



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2018 Volume I: An Introduction to Income Inequality in America: Economics, History, Law

Economic Inequality: What It Is, How It Affects Our Lives, and What We Can Do About It

Curriculum Unit 18.01.07
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Unit Objectives and Rationale

This unit introduces the topic of economics and economic inequality to 8th grade students through the use of nonfiction texts and films, and also asks students to examine, interpret and evaluate data independently, thus acquiring one of the most important skills for critical literacy in the 21st century. The recent young adult book, *Economic Inequality: The American Dream Under Siege*, by Coral Celeste Frazer ¹ will be the central text for this curriculum unit and each student will have a copy of the text to read in class.

In her book, Ms. Frazer has written for both teens and adults and studied economic inequality extensively; she has made her text understandable for eighth graders at the same time as providing data and bibliographic references. The book contains many helpful text features such as photographs, colorful charts and graphs displaying the data that illustrate economic inequality, text boxes that display important concepts and insets with individuals' stories to make the facts more understandable and relatable. There is also a glossary and a guide to where students may find further information. The objective is for each student to read most of this text and also focus more closely on one particular proposed solution to the problem of economic inequality facing our society today.

Since the implementation of the Common Core State Standards beginning in 2010, there has been a push to increase the reading and writing of nonfiction in the English Language Arts classroom. In our urban district we have seen the curriculum change so that at least 50% of our core reading and required writing tasks consist of nonfiction. There has been an effort to find texts that are both interesting and challenging in order to maximize student engagement and prepare students for the challenges of higher education and life in the 21st century. In fact, the preeminent reading researchers and authors Kyleene Beers and Robert E. Probst have noted, "For our kids to become the readers our ever-changing society needs-our *democracy* needs-they must become responsive readers." ² They want students to become responsible both to the text and themselves, and they argue that doing so requires the use of relevant materials and critical literacy - the ability to evaluate the truth and validity of an author's assertions. In their research they found that the problems middle school students are interested in studying include poverty and economic inequity, issues which are relevant to them because they directly impact their lives. Thus, though the unit addresses difficult concepts it is expected to be highly engaging to the middle school population for which it is intended.

Literacy objectives for this unit extend further than the reading and interpretation of nonfiction text and data. The unit also includes the use of audio sources such as podcasts, and videos including documentary footage and sections of a feature film. Common Core Reading Anchor Standard 7 requires students to “Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.”³ In addition, classroom debates which students find particularly engaging and stimulating are peppered throughout the unit. For the culminating task students will be writing an argumentative essay as well as preparing an oral presentation utilizing digital media for their classmates.

When he was President of the United States, in an eloquent speech Barack Obama labeled economic inequality the defining issue of our time. He noted “The combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe.”⁴ Eighth graders are at the perfect age and stage of their development to be introduced to these topics in light of their growing observation of inequality in their schools and communities, along with their developing awareness of financial concerns of their families and how it impacts their own goals and dreams. Jonathan Kozol has written extensively of the inequity and phenomenal segregation of the American school system and our own New Haven Public Schools is a prime example of this.⁵ Distressingly, inner city children are being held accountable for their success or failure by many politicians and even educators, despite that they had no control over where they were born and raised. These students must be taught that they are not responsible for where they were born or where they led their childhood.⁶ Thus, they will realize that in order to overcome these obstacles they must be ready to change these factors for themselves and others.

Content

Introductory Material

In order to begin studying the complex issue of economic inequality students must have a basic introduction to money and the economy. The fifteen minute educational video “A World of Money,” not only covers the history of the use of money from bartering in ancient times through the innovations of coin and paper money but also introduces essential terms such as supply and demand and inflation.⁷ The video uses an engaging format through interviewing teens, showing footage of the Masai who continue to barter animals for their needs, and explains how humans developed from using tokens such as seashells and salt to the electrum used in Lydia to coins in Ancient Greece and Rome. With simulation there is an explanation of why Roman emperors began to inflate their money leading to the fall of a great empire and the return of most of the world to a barter system. Subsequently, it is shown how paper money re-emerged in China and then jumps to an explanation of what determines prices. The viewer sees how supply and demand can result in the lowering of some prices such as for technological innovations, as well as how governments abandoned the gold standard and printed more and more money resulting in inflation. This video will be followed by open ended response questions for the students to discuss.

