

Issues-Centered Projects for Classrooms in the United States and Mexico Borderlands

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This study explicates the collaborative efforts of university preservice educators from a social studies methods course and middle school students from a local public magnet school in a project entitled the Borderlands Issue Project. Pre-service teachers and middle school students co-planned, co-designed, and co-presented issues-centered projects that examined local issues on the United States and Mexico border. The goals of the issues-centered projects were to develop well-reasoned responses based on disciplined inquiry, on thoughtful, in-depth study, and to move beyond relativistic notions of truth. Teams of university and middle school students co-presented their projects during the local school site's Parent Night. Examples of learning outcomes of the Borderlands Issues Project are the following: how university faculty and school site administrators and faculty worked together to overcome logistical concerns for Parent Night project presentations, how participants learned to co-plan, co-design, and co-teach an issue with others, how middle school students exceeded performance expectations of pre-service educators, and how participants learned from collaboratively researching and presenting on complex issues. Participants presented on topics such as the local history of the KKK, indigenous American struggles in the Borderlands region, non-Mexican immigration and its impact locally, and the environmental and community impact of pollution from a copper smelter.

Keywords: issues-centered projects, social studies education, language and culture, collaborative teaching, performance assessment, enduring understandings.

Introduction

In its mission statement, the National Council for the Social Studies (2006) states that social studies education should provide students with “the opportunity to learn content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy.” An issues-centered curriculum is a path that can be pursued in trying to achieve these ends. Issues-centered approaches do not measure success by the degree to which students can recall information memorized from textbooks and notes. On the contrary, success is based on student performance and how well the student has intellectually addressed public issues. Ochoa-Becker (1996, p. 1) argues that “the issues-centered curriculum

encourages students to actively participate in the improvement of society” instead of emphasizing the recall of information. Accordingly, issues-centered education concentrates on questions that need to be confronted and answered, at least conditionally (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996).

This study provides an example of issues-centered projects that were facilitated at a middle school site literally within view of the United States-Mexico border. The resulting collaborative efforts incorporated the following essential components of authentic learning:

1. problems rooted in the real world
2. inquiry and thinking skills
3. discourse among a community of learners, and

4. empowerment of learners (Rule, 2006).

To further clarify, project participants brainstormed for possible problems that needed to be addressed. They engaged in problem solving with peers and also across educational levels, as university pre-service educators collaborated with middle school students to develop issues-centered projects. The project participants learned how educational processes can develop at a grass roots level rather than from a traditional, authoritarian-based model of learning. Finally, university and middle school students took collective responsibility and credit for their learning and subsequent accomplishments.

The Setting of the Study

At the University of Texas at El Paso, the teacher education program calls for university collaboration and involvement of cohorts of pre-service educators in local public schools. Field-based initiatives are integrated throughout the teacher preparation program. In this study, the author, who teaches at the university, along with pre-service educators from his social studies methods course, collaborated with middle school teachers and students at a local, publicly funded magnet school.

The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) has a student population of approximately 20,000, of whom approximately 80% are Mexican American or Mexican. This statistic reflects the ethnic makeup of the surrounding city and its environs, which form a combined metropolitan population of approximately 2.5 million inhabitants on both sides of the United States and Mexican border. The collaborating school site, International Middle School, has a student population that is 97% Mexican-American or Mexican. Over 90% of the students are from working

class families. Students who attend International Middle School must learn three languages. English and Spanish are mandatory. The third is an elective language; students choose among Chinese, Japanese, Russian or German. Civic responsibility, life-long learning, and risk-taking in a multicultural society are components of the school's vision statement. Contractual parent involvement is a requirement for student acceptance into the magnet school. Moreover, all parents are obligated to attend school functions and contribute to site-based activities and projects.

The researcher received permission from the International Middle School administration to work with the administration and faculty in the planning and facilitation of issues-centered projects at the school site as part of a university and school partnership. This university assistant professor sought to facilitate issues-centered projects that model approaches for addressing concerns of how to simultaneously supplement and enhance textbook information, engage students in social studies processes, and fully address the state curriculum standards. Although individuals new to the profession realistically feel overwhelmed with all of the expectations that are placed on new faculty members, issues-centered pedagogies do manage to address all of the aforementioned concerns. This study explicates the collaborative efforts of pre-service educators and International Middle School students who co-conceptualized, co-designed, and co-presented issues-centered local history projects. Their collective efforts helped to promote greater understandings of the unique cultures, contributions, and concerns of residents on both sides of the international border.

