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Math Alive

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MATH ALIVE**Ann Suttle****Essay (1982 Second Place Winner)**

Most of the children in the sixth grade at Kilby School were engaged in some kind of business transaction when I arrived to make an observation of math skills and techniques for Education 306 (Math for the Elementary Teacher). I was amazed, and almost shocked, to see such an enthusiastic group of children, especially so much enthusiasm over math. I am not saying that one cannot be excited about math but I did find it rather unusual for everyone in a group of this size (about 30 children) to be so excited about this subject, because as everyone knows math is a subject that many of us are supposed to hate or dislike. At least, for many, math has this bad reputation. However, this reputation did not hold true here. The children were working diligently in small groups on various math activities.

Mr. Harris, the teacher, had the classroom set up in a business world atmosphere. Each small group was operating like a business in a realistic

environment. There was a bank with the banker issuing play money. A jail and a jailor were also in evidence for those who broke the rules of society. In fact, every Friday is set aside as the day for court. If a student is caught chewing gum or breaking any school rule for that matter, he is given a choice of either paying a fine, going to jail, or having a trial by jury. And of course, Mr. Harris is the judge. He passes the sentence after the decision is handed down by the jury. However, if the defendant is not satisfied with the sentence, he has a right to oppose it.

Each child was issued a definite amount of money but he had a job in which this money had to be earned. Jobs were based on society's employment opportunities - just as in the real world today, the economic situation has a great bearing on the employment rate. But this sixth grade class has never let the unemployment rate drop below twelve percent. Maybe Capitol Hill could follow suit. Each child is given the opportunity to earn additional money too. For example, for every A made fifteen dollars is received. For every B ten dollars, and for every C five dollars. A five dollar bonus is given for a grade of one hundred.

Many decisions had to be made: one had to pay (play money) for the permission to go to the restroom. One had to decide—was the trip necessary? Much money, real money, is spent daily without due consideration. There was even a welfare department for those who could not adjust to a society financially and had to have means of monetary resources.

The children are also learning to live in a democratic society. They have elected officials. A president and a vice president are elected by the people. A secretary is appointed to the teacher. The appointed person must be in good standing with the teacher and fellow-classmates. Children having this experience have told me something from other observations made at Kilby. All of the supervising teachers at Kilby School know that classes are not for the purpose of preparing children for living, but classes are for living and experiencing reality.

In concluding my observation, I talked with Mr. Harris for a few moments asking about other math experiences one might get in this class since I was there to concentrate on math skills and techniques. He told me he had always been interested in stocks, bonds, and other investments and hopefully some of this interest might rub off on his students. He said, one day while talking about stock, the class wanted him to play the stock market with them. They called

Math Alive
(continued)

their stock Earl's Pearl Production and were selling it for one dollar per share. The financial information presented to him looked very hopeful so he invested rather heavily. Mr. Harris probably thought: here was a chance to make a fortune. Too bad it was only play money in a make-believe world. Earl's Pearls began to drop. Then suddenly it dropped drastically—60 points. Mr. Harris lost many thousands of dollars and was thankful that it was only play money. Members of the class had great losses too. The whole class was in an economic depression. I guess one could say "the bottom fell out" and the moral behind this episode is that it is not always wise to over buy and "to think before indulging."

Even though my observation period was only for one hour, I was greatly impressed by the realistic approach to living in a world based on monetary units. And too that these children are learning the rules of a democratic society. A program which will help them to adjust to becoming stable adults. This program begins in September and concludes in May, involving all subjects and activities of the sixth grade. It was a wonderful and enjoyable learning experience for this student of Education, an experience that won't soon be forgotten.