Students will require a more thorough explanation of economic systems with specific emphasis on market economy and its advantages and disadvantages. This introduction will serve the important function of pre-reading for the core text of the unit. Students will first be introduced to the traditional economic system

revolving around a family or tribe, producing only what they need with little surplus. Second will be the command economic system where the government determines what is produced as well as prices and owns most of the land and businesses. Finally, the market system will be discussed, with its features of control by the people, the force of competition, and the laws of supply and demand. Students will have the opportunity to compare and contrast the three systems and be introduced to the concept of a mixed system which is applicable to much of the world today.

Quality of Life

Direct instruction may be necessary in order for students to appreciate the important nature of the phenomenon of economic inequality as differentiated from poverty. Straightforward concern about poverty seeks to help the neediest members of our society without concern about how much money those who are at the top of the economic ladder have. In contrast, concern over economic inequality focuses on the disproportionate amount of income and wealth a small minority of the people at the top of the economic distribution are accumulating while the poorest and middle class improve their circumstances marginally or not at all. Economic inequality has consequences for a society independent of poverty which are addressed later in the unit. In order to analyze the topic of economic inequality it will be essential to thoroughly address the topic of quality of life. The importance of objective measures such as infant mortality, life expectancy, birth rate, death rate, literacy rate, poverty rate, per capita income, gross domestic product and unemployment rates must be recognized, because the difference these measures will demonstrate objectively the negative consequences of economic inequality. At this point, it will be advantageous to conduct some interdisciplinary lessons with the math teacher regarding exactly how these indicators are calculated and examining data on various countries to compare and contrast them. Small groups can be assigned a specific country to examine and then the whole class can discuss the comparison and hypothesize regarding reasons for the differences. This will be an excellent follow up to students' study of world cultures from the previous academic year.

The American Dream

Prior to reading about economic inequality and reading our core text, students will benefit from an introduction to the concept of The American Dream ⁸. The following definition can be provided:

“For those willing to work hard and take advantage of their opportunities, there is the expectation of a prosperous and fulfilling life. The United States has long been epitomized as a land of opportunity, regardless of one’s situation in life.” (p.1)

The students should unpack this definition and discuss exactly what is meant by prosperity, fulfillment, and opportunity. The idea of economic mobility can be discussed, and data examined through the use of an engaging interactive from The New York Times. ⁹The interactive allows for the comparison of black, white, Asian American and Hispanic girls and boys from lower, middle and high-income groups over time. This will also serve the function of introducing students to the idea that income itself as well as income mobility can be at least partially influenced by race in our society.

Economic Inequality

To begin our study of economic inequality, a high interest opening article from Forbes for the whole class to read is “Five Economic Lessons from the Hunger Games.”¹⁰ *The Hunger Games*¹¹, a wildly popular young adult novel by Suzanne Collins, depicts a dystopia consisting of twelve districts, each with a specialized function for the society. Most of the students will either have read the novel or seen the movie and will be familiar with the structure of the society. The heroine of the novel, Katniss Everdeen, lives in the poorest district, labeled District 12. District 12 is divided into two sections: The Seam, where the coal miners live, and the town, where the merchant class lives. The article points out that The Capitol, a high tech and extremely wealthy epicenter, controls District 12 and other district slave laborers with propaganda, force and the Hunger Games ritual, which involves a deadly game where two child tributes from each district are practically offered up as human sacrifices. In terms of the economic side of the story, the thirteen Districts supply The Capitol with resources and wealth. This is what makes the story and the article a great place to begin the discussion of economic inequality with middle school students. The lessons to be learned from *The Hunger Games* include that market economies are more efficient than command economies, globalization only works if markets are really free and you don’t extract resources and wealth from developing nations, economic inequality is bad for business in that it ultimately leads to only superficial success of the wealthy and revolutions of the workers, war drains economic resources, and technology can be used for good or evil.” Many details of *The Hunger Games* text with its worker heroine Katniss Everdeen who inspires a revolt among the slave laboring districts are used to illustrate these lessons. The conclusion that spreading the wealth across all demographics creates more stable societies will set students up for some of the complicated controversies in the remainder of this unit of study.