Addressing the Problem

The problem the researcher faced was one of facilitating issues-centered projects while promoting “doing” social studies, and fully addressing the state standards aligned with state-mandated examinations. “Doing” social studies can be defined as emotionally engaging participants in social studies processes. However, International Middle School is facing pressure to attain and maintain distinguished scores on high-stakes, standardized tests. To address the aforementioned impasse, the researcher followed the basic tenets of action research in tackling the problem. Specifically, the researcher gathered information on how issues-centered projects could be implemented in a particular school, how the projects could be presented, and how participants in the issues-centered projects learn. This information was gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, affecting positive changes in the school environment (and on educational practices in general), and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved (Mills, 2003). According to Sagor (2000), action research is a seven-step process that includes selecting a focus, clarifying theories, identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results, and taking action based on the knowledge discovered.

The efforts of pre-service educators, university faculty, and International Middle School students, parents, teachers, and administration in planning and orchestrating the issues-centered projects during one academic semester were analyzed. This study was conducted as a “systematic execution of carefully articulated processes of inquiry” (Stringer, 2004, p. 10). The collaborative effort that resulted, the Borderlands Issues Project, was

implemented as a way of addressing the problem of promoting learning outcomes outside of textbook content and promoting engagement in the “doing” of social studies, while fully addressing the state standards aligned with state-mandated examinations. Participants were “doing” social studies as they engaged in the planning, creating, and presenting of projects that addressed the state standards.

University pre-service educators and International Middle School students were provided with a rubric that was collaboratively developed by the researcher and International Middle School faculty. The rubric clearly stated the expectations for the Borderlands Issues Project. In particular, participants were required to co-author and submit a written research component that explicated the major controversies of a local issue. Pre-service educators and middle school students alike were expected to share and defend ideas and positions from their collective research in oral presentations. A variety of visuals and artifacts were to be included in mini-museums that were to be designed and described along with the findings of their research. Furthermore, an essential part of the oral presentations was a discussion of how planning, designing, and orchestrating the mini-museum addressed and aligned with the state social studies standards.

Pre-service educators and middle school students were randomly assigned to work together in teams, and their teams developed issues-centered research papers and oral presentations as part of the Borderlands Issues Project. Performance was at the core of all measurement of student efforts. Teams of State University students/pre-service educators and International Middle School students collaborated in the planning, creation, and demonstration of their products. The Borderlands Issues Project was based upon

the principles of authentic assessment, including risk-taking, inquiry, action, evaluation, and reflection. (Eisbender & Wood, 1995).

Data were collected from the minutes of planning meetings and sessions, systematic observation with notations, videotaped recordings of the content and pedagogy presentations, digital audio recordings, videotaped focus group debriefings, focus group question-and-answer sessions, written post surveys, face-to-face interviews with individuals associated with issues-centered projects from the planning stages to the culminating activity of group presentation on Parent Night, and subsequent de-briefings.

Participants were systematically observed and learning outcomes were explicated for the purposes of this study. The data from participants were read carefully and coded for concepts that emerged. These concepts were grouped according to their commonalities and were eventually grouped into themes. Themes provided the foundation for the action research analysis. Finally, relationships among variables were noted, and the researcher constructed a logical chain of evidence (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Categories for analysis that emerged were:

- how initial concerns were overcome,
- risk-taking as a part of collaborative efforts,
- learning outcomes of the issues-centered projects, and
- sustaining and enhancing the issues-centered projects.

Rationale for the Borderlands Issues Project

Caron (2004) recommends incorporating issues-based approaches in the teaching of methods courses at teacher preparation institutions. Issues-centered

education is an approach toward teaching and learning that does not intend to frame definitive “right answers,” but underscores the need for students to become more thoughtful about social life (Evans & Saxe, 1996). The Borderlands Issues Project focused on problematic questions selected by pre-service educators and International Middle School schools in this study that needed to be developed, addressed, and answered by students. Problematic questions were those that produced some level of disagreement among individuals with vested interests in the issue. The purpose of the Borderlands Issues Project was not just to raise the questions and expose students to them, but to promote learning among the participants and audience so that they would ultimately be better prepared to defend positions and develop answers to questions that were based on trustworthy research.

The point of issues-centered education is to develop well-reasoned responses to questions based on disciplined inquiry, in-depth study, and to move beyond relativistic notions of truth (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996). The key principles of issues-based pedagogy are as follows:

1. depth of understanding is more important than coverage and superficial exposure;
2. topics and issues are connected through some kind of thematic, disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or historical structure;
3. the study must be substantially grounded in challenging content; and
4. students must make choices and express their personal positions as part of the inquiry process (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, p.3).

