

A longstanding commitment to lab schools and constructivist-based curriculum: one university's story

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Abstract

Stephen F. Austin State University, a small regional educational institution located in East Texas, has a long tradition of dedication to education. Since the inception of the university in 1923, laboratory schools were a critical component of the College of Education. This historical case study documents the history of the development of the lab schools and identifies the curriculum practices demonstrated by those schools that led to academic success.

Alongside the towering pines in deep East Texas, Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) is nestled in a small community that exhibits a long history of dedication to education. Since 1923, SFASU has instituted laboratory schools with the purposes of research and teacher preparation. Throughout the years, the laboratory schools achieved excellence as reported by parents of students who attended the labs and by state and national accreditation bodies. This excellence was voiced by a parent who described the Early Childhood Lab (ECHL), one of the lab schools operated by SFASU.

It was the premier site. We were blessed to have it. I knew it at that time; I know it today. When you walk into another world and think about your child going into care of some kind or school of some kind, to think that we had this. It was incredible. It was the premier. You don't do better than what we had.

Additionally, the ECHL and Charter School, two lab schools instituted at SFASU, have achieved recognition by state and national entities. The ECHL was among the first early childhood programs to earn accreditation from the more rigorous standards set by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The ECHL was also designated as a Texas Rising Star Provider, a childcare provider that exceeds the state minimum licensing standards for child care facilities according to the Texas Workforce Commission. In addition, The SFASU Charter School has achieved the state of Texas accountability rating of either recognized (the second highest rating) or exemplary (the highest rating) according to the state accountability standards since its inception.

In order to document the history of the development of the lab schools and to identify the curriculum practices demonstrated by the schools that led to academic success, a historical case study of the university's lab schools was conducted (Merriam 2009). Since the researchers desired to attain a deep understanding of the practices implemented over time in the lab schools, the case study was a method that provided "intensive descriptions and analyses of a bounded system" (Merriam 2009, 19).

Data collection was primarily qualitative in nature and focused on interview data and document review. Administrators, teachers, and parents with knowledge of each lab school were interviewed. University artifacts including board minutes, photographs, SFASU historical accounts, newspaper articles, and records from

the university were examined. The researchers gathered additional, informal information through conversations with other individuals who had memories of and/or involvement with the lab schools. The study revealed rich data documenting a historical overview of the development of the lab schools and curriculum practices implemented that were dedicated to constructivist-based instruction.

Nacogdoches and a History of Community Education

On the official SFASU university website, university historian, Dr. Jere Jackson, wrote about the history of Nacogdoches and the community's sense of the importance of education early in its history. "The sense of scholarship and educational responsibility" was instilled in the community by the Spanish friars who established the Mission of Our Lady of Nacogdoches (Jackson nd., "The University Tradition in Nacogdoches"). By the 1840s, the citizens of Nacogdoches wanted to procure a university to provide higher education for the students of East Texas. In February 1845, the Republic of Texas granted a charter to the town of Nacogdoches for a preparatory school to be built which was named Nacogdoches University and which also taught some college subjects. However, over the next sixty years the school did not prosper. As a result of financial hardship during the Civil War years, changing ownership by several entities, and finally the loss of the state charter, the school was closed in 1900. The vacated building and grounds were deeded to Nacogdoches Independent School District (NISD) in 1904. By 1906 the citizens were determined to re-establish an institution of higher learning and town leaders lobbied Texas legislatures during the next nine years to establish a normal school for the training of teachers (Jackson nd., "The University Tradition in Nacogdoches").

