

Let's Go to Market!

Field Trips to Discover Economics and Cultures

Diana Gomez

The door opens and you enter the market in our elementary school. Strains of salsa music fill the air with an upbeat rhythm, and you can't help swaying your hips as you shop. Two first-grade workers in bright T-shirts emblazoned with the store's logo greet you at the door and hand you a cloth shopping bag, a small paper bag of play money, and a copy of the store's mission statement. This is !Rica!, named for the Spanish word for "delicious!"

My first grade class and I embarked on a wonderful journey of learning through a unit of study about local food markets. The study was a rich exploration of the cultural diversity of our city, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as well as an introduction to basic concepts about economics. At the end, we transformed our classroom into a market, and we invited parents and other classes in the school to visit, shop, and learn. But first, we had to investigate the real thing!

Planning the Unit

Social studies scholar Hilda Taba enumerated eleven key concepts that undergird all elementary social studies.¹ I determined which of these were relevant and accessible within a unit on food markets: interdependence among people, aspects of cultural diversity, evidence of cooperation among people to solve problems, and experiences of traditions and values—both our own and others'. In addition, we could study some economic aspects of a market, including the choices that store owners make to attract customers, the jobs that a market provides for the community, and the role we play as consumers.

I planned how this months-long study would fit into the overall curriculum, and put together a time line of activities, trips, and classroom questions for each week of the study. I often deviated from the time line, but the process of creating it helped me to prioritize different aspects of the work.

I created a document called a *focus sheet* that outlined my teaching goals for each week, listing the key concepts, skills, factual information, and attitudes I hoped the children would develop.

Interdependence

Large concepts like "interdependence" are not immediately accessible to young children; they must be built through experiences and interpretations of those experiences. Children encountered new information on a visit to the market, but they did not generalize from their observations into an understanding of a larger idea. For example, a first grader knew that food grows on farms, but she was not necessarily aware that the food from the farm is harvested and transported to the stores where her family shops. Helping the children to discover the many hands involved in the process of getting food to our tables (planting, growing, harvesting, packaging, transporting, pricing, selling, buying, preparing, and serving food) required a series of experiences and discussions.

My goal was that, at some point in the process, a child would be able to put himself in another's shoes and wonder, for example, "What if it doesn't rain? What will the farmer do?" "What would we do if the farm didn't produce vegetables because it didn't rain?"

At that point I would know that the child is beginning to understand the interdependence of the farm, market, and consumer.

Attitudes

Attitudes are also acquired through experience interpretation, and reflection. One civic attitude is appreciation of "the other fellow," with an idea that there are many good ways to live one's life and many good choices to be made.² Another is curiosity, particularly about other people and the ways in which they do things. Finally, I wanted the children to appreciate the beauty of the natural world and to foster in them a sense of lifelong learning.

Fair Food Farm

I launched our study with a trip to Weavers Way Farm operated by a local food co-op. The trip created a sense of community within the class and generated a sense of anticipation for what might come next.



When we arrived, Farmer David explained our work for the morning: picking purple and green string beans and delivering them to the food co-op in Philadelphia. He showed the children how to pick the beans, and we filled two large baskets. When we had finished our work in the field, we brought our string beans on the bus to the co-op. The manager priced the beans and put them out for customers to purchase under a sign that said, “Picked by the first graders at Germantown Friends School.”

A Bushel of Questions

Back in the classroom, I asked the children, “What surprised you about the Co-op farm?” Listening to the children’s responses helped me to assess their level of knowledge and to determine our next steps. While many of the children had seen okra, string beans, gourds and watermelon, few had seen these foods while still on the plant.

A number of children were surprised to see a farm so close to downtown. Others were surprised by what seemed to be missing. One child said, “I expected to see horses and sheep. There was no hay, no red farmhouse, just vegetables and flowers. And David didn’t look like a farmer.” One of the major goals of the trip was to have children experience the full cycle, from farm to table. One child said, “I was surprised that the food from a farm goes to a store.”

A few days later, I asked the children what they already knew about markets and what questions they had. As the study went on, children became more skilled at asking questions that would yield rich answers. Here are some examples of children’s questions from early in the study:



How do markets get their food prices?

Where does our food come from?

What does “organic” mean?

How does a plant make a seed?

How do people pick food off plants?

How do seeds make plants grow into food?

How do markets get so much money to buy the food?

How do the farmers get the food to the market in the winter when nothing is growing?

Who buys the fish with the pointy tails at the fish market?