Research has indicated that issues-centered approaches involve considerable risk-taking and require that teachers are flexible in designing instruction for their

classrooms (Caron, 2004; Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996; Evans & Saxe, 1996; Gross, 1989). By nature, issues-centered projects are interdisciplinary. Hence, social studies educators who facilitate issues-centered learning are willing to incorporate content from other disciplines such as literature, art, music, science, and math in their teaching. Many issues transcend traditional subject boundaries. In order to understand fully any major societal issue, the individual must apply knowledge and modes of inquiry from a variety of disciplines (Beane, 2000; Wraga, 1998). Dewey (1964) recognized that knowledge must be integrated as it is applied to an understanding of personal and social problems.

The design of performance-based assessments is critical to the efficacy of issues-based teaching (Caron, 2004). Within the design of the Borderlands Issues Project pre-service educators and middle school students were asked to consider problematic questions that needed to be addressed and answered, offer defensible and well-grounded answers to these questions, participate fully in the inquiry process by collaborating with others besides their own peer group, and contemplate issues that transcend traditional subject boundaries.

Issues-centered curricula are a vital component of students' social education. If educators are to be successful in preparing our students for the responsibilities of participatory citizenship, teachers must learn from the efforts to implement issues-centered education by our colleagues before us (Wraga, 1999). In previous studies (Caron, 2004; Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996; Evans & Saxe, 1996; Gross, 1989) researchers found that social studies teachers who make a commitment to issues-centered instruction are likely to find that their students become more interested in the political arena, develop a greater sense of political efficacy and confidence, and

become more interested and knowledgeable in the issues that they have studied. Moreover, when issue-based content is presented in a format that addresses conflict and promotes open classroom discourse, more students participate in class discussions and express more reflective thinking and in-depth understanding than they would otherwise. Furthermore, students are likely to enjoy social studies and to perceive that social studies instruction is useful for understanding the world around them (Hahn, 1996).

The goals of the Borderlands Issues Project took into account recommendations for school success. Apple (1999) advises a close working relationship between schools and universities; a collaborative spirit in schools; a curriculum that is connected to the cultural and economic lives of the students; a commitment to social justice, not only in society but inside the school; and participation in learning activities that reflect a democratic ethos. Teams of university and middle school students worked together to grasp and share their apprehension of an issue. They also tried to determine and understand causal links to the problems embedded within the issue. According to Freire (1974), the aforementioned steps are vital for developing critical consciousness. Indeed, the Borderlands Issues Project was implemented so that a close working relationship between the University of Texas at El Paso and International Middle School could be furthered, the existing school curriculum would be supported, a forum would be created for the discussion of issues of social justice, and pre-service educators and middle school students used democratic processes to decide upon issues and determine the roles of group members who co-designed and co-presented issues as part of the Borderlands Issues Project.

The development of a strong, overarching school-university collaborative partnership is an important ingredient in the promotion of successful learning outcomes in educational settings. Efficacious school-university partnerships involve practicing teachers, university faculty, and undergraduate students teaching and researching together to co-develop and examine curricular changes in public schools and teacher education programs. Moreover, school site administrators, faculty, students, and parents participate in the educational processes. According to Dana (1996), the establishment of a school-university collaboration that centers on providing issues-centered instruction enables social studies educators and social studies teacher education faculty to implement recommendations for efficacious partnerships.

Designing the Borderlands Issues Project

The collaborative co-teaching projects were designed by teams of university pre-service educators from a social studies methods course in collaboration with International Middle School students. School site administrators and faculty coordinated schedules to allow pre-service educators to work with middle school teachers and students in the planning stages of the Borderlands Issues Project. The participating school site had some philosophical buy-in for facilitating the projects, as the International Middle School curriculum placed an emphasis on learning languages and cultures. In this case, administrators and faculty expressed an interest in complementing the present curriculum with the collaborative efforts. However, high stakes testing preparation took precedence over the facilitation of projects during the regular school day. Consequently, some of the presentations

took place during a Parent Night after the regular school day had ended. Issues-centered collaborations were considered peripheral to the goal of achieving high test scores, even though the International Middle School mission statement emphasizes civic responsibility, life-long learning, and risk-taking in a multicultural society. Although the school had already earned a “Recognized” status from the state commissioner and state board of education, its faculty felt the pressures of state-mandated and school district evaluations.

