

# Teaching Economics Through Children's Literature in the Primary Grades

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By using economics-related children's fiction and nonfiction literature, teachers can meet state standards while teaching reading at the same time.

One day, Beatrice returned from collecting water and noticed Mama frowning and counting the money in her woven purse.... As she looked up, Mama's frown turned to a small smile. "I think," she said, "you may just have saved enough to pay for school." (From *Beatrice's Goat*, McBrier, 2001, n.p.)

Few texts can better communicate the importance of saving to achieve one's dreams than the children's book *Beatrice's Goat*. Through its powerful story, this book effectively teaches young learners several essential economic concepts, which are frequently found in state content standards. Because of the U.S. standards movement, even elementary school teachers face considerable pressure to teach economics content that is based upon state requirements and often linked to school accreditation and funding. But with an increasingly crowded curriculum, many teachers feel they are too busy to teach economics. As the mandated curriculum in the primary grades (defined as kindergarten through fourth grade) changes, however, teaching strategies have needed to change too.

We argue that primary-grade students can gain exposure to a wide range of the economic concepts contained in state standards if teachers use reading strategies that embrace children's literature with economics content. This approach allows teachers to simultaneously teach reading strategies and empower their students to understand economics.

In evaluating reading strategies to teach the standards, we review a large body of children's literature for economics-related content. We identify more than 350 picture books and easy readers that have an economics-related theme as a major focus. This list should prove useful given the current trend in numerous states to link their English standards to required readings with topics in the social sciences, including economics.

## The Importance of Economics Education in the Primary Grades

Ferment over learning standards in U.S. schools has led to the direct inclusion of economics in the K–12 curriculum. Before the 1960s, younger students were exposed to economic ideas indirectly through social studies lessons, which tended to focus on history, civics, geography, and traditions. Subsequently, the social science reform movement attempted to replace traditional social studies programs with cross-disciplinary curricula that emphasized the development of basic concepts in one or more of the social science disciplines. The most prominent benchmark curriculum in economics at the primary level was *Our Working World* (Senesh, 1964). In addition to teaching economics through the use of textbooks, Senesh also stressed the use of children's stories as a vehicle for illustrating economic concepts. He argued that basic concepts could be taught through simple stories that related to practical issues in the routine life of a child (Senesh, 1964). However, he used stories specifically written for economics lessons as opposed to general children's literature.

Educational reforms since the 1960s have led to the development of formal content standards in economics

and the infusion of economics as a central component of social studies curricula in every grade level. Of greatest relevance for today's teachers in the primary grades, the Goals 2000 Educate America Act of 1994 mandated the development of standards in nine core subject areas, including economics. The National Council on Economic Education (NCEE) published the new economics standards as a voluntary set of standards containing 20 important principles that students should understand (National Council on Economic Education, 1997). The standards also include a set of benchmarks for grades 4, 8, and 12 that provide more detail in an increasingly sophisticated fashion. Also in 1994, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) published its own set of curriculum standards for social studies. These standards encompass 10 themes, with one (production, distribution, and consumption) devoted to economics.

A careful examination of the U.S. Department of Education website for all states indicate that all but one state currently include economics among their mandated curricula. Only Iowa has no required content standards for any grades in economics. Of the 49 states with economics standards, almost all have standards for every primary grade beginning with kindergarten. In practice, most states have incorporated economics as a strand within their social studies standards, suggesting that the NCSS standards served as the main benchmark for states as they adopted their own standards. Only Colorado and Pennsylvania have stand-alone economics standards.

Just because states address specific concepts and skills in their standards does not mean that these concepts are taught. State testing serves as an important signal of the degree to which the standards are actually being taught. States that require testing are likely to have less within-state variation in the economics material that is being taught compared to states without testing. Data from the American Federation of Teachers (2001) indicated that 28 states required student testing in social studies (including economics) in elementary school, and more than one third of these states started as early as the second or third grade.

Further review of economics content standards across states allows us to evaluate the types of economics concepts most commonly emphasized in the primary grades. There is a fairly high degree of consistency across states in which concepts they include and do not include. Most states include concepts re-

lated to scarcity, choice, markets, human resources, and physical capital. Despite their importance to the functioning of market economies, the concepts of incentives and competition are less common among state standards. Even though the national voluntary standards in economics have a fourth-grade benchmark for inflation and unemployment, almost all states wait until subsequent grade levels to introduce these ideas. The states whose content standards reflect the widest range of economic concepts include Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Nevada.

