

**Male and female students' attitudes toward social studies –
a case study.**

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes research into male and female secondary students' attitudes toward social studies. The research was a case study involving Year 9 students at one Western Australian government secondary school. The aim was to obtain information about students' attitudes toward social studies and the factors that influence these attitudes, and more specifically, to determine whether student gender influences attitudes. The research design included both quantitative and qualitative techniques, incorporating a survey questionnaire and a focus group discussion.

The findings from the study suggest that social studies has a low status among Year 9 students at the case-study school. The reasons for this poor image may be attributed to the teacher-centred, didactic pedagogy and uninteresting content. There were significant differences in attitude toward social studies based on student gender. Female students had a more positive attitude towards school and social studies than did males in most aspects and were also more positive about most school subjects including social studies.

This case study offers an informative foundation for further studies.

Introduction

This study had two purposes: to ascertain the status of social studies amongst Year 9 students at one metropolitan Government high school in Western Australia; and to identify factors that influenced the attitudes of these students. Specifically, it sought to determine whether or not student gender impacted on attitudes toward the learning area.

Research into the attitudes students hold towards social studies has been both wide and varied throughout the United States; however, apart from research by Fraser (1981) and Print (1990), very little insight had been given to the status of the subject in Australian schools until the Moroz study in 1996. The Moroz study investigated the attitudes of middle and upper Government primary school students to the learning area in Perth metropolitan schools and in 1998 in rural schools. Moroz (1996) found that in a list of thirteen subjects, social studies, according to students, ranked worse than all but religious education. Findings indicated that although students liked social studies and perceived it as important in providing necessary skills and knowledge, they became more negative about it as they progressed from Year 4 to Year 7. By Year 7 students held negative attitudes about the learning area. The low status of social studies was attributed to the way it was delivered and the 'uninteresting and irrelevant topics' (Moroz, 1996, p2).

The studies in the United States depict similar findings though the students at all year levels were negative about the subject, growing increasingly disenchanting with it and with school in general. Social studies is frequently shown to be the least-liked subject at both primary and secondary levels of schooling (Jersild, 1949; Fernandez, Massey and Dornbusch, 1976; Schug, Todd and Beery, 1984; Goodlad, 1984; Shaugnessy and Haladyna, 1985; and Pahl, 1994).

The issue of students' perception of social studies is important currently in Western Australia as a new *Curriculum Framework* is being implemented in all schools. Social studies in Western Australian secondary schools has had a dynamic history. In the early 1970s it was recognised as a core secondary school subject and by the later 1970s a new curriculum was developed. This was implemented in schools in 1981 as the *Social Studies K-10 Syllabus* which was for the first time 'conceptually based, multi-disciplinary and which emphasised a child-centred, active learning, inquiry approach with a strong focus on the study of values and social interaction with skills' (Moroz, 1996, p.5). However, in 1986 and 1987, as a consequence of the *Beazley Report into Schooling* (1984), there was a fundamental restructuring of the curriculum at the lower secondary school level (Years 8-10) which was known as the *Unit Curriculum* (Print, 1990, p.3). The change meant social studies lost its core status and the sequential development of skills disappeared.

More recently, following the Commonwealth Government's initiative to develop a National Curriculum and the establishment of the eight learning areas, social studies, which was one of the learning areas, was renamed '*Studies of Society and Environment*' (or '*Society and Environment*' in Western Australia). This was to be characterised by an inquiry-based method of learning and to have a wider focus than the earlier curriculum. The Western Australian Curriculum Council, established in 1997, then produced a Curriculum Framework, an outcomes-based approach to schooling, to be mandated for all schools in Western Australia. The new Framework is a long-term educational reform which identifies what students need to achieve and ensures they do so by emphasising what is actually learnt as opposed to what, when and how something is taught. The Framework, unlike previous social studies documents, has a K-12 approach.

Given the scarcity of research into the status of social studies in Australian secondary schools and, in particular, in Western Australian secondary schools, the focus of this case study was to ascertain how the subject was perceived by Year 9 students in one metropolitan Government high school in Western Australia. A second aim was to identify the factors which contributed to these attitudes. Gender difference in attitudes was a major focus of the research.

