

Secondary students' growing disenchantment with social studies – a case study

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HOBO1502

**A paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education 2001
Conference. *Crossing Borders: New Frontiers for Educational Research* - 2 to 6 of
December 2001 Fremantle, Western Australia.**

Abstract

This paper describes findings from a case study of student attitudes toward social studies in one independent secondary school in Western Australia. The research used quantitative and qualitative methods to determine the attitudes of lower secondary students toward social studies and to explain the factors influencing these attitudes. A particular focus was on the impact on attitudes of students' year levels.

The findings indicate that students at the case-study school do not like social studies and that its status declines from Year 8 to Years 9 and 10. Students find social studies boring because of the teacher-centred activities and they do not see its relevance for future job prospects.

The study provides a foundation for further research to be conducted

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the attitudes of lower secondary school students toward social studies and explain the factors that influenced these attitudes. A particular focus was on the impact on attitudes of students' year levels.

The case study is significant because of the lack of previous research conducted in this area in Western Australian secondary schools. A comprehensive study of primary school student attitudes toward social studies in Western Australian government schools, however, was undertaken by Moroz (1996). He found that students were generally positive toward school and social studies but that the students' liking for the subject area declined between Year 4 and Year 7. By Year 7 students were negative toward the subject and Moroz surmised that the students' attitudes toward social studies might continue to decline into lower secondary school.

Previous research findings

In the United States, research into student attitudes toward school subjects indicates that social studies is one of the least liked subjects (see, for example, Shaughnessy and Haladyna, 1985). In Australia, Fraser (1981) found that student attitudes toward school become more negative in successive year levels and that this was particularly so for social studies. More recently, Moroz's research (1996) showed that students in primary schools in Western Australia in Years 4, 5, and 6 are positive toward social studies but become negative by Year 7. Between Years 4 and 7 the attitudes toward social studies declined by 23%, whereas student attitudes toward the other twelve subjects declined by only 8.7% (Moroz, 1995, p.46; Moroz, 1996, p.62). In the research, the main reason for the negative attitudes toward social studies appears to be the way the subject is delivered to students by teachers, with heavy reliance on texts (see, for example, Fouts, 1989, p.137). Moroz (1995, p.47; 1996, p.62) similarly found the most common teaching methods employed by teachers in primary schools relied heavily on textbook work.

Theoretical framework

Haladyna, Shaughnessy, and Redsun (1982a, p.2-4) provide the theoretical framework for the study. They categorised factors affecting students' attitudes into three sets of variables: environment, teacher and student. This study focuses on student variables through their perceptions of: the usefulness of social studies, the learning environment, the teaching/learning methods, the teacher and his/her attitudes toward social studies and toward the learners and parental support for social studies. Another key issue was student attitude toward school.

Research Design

Quantitative data was collected using an existing questionnaire, *Student Attitudes Toward Social Studies* (SATSS), developed, tested, and validated by Moroz (1996) in his study of primary school students. This was modified for use with the lower secondary students to become *Secondary Student Attitudes Toward Social Studies* (SSATSS). In order to validate and support the results of the questionnaire, qualitative data was collected through two open-ended questions and focus group discussions for each Year level.

The reliability estimates for the constructs in SSATSS were calculated using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient and all were found to compare favourably to the reliability estimates achieved for the original instrument. All constructs produced highly reliable alphas except "Student perceptions of the classroom environment in social studies" which was marginally reliable.

The case-study school

The research was conducted as a case study of one Independent secondary school in the Perth metropolitan area in first term 1999.

Criterion based sampling was used to select the participating school which had four social studies teachers for Years 8, 9 and 10, all of whom were male. All of the students present on the day and willing to participate were included in the sample.

Research instrument

The initial three items in the questionnaire dealt with demographics, there were then 45 items that dealt with the key issues of the classroom learning environment, a learning activities section, two stand-alone items dealing with students' liking for the social studies teacher and their liking for social studies, and two open-ended questions asking for students' likes and dislikes in social studies.

The qualitative data were collected through focus group interviews, which were conducted separately for each of the year levels. Nine students from each year were randomly selected and asked to participate.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics and independent samples two-tailed *t*- tests were derived using the *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (1996).

Research findings

A total of 203 students participated in the case study. Of these, 79 were in Year 8, 60 in Year 9 and 64 in Year 10.

Key issues associated with student attitudes toward social studies

The data from the key issues about classroom and learning environment were categorised and analysed according to nine constructs:

1. Student attitudes toward school
2. Student attitudes toward social studies
3. Student perceptions of the usefulness of social studies
4. Student perceptions of the teacher's attitude to social studies
5. Student perceptions of the teacher's attitude to students
6. Student perceptions of the classroom environment in social studies
7. Student perceptions of classroom management in social studies
8. Student perceptions of own ability in social studies
9. Student perceptions of parental support for social studies

The responses for each of the items forming the constructs are summarised below according to overall results and Year level comparisons.