How do they cut lunchmeat?

How do they get the lobsters out of the tank so people can buy them?

It was interesting to me that some children had questions like, “How do people pick food off plants?” when they had picked green beans themselves. Children often need many experiences to incorporate a new understanding. A child who had picked green beans once had not yet generalized that she had learned something about how all vegetables grow. They needed more evidence, to be gained by more direct experiences. For another child, that question had been answered, but he wondered about the relationship between seeds and plants. We discussed each question in turn.

Tools and Jobs

Many of the children’s questions were about workers’ tools. First graders are very interested in the adult world of work that they see all around them. Observing people at work, the differentiation of jobs, and the specific tools people use for

their work are important parts of any first grade social studies curriculum. They help the children to understand the concept of interdependence; each worker doing his or her particular job contributes to the functioning of the entire operation.

It was easy to ask someone at a market to show us how they cut lunchmeat or take a lobster from a tank. My role was to connect a child's concrete question to a larger idea. For example, cutting lunchmeat requires the use of a specialized tool that relates to an important understanding about the specificity of jobs and roles within an organization. The children observed lunchmeat being cut without ever making that connection. I helped children relate their experiences to larger concepts through discussions both in the field and later, in the classroom, as we reflected on what we had seen.

An Agricultural Museum

We were invited to come and help with the work at the Wyck Historic House Museum. The museum has a small food and flower farm on the property. We helped the museum staff prepare for their weekly "farmers' market" by picking, washing, and packaging lettuce for sale; picking and weighing tomatoes; making bouquets; and making signs for display. The farmer explained that the museum did not make a profit from this market, which surprised the children. "If we charged what it cost to grow these beans," the docent told us, "they would cost \$8.00 a bunch, and no one would buy them. We sell them anyway because we want people to know we grow interesting foods so they'll shop here regularly" —and visit the nonprofit museum.

From Field To Table

The experiences at the Weavers Way Farm and at the agricultural museum got the children wondering where their own food was coming from. We decided to start by investigating our own kitchens. Each child received a chart on which to record five foods they found at home and where those foods came from. We plotted each source location on a world map. Using the program Google Earth, I computed the mileage from each of those places to Philadelphia. We had, for example, string beans from Weavers Way Farm (which traveled 0.5 miles); potatoes from Lancaster County, PA (60 miles); red rice from Bhutan (9,687 miles); kiwi from New Zealand (8,744 miles); and Fuji apples from South Africa (8,011 miles).

I read aloud *Night Markets*, by Joshua Horwitz, so students had an idea of how food travels on ships, trains, airplanes, and trucks to distribution centers and finally to stores.³ "Picture the kiwi on the tree in New Zealand," I told the children, "and let's try to imagine the path that it took to get to your home." The students suggested that a kiwi might travel in a truck from the orchard to a ship terminal in New Zealand, sail across the ocean to a ship terminal in the United States, ride in a truck to a distribution center, then ride another truck to the supermarket, and finally travel home in a car.

Hands began to shoot up. "That's a lot of gas!" "And a lot of money!" One child said, "I don't think it's good to use that much gas. Someone told me that gas comes from dinosaur bones, and that makes me think two things: one is that dinosaur bones are really cool and should be in museums. The other is that there aren't that many of them and we might run out one day!" I explained that indeed, oil is a "fossil fuel," although most of it is formed from decayed, ancient plants.

A Chinese Market

Some experience of Asian culture is part of our school's first grade curriculum, so we planned visits to three different Asian specialty markets that each reflect a different culture. Our school's transportation department provides buses for a nominal fee. Many of the markets we visited, however, could have been reached by public transportation.

At the Chinese supermarket I asked the children to walk around the entire store and then decide which section of the store was the largest. Was it produce? Meat? Fish? Snacks? They also had to find the rice section, notice the sizes of the bags of rice sold, and count the numbers of shelves devoted to rice.

A Korean Market

Students completed a chart listing the sections of a Korean market, such as seaweed, produce, fish, tofu, noodles, and beans—noting whether each section was big or small. Children noticed that the seafood sections were very large in the Korean and Chinese markets, and that the rice was sold in huge bags. I showed the children where China and Korea are located on the world map. Students noticed that both countries have a significant border on the ocean, and hence, the populations would likely eat lots of fish. We then discussed the conditions needed for growing rice, noting that large areas of Korea and China meet these conditions.