Findings from previous research

The two issues relevant to this research (the status of social studies and the factors that affect its status) have been investigated in varying degrees by educators. The Western Australian research in primary schools indicated that students valued the social studies learning area, believing it to be worthwhile for their future careers (Moroz, 1996). However, students did not rank social studies highly in comparison with other school subjects, they did not like many of the social studies topics studied and did not look forward to their social studies lessons, principally because of the didactic teaching methods employed by teachers. According to the Moroz studies (1996, 1998) the main activities involved were reading, listening to the teacher, copying from the blackboard, whole-class discussions, library and seat work orientated learning activities. Students indicated they wanted more small group work, relevant and interesting topics and more computer use in social studies.

An associated concern with the low status of social studies is the grade-level decline in attitudes toward the subject. Research by Haladyna and Thomas (1979), Fraser (1981), Moroz and Washbourne (1989) and Moroz (1996) has shown there exists a significant deterioration in attitude toward social studies as students progress from one year to the next. Researchers reported that the poor image of social studies was caused by the students' belief that the subject was not relevant to their future occupations. They contended the closer students were to leaving compulsory schooling and seeking employment, then the

less relevant was the subject of social studies (Betres, 1983; and Print, 1990; as cited by Moroz and Baker, 1997).

Findings about gender differences in attitudes toward social studies are contradictory, with some researchers reporting significant differences and others no significant differences at all. According to Tittle (1986), educators are aware of boys' higher interest and achievement in mathematics and science, whereas girls seem to favour courses emphasising the language arts. Curry and Hughes (1965) reported a study which found high school junior boys preferred math and science courses in contrast to the girls who preferred English and social studies courses. Fraser (1981) found Australian girls, irrespective of their year level, liked social studies more than boys did. Findings by Moroz and Baker (1997) indicated males were more positive towards science, computing, sport and mathematics while females were more positive about social studies, English and reading. Fouts (1990) found that girls enjoyed social studies more than did boys, but only when they had female teachers. On the contrary, Chase (1949) noted that boys showed a significantly stronger preference for social studies than girls. McTeer et al (1975) reported that girls tended to like social studies less than boys because 'the content of the social studies curriculum is largely male orientated' (McTeer, 1975, p.168). In comparison to these studies, Haladyna and Thomas (1979) and Moroz and Washbourne (1989) reported no significant differences in student attitudes based on gender.

Definition of Social Studies

For the purposes of this study, social studies is defined as the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides a coordinated and systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion and sociology as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an independent world (National Council for the Social Studies, 1998, p.1).

Research Design

The theoretical basis for research into attitudes to social studies was postulated by Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun (1982a), who proposed that student attitudes towards social studies are determined by three sets of interrelated variables: student, teacher and classroom learning or learning environment variables. This study, due to time and cost constraints, concentrated largely on the student variables. However, aspects of the teacher and learning environment variables were investigated.

The design was quasi-experimental in nature, employing quantitative and qualitative techniques. It incorporated the use of an attitude scale presented in a questionnaire to identify the attitudes of students towards social studies (quantitative). This was then followed by a focus group discussion session (qualitative) to gain student insights into the status of social studies.

A pilot study was not required for the study as the chief instrument used was based on a questionnaire extensively trialled and tested by Moroz (1996). Minor modifications were necessary to make it more suitable for use with secondary students and to update subject lists, etc.

The revised questionnaire, *Secondary Student Attitudes Toward Social Studies SSATSS*, incorporates a five point Likert-type attitude scale with 94-items. The first three questions obtained student demographic information then five parts addressed classroom environment, instructional practices, social studies in comparison to other school subjects, 'likes' and 'dislikes' of social studies and two 'stand-alone' items.

The 46 items in the 'classroom environment' section or Part A of SSATSS were structured around nine constructs or issues. Each construct had five items which were cycled throughout the questionnaire to minimise the patterning of responses. Students were to respond to the items using a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' (5), to 'neither agree or disagree' (3) and 'strongly disagree' (10). The nine constructs were:

- Attitudes to school,
- Attitudes to social studies
- Usefulness of social studies
- Perceived teacher attitudes to social studies
- Perceived teacher attitudes to students
- Classroom environment
- Classroom management
- Perception of own ability
- Parental support for social studies

The constructs were all considered to be independent variables which impacted on the students' attitude toward social studies (the dependent variable).

Part B of SSATSS related to twenty-eight 'instructional practices' and students were required to indicate how often they were engaged in these activities during their social studies lessons. The five-point scale ranged from 'at least once a week' (5) to 'hardly ever' (1).

