Factors affecting secondary students' attitudes toward social studies - a case study

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Abstract

The case study described in this paper sought to investigate secondary students' attitudes towards social studies and factors which influence these attitudes. This paper focuses in particular on findings from the study which relate to two factors, student gender and Year level.

In a previous study Moroz (1996) found that Western Australian government primary school students' liking for social studies declined from Years 4 to 7 more strongly than any other school subject. This case study of Catholic secondary students suggests that the declining support for social studies continues into the lower secondary years (8, 9 &10). The decline is greatest for male students who by Years 9 and 10 have negative attitudes towards the subject. Students disliked the teaching-learning practices associated with social studies which were most frequently homework and reading.

This case study appears to have implications for implementation of the new Society and Environment learning area.

Introduction

Social studies was until 1997 one of the four 'core' subjects taught in Western Australian schools. Today it is one of the eight mandated learning areas (Curriculum Framework, 1998). The learning area has changed significantly over the last two decades.

In the mid 1970s, the Social Studies K-10 Syllabus was developed. The Syllabus was meant to provide a coherent and sequential treatment of knowledge, skills and values to ease the transition from primary to secondary schooling. The Syllabus was content driven and an inputs-based approach to the teaching-learning process. Student centred approaches to learning were emphasised (Education Department of Western Australia, 1992, p.1.

In the mid 1980s, the K-10 Syllabus was reviewed by the Beazley Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Education in Western Australia and, as a result, the Unit Curriculum was introduced in 1988. Under Unit Curriculum, changes occurred to the structure, type and progression of units taught, the sequence of skills development and assessment and grading procedures. Units were to be taught over 10 weeks and a minimum of six units were to be completed in Years 8 to 10 but choice of units depended on individual schools.

In 1989 the Australian Education Council, a body comprising Federal and State Ministers of Education, at 'The Hobart Declaration on Schooling', produced the Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia. As a result of the Hobart Declaration, a National Curriculum was mooted, and in 1990 social studies was renamed Studies of Society and Environment (Society and Environment in Western Australia), one of the eight learning areas.

Today, Unit Curriculum is still used in most secondary schools. Recent curriculum development and the introduction of the Curriculum Framework will eventually see it replaced with an outcomes-based approach to teaching. At present Western Australian schools are in the process of implementing the Curriculum Framework.
As a result of these forces of change, learning environments in Western Australian schools are entering a transition phase where teachers are expected to shift from an inputs, content-driven approach to an outcomes-based approach to learning. The social studies learning area is a significant part of the Western Australian school curriculum at both primary and secondary school levels and research into this learning area would serve to inform the Curriculum Framework implementation process.

Purpose of the study

There has been very little research into the attitudes of Years 8, 9 and 10 students towards the social studies learning area and, in particular, Catholic students’ attitudes have not been researched. The purpose of this case study was to identify the attitudes of Year 8, 9 and 10 students towards social studies and the factors that influence these attitudes in one Catholic secondary school located in the Perth metropolitan area. The overall aim of the study was to investigate whether a negative trend in the attitudes towards social studies found in previous research in primary schools was evident in a lower secondary Catholic school. The case study also focused on whether gender affected students’ perception of the learning area.

Definition and terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions are used:

1. **Catholic school**: Western Australian primary and secondary fee paying schools that are constructed and funded by Catholic parishes, the Commonwealth, the Western Australian State Government, student’s parents and communities.

2. **Curriculum Framework**: The Curriculum Framework sets out what all students should know, value and be able to do as a result of the programs they undertake in schools in Western Australia from Kindergarten through to Year 12. Its fundamental purpose is to provide a structure around which schools can build curriculum. It is neither a curriculum nor a syllabus, but a framework to direct the provision of learning opportunities for students attending government or non-Government schools or home schooling. It is aimed at giving schools and teachers flexibility and ownership over curriculum in a dynamic and rapidly changing world environment (Curriculum Framework, 1998, p.1).