With test scores linked to accreditation and funding, effective teaching strategies in economics have become crucial. A useful teaching methodology in the primary grades consists of read-aloud strategies and reading instruction based on children's literature—both fiction and nonfiction—with an economics-related theme.

## Teaching Economics Through Literature

Using children's literature to teach economics in the primary grades is gaining in popularity. A common approach is for teachers to integrate literature with economics content into classroom time devoted primarily to reading aloud to children or to reading instruction, with a relatively short discussion of the main economic ideas. Primary-grade teachers already read aloud to their students daily, and teachers know they can use high-quality literature for a variety of purposes. Such purposes include demonstrating story structure, teaching author's craft, building vocabulary, and teaching content areas. Because more requirements are added to the elementary school curriculum each year, teachers are looking for ways to achieve more than one objective in the same lesson.

Furthermore, because most children enjoy stories, teaching economics within a literature framework can add to student motivation. The visual images and text work together to help students conceptualize how economics operates in the world around them. Children's literature has been used to describe economic ideas to young people since children's books were first published. In particular, children's stories written by Maria Edgeworth in the early 19th century contained a rich set of economic themes. Stories such as "The Cherry Orchard" (about the division of labor), "The Purple Jar" (about consumer choices), and

“Lazy Lawrence” (about work and saving) served as models for evaluating subsequent publications in children’s literature and in economics education (Edgeworth, 1818, 1838; Henderson, 1995).

Some research indicates that boys prefer the functional approach of nonfiction books, while girls prefer the narrative approach of fiction (Moss, 1999). This

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gender difference in preferences does not detract from our argument about using children’s literature to teach economics because teachers are highlighting the functional lessons in both types of books. In addition, the

quantity and quality of nonfiction picture books have increased in recent years, just as the distinction between these two categories of books has become more blurred. These changes give teachers numerous options for modeling reading strategies—including the use of text structure, signal words, and charts—as they read aloud and teach the curricular content found in children’s books.

When using economics-related children’s literature for reading aloud or for reading instruction, it is critical that teachers highlight the economics lesson to their students. Otherwise, students just enjoy the story and miss the economics point. For example, teachers could introduce *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* (Burton, 1939) in the following way: “Boys and girls, while you listen to the story, think about what the capital resource is in the story. Remember, capital resources are goods made by people to produce other goods and services.” As another example, *Max’s Dragon Shirt* (Wells, 1991) presents a humorous story of a young bunny having problems differentiating between wants and needs. Before reading the story, a teacher could say, “Max has all sorts of problems choosing between wants and needs. What is an example of a want? A need? As I read *Max’s Dragon Shirt* to you, think about Max’s wants and needs.” Or a teacher could introduce *Arthur’s TV Trouble* (Brown, 1995) in the following way: “Have you ever wanted something you saw advertised on TV? When you got the item you wanted, was it just what you expected? In this story, Arthur learns a lesson about his wants.”

As an alternative strategy for economics instruction, teachers can structure an extensive, comprehensive economics lesson based on children’s literature

and active learning techniques. Educational materials for teachers that link economics and children’s literature are now widely available in print and online at the state and national level. The NCEE has published its voluntary content standards online with free lesson plans and refresher materials in economics for teachers ([www.ncee.net](http://www.ncee.net)). Other organizations, such as Junior Achievement and Jumpstart Coalition, further support teachers’ efforts to teach economic and financial literacy with training programs, business sector volunteers, and curricular materials. Also, the NCEE (2003a, 2003b) and SPEC Publishers (1992, 1993) each provide comprehensive sets of lesson plans to accompany a number of popular children’s books, and many of the NCEE’s state-level councils have sponsored efforts to develop lesson plans. Such lesson plans often combine reading aloud with a wide range of active learning techniques to teach economics.