The Borderlands Issues Project was designed so that a class of 28 pre-service educators formed teams of 3-4 students, and the teams discussed the selection of a topic with a team of 3-4 International Middle School students. Collaboratively, university students and middle school students selected their own Borderlands issues. Decisions were made and the planning and designing of the Borderlands Issues Project transpired via face-to-face school site visits and e-mail exchanges. Middle school students collaborated in selecting the topic as well as in carrying out and reporting on the research component. Each team of pre-service educators and middle school students completed and submitted 8-10 pages of written research on their self-selected local issue. Moreover, university pre-service educators and middle school students co-planned, co-designed, and co-prepared 30-minute Borderlands issue oral presentations, complete with mini-museum booths and exhibits.

A school cafeteria was converted to an exhibit hall that contained the mini-museum booths, tables, and artifacts that displayed aspects of the Borderlands issues. Maps, cultural relics, photographs, written sources of information, information booths, and other props were included in mini-museum presentations. Teams of pre-service educators and middle school students co-

presented their findings with parents, teachers, school administrators, and their peers.

Planning the Borderlands Issues Project

Meetings at International Middle School were scheduled for the researcher and school site administrators and teachers. Common goals were determined by all those who were present at the meetings. Classroom teachers play a central, substantive role in the development of issues-centered social studies curriculum and instruction (Wraga, 1998). In this case, the teachers and administrators planned and developed guidelines for the issues-centered projects collaboratively with the researcher.

First, a Parent Night date and format was agreed upon by those who attended the meetings. Next, a time was established for initial meetings and project planning by each team of pre-service educators who were assigned a team of middle school students. Sufficient time during the planning stages is a key factor in developing exemplary issues-centered projects. Beane (1990) argues that students must take part in both the selection of issues for the study and also the organization of the investigations. Pre-service educators and International Middle School students worked in partnership to choose issues, develop strategies for presenting sides of the issues, write up their research for their issues, design mini-museums that provided a visual representation of the subjects at hand, and determine roles of group members for discussing their issues for the Parent Night audience. The university professor collaborated with school site administration, faculty, and staff to guide and facilitate the pre-service educator and International Middle School student joint presentations.

Issues-centered projects are more successful when those involved are provided

with time to ponder the situation or scenario, form their own positions, and accept the risk of sharing positions with peers and parents (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). In this case the pre-service educators and the middle school students had two weeks after their initial meeting to communicate with each other online or by telephone. Two groups of university students made special trips to the school site to meet with middle school students who would serve as co-presenters.

Orchestrating the Issues-Centered Projects

Data were collected from meetings and systematic observations before the Parent Night presentations at International Middle School. Pre-service educators provided feedback and concerns during focus group question-and-answer sessions and on surveys before they met with middle school students at the school site. Participants were also videotaped during the planning, design, presentation, and debriefing phases. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants associated with issues-centered projects from the planning stages to the completion of the Parent Night presentations and subsequent de-briefings.

The initial implementation of the Borderlands Issues Project was made possible after discussions with a local middle school resulted in the scheduling of pre-service educator presentations on local issues at the middle school site. For the past three semesters UTEP students in a social studies methods course worked with International Middle School students to create mini-museums and co-present border issues using various visual aids and artifacts.

Among the issues chosen by the university preservice educators and middle school students were the following:

- a history of the KKK in the local community;

- Native Americans and their struggles on both sides of the United States and Mexico Border;
- water and its impact on *colonias* in the Borderlands;
- the Patriot Act and its impact locally;
- the Bracero Program and its development, implementation, and the long term controversies of the program;
- the 14th Amendment, its original intent and the realities of its enforcement;
- railroads, local urban development, and subsequent issues;
- non-Mexican immigration and its impact locally;
- historical controversies that surround the Texas Rangers; and
- how a copper smelter's pollution affects the local population.

During the semester that the research was conducted UTEP and International Middle School students co-created Borderlands Issues Projects for a Parent Night audience that included mini-museums designed to provide the audience with multiple perspectives on local issues. The projects were designed to engage participants in social studies processes that complemented the existing curriculum.

Stakeholders included the International Middle School students, parents, teachers, and administration, as well as the UTEP pre-service educators and professor. Among the specific goals of the Borderlands Issues Project were the following: (a) to promote a greater understanding of community traditions and home cultures, (b) to use authentic assessment and build upon our individual students' strengths, and (c) to model and encourage emotional involvement in the social studies. As Loewen (1996) argues,

emotional engagement in social studies processes provides the "glue" that "sticks."

