Students in UH 333 chess in education course learn the academic and social benefits the game holds for children while teaching it in schools.

Visitors to Tuscaloosa Magnet Elementary School are regularly amazed at the scene: more than 20 first and second graders gathered around chess boards, carefully planning out moves in the age-old game and clearly enjoying themselves.

At each board, a college-student coach looks on, providing guidance, encouragement and a quick smile.

At the principal’s request, all children at Tuscaloosa Magnet Elementary School are learning to play the game. “I am completely sold on chess integrated into the school day now,” said principal Jeanne Burkhalter, citing the game’s role in improving math and logic skills.

Extensive educational research shows chess improves not only math and reasoning abilities, but also reading and English scores, critical thinking and concentration skills, general intelligence, self-esteem and self-control. Since gender, ethnic background and socioeconomic status are irrelevant to the game, chess brings together diverse groups of children, helping them build friendships they might not have formed otherwise, said Dr. Rose Marie Stutts, educational director for Freedom Chess Academy, a small nonprofit offering free chess lessons, and a consultant for the Every Move Counts program.

Christian Smith, a junior finance major who taught first and second graders, said he realized through the experience how quickly young minds can learn. “In class we would read material on the effects chess lessons can have on children and we could witness some of the results weekly,” Smith said. “Characteristics such as sportsmanship, analytical thinking, competitiveness and thinking out one’s decisions would be reflected in my students.”

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In conjunction with Freedom Chess Academy, CESR has held a tournament at the end of each semester, allowing children in the program to compete against others in the Tuscaloosa area.

In April 2011, Every Move Counts students won a tournament against three other groups.

“Chess club helped improve my sportsmanship in P.E. and other games,” says Maya Samuels-Fair, a student at Tuscaloosa Magnet Middle School. “It’s also a fun thing to do with my dad on the weekends. Sometimes I even beat him!”

Maya’s mother, Tana Samuels-Fair, said chess class is the highlight of Maya’s week. “It’s her favorite thing,” Samuels-Fair said. “It’s really helped her with strategy skills; She’s absorbed everything the UA students have taught her.”

Kristi Thomson, principal of Tuscaloosa Magnet Middle School, sees many benefits for her students, including the chance to witness acts of service by UA students. “The children learn to give back to the community as they observe volunteers from UA sharing their talents and time with the school,” Thomson said.

To learn more about Every Move Counts, visit cesr.ua.edu or contact the Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility at cesr@ua.edu or 205-348-6493.

Matt Tucker, a senior biology major who participated in the inaugural semester of the course and now helps lead the initiative, “Every Move Counts gives me the opportunity to share the same passion with truly outstanding kids. Watching them, it’s easy to see how much they enjoy playing the game. But it’s when they get quiet and focus on the board that I know we’ve accomplished something.”

The program has grown exponentially since Spring 2010, when it began with three UA students teaching chess to 12 sixth graders. In Fall 2011, 25 students are teaching chess to approximately 220 students at an elementary school, middle school and high school. At the principal’s request, all children at Tuscaloosa Magnet Elementary School are learning to play the game.

Every Move Counts: A Chess in Education Project, a nationally unique, rapidly growing service-learning initiative of the Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility. In addition to reading and discussing the academic and social benefits of chess and its role in education reform, UA students develop lesson plans and spend one to three hours each week teaching chess to children in schools.

“Through the game of chess, my brother shared his passion for logic and critical thinking with me at a very early age,” said Matt Tucker, a senior biology major who participated in the inaugural semester of the course and now helps lead the initiative. “Every Move Counts gives me the opportunity to share the same passion with truly outstanding kids. Watching them, it’s easy to see how much they enjoy playing the game. But it’s when they get quiet and focus on the board that I know we’ve accomplished something.”

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Steve Black, director of the Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility, said of the Every Move Counts program. “Chess is increasingly popular among college students, and the proven educational benefits of the game for school-age children are remarkable. Bringing these two groups together provides advantages for both: through mentoring young chess players, college students establish a tie with the community while teaching a game they enjoy, and children have fun while reaping educational and social rewards.”