“Diggin’ It! Archaeological Education for Today’s Youth”

By: Anna Surovic

Department of Anthropology

Abstract:

Early archaeological education can help young people develop critical thinking skills, understand conservation needs, and appreciate cultural diversity in a way that the current educational system rarely allows. Through an examination of research previously done on archaeological public outreach and a discussion of the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) Legacy Summer Camp, this paper will illustrate how instructing young people on archaeological findings, issues and practices is an overall benefit to their education. This will lead to more people willing to financially and intellectually invest in archaeological research.

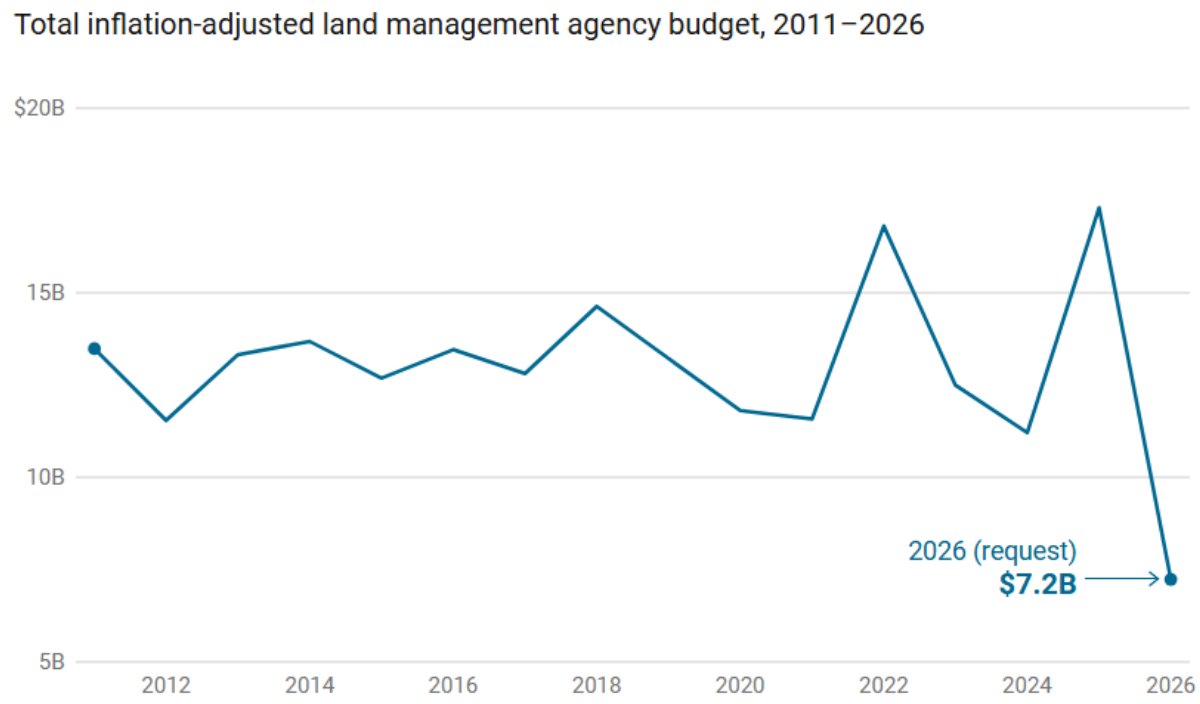
Introduction

One of the foremost concerns of the modern age is preparing the next generation to contend with the issues they may face in the future. Parents and teachers alike work tirelessly to prepare their children for the challenges of life and must hope that these efforts do enough to make the chaos of life more manageable and understandable. Although these efforts do a lot to form children into functional, knowledgeable adults, there are some undeniable gaps in many a young person's education: in the development of their critical and creative thinking skills, their understanding for and care of historical sites and cultural heritage, and in their knowledge of and curiosity for their cultural history and that of those around them.