Learning Outcomes of the Borderlands Issues Project

The researcher has selected four completed group projects to demonstrate content and concepts researched, integrated into a written paper, and incorporated into the oral presentations of university and middle school collaborators. For example, one team of pre-service educators and middle school students presented to the Parent Night audience on how Jim Crow legislation and segregation had, indeed, been enforced by local laws until the 1960s. They pointed out that in the 1920s the largest area school district was controlled by KKK members, and the presenters explained how African American, Mexican American, Mexican, and Native American students were adversely affected by the school board policies at that time. Group members compared and contrasted historical racism with current situations on the United States and Mexico border, with some speakers noting changes since the Civil Rights movement. Other presenters carefully illustrated their concerns of institutionalized racism present in today's Borderlands, such as inequalities in educational funding and lower expectations for Mexican American and Mexican students, especially of lower socio-economic status, as compared to their white peers.

Another group described how indigenous Americans and *indigenas*, or indigenous Mexicans, on both sides of the international border have been negatively affected by their governments' decisions. Pre-service educators and middle school students shared photos, charts, copies of documents, and readings that illuminated the politics behind the closing of a local Indian casino on the United States side. The

presenters delineated tribal economics before and after the state government's decision to block the tribe's gaming operations. Other members of the group explored the impact of the Mexican government's decisions not to preserve and protect the Tarahumara in Northern Mexico. In this case, indigenous Mexicans who were originally inhabitants of the Sierra Madre mountain range were forced to relocate to Mexican cities from their homelands because of political and economic reasons. Urban Tarahumara were interviewed by university students as they begged for donations on the Mexican side of the international border. Transcripts of their responses indicated that they felt that they were forced to leave their traditional lifestyles behind in the Sierra Madre and subsequently treated as second class citizens in their new homes.

A third group elected to discuss immigration of non-Mexican populations and its effects on the local urban community. Borderlands Issues Project participants detailed the movement of populations from Central American and South American nations, the Middle East, and Asian nations to the local Borderlands region. Pre-service educators and middle school students imparted the historical, cultural, social, and economic reasons for resettlement of populations on the international border. A key thrust of the group presentation was to articulate how newcomers to the local urban community have faced and, in many instances, still face problems adjusting to their new community. Nonetheless, university and middle school students dutifully pointed the historical contributions and successes of immigrant populations, whether they arrived as political refugees who ultimately adjusted to living in the local area, or whether they were seeking economic opportunities. One poignant case presented was the situation of

Chinese immigrants who arrived locally in the 1880s and the early part of the twentieth century and established residence in a local Chinatown, only to be part of a community that would be decimated by local edicts, the Chinese immigrants and their families dispersed to other parts of the city.

A final example that illustrates the learning outcomes of the project was a group presentation on the effects of a copper smelter's pollution in the local community. Pre-service educators and middle school students communicated various stances on the impact of a mining company's corporate historical decisions on the local community, including economic and environmental effects. A university student whose relatives worked at the copper smelter and resided in the adjacent mining company town, shared first hand accounts of her family's experiences as they grew up in the "smelertown." The presenter also shared with the Parent Night audience her family's history of chronic health problems, including cancer, lung and respiratory diseases, and multiple sclerosis. International Middle School students supplied more recent accounts of corporate interests in reopening the copper smelter. With the aforementioned information and other research group members presented, the team of university student and the middle school students were able to compare and contrast opposing views of this local issue that still resonates with many residents.

Throughout these presentations and the other Borderlands Issues Project performance-based assessments, middle school students co-taught and contributed as partners to the overall understandings of local issues. Whereas pre-service educators had underestimated the middle level students' potential to complement, enhance, and act as true collaborators in the process, members of the social studies methods course were pleasantly surprised with the

learning outcomes of the Borderlands Issues Project. The pre-service educators learned from the content presented, and discovered that middle school students could contribute their own original research to the projects. Parents in attendance for the Parent Night presentations expressed their pride in observing middle school students co-teaching as partners alongside university students. Moreover, parents stated their appreciation for being afforded the opportunity to learn and contemplate the essence of the Borderlands issues presented at Parent Night.

UTEP pre-service educators were debriefed in focus groups and on written post-survey instruments for the efficacy of the Borderlands Issues Project. The following questions were examples of questions asked:

1. What were your concerns with the Borderlands Issues Project when it began?
2. How would you compare those feelings with your feelings toward the project now?
3. What would you recommend for future projects?

