

# One Hen: Using Children’s Literature in Project-Based Learning

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Can reading a book about a boy and a hen in Ghana make a difference to fifth graders in their Michigan community? Indeed, it can, and in myriad ways.

At a suburban elementary school in Michigan, we introduced fifth graders to economic concepts in a project-based learning (PBL) unit. We began by reading aloud and discussing the picture book, *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference*.<sup>1</sup> The story takes place in a rural village in Ghana where a boy named Kojo uses a small amount of money loaned to him by a neighborhood “trust group” that includes his mother. He buys a hen with the money, then sells the eggs to pay back the trust group. The sale of more eggs allows Kojo to buy more hens. The business grows, and eventually he builds a large chicken farm and is able to loan money to other villagers who want to start businesses. The narrative is based on a true story.

The book touches on the fact that, in the beginning, a large bank would not lend money to Kojo to build his chicken farm because he was poor; it also shows how Kojo eventually helped his entire impoverished village, and even his country, through the system of micro-lending. The book *One Hen* introduces students to concepts relating to microfinance (like loans, lending, interest, and investment) and to the day-to-day operations of a business (marketing, sales, revenue, cost, and profit.).

## The One Hen Project

The One Hen Project is a PBL social studies unit that emphasizes economic and civics concepts and integrates English-Language Arts (ELA) and math. There is much flexibility in how the activities in a 16-lesson project like this can be implemented, and we found many ways to link the themes of this project (as described in the Teacher’s Manual, **SIDEBAR**, p. 27) to local issues and to our fifth grade curriculum.

Kojo’s story hooked these fifth graders into the idea of starting a small business to benefit a community. The story served as an “entry event” into a PBL unit in which students obtained a small microfinance loan (from their teacher) to start a small business to raise money to help their community. Students worked in collaborative teams to research a community problem and

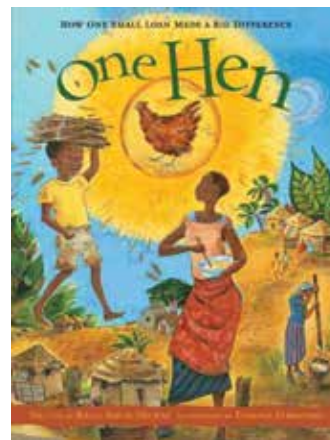
then designed a product, marketed it, and sold it during lunch period at school in order to raise money to solve that problem.

## Selecting a Community Problem

After a lesson researching community problems and several whole-group discussions about what problems were most meaningful to them, the students chose to address a community problem of child welfare. After further research, we discovered that teenage homelessness was a related problem that the students felt strongly about.

## Creating Products

To address the problem of child abuse, five student groups chose to create products that were royal blue, the awareness color of child welfare, to raise awareness about the problem. Some students stuffed cotton into blue balloons to make “stress balls”; another group sold key chains and friendship bracelets they had designed. The “Goo Crew” tweaked their recipe for the “slime” they wanted to sell (it’s made with Borax and water, and switches from being a solid to a liquid as it’s warmed by your hand).



## Receiving a Loan

In our One Hen project, five student groups each received a \$10 loan (provided by the teacher) to buy materials for the products they would sell. The project gave students hands-on experience that helped them make sense of economic terms. One student remarked, “I learned that getting a loan ... it’s really important for a business for

starting it. And some banks say no [to a loan] because they're not sure if you can pay it back. Other [microfinance] banks help people in the community. They're helping the world to make it a better place."

Students also made connections between their experiences and Kojo's story on the other side of the globe. In a reflection, one student wrote, "[Kojo] started his own business selling eggs. He got a loan and so did we ... He gave money to help people just like we did. He made a difference too."

## Marketing

Two girls wrote a script for an advertisement to read on the loudspeaker to announce the opening of our lunchtime market; another group created a giant bulletin board to raise awareness about homelessness: describing the problem and explaining some solutions. Each group made signs naming the product and listing its price. We used these advertisements as assessments for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS)<sup>2</sup> for informational text. The students also examined different print advertisements and evaluated the elements that made them persuasive and effective. Then the students created their own ads in the computer lab. Advertisements were another way that students were working on literacy CCSS in a meaningful way—the advertisements could contribute to increased profits.

