

## MIDDLE & UPPER PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SOCIAL STUDIES

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Fremantle, W.A. 22nd - 25th November, 1993.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper will describe the research methodology and present the pilot study findings of empirical research into the status of social studies and the attitudes of middle and upper grade students toward social studies in Western Australian government primary schools.

The pilot study data were obtained from two government primary schools. The analysis suggests a deterioration in attitude toward social studies from middle primary through to upper primary and shows that there exist differences in students' attitudes to social studies which appear attributable to teacher gender and student gender. This pilot study formed the basis

from which to proceed on a major study involving over 3000 students from 30 government primary schools.

#### BACKGROUND

Various researchers have tried to identify how students feel about the subjects they study. Some research exists on student attitudes towards social studies although most studies have focused on the mathematics and science curriculum areas of primary and secondary schools. There are, however, few studies of attitudes towards social studies in Australian schools.

Attitude to subject research tends to be either status or causal based. The status studies focus on how students feel about a particular school subject in relation to other school subjects. The causal studies attempt to identify and explain the factors which contribute to the development of the attitudes held by the

students towards the school subject.

#### Status Studies

The majority of status studies report that students have negative attitudes towards social studies. Haladyna and Thomas (1979) found social studies to be the least popular subject studied at the elementary and junior high school level. They also concluded that student antipathy toward social studies was not directly correlated to their antipathy toward school in general. The research teams of Shaver, Davis and Helburn (1979) and Schug, Todd and Berry (1984) concluded that a majority of students found social studies to be uninteresting, unimportant and insignificant. In 1985 Shaughnessy and Haladyna found that most students surveyed indicated that social studies was boring and irrelevant. Borton (1985) presented findings that showed social studies was the least liked subject of students in grades two through to nine.

Status studies by Kaoru, Thomas and Karns (1969), Haladyna and Thomas (1979), Fraser (1981) and Moroz and Washbourne (1989) have shown that there exists a significant deterioration in attitude toward social studies as students progress from one grade to the next.

There are similar image problems in other school subject areas, for example, reading (Di Sibio and Savitz, 1983), mathematics (Reyes, 1984) and science (Rakow, 1984). The problem for social

studies in schools in the United States is that "social studies is the least stimulating and the least liked subject". (Shaughnessy & Haladyna 1979. p 2)

A recent study completed in Western Australia by Moroz and Washbourne (1989) found that primary school students generally liked their social studies. This contrasts with the findings of the status studies in the United States of America where the dominant teacher strategies focused on the use of text books (prescribed), worksheets and films and the teachers appeared to have little creative input into the teaching programme: Fancett and Hawke (1982). Weilbe and Evans (1984), Patrick and Hawke (1982) Woodward, Elliot and Carter (1986). In Western Australia primary school teachers of social studies do not generally make use of a set text book and the nature of the Social Studies K-10 Syllabus encourages and necessitates a creative input into the teaching programme by the teacher.

### Causal Studies

Attitude to subject researchers have attempted to find the reasons for the antipathy toward social studies. Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Resdun (1982) put forward a model to explain that student attitudes toward social studies relate to the interaction of a multiple set of factors related to teacher variables, student variables and learning environment variables which are exogenous or endogenous to the schooling process. The exogenous variables include student, teacher and school socio-economic factors, student's home environment, teacher qualifications, nature of the social studies syllabus and various demographics such as age and gender of the teacher and student. These are all 'givens' and cannot be manipulated to produce changes in attitude. The endogenous variables are those which operate within a school and/or a classroom and include teacher style and selection of strategies, school modification of

syllabus, student gender mix and size of classrooms etc. These may be manipulated and may be powerful determinants of attitude. Both exogenous and endogenous variables shape the student's attitude towards school and subjects studied.

The independent variables of teacher, student and learning environment can be identified and the relative impact of each set of variables at each grade level can be established by utilising existing measurement instruments and/or by developing new instruments.

The causal type of research suggests that the teacher plays a key role in student attitude formation more so than the content matter of the subject and that the teacher variables along with

student and learning environment variables together determine student attitude towards social studies. Researchers have concluded that the teacher variables were the key to student attitudes rather than the content of social studies. (Superka 1982, common 1985, Eslinger and Superka 1982, Schug, Todd and Berry 1983, Haladyna et al 1982 a, 1982 b.) Fancett and Hawke (1982) and Weible and Evans (1984) found that general instructional practices used in social studies classrooms were correlated to student attitudes. McGowan (1990) in a limited qualitative study, however, concluded that teaching style (treatment of students) more than teaching strategy (methods selected) seemed the crucial factor in influencing attitude toward social studies. Therefore teacher variables are an important influence on student attitudes toward social studies.