Construct 1: Student attitudes toward school

The mean of 3.14 for the five items shows students were generally positive toward their school, although means were low.

Year 9 students were significantly more negative than Year 8 toward school, their liking of the teachers and how good they thought the school rules were. Attitudes toward school improved between Years 9 and 10 but over the three years there was a decline in students' overall attitudes toward school.

Construct 2: Student attitudes toward social studies

Students did not like social studies, its activities or its topics. However, they were very positive to "In social studies I try to do as well as I can", and thought what they learned in social studies was interesting.

Year 9 were more negative than Year 8 in terms of their enjoyment of the activities in social studies, their liking of the topics, how much they try, and how interesting they find their learning in social studies.

Construct 3: Student perceptions of the usefulness of social studies

Students believed social studies was useful (mean 3.29) but did not believe social studies would help them get a job (mean 2.98). Their perceptions of the usefulness of social studies declined significantly for all the items in this construct between Years 8 and 9, but improved slightly in Year 10.

Construct 4: Student perceptions of teacher attitudes toward social studies

Students perceived their social studies teachers to be positive toward the subject (mean 3.32). Year 9 were significantly more negative than Year 8 for "In social studies my teacher often talks about world news".

Construct 5: Student perceptions of teacher attitudes to students

Students were positive about their teachers' attitudes toward students (mean 3.35). Year 8 students were more positive than Years 9 and 10. There were significant differences between all the mean responses of Year 8 and 9 students in this construct and a general decline between Years 9 and 10.

Construct 6: Student perceptions of classroom environment in social studies

Overall, students did not look forward to their next social studies lessons and believed students wasted time in lessons (mean 2.91). However, positive mean responses indicate students worked well together in social studies, the lessons were not noisy and students were slightly competitive with each other.

Year 9 students were generally more negative in their perceptions than the other year levels and Year 8 students were the most positive cohort. There were significant differences between Year 8 and Year 9 mean responses for four statements in this construct.

Construct 7: Student perceptions of classroom management in social studies

Students were generally positive to classroom management (overall mean 3.22). There were significant differences between Year 8 and Year 9 on each item with Year 9 attitudes more negative. Year 10 responses varied.

Construct 8: Student perceptions of own ability in social studies

Students were positive about their own ability in social studies (mean 3.39). Year 8 students were the most positive cohort and there were significant differences between some Year 8 and 9 responses.

Construct 9: Student perceptions of parental support for social studies

Students perceived that parents were encouraging and supportive with regard to social studies (mean 3.52). The only negative mean response was by Year 9 for parental interest in social studies work.

Students' liking of their social studies teachers

Year 8 students were the most positive about their liking for their social studies teachers (mean 3.62) while Year 9 were negative (mean 2.82, a significant difference). The decline in students' liking for their social studies teachers continued in Year 10 (mean 2.57).

Learning activities in social studies

Students were asked to indicate how frequently they participated in a list of 28 activities in social studies lessons. The activities were then ranked by adding the percentages of students' responses to "At least once a week" (5) and "Every two weeks" (4).

Activities such as text book work, reading and copying from the board ranked high on the list for all levels, whereas student-centred activities such as small group work and problem solving were ranked in the lower half. The most common activities were textbook work (91.5%), homework (82%) and reading (80.8%).

Status of social studies and other school subjects

The mean for each subject was used to rank the fourteen subjects listed on the questionnaire. Overall, social studies ranked the lowest of the fourteen subjects and art ranked the highest. The mean response for social studies was only marginally positive (3.05) and responses were not widely dispersed (SD 1.17).

As shown in Table 1, students' ranking of social studies falls from fifth last in Year 8 to second last in Year 9 and last in Year 10. Year 8 students were not negative toward any of the school subjects on the list whereas Year 10 students ranked all of the former core subjects in the lowest six subjects, although, only social studies had a negative mean (2.84).

Students' liking for social studies declined by 15.9%, the largest decline for any subject over the three years.

Students' likes and dislikes about social studies

The responses students gave to the two open-ended questions in SSATSS were divided into three categories: the teacher, the teaching/learning activities and the content of the subject.

Students' responses about the teacher varied according to which teacher they had and the students themselves varied in their opinions of the same teachers.

Most students wrote comments about social studies being "boring" because all they did was write notes from the board or read and work from the textbooks. Students did not like the textbooks, which they said were "decrepit and out of date".

Students' comments on the content of their social studies lessons varied but more than a quarter commented that social studies was boring, irrelevant to their lives and repetitive.

