a simple way. The students can see the consequences of choices and see what the family does as a result, all while laughing and enjoying the story of the family.

There are many books that can be used to teach various economic concepts if teachers read them with a purpose, looking for these ideas within the text. It is important for teachers to make a clear economic connection during a lesson in order for students to learn not only the literacy concepts but also economic vocabulary and ideas. Table 1 gives a few more examples of popular literature that can be used to teach various economic concepts.

Connection to ELA Common Core Standards

As previously mentioned, one way to integrate teaching about economics is to integrate it with literacy instruction. Teachers can use the Common Core standards for English Language Arts and their state standards for Social Studies, to teach two content areas at the same time. For example, a teacher can use the same text on multiple days to teach both subjects. Day one could be a read aloud focusing on the character traits of the main characters in a story like Bennie in the book Bennies Pennies. Then the next day, the teacher reads the story aloud again, but asks students to think about spending money. Setting a different purpose each day multiplies the use of one text and creates connections for students between content areas. This helps students realize that everything is intertwined and subjects in life are not separate like they often are in the classroom.

Additional Resources

There are a number of websites generated for teachers to use to find children's literature to teach economics in an engaging manner. One website called Classroom CLUEs (Children's Literature for Understanding Economics), created by the University of Kansas, is a database for teachers to find literature that connects to economic concepts (University of Kansas, 2013). This site allows teachers to sort books by grade level or economic concept (University of Kansas, 2013). In addition to this site, another database, EconKids, compiled by Rutgers University highlights scholarly articles, lesson plans, and literature for teachers to use to teach economics in grades K-6 (Rutgers, 2013).

Summary

Teaching economics can be fun for students and teachers alike. Economics surround each person's life, throughout their life, so it's critical to teach students about the importance of economic concepts and decision making while in school. Many teachers may feel that they are too busy to teach economics, but it could be done with something as simple as integrating the content into daily a read aloud (Newman, 2010). Using books that have characters in which they are interested and stories that capture their interest and attention teachers can engage all ages of students in critical thinking about economic concepts that are connected to their lives.

Table 1
Example Children’s Literature with Economic Connections

Economic Concept	Title	Author	Lexile Level	Description
Spending and Saving	<u>Bennies Pennies</u>	Pat Brisson	360	At the beginning of the book, Benny has five new pennies and is determined to spend them all. He has many choices about what to do with each penny and needs to make wise decisions about how to spend his money. With the help of others in the book, Benny buys gifts for others using his pennies.
Resources	<u>The Goat in the Rug</u>	Charles L. Blood and Martin Link	660	The story is about Geraldine, a goat, and Glenmae, a Navajo weaver. One day, Glenmae decides to make a rug, so Geraldine’s wool is clipped, her wool is spun into yarn, and finally, Glenmae weaves the wool using a loom. The use of a natural resource from the goat, the weaver as a human resource, and the loom as a capital resource are highlighted as the reader learns about Navajo traditions.
Opportunity Cost	<u>The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Rain Forest</u>	Lynne Cherry	670	This story is about a man who is sent to the Amazon Rain Forest to cut down the great Kapok tree. He falls asleep by the tree and dreams about different animals. They try to tell him why he should not destroy their habitats. This book highlights the struggle of the man and how his decisions impact others. He must make choices, each of which has a cost, or consequence.
Trade and Barter	<u>A New Coat for Anna</u>	Harriet Ziesert	690	This story focuses on a young girl named Anna during WWII who wants a new coat. Anna’s mother trades her valuables for materials she needs to make a coat for her. She barter with others in the story in order to get all the materials needed to make the new coat for her daughter.

Markets	<u>The Have a Good Day Cafe</u>	Francis Park and Ginger Park	720	This book is about a Korean family who runs a hot dog cart on a corner in the city. Business is good until more carts start to show up, then many customers begin to eat at the other carts. The family must learn how to compete with the other carts in order to keep their business.
Scarcity	<u>The Mitten</u>	Jan Brett	800	This Ukrainian folktale tells the story of a lost mitten. One by one, forest animals find the mitten and get inside. As they try and squeeze more animals inside there is very little room and it gets rather uncomfortable for the animals. Finally, the climax of the story comes when a big bear and a tiny mouse come inside. This story can be used to teach about the concept of scarcity of space in certain situations (overpopulation, not enough air resources, etc).

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