Student variables have not been exhaustively analysed or assessed in terms of relative impact by attitude researchers. McTeer, Blanton and Lee (1975) found that boys expressed a higher interest in social studies than girls and that the students with a higher interest in social studies came from homes where there was a supportive educational environment. Haladyna and Thomas (1979) reported research which showed that no gender differences in attitude toward social studies existed. All students rated the subject lowly. Fraser (1981:67) found that irrespective of grade level there was a tendency for girls' attitudes to be more favourable toward social studies than boys' attitudes. Moroz and Washbourne (1989) found that there were no significant gender differences toward social studies in a study of primary school students. Fouts (1990) in a comparison of secondary students found that girls enjoyed social studies more than boys when the girls had a female teacher.

Wiley (1977) reported that the poor image of social studies was caused by the students' belief that the subject was not relevant to their future occupations. Print's (1990) case studies showed that secondary social studies students perceived social studies to be less functional and useful than other subjects, particularly in finding employment. Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun (1982) found that students with higher degrees of self confidence, with lower degrees of fatalism, and higher ratings of the importance of social studies tended to like social studies.

Moroz and Washbourne (1989) also found that there was a significant grade level deterioration in attitude toward social studies in the middle and upper primary grades on virtually every measure utilised and that student interest and preference for using maps, graphs, tables, and other skills were affected negatively. Print (1990) suggested that grade level deterioration and disenchantment with social studies could be partially explained by the general decline in attitude to school

as students pass through the senior years of the primary school. However, he offered no evidence to support the suggestion.

Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun (1982) and others considered the impact of learning environment variables on student attitude and found that learning environment variables have not received in depth treatment by attitude researchers which have tended to focus on teacher and student variables.

The causal research has not been conclusive and the variables have not been exhaustively analysed or assessed in terms of relative impact. Researchers have not proposed any intervention programmes which practitioners might attempt in order to reverse student antipathy toward social studies.

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

It was the purpose of the study to identify the status of and the attitudes towards social studies in the middle and upper grades of government primary schools in Western Australian because social studies is a significant area of the primary curriculum and the negative attitudes must impact on the learning, teaching and achievement in an undesirable way. Students may well be leaving school without the knowledge, skills and values necessary for good citizenship, possibly because of their negative attitudes toward social studies.

"Students who are unmotivated to learn do not learn", Slavin (1984:53).

The research findings of the study may lead to the development of an intervention programme which may assist in the arrest of the grade level deterioration of attitude towards social studies and in the long term, improve the overall status of social studies.

#### METHODOLOGY

The dependent variable of the study was attitude to social studies. The independent variables were the student, teacher and learning environment variables. It was decided to examine all grade four, five, six and seven students, present on the day of the survey, from a sample of randomly selected schools drawn from a stratified sample of schools based on size and location. Two schools were selected for the pilot study and it is these results which will be presented in this paper.

#### PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

The pilot was conducted in two government primary schools where a total of 158 middle and upper primary students were surveyed. Fifty seven percent of the respondents were boys and forty three percent were girls from grades four, five, six and seven. (Table

1).

TABLE ONE : YEAR AND GENDER  
GENDER

Grade	Female		Male		Total
	N	%	N	%	
4					
5					
6					
7	16				
19					
17					
16	10				
12					
11					
10	21				
21					
20					
27	13				
13					
13					
17	37				
40					
37					
43					
Total	68	43	89	57	157

#### INSTRUMENTS

To identify student attitude toward social studies and to determine the status of social studies, the Students Attitudes Toward Social Studies (SATSS) instrument was developed in two forms, one for grade four and five and another for grades six and seven. Both versions of SATSS contained the same variables and constructs but the fourth and fifth grade version did not include any item reversals.

SATSS was developed by adapting and/or adopting some items from the following instruments:

- I.A.A.S. (Inventory for Affective Aspects of Schooling) developed by Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun (1982).
- L.E.I. (Learning Environment Inventory) developed by Anderson and Walberg (1976).
- C.E.S. (Class Environment Scales) developed by Moos and Trickett (1974).
- T.R.E.A.T. (Subject Matter Attitude Scales) developed by Haladyna and Thomas (1979).
- T.A.S.S. and S.A.S.S. (Teacher and Student Attitude to Subject Scales) developed by Moroz and Washbourne (1989).

