

# “Bluey-economics”: It’s Not All About the Money

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*In this article, we describe ways to use the television series Bluey to examine economic concepts in children’s daily lives. We identify and unpack parts of Bluey episodes that might serve as the basis for lessons or discussions with young children. We explain how economic decision-making can have either “market” or “nonmarket” contexts, which is to say that economics is not only about money!*

In the twelfth episode of the award-winning children’s television show *Bluey*,<sup>1</sup> Bluey brings home a classroom puppet that she is supposed to entertain for the weekend. Her family (father Bandit, mother Chilli, and younger sister Bingo) makes grand plans for how they will surpass previous entries in Bob Bilby’s memory book, but despite good intentions spend much of the time watching cartoons. After Chilli shows everyone some photographs that capture their abundant screen time, the children decide to get back to playing with one another and make lots of memories. It is great TV, and furthermore a great tool for teaching economics to young children.

Economics is the study of how people make choices when they encounter limited options. A good definition for young children is “thinking about how we make choices when we can’t get everything we want.” These choices do not necessarily need to be about money. Economists distinguish between *market* and *nonmarket* choices. Market choices have to do with buying and selling goods and services using money and are guided by prices. *Nonmarket* choices include pretty much everything else—the vast majority of choices! In nonmarket choices, people act “economically” in that they face trade-offs, weigh costs and benefits, and respond to incentives. But the choices they face and the incentives they follow do not necessarily have to do with money, trade, production, or consumption. Their choices are often more subtle and are governed by cultural and societal norms.

The “Bob Bilby” episode of *Bluey* portrays what is for many U.S. families a relatable dilemma about how to make choices about device use. Screen time for young children is on the rise, with families recognizing beneficial new learning opportunities while simultaneously expressing worries about how much is too much.<sup>2</sup> This consideration of costs and benefits is an example of economics in action, and *Bluey* is full of examples like this.

## Teaching Economics with *Bluey*: The “Why” and the “How”

*Bluey* itself is a leading player in the current media landscape, topping U.S. streaming charts in 2023.<sup>3</sup> Produced in Australia beginning in 2018, the show has successfully navigated the transition from the local to global market.<sup>4</sup> The seven-minute episodes illustrate the humor and deeper meaning in everyday situations and are popular with both children and adults.<sup>5</sup> Much children’s programming features overt socioemotional or academic lessons, such as PBS Kids’ *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood*, with episodes focused on going to the dentist or what to do if you feel upset, or *Molly of Denali*, which was designed by researchers to teach about informational text.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, *Bluey* takes place primarily in and around a family home, offering fewer explicit lessons but lots to learn for children and parents alike.<sup>7</sup>

Television shows that students watch outside of school can be great instructional resources, if mediated by a teacher. In addition to increasing engagement through multimodal content, using television shows offers opportunities to connect to students’ interests and funds of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, teachers can direct student attention to aspects of a show that the students might not have noticed or considered.<sup>9</sup> In “Bob Bilby,” this could be highlighting the opportunity cost of the choice to watch cartoons or asking students to identify factors that make the memory book activity more difficult for some families than others. State or national standards can guide teachers as they identify these connections. The C3 Framework outlines content standards across disciplines. In Table 1, we link K–2 and 3–5 economics standards to possible *Bluey* episodes and suggest discussion questions (and possible answers) for use in classrooms.

Pedagogy focused on developing critical media literacy with young children highlights the importance of students engaging in both analysis and production of media.<sup>10</sup> Teaching economics with *Bluey*, then, can involve watching and