Two examples are presented in Table 1, which summarizes the lessons plans for teaching economic concepts found in *Mama Is a Miner* (Lyon, 1994) and *Uncle Jed’s Barbershop* (Mitchell, 1993). Both lessons involve an introduction by the teacher emphasizing the new concepts, a warm-up activity, time to read the book aloud, a class activity and discussion time, and a conclusion. Unlike the first approach, these lessons can take a full hour, with the possibility of additional suggested projects that can be completed at home or at school.

Easy access to materials, combined with growing attention to the topic of economics and literature at teachers’ inservice meetings and conferences, is providing new incentives for teachers to use literature for teaching economics. When teachers integrate read-aloud time with activities, children observe economics at work in their reading materials, and they experience economics at work in their learning activities. The benefits of active learning techniques are well documented, with findings that such teaching devices motivate student participation, improve the understanding of reading material, and increase class enjoyment. Evaluations of particular active learning strategies for economics can be found in Van Scotter and Van Dusen (1996), Fields (1993), and Kourilsky (1983). Involvement in economics-related activities introduces students to experiences beyond what could be gained by the relatively passive act of reading and discussing. Observing how children respond to these activities can also give teachers and researchers a bet-

**Table 1**  
Sample Lesson Plans Using Two Children’s Books to Teach Economic Concepts

	<i>Mama Is a Miner</i>	<i>Uncle Jed’s Barbershop</i>
Book summary	This book by George Ella Lyon describes the experience of a young child whose mother works in a coal mine. The reader learns about the mines, the tools, and the costs and benefits for the family that come with holding a job as miner.	This story by Margaree Mitchell describes Uncle Jed’s decision to donate his savings, intended to buy his own barbershop, to his niece for an operation. Hard times hit again when he loses his savings to the Great Depression. He continues working until he has saved enough to start his own barbershop business.
Concepts/objectives for students	Opportunity cost, production, resources. 1. Identify various jobs involved in coal mining. 2. Identify the capital resources used in mining. 3. Discuss how technology has affected people’s lives.	Opportunity cost, saving, banks, entrepreneurship. 1. Explain that choice involves giving up an opportunity. 2. Identify the role of banks in helping people to save. 3. Identify the resources needed to open a business.
Warm-up activity	<u>Simulation.</u> Teacher makes a simulated coal mine in the classroom using clothesline rope and a blanket to create a dark tunnel. Students pretend to be miners crawling on their hands and knees with a flashlight to find coal.	<u>Partner work.</u> Students think about something they wanted and how they earned it, and they share their story with a partner. Both partners draw a picture of something they had to give up in order to get what they wanted.
Lesson steps	1. Read the book aloud. 2. Have students complete a worksheet about the jobs of coal mine workers. 3. Have students respond to verbal questions, such as what are the gains and losses from mama’s job as a coal miner. 4. Ask students to draw small pictures of eight capital resources found in the book (e.g., pick, shovel, mantrip car). 5. Go back through the story to identify examples of technology and discuss how technology in mining has changed over time. 6. Have students talk or write about why they would like to be a coal miner and why they would not like to be a coal miner.	1. Read the book aloud. 2. Divide the class into groups of four and give each group a worksheet containing a “decision tree.” Assign a problem and potential choices. Each group writes the pros and cons of the potential choices. Volunteers share their choices with the class and label the alternative choice as the opportunity cost. 3. Have students draw a picture of Uncle Jed’s decision and opportunity cost and compare it with their partner-work picture. 4. Explain why people place their savings in banks and why many banks were forced to close during the Great Depression. 5. Have students write in a journal how Uncle Jed’s niece may have felt when she sat in Uncle’s Jed’s barber chair at the end.
Conclusion	Review the economic concepts and help students understand that technological changes can make life easier but can also involve costs for people or for the environment.	Review the economic concepts and create a Decisions and Opportunity Costs bulletin board for completed decision trees and pictures.

Note. Condensed from Robeson and Yingling (2004).

ter idea of the degree to which students are internalizing or using economic concepts in their everyday lives.