- B.L. (Baseline - Teacher and Student Attitude to Subject Scales) developed by the Education Department of Western Australia (1984).

These instruments have been validated and there are numerous accounts of international research and validation data presented by Fraser and Fisher (1984) and others.

#### INTERNAL CONSISTENCY

Estimates of the internal consistency of each SATSS construct was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Table 2 shows the standardized alpha coefficients for the pilot survey and for the study. The data suggests that each SATSS construct has acceptable internal consistency and reliability.

TABLE 2 : SATSS CONSTRUCTS AND RELIABILITY ESTIMATES  
Standardized Alpha

#### Coefficients

Constructs	Pilot Survey	The Study
Attitude to school		
Attitude to social studies		
Usefulness of social studies		
Perceived teachers' attitude to social studies		
Perceived teachers' attitudes to students		
Classroom environment		
Class management		
Own ability		
Perceived parental support		.793
	.852	
	.696	
	.615	
	.505	
	.225	
	.679	
	-.275	
	.694	
	.790	
	.839	
	.753	
	.559	
	.661	
	.431	
	.626	
	.764	
	.711	

#### PROCEDURES

Written permission to conduct the research was obtained from the appropriate school system administrators and the research was cleared by the relevant ethics committee. Permission to conduct the survey was negotiated at each school site with the principal and the classroom teachers. Students had the right not to participate or not respond to any item if they so desired. To ensure confidentiality and to encourage honesty all responses were anonymous. A group of trained research assistants administered SATSS and provided assistance when required. For grades four and five the items were read to all students while for grades six and seven SATSS was self administered. Students were required to indicate on a five point scale whether they strongly agreed (5) or whether they strongly disagreed (1) with various statements concerning aspects of social studies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Statistically significant findings from the pilot study are presented below.

### Student Gender

The data revealed that there were some significant gender differences in social studies classes. The significant findings and associated levels of significance are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3 : STUDENT GENDER

	Sex	Level of Significance
Item	Female	Male

In Social Studies lessons the teacher tells me when my work is good

My parents help me with my Social Studies homework

I like school

I like the teachers in this school

In Social Studies I try to do as well as I can

I like my Social Studies Teacher

4.4

4.5

4.3

4.3

4.4

4.5

4.1

4.2

3.9

3.8

4.0

4.2

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\*

Where level of significance is: \* = 0.05, \*\* = 0.01

The results suggest that:

1. girls receive more positive feedback from their teachers than do boys;
2. girls receive assistance more assistance at home with the social studies homework than do the boys;
3. girls like their school more than do boys;
4. girls like their teachers more than do boys and in particular their social studies teacher;
5. girls try harder in social studies than do boys.

Teacher Gender

Sixty eight percent of the students in the pilot study were taught by female teachers. The data in Table 4 suggest that teacher gender does impact significantly on attitude to social studies particularly in the constructs of self esteem, perceived teacher attitude towards the subject, parental support and classroom climate.

TABLE 4 : STUDENT RESPONSES : TEACHER GENDER

Item	Teacher Gender		Level of Significance
	Male	Female	
I enjoy the activities we do in social studies			
My teacher is interested in social studies			
In social studies the teacher is interested in my opinion			
There are not too many social students in my social studies class			
My parents encourage me to do my social studies homework			
In social studies lessons students follow the rules			
If I do well in social studies it will help me get a job			
In social studies lessons the class is well organised			
Social studies is not too hard for me			
My teacher tries to make us find out more about social studies			
In social studies I try to get a higher mark then my friends			
			3.8
			4.2
			3.7
			3.4
			3.5
			3.6
			4.3
			3.5
			3.8
			4.5
	3.9	3.5	
			3.6
			4.1
			4.1
			4.4
			4.0
			3.9

3.8

4.2

4.1

3.4 \*

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In social studies lessons the teacher tells me when my work  
is good

My parents help me with my social studies homework

I like school

I like the teachers in this school

In social studies I try to do as well as I can

I like my social studies teacher. 4.4

4.5

4.3

4.3

4.4

4.5 4.1

4.2

3.9

3.8

4.0

4.2 \*\*

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Where level of significance is: \* = 0.05, \*\* = 0.01, \*\*\* = 0.001