Table 1. C3 Economics Disciplinary Standards and *Bluey*

C3 Framework Indicators*	Suggested <i>Bluey</i> Episode(s)	Suggested Discussion Questions and Possible Answers
<p><b>Economic Decision Making</b> D2.Eco.1.K-2. Explain how scarcity necessitates decision making. D2.Eco.1.3-5. Compare the benefits and costs of individual choices.</p>	<p>“Shops” (S1, E23) Bluey struggles to decide what role she wants to play in a game of shops and frustrates her friends by restarting the game every time she changes her mind.</p>	<p>Why does Bluey have a hard time choosing one role in the game of shops? (<i>She can only pretend to be one person at a time, and she can’t decide between all the options.</i>)</p>
<p><b>Economic Decision Making</b> D2.Eco.2.K-2. Identify the benefits and costs of making various personal decisions D2.Eco.2.3-5. Identify positive and negative incentives that influence the decisions people make</p>	<p>“Ice Cream” (S2, E47) Bluey and Bingo convince Bandit to buy them ice cream, but their treats melt while they try to decide on a fair way to trade licks.</p>	<p>What are the benefits and costs of Bandit’s decision to give the kids his ice cream at the end? (<i>Benefits: The girls stop crying; the girls get another chance to try sharing; Costs: He doesn’t get to eat any ice cream; the girls might not learn their lesson.</i>)</p>
<p><b>Exchange and Markets</b> D2.Eco.3.K-2. Describe the skills and knowledge required to produce certain goods and services. D2.Eco.3.3-5. Identify examples of the variety of resources (human capital, physical capital, and natural resources) that are used to produce goods and services.</p>	<p>“Ragdoll” (S3, E24) Bluey finds money on the ground, and the kids ask Bandit to drive them to the corner store to buy ice cream. He insists that “it tastes better when you work for it.” He then goes limp or “ragdoll.” The girls have to use various resources to get him into the car.</p>	<p>What natural, human, and capital resources do the kids use to get their dad to the car? (<i>Human capital as the girls work to roll dad through the house; human capital as they plan a better way; capital resources when they use the skateboard and roller skates to make the job easier; human capital to enlist neighbor Wendy’s support</i>)</p>
<p><b>Exchange and Markets</b> D2.Eco.5.K-2. Identify prices of products in a local market. D2.Eco.5.3-5. Explain the role of money in making exchange easier.</p>	<p>“Burger Shop” (S2, E32) Bluey and Bingo operate a business in the tub. The game is an end-of-bath delay tactic, as Bandit has been convinced by a parenting book that he should let the kids make all their own decisions. The burger shop charges five dollarbucks per burger, which Bandit repeatedly pays. As the kids get colder and Bandit becomes more frustrated by their decision to stay in the tub, he eats all the remaining burgers. When the bill comes, he cannot afford the \$100 price, so he gets into the bath to “wash dishes” instead.</p>	<p>How does money make it easier for Bluey and Bingo to run their burger shop business? (<i>Customers can pay for the products and the burger shop owners can use the money to buy things they want. This is easier than trying to get things they want [food, shelter, etc.] from the customers directly via barter.</i>)</p>
<p><b>Exchange and Markets</b> D2.Eco.6.K-2. Explain how people earn income. D2.Eco.6.3-5. Explain the relationship between investment in human capital, productivity, and future incomes.</p>	<p>“Whale Watching” (S3, E22) Bluey pretends to be a boat captain providing a whale watching service. Bluey and Bingo exchange money for a ticket, with a money-back guarantee.</p>	<p>How does a “money-back guarantee” affect Bluey’s pretend business? (<i>If she doesn’t do a good job and provide a good experience for her customer, then she returns the money, which means she doesn’t get an income, and might lose future income if the customer tells others they didn’t like the service.</i>)</p>
<p><b>Exchange and Markets</b> D2.Eco.7.K-2. Describe examples of costs of production. D2.Eco.2.3-5. Identify positive and negative incentives that influence the decisions people make.</p>	<p>“Pizza Girls” (S3, E19) Bluey and Bingo are making mud pizzas and delivering them to the grown-ups, but their pedal car’s wheel keeps falling off.</p>	<p>Should the children give up on the pedal car (“Pedally”)? (<i>No, the girls should keep fixing the wheel. It’s important to stick with something you started; They should leave Pedally—it’s not worth the extra work to fix. They should deliver pizzas by hand for now and find a new way later.</i>)</p>
<p><b>The National Economy</b> D2.Eco.12.K-2. Describe examples of the goods and services that governments provide. D2.Eco.12.3-5. Explain the ways in which the government pays for the goods and services it provides.</p>	<p><i>Public goods</i> are things that governments can provide better than markets. Public goods in <i>Bluey</i> include the roads, (“Road Trip,” S2, E46), the military (“Army,” S2, E16), the police (“Sleepover,” S1, E39).</p>	<p>If you go to the library, do you have to pay for books? Why not? If a police officer helps you, do you have to pay? Why not? (<i>No, these goods and services have been paid for with taxes.</i>)</p>
<p><b>The Global Economy</b> D2.Eco.14.K-2. Describe why people in one country trade goods and services with people in other countries. D2.Eco.14.3-5. Explain how trade leads to increasing economic interdependence among nations.</p>	<p>“Markets” (S1, E20) The children face tough decisions about what to buy.  Trade between countries is just like having a much bigger market. One that covers the whole world! When people from all over the world trade, it gives us a lot more market choices.</p>	<p>Would their choice be easier or more difficult if the market was much bigger, with way more choices? (<i>Easier, because they would be more likely to find what they want. Or more difficult, because having lots of choices makes it harder to choose—higher opportunity cost.</i>)</p>