Eventually, the argument that East Texas lacked a higher education facility as well as a normal school persuaded legislators in 1917 to create provisions for locating a normal school in East Texas (Craddock 1973). Nacogdoches city leaders again lobbied the legislature and won the rights to establish a teachers college in Nacogdoches. Stephen F. Austin State Teachers College opened in September 1923, convening in the Old University Building, a stately four-room structure that formerly housed Nacogdoches University. The location was temporary, and in the late spring of 1924, the college moved to the Austin Building that currently houses the university's administrative offices. Subsequent changes in name and status came in 1949, when the 51st State Legislature, changed the name Stephen F. Austin Teachers College to Stephen F. Austin State College and in 1969, when the 61st Texas Legislature approved university status and changed the name again to Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) (Craddock 1973). Even though other degree programs have been added, teacher preparation was the mission of Stephen F. Austin from the inception, and the university continues today as a major force in Texas teacher preparation.

The History of the SFASU Lab Schools

From its inception, the College of Education at SFASU embraced laboratory schools- preschool, elementary, or secondary schools attached to universities for the purposes of research and teacher preparation. The SFASU lab school, the Demonstration School, was one of several teacher training centers and laboratory schools established throughout the country during the 1920s and 1930s as educators experimented with ideas of progressive education. The SFASU lab schools have always had a two-part mission that reflected Progressive educational theory: (1)

to better prepare teacher educators and (2) to provide an exemplary instructional program for children where theory was modeled for teacher candidates. Over the years, the SFA College of Education established six lab schools spanning the period from 1923 until the present.

The Demonstration School

The first lab school was established for the 1923-24 school term and named the Demonstration School (Craddock 1973). Craddock (1973) described the purpose of the Demonstration School.

As part of the education department, the Demonstration School was proposed to serve as a practice school for college students who planned to be teachers. This gave prospective teachers an opportunity to put education theories into actual practice (13).

Initially, the Demonstration School housed 25 first and second grade children and was located in the southwest corner of the Central Grammar School (Craddock 1973; Hallman 2001). In 1924, the Demonstration School moved to the newly completed Austin Building's lower level, and in 1926, relocated to its permanent home, the Rusk Building (Hallman 2001). By this time, the Demonstration School grew to house grades one through seven with a staff to include a director, a supervisor, and 10 teachers. The June 24, 1927, minutes of the SFASU Board of Regents documented a description of the school, "The first floor provides classrooms for the Demonstration School, a small gymnasium, with showers, for the students of the Demonstration School..." Grades eight and nine were added the year after the move to the Rusk building (Hallman 2001).

A commitment to producing quality teachers was evidenced from the beginning. Hallman (2001) reviewed a 1923 article from the *Nacogdoches Daily Sentinel* newspaper which described the process of using both practice and "critic" teachers in the Demonstration School.

Each room is handled directly by a critic teacher who is responsible for the children and devotes all her time to them. She teaches them except for the few minutes each day they are taught by practice teachers. All practice teaching is done in the presence of the critic teacher who is responsible for the instruction of her children and the criticism and training of the students.

In 1950, an agreement was reached between SFASU and Nacogdoches ISD which disbanded the Demonstration School and led to student teachers going out into the City of Nacogdoches schools to receive onsite training (SFASU, "Demonstration School (SFA)"). For a brief period of time, this change in practice left SFASU with only one lab school, the Nursery School.

The Nursery School Lab School

In 1936, the College of Education implemented a Nursery School. Under the direction of the Home Economics Department Chair Edna Wilkin, a nursery school was instituted in a "beautiful four-bedroom colonial house located on the south side of the campus called the Home Management House" (SFASU, "History of Human Sciences"). The building was made possible due to the creative financing of the university's first president, Alton W. Birdwell. Alton Birdwell "was a member of the Texas Board of Normal Examiners [and] traveled around the state working with teacher institutes.

He consulted in Nacogdoches on normal schools many years before he was first designated President of SFA Normal School in 1917” (Jackson, “Final Years of the Old University”). During the depression year of 1936, money was scarce, and the SFASU Board of Regents determined that faculty should receive only a portion of their summer salaries. President Birdwell used the money not paid to faculty to build the Home Management House. Later, the *Daily Sentinel*, on May 19, 1948, published an article stating that the Nursery School operated in the summer as a, “laboratory for the college girls who enroll for the course entitled Child Care and Training (SFASU “SFA Nursery School”).