Focus group interviews

During each focus group interview, students were asked what they liked most and what they liked least about social studies.

Year 8 focus group

Year 8 students were generally positive about their teachers. The three different classes participated in different teaching/learning activities. Students said they learnt mapping skills, the world and the solar system. They did not agree that social studies could help them get a job, because "it depends on what you want to be".

Year 9 focus group

Videos and class discussions were the most liked teaching/learning activities of the Year 9 students. The students could not see the relevance of social studies to their future employment and generally they did not like the teachers or the activities they participated in.

Students thought that social studies was "looking at other places", "what's going on in the world" and "learning about people and society today". Students were "tired of" learning about Australia and wanted to know more about their world and how other people in other places lived.

Year 10 focus group

Year 10 students agreed that each teacher was different, and used different strategies to teach social studies. The consensus was that videos were good. Students were also pleased that they participated in more class discussions than they had the previous year.

Students thought the purpose of social studies was to gain general knowledge about the world and their society. However, they did not think social studies was relevant for their future employment.

Conclusion and implications from the research

The analysis of the constructs in the questionnaire indicates students are most positive toward social studies in Year 8 while Year 9 are least positive. There are significant differences between the attitudes of Years 8 and 9 students but few significant differences between Years 9 and 10 students.

Social studies was ranked amongst the bottom five subjects by all year levels and students found social studies boring and irrelevant. Students said social studies was boring, mainly because of the way the teacher taught the subject. The most common activities in social studies lessons were textbook work and copying from the board. Students also found social studies boring because of the repetition: "every year all you get is the colonisation of Australia".

Students were more positive toward social studies (mean 3.22) than they were towards school (mean 3.14). Students were not very positive about liking school and they did not agree that the school had good rules. Years 9 and 10 were negative to the item "I like social studies".

Although students perceived their parents were encouraging and supportive of their work in social studies (mean 3.52), they were not very interested (mean 3.12).

From the two open-ended questions and the focus group interviews, it was evident that the students' perception of their social studies teachers influenced their attitudes toward social studies. Students who were positive about the teachers' classroom management and the learning environment during social studies lessons also liked social studies more. Students who liked their social studies teacher also liked the subject more than students who did not like their social studies teacher.

Implications of the results

The research indicates that students do not like social studies and that this is because of the teacher-centred learning activities, which require very little from the student. Given the aims of social studies (such as outlined in the *Social Studies K-10 Syllabus*, and the *Curriculum Framework*) the results are of concern. Student attitudes toward social studies have implications for the successful learning and development of essential skills and values, which are central to the social studies syllabus at the case study school. It appears that the aims of social studies are not being fully achieved.

This case study provides preliminary findings that can provide a basis for further research.

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Table 1: Students' ranking of school subjects – Year level differences

Subject	Year 8		Subject	Year 9		Subject	Year 10	
	Mean	SD		Mean	SD		Mean	SD
Art	4.33	0.84	Photography	4.13	1.06	Photography	4.29	1.03
Health	4.15	5.27	Art	4.12	1.06	Art	4.13	1.05
Physical education	4.04	1.21	Design and technology	3.77	1.43	Home economics	3.91	1.14
Science	3.85	0.96	Computing	3.70	1.37	Physical education	3.90	1.23

Computing	3.82	1.1 1	Home economics	3.55	1.2 0	Design and technology	3.85	1.1 3
Design and technology	3.63	1.1 6	<i>Maths</i>	3.50	1.1 9	Music	3.57	1.2 5
Drama	3.59	1.2 8	<i>Science</i>	3.48	1.1 4	Health	3.52	0.9 9
Music	3.53	1.4 1	Drama	3.38	1.4 4	Computing	3.48	1.0 3
Photograph y	3.50	1.2 3	Health	3.22	1.5 3	<i>Science</i>	3.47	1.2 3
<i>Social studies</i>	3.38	1.0 2	Physical education	3.18	1.5 3	<i>English</i>	3.39	1.0 8
<i>Maths</i>	3.34	1.3 2	<i>English</i>	3.15	1.0 5	Drama	3.30	1.4 6
Home economics	3.33	1.1 7	Media studies	3.14	1.1 9	<i>Maths</i>	3.30	1.3 1
Media studies	3.04	0.7 3	<i>Social studies</i>	2.83	1.2 5	Media studies	3.22	1.0 6
<i>English</i>	3.04	1.2 7	Music	2.72	1.4 9	<i>Social studies</i>	2.84	1.2 0

5 = Like a lot; 4 = Like; 3 = Not sure; 2 = Dislike; 1 = Dislike a lot . The 'core' subjects are shown in Italics. SD = Standard deviation

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