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Teaching about social business: The intersection of economics instruction and civic engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study describes the implementation of a curricular tool designed for students to develop civic engagement through running a social business in one fifth-grade classroom. The One Hen unit focuses on teaching elementary students the concept of social entrepreneurship through a project where students run their own social business to address a community need. This study has the potential to contribute to our understanding of how elementary students learn economics to increase civic engagement as the One Hen unit could lead to students' becoming more aware of problems in their community and to gain experience planning for civic action.

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"People don't believe something until they know it or see it... I learned in the One Hen project that you should always believe before you don't."- Tommy

It was the afternoon before a long holiday break and all throughout Lanley Elementary students were eating treats and watching movies—every classroom except Lynn Rey's fifth-grade students. These students were busy preparing for an all-school assembly happening in a couple of hours, where they were excited to present the director of the Teen House with the \$700 profit they made from their collective social businesses. The Teen House is building a shelter for homeless youth, a cause that inspired the fifth graders after their research investigations.

Students worked on various aspects of their upcoming presentation including rehearsing their parts of the presentation and translating the entire thing into Spanish. Some students prepared a "giant check" to present to Becky, the Teen House director. After these smaller tasks were completed, the class discussed as a whole group possible ways they can allocate their donation in the future shelter. They decided they would like their money to go toward a fish tank so that homeless kids have pets to care for.

This final day before break is an example of students being fully engaged in the One Hen project—an elementary social studies curriculum that guides students to start their own social businesses while teaching economic concepts throughout the project. The civic engagement component of the unit on this particular day captured the students' attention—none of them asked for any treats or to watch a movie.

There are many economics curricula similar to One Hen where students create their own businesses (e.g., [Broome & Preston-Grimes, 2011](#); [Kourilsky & Ballard-Campbell, 1984](#); [Kourilsky, 1977](#)). These curricula have mostly focused on teaching students about how they participate in the economy for their own personal gain (i.e., maximizing income, rewards, or profits). Few economics programs introduce students to the idea of participating in the economy to specifically address societal problems.

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“Social business” is a concept created by Mohammed Yunus (2010), an economics professor in Bangladesh. He describes a social business as one that creates a product or service that addresses a need in a specific community. Social businesses are not non-profit organizations. Instead, they represent a “new kind of capitalism” that Yunus (2010) believes can be taught to students, possibly to encourage these students to become social entrepreneurs themselves.

Learning about social business can be one way to teach economics for civic engagement. Typical economics units that involve starting a business rarely engage students in a discussion about the reasons for starting a business or how businesses can work to benefit society. Perhaps the assumption is that one makes profits for personal gain only, when in reality businesses may take on a bigger responsibility within a community. Civic engagement is also often taught separately from economics such as through community service projects (Billig, 2010). There is a gap in the literature and in elementary social studies programs about economics curricula that focus on social business and social entrepreneurship.

The One Hen project

This study describes the fifth-grade students at Lanley and their experience with the One Hen unit. One Hen is an elementary curriculum that focuses on social entrepreneurship that I helped develop with a non-profit educational group called One Hen, Inc. Through the lessons in the unit, students are taught economic concepts needed to understand how to run a business, and they are also exposed to stories of how others (such as Mohammed Yunus) used social businesses and microloans to help empower others to be social entrepreneurs around the world.

The One Hen unit is 16 lessons that are a mix of social studies (economics), language arts, and math lessons. The first lesson of the unit involves reading the students the book *One Hen* (Smith-Millway, 2008) about Kojo, a boy who eventually turns a small loan of a hen into a large chicken farm. Kojo then gives other micro-loans to entrepreneurs in his village of Ghana, which transforms the country’s economy. The story in the first lesson is designed to introduce the idea that anyone can make a difference in their community even if they start with small steps. Students then receive a micro-loan and work in groups to run their business. The project allows students to experience running a business for profit and to learn economic concepts of revenue, cost, profit, and loans.

The students also make connections between their experience and Kojo’s story. Similar to how Kojo’s business in Ghana helped improve his entire community, the students research a community need and decide as a class how to build their social business and design products to address this need. Researching community needs and presenting their work at the end of the project involves students practicing literacy skills such as researching and evaluating sources, participating in discussions, public speaking, and writing. The process of investigating questions to take civic action is also related to the Inquiry Arc as outlined in the *NCSS College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* (2013). The C3 Framework guides students through investigating a compelling question (in this case, How can we use a small loan to help the community?) through studying social studies disciplines, evaluating solutions, and taking action. While engaging in this Inquiry Arc, The One Hen unit involves disciplinary concepts from economics, civics, and literacy, as outlined in content standards from the National Council for Economics Education (NCEE, 2010), and the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 2010), and the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

This study’s contribution to the literature

There are various studies of economics curricula that have shown that combining a content area that has meaningful application in the world beyond school (economics) with authentic instructional approaches can increase students’ content knowledge in economics (Broome & Preston-Grimes, 2011; Wittingham, 2008). Elementary economics instruction has been traditionally experiential, with several examples of simulations where students act as producers, consumers, and even entrepreneurs in an artificial (but somewhat authentic) environments (Broome & Preston-Grimes, 2011; Brophy, Alleman, & Halvorsen, 2012; Sylvester, 1994) such as Kinder-Economy, Mini-Society (Kourilsky, 1977; Kourilsky & Ballard-Campbell, 1984), and Junior Achievement. Sylvester’s (1994) case study of his economics simulation with elementary students, called “Sweet Cakes Town” also showed the potential of using this combination of content and instructional strategy as a form of critical pedagogy to make students more aware of societal inequalities. Sylvester’s students participated in an economy by working jobs, starting businesses, paying taxes, and dealing with real-life economic consequences and issues such as outsourcing, immigration, homelessness, and unions.

However, the One Hen unit encourages teaching of civic engagement, something that is not often connected to economics teaching in the literature (Sylvester’s (1994) simulation being the closest thing to introducing students to social justice). There are many examples of “running a business” simulations, but none that encourage students to start a social business—One Hen is unique in this regard. Despite the research on teaching strategies in elementary economics, there is little research on student learning in elementary economics. One Hen is one of the few economics curricula that target developing students’ economic reasoning skills as well as their understanding of economic concepts. Research on how students are developing these problem-solving and reasoning skills is very thin (Miller & VanFossen, 1994; Miller & VanFossen, 2008). One Hen has the possibility to increase students’ civic engagement as well, as the students are also

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