The Nursery School served infants one day per week and toddlers through 4-year-old children in a half-day format, with the instructional day beginning at 8:30 a.m. and ending at 12:15 p.m. This lab school was later relocated to the Human Sciences North Building and was one of two lab schools serving early childhood learners after the Kindergarten was implemented (SFASU, “ECHL History and Mission”).

The Kindergarten Lab School

As an increasingly larger percentage of women joined the work force beginning in the 1960s, the need for adequate childcare for families also increased. Additionally, the nation as a whole was focusing on early childhood education. In the late 1960s, the state of Texas created an elementary certification endorsement for kindergarten to meet the urgency for early childhood educators. The SFASU College of Education responded to the critical need by instituting a kindergarten program for teacher candidates as well as a kindergarten lab school. Dr. Eugene Howard, a specialist in early childhood, was employed by the university to

facilitate the creation and implementation of a kindergarten program. In 1969, the Kindergarten opened for the purpose of preparing teacher candidates in early childhood practices. Janice Pattillo, the first kindergarten teacher, taught this class in the Manse of the local Westminster Presbyterian Church. In 1970, in its second year of operation, the university purchased an old, one-room building on Baker Street from the Church of Christ and relocated the Kindergarten. The Kindergarten remained there until 1974 when a new facility was built just north of the Human Sciences North building on Raguet Street (SFASU, “ECHL History and Mission”).

Children in the Kindergarten attended a half-day format, mornings only. Later the program grew to include two classes, offering morning and afternoon sessions, in order to serve the growing number of future kindergarten teachers. College students seeking a kindergarten endorsement observed in a one-hour lab that corresponded to course content and also planned learning activities and taught the children in the lab. In 1974, the new Early Childhood Laboratory opened its doors to the expanding early childhood program where the Nursery School and the Kindergarten were combined to form the Early Childhood Laboratory.

Early Childhood Laboratory (ECHL)

In 1974, the ECHL opened with Dr. Eugene Howard as program coordinator and Ann Sartin-Wendell as the first director. Kindergarten was offered in a half-day format with morning and afternoon sessions. Childcare was provided while children were not in the formal kindergarten instructional setting. In addition to the kindergarten class, the ECHL housed one room for infants and another for toddlers. In the third year of operation, the kindergarten moved to a full-day program with one class of 4 ½ to 6-

year-old age groups and another class that served 3- to 4 ½ year-olds. Afterschool care began at 3:00 p.m. and ended at 5:30 p.m. and served between 35 and 40 children on a regular basis.

From the parents' view point, the children were successful in the lab school, and many wished their children could attend the ECHL all the way through their elementary school career. To meet this request and offer additional opportunities for university students, in 1979, a primary class was added. According to a former ECHL teacher, the primary classroom was multi-age, serving older kindergarten and first grade students. In 1984, the ECHL building was expanded to house infants through primary grade students.

In the fall of 1995, Nacogdoches Independent School District (NISD) Superintendent James G. Partin and Dean of the College of Education, Dr. Thomas Franks collaborated and with the approval of the NISD School Board and SFASU Board of Regents, placed a second grade classroom in the ECHL to relieve district overcrowding. Superintendent Partin had strong ties to the university where he had attended the Demonstration School as a child, and the school district was also an active partner with the College of Education in other educational endeavors. Second grade students were bused on a daily basis from Raguet Elementary to attend class at the ECHL. Dr. Carol Harrison, then principal of Raguet Elementary, described the collaboration:

The Raguet campus was running out of space when NISD officials began talking with SFA officials last spring about the possibility of moving one of the public school classrooms to the lab. Anytime we can do something with SFA, we can't lose. This is a place where I can send teachers for new ideas, and I was

confident in sending my 22 students (Goodrich 1996).