In Part C students were asked to state their liking for 14 school subjects on a five-point scale ranging from 'like a lot' (5) to 'dislike a lot' (1). The neutral response was 'not sure' (3). The subject areas included the traditional 'core' subjects of mathematics, science, social studies and English and other 'elective' subjects in order to more accurately survey student preferences within the wider curriculum.

Part D requested students to address two open-ended items about their 'likes' and 'dislikes' in social studies. These were analysed by categorising student responses into social studies 'instructional practice', 'content', 'skills', 'teacher' and 'other'.

Two 'stand-alone' questions constituted Part E. One required students to indicate how much they liked social studies by responding on a five-point scale. This stand-alone item was included to validate the 'attitudes to social studies' construct and the items relating specifically to students' attitudes toward social studies. 'I like my social studies teacher' was another stand-alone item, also used as a validation tool to the 'perceived teacher attitudes to students' construct and the items related specifically to students' 'perceived teacher attitudes' towards students.

Two research assistants (both third year Bachelor of Education students) were trained by the principal researcher in all aspects of the data collection: introduction, explanation of instructions, reading and pacing and student assistance.

The survey of Year 9 students was completed on the same day in one 50 minute period.

Population and Survey Sample

The survey included all Year 9 students from one metropolitan Government high school in Western Australia. A Government school was chosen as the focus of the case study as opposed to a Catholic or Independent school as these schools are invariably different, possessing special fees with a sometimes single gender student population holding an exclusive and/or elitist image (Moroz, 1996). Government high schools account for approximately two thirds of all full-time secondary students in the metropolitan area (Education Department, personal communication, November 1998). Year 9 was chosen for the investigation because students are then established and non-transitional in the lower secondary school.

The case study school had 10 Year 9 social studies classes with 320 students whose ages ranged from 13 to 14 years. The study took place over two days on the last week of Term 4 in December 1998. Six of the Year 9 classes participated in the study and all students at school and in class on the day of the survey were included in the study. None refused to participate. In total, 144 Year 9 students completed the questionnaire. They made up 45% of the Year 9 cohort at the school.

Focus group interview

The focus group interview was conducted the day after the SSATSS questionnaire was completed. The group interview was informal, designed to 'gather together a group of informants and [provide] them with the opportunity to engage in discussion' (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1990, p.97). It was decided to pursue the focus group technique after consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of individual and group interviews. These have been outlined by researchers such as Krueger (1996).

Twelve students (2 males and 10 females) were randomly selected from the class enrolment list (two from each class) to participate in the discussion. Participation was voluntary. A series of predetermined questions guided the discussion on the factors which influence Year 9 students' attitudes toward social studies. The questions comprised:

- What do you like about social studies (and why)?
- What don't you like about social studies (and why)?
- How relevant is social studies to your anticipated future career?
- If you had any advice to offer your social studies teacher now, what would it be?

Data analysis

The computer package *Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences version 8.0 for Windows [SPSS 8.0]* (1997) was used to conduct the data analysis of the questionnaire. The statistical tests used in the analysis of data were the 'Oneway' Analysis of Variances test (ANOVA), Wilkes' Lambda General Linear Model (Wilkes' Lambda GLM) between subject factors, means and frequency distributions and standardised alpha coefficients. The open-ended items for the SSATSSquestionnaire were analysed by grouping responses into five broad categories: 'instructional practices,' 'content,' 'skills,' 'teacher' and 'other.'

It should be noted that the research had certain limitations since it involved only one metropolitan Government secondary school and was limited to those Year 9 students who were present and willing to participate on the relevant days. Also, while group environments encourage people to express views, there may be problems with some students hiding their real opinions and others possibly dominating the discussion.

Analysis and findings - secondary student attitudes toward social studies

Of the 144 student respondents completing the SSATSS questionnaire, 69 (47.9%) were female and 75 (52.1%) male. The six teachers of the participating classes had varied teaching experience ranging from 8 to 26 years. They each had taught at more than five high schools in their careers. All teachers taught both lower secondary *Society and Environment* (social studies) and upper school social sciences such as geography, economics and history.

