

International Issues, High-Stakes Testing,  
and Border Pedagogy  
Social Studies at Border High School

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### Introduction

A recently constructed border wall stands within walking distance of Border High School (BHS) and was created to impede the flow of people, goods, fauna, and contraband from Mexico into the United States (U.S.). The reality, however, is that this geopolitical border is fluid, allowing connections between sociopolitical zones (Romo & Chavez, 2006). As posited by Romo and Chavez, "The geopolitical border between Mexico and the United States represents the beginnings, endings, and blending of languages, cultures, communities, and countries. It also reflects the complexity, juxtaposition, and intersection of identities, economies, and social and educational issues" (p. 142). Gruenewald (2003) noted an intimate connection between individuals and their inhabited space and that pedagogy of place can be a means of examining this relationship. Pedagogy of place, in turn, is linked to critical theory and considers borders as dynamic inhabited regions rather than divided, disparate locales divided by a political borderline (Reyes & Garza, 2005).

The researchers selected BHS, which is in close proximity to the international border, as a site to uncover how social studies teachers

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and school administrators address U.S. international issues in classroom discussions. Within this setting, border pedagogy served as a framework for examining the work of educators on the U.S.-Mexico border. Specifically, the following question guided the researchers' investigation: To what extent and how are U.S. international policies addressed in social studies classrooms?

### ***Border High School***

In the school year 2008-2009, BHS qualified as a Title I school based on its numbers of students who qualified for a free or reduced-cost lunch, Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC), or Medicaid. At the time of the study, BHS had a student population of 2,801 and a 15.4:1 student-to-teacher ratio. Of the total school population, 1,417 (50.6%) were male, and 1,384 (49.4%) were female. The student population was 97.5% Hispanic, and 85.5% were eligible for a free lunch or reduced-cost lunch (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Additionally, 94% of BHS students met the state standard for social studies scores on the state standardized exam (Border School District, 2009).

The 2011 results of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKs) indicated that 97% of the students passed the social studies component of the state exam, and 33% enrolled in and passed a pre-advanced placement, advanced placement, or dual credit course. Based on a combination of test score results and graduation, dropout, and attendance rates, the state of Texas has given the school its highest possible designation, "recognized."

## Theoretical Framework

### ***Border Pedagogy***

In this study, the dynamics of what occurs in border classrooms was considered through the lens of border pedagogy (Flores & Clark, 2002; Garza, 2007; Giroux, 1991; Reyes & Garza, 2005; Romo & Chavez, 2006). Giroux (1991) stated that border pedagogy draws upon diverse cultural resources that promote new identities within existing configurations of power. Border pedagogy can be used to teach students the skills of critical thinking and debate as well as develop self-identity with regard to their sense of place, both locally and globally. In the context of this study, border pedagogy is put forward a means of providing students with better contemplation and clarification of their positions in a region that crosses the international border of two countries (Flores & Clark, 2002).

Embedded within the discourses of border pedagogy are the goals of

transformative education (Garza, 2007; Giroux, 1991; Romo & Chavez, 2006). According to Romo and Chavez:

Border pedagogy encourages tolerance, ethical sophistication, and openness. In short, border pedagogy works to decolonize and revitalize learning and teaching to promote liberty and justice for all. Border pedagogy particularly engages K-12 students in multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages to help them construct their own narratives and histories, and revise democracy through sociocultural negotiation. (p. 143)

The goals of border pedagogy coincide with the educational goals of promoting literate, critical, and independent learners (Reyes & Garza, 2005). As educators strive to meet the needs of English language learners on the U.S.-Mexico border, who have distinctive family traditions and cultural identities, their work has implications for social studies education outside of geopolitical border regions.

Garza (2007) examined changes in border educators after cultural exchanges that engaged teachers in systemic dialogue and physical visits to schools on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Garza found that conversations among educators on both sides of the California-Mexico border area promoted an interconnectedness among educators in the borderlands. Participants in Garza's study learned through a transnational dialogue that they could inform and strengthen each other's educational practices. Educators reconsidered how Mexican influences affected local U.S. schools.

### ***The Border***

Martínez (1994) and Staudt and Spener (1998) argue that borders are spaces where diverse and contradictory elements converge. They view borders as places that divide, unite, repel, attract, segregate, and integrate, while promoting association, identity, trust, separation, exclusion, domination, and exploitation. Accordingly, a border does not simply divide two countries. "Instead, the border region should be viewed as an energetic, constantly changing area where new possibilities are always on the horizon" (Flores & Clark 2002, p. 9).