The merger lasted until the fall of 1998 when a more complex arrangement between SFASU and NISD was instituted, one that had multiple goals: to provide area parents a choice of educational options for their children, to increase opportunities for future teachers to work with older children, to demonstrate exemplary instructional practices, and to relieve overcrowded schools in NISD.

ECHL and NISD/SFASU Charter School

Major education reform in the Texas Education System occurred in 1995 when the Texas Legislature overhauled the Texas Education Code (Texas Education Agency 2007) enabling the State Board of Education to grant charter schools as an alternative to public education. During this time, parents of students attending the expanded ECHL voiced the desire to have their children remain in the lab experience beyond the second grade. Former NISD superintendent, James G. Partin described parent interest and events leading up to the development of the NISD/SFASU Charter School Campus:

They [parents] were concerned about their children transitioning into a more traditional classroom setting in public schools. There was parental concern expressed to the school district, and there was a concern of the public school to find a more effective way of teaching that would improve performance on state assessments. Around this time there was the state movement toward professional development and technology. A number of university personnel and surrounding public school districts had been involved as placement centers for student teaching and other types of field experiences.

Several faculty members and public school administrators traveled to San Diego State and looked at their professional development center. This group saw a partnership between the public school where a lab setting was displayed; university professors and public school teachers worked together to prepare teacher educators. The situation was impressive. As far as the parental and public school concern, the vision began to develop. What if there was a cooperative lab setting that provided the training facilities for the university students and at the same time provide a model of effective teaching practices that public school teachers could observe first-hand and implement in their own classrooms? It was a way of improving instruction in the public school setting.

From 1995 through 1997, discussions took place between SFASU and NISD administrators concerning the implementation of a professional development center and university/public school cooperative charter that could fulfill the needs of both institutions. After much discussion and deliberation, the NISD School Board and SFASU Board of Regents approved the merger, and on August 14, 1998, the NISD/SFASU Charter Campus opened as an extension of the ECHL with the mission of creating a learning environment that would include a constructivist-based curriculum that would support the vision of Early Childhood faculty to foster student development of autonomy, openness, problem solving, and integrity through a learning centers approach.

Initially, the ECHL and NISD/SFASU Charter Campus provided classrooms serving children from the two months of age through third grade; fourth grade was added next, and finally fifth grade was included. According to the Texas

Education Agency, 84 charter schools were operating in Texas in 1998 with the NISD/SFASU Charter School being one of those schools (Texas Education Agency). The newly formed school was under the direction of Dr. Mary Nelle Brunson, SFASU Elementary Education Early Childhood professor. Brunson described the unique position of the SFASU Lab School at the time saying, “Nacogdoches, Dallas, and Houston are the only cities in Texas that currently operate district charter schools. The NISD-SFASU Charter Campus is the only university and school district charter school collaboration in Texas” (Brunson n.d.).

Over the next nine years, district budget constraints, as well as a change in the philosophy of district administrators, produced a strain on the relationship between SFASU and NISD. This finally resulted in a suspension of the collaboration between the school district and the university and led to the establishment of an independent ECHL and SFASU Charter School.

ECHL and SFASU Charter School

Even though the NISD/SFASU Charter campus was successful according to student scores and parent opinions, coordinating programs and finances between the two entities was cumbersome and fraught with differences of opinion on major issues. After much discussion, reflection, and research by NISD and university administrators, a new course of action was forged. Through a joint decision, NISD and SFASU officials determined that an open-enrollment charter school was the right move. The NISD School Board and the SFASU Board of Regents approved the request to apply for a university charter school from the Texas Education Agency. On January 18, 2008, the Texas State Board of Education unanimously approved the SFASU application for a university open charter school to

begin in the fall of 2008 (SFASU, "State Approves SFA University Charter School").

The opening of a university charter meant expansion, and expansion provided the creation of a more diverse student population pool, one that more closely mirrored the neighboring public school population, thus providing a more realistic environment for teacher preparation. In July 2006, the state approved the tuition revenue for the construction of a new building that would house the ECHL, SFASU Charter School, and Department of Elementary Education. The building was named the Early Childhood Research Center.

