Encouraging Awareness of Environment through Art and Print

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The era of high stakes testing often puts pressure on teachers and administrators to deemphasize creative activities, especially those involving the social studies, art, and music. Teaching strategies not perceived as directly related to improving test scores are often marginalized. Environmental text is essential for encouraging overall learning competencies in general and social studies in particular. Using environmental text such as real estate booklets can be helpful in generating learning activities in the social studies. Real estate booklets are colorful, rich in content, and readily available at no expense. Methods for integrating music and art strategies are presented also.

Key words: social studies, early childhood, environmental print, real estate, art, literature

Literacy related curriculum is influenced, and almost entirely driven in some environments, by high-stakes testing (International Reading Association [IRA], 1999). High stakes testing “means that the consequences for good (high) or poor (low) performance on a test are substantial …such as promotion or retention, entrance into an educational institution, teacher salary, or a school district’s autonomy depend on a single test score” (IRA, p. 1). An outcome of mandated testing is that high stakes tests tend to encourage a focus on classroom strategies purported to increase reading scores and, consequently, great amounts of time are allocated to such activities in the elementary and middle schools (IRA, 1999). Test conscious educators and politicians often downgrade curriculum, such as the social studies, they do not perceive to contribute to high stakes testing. This denigration appears to be a natural outcome of high stakes testing and certainly of great consequence to our young social studies learners.

As the widely adopted Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association [NGA], 2010) stress wider use of informational texts and literacy achievement, many school leaders appear determined to incorporate language arts standards into social studies instruction. We propose that creative enterprises in the primary classroom based on integration of social studies, environmental text, reading, and the arts can be both creatively pleasing and academically sound. We propose that the building of classroom community is essential for learning. Developing academic competencies through the study of real estate can be both academically productive and highly enjoyable for teachers and students. Basic themes of the social studies as presented in the National Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010) can be encouraged through the practices presented herein.

Educators and psychologists have demonstrated the importance of involving learners physically and emotionally, as well as academically, in their learning. Lev Vygotsky (1978) was a pioneer in demonstrating the importance of socialization as a vital component of learning. He
proposed a zone of proximal development in which the learner is ready to learn but must receive support in both social and academic contexts. This process, known as scaffolding, is described by Timothy Rasinski (2010), where the learner is led from dependence to independence. In an additional study, Pam Allyn (2013) determined that scaffolding must be systematic so learning builds on learning and firm foundations must be established. Allyn concluded that Vygotsky’s emphasis on combining social and academic contexts in building instructional scaffolds is more important than ever given the strong emphasis on informational texts presented in the Common Core State Standards (NGA, 2010).

An extensive review of research led Kelly Cartwright (2009) to determine that going beyond domain specific study strategies by integrating a variety of complementary learning domains (i.e. social studies, reading, writing, mathematics, and the arts) encourages “cognitive flexibility” (p. 130) leading to more powerful learning experiences. The study across domains fosters development of the “ability to conceptualize a task or situation in multiple ways” (Cartwright, 2009, p. 118) leading to greater comprehension and flexibility relative to new learning.

The strategies proposed herein encourage enjoyment of learning. They are strategically sound approaches that include social studies content and reading comprehension skill development. We support Maurna Rome (2012) who concluded that instruction is as much about teaching children to want to learn as it is about what to learn. Implementing strategies presented herein provides what Andrew Weil (2011) described as “healthy variability” (p. 9) in providing experientially oriented classroom environments. Routines associated with emphasis on study strategies focused on enhancing scores on high-stakes tests, on the other hand, can lead to school seeming more like a workplace than an adventure in learning.

**Shelter as a Culturally Universal Concept**

For our work in this project, we use real-estate environmental print with young children within a larger framework built on the culturally universal concept of shelter (Brophy & Alleman, 2010). Culturally universal concepts were defined by Brophy and Alleman as, “those domains of human experience that have existed in all cultures, past and present” (p. 133). The domains include, “the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, as well as family structures, government, communication, transportation, and several others” (p. 133). While the definitions, expectations, and perceptions of each culturally universal concept can vary from culture to culture, it is generally represented in some form in each community and historically has existed over time.