Critical and creative thinking skills are some of the most important abilities one can learn, and yet, it seems more and more that these skills are not being taught. Our truly unprecedented times have yielded an untenable growth in the use of digital technology, most pertinent to our topic being the rapidly increasing use of Artificial Intelligence in the classroom. The rise of AI and other technologies built to make learning or studying easier has made people more reliant on these devices, and less capable of finding their own answers and making their own conclusions. Research has shown that people, particularly students, who learn to rely on AI for easy solutions are, after a time, trained not to push their minds to think harder, to train these cognitive "muscles" and make them stronger, but rather to rely on these easy shortcuts to "good enough" solutions (Shaji George et al. 2024; Zhai et al. 2024). Instead of taking the time and energy to gain the important mental abilities that allow people to reason, infer, or even create, the devices end up doing the labor, and the students gain nothing from the experience except a further reliance on technology (Shaji George et al. 2024). This has become a measurable impediment to children's education over the past thirty years (Zhai et al. 2024). The ingrained

reliance on technology will continue to impair the development of these skills if nothing is done to give children the opportunity to develop these skills.

Another important concept that children, and by extension, adults, ought to grasp is that we all ought to be caretakers of the past. In recent years, archaeologists have raised concerns about how landowners legally have the right to do, within certain legal limits, whatever they want to their land, including damaging any cultural materials or sites that might be found on such land (Rawashdeh 2017). The most punishment any of these landowners might get for such destruction is often a small fine, which, as one might imagine, does little to curtail such behavior (Rawashdeh 2017). Such disrespect for a site, or at least, such apathy towards potentially monumental finds in the face of profit, is not simply a problem for landowners or anyone who might just so happen to pull up a pot sherd from the ground. No, this problem has extended itself all the way to the highest seats of governance in America. The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has cut an incredible number of government programs and grants that allowed historical sites, museums, and educational centers of all stripes to host education programs, conduct research, and preserve the cultural history of America (Chhaya 2025). Without this money, these institutions are forced to terminate many of their efforts to educate the public and protect the past. When children are educated on how to care for the past, they grow up to become adults who appreciate and support the work done by researchers, conservators, and so many others to maintain these sites and tell others about them.



(Zeno and Rowland-Shea 2025)

A third element that is important for children is the ability to understand culture, both one's own and that of someone else. Today, it seems that people are more distant than ever. Between the devastation the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked on the social development of the youth and the increased reliance many people of all ages have on social media and the loss of spaces that were specifically for kids, it is no wonder that there exists a pervading sense of loneliness. In 2023, the Office of the Surgeon General (OSG) put out a guide entitled, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*. It draws attention to the negative health impacts such loneliness is having on people, including higher rates of heart disease, depression, and even suicide (Office of the Surgeon General (OSG) 2023). The book talks about the importance of community and building relationships, while particularly pointing out the need to "create diverse

ties among community members" (Office of the Surgeon General (OSG) 2023; pg. 48). A crucial part in creating such ties lies in our ability to understand others' perspectives, no matter how different from our own they might be. Teaching children about cultures different from their own allows them to connect to others more easily, making the forging of strong relationships, quite literally, child's play.

These ideas and skills are imperative to building a complete skill set for an adult, and archaeological education programs are a fantastic way of helping children learn them. From giving kids scenarios where they must infer the use or time of an artifact, to instilling a sense of stewardship for all archaeological sites, to acquainting children with cultures from around the world, archaeological educational programs can do much to help the children augment these skills. Numerous studies have shown such programs to be beneficial in engaging children in these skills (Erickson-Harvey 2016; Moe 2016). Instructing children in anthropology and archaeology, even briefly, aids in furthering their education by building critical thinking skills, growing their care and curiosity for archaeological sites, and helping them relate to people of other cultures and their own (Urpi 2021).

Case Studies:

With these concerns regarding the gaps in children's education in mind, now one must look at how archaeological outreach and education can support the efforts to address these gaps. As previously mentioned, a number of archaeological outreach programs have been lost as the DOGE-mandated budget cuts have forced many institutions to limit their public outreach. Looking at this, and with the proposed benefits in mind, one must ask: what has been lost? Is there a measurable impact that such programs have on children's education, or is it all just a waste? In response, one would only need to familiarize themselves with the research done

regarding archaeological outreach programs to know that these curriculum supplement programs, formal lectures, even summer camps all work to improve young people's minds. The act of illustrating that archaeological heritage education programs have value is one that, by its nature, relies on the study of existing and proposed programs.