***Economic Inequality: The American Dream Under Siege* by Coral Celeste Frazer¹²**

At this point in the unit the class reads the core text, *Economic Inequality: The American Dream Under Siege* by Coral Celeste Frazer. During the reading of the text, students will learn important literacy strategies of note taking, summarizing, and responding to nonfiction. The first section of the text reviews the history of economic inequality in the United States of America. Students in the later part of Grade 8 have already studied an overview of much of American History. They will be particularly interested in how the industrial revolution with its transition to a cash based, market driven economy and more wage earners led to greater economic inequality. The gilded age and the controversy over viewing its elite as robber baron or captains of industry will also be familiar to them. Political cartoons will be viewed here and also later in the unit as yet another type of text for students to interpret and critically evaluate. More attention will have to be paid for the history of trade unions perhaps here branching off into the advantages and disadvantages or regulatory capture by professions themselves or those with a vested interest in regulating the profession. Students will see how artisan guilds of the middle ages evolved into present day trade unions, and at times professional organizations enact legislation to control incomers to their professions. They may make it seem like they are protecting the public when in fact they are making it impossible for hardworking individuals to find a gateway into a profession or climb out of poverty. Further, the facts that trade unions are what helped common workers be treated in a humane fashion by helping to pass laws requiring safe working conditions, the 8-hour work day, and prohibiting child labor as well as demanding a living wage will be important to emphasize. Listening to a podcast from Planet Money may serve to keep students engaged and also tie the past into the present.¹³ Finally, the section concludes with describing how the strong productivity of the 1980s led to extreme profits for top management but not for workers. When these profits were combined with the decline

in United States (US) manufacturing, changes in the tax structure, trade unions losing strength, and the growth in service sectors with its low paying and non-unionized jobs, the consequence is our current extremely unequal situation.

“How Unequal Are We”¹⁴ explains some essential terms and presents the data of the present situation. The difference between mean and median should be known to the students from math class. In addition to viewing the charts in the books student will directly examine charts on the World Inequality Database and interpret these charts for themselves.¹⁵ The demographic of inequality including that of race will connect to the novel *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers,¹⁶ in which a young African American male faces the inequity of the judicial system in Harlem, read by the class earlier in the year. However, the difference between poverty and inequality will be important for the students to note and they will also read about Piketty’s observations of how money makes money.¹⁷ Time will be spent discussing the differences between income inequality and wealth inequality and examining data for the two respective measures.

In the next section (Chapter 3), of our core text, students will study the costs of economic inequality. The text has colorful graphics illustrating one theory of how economic inequality can harm our society: the difference between the vicious and virtuous cycles. During a vicious cycle, there is a large gap between rich and poor and the majority of consumers have few resources. Consumers spend less and buy fewer goods. This leads to companies making less money and resulting in lower wages. Thus, tax revenue decreases and the government invests less money continuing the vicious cycle. During a virtuous cycle, there is a smaller gap between rich and poor and good-paying jobs are available for many. Consumers have more resources and are able to buy more good and services. Companies makes more money and wages can increase. Tax revenue increases and the government can invest more so that the cycle is continued.

Here a classroom debate will be introduced on whether cutting taxes for the rich actually creates jobs. Arguably the most complex information for students to digest will pertain to the housing bubble that occurred in our own century and the burst of it in 2006. Students may find it shocking how little of the money provided by the government to “bailout” the banks and mortgage companies actually reached ordinary people struggling to stay in their homes. The human costs of decreased savings, increased debt, and the resultant impact on healthcare and health, diet, stress and lifespan may be illustrated by viewing parts of the film “The Divide” by Katharine Round,¹⁸ which outlines the lives of seven individuals and how they have each been impacted by economic inequality. Furthermore, data on deaths of despair, meaning deaths resulting from suicide or alcohol or drug abuse, in the United States as compared with other countries will also be examined.