Many pre-service teachers initially voiced their concerns over the levels of interest and prior knowledge of the middle school students. The preliminary surveys and focus group sessions uncovered the following trends:

- 23 out of 28 pre-service teachers wondered about having sufficient background research themselves, and whether or not middle school students would contribute to the research and oral presentations effectively.
- 18 out of 28 expressed anxieties over whether their groups would have enough varied and accurate sources of information.
- 17 out of 28 UTEP participants were concerned over the quality of their

fellow group members' potential contributions.

- 21 out of 28 of the pre-service teachers were apprehensive over the degree of collaboration to expect from the middle school students; and, once in progress, the middle school students' levels of engagement in the issues.

There was a marked contrast, however, in how pre-service educators reported their own learning outcomes. Accordingly:

- 25 out of 28 pre-service educators reported that the experience, although nerve-wracking, was rewarding.
- 15 out of 28 noted that you should not underestimate the prior knowledge of middle school students.
- 26 out 28 stated that the co-teaching experiment was a beneficial learning experience for themselves and the middle school students alike.

Some observed that the overall school curriculum and environment had a lot to do with the willingness of students to participate. They felt the focus on language and culture at International Middle School fostered in its students a willingness to discuss vital, controversial social issues. Others noted that they were surprised that the middle school students were "so eager to learn." Some stated that the project was a great deal of work "in a short span of time" and expressed a sense of relief "now that the project was over", but they overwhelmingly reported that the experience was rewarding nonetheless.

Overall, university students expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of their presentations, yet patterns emerged with regard to the pre-service educators' ideas for enhancing the Borderlands Issues Project. 11 out of 28 pre-service educators

recommended having more time to plan and prepare with their middle school students. Some presenters felt they could have determined a narrower focus for their projects after reflecting upon the learning outcomes of their presentations. Examples of pre-service educators' specific comments are as follows:

- "Co-presenting with students in front of their parents was a great experience. We learned how to manage our time wisely and collaborate with the middle school students."
- "The group project would have been better if we had put more effort into collecting and designing props and visuals for their presentation."

Several students reflected on their initial concerns versus their personal learning outcomes. Their comments illustrate changes in their perspectives that developed after their involvement in the project. Accordingly, one respondent in the post-survey instruments offered these contrasting sentiments:

I was concerned that the students at [the middle school] were not going to be cooperative or willing to present. I was also concerned with working in a group as there are often slackers or procrastinators.

After the project was completed the same person stated,

I was very impressed with the students. We worked with six eighth graders who were great. They were very experienced in presentations and contributed more substantially than we (the university students) had expected.

Another participant stated,

I was concerned that we would have a difficult time integrating the middle school students into the overall presentation. I wondered if

the level of information was appropriate.

The same person reported on a post-survey, The middle school students were extremely bright and accommodating. They gave their input and support to the project with enthusiasm. I never felt that the material we presented was beyond our audience.

A third pre-service educator noted, Actually finding a topic to present concerned me, and taking that topic and presenting it in a meaningful way was also a concern. Now that [the presentations are finished], I see my (initial) concerns were unfounded. There is always something controversial to research on the Borderlands.

Other participant observations dealt with the lack of problems in co-planning, co-designing, and team teaching with the International Middle School students. Pre-service educators noted surprise regarding the high levels of parent engagement during the Parent Night presentations.

International middle school students, parents, teachers, and administration were surveyed in face-to-face interviews, and in focus group question-and-answer sessions. The researcher used different sources of data to note emergent themes. Moreover, International Middle School students, parents, teachers, and administration were asked the following questions in follow-up face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions:

1. What are important considerations for the facilitation of issues-centered projects?
2. What is the reaction of other students, parents, teachers, and administrators to university and middle school team presentations on Borderlands issues?

3. How do pre-service educators, middle school students, parents, university faculty, and school site administrators and teachers learn through university and school site collaborations such as the Borderlands Issue Project?
4. How could university and school-site collaborative issues-centered projects be sustained and enhanced?

International Middle School parents, overall, stated that the Borderlands Issues Project presentations were highly informative and exceeded their expectations. They expressed their gratitude to the university and its future teachers for engaging their middle school daughters and sons in the co-teaching projects. Accordingly, feedback from parents included the following:

- “It’s exciting that the university students are out in the schools doing this sort of work.”
- “I appreciate them being here sharing information about issues that affect all of us.”
- “I am glad that all of you are taking the responsibility to get involved.”
- “Unique and informative presentations, with a high level of cooperation. I want to thank the university for helping out kids.”