3. **Social studies**: Is the study of people as social beings, as they have existed and interacted with each other and the environment, in time and in place (Education Department of Western Australia, 1992, p.1).

4. **Society and Environment Learning Area**: The Society and Environment Learning Area enables students to understand how individuals and groups live together and interact with their environment. It encourages them to actively explore, make sense of and contribute to improving the world around them (Curriculum Framework, 1998).

Previous research

Student attitudes towards social studies have been investigated in a limited capacity by educators in Australia and the United States.

Over the last three decades, research findings from the United States at the high school level have found student attitudes to be consistently negative towards social studies (for example, Schug, Todd and Berry, 1984; and Shaughnessy and Haladyna, 1985). Students generally described social studies as ‘boring and irrelevant’.

Shaughnessy, Haladyna and Redsun (1982a) explored the relationship of student, teacher and learning environment variables to attitudes towards social studies and found that
student motivation, teacher quality/traits and classroom organisation variables were most consistently related to social studies attitudes for each grade level and gender. Other studies supported these findings, for example, Hornstein’s 1990 study which found that social studies learning environments were predominately teacher-centred and not inquiry based. It was not unexpected that almost half of the elementary school children interviewed stated they disliked social studies.

Research in Western Australia by Moroz (1996) found two major concerns in the area of social studies education: firstly, the low status of social studies compared to other school subjects; and, secondly, the fact that students' liking for social studies declined as students progressed to upper primary school. Moroz (1996) found a 23.22% decline in the status of social studies in primary school between Years 4 to 7. This was much more pronounced than the decline in attitude towards any other subject. Students were moderately positive about social studies up to Year 6 but held negative attitudes by Year 7. Of the thirteen school subjects, social studies was ranked second last.

One explanation for the decline in interest in social studies is explained by gender. McTeer, Blanton and Lee (1974) and Fraser (1981) found that girls showed a greater interest and liking towards the subject area than males. However, McTeer also undertook research (1975 & 1986) which showed that males were more positive than females towards social studies and Haladyna and Thomas (1979) found no significant gender differences existed as most students, regardless of their sex, rated the subject in very low positions.

Fouts (1990) showed that girls viewed social studies in a less favourable manner than boys; however, girls liked social studies more than boys when they had a female teacher. In comparison, Moroz and Washbourne (1989) found no significant gender differences in the way students perceived the usefulness, degree of difficulty or appeal of social studies (Ministry of Education, 1990, p.5).

Studies in Australia and the United States to investigate attitudes towards the subject area all confirmed that a reason for the decline in status is because the topic is not interesting to students. Moroz (1996) found that students preferred social studies when it was treated in a more active learning mode. Fouts (1990) and Hutchen (1993) found that students preferred social studies lessons which were cooperative and collaborative learning environments. Teacher reliance on the use of predominately teacher-centred learning activities was found to be an influence on student attitudes towards social studies.

The findings suggest that most teachers continue to conduct social studies lessons using teacher-centred delivery (Moroz & Baker, 1996, p.13). Moroz and Baker argue that, if the learning area is to regain status in schools, 'profound changes are required, particularly in the area of teacher development'. Fouts (1989) and Moroz & Baker (1996) suggest that changing the classroom environment by introducing diverse teaching strategies, active student participation in the lesson, cooperative learning and better positive interpersonal relations, would result in a positive change in attitude towards social studies at all levels.

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical basis for this case study adopts the model developed by Haladyna, Shaughnessy and Redsun (1982b). This model proposed that students’ attitudes towards the learning area relate to the interaction of a set of factors linked to student, teacher and learning environment variables.