## Sales and Profits

When the clock struck noon each day, students ran out to their tables to sell their wares: "Stress balls for 50 cents!" "Come order a key chain!" The market was open for business. The fifth graders' social businesses yielded \$800 in revenue.

When students paid back the teacher for the loan and subtracted costs, there remained \$700 in profit, which the class contributed to a non-profit group to aid in construction of a homeless shelter for teens. (I also charged the students for "interest on the original loan," which was donated to the shelter.) Running a businesses gave the students practice with the CCSS for mathematics, including adding and subtracting decimals.

To make integration more meaningful, we moved math class to right after lunch so the business teams could "balance the books" after each day of selling their products at lunch. The students counted money, added their costs, subtracted costs from their revenue, and found a total amount of profit for the day. Not only were the students practicing math concepts and skills, but they were also reinforcing economic concepts. We also met math CCSS by integrating graphing and data displays into math instruction. Students graphed their profits over the course of the week for homework, or summed the class's total profits and made a bar graph to determine which day of the week was most profitable.



## "Social Business" Defined

One of the goals of this project was to increase the fifth-grade students' civic engagement through the creation and operation of a social business. A social business creates a product or service that addresses a community need.<sup>3</sup> Students research their own community's needs, which can lead to an increased awareness of broader community problems. For example, before the unit began, one student described "a community problem" as a neighbor who needed help mowing their lawn. After the unit,

## One Hen Inc.: Microfinance for Kids

From the About Us webpage at [www.onehen.org](http://www.onehen.org) • Teacher's Manuals, \$95.00; Student Workbooks, \$7.50

Since its publication in Spring 2008, the book *One Hen* has evolved from an inspirational story into a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, One Hen, Inc., a provider of enrichment curriculum that teaches elementary school children about world issues and how they can make a difference. Each program includes a book, website, and teaching modules that can be integrated into classroom teaching or run as stand-alone activities for after-school programs, clubs, or summer enrichment curriculum.

**One Hen: Microfinance for Kids**, the first enrichment program of One Hen, Inc. introduces children to microfinance and entrepreneurship through the award-winning picture book *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference*, the website [www.onehen.org](http://www.onehen.org), and "Kojo's Market: Microfinance for Kids" teaching modules.

**The Good Garden: Food Security For Kids** enrichment program introduces kids to the concept of food security and what they can do about the global food crisis through a picture book *The Good Garden: How One Family Went From Hunger to Having Enough*, the website [www.thegoodgarden.org](http://www.thegoodgarden.org), and "Maria's Garden: Food Security for Kids" teaching modules.

Schools and organizations in the US, UK, Canada, and Ghana are implementing One Hen programs. If you have used One Hen in your teaching and would like to share your materials or join our focus groups, or if you have questions, please write to: [letters@onehen.org](mailto:letters@onehen.org)





this same student described her concerns with people living in poverty in Ghana, a connection to Kojo in the *One Hen* story. Other students realized that there were issues of child abuse and homelessness in their own community.

### Civic Action

Kojo's story also led to an increased awareness of the power of civic action. In the story, Kojo creates a large, successful business that grew from an investment in a single hen. Students noted that, even though Kojo was a child from a poor village in Africa, he was able to have a positive impact on his neighborhood without having a lot of start-up money or overt power. One student said, "Even if you're small you can make one change... That *One Hen* book inspired me to start to make a difference. Look, I didn't know I was an entrepreneur. I can make the smallest thing and still get money to help."

The *One Hen* project helped students construct connections between Kojo's life and the lives of other people—both globally and in their own community. After giving her teacher a small holiday gift that had been hand-made in another country, one student proudly said, "When I bought you this present, I helped women and children in another country escape slavery!"

Literacy-based activities allowed students to incorporate their civic awareness into the running of their social businesses. Advertisements helped market each product and also informed the public about community issues such as child welfare and the problem of homelessness.