Six out of six International Middle School teachers and administrators surveyed in focus group question-and-answer sessions and face-to-face interviews expressed a high level of satisfaction with the amount of effort put into the projects, by the university pre-service educators and the middle school students alike. An administrator commented, “This was the best-received Parent Night to date.” An International Middle School teacher stated that the university students collaborated with the middle school students exceptionally well, and that the project served as an important springboard for

interdisciplinary learning (see Figure 1). International Middle School teachers’ and administrators’ recommendations for enhancing future collaborations were primarily focused on logistical concerns such as the space available for the group presentations, the time allowed for presentations, and the number of group and middle school students assigned to co-teach in groups.

Shifting Priorities

Educators should focus upon the long term learning outcomes of their students and facilitate rigorous, yet authentic assessments with their students. Rather than be concerned primarily with imparting expert knowledge, teachers should assess students with a consideration for an inclusive curriculum and authentic care for cultural differences (Valenzuela, 1999). In other words, teachers can incorporate an issues-centered curriculum with the desired goals, or an “end” in mind.

There is evidence that issues-centered approaches promote an “end” of enduring understandings. For example, a fellow UTEP professor taught the same cohort of pre-service educators one semester after their participation in the Borderlands Issues Project. The professor commented that some six months after the Parent Night group presentations and subsequent debriefings, the former participants continued to reflect on their experiences at International Middle School during class discussions. Moreover, the professor noted that the pre-service educators were able to articulate their personal understandings of issues-centered instruction, authentic assessment, constructivism, and collaborative planning, teaching, and learning. Indeed, enduring understandings go beyond facts and skills to focus on larger concepts, principles or processes that serve