Student variables consist of pre-existing student tendencies such as student gender and age, student motivation and perception of ability, perception of subject matter’s importance...
and home/community environments. This case study focused on student age (as reflected by year level) and gender to determine whether or not these are factors that play a role in shaping attitudes. Consideration was also given to whether students' perception of: their own ability, usefulness of the subject matter, their teacher's attitude towards social studies and students, aspects of the classroom learning environment and parental support for the subject area, are factors affecting attitudes to social studies. The learning environment section of the questionnaire, explores the nine key issues or constructs associated with student attitudes towards social studies.

Teacher variables and learning environment variables were not specifically investigated in this research due to time and cost constraints.

Research method

The study had two purposes: firstly, to investigate lower secondary student attitudes towards the social studies learning area in one Catholic school located in the Perth metropolitan area; and secondly, to try to determine which factors influenced these attitudes.

School population and sample size

The sample was derived from lower secondary school at a selected Catholic school. The school is a Catholic co-educational day school (Years 8 to 12) with 728 students enrolled in 1999 and eighty staff members. A total of 475 students were enrolled in Years 8 to 10 at the school.

A total of 421 lower secondary students participated in the survey which was undertaken at the end of term one of the 1999 school year.

Instrument used in the collection of data

An existing attitude scale instrument, developed and validated by Moroz (1996), Student Attitudes Towards Social Studies (SATSS), was utilised. Originally the instrument was used to gauge the attitudes of students towards social studies in primary schools. For this case study SATSS was modified to suit secondary students. A pilot study to determine the validity and reliability of the instrument was not needed as the original instrument was trialed and validated by Moroz.

The questionnaire included 45 constructs measuring variables of the learning environment identified from the literature. A second section dealt with frequency of various learning activities undertaken during social studies lessons. To assess the status of social studies, the instrument then asked students to state their liking for 14 school subjects. Two open-ended items asked students to state their likes and dislikes about social studies and, finally, two stand-alone items were included, one requiring students to state their liking for their social studies teacher, and the second, their liking for social studies.

Reliability values

The consistency of each SSATSS construct was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. Compared with Moroz's study, the reliability estimates showed an improvement in the alpha coefficients for all nine constructs, except for the construct dealing with ‘classroom environment’.
Analysis of data

Research data was analysed using the computer software package, *SPSS 9.0 for Windows* (SPSS Inc, 1999). Descriptive statistics were used initially then formal statistical tests (Independent T-test and Analysis of variance, ANOVA) to investigate if any significant variable relationships existed.

Research findings

The respondent group of 421 included all lower secondary students present at the case-study school on the day of the survey. Of the students surveyed, 39% were in Year 8, 33% in Year 9 and 28% in Year 10. There were slightly more males than females in the sample.

The total number of classes surveyed was 17, with six classes each in Years 8 and 9 and five in Year 10. Class numbers ranged from 22 to 32 students per class. All classes surveyed were taught by female teachers except for one Year 10 class.

Key issues associated with student attitudes towards social studies

The learning environment section of the questionnaire identified student attitudes to nine key issues or constructs associated with social studies:

- 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

Each construct contains five items. Student responses on a five point Likert scale, ranged from ‘strongly agree’ (5) to ‘strongly disagree’ (1), the neutral point on the scale being (3). Table 1 shows the mean results for each construct.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Standardised alpha coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes to school</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes to social studies</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of social studies</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived teacher attitudes to social</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived teacher attitudes to students</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.784</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, student attitudes towards school and social studies were moderate with mean scores of 3.27 for the construct ‘Attitudes to school’ and 3.38 for ‘Attitudes to social studies’. Students perceived social studies to be a useful subject (mean 3.60) and perceived that their teachers were also positive towards the subject area (3.74) and their students (3.70). Attitudes towards the classroom learning environment in social studies lessons were barely positive (3.12). Students had a positive perception of their own ability in the subject (3.54) and parental support was perceived to be high (4.02). Within the constructs, responses for some items differed depending on students' gender and Year level.

**Construct one - Student attitudes to school**

Overall, lower secondary student attitudes towards school were moderate and students indicated that they were ‘happy to go to school’, although their ‘liking for school’ was not as positive. Students stated that they found most subjects interesting.

