

It's About Community: Active Social Studies Learning in a University Charter School

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In August 2003, the University of Texas (UT) Elementary School opened its doors, becoming the state's only university-charter school endeavor. Located in East Austin, the school's brightly-colored portable buildings are decorated with murals painted by parent volunteers.

The school serves urban children as part of the UT System's "Every Child, Every Advantage" initiative to support preK-16 education (SIDEBAR A). The University of Texas-Austin operates UT Elementary as an open-enrollment campus, free to students, with a lottery-based admissions system. The pre-kindergarten class has 20 students, and all other grades (K-5) have two classes of 20 students.¹

Walking into UT Elementary School, one is likely to encounter flurries of activities. If it's early in the morning, all children are gathered in the school's cafeteria for opening exercises, announcements, and celebrations. Clusters of children may be seen all over the school, conferring with one another on group assignments. Faculty from UT observe student learning, classroom activities, and teacher-student interactions. Parents may be participating in oral history interviews. Children might be tending the school garden or recording the day's weather and environmental factors. Older children might be viewed tutoring the younger students in the school.

Students from UT participate as interns or apprentice teachers in one or more classrooms. They might supervise a debate about patriot and loyalist sentiments during the American Revolution, or work with their mentor utilizing multimedia to teach about the Great Depression. Activities such as these provide evidence that this is a lively school whose stakeholders include administrators, teachers and staff, parents and students, university students and faculty, and community members.

Planning Together

Prior to the opening of the school, university faculty met with the teachers and administrators to plan the curriculum. In social studies, we decided that the emphasis should be not only on the state-mandated curriculum, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), but on giving children at all grade levels

ample opportunities to learn about the larger world. According to the school's executive director Melissa Chavez, "Our curriculum was designed to have a strong and active out-of-school learning component ... to expose children to real life social studies experiences, teach them to right injustices and make their community accessible. These are vitally important school experiences. We want our students to understand that they are part of the community, that they can take part." Teachers receive training during school-wide professional development on culturally responsive pedagogy,² social emotional learning,³ differentiated instruction,⁴ and use of inquiry strategies and primary sources.⁵

UT Elementary School emphasizes community engagement in a variety of ways. The school's Parent Forum encourages families and members of the community to become involved in school projects such as Beautification Day, and Connected Community (which includes a laptop loaner program for student and family use at home), and school events such as Fiesta, Olympic Day, Career Day, and Las Posadas. In addition, the school has an ongoing Healthy Family Initiative. During the past

SIDEBAR A

A Lasting Mission

As the eighth year of University of Texas Elementary School begins, the school's mission is as relevant today as it was in August 2003:

1. To develop students into lifelong learners through rigorous, research-based curricula, individualized instruction, high expectations, and a nurturing environment that includes parental and community involvement;
2. To provide opportunities for professional development and outreach for The University of Texas at Austin's academic units; and
3. To serve as a model of an exemplary educational program for diverse learners.

year, the school has decreased overweight and obese tendencies in students by 50 percent through free, weekly Kidshape classes for parents and students.⁶ Kidshape teaches cooking strategies to improve nutrition at home and physical activities that are appropriate for the entire family.

From its inception, the school has at its heart a celebration of multiculturalism and diversity. Embracing the belief that cultural celebrations that include a host of holidays are beneficial by increasing respect for diversity,⁷ UT Elementary School students learn about Red/White/Blue Day, Diez y Seis, Rosh Hashanah, Ramadan, Thanksgiving, Circle of Light (which is a recognition of Eid al-Fitr, Hannukah, Christmas, Kwanzaa, and Diwali), Las Posadas, Martin Luther King Day, Black History Month, Lincoln's Birthday, Passover, Easter, and Cinco de Mayo. For each celebration, school-wide activities engage students and families.