Fuentes and Peña (2010) identified the US-Mexico border as a location of multiple transnational urban communities that are highly productive in terms of the global economy. Martínez (1994) defined the U.S.-Mexico border as an interdependent borderlands region, whereby border regions in both countries are symbiotically linked. In this case, the symbiotic link is economic. While the economic link may be one of domination-subordination, it still ties the two regions. Moreover, educational systems on both sides of the border are influenced by standardization in the global

marketplace. According to Staudt and Méndez (2010), the standardization of education on both sides of the border through the standardized testing movement has been influenced directly by pressures to compete in global markets. These “standardization policies construct a large class of failing students who drop out of school” on the U.S. side of the border (Staudt & Méndez, 2010, p. 191). The majority of these marginalized students are Hispanic, English language-learning students who are of low socioeconomic status.

Martínez (1994) provided typologies of people who live in the border regions, “borderlanders.” Generally, borderlanders perceive themselves as different from citizens who reside in the interior, and those in the interior perceive borderlanders as different as well. According to Martínez, those who identified as Mexican Americans also generally tended to be transnational, and Mexican is typically a national typology. Transnationals are bilingual, bicultural, and have frequent contact with those on the other side of the border. Nationals on the periphery are typically monolingual, monocultural, “and their ties to foreigners or to countrymen who are racially, ethnically, or culturally different from themselves are slight or nonexistent” (Martínez, 1994, p. 62).

Students, as borderlanders, go back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico on a daily basis. These students are best served by schools that are responsive to their needs. However, such responsiveness is not always the case due to state regulations that standardize schooling (Necochea & Cline, 2005). Garza and Reyes (2005), in a study of a partnership between two border universities, one in California and one in Mexico, found four major themes: (a) a need for a culturally relevant and critical learning curriculum to meet the unique needs of students in the border areas; (b) mutual concerns among teachers from both sides of the border; (c) teachers’ needing more opportunities for cultural and educational exchange; and (d) border pedagogy initiatives by the two universities as affording educators an important forum for exchanging information and ideas that prove beneficial in their classrooms.

Zhao, Lin, and Hoge (2007) maintain that there is a need for further comparative and transnational studies on how well students know each other’s histories and cultures. In this regard, neither US students nor teachers are well prepared in global education, and, thus, it is important to foster their knowledge of other nations and cultures.

## Method

The researchers employed a research methodology based on Stake’s (2000) model of a substantive case study through which naturalistic

phenomena are examined. Naturalistic generalizations develop through the recognition of similarities of objects and issues within a context and “by sensing the natural covariations of happenings” (Stake, 2000, p. 22). Accordingly, the researchers reflected on impressions, data, and records at the observed site to determine and reflect on outcomes of the study. The researchers served as participant-observers and developed interpretive explanations of observations, interviews, and archives (Creswell, 1998). The researchers recorded and transcribed face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Data were categorized and the frequency of the categories noted. Additionally, the researchers developed interpretive explanations of documents. To provide an analysis of the overall case study, the researchers took into consideration the recommendations of Yin (2003) for considering local meanings and foreshadowed meanings within their context. Our work was highly reflective, with border pedagogy (Giroux, 1991) as a framework for uncovering the contextual conditions relevant to the phenomena (Yin, 2003).

The study focused on how teachers taught, discussed, and addressed U.S. international policies in classrooms. For trustworthiness, interpretations of the data were clarified by paraphrasing or restating what the researchers believed to be the intended positions of participants, as well as verifying that the interpretations were reflective of the participants’ true sentiments in the responses, either orally with the interviewees or through online communications.

Eight instructors and two administrators participated in the study. The social studies curriculum director at BHS invited eight instructors, who each had at least three years of experience, to be interviewed. At least one teacher participant represented each social studies course taught at the high school. All selected teachers agreed to participate in the study. The BHS principal and the social studies curriculum administrator also were interviewed. In total, there were two females (one Latina and one White) and eight males (five Latino, two White, and one Black).

Participants were asked four main questions:

1. How are US international polices or affairs discussed in your classrooms?
2. Have you noticed a change in tone in classroom discussions since the 2008 election and the administrative change from Bush to Obama?
3. What sentiments have your students shared with respect to US international policies?
4. How do your students discuss the current war on terrorism?