Moving to a new building would allow more interaction between the ECHL and Charter School students, university students, and Elementary Education faculty and also permit university faculty to conduct valuable research using the lab school setting. On December 19, 2008, the SFASU Office of Public Affairs announced in an article displayed on the SFASU website, that the SFASU Charter School was seeking applicants to fill approximately 70 student openings available for the 2009-2010 academic year. As stated in this article, "The charter school's capacity will increase from 154 to approximately 220 students." (SFASU, "SFA Charter Seeks Additional Students").

The opening of the new Early Childhood Research Center took place July 19, 2009. The ECHL continued to operate as it had in the previous facility, but the SFASU Charter School doubled its enrollment in the fall of 2009 offering two of each grade level: kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and third grade classrooms. Children in the ECHL and SFASU Charter School were exposed to curriculum grounded in constructivist theory as had all children since the implementation of the original Demonstration School.

Constructivist-Based Curriculum

Interviews with former lab school teachers and students as well as relevant historical documents paint a portrait of the influence of the grounding principles of Dewey, Vygotsky, and Piaget on the curriculum of the lab schools: (a) children learn through constructing personal meaning based on their past and present experiences; (b) they learn through a social context; and (c) they develop individually by exploring their environment through inquiry (Field, 2005; Learning Theories, "Social Development Theory,"; Wadsworth, 2003). The instructional focus of the lab schools was designed to meet the needs of the whole child. Though not explicit in the Demonstration School and the Nursery School, four personality goals (still in existence) were formally articulated when the Kindergarten program began in 1969: autonomy, openness, integrity, and problem solving. One Department of Elementary Education faculty member described the intent of these curriculum goals:

There was a desire for students to be autonomous in terms of their way of thinking so that they trusted their thinking and were free to question. We wanted to develop openness to new ideas and to other people. Integrity not just honesty, but we wanted to help children develop a sense of values and be value-driven so that they reacted to problems or situations based on their developing sense of values. We wanted to develop problem solving or being able to have the skills and strategies they needed in all the academic areas so that they could be self-confident.

Not desiring to implement a purchased or "canned" curriculum but needing guidance in planning developmentally appropriate activities

for young children, Dr. Eugene Howard, faculty member and coordinator of the Early Childhood Program in 1969, created a comprehensive document that outlined wide-ranging and specific characteristics, skills, and developmental milestones; he named it the “Integrated Approach Design.” Teachers referred to it as “IAD,” and this instrument embraced the program goals of autonomy, openness, problem solving, and integrity. Some 40 years later, the ECHL continues to use the “IAD” as its planning footprint.

Actual documentation of specific instructional practices was uncovered beginning with the first kindergarten. Artifacts provided only a glimpse of the instructional programs of the Demonstration School and Nursery School. A photograph provided by the East Texas Research Center indicated that teachers at the Demonstration School facilitated instruction and worked among the students. A former Demonstration School student revealed that she believed effective, creative instruction was displayed at this school:

We, as students, had the best of both worlds; we had the best teachers available anywhere. We were constantly being exposed to new theories of effective teaching, and we had young, attractive practice teachers who were lots of fun and who seemed to us to be our contemporaries.

Children learned about their environment through interaction and inquiry, indicating that the constructivist philosophy influenced the instructional practices of the Nursery School. For example, a description of the Nursery Lab School in a 1948 *Daily Sentinel* article discussed how students were encouraged to experience their environment and develop autonomy:

The school gives the child a first introduction to the “away from home” world and acquaints them with the joys and problems of contacts with others their own age. It also offers them experiences that will promote skills, knowledge and satisfaction and helps them develop feelings of independence, confidence, and success in themselves (SFASU, “SFA Nursery School Enlarged”).

Interviews with former teachers and students articulated that learning centers were an instructional delivery approach used to foster the four program goals: autonomy, openness, integrity, and problem solving. Making choices was also instrumental in helping children solve problems. A former teacher communicated that if a child wanted to go to the art center but there were already the allotted number of children in that center, he must rethink his plan, choose another center, and wait for a friend to leave the art center.