Male and female responses to items were not significantly different. However, there were significant differences between year levels. Year 8 students were more positive towards the statements ‘I am happy to come to school’, ‘I don't like school' (reversed) and ‘We have good rules in our school.’

**Construct two - Student attitudes to social studies**

More than 44% of students indicated they liked social studies. However, they were marginal in their support for the item ‘I enjoy the activities we do in social studies’. At the same time, they found the things they learnt in social studies to be interesting, they had a strong positive perception about their own achievement and strongly agreed with the statement ‘In social studies I try to do as well as I can’.

Overall, Year 8 students were significantly more positive towards the subject area than Year 9s and 10 and about their achievement in social studies.

**Construct three - Usefulness of social studies**

More than 77% of students felt that social studies would help them with an understanding of the world around them, 56% indicated that they expected to make use of what they learnt in social studies and 35% were positive that social studies would help them gain future employment. Overall, 63% of students indicated that doing social studies was important and disagreed that they did not learn much in social studies.
Significant differences were evident between year levels. Year 9 and 10 students were most negative towards the item 'If I do well in social studies it will help me get a job' and Year 9 students towards 'Doing social studies is not important' (reversed).

**Construct four - Perceived teacher attitudes to social studies**

Students generally perceived that their teachers enjoyed and were interested in social studies.

Significant differences were found between year levels for 'In social studies my teacher often talks about world news' with Year 10 students responding most positively. A reason for this difference could be that in both the *Social Studies K-10 Syllabus* and *Unit Curriculum*, units of study completed in Year 10 focus on current and past world events and issues. The open ended question section also found that the discussion of current world events and issues, was one of the most liked aspects of social studies lessons.

**Construct five - Perceived teacher attitudes to students**

Generally, students felt their teachers were fair and liked all students. Fewer than 65% of students disagreed that during social studies lessons their teacher was unfair. Over half agreed with the item 'In social studies lessons the teacher likes most of the students'. Students thought that their teachers encouraged them to do well during lessons and would reinforce good work completed in class. Approximately 69% of students suggested that their social studies teacher was interested in student opinion.

From Years 8 to 10 significant differences were evident for 'In social studies lessons the teacher is unfair', with an absolute decline from 3.99 in Year 8 to 3.48 in Year 10. Significant differences were found for other items in the construct.

**Construct six - Classroom environment**

Students liked and believed social studies to be important. However, fewer than 21% of students looked forward to their next social studies lesson. Students agreed that in social studies students worked well together and that lessons were not too noisy but more than 44% stated that many students wasted time during social studies lessons. About 50% of students stated they tried to get a higher mark in social studies than their friends.

A significant difference was evident between female and male responses to the item 'In social studies I try to get a higher mark than my friends' with males more positive. Year level responses were significantly different for 'I look forward to my next social studies lesson' and 'Many of the students waste time in social studies lessons' with Year 10 more negative.

**Construct seven - Classroom management**

About 56% of students perceived that their teacher was able to control students in their classrooms, 37% of students indicated that during social studies lesson the class was well organised and 67.3% thought their teachers' explanations were clear and that they used good resource materials during social studies lessons. Student attitudes were barely positive towards the statement, 'In social studies lessons there is lots to do when I finish my work early'.
Significant differences were found between genders’ and year levels’ attitudes towards the latter item, with male students higher than females and a decline by Year 10.

**Construct eight - Perception of own ability**

Overall, students had a positive perception of the their own ability in social studies, they felt that they could complete all the tasks set and almost three quarters suggested that social studies was not too hard for them. In the open-ended section of the questionnaire, students suggested that what they liked about social studies was that it was easy for them to complete the work and gain good marks for project work.

A significant difference was found between male and female responses to the item 'I can do all the work in social studies', with males more positive.