An Indian Market

Many of the ethnic markets we visited carried non-food items like rice cookers, kitchen utensils, dishware, and DVDs. The children's curiosity about those items helped us learn about the role of an ethnic market in the life of an immigrant community. When we visited the Indian market, many of the students were surprised that the store contained a DVD section. We had the opportunity to ask a parent in our class who shops there. She explained that for many people who move here from India, the store is a place to find familiar food, but also movies in your home language, steel plates and cookware like you would use at home, and people who speak your language.

Students had a chart to record how many shelves were devoted to different items. Students counted forty-one shelves of beans and lentils! No meat at all! A whole section of spices, and bags of rice stacked to the ceiling.

Food and Religion

“There is a reason that there’s no meat at this market,” I told the children. “The owners of the market are Hindus, and they do not believe in eating meat.” One of the children, also Hindu, said, “That is because our gods are represented by animals, and we believe that if we eat animals we will be taking power away from the gods.”

This was a great opportunity to draw an important generalization. “Is there anyone whose family doesn’t eat pork?” A number of children raised their hands. “Does anyone know why?” “Because my dad says that pigs are dirty because they eat scraps,” one child said, and others, both Jewish and Muslim, agreed.

“This is an important idea and it’s true for lots of people,” I told the class. “Lots of people, not only Hindus, eat or don’t eat certain foods because of their religious beliefs.” It was a powerful moment and a good example of children taking a concrete experience and building upon it to make a generalization: several of the world’s main religions have rules about diet and the eating of meat.

Creating Our Market

While a culminating project is a way to display and celebrate and what we have learned, it is also an opportunity to create something grand and memorable. The resulting project is always greater than I imagine, because of the learning that comes through the doing of it. Assessment then becomes part of the process of learning.

To create our own market, we had a lot of decisions to make. What kind of market should it be? Should we feature foods from local farms or far away or both? Organic or conventional? While we were aware that all markets are created to make money, how would we handle pricing and payment in our market?

A Mission Statement

On our visits to the Fair Food Farmstand (as well as visits to Trader Joe’s, and Whole Foods), the children were introduced to a set of beliefs held by the owners of those ventures. We learned that Whole Foods does not sell lobsters because keeping them in tanks violates the company’s ethical standards for people and animals. Its bakery also uses turmeric, beets, and spinach to color frosting, as the company is committed to natural foods and does not use artificial food coloring. Trader Joe’s is committed to a fun experience for both the shopper and its employees. The Fair Food Farm stand only carries foods from farms with which they have a relationship; in that way they can be sure that the soil is not depleted and the animals are treated well.

We launched into our own study of mission statements, beginning with the mission statement of our school, which reads:

To seek the truth, challenge the intellect, honor differences, embrace the city, and nurture each student’s mind, body, and spirit.

I wrote out this mission statement on a chart and translated it into language that first graders could understand. We talked about each aspect of our mission and where the children saw evidence of it in their experiences at school. Over the next two classes, we read and discussed the mission statements of three markets we had visited.

We then turned our discussion to the market we were planning in the classroom, which the students had named !Rica!. Groups of three children each wrote down what they felt were the most important values and ideas that they would want to put into place in our market. From their work, I composed this mission statement:

Our Mission

At !Rica!, we want you to have fun while you shop, just like we are having fun while we’re working. We sell the freshest and healthiest foods from local farms and from all over the world. We care about our workers and our customers. That’s why we greet you in a friendly way and we are always there to help. Just ring our bell and we’ll come over to help you.

At !Rica!, we keep our promises. We tell you the truth about our foods. All of our produce is organic because we don’t want our food sprayed with pesticides. We also care about the earth, which is why we don’t give out paper or plastic bags. Enjoy!

We decided to open our store for both morning and afternoon sessions so that all of the families in our class could visit. By the time market day was over each child had gotten the opportunity to do each job in the store at least once, our café had run out of treats, and we had served hundreds of free samples. !Rica! was a great success. 🍷

Notes

1. Charlotte Biber Winsor, *What Are We Doing in Social Studies?* (Philadelphia: 69 Bank Street Publications, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957).
2. Hilda Taba, M. C. Durkin, J. R. Fraenkel, and A. H. Mc Naughton, *A Teacher’s Handbook to Elementary Social Studies: An Inductive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1971).
3. Joshua Horwitz, *Night Markets: Bringing Food to a City* (New York: Harper Trophy, 1986).

DIANA GOMEZ is a First Grade teacher, Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Photo by Diana Gomez