\* National Council for the Social Studies, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K–12 Civics, Economic, Geography, and History* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013).

discussing episodes as well as creating media in response. For example, students might be asked to create an advertisement to publicize one of the Heeler children's imagined businesses, craft a review of an episode that comments on how realistically it portrayed a real-life challenge that children face, or rewrite an episode to portray a different decision than the one the characters in the show chose.

The creative dramatics and imaginative play that are illustrated so well in *Bluey* are also a valuable form of pedagogy.<sup>11</sup> Students might create and narrate *tableaux* (still figures representing a scene from a story or history) to represent economic concepts observed during an episode. After watching all or part of a *Bluey* episode and engaging in discussion, students might be asked to reenact a scene with a different choice and imagine how it would change the outcome. See Michelle Pieczura's article, "Decidedly Dramatic! The Power of Creative Drama in Social Studies," for more ideas.

As a foundation for these strategies, we recommend that teaching economics with *Bluey* center on purposeful discussions.<sup>12</sup> Purposeful discussion should include comprehension questions related to the details of an episode with the purpose of clarifying concepts<sup>13</sup> and open-ended questions that prompt inquiry about character motivation and decision-making.

A specific discussion routine that is well-suited to exploring decision-making in *Bluey* is *collaborative reasoning*,<sup>14</sup> in which the teacher poses a central question concerning a dilemma faced by a character in the story. After posing the question, students first explain their position. Then they build on and challenge one another's thinking with additional reasons and evidence from the story. After the discussion, a final poll is taken to see where everyone stands.<sup>15</sup>

In this article, we highlight many examples of texts (in the form of *Bluey* episodes) that are likely to support powerful talk. In addition, we provide a variety of text-based and open-ended questions to promote student dialogue. We suggest teachers

plan for a combination of discussion, creative dramatics, and media creation when using *Bluey* to teach economics in elementary classrooms.

### Nonmarket Decision-Making in *Bluey*

Economics often uses market prices to express value—but not all the time. Economics is not only about money. People can use economic thinking to understand decisions outside the marketplace, too. *Bluey* does a masterful job showing nonmarket decisions in family life. These situations can be both funny and distressing at the same time, which is what makes them so compelling. Oftentimes, the humor in *Bluey* spotlights situations in which innocent children's games cause the adults discomfort. For example, in the episode entitled "Fancy Restaurant" (S2, E17), the children set up a date night for the parents and proudly serve them an appalling concoction made of refrigerator condiments. (Bandit gallantly eats both adults' portions and thereby wins Chilli's affection. The date was a success after all!) In other episodes, the parents make decisions that the children don't understand, such as in "Mr Monkeyjocks" (S2, E38), when Chilli and Bandit ask Bluey and Bingo to choose which of their dozens of stuffed animals to donate. The children, of course, claim that they are in love with all the animals—even the ones they never play with. Choices are discussed frequently in *Bluey*, and many involve abstract ideas rather than tangible resources. For example, in "Grannies" (S1, E28), Bluey must choose between playing a make-believe game the way she envisions it and maintaining Bingo's participation in the antics.

Each of these episodes highlights some tension and even contradiction in the various goals that people pursue in normal life. And all of these situations abound with examples of *decision-making*, which is to say, economics. Economics is often believed to be the study of money. Some think that economic thought is crassly consumeristic, but economics is actually the study of how people make choices when faced with scarcity. Scarcity is when one cannot reach all their goals

### Discussion Questions: Nonmarket Decisions in *Bluey*

- What are some things that you want, but you can't get with money? Does it take money to have friends? (*Possible answer: no, friends don't take money. Other examples could be making new rules for a game; spending family time; or giving your teacher a hug!*)
- In "Fancy Restaurant," why does Bandit eat the yucky food that his children make? (*Possible answer: because Chilli and the children being happy is more important to him than eating something that he likes.*)
- In "Mr Monkeyjocks," why did the kids suddenly like a toy so much that they never played with? (*Possible answer: because they didn't like the idea of something being taken away from them, even if they usually didn't play with it.*)
- In "Grannies," what does Chilli mean by the question "Do you want to be right, or do you want Bingo to keep playing?" (*Possible answer: it means that when we make a choice, we have to give something up. In this story, Bluey had to give up winning the argument if he wanted Bingo to keep playing the game.*)

with the available resources.<sup>16</sup> Put differently, economics is the study of ends and means or choices and plans. *Bluey* frequently shows the complexity and tension in trying to meet common relational goals in a family and with friends.