**Construct nine - Parental support for social studies**

There was strong parental support for students to do well in social studies, students agreed that their parents encouraged them to do well in social studies and that they thought social studies was an important subject. More than 80% suggested parents encouraged them to complete social studies homework and that they were interested in their childrens’ social studies work. Significant differences were found between year level responses with Year 8 more positive towards 'My parents think social studies is not an important subject' (reversed), 'My parents help me with my social studies homework if I need help' and 'My parents encourage me to do my best in social studies'.

**Learning activities in social studies**

Students were asked to indicate the frequency of twenty eight learning activities (instructional practices) undertaken during social studies lessons. Learning activities were then ranked in order from most common to least common learning activities. The rank order of activities was based on the combined percentages of students who indicated they undertook the activities either once a week or every fortnight.

Most frequent learning activities conducted in social studies lessons were:

- Homework (96% of students undertook this at least every two weeks);
- Text book work (91%);
- Reading (81%);
- Copying from the blackboard (71%); and
- Map work (63%).

The most common learning activities were predominately teacher-centred. The least frequent activities were student-centred approaches such as:

- Problem solving;
- Small group activities;
- Computer activities;
- Newspaper activities;
- Whole class discussions;
- Role-plays;
- Guest speakers; and
- Excursions.
The results are interesting. At a time when student centred learning and inquiry based approaches are recommended for learning in social studies and other school subjects, the data show that social studies lessons at the case study school adopt teacher-centred approaches and that diverse teaching strategies involving active student participation and cooperative learning were absent from or infrequently used in the learning environment.

**Students attitudes towards social studies and other school subjects**

Students were asked to state their liking for 14 school subjects on a scale ranging from 'like a lot' (5) to 'dislike a lot' (1). Mean scores were calculated for student responses and subject areas were ranked in accordance with their mean score.

Students were positive about social studies; however, the learning area was one of the least favoured. Social studies ranked eleventh out of 14 school subjects, ahead of only English, media studies and music education. The most liked subjects were physical education and art. Of the academic subjects, science ranked the highest in eighth position, followed by mathematics in ninth and English in twelfth. Students were most positive towards subjects which focus on performance, rather than written type assessments.

No significant differences were found between the genders; however, significant differences in year level responses were found. Social studies was ranked twelfth in Year 8 and 9 and eleventh in Year 10. Students' liking towards social studies dropped from 3.46 in Year 8 to 3.00 in Year 10, giving an overall decline of 13.30% in students' liking for the subject.

**Year Level and Gender Differences**

In Year 8 female students' most liked subjects were physical education, art and home economics while males liked design and technology and physical education. Female students ranked social studies nine while males ranked it eleven.

In Year 9 both males and females ranked social studies 11. However, females' attitudes towards social studies were positive whereas males in the same Year were negative. Females were most favourable towards home economics and photography and males towards physical education and photography.

In Year 10 social studies was ranked tenth by male and female students. Male students were negative towards the subject with a mean of 2.96 while females were barely positive with a mean of 3.09. For females art was the most liked subject, while males most liked design and technology and physical education.

**Rate of decline: social studies and other school subjects**

**Year Level Changes**

Overall, students' liking for social studies showed a significant decline of 13.30%, over the lower secondary years of schooling. From Years 8 to 9 students liking for the subject declined by 10.69%, whereas from 9 to 10 it declined by 2.91%. Students' liking for the other subjects showed an average decline of 9.6%, significantly lower than the decline for social studies. The magnitude of the deterioration of student attitudes towards social studies over the lower secondary years of schooling was greater for male students than for females.
Table 2: Years 8 to 10 female and male students' attitudes towards social studies

Female Male

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female Mean</th>
<th>Female SD</th>
<th>Female Rank</th>
<th>Male Mean</th>
<th>Male SD</th>
<th>Male Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 9</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 10</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change</td>
<td>-12.43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-14.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SD = Standard Deviation

As indicated in Table 2, female students’ liking for social studies declined by 12.43% across the lower secondary years of schooling and males by 14.20%. For both genders this was significantly greater than for other school subjects. Male students however showed a much higher average decline across school subjects (not including social studies) of 13.91% while for females this was 4.10%, suggesting that for boys the decline in status for social studies is part of a wider growing dislike of school subjects generally.