Responses to the key constructs

Taken as a whole, the nine key constructs reported good standard alpha coefficients, indicating they were all legitimate and valid according to Burns (1997). Each construct was considered positively by the respondents, with means reported all quite high, between 3.06 and 3.52, and all over neutral (3.00). The constructs reported low standard deviations between 0.10 and 0.42, indicating a reasonably tight concentration of scores around each mean. As shown in Table 1, students viewed the 'Classroom management' and 'Perceived teacher attitudes to students' constructs most positively with means above 3.50. Students considered 'Attitudes to social studies' ($m = 3.06$) and 'Classroom environment' ($m = 3.08$) least favourably, with means just above neutral.

Differences in responses based on gender were explored across constructs and items using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Wilkes' Lambda General Linear Model. Table 1 indicates that significant differences between gender groups were found for only two constructs: 'Attitudes to school' ($F = 3.04$, $P = 0.01$) and 'Classroom environment' ($F = 4.59$, $P = 0.00$).

Table 1: Differences in responses to constructs based on students' gender

Constructs	Gender						Sig
	Total		Female		Male		of Diff
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
Attitudes to school	3.34	0.41	3.49	0.89	3.20	1.06	**
Attitudes to social studies	3.08	0.21	3.14	0.84	3.02	1.01	NS
Usefulness of social studies	3.29	0.33	3.33	0.82	3.26	1.05	NS

Perceived teacher attitudes to social studies	3.48	0.27	3.49	0.83	3.47	0.90	NS
Perceived teacher attitudes to students	3.51	0.42	3.49	0.86	3.53	0.98	NS
Classroom environment	3.06	0.28	3.05	0.93	3.06	0.96	***
Classroom management	3.52	0.26	3.50	0.86	3.54	1.02	NS
Perception of own ability	3.45	0.71	3.46	0.89	3.43	1.08	NS
Parental support for social studies	3.39	0.10	3.41	0.88	3.36	1.10	NS

n = 144 students: 69 females; 75 males

Scale: 5 = Strongly agree, 3 = Unsure, 1 = Strongly disagree

M = Mean

SD = Standard Deviation

Significance = Level of significance where * = 0.05, ** = 0.01, *** = 0.001. NS = no significant differences

However, as indicated by the means, female students viewed two-thirds of the constructs more positively than males, while male students favoured the constructs dealing with teacher attitudes to students, classroom environment and classroom management.

To determine which specific items within the constructs produced significant differences post hoc testing was carried out. using the Wilkes' Lambda GLM procedure. This indicated that the construct 'Attitudes to school' contained three items with significant differences: 'I am happy to come to this school'; 'I like school'; and 'We have good rules in our school'. Females viewed items within this construct more positively than males. The construct, 'Classroom environment,' contained two items: 'In social studies lessons the students work

together' and 'In social studies I try to get a higher mark than my friends' for which males were significantly more positive.

Instructional practices in social studies lessons

Students were asked to indicate the frequency of their participation in a range of 28 instructional practices in social studies lessons. The data for all Year 9 classes was grouped together and analysed and then gender differences were considered. The overall results reveal that the most common activities undertaken in social studies are all traditional teacher-centred tasks that invite little opportunity for students to engage in active learning. Students indicated that the most frequently practiced activities were text book work (81.1% undertook this at least every two weeks), homework (78.8%), copying from the blackboard (72.9%), whole class discussions (65.7%) and reading (62.6%).

Conversely, the more student-centred, interactive and/or action-orientated strategies were rarely employed by teachers, for example, computer activities and role-plays were each undertaken by 2.1%, newspaper activities 2.0%, guest speakers and excursions each 1.4%.

Male and female students ranked teacher-dominated practices such as homework, textbook work, whole class discussions, reading and copying from the blackboard, in the first five activities but in differing order, with females ranking homework first and males ranking textbook work first. Student-centred activities (excursions, roleplays, guest speakers and computer activities) were the last four activities ranked by both genders. Overall, there were no significant differences between genders in the ranking of the practices.

Status of social studies and other school subjects

Students were asked their views on the extent to which they 'liked' social studies in comparison to 14 other school subjects on a five-point scale ranging from 'like a lot' (5) through to 'not sure' (3) and 'dislike a lot' (1). Response rates per item varied as respondents were instructed to consider only the subjects they were currently studying.

The data show that photography and physical education (with mean scores above 4.00), were perceived a great deal more positively than other subjects. Other highly- rated subjects were home economics, art, design and technology and drama - all practical, student-centred electives that usually invite creativity and sometimes require little written work and often informal or no assessments. Social studies, with a negative mean of 2.90, was perceived less favourably than most other learning areas. Only 5.5% of respondents 'liked social studies a lot' and 13.8% 'disliked it a lot'. Social studies was ranked 12th in a list of 14 school subjects, ahead only of music and health, and last out of the traditional core subjects.

