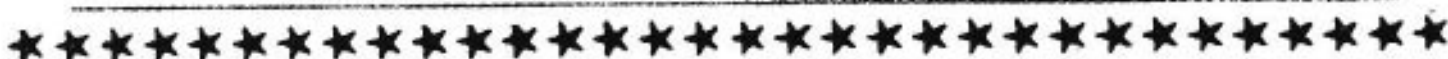




# Real-World Education Sherman Elementary's Micro-Society

by Robin Brooks

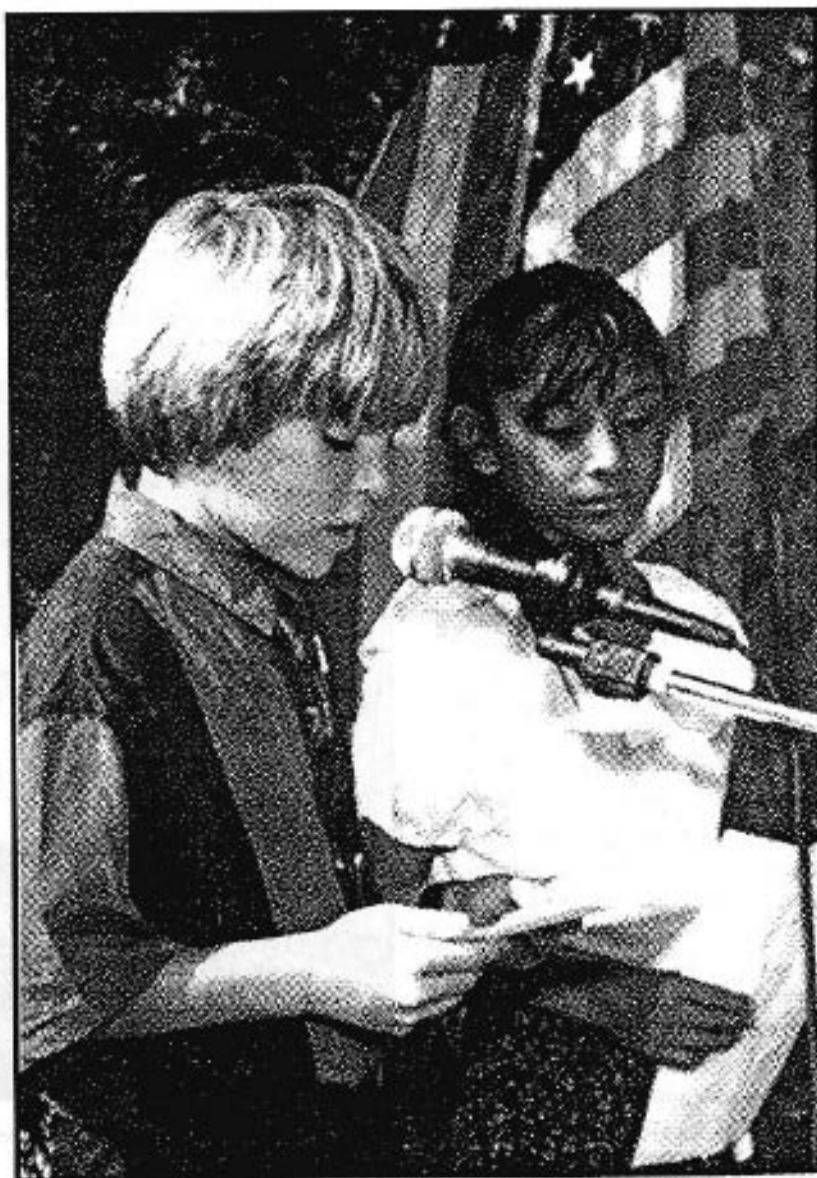


**I**n some respect, human beings are unfinished projects, works in progress and products of change – be it social, environmental, historical or technological. To some degree, everyone has regrets ... Opportunities missed or, in hindsight, opportunities seen with complete and utter clarity. In this particular instance, my personal regret is educational – along the lines of practical, sensible, worldly, *elementary education*.

Can you contemplate having paid rent as a mere kindergartner? Or, for that matter, tuition, taxes and utilities? Can you imagine having grasped – as a whimsical second-grader – the concept of currency? The connections between earning, saving, investing and spending? What about applying for a job or obtaining a loan from a bank? What about creating goods and services for a burgeoning marketplace? Or – beyond all shades of the imagination – voting, campaigning and electing public officials?