A comprehensive unit on shelter asks young learners to consider many aspects of this everyday living component. With the advancement of social studies as a fundamental goal of our work and supported by the 10 themes of social studies as promoted by the National Council of the Social Studies (NCSS, 2010) we begin with this basic premise. Young learners explore, consider, and question why we need shelter, the many ways shelter can look, how shelter has changed over time (early civilizations and in the last 100 years) and for different cultures. This provides an excellent opportunity for students to engage the NCSS theme of Time, Continuity, and Change (2010). It also explores the technological impacts on shelter; connections to electricity, water, and communication; economic implications of needs and wants in choosing shelter; inequalities in types of shelter, renting and buying shelter; access to mortgages for shelter purchases; and careers in real estate or other shelter-related careers. For our youngest elementary learners, Janet Alleman, Barbara Knighton, & Jere Brophy (2007) suggest that,
If cultural universals are taught with appropriate focus on powerful ideas and their potential life applications, students should develop basic sets of connected understandings about how our social system works (with respect to each cultural universal), how and why it got to be that way over time, how and why related practices vary across locations and cultures, and what all of this might mean for personal, social, and civic decision making. (p. 169)

Our use of real-estate booklets as informational text, as a component of a larger unit on shelter, seeks to begin building these concepts with young learners. We focus on connections between environmental print, higher-order comprehension and questioning strategies, and a deeper understanding of various social studies concepts and universal themes, while utilizing creative, hands-on, and experiential pedagogies for young student learning. We discuss access to resources, connections to critical thinking, literature connections, vocabulary and comprehension strategies, and activities with art integration below.

Environmental Print in the Social Studies and Real Estate Resources

Environmental print is all around us. It is the text present in our visual landscape. It is the street signs towards home, in the billboards we read, the corporate logos we recall, and in the advertising we encounter. For young learners, environmental print is often the first words they will begin to read. With implications for both reading skills and social studies content ranging from emerging literacy to geography we believe that environmental print provides a robust opportunity to examine the world around us. For our purposes we engaged real estate publications as informational text and as our source of environmental print.

Most major real estate organizations produce free comprehensive guides to real estate for sale or rent in a geographic area. Real estate organizations frequently combine efforts for advertising purposes. The guides, often, are in the form of colorful booklets demonstrating a wide variety real estate purchase options from barren fields to large mansions. The booklets contain enticing photographs of properties that are on the market. Accompanying each photograph is a description of the property such as ONE-LEVEL CONDO 2BR 1BA in beautiful…etc. The description usually concludes with the price of the property and realtor contact information. There is no cost for these colorful and professionally designed booklets as real estate agents offer them free to the public.

Critical Social Studies and Historical Connections

In our use of this activity with early childhood students, we found it helpful to begin the conversation by asking students to brainstorm all the buildings, areas, services, and locations needed in a community or neighborhood. We continue with the culturally universal topic of shelter (Brophy & Alleman, 2010). We then lead the discussion of what makes a home and the many ways homes differ for different types of families in our communities and in our country. We discuss the various types of communities with a guiding focus on the NCSS theme of People, Places, and Environments (2010) to encourage our students to consider the following: concepts of location and place, the connections between people and their communities, and personal experiences in cities, town, rural areas, and other states inform their understanding of home and community. While our students mostly reside in rural areas where single family houses are very common, an excellent discussion occurred when we considered the many other homes that people live in that may be outside of their preconceptions: hotels, trailers, mobile homes, apartments, condos, parks, with other family members, apartments above garages, etc.

For teachers interested in exploring critical pedagogies with social studies content, this would be an excellent segue into conversations concerning homes around the world.
homelessness, basic human needs and rights, social justice, and inequalities in shelter access. We are reminded of Mary Cowhey’s (2006) excellent book, *Black Ants and Buddhists: Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades*. We often use in our elementary social studies methods courses to illustrate this Freireian pedagogical stance. She speaks to teaching critical inquiries in reading and social studies in such ways with young children. There would be valuable opportunities to begin to critically discuss shelter, socio-economic differences in shelter, shelter inequalities, and homelessness. Teachers and their students might consider a similarly critical topic of media literacy and the vast usage of images, advertisement, messages, and texts that our young students encounter.

There are many additional ways to integrate real estate booklets into historical social studies discussions. During study of the early 1900s, children can consider different types of shelter typical of that era by experiencing resources such as a story about Italian immigrants living in New York City (Bartone, 1993) or differing shelters used by various historical Native American tribes and peoples. The Great Depression and homes of that era can be engagingly experienced through a poetic narrative presented by Amy Hest (1997) and a stark but elegantly powerful accounts of the time authored by Albert Stanley (1992) and Jerry Marrin (2009). The suburban revolution in the mid-1950s could be explored using resources about planned suburban communities like Levittown.