In an effort to determine the accessibility of economics within the genre of children’s literature, we conducted a comprehensive review of children’s fiction and nonfiction books for their economics content. Reading materials analyzed are picture books and easy

readers. Our search to date has produced a list of about 350 books that embrace economics themes. These books are all readily available in school libraries, public libraries, bookstores, and through the Internet; they are not specialized teachers’ materials. A selected number of these books, arranged in groups of five by economic concept, are shown in Table 2, and the

**Table 2**  
 "Top Five" List of Children's Books for Selected Economic Concepts

Concept	Title	Author	Publisher	Year
Barter	<i>Bearhide and Crow</i>	Johnson, Paul Brett	Holiday House	2000
	<i>Monkey for Sale</i>	Stanley, Sanna	Farrar, Straus and Giroux	2002
	<i>A New Coat for Anna</i>	Ziefert, Harriet	Knopf	1986
	<i>One Fine Day</i>	Hogrogian, Nonny	Aladdin Paperbacks	1971
	<i>Saturday Sancocho</i>	Torres, Leyla	Farrar, Straus and Giroux	1995
Capital resources	<i>How Is a Crayon Made?</i>	Charles, Oz	Simon & Schuster	1988
	<i>How Santa Really Works</i>	Snow, Alan	Simon & Schuster	2004
	<i>Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel</i>	Burton, Virginia Lee	Houghton Mifflin	1939
	<i>Up Goes the Skyscraper</i>	Gibbons, Gail	Macmillan	1986
	<i>Winnie's New Computer</i>	Paul, Korky; Thomas, Valerie	Oxford University	2003
Entrepreneurs	<i>A Basket of Bangles: How a Business Grows</i>	Howard, Ginger	Millbrook Press	2002
	<i>Boom Town</i>	Levitin, Sonia	Orchard Books	1998
	<i>Once Upon a Company: A True Story</i>	Halperin, Wendy Anderson	Orchard Books	1998
	<i>Pete the Sheep-sheep</i>	French, Jackie	Clarion Books	2004
	<i>Zara's Hats</i>	Meisel, Paul	Dutton	2003
Goods/services	<i>Anna the Bookbinder</i>	Cheng, Andrea	Walker & Company	2003
	<i>On Market Street</i>	Lobel, Arnold	Scholastic	1981
	<i>Ox-Cart Man</i>	Hall, Donald	Viking Press	1979
	<i>Strega Nona Meets Her Match</i>	dePaola, Tomie	Putnam	1993
	<i>What Do People Do All Day?</i>	Scarry, Richard	Random House	1968
Human resources	<i>Coolies</i>	Yin	Philomel Books	2001
	<i>A Full Hand</i>	Yezerksi, Thomas	Farrar, Straus and Giroux	2002
	<i>Peppe the Lamplighter</i>	Bartone, Elisa	Lothrop, Lee & Shepard	1993
	<i>Rumpelstiltskin's Daughter</i>	Stanley, Diane	Morrow Junior	1997
	<i>Snowflake Bentley</i>	Martin, Jacqueline Briggs	Scholastic	1998
Markets/competition	<i>Grandpa's Corner Store</i>	DiSalvo-Ryan, DyAnne	HarperCollins	2000
	<i>How Much? Visiting Markets Around the World</i>	Lewin, Ted	HarperCollins	2006
	<i>Mama Panya's Pancakes: A Village Tale From Kenya</i>	Chamberlin, Mary; Chamberlin, Rich	Barefoot Books	2005
	<i>Saturday Market</i>	Grossman, Patricia	Lothrop, Lee & Shepard	1994
	<i>This Is a Great Place for a Hot Dog Stand</i>	Saltzberg, Barney	Hyperion Books for Children	1995
Money/banking	<i>The Berenstain Bears' Dollars and Sense</i>	Berenstain, Stan; Berenstain, Jan	Random House	2001
	<i>Bunny Money</i>	Wells, Rosemary	Dial Books for Young Readers	1997
	<i>Follow the Money!</i>	Leedy, Loreen	Holiday House	2002
	<i>If You Made a Million</i>	Schwartz, David M.	Lothrop, Lee & Shepard	1989
	<i>Round and Round the Money Goes</i>	Berger, Melvin; Berger, Gilda	Ideals Children's Books	1993

(Continued)