As the ECHL evolved and changed to add the NISD/SFASU Charter School and later the SFASU Charter School, the learning centers approach remained an important component of the instructional program. Learning centers were well-defined spaces with organized materials to teach content and/or specific skills (Pattillo and Vaughan 1992). Multiple centers were provided in the classrooms, and centers differed according to grade level. Pre-primary centers included art, blocks, construction, discovery, dramatic play, library, muscle (gross motor), music, and table games. Primary centers included art, blocks (first and second grade classrooms only), discovery (which grew into the science center), handwriting, library, math, reading skills, spelling, and social

studies. All center set-ups were based on the assessed needs of individual children.

In the early years of the Kindergarten and the ECHL, literacy was encouraged through language experience and key words (Veatch, Sawicki, Elliott, Flake, and Blakey 1979), rebus charts, and Rug Time. Wanting to provide a more constructivist method of learning to read, teachers avoided basal readers and phonics-driven reading programs. Language experience charts, based on the personal stories dictated by children, were recorded by the teacher and read chorally. A former primary teacher described dictation:

Each child had his/her own spiral notebook. On a somewhat regular basis, the child would dictate words to the teacher who acted as the child's secretary, recording precisely what the child said. It was important for the child to see that his/her words could be recorded.

Children learned to associate the written word with the spoken form (McCormick, 1988).

Rebus charts, allusional devices that use pictures to represent words, had been used in educational settings for quite some time, but the teachers of the Kindergarten and ECHL created their version of rebus charts and called them symbol charts; later the name changed to directional guides. Symbol charts directed student activity in learning centers to encourage children's independence; they did not rely on the teacher's presence. One teacher explained, "Rebus charts had been around forever, but we took it to a different level so that we could post them in the different learning centers to give children guidelines. They could turn to the picture and print provided to find out what to do."

Students were also instructed in reading through large-group time called Rug Time.

During Rug Time, teachers first used music time to introduce children to words through the use of song cards. One former ECHL teacher explained:

We created attractive song cards with a song title, picture related to the song, and the staffed music. When we introduced a new song, we'd ask children to look at the picture and tell us what they thought the song was about. Predicting is an important precursor to reading. We'd show them the title and read it. It didn't take long for them to learn to sing the song or "read" the title (and picture) and know what song we'd sing when they saw a particular song card.

Story Time was also a part of the daily schedule to encourage children's reading. Infants and toddlers heard nursery rhymes, looked at and labeled pictures, and heard simple stories. Pre-kindergarten children participated in retelling stories, as did kindergartners. First through fifth grade students listened to teachers read story books, chapter books, and informational text. Terminology changed and Story Time became Read Alouds. According to Fountas and Pinnell, interactive Read Alouds include "a teaching context in which students are actively listening and responding to an oral reading of a text" (2007, 163).

Literacy instruction at the Charter School also included instructional strategies such as grand conversations, guided reading, reading workshop, and writers' workshop where children engaged in more authentic reading and writing. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) viewed guided reading as an instructional setting that allowed teachers to work with a small group of children to help them learn effective strategies for processing text with understanding. Grand conversation was a discussion of a book in which students

deepened their comprehension and reflected on their feelings during the responding step of the reading process (Eeds 2007). Reading workshops as described by Bennett (2007) were predictable structures that allowed for “deep reading, brilliant writing, mind-changing conversations, inspirational epiphanies, and connections of knew to the known” (9).

In language arts instruction, comprehension strategies such as monitoring for meaning, questioning, using prior knowledge, determining importance, creating mental images, inferring, synthesizing, and using “fix up” strategies were encouraged and vertically aligned from kindergarten through grade five (Keene and Zimmermann, 2007). A Charter School teacher reviewed her intent in language arts instruction:

I want them reading. I want them to feel free to choose their own books, to enjoy what they want to read, not just what I impose on them to read. Also I want them to have a variety of books and learning experiences. I think it is important to have an opportunity to write in different genres. We research. We write essays and poetry. We have a variety of ways to learn.

