



New Jersey Middle School Ethics Bowl

Final, Case 2

Desk Rent

There is an emerging trend in primary and secondary education to teach financial literacy to students by structuring the classroom as a “simulated microeconomy.” The education group My Classroom Economy gives teachers the tools to create their own microeconomy in the classroom where students can earn and lose dollars, balance their checkbooks, and even pay rent on their desks. The program boasts that students learn how to be responsible in a simulated environment: learning, among other things, to delay gratification—an ability which has been linked to future success—because the simulation involves some real-life consequences. For example, if you can’t pay rent on your desk, then you become “homeless” and sit on the floor.

Parents and teachers alike have praised the program for making the process of learning about financial responsibility fun for the students, and for teaching important life skills and values organically— “in the background” of their everyday class activities. However, one might worry that this program will merely recreate in the classroom the oppressive class structures that already cause so much trouble in the wider society.

In *So You Want To Talk About Race*, Ijeoma Oluo recounts how this method was used in her brother’s classroom. Due to their family’s financial insecurity, Ijeoma’s brother would often lose classroom money (e.g. by turning in homework late) and be unable to “pay rent” on his desk. This resulted in his classmates nicknaming him “the homeless kid.” He was, then, not only struggling with homelessness in real life, but in the classroom as well.

These concerns may increase given that a recent study has shown only limited support for the claim that delayed gratification leads to future success. Instead, it seems that class is a more likely predictor of future success since for poorer families, delaying gratification may result in loss of opportunity, whereas wealthier families have more stable predictable outcomes. Still one may be concerned that without programs like My Classroom Economy it will be hard for students to learn concrete lessons about economics in daily life, and therefore the program is still valuable.

Question: Is it ethical to turn a classroom into a micro-economy by doing things such as ‘paying’ students for completing certain tasks and ‘charging’ them for others?