Data analysis followed what Glesne (2011) refers to as thematic analysis, whereby the data were read many times in search of emerging themes as well as categories and subcategories. This also corresponds with Creswell's (2007) description of the data analysis spiral, wherein the analysis process is iterative and includes multiple coding phases. Initial data analysis began during the interviews themselves (Glesne, 2011). Themes emerged during the interviews and follow-up questions elicited more information on the emergent themes. A team of two researchers independently coded the data. One researcher used NVivo8 software to code the data, while the other researcher used hard copies of the transcripts and notes to highlight and sort codes. Upon completion of the first round of coding, the research team met and reached consensus on which codes to use. The researchers recoded the entire body of data and organized the coded data into major themes or categories. After member checking with participants, the researchers also employed counterexamples of major themes to ensure that the researchers' interpretations were trustworthy (Maxwell, 2010).

A thematic coding procedure was used to develop themes and sub-themes in the body of interview data with the 10 participants. Coding captured all the data related to the initial interview questions. The major themes that emerged from coding were: (a) U.S. international policies, (b) war and terrorism, (c) border issues, and (d) pedagogical concerns.

## Results

### *U.S. International Policies*

A pattern emerged whereby educators indicated that U.S. international policies should be further addressed in the state curriculum. Although students were extremely interested in border issues, the curriculum in social studies courses fell short of sufficiently addressing the impact of U.S. international policies on countries outside of Mexico. Nonetheless, educators in the study indicated that there was considerable discussion on U.S. and Mexico affairs. Educators maintained that students, while interested in international policies, needed the background knowledge to be able to further support their opinions (Table 1).

Educators also expressed concern about the lack of depth for most topics, including issues related to U.S. foreign policies and subsequent repercussions. Participants noted that attention to a prescriptive state social studies curriculum and the attendant time constraints often led to a superficial addressing of U.S. international policies. Educators noted that the curriculum is driven by high-stakes testing, which is used to determine whether a public high school is considered successful, and

teaching the mandated curriculum cuts into the time available to discuss certain topics in depth. According to one teacher:

The TEKs [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards] that help develop our curriculum barely touch on international politics or international diplomacy. It really focuses on domestic issues in almost every sense. As an example, under the [state] standards, we don't discuss the events leading up to World War II or the dropping of the atomic bomb.

Common topics for high school discussions included the federal government's stimulus package, job losses due to current economic situations, and the oppositional stances of the nation's major political parties. Some educators noted, however, that students are afforded the opportunity to discuss current U.S. domestic policies but that the U.S. role in international affairs receives little attention.

Educators also observed that current international discussions often focus on the U.S. and Mexico, given the border location and student population of the high school. Further, students' positions are often presented from nationalistic perspectives, either pro-U.S. or pro-Mexico, and the nationalism depends on whether the student was born in the U.S. or Mexico. For instance, those students born in the U.S. share the

**Table 1**  
*Frequency of Response (N = 10)*

Response	n
1. Students were eager to discuss border issues, including immigration law, drug cartel violence, and U.S.-Mexico international policies.	10
2. The present system of high-stakes, standardized tests reduces the emphasis on discussing U.S. international policies.	10
3. Students benefited from international comparisons that often focus on the U.S. and Mexico.	9
4. Discussions of Mexico's drug cartel violence took precedence over discussions of international terrorism.	9
5. Classroom discussions should center more on the U.S. role in international relations and events.	9
6. The state social studies curriculum should better address U.S. international policies.	7
7. Student opinions of international policies need further support.	7
8. There was more time for discussion of current U.S. domestic policies than for the U.S. role in international affairs.	3

U.S. viewpoint for the U.S. War with Mexico, while students who are more recent immigrants from Mexico share anti-U.S. sentiments on the U.S. War with Mexico. Some teachers noticed that students were highly engaged when provided the opportunity to discuss comparative perspectives with international exchange students. Moreover, they felt that students benefited from using technology to obtain information from international sources. Educators stated that some students acted defensively when they learned of animosity toward the U.S. government in other countries. The general consensus among educators was that the curriculum could and should include broader discussions of international perspectives in addition to U.S. viewpoints, including further discourse on the impact of U.S. international policies.