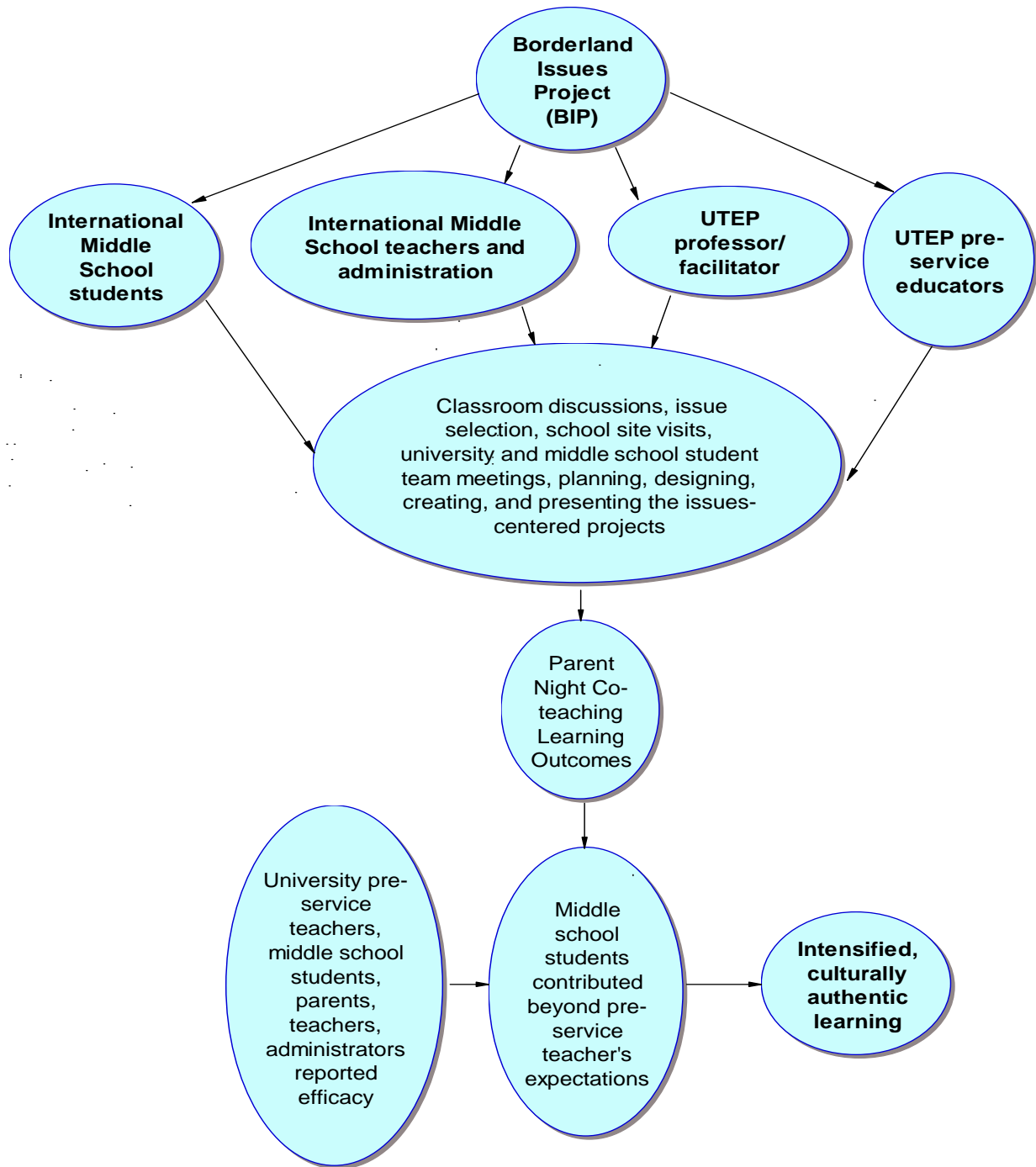


Figure 1. Selected outcomes of the BIP for International Middle School students, International Middle School faculty and administration, University of Texas at El Paso pre-service educators, and the university professor.

as worthy goals (Wiggins & McTieghe, 2001).

The present emphasis on high-stakes testing in schools does not promote larger conceptual understandings, but rather focuses upon facts and skills. Thus, our schools must shift away from an overwhelming pre-occupation with rote memorization and recall in an attempt to perform well on high stakes tests. In the case of International Middle School, collaborative, engaging, culturally relevant, and issues-centered approaches did not hold back students on standardized tests.

On the contrary, International Middle school students scored the highest of all the district's middle schools on the annual state-mandated social studies assessment. High test scores can be "intoxicating", however, and schools should be careful not to shy away from the risk-taking elements of the Borderlands Issues Project that are most important for long-term learning outcomes. It can be argued that the long-term learning outcomes outweigh the perceived student learning measured on high-stakes tests. The researcher maintains that greater priorities should be placed on university students, middle school students, parents, and educators reflecting on the enduring understandings that result from recognizing and discussing past and present racism perpetuated by groups such as the KKK in the Borderlands, describing how indigenous peoples on both sides of the international border have been negatively affected by their government's decisions, articulating how the movement of individuals and families from countries outside of Mexico has impacted life on the United States side of the international border with Mexico, and demonstrating an understanding of how pollution from a local copper smelter had profound effects on the surrounding communities.

Final Reflections on the Project

In 2005, the year UTEP students and International Middle School students co-presented their issues-centered projects for Parent Night, the eighth grade social studies scores ranked the highest of 13 middle schools in the surrounding urban school district. Many possible explanations could be offered for the students' test performances, but certainly a key component of the eighth grade successes was a faculty that was willing to engage students in local issues as a complement to the state-mandated curriculum. Rather than juxtapose the state standards against issues-centered social studies, faculty were willing to take risks and reinforce the content of the curriculum with approaches that precipitated various levels of success on the part of International Middle School students.

Follow-up studies of classroom teachers who participated in the Borderlands Issues Project as pre-service teachers would shed light on the extent that issues-centered approaches continue to be facilitated and modeled by former participants of the International Middle School Parent Night presentations. In the short term, UTEP's future teachers provided the researcher with feedback regarding their perceived enduring understandings. According to one university pre-service educator, Arnulfo,

These kinds of projects give you hands-on opportunities and are eye-opening activities. This project exposes us to what it will be like when we have our own classroom. But it also helps the young kids be exposed to teacher education students. To them representatives from the university are intriguing.

Others, including Arnulfo's fellow pre-service educators and the International Middle School administration and teachers, were "intrigued" with the co-planning, co-designing, and co-teaching of the

Borderlands Issues Project. They collaborated to learn outside of a textbook, engage each other and an audience in social studies processes, and address state social studies standards. The learning outcomes of the project can be enhanced with additional cooperation and preparation time devoted to an issues-centered social studies curriculum. Stakeholders, including representatives of all who are involved with university and school partnerships, can continue to support such endeavors and recognize the significance of “doing” social studies and promoting enduring understandings.

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