The significant teacher gender items include:

1. female teachers are more interested in the students'

opinions than male teachers;

2. parents of children with female teachers are more supportive of social studies homework than parents of children with male teachers;

3. female teachers tend to have a more positive classroom climate in social studies, in terms of following rules and organisation;

4. students tend to be more competitive in a male teachers' classroom and perceive that there is more 'challenge' in their social studies;

5. students with male teachers think that doing well in social studies will assist their job prospects in the future;

6. overall students like male teachers more than female teachers for social studies;

7. male teachers praise students' social studies work more than female teachers.

#### YEAR LEVEL DIFFERENCES

Table 5 shows significant differences in responses based on the respondents year level.

TABLE 5 : SIGNIFICANT YEAR LEVEL RESPONSES

Item	Grade				Level of Significance
	4	5	6	7	
I enjoy the activities we do in social studies					
My teacher is interested in social studies					
In social studies the teacher is interested in my opinion					
There are not too many social students in my social studies class					
My parents encourage me to do my social studies homework					
At school I find most subjects interesting					
In social studies lessons the teacher tells me when my work is good					
My parents help me with my social studies homework					
I like the topics we do in social studies					
If I do well in social studies it will help me get a job					
I like the teachers in this school					
We have good rules in our school					
The things we learn in social studies are interesting					
I learn a lot in social studies					
My teacher tries to make us find out more about social					

studies

I like my social studies teacher. 3.8

4.2

3.6

3.4

3.4

4.4

4.5

3.9

4.0

4.3

4.2

4.3

4.2

4.4

4.5

4.6 4.0

4.0

4.1

3.8

4.3

4.3

4.4

4.6

4.3

4.4

4.3

4.6

4.4

4.5

4.5

4.6 3.2

3.4

3.9

4.2

4.3

4.1

4.1

4.3

3.3

3.7

3.8

3.8

3.6

4.0

4.0

3.9 3.4

3.7

4.2

4.0

4.4

3.9

4.0

4.4

3.5

3.6

3.6

4.1

3.7

4.2

4.0

4.3 \*\*\*

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In social studies:  
homework is interesting  
I like doing the projects  
we have too many excursions  
tests are too easy  
using atlases is interesting  
I have learnt how to use maps properly  
I like using graphs and tables

3.3

3.8

1.7

3.1

3.9

3.5

3.2

3.7

3.6

2.1

2.7

3.9

4.0

4.2

2.7

3.2

1.3

2.2

2.9

4.3

3.3

2.4

3.1

1.7

2.3

2.7

3.7

2.9

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Where level of significance is: \* = 0.05, \*\* = 0.01, \*\*\* = 0.001

The table shows that from middle primary through to upper primary there is deterioration in the:

1. students enjoyment of activities, liking for and interest in the social studies topics studied;
2. teachers perceived interest in social studies;
3. students' liking for their school teachers and for their social studies teachers.

Further statistical tests are required on the data. Although there is some significant deterioration in attitude from grade four through to grade seven, for the above items, it should be noted that the attitudes remain overall positive toward social studies as shown by the fact that the mean scores in Table 5 are much closer to strongly agreeing with the items than disagreeing. Negative attitudes were only displayed for relatively few items (using atlases, interesting homework and liking for graphs and tables) and these mostly occurred in grades six and seven.

#### OVERALL RESPONSES

The overall responses rank ordered on mean score (Table 6) indicate that students try to do their best in social studies and that teachers clearly explain the tasks. Social studies teachers are well liked by their students and they encourage their students to do well in social studies. Students perceive social studies to be useful, important and probably important in gaining a job. Parental support for social studies is perceived to be positive in that parents encourage their children to do their homework and to do their best in social studies. Students perceive that parents value social studies as an important school subject.

TABLE 6 :OVERALL RESPONSES

Item	Mean Score	S.D.
In social studies I try to do as well as I can	4.54	
In social studies the teacher clearly explains what we have to do	4.38	
I like my social studies teacher	4.37	
In social studies lessons the teacher encourages me to do well	4.32	
My parents help with my social studies home work if I need help	4.31	
I learn a lot in social studies	4.28	
Doing social studies is important	4.25	
My teacher tries to make us find out more about social studies	4.25	
In social studies lessons the teacher is fair to us		
My parents encourage me to do my best in social studies		
In social studies the teacher tells me when my work is good		

4.25  
4.24  
4.23 0.62  
0.79  
0.88  
0.77  
1.00  
0.77  
0.93  
0.87  
0.86  
0.92  
0.77

Item Mean Score S.D.