In “Fancy Restaurant,” Bandit has to choose whether to sacrifice his children’s happiness (by rejecting the food they made and are proud of), Chilli’s comfort (by making her eat her portion of the food), or his own comfort. Happiness and comfort are the goals he is trying to achieve, but he cannot achieve all of them for all the people involved. He decides that the best choice is to sacrifice his own comfort, which leads to a happy ending. Ironically, he chooses to consume something that, frankly, grosses him out. His goal is not his own comfort, but Chilli’s. Bandit’s actions might not seem like they fit under the famous economic goal of “self-interest.” But in this case, and many others, self-interest is aiming for goals that an individual thinks are more important than money or comfort.<sup>17</sup> A collaborative reasoning discussion based on this episode could involve asking students, “Should Bandit have eaten the ‘special dish?’” and asking students to share ideas and consider their peers’ reasoning. Students could offer and discuss various positions and explanations (No, he might get sick; No, you shouldn’t eat food if you do not want it or you think it might be unsafe; Yes, he wants to protect Chili from eating it; Yes, he doesn’t want to hurt Bingo’s feelings). The lesson could close with a final poll or opportunity for groups to act out potential outcomes of different choices.

*Bluey* provides a unique opportunity to spotlight economic decision-making in family relationships and social life. For example, the forced choice between stuffed animals in “Mr Monkeyjocks” could be used to introduce the idea of *opportunity cost*: the potential benefit of an option other than

the one chosen. In “Mr Monkeyjocks,” the opportunity cost of a choice among beloved stuffed animals is the value of the animal not selected, while the opportunity cost of a choice not to give up *any* toys might be access to the space the toys take up or the missed opportunity to share with others. Students could be asked to brainstorm similar examples of choices and opportunity costs in their own lives. In the episode, Bluey and Bingo come to realize through their play that scarcity can increase value (“When you have everything you want ... nothing feels special anymore”<sup>18</sup>), and they end up selecting a basketful of toys to donate so that other kids can enjoy them.

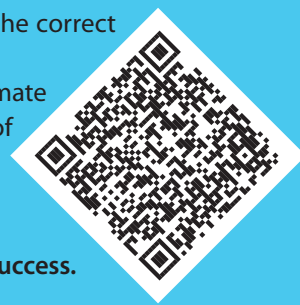
*Bluey* also offers opportunities for teachers and students to gain a broader view of decision-making, with personal goals that may be altruistic and that are fundamentally dependent on context. In the episode entitled “Grannies,” the mother challenges Bluey with the following scarcity situation: “Do you want to be right, or do you want Bingo to keep playing?”<sup>19</sup> After confirming that she can’t have both, Bluey has to determine what her highest priority is: Is it being right, or being happy? One way to investigate this question (and others like it) is to use a decision-making model. The class could make a T-chart on which they do a cost–benefit analysis of Bluey’s choice. They could use a side-by-side T-chart, or “Decision Tree,” to clarify what both choices are. Teachers can find resources for how to use decision-making models at the Virginia Council on Economic Education website ([vcee.org/economic-decision-making](https://vcee.org/economic-decision-making)).

### Market Economics in *Bluey*

We also see examples of market decisions in *Bluey*. The words *market* and *nonmarket* are terms that teachers can use with students. If a teacher does not wish to introduce this vocabulary, then they can simply refer to “choices,” which will

### Bluey “Markets” Lesson Outline

- Watch full episode or clips from *Bluey* episode “Markets” (S1, E20; 7 minutes). Ask children to notice:
  - The different goods and services at the market
  - How Bluey makes the decision about how to spend her \$5
  - The path that Bluey’s \$5 takes through the market
- After discussing the episode, begin the simulation. Assign children a booth (e.g., honey stand) and supply three natural, human, and capital resource cards that don’t match their booth (e.g., rake, egg, florist), as well as a \$5 bill to write their name on.
- Ask children to complete three rounds of purchases from their classmates to procure the correct productive resources they need to operate their booth (e.g., bee, beekeeper, jar).
- Finally, debrief the simulation. Create a web by asking children to pass yarn to the classmate whose \$5 they ended up with, illustrating circular flow and the interconnectedness of participants in a market. The goal of a market is that everyone—both consumers and producers—is working together to get the things they want.