Children’s literature that focuses on the concept of home is a powerful tool for young social studies learners. Mary Ann Hoberman’s book, *A House is a House for Me* (1982) describes how many creatures (and things) and children have homes suitable for each of them. Eve Bunting’s *Dandelions* (1995) elegantly captures the essence of moving from a familiar home to the Nebraska prairie in the late 1800s. Jane Yolen’s *Letting Swift River Go* (1992) is the story of the coming of a giant reservoir and the people who saw their homes covered with water. We made an engaging Readers’ Theater script out of *Letting Swift River Go*. Monica Gunning’s *A Shelter in Our Car* is a powerful story of love, determination, and homelessness. See Appendix B for additional favorite books about home.

We have found that creative pedagogies like songs and crafting art projects concerning home provide much repeated reading practice (students are provided lyrics), enjoyment, and an enhanced sense of community to the activities. *Take Me Home Country Roads* (Denver, 1997) and *Home on the Range* (Higley, 1872), and *This Land is Your Land* (Guthrie, 1944) are among those songs we’ve used during our crafting time. The use of art provides an opportunity for individual creativity and construct new social studies knowledge.

**Content Area Vocabulary**

Professional organizations specializing in applying economic concepts such as real estate, out of necessity, have a vocabulary essential for communication within their organization and with the general population they serve. The vocabulary of real estate is informative, intriguing, and relevant for students, especially for young children who encounter these terms in the environmental print around them and in guided discussions with adults. The study of figurative language such as hyperbole, described by Susan Van Zile, Mary Napoli, and Emily Ritholz (2012) as an “exaggerated statement used to heighten effect and to emphasize a point” (p. 96), meshes comfortably with real estate study even at a young age. Such terminology as *better than new, golfers take notice, great for large family, THE LIFESTYLE YOU ALWAYS WANTED,* and *fashionable* abound in real estate booklets and in other commercial advertising. On the other hand, although we think this to be an excellent outcome, real estate agents might likely take exception to having teachers present the higher-order thinking concepts of hyperbole and
advertising strategies while using their booklets as a primary resource with young consumers. Exploring real estate booklets is an adventure in language usage for young learners as well as a vehicle for understanding basic economic terms such as needs, wants, and terms like advertising. We believe that young learners are capable of understanding corporate logos, marketing tactics, and critiquing basic advertising around them and we use it as an opportunity to share foundational vocabulary and advertising strategies that they might encounter even as a kindergarten or second grade consumer. See Appendix A for a partial listing of real estate terms we used in our conversation with young learners.

Comprehension Strategies

Real estate advertising offers opportunities to encourage higher order thinking. Too much time in schools is spent on tedious and uncreative learning while (Kahn, 2012), on the other hand, discussion involving critical thinking and shared perspectives can foster “intuitive understanding of almost any concept” (p. 248). Working with the concept of shelter and home (Brophy & Alleman, 2010), the vocabulary of buying and selling real estate, and environmental print found in real estate booklets, we find opportunities for efficient and effective comprehension strategy development with emphasis on higher order thinking, inference, and discussion.

Questioning strategies will vary widely depending on the learning environment, purposes, and development readiness of the students. The real estate descriptions usually are accompanied with a photograph designed to make the residence as appealing to a consumer as possible. A typical real estate booklet entry is presented below with sample discussion questions. For example:

391 Maple Grove: Newly remodeled 2 bedroom. 1-1/2 bath home on a nice level lot. Make this your home today. Call Sandy for your showing today!

1. What type of shelter is this for? Where is the home located? (Easy literal questions get discussions off to a good start.)
2. What is another way of saying “1-1/2 half bath home”? (The ad is not clear but one could assume that there is one full bathroom, including shower, and a more limited bathroom in another part of the house.)
3. What is another way of saying “a nice level lot”?
4. Why might having a “nice level lot” be important to some customers?
5. Who is Sandy?
6. Why do they refer to the real estate agent as “Sandy” and not by more formal names?
7. What is another way of saying, “showing” the house?
8. What will Sandy do when she is “showing” the house?
9. Is Maple Grove a good name for an area where houses are located? Why or why not?
10. Are the names of streets and the name of the subdivision important when developers plan an area for building homes?
11. Why is it important to study the community where a house is located before buying a house in that community? How do communities differ in our nation?
12. What services are important in the community? (Example: How does a potential homebuyer find out about community services such as trash collection, firefighters, police, and schools? How do we find out how much our services will cost us in taxes, etc?)
13. What do community leaders do to make life better in the community? (Invite a county commissioner, mayor, school board member or other official(s) to visit the class and tell about what they do in the community.)
14. What is the cost of this home? Can everyone afford to purchase this home? Why or why not? Can I rent this home?
15. What about other types of homes? (Condos, apartments, mobile homes, multi-family living, etc.)
16. Why do urban neighborhoods have more apartments and fewer homes with large land areas?
17. How does climate affect the types of homes where people live?
18. What causes neighborhoods to change over time?
19. How has the increase in the availability of automobiles changed neighborhoods?
20. What is mass or public transit? Why is mass transit important in large urban areas?

