

Microsociety

Experiment emphasizes learning by doing

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bigger kids, quickly became a coveted companion. The top math student, he assumed the role of class banker.

One day, Ramon told his teacher he was having trouble collecting debts from a few of his fellow students.

"I asked him if he wanted me to do it for him," Richmond recalls. He said, "No, I want to hire Emilio to do it." Emilio was the class bully. When he got Emilio working, I knew we were on to something."

Richmond wrote a book about the experiment and in 1981 helped establish the first Microsociety school, City Magnet School, in Lowell, Mass. The quantifiable results were impressive. In 1987, students at CMS tested at two years above average in math and reading. Statewide exams have been discontinued, so there is no way of knowing whether achievement is still so high, but CMS language arts teacher Lois Cullen suspects it might be.

"When kids have to add ledgers and make sure their checking accounts balance, then math has real meaning to them. When kids are making laws that affect their lives at school, then government has real meaning to them."

Success at Sherman

During recent years, about 120 Microsociety programs have started around the country, all in a word-of-mouth, grass-roots fashion, says Richmond. "It happens from the bottom up, with teachers

who have heard about it, rather than from above, imposed by the administration."

At Sherman, a magnet school that emphasizes government and business, the Microsociety method seems an ideal fit, says Christyn Pope, the program's facilitator.

A predominantly Latino school, 80 percent of the Sherman students have limited proficiency in English. Can students learn how to run a bank if they don't know the English words for "teller" or "loan"?

Pope says getting kids to participate is the crucial first step, and that the learning, whether English comprehension or math, will follow.

Pope is encouraged by Microsociety's early results. "Some of the children who weren't interacting (socially and academically) have gotten very involved. Kids are even taking their checkbooks home and showing their brothers and sisters how to use them."

The allure of money, the realization by students that a week's work pays off, in pizza and chips, or Easter baskets, is a great motivator in the Microsociety.

To get a better sense of the marketplace, let's follow fourth-grader Chad Van Haren around on payday.

Real-world dilemmas

After a thorough examination of the merchandise at one stand, he buys a wallet made from laminated construction paper for 50 Aztecs.

He hesitates over the purchase, isn't sure about the color — pink — and after visiting another crafts stand, becomes convinced the overpaid.

"Way too expensive," he says.

What to do? Chad hustles back to the first stand. With a winsome smile and a heartfelt explanation about his brother's birthday, Chad asks for a refund. The students running the stand are unprepared for such a de-

velopment.

Are sales final or not? A consultation ensues, four students considering an essential challenge of any new business: quick profit vs. customer service.

Finally, fourth-grader Patricia Camacho pipes up. "OK, you can have your money back."

Chad returns to the other stand, where he selects two items: a lollipop passed to a paper St. Patrick's Day shamrock, and a fuzzy Easter bunny in a basket.

One problem: The total price is 110 Aztecs. He only has 100 to spend.

"Can I pay you the rest next week?" he asks.

Another meeting of the minds. Thumbs down. "They wouldn't let you do that at Hallmark," someone says.

Unwilling to live with less, Chad beseeches his teacher for an advance of 10 Aztecs on his next paycheck.

She agrees. Chad gets the goods.

The work ethic

Goodies, cash, bargaining — does Microsociety turn kids into wheeler-dealers with no interest in knowledge unless there's a payoff at the end?

"The money is just a medium to put kids in positions of responsibility," says Joan Crosson, principal of a Microsociety school in Newburgh, N.Y. "Like adults, they see what they can get away with. But the kids have a lot of heart. They prefer to work as a team than amass money on their own."

Richmond finds that Microsociety students share an experience unusual among American children: the gratification that comes from creating goods and services of value, whether it's making pizza or passing a just, well-reasoned law. "A major problem with childhood

is that we have created a new leisure class that lives off the production of its parents. Children become excellent consumers but terrible producers. Microsociety is a way to put work back into the lives of children."

The combination of work, instruction and role-playing seems to motivate the Microsociety students.

Octopus helps, too.

A Microsociety teacher, Mary Beth Milliken has brought a bag of them from a Chinese supermarket, and the Sherman scientists hold the creatures without squeamishness, counting tentacles. Soon, the kids are engaged in myriad octopus-related activities.

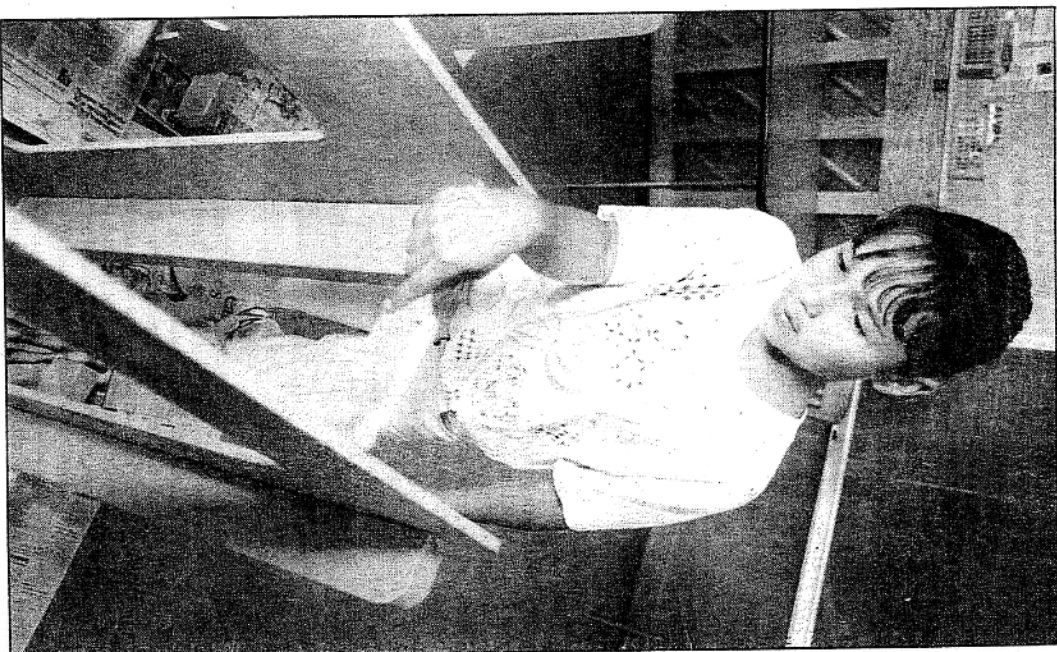
Octopus art. The kids dab the tentacles with paint and swirl them on construction paper, making prints. The creations go on sale in the marketplace for 50 Aztecs. Inside a classroom, students cook octopus in batter.

"Yum," says a boy with a fried octopus platter, hawking samples for sale. Soon, there's a spontaneous market for raw octopus, 25 Aztecs apiece.

Veteran Microsociety teacher Rachel Kharten moved to San Diego from Lowell, Mass., to help Sherman start up its program. She teaches fifth grade and oversees the Microsociety bank, a hub of activity where a handful of students put in overtime and work through recess or lunch period.

They're not all workaholics, but Kharten says there's almost always some aspect of Microsociety that persuades kids to pitch in.

"For some, it's the money that motivates them. For others, it's being a police officer and wearing an orange vest. For others, it's being a leader or an innovator." She has seen it before, kids shifting into high gear in a community of their own.



Doing it herself: Joanna Gamez earns Aztecs — by painting a booth.

Union-Tribune / JOHN NELSON