### ***War and Terrorism***

Educators indicated that students were more engaged in discussions of cartel drug violence in Mexico than in discussions of the root causes of terrorist attacks. One participant stated that students “saw everything that had to do with terrorism as Bush policy.” Overall, teacher observations indicated uncertainty about why the September 11, 2001 (9/11) attacks took place, who participated in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and why there were still limitations placed on travel and other freedoms. Educators put forth that several students believed that the War in Iraq was an attempt to punish the terrorists who were involved with the 9/11 attacks. One teacher took note of students who asked, “So, really, why did we go to Iraq?” Another educator reported that students had difficulty understanding the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, as the conflicts were not “total wars,” and that students felt disaffected, unless they had a family member serving in the military. Teachers reported that students expressed concerns related to the high costs of waging wars simultaneously, whereas the general economic picture remained gloomy. A teacher maintained there was a great deal of “independent thinking” among Advanced Placement students, but discussions of Afghanistan were “totally off the radar.” Students were more concerned with whether the government was providing needed domestic services. Three educators specifically mentioned the wars not receiving the television coverage of the Vietnam War; the educators put forth that high school students without personal and family connections to the current wars did not “feel it that much on an everyday basis.”

Students engaged in discussions of border violence, including the purchase of large caches of weapons in the U.S., as a possible form of terrorism. Students argued that such realities were of more immediate concern to them than were discussions of ongoing wars on another conti-

ment. There also were questions about why there was a bigger crackdown on immigration on the U.S.-Mexico border. Much of the planning for the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place on the Canadian side of the U.S. border, as opposed to Mexico. Nonetheless, students, as borderlanders, argued that they became the targets of anti-immigration sentiments that were under the guise of providing better security for the U.S.

### ***Border Issues***

All educators noted that their students were preoccupied with border issues, including immigration law, drug cartel violence, and U.S.-Mexico international policies, which stood in contrast to the student apathy noted toward U.S. war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Administrators and teachers stated that students wanted clarification on Arizona's most recent immigration legislation and proposed amnesty laws. Many students and their families were affected directly by the criminal activity related to ongoing violence in Mexico. Students posed questions such as: Are drug cartel operatives terrorists? Why doesn't the U.S. government get more involved in the Mexican government's fight against the cartels? Why aren't we doing more to support those in Mexico who want to see an end to the drug cartel violence? Why does the U.S. military get involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet stay out of the present conflict in Mexico?

Ultimately, discussions moved toward US-Mexico relations on the border. Educators reported that students were concerned about the possibility that drug cartel violence would spread across the border.

### ***Pedagogical Concerns***

Educators noted that students brought outside knowledge to their classrooms and that such knowledge was influenced by various media representations. In particular, border violence issues were influenced by media images put forth by either English or Spanish media. Participants added that students brought negative images of U.S. international policies but often repeated what they had heard in the community and did not understand the historical, social, or economic context of these policies.

Educators reported on several teaching and pedagogical approaches that produced better analyses of issues among their students. Of particular note were the following: observations followed by directed question-and-answer sessions of non-stereotypical visual images, including diverse religious and international populations; debate on the pros and cons of the U.S. role in Mexico and other parts of Latin America; putting themselves in someone else's shoes (either nationally or internationally); and written analyses of U.S. corporate, mainstream media international news stories.

A majority of educators recommended more classroom discussion of the U.S. role in international relations and events. All of the teachers and administrators reported that the amount of time spent discussing the impact of U.S. policies was limited because time had to be set aside to teach curriculum mandated by the system of accountability associated with standardized testing.

### Discussion

A limitation of this case study was its small scope. BHS is a secondary school with a record of improvement on state assessment, school attendance, extracurricular activities, and other tangible and intangible measures of school academic and social success. Other studies should be conducted with schools in diverse border settings to establish patterns among educators and schools on the U.S.-Mexico border.

In this study BHS educators played an important role in the attainment of “recognized” high school status and that BHS fares much better than most of its peer institutions in standardized test score results (Border District Website, 2009). The principal believes that state-mandated test scores are not the most important aspect of education, yet acknowledged the high-stakes nature of these examinations. Teachers and students alike felt restricted by the demands of achieving distinguished test scores; yet, they were fully aware of the negative repercussions of low test scores. Accordingly, the BHS principal put forth that student success on the high stakes examinations was a prerequisite for graduation from high school and students who did well on their tests were allowed to pursue post-secondary education. Administrators in the school district were held accountable, and their job security depended on high test scores and test score improvement. The principal also felt pressure from community leaders who made it known publicly that maintaining the high school’s state designation as a “recognized” high school reflected on the community as a whole.