Children are active watchers of the world as they learn to be a part of their community. Field trips are a key component in addressing the ten themes of the social studies standards through experiential learning. Teachers understand the need to build upon the students' prior knowledge of social studies topics by integrating the curriculum and emphasizing four components: our place in space (geography), our place in time (history), our place in the world (culture and economics), and our contributions to society and the world (civic efficacy). At each grade level, the social studies program is designed to include strong content through a curriculum taught in and out of school.

Pre-Kindergarten

Pre-Kindergarten children are expected to learn to cooperate with one another; identify common features in the home and school environment; understand basic human needs and similarities among people; and recognize the roles, responsibilities and services provided by community workers. In-school investigations at UT Elementary School include visiting all of the classrooms in the school and a walk around the school. In addition, guest speakers come—a fire fighter, police officer, sheriff, scientists, and a nurse. Field trips include a visit to the grocery store, Cepeda public library, Paramount historic theater, Crowe's Nest farm, and nearby fire station.

Kindergarten-First Grade

Kindergarten and first grade students learn about themselves, their families, friends, and the school community. Teachers and their students focus on family heritage and traditions—their own as well as those of others—as they learn about national holidays and celebrations. Children use maps to describe their classroom, school, and neighborhood. As they learn about becoming active citizens, they find out about leaders in the community, state, and nation. In addition, the first grade students complete a lengthy unit of study on Texas culture. They engage in visits to the West Austin Youth Association for a day of organized physical activities, Mexic-Arte Museum and Mexican Consulate, Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center, Cowboy Ranch, IMAX Theater,

LBJ Ranch and its Living Museum, Pedernales State Park, and the Texas State Capitol. Student work includes pictures and/or other works of art, group stories, role-plays, and poetry.

Second Grade

The social studies curriculum in second grade extends notions of citizenship through the exploration of the neighborhood and the people who live there. Specifically, they consider geographic characteristics, economics roles people play and what they produce, and the neighborhood services provided by the city, state, and national government. Second grade students learn from a local state legislator about how a bill becomes a law. They visit the George Washington Carver Museum, which boasts the nation's only permanent exhibit about Juneteenth (when news of emancipation reached Texas in 1865). This grade hosts the school's Martin Luther King remembrance, which is open to the community. In addition, the children visit San Antonio; plan and organize a school-wide Market Day; and complete a timeline of the school, a historical figure project, and a community map project.

Third Grade

Social studies at the third grade level focuses on community, leadership, citizenship, geography, and consumer science. Third grade students are responsible for learning about history and major landmarks of the cities in which they live, the geography of the area, African American and Latino/a history, and women's history. Field trips include visits to the West Austin Youth Association for a day of organized physical activities, the Texas Memorial Museum and the Blanton Museum of Art, and a McKinney Roughs rafting trip. As the students learn about the community, they may develop maps of the area, create interview questions and interview a local government official, write letters, and complete a timeline of community history.

Fourth Grade

At the fourth grade level, Texas history dominates the curriculum. This study includes regions of Texas (geography); Native Americans, explorers, colonization, and the Texas Revolution (history and culture); contemporary Texas (economics); important figures (government); and leaders and leadership (citizenship). Fourth grade children visit the Bob Bullock Texas History Museum and State Capitol in Austin, as well as the Institute of Texas Cultures, the Alamo, Witte Art Museum, and Sea World in San Antonio. They also participate in a variety of virtual field trips as they begin to use primary sources and historical documents. Student work includes murals, timelines, student created books, artifacts, biographies, and newspapers reflecting the fourth grade study of Texas history.

Fifth Grade

Fifth grade students learn about the United States, with an emphasis on history, geography, government, and economics.



Special features include learning about the bordering nation, Mexico, and its capital, Mexico City to the south.⁸ Students visit Mexic-Arte, a contemporary arts museum featuring the work of Latino/a artists; participate in the community's *Dies y Seis* parade; and interview family and community members about their experiences in Mexico.