Students’ liking for social studies

Students were asked to state how much they liked social studies on a scale from ‘Social studies is my favourite subject’ (1), ‘Social studies is okay’ (3) to ‘I don’t like anything about social studies at all’ (5).

Overall, 56% of lower school students agreed with the statement ‘Social studies is okay.’ Twenty one percent of students were most favourable towards the subject area, while 23% stated that they did not like social studies. The overall mean score was 3.03. Year 8 students were most favourable towards the social studies subject area with a positive mean of 2.87. Year 9 students were less positive than Year 8 and Year 10.

In Year 8 females were less positive towards the subject area than males but in Years 9 and 10 they were more positive (see Table 3).

Table 3: Gender and year level differences - Students' liking for social studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to this item, males' liking for the subject declined more than that of females over the lower secondary years of schooling.

**Students’ liking for their social studies teacher**

A stand-alone item asked students to rate their liking for their social studies teacher from 'strongly agree' (5) to 'strongly disagree' (1).

Lower secondary students' attitudes towards their social studies teachers were moderate. Approximately 54% liked their social studies teacher and the overall mean score for the item was 3.38. Year 8 students had a positive mean of 3.84, Year 9 were more moderate (mean 3.19) and Year 10 did not like their social studies teacher (2.97).

There was no significant differences between genders; however, for all year levels, female students were more positive than males towards the statement 'I like my social studies teacher'.

**Table 4: Gender and year level differences - Students' liking for their social studies teacher**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Students' likes and dislikes**

The open-ended questions of the student questionnaire were designed to determine what students liked and disliked about social studies.
Likes

Aspects of social studies liked by the students included the teaching-learning practices, the topics learnt, their classroom teacher’s instructional practices, the usefulness of the subject and student’s perception of their own achievement in social studies.

Forty five percent of students indicated that they preferred social studies activities which were interactive and student-centred. For example, students wrote:

- I like it when we go onto the Internet to look up things about space.
- I like it when we go to the library for social studies lessons.
- I like to do lots of map work and discussion in class.
- I like group activities.

Fifteen percent of students commented that they liked social studies when they were engaged in group work and class discussions, 37% enjoyed learning about certain topics, such as: world issues, the solar system, etc.

Almost 12% of students commented that they liked social studies because of its value and importance.

- It is fun and interesting and you learn from what you do in class and helps you in other areas like homework.
- I like it how we can learn more about the world we live in. We can use various resources to help us get a better understanding of the past, present and future.

The study’s findings suggest students’ perception of their own ability in social studies and self concept were highly positive.

Dislikes

The findings show that social studies is one of the least liked subjects. Student response to the open-ended question ‘What do you dislike about social studies?’ reinforced that what students disliked related to the teaching-learning practices, the repetition and the lack of interesting and relevant topics learnt, the classroom learning environment and teacher practice, management and organization during social studies lessons. Writing and reading activities such as ‘copying off the board,’ tests, essays, worksheets, working from textbooks and workbooks were disliked by 48% of the respondents. Homework and reading were the most disliked and most frequent practices undertaken during social studies lessons.

- I hate doing worksheets, especially worksheets in our green books we have to do for homework.
- I disliked repeatedly reading the same thing over and over again.
- I dislike the amount of writing we have to do.

Fifteen percent of students indicated that they disliked social studies because they never engaged in activities that were fun and student centred.

- I don’t like social studies because it is not very interesting, the activities are boring and we don’t get to go on excursions.