If I'm correct, you, like most Americans, were wondering what all the commotion was about the moment you hit the streets – big smile, new suit, diploma ... student loans – after graduating college! You had all the right stuff, but no idea how to apply "the stuff" or what "the stuff" meant in relation to the real world. You thought that starting salary was equivalent to the amount of money you would have at your disposal for dinners, concerts and a new-car payment! You knew how to sign the lease on an apartment, order out, stay abreast of the latest trends, talk on the telephone, charge it, access the ATM and operate the remote.

Most likely, you set elaborate, career goals – never mind your degree in economics and the inkling that you were never meant to be a financial planner – and panicked the moment an overdraft notice or some mysterious, anonymous monthly statement took up space in your otherwise uncluttered mailbox. You had no savings or spare change, for that matter, and



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Sherman's Constitutional Convention



*Sherman's adopted form of currency*

probably voted just like your parents did! "Four legs good, two legs bad. Four legs good, two legs bad."

I'm here to tell you that a sanctuary of real-world learning truly exists! It's the Sherman Elementary Business and Government Preparatory School's Microsociety program. Christyn Pope, resource teacher and Microsociety facilitator, says the program – a miniature version of a true-to-life society – has challenges like any community, city, state or country:

"Here, we are running a huge society. Our biggest thing right now is taxes – and how we keep from raising them – yet bring in enough money to pay government salaries.

"What do you do if there's no more money or students don't have the 1,000 Aztecs (Sherman's adopted form of currency) they owe the court for whatever reason? I don't have all the answers. It's been a learning experience for all of us."

Sherman students study traditional academics in the morning, and have Microsociety jobs to perform in the afternoon. They are bankers, marketers, entrepreneurs, politicians, artists, scientists, doctors, judges, architects, media and publishing moguls. They are: "butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers."

The first six weeks of school, students learn all about the U.S. government: the presidency and the positions of government. "We elect a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, sergeant at arms, and a historian," Pope said.

Students register to vote. They nominate fellow students "to serve the country." Campaign speeches are conducted during campaign week, then the voting process ensues. "Once the students are voted in, we elect senators to represent each classroom," Pope said.

The next stage is Sherman's version of a constitutional convention. Patriotic songs are played, officials are sworn in, the newly elected president delivers an inaugural speech and the preamble of the constitution is signed. Whew!

Every student, from kindergarten through

fifth grade, plays an important role in the daily operation of the Microsociety. They run banks, courts, a variety of businesses and government agencies. They create and enforce laws, earn an income through class attendance, and learn to save and invest their money.

The remarkable thing is, even the youngest students manage to absorb the crux of the marketplace – of how things ultimately work together in a flourishing economy. They grasp buying and selling, resource conservation, forecasting profits and, most importantly, that to survive in the real world, "the horse comes before the cart," not the other way around! (The cart leads the race for several people I know. In fact, they've been known to bid on the cart!)

Nine-year-old Victor Jackson works for Sherman's Bureau of Investigation (known as the SBI), and is a shining example of one with a firm grasp on reality.

"I've learned that sometimes if you don't pay your rent or stuff, your money adds up and

adds up...and you won't have enough," he said. "If you just keep buying stuff, and the tax people come around and you say you don't have any money – you won't be able to go to auctions or buy anything.

"That's why I take out half of my money to pay my rent, taxes, and tuition. That way I won't owe anything. Most of the time, I still have a lot of Aztecs to spend."

"I do the same thing as he does," said Nathan Garbutt, an outspoken fifth-grader who works as a physical education teacher at Sherman's Microsociety Health Department. "I keep a secret stash, so that I won't be in debt if something bad happens – like a big, major ticket – which luckily I haven't gotten this year."

Nathan is referring to tickets given out by the SBI for various offenses, including indebtedness to the Internal Revenue Service. "I was clean this year – I paid all my taxes and everything. There are tax people that come walking around with their little folders, and they jot down your name and how much you owe. I was like 'Yea! I don't owe anything!' I was real happy. I had lots of savings, up to 1,040 Aztecs."

