

Civics in the Grocery Store: A Field Trip of Awareness and Agency

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The local grocery store might seem like an unlikely choice for a social studies field trip, particularly for older elementary students. After all, it is likely that your students already know how to shop at a grocery store. Perhaps you are thinking that a field trip to a history museum or government building is more appropriate, but while those trips would be instructive, grocery stores and local markets are great and potentially untapped sites for social studies field trips. They present opportunities for inquiry into geographic, civic, and economic concerns in students' communities. It is precisely the students' familiarity with these stores that lends itself to critical inquiry and fosters civic agency. Such field trips not only align with social studies content in civics, geography, and economics, but they can also inspire students and teachers to ask thoughtful questions about their communities and to think about human behavior—including their own.

Civics and Economics in Communities

In their daily lives, young children learn about the people, places, and institutions that comprise the communities they live in. This learning takes place informally in the community and formally in school. Specifically, social studies classrooms can help children understand their own civic and economic roles in their communities.

Young children can learn about “civic agency,” or “the exertion of influence and power in a given situation” as well as their civic efficacy, or “the belief that one can make a difference in the world, and the responsibility to do so.”¹

Grocery stores are dynamic places where people in the community obtain the things they need for survival, such as food, medicine, and household items. They serve as a “field” in the truest sense of the word, in that grocery stores are places that embody economics, civics, and geography and have a large impact in their communities.

Curriculum Connections

The store has been used as a way to support and reinforce in-class

learning in subjects such as math, language arts, and health.² Educator Kristy Ross introduces social justice into the grocery store-math field trip by asking students to use math concepts to help others.³ For example, students would collect coupons and money and then shop for items for a local charity. Weighing food in the scales may be one way for students to practice measurement. Others recommend taking students to grocery stores so that they can learn to make healthy food choices.⁴

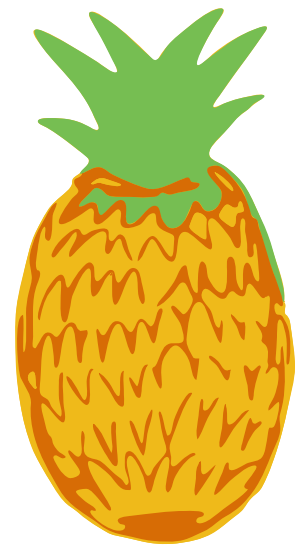
Social studies educators Boyle-Baise and Zevin suggest using the supermarket to discuss “supermarket secrets” and sustainability.⁵ They suggest children think about marketing “tricks” supermarkets use when stocking their shelves, such as putting cereal within reach of children and “adult” oriented cereal on higher shelves. They also suggest that students use gardens as a way to access healthful produce. Social studies educators Field and Bauml provide a plethora of field trip ideas for elementary students, such as having pre-K students locate the grocery store as a way to begin exploring their community.⁶

The activities described below (with handouts in the **PULLOUT** that follows this page) add to these important lessons with a critique of the store's role in the community. Students not only practice what they learn in the classroom, but they think critically about the relationship between that learning and wider world—and how civic agency works in each of these spaces. In this way, they are doing authentic social studies inquiry. Each of the activities below engages students in critical inquiries in civics and economics. The lessons here relate to the C3 Frameworks for College and Career Readiness by providing cross-disciplinary inquiry and action.⁷ They offer openings for social justice teaching, critical thinking, and civic agency.

Activity 1: Identifying Goods and Services

Students can critically investigate the types of goods and services offered in the grocery store and the social consequences of these goods and services. As they walk through the store, students document the various goods and services they find in

continued on page 17



the grocery store. As students walk through the store, they note goods (food and other items related to cooking) and services (e.g., help desk; delis and coffee shops; grocery carryout services; money transfer stations; a flower desk).

Before leaving the store, ask students to look around and consider what goods and services might be missing at the market. Are there particular groups of people whose (cultural, dietary, religious, or financial) needs might not be met at this store? How were various products displayed? How much shelf space was reserved for a category of food?⁸ If students were to suggest a new item or service in the store, what would that be? Take a moment for students to review their lists to deduce what other goods and services might be needed in the community. Would a food store be the best place to provide this thing? Why or why not?

Activity 2: Mapping the Market

Maps often tell us more about the map-maker than the space being mapped.⁹ Student-created maps can provide teachers with important insights into their students' relationships to the grocery store and allow children to express their civic and economic concepts. Ask students to sketch rough maps of the store's floor plan. Hint that they can pay attention to the issues of access and space. For example, how do customers access various parts of the store, such as the market's entrances and exits? How is the store organized by product categories (e.g., produce or canned goods)? Where are the checkout aisles?

Having all of the students draw maps of the same space and (later in the classroom) share their maps is a way to help children consider the various ways a space can be represented. In this way, teachers can introduce the idea of multiple perspectives and authorship of maps, an important component for life in a democratic society. The point here is not to strive for "accuracy" in the maps, but to let children demonstrate their valid view of the world as they describe it on paper. Students can then "read" their maps as stories about the grocery store, thus emphasizing the contextual nature of map-making, while fostering an appreciation for various points of view.