Comprehension questions can generate lively discussions with Kindergarten-3 students concerning specific real estate advertising while encouraging comprehension competencies in general and in the social contexts of neighborhoods. Young children can discuss the concepts of home, shelter, needs, wants, advertising, and the many ways in which people live. The booklets are a resource for endless comprehension development possibilities. We have obtained real estate booklets from a variety of geographic locations in an effort to focus on the geography theme of People, Places, and Environments. Using the NCSS theme of People, Places, and Environments and the theme of Production, Distribution, and Consumption (2010) as a guide, students could compare the cost of similar types of houses in two differing geographic areas and consider why the purchase prices of the homes are so varied. Students could participate in discussions about access to shelter, supply and demand of some geographic areas, and revisit the ideas of shelter inequality in geographic areas.

**Art and Real Estate**

We use large 18” x 12” white paper and invite our young learners (Kindergarten-2) to create a reproduction of their own neighborhoods. We tear apart booklets and provide each student with a few pages of houses and black, green, and brown paper as well as other colorful paper scraps for constructing the neighborhood. The students have glue sticks, scissors, and crayons, or markers. The creation of their own neighborhood is an enjoyable and engaging activity providing what Weil (2011), mentioned above, and described as healthy variability. The students work intently and joyfully using their hands and minds to develop a neighborhood. The results are delightful expressions of art and awareness of concepts concerning neighborhoods. See Figures 1, 2, and 3.

*Figure 1. Materials.*
Conclusion

Integrating real estate content, vocabulary, and creative expression with powerful social studies understandings, can provide opportunities for learning that are both academically sound, relevant to real-world issues and challenges, and instill curiosity in young students. Such strategies can be modified to complement a wide variety of learning environments and purposes. An extensive international study of schools and other learning environments led Ripley (2013) to conclude that no matter where learning is undertaken there must be enjoyment, excitement, curiosity, and sense of community. We propose that the study of real estate as part of the social studies curriculum provides educators with the opportunity to create an atmosphere for learning for both literacy and social studies similar to that presented by Ripley.
References

Web-based Resources

### Appendix A

#### Real Estate Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apartment</th>
<th>Full Basement</th>
<th>One level living</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acreage</td>
<td>Full In-Law Suite</td>
<td>Open house</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affiliate Broker</td>
<td>Gated Community</td>
<td>Partially Wooded</td>
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<td>Amazing value</td>
<td>Gourmet Kitchen</td>
<td>Pending</td>
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<td>Apartment</td>
<td>Hardwood floors</td>
<td>Plaza</td>
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<td>Building</td>
<td>Incredible offer</td>
<td>Pool</td>
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<tr>
<td>Auction</td>
<td>Inside city limits</td>
<td>Ranch</td>
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<td>Bank Owned</td>
<td>Investment</td>
<td>Realtors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cathedral style</td>
<td>Just Completed</td>
<td>Reasonably priced</td>
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<tr>
<td>City Water Access</td>
<td>Lakefront Luxury</td>
<td>Reduced</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>Level Lot</td>
<td>Remodeled</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condo</td>
<td>Listed</td>
<td>Rent</td>
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<td>Country living</td>
<td>Maintenance free</td>
<td>Rustic style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cul-de-sac</td>
<td>Make an offer</td>
<td>Screened porch</td>
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<td>Drastic Reduction</td>
<td>Mature apple trees</td>
<td>Se Habla Espanol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>Sold</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farm Estates</td>
<td>Motivated seller</td>
<td>Spacious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fenced Backyard</td>
<td>Mountain Views</td>
<td>Split Foyer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financing</td>
<td>Nature Lover</td>
<td>Subdivision</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fixer upper</td>
<td>New Listing</td>
<td>Updated Condo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreclosure</td>
<td>Newly remodeled</td>
<td>Utilities Included</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foyer</td>
<td>New Roof 2012</td>
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### Appendix B

**Additional Stories about Home**


Author Bios

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