**Table 2**  
 "Top Five" List of Children's Books for Selected Economic Concepts (continued)

Concept	Title	Author	Publisher	Year
Natural resources	<i>From Dawn Till Dusk</i>	Kinsey-Warnock, Natalie	Houghton Mifflin	2002
	<i>The Giving Tree</i>	Silverstein, Shel	Harper & Row	1964
	<i>The Goat in the Rug</i>	Blood, Charles L.; Link, Martin	Four Winds Press	1976
	<i>Ma Jiang and the Orange Ants</i>	Porte, Barbara	Orchard Books	2000
	<i>The Magic School Bus at the Waterworks</i>	Cole, Joanna	Scholastic	1986
Opportunity cost	<i>Alexander, Who Used to Be Rich Last Sunday</i>	Viorst, Judith	Atheneum	1978
	<i>Clever Cat</i>	Collington, Peter	Knopf	2000
	<i>The Great Kapok Tree</i>	Cherry, Lynne	Harcourt Brace	1990
	<i>I Remember Papa</i>	Ketteman, Helen	Dial Books for Young Readers	1998
	<i>Mama Is a Miner</i>	Lyon, George Ella	Orchard Books	1994
Producers/consumers	<i>Abuela's Weave</i>	Castañeda, Omar	Lee & Low	1993
	<i>Big Jimmy's Kum Kau Chinese Take Out</i>	Lewin, Ted	HarperCollins	2002
	<i>Curious George Takes a Job</i>	Rey, H.A.	Houghton Mifflin	1947
	<i>The Have a Good Day Cafe</i>	Park, Frances; Park Ginger	Lee & Low	2005
	<i>Yoshi's Feast</i>	Kajikawa, Kimiko	Dorling Kindersley	2000
Saving	<i>Beatrice's Goat</i>	McBrier, Page	Atheneum	2001
	<i>A Chair for My Mother</i>	Williams, Vera	Mulberry Books	1982
	<i>My Rows and Piles of Coins</i>	Mollet, Tololwa M.	Clarion Books	1999
	<i>Uncle Jed's Barber Shop</i>	Mitchell, Margaree	Simon & Schuster	1993
	<i>Willie Wins</i>	Gilles, Almira	Lee & Low	2001
Scarcity	<i>Fly Away Home</i>	Bunting, Eve	Houghton Mifflin	1991
	<i>The Little House</i>	Burton, Virginia Lee	Houghton Mifflin	1942
	<i>The Lorax</i>	Seuss, Dr.	Random House	1971
	<i>Mia's Story: A Sketchbook of Hopes and Dreams</i>	Foreman, Michael	Candlewick	2006
	<i>The Mitten</i>	Brett, Jan	Scholastic	1989
Wants/needs	<i>Arthur's TV Trouble</i>	Brown, Marc	Little, Brown	1995
	<i>Chicken Sunday</i>	Polacco, Patricia	Philomel Books	1992
	<i>Gettin' Through Thursday</i>	Cooper, Melrose	Lee & Low	1998
	<i>Max's Dragon Shirt</i>	Wells, Rosemary	Penguin	1991
	<i>Owen Foote, Money Man</i>	Greene, Stephanie	Clarion Books	2000
Other:				
Altruism	<i>Kermit the Hermit</i>	Peet, Bill	Houghton Mifflin	1965
Externality	<i>Sanji and the Baker</i>	Tzannes, Robin	Oxford University	1993
Incentives	<i>Professor Puffendorf's Secret Potions</i>	Tzannes, Robin	Checkerboard Press	1992
Profit	<i>How the Second Grade Got \$8,205.50 to Visit the Statue of Liberty</i>	Zimelman, Nathan	Albert Whitman	1992
Strikes	<i>Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type</i>	Cronin, Doreen	Simon & Schuster	2000

Note. The complete list is available at <http://econkids.rutgers.edu>.

complete list of titles is available online at <http://econkids.rutgers.edu>. The selection of a book into the "top five" list for each concept is based on ob-

jective criteria and on direct experience in teaching with the books. Among the criteria, many of the books have won awards for writing or for illustrations, includ-

ing *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* (Cronin, 2000); *My Rows and Piles of Coins* (Mollel, 1999); *Ox-Cart Man* (Hall, 1979), and *Pepe the Lamplighter* (Bartone, 1993). Others are by noted children's authors such as Tomie dePaola, Gail Gibbons, Bill Peet, and Patricia Polacco. This list should provide a useful reference for primary-grade instructors, parents, and volunteers who are interested in improving the economic literacy of their students and children through the act of reading children's literature. As an example of how the list can provide new ideas for teaching economics, an elementary school teacher remarked, "I used that book (*Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*) and never thought about the economics."

