

Poverty and World Wealth

BY SUSAN HERSH AND BOB PETERSON

An important part of a person's understanding of global issues is the recognition of the dramatic inequalities between nations and social classes within countries.

The purpose of this activity is to graphically demonstrate the vast differences in wealth between different areas of the world. It combines math, geography, writing, and social studies.

We remind students of some of the things we learned about colonialism — such as how great quantities of silver and gold were stolen from the Americas and taken to Europe. We also explain that current relations between countries and international organizations such as the World Trade Organization also affect how wealthy countries are. We make sure that students know the following terms: resources, GNP, wealth, distribution, income, power, and colonialism.

MATERIALS

- 11" x 17" blank world maps for each student, or pair of students, to write on
- 50 chips (25 of one color, and 25 of another) for each map
- 25 slips of paper with "I was born in [name of continent, based on chart]"
- 25 chocolate chip cookies
- playground map, or signs with names of continents and yarn to distinguish boundaries
- transparency of resource table on page 68
- six "negotiator" signs with yarn to hang around students' necks
- writing paper
- additional cookies for students who don't get any during the simulation (optional)

SUGGESTED PROCEDURE

- Give each student or pair of students a world map. Have them identify the continents and other places you may have been studying.
- Ask students how many people they think are in the world (about 6 billion in early 2002). After students have guessed, show them an almanac with the current estimate. Ask: If we represent all the people in the world with 25 chips, how many people is each chip worth?

(For six billion people, each chip represents approximately 240 million people.)

- Give 25 chips to each student/group and have them distribute them by continent where they think people live. Discuss student estimates and then tell them the accurate figures. Have them rearrange their chips to reflect the facts. Ask students what the differing stacks of chips tell them about the world's population.
- Explain that you are now going to give them another 25 chips of a different color and that they represent all the wealth produced in the world (the monetary worth of all the goods and services produced every year — from health care to automobiles). Tell them to put the chips on the continents to indicate their estimate of who gets this wealth. (Each chip represents 1/25 of the world's total amount of goods and services produced.)
- Discuss student estimates and record them on the chalkboard. Have students reflect on the size of the two different stacks of chips, population and resources. Collect the chips.
- Tell students you are going to demonstrate how population and wealth are distributed by continent. Have each student pick a slip of paper from a container. (The "I was born...." slips.) They may not trade continents. (As you distribute the slips, listen for stereotypical reactions to the continents — these will be useful in the follow-up discussion and will indicate possibilities for future lessons.)
- Have students go to an area in the room that you have designated to represent that continent. (Playground maps work great for this.) After students are in their areas, remind them that they each represent about 240 million people and that you are going to distribute the world's riches. Have each continent/group designate one person to be a "traveling negotiator" and distribute a "traveling negotiator" sign to those people.
- Explain that once the bag of resources is passed out to a representative from each continent, each group needs to sit in a circle and discuss their situation. They are to talk about how many resources they have compared to

people on other continents, and discuss ways they should negotiate to increase their resources. They may plead and/or promise. Tell the students there will be a cross-continent negotiation session, then a time for the traveling negotiators to return to their home base to discuss their negotiations with the rest of their group, and finally a time for any trading or donating of resources to take place. (Note: Every continent, except North America, will have at least one “stay at home negotiator” and one traveling negotiator. The North American person can stay put or travel throughout the world.)

- Use a popular treat — rice crispy bars or chocolate chip cookies — and distribute them according to the percentages given in the chart. Announce the number of treats you are giving to each continent as you do so. Provide a paper bag for each continent to keep the treats in as you dramatically place each of the resources into the bag. Remind students they are not to eat the treats until after the negotiation session.
- Announce that the negotiation session is to begin. Only traveling negotiators may move to a different continent. When they come, they should sit in a circle with the “stay-at-home negotiators” and discuss the distribution of wealth and what should be done about it.
- After about 5 or 10 minutes, tell all traveling negotiators to return to their home continents. Each group should discuss the negotiations. After a few minutes, announce that the trading session may begin and if a continent wishes to trade or donate resources, they may. After that, instruct the people holding the resource bags to distribute the resources to people in their group.
- Give each continental group tag board and markers. Tell them to make some signs that describe what they think of the way the resources were distributed.
- Bring students back together for a whole-class discussion. Have each group share their posters and perspectives. Show students the information from the chart via a transparency or handout. Connect their emotions and feelings of fairness to the information on the chart. (At this time a teacher can give out additional treats to those students who did not get any, if one desires.)

Some questions worth posing if the students don't ask them themselves:

- How did the distribution of wealth get to be so unequal?
- What does the inequality of wealth mean in terms of the kinds of lives people lead?
- Who do you think decides how wealth is distributed?
- Should wealth be distributed equally?
- Do you think that, within a particular continent or nation, wealth is distributed fairly?
- How does the unequal distribution of wealth affect the power that groups of people hold?
- Within our community, is wealth distributed fairly?
- What can be done about the unequal way wealth is distributed?
- Who can we talk with to find out more information about these matters?

If you did any of the activities from the chapter on colonialism, ask students what role they think colonialism played in creating this inequality.

- After the discussion, have students write an essay about their feelings, what they learned, what questions they continue to have, and what they might want to do about world poverty.
- A few days after this simulation, “Ten Chairs of Inequality” (p. 115) is a useful activity to help students understand that in individual countries wealth is also unequally distributed.
- Students can do follow-up research on related topics, such as: the role colonialism played in the wealth disparity; how current policies of U.S. corporations and the U.S. government affect people in poorer nations; the role of groups such as the WTO and the IMF; and what different organizations and politicians are doing about world poverty. (See “Organizations and Websites for Global Justice” in the Resources section.) ■

Susan Hersh developed this lesson while teaching fifth graders at La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She currently teaches seventh grade social studies at Preuss School in San Diego, California. Bob Peterson (repmilw@aol.com) teaches fifth grade at La Escuela Fratney and is a Rethinking Schools editor. A version of this article first appeared in Rethinking Our Classrooms, Volume 1 (Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 1994). For sample student handouts visit our website: www.rethinkingschools.org/rg.

WORLD POPULATION AND WEALTH

Continent	Population (in millions) 2000	% of world Population	# in class of 25	Wealth (GNP in billions of dollars)	% of world GNP	# of treats out of 25
Africa	794	13.1 %	3	495.4	1.8 %	0.5
Asia	3,672	60.6 %	15	7,172.6	25.5 %	6
Oceania	31	0.5 %	0	442.4	1.6 %	0
Europe	727	12.0 %	3	9,606.3	34.2 %	9
USA & Canada	314	5.2 %	1	8,933.6	31.8 %	8
Latin America	519	8.6 %	2	1,430.7	5.1 %	1
World Total	6,057	100 %	24*	28,081	100 %	24.5

Sources: World population figures are from the United Nations Population Division: <http://www.un.org/esa/population>.

For purposes of this chart, one-third of Russia's GNP was attributed to Asia and two-thirds to Europe. Latin America includes Mexico, the Caribbean Islands and South America. The data were broken down this way to highlight the great disparity of wealth between Mexico and the United States and Canada, all of which are considered part of North America.

*Because of rounding, there are only a total of 24 students needed to represent the world's population.

GNP figures are from the World Bank, quoted in the Universal Almanac, 1994. GNP is defined as the total national output of goods and services. Percentage of world wealth is an estimate based on total GNP. (Not shown in the graph.)