With its improved test scores, BHS made the state’s adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the past three years. Meeting AYP meant that the school had additional funds; without the additional funds, it would have been difficult to provide the additional technology used in the classrooms and the computer lab. The additional funding was also used for professional development and the tutoring of students. Thus, the expenditures needed to maintain the high school’s high standing were contingent upon maintaining or improving the school’s test scores. Essentially, schools that showed improvement in other areas related to their student population’s needs, including performance-based assessment other than the state’s

single measure tests, were penalized for underperforming because of their students' low scores on the state's standardized tests.

Despite the success and high standing of BHS in the community, participants in this study questioned whether the state curriculum and state-sponsored assessments could better reflect the social studies knowledge that students possess or have the potential to demonstrate in classrooms. Prior to participating in this study, many BHS educators had little time to reflect on their roles as key individuals in the lives of border region students. In essence, their preoccupation and reliance on high-stakes test scores limited educators' opportunities for a border pedagogy that could translate beyond the successful standardized test preparation. An increased focus on a pedagogy of place could provide BHS students with a consideration of the ever-changing ebb-and-flow spaces they occupy. According to Gruenewald (2003), "place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well-being of the social and ecological places people actually inhabit" (p. 3). Moreover, educators reported that students sought to engage in dialogue with their transnational peers but lacked sufficient opportunities to do so.

Students at BHS are in a unique position to develop international skills, but they have not been allowed a pedagogy of place to do so. Students who better understand how they are uniquely positioned and situated can apply their new knowledge obtained from transnational lessons. In this respect, these students feel more empowered to respond to challenges in dynamic settings, including situations that develop far from their border setting.

Educators also benefit from broader understandings of educators' roles and students' perceptions in a binational community (Cashman & Rubio, 2011). Part of the charge for border educators should be to examine critically the policies that separate individuals on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and to understand more about the "wedges that educational and power systems push between children and quality educational experiences" (Hampton, Liguori, & Rippberger, 2003, p. 9). Through a pedagogy of place, we can identify, analyze, evaluate, and apply new understandings to a larger world with its present day misunderstandings and schemes. In this context, the border serves as a metaphor for what is transpiring in educational settings worldwide.

Educators at BHS believe that there is much that can be accomplished when they are afforded opportunities to discuss the impact of U.S. policies and decision-making through the lens of border pedagogy. As Giroux (1991) noted, border pedagogy works to "further create borderlands in which the diverse cultural resources allow for the fashioning of new identities

within existing configurations of power” (p. 28). Further, according to Romo and Chavez (2006), border pedagogy “works to decolonize and revitalize learning and teaching and engages students in multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages to help them construct their own narratives and histories, and revise democracy through sociocultural negotiation” (p. 143). Moreover, border pedagogy can be used by decision-makers, administrators, and classroom teachers to broaden perspectives and better understand and develop comparative social studies education. For example, in Glenn’s (2007) study of government-sponsored educational systems in Denmark, France, and Spain, accountability is conducted through a combination of measures, as opposed to a singular high-stakes assessment. Darling-Hammond and McCloskey (2011) conducted studies in Finland, Sweden, Australia, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom and found that the “integration of curriculum, assessment, and instruction in a well-developed teaching and learning system creates the foundation for much more equitable and productive outcomes” (p. 344). Equitable outcomes stand in stark contrast to the prevailing U.S. pattern of recognition for a few schools and reprimands for others.

Reyes and Garza (2005) recommend the design of a flexible, binational curriculum for students. The development of such a curriculum would require those who live far from international borders to share in the work of becoming border-crossers, or individuals who are able to traverse ideological boundaries. Border pedagogy educators and their students learn from international political, historical, social, and educational narratives as well as reflect on and develop enriched understandings of strengths and weaknesses within US educational systems (Cashman & Rubio, 2011). According to Necochea and Cline (2005), border pedagogy stands in stark contrast to a system that promotes social Darwinism and categorizes students and teachers in a way that exacerbates societal inequities. Left unchecked, schools become complicit with the government in this process of social stratification. Democracy, social justice, and equity should be “integral components of schools in diverse society that purports to provide opportunities for all children, including those in the borderlands” (Necochea & Cline, 2005, p. 131).

Border pedagogy contributes to the process of developing richer understandings of the impact of U.S. policies. The U.S.-Mexico border, with its potential for border pedagogy in its institutions and cross-cultural exchanges, serves as a worthy location to begin to develop such enriched learning outcomes.

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