“The Inequality of Opportunity” is the topic of the next section of our text and the unit.¹⁹ That fulfillment of the American Dream largely depends on where you grow up, how much money your parents have, as well as your gender and race may be disturbing to students, though it should not be shocking to them at this point in their studies. The concept of absolute upward mobility and relative mobility will be introduced. Illustrations of how quality of schools are tied into property taxes for the community here in Connecticut will be of particular interest. The data showing that students in poor schools are more likely to be suspended, spend more time out of school, fail, be less able to get into college, and eventually turn to crime is very troubling. On a different note, the increasing cost of higher education in the US and increasing student debt is impacting many young people in the middle class whose parents earn too much to qualify for financial aid packages and is resulting in a whole generation of young people who may never have the familiar trappings they accept as their birthright such as home ownership. This consequence can be seen both in people who can’t afford a college education, or people who get one at such an exorbitant cost that they end up paying back students

loans for many of their prime earning years and cannot afford to purchase their own homes.

The next section covers how the wealthy maintain their power over the government in the US through political activity, differentially more voting, lobbying and other political activity. The high costs of running for office and the 2010 Supreme Court ruling that people can spend as much as they want on political advertising will also serve to illustrate how the wealthy have managed to monopolize our current government. The connection to obtaining government contracts, leasing of government land, tax breaks and changes in the tax code are covered. All of these differential benefits can be and are paid for by the wealthiest members of society through lobbying. Another classroom debate can be conducted in this section on raising the federal minimum wage and impacts this could have on the economy. In addition to reading articles on the Internet and the summaries of positions at procon.org, the short film "Raise the Wage," available for streaming at izzit.org, discusses the history of the minimum wage and also explores unintended consequences of raising the minimum wage. It is vital to assist students in recognizing the bias in this film as close analysis reveals the filmmakers to clearly be against the raising of minimum wage in our country.

The final section of content for this unit is what can be done about economic inequality. First, the last chapter of Frazer's book discusses the point of view that such inequality is healthy for a society in accordance with our American ideas that successful businesses and individuals should be rewarded, and distrust of big government and its excessive regulation. It is also important to note the belief by some that taking money from the rich discourages innovation, and that inequality encourages work ethic. The remainder of the text outlines the main areas that can be focused on to try and make our society more economically equal.

Analyzing Cartoons

The analysis of images is a vital area to focus on in the language arts classroom during the 21st century as they are prevalent on the Internet and in digital social media. A wide variety of cartoons addressing issues pertaining to economic equality are available at the Cartoonist Group website.²⁰ Student will be allowed to choose one cartoon he or she finds engaging for analysis using a graphic organizer. The class will be instructed regarding the importance of investigating the context, intended audience, symbols and techniques such as sarcasm, irony, caricature, exaggeration and stereotypes. Following the analysis students will write a response summarizing the point of view of the cartoonists, evaluating the persuasiveness of the cartoon, and explaining his or her own agreement or disagreement with the point of view. The students will then present their chosen cartoons to the class.

Culminating Project

At this point in the unit students may choose one of the proposed solutions for economic inequality to focus on, research and to write an argumentative essay and present an overview to the class. At this point in their education students have some experience with research and will be expected to have at least two additional sources in addition to the information in the core text. Assistance will be given to those students who require it. The students will need to cite evidence from the sources in their essays as well as explaining the evidence. In the conclusion they will evaluate the viability of the proposed solutions via a classroom debate. A brief presentation will be made to the class utilizing a digital platform. A choice will also be given to those students expressing the opinion that economic inequality is not a negative phenomenon for our society to write their essays on that topic.

The first idea for a solution and choice for students to focus on is **redistribution**, with Piketty's version of taxing the rich heavily and distribute the money equally through the form of a basic income like has been

tried in Norway. ²¹ This can be contrasted to Atkinson’s idea of participatory income in which all individuals participate in a socially meaningful activity. ²² A closely connected solution to our economic problems is **shifting the tax burden** by eliminating the sales tax, increasing tax on capital gains, and removing tax loopholes for the rich and corporations. The second major choice is to focus on the rising cost of **healthcare** and the unique role of insurance companies in the US, with an emphasis on what can be done to mitigate this factor. Next is the idea of **investing in communities** by making sure all families have the money, services and benefits they need to raise children, investing in our public education system, and investing in infrastructure and public transportation. The last main area is more and tighter **government regulation** in limiting money spent on political advertising, restricting lobbying, controlling banking and financial industries and higher minimum wage. Finally, there is an alternative of choosing some other smaller areas to focus on for solutions that are also mentioned in the text such as **increasing union membership, citizen action through protest, increased voting, boycotts and new business models** . It should be also recognized that some students may decide economic inequality is not such an important issue for our society and may want to have this as the thesis for their argumentative essays. Each student will present his or her topic to the class using a digital platform.