Just as important to the whole child’s development were mathematics, science, and social studies instruction which also followed the constructivist workshop model. Problem solving and use of mathematical strategies where students used what they knew to solve problems were encouraged. Science and social studies followed an inquiry process where children observed, questioned, hypothesized, designed and conducted experiments, compared predicted results to actual results, and reflected upon the results (Southwest Center for Education and the Natural Environment).

Kamii games (math games inspired by noted constructivist Constance Kamii), as well as other commercial games, and teacher-made games were located in math centers along with data sheets used for recording findings. Creating opportunities for cognitive dissonance were encouraged. One ECHL teacher described how dissonance was created:

We were taught to think about creating moments in the simplest ways, to create cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance [involved] moments where things were just not like they are supposed to be. When students were off balance, they did their best thinking.

ECHL children’s explorations in the science discovery center were vast; they investigated the properties of solids and liquids, used their senses to examine objects, cared for classroom pets (rabbits, hamsters, gerbils, birds, spiders, and fish, to name a few), and often just wondered. Older children in the Charter School continued to explore and investigate in their science centers. Predictions were made, experiments were conducted, and results were recorded.

Social studies for young children centered on ‘self’ and ‘family.’ As children grew older, they learned about their community. Read Alouds were primarily based on the day-to-day events of a young child’s life involving families, working parents, siblings, and eventually the community. Dramatic Play set-ups included the home center, area restaurants and bakeries, and other businesses children frequented. Ice cream parlors were always popular. These set-ups provided an appropriate venue for children to assume adult roles and interact with peers that contributed to social competence or social studies. A former kindergarten teacher recalled a time when

children were in the “SFA Flower Shop.” The teacher placed an order for a flower delivery only to be told there was an extra charge for deliveries. This information spoke to the kinds of experiences children came to school with, experiences that helped them make sense of the adult world. Older children explored the larger world by reading and researching topics of interest. One SFASU professor remembered a time when she visited a classroom, and students were working on their self-chosen research topic.

The intensity of their [the children’s] focus was astonishing! I walked into the fourth grade room classroom and was quite impressed with the fervor in which students worked. Their investigations took them well beyond the typical “read the chapter and answer questions at the end” approach to teaching. Students were digging deeply to become experts on their topic, and experts they became. Social studies involved students delving into subjects they wanted to learn about and this was their motivation. These students will grow up to be quite the researchers.

Focused student commitment and learning through choice and personal experience in all of these many activities were evidences of constructivist-based curriculum implementation.

Conclusion

Stephen F. Austin State University’s College of Education has a tradition of commitment to teacher preparation fostered by connecting content courses to field experiences in laboratory schools. This method of clinical practice ensured that future teachers participated in authentic experiences where research-based instruction was guaranteed. Clinical practice was emphasized as a way to reform and improve

teacher preparation. “The Clinical Preparation of Teachers: A Policy Brief” disseminated in 2010 by the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) required a clinically-based approach to teacher preparation and encouraged teacher preparation programs to require at a minimum 450 hours of clinical practice. Since 1923, laboratory schools at SFASU have historically served as clinical teacher training sites. By 2012, elementary education students graduating from SFASU with a certification in elementary education, now graduate with approximately 650 clinical hours devoted to working with children in authentic classrooms. Not only do future teachers have hands-on experience in working with children, but they witness and learn to implement curriculum grounded in constructivist theory.

The intent of the lab schools at SFASU was to also develop learning environments where children are the center and to encourage children to be autonomous, open to new ideas, problem solvers, and people of integrity. The SFASU lab schools implemented from 1923 to the present day were places and spaces designed for children. Sustaining lab schools demonstrated one university’s commitment to educating teachers in constructivist curriculum.

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