

Honors students learn about the educational and social benefits of chess while teaching the game to children in Tuscaloosa public schools.

BY ERIN MOSLEY

Twice a week, University of Alabama students teach chess lessons to Tracie Barnes' class of second graders at Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools – Elementary. Barnes says she has seen improvement in the children's critical-thinking skills since they started learning the game. "They've gotten better at everything from thinking about strategies to getting along with other people. They have good sportsmanship," Barnes says.

Barnes' class is one of 12 in which UA students taught once- or twice-weekly chess lessons during the 2016-17 academic year. Through the Every Move Counts initiative and UH 333 Chess in Education course, 90 students worked with approximately 215 children at Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools – Elementary and Middle, Alberta School of Performing Arts, Arcadia Elementary School and Oak Hill School.

Educational research shows chess improves problem-solving and con-



A second grader at Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools – Elementary concentrates on his next move.

centration abilities as well as math, reading and English scores. The game also instills life skills such as perseverance, responsibility and planning.

Chess is a deep game because the different pieces on the board can work independently and together, says Hayden Martz, a sophomore from

Reardan, Wash., double majoring in electrical engineering and physics. "So it really develops your critical-thinking and analyzing skills and your ability to synthesize solutions," he says.

Since gender, ethnic background and socioeconomic status are irrelevant to the game, chess brings together diverse groups of children. "Children end up working with others they may not have," says Merrill Flowers, coordinator of Every Move Counts. "It levels the playing field. There is no bias in chess."

Flowers says the Every Move Counts initiative is popular with both kids and college students. "We've seen a lot of success," she says. "The students love to come back."

In class at UA, students read about and discuss the academic and social benefits of chess and its emerging role in U.S. education systems. They also develop lesson plans and spend at least two hours each week mentoring and teaching chess to children in nearby schools. Students involved in earlier semesters of the program return as program leaders through an honors independent-study course.

Martz says during a typical class visit, he helps second graders set up chess boards and teaches as they play each other. He tailors his lessons to the kids' ability levels. "On Thursday, for example, one of the kids I was working with was better than the other," he says. "I had to focus more on developing one student while at the same time challenging the other student."

Cathryn, a second grader at Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools, says she has gotten much better at chess while participating in Every Move Counts. "I learned a bunch of special moves like the Stonewall Approach," she says.

The relationships children form with the UA students are important as well, says Minda Paxton, principal of Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools – Elementary, and help motivate and prepare the kids to attend college.



UA student Edwin Randall coaches a third grader at Alberta School of Performing Arts. photo by Dysen Neeb

Seth Hayes, a freshman from Rockford, Ill., majoring in mathematics, says he joined Every Move Counts because he enjoys chess and was looking forward to sharing his love of the game with kids. "There's a lot of privilege in being able to pursue higher education, and I've learned that it's important to use your past experiences to help others who may not have the same advantages in life," Hayes says.

Encouragement and compliments can have a big impact on some children, Hayes says. While playing a child who was despondent, he went over tips he usually gives kids when they are trying to decide on a move. "She eventually made a move that really pressured me in the game," he says. "When I responded with 'Wow, that's a good move,' her disposition was completely different. She seemed to play with twice the confidence she had before."

In addition to leading classes in schools, UA students involved in Every Move Counts host a Tuscaloosa-

area chess match each fall for children in the program and others in West Alabama to come together and experience competitive play. Students also hold two chess festivals for children who complete a year with the Every Move Counts program at Tuscaloosa Magnet Schools and Alberta School of Performing Arts.

The student-led structure of Every Move Counts facilitates expansion of the program and gives students an ownership stake in the initiative, Flowers says.

"Every year has gotten better and better," Paxton says. "There are lesson plans, strategies and steps. It's very organized and very well managed. I hope this continues for a long time to come."

Every Move Counts is a nationally unique service-learning initiative of the UA Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility. To learn more about the program and course, visit cesr.ua.edu or contact the Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility at cesr@ua.edu or 205-348-6493.

MAKING EVERY MOVE COUNT