Activity 3: "Interviewing" a Food Item

Back in the classroom, ask students to choose one good or service and use their imaginations to conduct an "interview" with that item (e.g., imagining that carrots could answer questions about where they grew and how they were transported). Then, for example, students might prepare for the "coffee interview Q & A" by forming teams to research topics such as where coffee comes from, who manufactures it, the working conditions of the coffee growers, how coffee is transported to the grocery store, why people buy it, and the purpose it serves in people's daily lives. Students can then compare the prices of their items and plot the travels of a product (from farm to store) on a *world* map. This can lead to important discussions about workers' rights, fair trade, and the environment.¹⁰

Activity 4: Discussing Rights and Responsibilities

In social studies, students learn about various people (in the past and present) who serve as community helpers and practice good citizenship. Workers in the food industry, such as farmers, truck drivers, migrant workers, health inspectors, packagers, advertisers, and store employees can also act as community helpers. For example, store owners might start charging for plastic bags (which has been shown to reduce the problem of litter), donate food to a soup kitchen, or sponsor a sports team. As a corporation, the grocery store also has certain rights (e.g., to use property to generate a profit) and responsibilities (e.g., pay taxes; obey anti-pollution laws) within the community.

By studying this place, students can consider ways in which grocery stores and other businesses are (or are not) acting as "good citizens," the extent to which these businesses should be held accountable for their actions, and citizens' roles in supporting (or not supporting) business practices through their patronage.¹¹

Activity 5: Considering Pros and Cons

Once children have explored the role of the grocery store in their communities, they could discuss civic and geographic issues particular to their neighborhood. In my town, for example, news

of an incoming Walmart has been met with both enthusiasm and dismay. Some residents are excited that they will no longer have to drive thirty miles to access the nearest store, while others are concerned about Walmart's business practices. Students can read about arguments for and against a proposed store, and teachers can create a "town hall forum" in which students role-play the different actors (e.g., a small business owner, a parent who is just trying to make ends meet, a fish in the nearby pond which might be drained during construction, etc.). Students can compose letters to the editor as an exercise—or to submit to the media, if any student chooses to do so. This research, writing, and reaching out helps children develop a sense of civic agency.¹²

Conclusion

A field trip to the grocery store can be a powerful experience, enabling students to exercise their civic agency in ways that matter for the wellbeing of their communities. Grocery stores present authentic "fields" of study in economics, civics, and geography for young children. The field trip and related activities can help students begin to grow as critical consumers and agents of civic improvement. 🌍

Notes

1. Dana Mitra and Stephanie Serriere, "Student Voice in Elementary School Reform Examining Youth Development in Fifth Graders," *American Educational Research Journal* 49, no. 4 (2012): 743–774.
2. Deborah Clark, "Grocery Store Math," *Teaching Pre K-8 27*, no.4 (1997): 42–43.
3. Kristy Ross, "Grocery Store Math," *Learning 23*, no.2 (1994): 94.
4. Christina Siry and Jillian Famiglietti "A Nutritious Field Trip," *Journal of Nutritional Education and Behavior* 39, no. 3 (2007): 175–176; Diane Lofshult "Field Trips to Local Markets," *IDEA Fitness Journal* 5, no.6 (2008): 68
5. Marilynne Boyle-Baise and Jack Zevin, *Young Citizens of the World* (New York: Routledge, 2014)
6. Sherry Field and Michelle Bauml, "It's About Community: Active Social Studies Learning in a University Charter School," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 24, no. 3 (2012): 27–30.
7. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications for the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
8. C3 Framework: D2.Civ.10.K-2. Compare their own point of view with others' perspectives. D2.Geo.1.K-2 & 3-5. Construct maps, graphs, and other representations of familiar places. D2.Geo.2.K-2. Use maps...to describe places and the relationships and interactions that shape them.
9. Avner Segall, "Maps as Stories about the World," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no.1 (2003): 21-25
10. C3 Framework: D2.Eco.5.K-2. Identify the prices of products in a local market. D2.Eco.15.K-2 & 3-5. Describe products that are produced abroad and sold domestically and products that are produced domestically and sold abroad. D2.Geo.11.K-2. Explain how the consumption of products connects people to distant places.) Interdisciplinary Connections: Language arts and math.
11. C3 Framework: D2.Civ.6.K-2 & 3-5. Describe how communities work to accomplish common tasks, establish responsibilities, and fulfill roles of authority. D2.Civ.12.3-5. Explain how rules and laws change society and how people change rules and laws.
12. C3 Framework: D4.6.K-2. Identify and explain a range of local, regional, and global problems, and some ways in which people are trying to address these problems. D4.7.K-2 & 3-5. Identify ways to take action to help address local, regional, and global problems. D4.1.K-2 & 3-5. Construct an argument with reasons. Interdisciplinary connections: language arts, writing, and math.

Additional Teaching Resources

Abad, Diane Vergara. *Zapizapu Crosses the Sea*. Bloomington, IL: Trafford Publishing, 2007. Explores themes of worker exploitation, fair trade, and children's ability to make social change.

Busam, Leah, B. Dickson, A. Doster, and K. Rod, "Business Ethics in the Film *Monsters, Inc.*" YouTube video (June 22, 2009), www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUCSK1QFwts. In this short video, business students have compiled scenes from the movie to create a narrative about the lapses in ethics (by the fictional electrical utility) and paths to reform.

Herrera, Juan Felipe. *Grandma and Me at the Flea*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 2002. Describes a young boy and his grandmother as they prepare to sell their goods at the flea market.

Joyce, Jaime. "Are Reusable Bags Dangerous?" *Time for Kids* (November 15, 2010), www.timeforkids.com/news/are-reusable-bags-dangerous/11841. Describes the problem of traces of lead present in some reusable shopping bags.

Lewin, Ted. *How Much? Visiting Markets Around the World*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006. Depicts the similarities and differences in the way people buy, sell, and trade in different lands and cultures.

Smith, Molly. "Grocery Store on Wheels Planting Roots in Downtown," News Channel 3 WREG Memphis (October 23 2014), wreg.com/2014/10/23/grocery-store-on-wheels-planting-roots-in-downtown. Shows how mobile grocery stores are combating food deserts in inner cities.

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