You can find the full lesson plan, all materials, and pilot notes online at <https://youreconomicsuccess.org/k-1-lesson-plans/>

cover most economic situations. However, we do believe that understanding the distinction between market and nonmarket economic choices will help teachers teach about decision-making more clearly.

One example of market choices is in the episode entitled “Work” (S1, E31). In it, the family plays a game in which they run a factory that makes drainpipes. When Bandit (the father) manages the factory, the children successfully make drainpipes. But when Bluey takes over as boss, she acts capriciously and even cruelly toward her so-called employees. This management style results in no drainpipes being produced.

The drainpipe factory demonstrates a characteristic of the market economy called the *circular flow* model (see Figure 1). Circular flow is an economic model that shows the mutual connection between producers and consumers; money flows in a circle between the two. It demonstrates that consumers support businesses by buying products and providing resources in the form of work and investments, and businesses in turn support consumers by selling products and paying wages.<sup>20</sup> A teacher can use this concept to explain to lower elementary students that everyone in the economy, at some level, shares both fortune and misfortune with one another. We are interconnected.

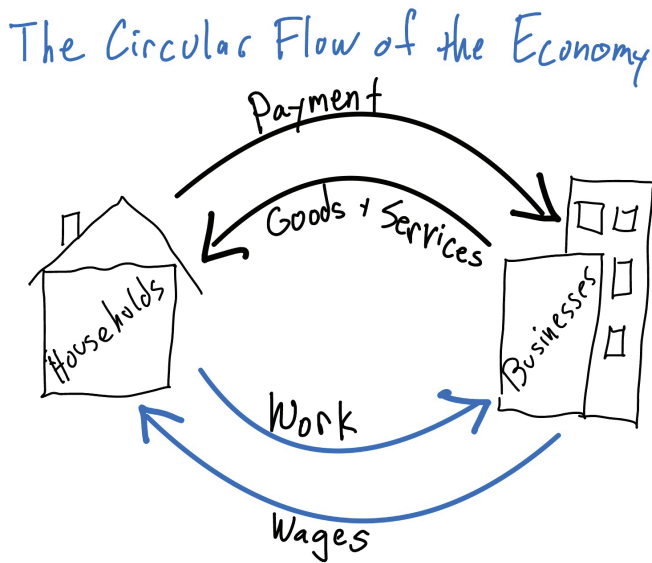


Figure 1. Circular Flow Model

A teacher can connect circular flow (i.e., interdependence) with the market economic concepts of income and productivity. They could ask their students the following questions:

- “When did the factory make more drainpipes: when Bandit was the boss, or Bluey?”
- “What did Bluey do to make it so her factory didn’t produce any drainpipes?”
- “If the factory doesn’t make any drainpipes, can they sell any drainpipes?”

- “If the factory doesn’t sell any drainpipes, will they be able to pay their workers?”

A final episode example, true to its name, is “Markets” (S1, E20). In this episode, Bluey gets a \$5 bill from the Tooth Fairy. When Bluey spends the \$5 at a booth at the farmer’s market, the worker at the booth subsequently spends it at another booth, and so on. Eventually Bluey gets the \$5 bill back. The same \$5 bill facilitates multiple market transactions. These interactions demonstrate the following characteristics of a market economy:

- A market is where people buy and sell goods and services.
- In a market, consumers and producers (i.e., buyers and sellers) decide on what the prices of things will be. If the price is too high, consumers will not buy what is for sale.
- A market has a circular flow. The money goes around and around as people continue to trade.

An elementary teacher can clarify these points for students by saying,

- “Money makes it easier for us to trade,”
- “Trade makes us depend on each other,” and
- “Producers are also consumers” or “Sellers are also buyers.”