An instance of other countries attempting to incorporate these types of educational initiatives to improve their programs can be seen in Spanish heritage education programs. A sample of archaeological sites and museums was selected for a descriptive study of the quality of their heritage education programs to see which practices were most effective (Urpi 2021). Of the museum-based programs studied, they all included various hands-on activities that allowed guests to forge a deeper connection with their heritage and understand how archaeological excavations work (Urpi 2021). A number of them even included curriculum for special needs classes, enabling greater access to this information (Urpi 2021). These institutions answer a need that basic school curriculum may not be able to meet, as the author writes,

> "In keeping with the idea of the museum as a vehicle for the development of personal identity… some institutions address needs that schools cannot fully satisfy. The National Archaeological Museum of Tarragona, for instance, chooses not to address curricular content and focus instead on skill development…Hands-on workshops allow the visitor to take a closer look at professional archaeology by applying the hypothetical-deductive method, which fosters the development of critical thinking… multidisciplinary activities employ methods of deduction, induction, interpretation, and manipulation. All of this promotes the understanding of the past, as well as individual active learning, interpersonal skills, and teamwork (Urpi, 2021; pg. 60-61)".

The variety of programs and resources has a beneficial impact on the attendees, allowing them to develop important skills, among which are critical thinking skills, beyond what a classroom alone would afford them.

In 2016, a study was done on the archaeological curriculum supplement program, Project Archaeology. The study aimed to show the efficacy of the program in teaching core archaeological concepts, such as site and artifact stewardship, critical thinking, pre-colonial

history, and cultural awareness (Moe 2016). Through a series of surveys of 15 classrooms before and after the program, the researchers saw a significant increase in children's understanding of how archaeologists ask and answer questions about the past (which uses critical thinking and an understanding of the scientific method), and an increase in feelings of personal responsibility regarding safeguarding archaeological sites and artifacts (Moe 2016). By adding an archaeological education to the curriculum, the children were able to augment their abilities in the previously mentioned areas of concern. These programs enforce the idea that the past is important and worth investigating and protecting, which is instrumental to the continued support of research, which in turn invites more educational programs.

This self-sustaining cycle requires a balance of researchers working in the field to create knowledge, and people outside the site knowing and caring enough about the site to continue providing resources to carry on with the work. An interesting example of this shows up in the article "Stories we tell: myths at the heart of 'community archaeology.'" In this article, the author records a series of anecdotes from various sources that show the importance of this loop. In the third anecdote, "It's Your History", a local councilman tried and failed to convince people to support his plans to set aside a section of land that had been found to be part of a historical battlefield (Carman 2011). While people had some knowledge of the historic battle, they did not have any local pride or protectiveness towards it, and so personal interests won out (Carman 2011). While we may never know how much would have been gained, financially or otherwise, from preserving this site, the loss of history can still be felt. What the public values as "heritage" is based on the process of turning a plot of land into a place of meaning, something sacred and important. This elevation needs the knowledge brought about by researchers, true, but without

people internalizing that knowledge, the cause for protecting heritage is lost, and with that loss, is a loss of this history to the generations that come after us.

Another great example of archaeological outreach programs improving children's education is apparent in the University of Texas at San Antonio's very own Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) Legacy Summer Camps. Some may wonder how effective summer camps really are at teaching children or influencing their behavior, but research has shown that these moments of learning and connection over the summer months can have a myriad of positive, lasting effects, including healthier habits, more emotional intelligence, and better learning outcomes (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine et al., 2019; Scott, 2019). So, knowing that summer camps can have a significant effect on the young people who attend them, one must question what benefits the Legacy Camps grant their young attendees. According to the camp website, the camps began in 1994, and they place emphasis on "teaching archaeological awareness to children and adults, and… preserving the rich cultural heritage of South Texas through public programs and events" (Center for Archaeological Research 2025). As a former intern who worked at these camps, I can wholeheartedly confirm that more than 30 years later, this mission continues to be carried out.

In my experiences with the Legacy Camp, I saw a marked improvement in critical thinking, site and artifact care, and cultural curiosity among the children. The camps themselves combined lectures with activities, which allowed the children to practice what they were learning in a hands-on manner. This combination allowed the kids to show off their skills in a variety of ways. In terms of increasing their critical thinking skills, I can remember the children as being rather hesitant to make predictions or inferences at the beginning of the class. They would not make suggestions about the artifacts or sites they learned about, relying on guidance from the

instructors for easy answers, but as the week went on, the kids learned to trust their instincts and build their own understanding of the objects and contexts they were examining. My favorite instance of this occurred every Thursday and Friday, in the dig boxes. The dig boxes activity involves a set of 3 or 4 sandboxes of various sizes, each with a unique concrete (and wood) feature at the base, and artifacts strewn throughout the sand. The artifacts are selected to work alongside the feature itself, for example, one of the features depicted is a cooking hearth, so animal bones and other cooking-related artifacts and ecofacts would be present. One of the features was a set of burned wooden posts in a row. The girls assigned to this box examined the charred wooden posts, carefully set aside and washed the artifacts: a buckle, a spoon, some animal bones, and some musket balls. The kids worked together to come to the conclusion that a fight had broken out, leading to the structure (a house) being burned down to the ground. Seeing the group gain that crucial faith in their own thought processes was truly marvelous.