Sherman students are expected to abide by the laws they've created, voted on, and passed through legislation. If laws are disobeyed, students pay fines of varying degrees (depending on grade level) for infractions, misdemeanors and felonies. Chewing gum, running, being caught without a hall pass, spitting, screaming, yelling and bringing candy to school are considered infractions. Talking back,

being disrespectful, saying bad words and fooling around are misdemeanors that carry a stiffer penalty, including community service and garnishment of wages for one week. Felonies – fighting, stealing, bribery, destroying property, threatening, hitting/kicking, ditching, gambling and littering – are harshly enforced: community service, garnishment of wages for two weeks and extremely expensive fines. This seemingly applies more to world events than a brisk, vague trip to "the principal's office."

"Occasionally, a student is 'taken out of society.' We don't believe in prison, but positive alternatives to prison," Pope said. "Students are taken away from their peers and sent to a lower grade level. To them it's like a prison, but at the same time they can be tutoring and teaching other kids."



*We the people...*

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**Micro-Society**

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"They also go to a counseling center that has leadership programs, conflict mediation training, how to deal with peers ...these are the things that help the Microsociety."

Because students earn wages and participate in a capitalist society, it stands to reason that somebody at Sherman has made a fortune. Kimberly Espinoza, 11, is apparently one of the wealthiest students in the Microsociety - having had great success as a bakery shop entrepreneur. Not only that, Kimberly is a doctor and the reigning president. "I like having a part in the rules," she says. "You make the rules for everybody and you have a lot of friends."

Kimberly is somewhat of a legend...infamously clever. "We had a student who owned a bakery, and had an abundance of money. She cooked brownies, cookies, and cupcakes on a weekly basis," Pope said. "We tell our students that they can only spend \$10 of outside money in their business ventures, because we want them to make products during Micro time - otherwise they're making profit they're not really entitled to."

Needless to say, this rule came in the wake of Kimberly's phenomenal success. "First of all, she should have been paying an import/export tax for purchasing flour and sugar outside of the school. It was too late...we never did an import tax on her," Pope said with a chuckle.

Carlos Cerna and Nathalie Ramirez, both earnest fifth-graders, are court judges. They're collectively learning the difficulties associated with high-profile positions:

"Sometimes it's hard to make decisions," Nathalie said. "I hear discussions. The defendant is saying 'No, I'm not guilty!' The district attorney is saying 'Yes, they stole the money!' It's really hard."

"I have to present myself in front of a lot of people," Carlos quipped, characterizing his role in the court room. "I'm up there...listening, writing notes down. It's very interesting. Although I enjoy the job now, I wouldn't actually want to be a judge in real life. I would want to be a police officer."

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Apparently for Carlos, the main benefit of the Microsociety involves the strict rules of conduct.

"It helps you to follow the rules...to discipline yourself. It helps you understand rules," he said.

Although Sherman's Microsociety program teaches practical skills and opens up a plethora of opportunities to kids who might not otherwise have the exposure, it isn't without perplexing issues.

"The kind of curriculum we have here doesn't correlate well with current methods of testing - like the multiple-choice test," Pope said.

Pope contends the reason has more to do with the Microsociety's stylistic learning environment than academic deficiency.

"Students are used to working both indi-

vidually and in groups to solve problems. That's what Microsociety is all about," she said. "If we look at a district multiple-choice test, the test scores are not really reflective of what we do or accomplish in the program. When we first implemented Microsociety, our kids did above the norm on state CAP (California Assessment Program) tests.

"We don't have an assessment to this program - other than attendance, lower discipline problems and positive self-esteem - and that's one of the faults in the whole Microsociety Consortium of Schools throughout the nation. We teachers see the effects, but there isn't written documentation of it."

Pope may have a lot more documentation than she realizes in the sea of students who will inevitably pass through Sherman Elementary's Microsociety program - flood-

ing the proverbial causeway - with brilliance and an insurmountable sense of purpose:

"I think Microsociety gets us kids a jump ahead in the real world, because it shows us how everything really is. It's not just some big, easy thing...you have to learn, you have to manage and you have to think," Nathan announced to the nods of Victor, Kimberly, Carlos and Nathalie. The first powerful surge in an endless series of magnificent waves. *SDFP*

*Robin Brooks is a contributor on the staff of Family Press. Photos provided by Sherman Elementary.*

The Microsociety Consortium of Schools consists of near 150 schools throughout the U.S. - and additional schools in countries around the world. It is a professional forum for sharing ideas and innovative practices, and for ensuring the quality and integrity of the Microsociety concept.

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