Overall, these reading materials teach a wide range of economic concepts in a clear and interesting fashion. The majority of books cover the concepts that are expressed in the early benchmarks for the voluntary national standards in economics. For instance, the popular Berenstain Bear series includes *The Berenstain Bears and Mama's New Job* (Berenstain & Berenstain, 1984) about Mother Bear's decision to return to work, *The Berenstain Bears' Mad, Mad, Mad Toy Craze* (Berenstain & Berenstain, 1999) about a fad in the goods market, and *The Berenstain Bears' Dollars and Sense* (Berenstain & Berenstain, 2001) about the value of money and the role of banks. In another popular series by Marc Brown, *Arthur's Pet Business* (1990) describes an entrepreneurial endeavor, and *Arthur's TV Trouble* highlights the persuasiveness of television commercials to shape wants. Several classic books, such as Burton's *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel* and *The Little House* (1942), illustrate the theme of economic development and technological change. Young students learn from these texts how living standards have changed and how new machinery can improve worker productivity.

A number of children's books also cover economic themes that are quite sophisticated and beyond those actually mandated in state curricula. For example, *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* tells the story of a barn full of cows that learn to type and use their new skills to demand improved working conditions. The book teaches children about collective bargaining and going on strike. In another book, Robin Tzannes's *Sanji and the Baker* (1993) teaches children about positive externalities through the story of a baker who unsuccessfully tries to receive payment from a boy who enjoys smelling the aromas that drift out of the bakery. The surprise ending revolves around the

baker's enjoyment from hearing the sound of clinking money. Kimiko Kajikawa's *Yoshi's Feast* (2000) plays on a similar idea but includes negative externalities from the smell of cooking the stinkiest fish in Japan. Both of these books about externalities add cultural content by using a foreign setting, yielding additional benefits for children's learning.

The final example is the book highlighted in our introduction: *Beatrice's Goat* by Page McBrier, with an epilogue by U.S. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton. This story is about a young African girl whose family receives a goat donated by a foreign-aid program. The girl sells the goat's milk and saves enough money to buy a school uniform and books so that she can enroll in school. Not only does this picture book teach concepts found in the early benchmarks of the voluntary national standards, such as natural resources and money, but it also presents more complex lessons about contrasting standards of living for children in a poor country and the impact of a nonprofit organization that donates livestock and technical assistance.

While teaching economics through literature may have its intuitive appeal, there are drawbacks. In particular, because the genre is children's literature and not textbooks, economics vocabulary and concepts are not systematically presented across books or even within books. The teaching strategy requires that teachers highlight functional lessons for economics topics that may not be readily apparent in the story. Children's books about topics such as savings and jobs have obvious economics lessons that are difficult to miss because they relate so easily to children's everyday lives. However, more abstract economics topics that are found in some picture books and easy readers—such as the operation of markets and investment in human capital—require more creativity on the part of instructors to teach a thorough and intuitive lesson. Children may need additional structure, discussion, special exercises, or group-based interactions to understand the lessons. Our experience in working with teachers indicates that some did not realize that the picture books they had already been using had strong economics content and could easily be used to address curricular standards. This observation highlights the importance of teachers developing an awareness of identifying economics lessons that may be taught using children's literature.

Primary-grade students usually begin to read expository texts that contain economics lessons by the fourth grade. For decades, the primary grades have

served as the place in the social studies curriculum in which important economic concepts are introduced for the first time. This pattern continues at present with the inclusion of economics vocabulary terms and lessons in popular social studies expository texts for elementary school, such as the Houghton Mifflin social studies publications. As described in Moss (2005), teachers can use effective content area literacy instruction to help prevent problems associated with the “fourth-grade slump.” This phenomenon is related to difficulties students experience while making the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” (Chall, 1983). Using children’s literature in the earlier grades to teach economics can make this transition easier if teachers introduce the appropriate economics vocabulary terms during the lessons.

