



Project PLACE (Project-Approach to Literacy and Civic Engagement)

A collaboration with Nell Duke from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, and Anne-Lise Halvorsen from Michigan State University

Project PLACE, led by Nell Duke of the University of Michigan and Anne-Lise Halvorsen of Michigan State University and funded by the Spencer Foundation and the George Lucas Educational Foundation, is a randomized controlled trial investigating the impact of project-based instruction that integrates social studies and literacy on second-grade students in schools in low-socioeconomic (SES) settings. Both social studies and content literacy are neglected in U.S. primary-grade education, particularly in low-SES school settings. In a previous study, we found that using a project-based approach to simultaneously address both of these domains resulted in statistically significant growth in reading (Cohen's $d = 1.31$), writing (Cohen's $d = .52$), and social studies (Cohen's $d = .85$) (Halvorsen et al., 2012)¹. Further, the approach rendered statistically insignificant (it essentially closed) the achievement gap between second-grade children in very low SES and very high SES school districts on standards-based social studies and content literacy assessments. However, only a small number of classrooms were involved in the study and the approach/curriculum we developed only addressed half of the Michigan Social Studies Grade-Level Content Expectations for second grade.

In the current study, Drs. Duke and Halvorsen developed two additional project-based units, which has resulted in a curriculum that addresses almost all the Michigan Social Studies Grade-Level Content Expectations (including economics, geography, history, and civics and government) and a range of Common Core State Standards related to content literacy. Each unit follows a project-based approach, wherein the children work over time to address a real-world problem or opportunity that has meaning to the students' lives beyond school and that involves an audience for their work beyond the classroom teacher. For example, in the history unit, each student creates a set of historical postcards about the local community that could be sold or given to community members. In the civics and government unit, students write and present a proposal to a local city government official to improve a local park or public space in ways that will enhance its value and use for community members.

The research will test the impact of our project-based units in 48 classrooms, assigned at random in within-school pairs to the experimental ($N=24$) or comparison ($N=24$) group. Teachers in the experimental group participate in an initial professional-development workshop, subsequent follow-up workshops, coaching, and detailed lesson plans for all four project-based units, which comprise a total of 80 lessons. Comparison teachers use their regular social studies curriculum, with a promise to teach 80 lessons over the course of the year. The study involves systematic observation of classrooms in both the experimental and the comparison group and administration of pre and post standards-aligned measures of social studies, reading, writing, and a Likert-scale motivation survey about literacy instruction, social studies instruction, project-based learning, and integrated instruction.

The study is also comparing the growth of the experimental group students with the growth of students in four very high-socioeconomic-status classrooms in which teachers taught their regular social studies curriculum (rather than our units). Analyses will primarily involve hierarchical linear modeling and descriptions of common patterns of practice in experimental and comparison group classrooms.

¹Halvorsen, A., Duke, N. K., Brugar, K. A., Block, M. K., Strachan, S. L., Berka, M. B., and Brown, J. M. (2012). Narrowing the Achievement Gap in Second-Grade Social Studies and Content Area Literacy: The Promise of a Project-Based Approach. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 40, 198-229.