We developed a classroom lesson (see sidebar) that uses *Bluey*, discussion, and a simulation to demonstrate these characteristics of markets. We piloted it in multiple second-grade classrooms. Second graders reacted with excitement when their teacher revealed they would be watching clips from *Bluey*. One student knew the “Markets” episode by

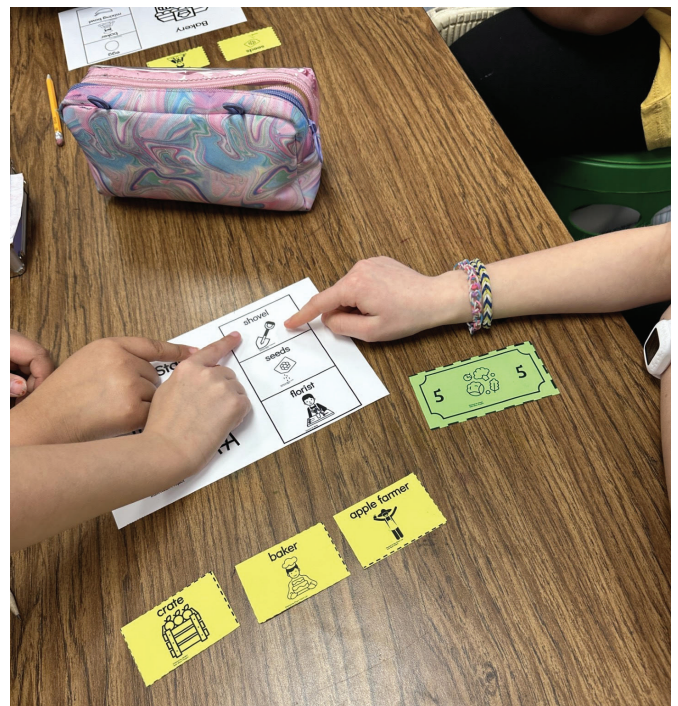


Figure 2. Market Trade from Simulation Activity



**Figure 3.** Market Web from Simulation Activity

heart and recited the lines alongside the on-screen characters! Following the episode and discussion, students successfully distinguished between natural, capital, and human resources in the interactive market simulation (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

### Critical Analysis and Taking Informed Action

Finally, *Bluey* can be used to help students develop a critical lens. With portrayals of everyday life, *Bluey* episodes present opportunities to consider how accurately scenarios from the show map on to students' lives and experiences. Children can also regularly be asked to consider "whose voices are heard, and whose are missing?"<sup>21</sup> or "which values and points of view are represented, and which are absent?"<sup>22</sup> For example, in "Markets," we see much more from the perspective of the consumer than we do from the producers of the various goods and services that Bluey considers buying. Might each of them have a different perspective on how Bluey should spend her money? This type of perspective-taking related to different roles in a market economy is an important skill in

developing critical economic literacy.<sup>23</sup>

There are also *Bluey* episodes that provide valuable entry points to considering occupations in modern society. Chilli and Bandit are both working parents who share childcare responsibilities. However, in "Mums and Dads" (S1, E41), two friends at Bluey's school pretend to care for a child but cannot agree on who should go to work. This episode opens up discussion about occupations, gender norms, and the role of childcare in dual-income families. Questioning media portrayals of gender, race, class and power is at the core of critical media literacy.<sup>24</sup>

Dimension 4 of the C3 Framework challenges educators to consider how to prepare students for action based on disciplinary learning. The imaginative play featured in *Bluey* episodes illustrates an entry point to taking action for young children. For example, in the aforementioned episode "Work," Bluey and Bingo are hired by Bandit as employees in a drainpipe factory. Bluey eventually takes over but abuses her power as a boss. Frustrated with working conditions, Bandit quits and pursues a different career. The episode offers opportunities to practice

identifying goods and services, but it also invites questions about the treatment of workers and workers' rights. Students might be asked to consider other actions Bandit the employee might have taken or be encouraged to act out the scene in different ways. When youth recreate media, they are taking action.<sup>25</sup>

### Conclusion

The television show *Bluey* demonstrates both the anxiety and the humor that results from tough family decisions. Sometimes decisions are motivated by money, production, and consumption, but usually they are not. In this article, we highlighted both market and nonmarket choices in *Bluey*, and suggested classroom questions and standards alignments that make use of economic thinking. With these tools, teachers and students have a fun and accessible way to question why people make the choices that they do. In addition, *Bluey* provides an opportunity to develop critical media and critical economic literacy skills as students analyze, discuss, and create media in the classroom. ■

### Notes

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