Not only will students gain exposure to these terms and understand what they mean, but they will also develop the ability to make various text connections to help them understand more abstract ideas in the fourth grade. Following the progression of text connections as discussed in Harvey and Goudvis (2000), early effective reading instruction using the economics-related children’s books can be used to explore text-to-self connections in which students relate the content of the books to their own life experiences. As students enter the second and third grades, numerous books can be used to explore text-to-world connections in which students relate the ideas from their books to the economic, business, and financial interactions they observe in the world around them. Examples of beneficial ways to encourage students’ vocabulary growth through teachers’ talk during read-aloud experiences are found in Beck and McKeown (2001) and Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2003). By the time students are using more expository texts in fourth grade, their knowledge of children’s literature is useful for developing text-to-text connections in which students can link the stories from the children’s literature to the definitions and lessons in their textbooks.

Although using reading strategies to teach economics has considerable merit, there is not much formal evidence in support of this approach as opposed to other teaching methodologies. What we do know is that primary-grade assessments of teaching methods based on reading and stories have pointed to the success of integrated strategies that allow students to directly experience economic concepts. In particular, Laney (1989) found that when tested immediately af-

ter instruction, first-grade children could master basic economic concepts taught through hypothetical, vicarious, story-like situations. Long-term retention (six weeks after instruction) was much higher for first-grade students who were given real-life situations to resolve. Some of Laney’s subsequent research drawing on imagery and fables suggests a positive outcome for reading strategies in economics, as does research on integrated teaching methods in disciplines beyond economics. In particular, Laney and his colleagues (Laney, Moseley, & Crossland, 1991) compared the effects of verbal-only, imagery-only, and integrated (verbal and imagery) strategies on fifth graders’ ability to use economic reasoning in decision-making situations. All three strategies resulted in higher reasoning scores, with the highest score for the integrated strategy (although the differences across the treatment groups were not statistically significant). Recent work shows that incorporating fables into cooperative teaching strategies can also enhance student learning in economics (Laney, 1999).

In evaluating the effectiveness of using children’s literature to teach economics in the primary grades, new assessment tools are needed. However, developing appropriate subject-matter tests for young children is not easy. The traditional paper-pencil, multiple-choice format used in state testing programs is unsatisfactory because of the limited reading ability of primary-grade pupils, leading to a strong correlation for primary-grade students between test scores and reading abilities. Another consideration is the maturity and attention span of this age group. One possibility of a new assessment tool for the youngest students who are just beginning to learn how to read is a picture-based test. For example, a test asking students to identify occupations discussed in a book could show pictures of workers dressed up in various uniforms.

The benefits of reading aloud to children as a pedagogical device are well documented. For example, Zuckerman and Kahn (2000) cited evidence from the National Commission on Reading that the act of reading aloud to children is the most significant determinant of the development of children’s literacy skills. Not only does reading to children help them become better readers, but it also improves school performance

*Numerous books can be used to explore text-to-world connections*

(Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Because the act of reading to young children yields well-documented benefits, the content of the reading materials that teachers choose makes a difference. When they choose economics-related children's fiction and nonfiction literature, teachers are effectively setting the stage for their students to learn basic economic concepts.

## Final Thoughts

We have argued that in the primary grades—defined as kindergarten through fourth grade—reading instruction using children's literature is an important methodology for teaching economics. Today, as a result of the standards movement and mandated economics content standards, the vast majority of students in public schools are learning economics beginning in kindergarten. Yet teachers face increasingly crowded curricula that are heavily tilted toward reading and math skills, leaving little room for stand-alone economics lessons. Motivated by the strategy that a good story helps students to remember key points, primary-grade teachers can use picture books and easy readers with economics content to teach reading and economics simultaneously. Our review of children's literature makes it clear that teachers, when choosing their materials for read-alouds, minilessons, and reading instruction, have access to a large selection of interesting books with an economics focus. This literature is providing young students with exposure to a wide range of basic economic concepts, including all those mandated in the state and national content standards in economics.

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 they are quite capable of learning basic economics during the primary grades. The economic lessons that young students learn in their early education form the building blocks toward achieving a solid understanding of economics at higher levels of educational attainment. Students in the primary grades are already gaining a rich exposure to a wide variety of ideas in economics, and they are gaining the skills to apply this new knowledge. The principles taught at a level appropriate for primary-grade students are crucial for a basic understanding of the economic world around them.

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