Through this unit, students have been introduced to basic economic information including types of economies, the laws of supply and demand, and quality of life and its measurement. They have studied about the American Dream, and economic mobility. Most importantly, students will have covered exactly what economic inequality consists of, how it impacts our lives, and finally what can be done about it. It is hoped that in addition to teaching valuable skills of critical literacy and data analysis the unit also provides a more educated citizenship for the future of our society.

Lesson Guide with Classroom Activities

Lesson Title	Content	Strategies and Activities
“A World of Money”	View documentary about the history of money in human society and become familiar with basic economic terms	Cornell note taking while viewing documentary Responding to text-based questions Class discussion
Introduction to economic systems	Handouts on market, command, and market economies	Graphic organizers for comparing and contrasting
Quality of Life	Define and describe measures of infant mortality, life expectancy, birth rate, death rate, literacy rate, poverty rate, per capita income, gross domestic product and unemployment in various cultures.	Examining, interpreting and summarizing data
Economic Inequality in <i>The Hunger Games</i>	Reading nonfiction text from an adult mainstream periodical entitled “Five Economic Lessons of <i>The Hunger Games</i> ”	Cornell note-taking on written text Participating in small group and whole class discussion.

<i>Economic Inequality: The American Dream Under Siege</i>	<p>Reading core text including graphs and figures Viewing data from the World Inequality database Listing to a podcast from <i>Planet Money</i> Viewing sections of the feature film "The Divide" Examining a <i>New York Times</i> interactive on generational mobility Viewing the brief documentary "Raise the Wage"</p>	<p>Cornell note-taking on written text Responding to text-based questions Examining, interpreting and summarizing data Connecting fiction and nonfiction Connecting print and non-print media Evaluating bias in print and non-print text Participate in classroom discussion and debate Choosing a cartoon Interpreting the meaning of a political cartoon Presenting a brief oral presentation to the class Choose a possible solution to economic inequality from our core text to focus on Conduct independent research on the chosen text with the help of the teacher and library media specialist Use a writing process to draft and write an argumentative essay Create a digital presentation and present it to the class.</p>
Examining Economic Inequality via cartoons	Viewing cartoons online.	
What We Can Do	<p>Researching and reading nonfiction text Writing an argumentative essay</p>	

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Reading List for Students and Materials for Classroom Use

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Appendix: Common Core Standards Implemented in this Unit

Common Core Standards Implemented in this Unit ²³

Reading Informational Text Grade 8 Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.1

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. Students will be responding to nonfiction periodicals and a core text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.2

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to supporting ideas; provide an objective summary of the text. Students summarize the text they have read and cite evidence to support the central idea.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.3

Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories). Students will analyze connections while conducting independent research for their argumentative essays.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts. All these skills will be necessary while reading the core text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.5

Analyze in detail the structure of a specific paragraph in a text, including the role of particular sentences in developing and refining a key concept. This type of analysis will be done while reading handouts on economic systems.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.6

Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.8

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound, and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; recognize when irrelevant evidence is introduced. Students are required to delineate and evaluate arguments while conducting research for their culminating essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently. The texts used in this unit include those at a high school level and beyond.

Writing - Grade 6-8 Standards

Text Types and Purposes:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1

Write arguments focused on *discipline-specific content* . Students write an argumentative essay as a part of this unit.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.A

Introduce claim(s) about a topic or issue, acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically. Students need to do this when writing their argumentative essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.B

Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources. Students will need to do this during classroom debates.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.C

Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence. This is necessary for the culminating project.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.D

Establish and maintain a formal style. Again, this will be required during the writing of the argumentative essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1.E

Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented. Required during the writing of the argumentative essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. Required during the writing of the argumentative essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.5

With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed. Required during the writing of the argumentative essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.6

Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas clearly and efficiently. Required during the writing of the argumentative essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.7

Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of

exploration. Required during the writing of the argumentative essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.8

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation. Required during the writing of the argumentative essay.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.9

Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research. This is also required during the argumentative essay.

Endnotes

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