These findings must be of extreme concern to educators, and in particular, to those responsible for the social studies curriculum at all levels, as the data show clearly that social studies is one of the least-liked subjects.

Females were significantly more positive than males about school subjects and, for this reason, Table 2 is ranked in accordance with the female subject means.

Table 2: Differences in attitude toward social studies and other school subjects based on student gender

	Gender									Sig
Subjects	Total			Female			Male			of Diff
	R	M	SD	R	M	SD	R	M	SD	
Home economics	3	3.93	1.16	1	4.37	0.83	7	3.38	1.29	***
Art	4	3.86	1.46	2	4.32	1.23	6	3.48	1.53	**
Drama	6	3.72	1.40	3	4.28	1.05	9	3.16	1.48	***
Photography	1	4.10	1.16	4	4.28	1.03	2	3.88	1.28	NS
Physical education	2	4.00	1.14	5	4.16	0.91	3	3.85	1.30	NS
ENGLISH	7	3.54	1.19	6	3.78	1.06	8	3.32	1.26	**
Design & Technology	5	3.86	1.13	7	3.59	1.16	1	3.97	1.10	NS
Media Studies	10	3.11	1.34	8	3.29	1.26	10	3.00	1.39	NS
SOCIAL	12	2.90	1.17	9	3.09	1.15	13	2.72	1.17	NS

STUDIES										
MATHEMATICS	11	2.92	1.24	10	3.04	1.24	12	2.81	1.23	NS
SCIENCE	9	3.24	1.19	11	2.97	1.16	5	3.49	1.17	**
Health	14	2.60	1.16	12	2.96	1.09	14	2.25	1.13	***
Computing	8	3.32	1.33	13	2.84	1.12	4	3.62	1.37	**
Music	13	2.73	1.42	14	2.52	1.50	11	2.90	1.35	NS

Scale: 5 = At least once a week, 3 = Once a month, 1 = Hardly ever

R = Rank M = Mean SD = Standard Deviation

Significance = Level of significance where * = 0.05, ** = 0.01, *** = 0.001. NS = no significant differences

Home economics, drama and health recorded very significant differences between means for males and females and there were significant differences also for English, art, science and computing. Design and technology, science, computing and music were the only subjects considered more positively by males than females, reinforcing conventional gender stereotypes. In general, both males and female students indicated a strong preference for the 'student-centred elective' subjects. Males favoured the practical, hands-on objective subjects of design and technology, physical education and computing while females were more attracted to art, drama and home economics. Females favoured English and social studies over mathematics and science while males favoured science and opted for mathematics over social studies, further reinforcing conventional stereotypes.

The differences in responses for social studies were not significant. For both sexes, the core subjects of mathematics and social studies were ranked close together with each sex ranking them one after the other in a list of fourteen school subjects. However, social studies was ranked positively by females (mean 3.09), above mathematics and science while males viewed social studies negatively (mean 2.72), and ranked it thirteenth out of fourteen subjects.

Students' liking for social studies

Students were asked to respond to the item 'How much do you like social studies?' by rating it according to five response options. As indicated in Table 3, just over half the respondents (51.7%) felt 'social studies is okay', with 31.3% indicating a more positive view. Perhaps of more concern are the 16.6% who perceived it as less positive than 'okay' and the 2.0% who did not like anything about social studies at all.

A comparison of responses shows the varying degrees to which males and females like social studies. Overall, females were more positive towards the subject with just over 70% of respondents either indicating it was 'okay' or 'liked a lot'. No females considered social studies their favourite subject yet 2.7% of males did. However, males were more negative in their attitude towards social studies with 35.1% of respondents either 'not liking it' or 'not liking anything about it', compared to 27.9% of females.

Table 3: Students' liking for social studies based on gender (%)

View of social studies	Total	Females	Males
Social studies is my favourite subject	9.7	0.0	2.7
I like social studies a lot	21.6	22.1	8.1
Social studies is okay	51.7	50.0	54.1
I do not like social studies	14.6	19.1	24.3
I don't like anything about social studies	2.0	8.8	10.8
Total	100	100	100

n = 144 students: 69 female; 75 male. Due to rounding, row totals may not sum to 100%

Student likes and dislikes

Two open-ended questions dealing with 'likes' and 'dislikes' in social studies gave students an opportunity to discuss their opinion on the subject. The responses were grouped into five categories: 'instructional practice,' 'content,' 'skills,' 'teacher' and 'other.'