The integrated geography and science curriculum in the fall entails a three-day field trip to Outdoor School in Marble Falls, Texas.⁹ Students and their teachers participate in field experiences focused on team building, confidence building, social studies, and science. One experience includes visiting the original home of the Noble family from the 1800s, where students use a hand plow and a two-person saw, tend a garden, and dig for artifacts, then try to determine the purpose of the objects they find. The science experiences include studying reptiles and rock formations, testing water quality, and participating in a Night Sensory hike through a course in the dark. In addition, students have a Civil War living history experience at Liendo Plantation in Hempstead, Texas.

Field trips include a three-day Texas coastal field trip. The students travel to Corpus Christi and take a guided tour of the Texas State Aquarium. Next, they travel to the University of Texas Marine Institute in Port Aransas. There, children explore the coastal environment in the Gulf of Mexico and on its beaches by investigating marine life evidence found on a beach walk and collecting samples during a boat tour of the coast's unique ecosystem. Additionally, students visit nearby Natural Bridge

Caverns to continue their study of rock formations and early Texas geology.

Children in fifth grade also learn from community members and school representatives from neighboring and private middle schools. Mary Ledbetter, fifth-grade teacher, explains, "We work very hard to get our students thinking about the future of their academic careers, with college in the long-term and middle school in the more immediate future. At the very beginning of fifth grade, we help facilitate the application process by holding parent information sessions, organizing presentations from the middle schools, and giving our students the tools they need to submit successful applications."

Student social studies products at the fifth grade level showcase integrative curriculum, and include posters, poetry, analyses of issues, timelines, essays, reader's theater performances, and interpretation of document-based questions. Their inquiries into the history of the United States reveal skills they have gained in both social studies and language arts.

Conclusion

We recognize that in today's tough economic times, field trips that require additional funding may not be possible for all schools. We encourage teachers to think about utilizing community resources that are free and that are nearby, thus allowing people outside of the school itself to be a part of every child's social studies education.

The UT Elementary School social studies curriculum has



enhanced the opportunities for students to learn in and out of school and to build upon the community's diversity in powerful ways. Visitors to the school see engaged children who are motivated to learn about themselves, the school, the community, and the larger world. During a recent visit to the school, UT Philosophy Professor Thomas J. Palaima noted, "What impressed me most during my three hours there was the joy and love the children exuded in simple ways."¹⁰ The collaboration between the elementary school teachers and UT faculty continues to yield insights into the ways inquiry-based social studies can thrive in an urban setting.¹¹ 📄

Notes

1. Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) Report, 2008-2009. ritter.tea.state.tx.us/cgi/sas/broker. The ethnic breakdown is as follows: 72.2 percent Hispanic; 20.2 percent African American; 7.1 percent white; 0.4 percent Asian-Pacific Islander; and 62.3 percent economically disadvantaged.
2. G. Gay, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).
3. Joseph E. Zins, ed., *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?* (New York: Teachers College Press 2004).
4. Pearl Subban, "Differentiated Instruction: A Research Basis," *International Education Journal* 7, no. 7 (2006): 935-947.
5. L. D. Labbo and S. L. Field, "Journey Boxes: Telling the Story of Place, Time, and

Culture with Photographs, Literature, and Artifacts," *The Social Studies* 90 no. 4 (1999): 177-182.

6. www.kidshape.com.
7. J. Bisson, *Celebrate! An Anti-bias Guide to Enjoying Holidays in Early Childhood Programs* (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 1997).
8. S. L. Field, M. Bauml, K. LeCompte, and J. Alleman, "Mexico, Our Closest Neighbor: Three Elementary Teachers' Perspectives," *The Social Studies* 100, no. 6 (2009): 251-259.
9. www.outdoorschool.com.
10. T. G. Palaima, "Surround Children with Beauty and Goodness," *Austin American Statesman*, (December 26, 2010).
11. For example, J. J. Brophy, B. Alleman, and B. Knighton. *Inside the Social Studies Classroom* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Barton, K. C. and L. A. Kreimer. "Teaching Social Studies in an Urban Elementary School," in *Teaching Together: School/University Collaboration to Improve Social Studies Education*, ed. Mary Christenson, Marilyn Johnston, and Jim Norris (Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies, 2001): 21-30.

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