As for site conservation and artifact protection, there were many great moments where this lesson was taught. From the very first lecture, where we talked about what archaeologists do, an emphasis was placed on the difference between archaeologists and looters. This difference lies in research, records, and writing about your finds, of course! And in legality, we cannot forget the importance of getting permission and following contractual and legal mandates. The kids solidified this idea by watching movie clips and deciding whether they counted as archaeology or looting. Surprisingly, pretty much all of them, from *Indiana Jones* to *The Mummy* (1999), were examples of looting, and not really archaeology at all. Over time, we taught them about the importance of mapping out finds, the work that goes into understanding soil color and stratigraphy, and how it helps people understand what really happened in these places all those years ago. The children especially enjoyed the game Archaeologists vs. Looters, a sort of Sharks

and Minnows-type game where the kids could run outside and play. In their final quiz, a marker of how much the kids learned, the children consistently showed that they understood this difference, the need to leave sites undisturbed if they cannot be adequately documented and preserved through papers and photos, and research.

Finally, cultural awareness came up many times throughout the camp. One of the most informative parts of the camp was the Dig Discoveries and the Sites Around the World lectures. The kids got to choose various sites to learn about from a list, and after a brief video presentation, they could ask questions about the sites. Most of the questions revolved around the people who lived there, and why they built what they built. The children were fascinated by these ancient buildings and exotic sites. Every child had a favorite site, and some even attempted to draw them. Another one of the activities involved the children making their own cultures, designing everything from foods to religion to clothes unique to their made-up culture. This encouraged the kids to discuss their own cultural backgrounds amongst themselves, showing their comprehension both of their own culture and of others. The camp developed their curiosity and understanding of other cultures.

All in all, the Legacy Camps did an excellent job of enhancing the campers' critical thinking skills, while also boosting their care for archaeological sites and artifacts, and convincing them to learn more about cultures different from their own. The internship also included an opportunity to help the Center for Archaeological Research show off their work and discuss conservation efforts at a showing of *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark* at the Mission Marquee Plaza. These works all add up to increasing the impact of archaeological research, and the reach future works can have. Hopefully, these efforts will yield a future of

better and more programs that will continue the work archaeologists across the nation do every day to better know our past.

Conclusion

To summarize, teaching children about archaeology, even for a short time, is a great benefit to their education, and teaches them much about how to think critically, how to care for material culture and sites, and how to connect to and respect people of other cultures. These experiences raise children to be well-rounded adults who care about protecting their heritage and the heritage of other people. People are more than just their current state of being, and this understanding of the past as something to be explored, understood, and protected as a living, breathing part of ourselves turns history into something more than words on a page. It shows how our culture, our history, and our ancestors remain a part of each and every one of us, and the ways we navigate the world. Perhaps in the future, these programs will be expanded as new technologies emerge, and people grow to care more about their collective past. For now, we must strive to find ways to preserve archaeological sites and programs as best as we can, with or without government assistance, and try to encourage those in power to share in our concerns for the future, not simply of these places and practices, but of our children's education. These efforts only succeed when archaeologists work, hand in hand, with the public, with the children, and with the educators who embrace and share this information. Perhaps Amanda Erickson-Harvey put it best in her article, *Outreach and Education in Archaeology*:

> "Since the curriculum is not currently changing to involve the topic of archaeology and since it is not required for professionals in archaeology to outreach to the community, the only solution is members from each group coming together to create a solution. Members from each side have recognized the benefits that the other can provide for the education of children and, ultimately, the general public. This solution is most often found in the collaboration between archaeologists, especially in archaeological units and other researchers, and educators. The benefits that curriculum-based resources from

archaeological units provide are a perfect example of this solution (Erickson-Harvey 2016; pg. 51)."

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