Students identified 44 aspects of social studies that they liked. Those most frequently mentioned came from what could generally be described as instructional practices and included videos/movies (26), group activities (19), class discussions (12) and guest

speakers (4). Forty-five percent of students indicated working with friends/peers in class was important and highly desirable. References made to teacher demeanour (18) were positive with students indicating their liking for praise and encouragement for good work. Twenty-two per cent of the respondents liked 'nothing' about social studies while 23% said it was interesting. Two students said:

- *Social studies is interesting and fun sometimes, but only when we work in groups or with our friends.*
- *It's interesting when we have guest speakers cos you learn so much more from them than a textbook...it's something different from the usual and I like it.*

Students mentioned 50 aspects that they disliked. Of the total number of responses, 40% relate to instructional practices and 8% relate to content. Students cited a large variety of activities that they disliked. Assessment (tests, in-class essays, assignments) headed the list being mentioned 47 times. Copying from the blackboard was also disliked (14) as was homework (13), reading (6), writing (4) speeches in front of the class (4) and some topics (2). There were 27 mentions that social studies was 'boring' with 4% of the respondents indicating they could not see any relevance in the subject for their future careers. Three students said:

- *I like nothing about it. It's damn boring...I would rather sit in a room and have to look at the ceiling for the time that period takes.*
- *Social studies has nothing to do with being an auto-mechanic and that's what I'm going to do when I leave school...take over the family business...so why do I need to know about fault lines in North America?*
- *Social studies is boring because all you seem to do is boardwork and homework, just work, work, work!*

Focus group interviews

The group discussion was guided by the following questions:

- What do you like about social studies (and why)?
- What don't you like about social studies (and why)?
- How relevant is social studies to your anticipated future career?
- If you had any advice to offer your social studies teacher now, what would it be?

Students' comments were as follows:

Female students indicated that what they liked about social studies included:

- *Group discussions.*
- *Excursions and guest speakers and role-plays...they are heaps of fun.*
- *I like the economics...I like learning about the share market...cos if we're gonna be rich or not then we need to know that sort of stuff...*

Male students indicated they liked:

- *You get to um, learn about the rest of the world...what's going on...*
- *It's interesting.*
- *It's better than maths... because in maths you have to think.*
- *I like working in groups but this class doesn't ever seem to get the opportunity to do that sort of thing.*
- *When we get our own say on what's happening in the world.*

- *Social studies is straight to the point...it increases your knowledge of the countries and continents.*

Students said they disliked:

- *The way they keep giving you worksheets with articles...all the time.*
- *...too much homework...all the same sort of thing...*
- *...when the teacher raves on it gets a bit boring, and he might be saying something really important but you don't pay attention...*
- *Always doing questions and answers out of a book. I really don't like my teacher either.*
- *Never getting to do any work in groups with our friends.*

When asked about how relevant social studies was to their future careers, students commented more on how important they thought it would be in general to their lives, with many asserting unknown career aspirations at this stage in their lives. Comments included:

- *Depends what you want to be though...like if you want to be a doctor you don't need social studies.*
- *...we should all know something about the history of our country...you only learn the history of your country through social studies.*
- *...the government and how to vote is important.*
- *You pick up a lot of good general knowledge.*

Finally, students were asked to reflect upon what teaching strategies their social studies teacher employed and to offer some alternative suggestions. Students said:

- *Teachers should allow students to work with peers more often so they can have an opportunity of learning from one another.*
- *Computer use should be incorporated into more lessons.*
- *More 'hands-on' activities should be done to stop us from getting bored.*
- *Less teacher talk and more group work because I love working with my friends.*
- *Cut down on the amount and type of homework given...*
- *Have lots of videos, group work, games, guest speakers...and it will be an enjoyable and fun subject.*

Discussion and Conclusion

Attitudes of Students Toward Social Studies

The 144 students from the case study school indicated that social studies was one of the least-liked subjects in Year 9. Of 14 school subjects surveyed, it ranked twelfth, ahead only of music and health. This supports findings in the United States (Jersild, 1949; Haladyna and Thomas, 1979; Shaughnessy and Haladyna, 1985; and Pahl, 1994) and in upper primary schools in Western Australia. (Moroz, 1996 and 1998).