### Guest Speakers and Public Speaking

A local businessperson and a residence supervisor at a home for teenagers visited the classroom as guest speakers. These presentations required students to assess their own understanding, generate questions, and practice attentive listening to meet the CCSS for Speaking and Listening. For example, the director of the residence for teenagers spoke to the students about her organization. The students asked her questions, such as, "How many people would the Teen House help?" "If we gave you money, what would you do with our donation?" and "Does your job ever make you happy? Or sad?" She responded to these questions with her own experience ("Yes, her job sometimes makes her sad, but is very rewarding to help people") and with findings from social science ("Ten states and the District of Columbia have child poverty rates of 25 percent or higher:").<sup>4</sup> After hearing this presentation, the class decided to donate their profits toward the building of Teen House.

These presentations also served as a model of public speaking skills. Students soon had opportunities to address the entire school community, parents, and other invited guests during a presentation at the conclusion of the project. Students also gave a presentation at our local school board meeting. Bilingual students delivered their presentations in English and Spanish, which was more evidence of sensitivity the students had developed to others' needs.



Palm oil production, Jukwa, Ghana, 2008  
(OneVillageInitiative)

## Experience is Believing

The success of their businesses gave the students real-life examples of how being social entrepreneurs can have a positive impact on their local community. When the construction of the homeless shelter is complete, students will see how their \$700 has been put to use: there'll be a fish tank that the teen residents can enjoy and also help maintain.

Our students felt connected to Kojo's story, partly because it is an engaging narrative, but partly because it is based on a true story. The book inspired students to learn about the culture in Ghana, as well as read about the micro-lending programs in Bangladesh run by Nobel Laureate Dr. Mohammed Yunus.

These fifth graders started with only \$10 per business team (which was \$50 total for the entire class). The students felt challenged to begin their next business venture with even less money (\$5 per team) because Kojo's story made them see that it's possible to do a lot with less.

## Making Connections

The students' engagement with Kojo's story created opportunities for them to meet CCSS for interpreting literature by making text-to-text connections. Throughout the unit, the teachers introduced other picture books to connect to *One Hen*, including *If the World Were a Village*<sup>5</sup> and *One*.<sup>6</sup> The unit allowed students to pursue their newfound passion in human rights for children and teenagers. Students were prepared to read longer and more challenging books that were centered on

a common theme of human rights such as *Number the Stars*, *Maniac Magee*, and *Sing Down the Moon*.<sup>7</sup> Literacy activities such as writing advertisements and reading widely increased the students' literacy achievement. Most students achieved grade-level proficiency on a reading test given near the end of the *One Hen* unit, which gave students the opportunity to read and write in various genres about global topics and to be exposed to meaningful and complex vocabulary. We believe the *One Hen* content added to the students' background knowledge and worldview, which could have contributed to the increase in reading comprehension.

Perhaps most important, these activities allowed students to make a better connection to their own civic competence. The book, and the project named after it, demonstrated that small efforts can make a big difference. "People don't believe in something until they know it or see it," wrote one student. "I learned in the *One Hen* project that you should always believe before you don't." 🌍

## Notes

1. Katie Smith-Millway, *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made A Big Difference* (Toronto, Canada: Kids Can Press, 2008).
2. Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, *Common Core Standards in English Language Arts and Math* (CCSSO, NGACBP, 2010).
3. Mohammed Yunus, *Building a Social Business: The New Kind of Capitalism That Serves Humanity's Most Pressing Needs* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2010).
4. "The State of America's Children, 2012," [www.childrendefense.org](http://www.childrendefense.org).
5. David J. Smith, *If The World Were a Village: A Book About the World's People*, 2nd.ed. (Toronto, Canada: CitizenKid, 2011).
6. Kathryn Otoshi, *One* (San Rafael, CA: KO Kids Books, 2008).
7. Lois Lowry, *Number the Stars* (New York, NY: Sandpiper, 1989); Jerry Spinelli, *Maniac Magee* (Little Brown, 1990); Scott O'Dell, *Sing Down the Moon* (New York, NY: Dell Laurel-Leaf, 1970).



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