My teacher thinks social studies is important

We have good rules in our school

What we do in social studies will help me understand more of the world

At school I find most subjects interesting

I expect to make use of what I learn in social studies

My parents think social studies is an important school subject

My parents encourage me to do my social studies homework

In social studies lessons the teacher is able to control social studies

I am happy to come to school

I like school

Social studies is not too hard for me

If I do well in social studies it will help me get a job

In social studies lessons the teacher is interested in my opinion

I like the teachers in this school

In social studies lessons there is lots to do when I finish work

In social studies lessons the teacher likes most of the students

The things we learn in social studies are interesting

In social studies lessons the students follow the rules

My teacher often tells us news in social studies

There are not too many students in my social studies class

I can do all the work in social studies

My teacher enjoys social studies lessons

In social studies lessons the students work well together

My teacher is interested in social studies

It is easy for me to do my best in social studies

I like the topics we do in social studies

In social studies lessons the class is well organised

Social studies lessons are not noisy

I like social studies

I enjoy the activities we do in social studies

In social studies I try to get a higher mark than my friends

I am the type to do well in social studies

My parents have books at home to help me with social studies

Many of the students waste time in social studies lessons

My social studies would improve if I tried harder 4.22

4.18

4.17

4.17

4.16

4.13

4.12

4.12

4.11

4.08

4.07

3.99

3.99

3.98

3.98

3.97

3.96

3.90

3.89

3.88

3.87

3.83

3.81

3.80

3.78

3.78

3.72

3.64

3.62

3.60

3.57

3.54

3.50

3.00

2.10 0.89

1.07

0.81

0.88

0.86

0.95

1.14

0.97

1.00

1.00

0.98  
0.99  
0.98  
0.96  
1.03  
0.95  
1.05  
0.86  
0.93  
1.09  
1.04  
0.88  
0.93  
0.87  
1.04  
1.03  
0.91  
1.07  
1.09  
1.00  
1.33  
1.15  
1.36  
1.17  
1.15

S.D. = Standard Deviation

#### STATUS OF SOCIAL STUDIES

Students were asked to respond to the question 'How much do you like your school "subjects?". on a five point scale ranging from 'Like a Lot' (5) to 'Dislike a Lot' (1). Computing and Library, although not subjects were included and explained in terms of "using computers at school" and "using the library". Table 7 shows that social studies was ranked eighth with the curriculum areas of maths, spelling, music health and religion being less popular. The item numbers indicate the original random listing of the "subjects".

TABLE 7 : STATUS OF SOCIAL STUDIES

Item No  
Subject  
Mean Score  
S.D.

129  
127  
131  
126

124

122

134

128

130

123

132

125

133 How much do you like:

sport

computing

reading

science

creative writing

writing

library

social studies

maths

spelling

music

health

religion

4.66

4.38

4.13

4.10

4.04

3.99

3.95

3.84

3.81

3.56

3.49

3.04

2.92

0.79

1.03

1.04

1.08

1.24

1.09

1.19

1.10

1.30

1.22

1.42

1.44

1.32

S. D. = Standard Deviation

## CONCLUSION

The results of this pilot study show that student attitudes towards social studies are positive. This contradicts the results of the majority of status studies which report that students have negative attitudes toward social studies. This study also found that social studies is far from being the least liked subject. This differs from the findings of several other studies mentioned above.

This study also showed that gender differences appeared to be significant in student attitudes toward social studies, again, contradicting the findings of other studies. It was found that girls liked social studies more and tried harder than boys. Teacher gender was also found to be significant in that students thought that female teachers were more interested and had a more

positive classroom climate than male teachers, while male teachers were more liked and provided a more challenging and competitive classroom environment.

The study showed that there are significant year level differences in attitude to social studies. There appears to be a deterioration from middle to upper primary school though this requires some further testing.

The results of this pilot study show that it would be feasible and worthwhile to investigate attitudes towards social studies more fully using a larger sample of students, teachers and schools. The gender differences and a possible middle to upper school deterioration must be cause for concern for teachers and educators and warrants further research.

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