The overall attitude of students to social studies in this study was negative, with a mean of 2.90 on a five point scale. These findings raise concerns about student learning in the subject, particularly when there is empirical evidence to support the notion that attitudes influence learning (Farman et al, 1978).

Factors affecting students' attitudes toward social studies

The study provided some insights into the possible causes of the low status of social studies. Unlike the study by Moroz and Washbourne (1989), which concluded that there were no significant differences in attitudes toward social studies based on gender of the students, the current study found significant differences. Gender comparisons indicated a trend in which females were consistently more positive in most subjects, except design and technology and science, further reinforcing conventional gender stereotypes. Female students were also more positive about the importance and usefulness of social studies, with females ranking it ninth out of fourteen subjects compared with males who ranked it thirteenth.

As in previous research, this case study highlighted that poor student attitudes toward a school subject lies with the intricate and dynamic relationship among student, teacher and learning environment variables (Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun, 1982). Teacher variables hold the key to students' attitudes toward school subjects because teachers, to a large extent, influence what happens in lessons and determine the content and teaching/learning processes (Haladyna et al., 1982a, 1982b; Schug, Todd and Beery, 1983; Moroz, 1996).

A major and long-standing concern for social studies educators has been the limited range of student-centred instructional practices utilised (Haladyna et al, 1982a, 1982b). These and previous research findings repeatedly suggest that most teachers continue to use teacher-centred delivery rather than student-centred inquiry strategies even though the latter has been advocated in the *Syllabus* materials since 1968. In this study Year 9 students indicated that their teachers tend to emphasis use of textbooks, homework, whole class discussions, reading and copying from the blackboard. Students said:

- *Textbooks are boring...they're all we use and I hate reading cos it's boring too...too much work and concentration...*
- *All we do is read passages and answer questions based on them...we don't learn anything from this experience but how to copy the right answers from other people...*

It seems this adherence to traditional didactic teaching practices in social studies, more than the content is what annoys the students most about the subject.

Implications from the study

This study provides a wealth of information for the teachers at the case-study school. The research also provides pointers to further research which might be undertaken using SSATSS with students at various Year levels at a sample of Government and non-Government secondary schools.

The findings are significant because of the dearth of research into attitudes toward social studies in Western Australian secondary schools, but more importantly, because of the implications they might have for facilitating the shift to an outcomes-based approach in the new curriculum.

The study shows that that social studies is not well liked by students in Year 9 at the case study school, supporting the suggestion made by Moroz (1996) that the tendency for negative attitudes as students approached upper primary levels might continue into lower secondary school. The findings also indicate the likelihood of a strong gender influence on attitudes. Female students ranked the learning area as ninth out of 14 while males ranked it

13th. The lower means for males across almost all learning areas highlights the need for concern about boys' secondary schooling generally.

Students as a whole ranked social studies twelfth in a list of fourteen school subjects. They indicated they were bored with the teacher-centred learning strategies and only enjoyed social studies when they watched videos, went on excursions, had guest speakers and did group work - all interactive student-centred learning activities.

Students said:

- *I like small group work because you're actually doing something instead of just sitting there and taking notes...*
- *If computers are what people today say the future are, then why doesn't the leaders of tomorrow (us) use them now...*
- *We do roleplays with our friends in drama and we have the greatest time...that's why drama rules forever over social slops.*

With the introduction of the *Curriculum Framework* in 1998, social studies today theoretically aims to adopt an all embracing student-centred focus, with teachers and students as active participants in the teaching-learning process through an outcomes-based approach. The student feedback from both the SSATSS and focus group discussion supports the need for teachers to consider the inappropriateness of their current delivery.

Social studies has for a long time had a low status among students primarily due to the manner in which it has been delivered. This must be of concern to educators in view of the importance of the subject as one of the key learning. The study has shown that students themselves, while they do not like social studies, recognise its importance to them. As one student commented:

- *Social studies is the only subject where we can learn about world history and geography, discuss current events, debate controversial topics, trace the creation, development and demise of human societies and seek to find solutions to dying environments, cultures and economies. There are no other school subjects which offer these invaluable insights so therefore it is important everyone at some time in their life is exposed to social studies. In this respect, it is up to social studies teachers to be the ambassadors of the subject and to make it as appealing as possible to students.*

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