Forty eight percent of the respondents suggested that they disliked social studies when they learnt about the same topics as in previous year levels.
Students placed emphasis on the classroom learning environment. Eight percent of respondents suggested that during social studies some students were noisy and wasted time, and that their teacher could not control the class.

- I dislike social studies when everyone is calling out and then it gets too noisy to work and think.
- I don’t like how mostly everybody wastes time.

Teacher explanation and instruction practices were frequently mentioned as an aspect of social studies lessons students disliked.

- I don’t like that the teacher does not explain anything properly.
- Our teacher talks too much in class and never explains anything really well.

Student responses to the open-ended items reinforced the survey findings from other items. Clearly, students dislike the learning area in terms of the delivery of the subject (especially the frequent use of teacher-centred learning activities), its content and the classroom learning environment.

Summary

As a group, students:

- liked school and were positive towards most subjects learnt;
- were moderately positive towards social studies;
- indicated that social studies was an important subject that would help them with an understanding of the world around them;
- did not think social studies would help them gain future employment;
- perceived their social studies teacher to be fair and liked most students;
- did not look forward to future social studies lessons;
- indicated that many students wasted time during social studies lessons;
- agreed social studies was not too hard for them;
- indicated strong parental support for social studies.

The most frequent learning activities undertaken in social studies were predominately teacher centred such as homework and textbook work. The less frequent learning activities were student-centred, inquiry-based approaches. Other findings were as follows:

- Of the 14 school subjects social studies was ranked eleventh.
- The younger the student, the more positive was their attitude towards social studies.
- Female students were more positive towards most school subjects.
- Overall, 56% of students indicated ‘social studies is okay’.
- Year 8 students were most favourable towards social studies.
- Approximately 54% of students liked their social studies teacher.
- Year 8 students were most favourable towards their social studies teacher and Year 10 did not like their teacher.

Students’ likes and dislikes

In response to the open-end section of the questionnaire, students indicated:

- 45% of students preferred social studies activities which were interactive and student centred.
• 15% liked social studies when they involved group work and class discussions.
• 37% enjoyed learning about certain topics.
• 48% disliked the learning activities undertaken in social studies lessons and the repetition of content taught.

The findings of this study were consistent with the findings of Moroz (1996b), indicating that social studies was one of the least liked subjects and that the decline in support for social studies found in upper primary school continued into the lower secondary years of the case study Catholic school.

Within this study particular emphasis was placed on the variables of student age and gender and it was shown that these factors played a key role in shaping the student attitudes in the case study school. Student attitudes became significantly more negative as students progressed through the schooling years and, while the status of social studies when compared with other school subjects was low for both male and female students, males were more negative towards social studies over the lower secondary years. These findings are consistent with previous findings (for example, Shaughnessy, Haladyna and Redsun, 1982; Curry and Hughes, 1965; and Moroz, 1996b), that is, student gender and year level are a determinant of student attitudes towards social studies.

The reliance on predominately teacher-centred learning during social studies lessons led to students’ perception of the learning area to be ‘uninteresting and boring’. Consistent with the findings of Moroz (1996), the study found that students preferred social studies when learning was interactive and cooperative. As suggested by Haladyna and Shaughnessy (1982), Fouts (1989), Hornstein (1990) and Moroz and Baker (1996), this study affirms that the classroom learning environment created by the teacher is an important determinant of student attitudes towards social studies.

Implications

Research into students’ perceptions about education provides a valuable tool which teachers and school administrators can use in making decisions about educational practices in schools. This case study confirms that students valued the social studies learning area in terms of its importance and usefulness. However, their liking for the learning area declined significantly over the lower secondary years of schooling. The reasons for the subject’s low status and the decline throughout lower secondary relate to the dominance of teacher-centred learning activities. If the learning area is to improve its status, there needs to be a shift towards adopting diverse teaching strategies which are cooperative and inquiry based.

Developing and achieving a balanced social studies curriculum under the new Curriculum Framework currently being implemented, is a challenge for all educators. However if teachers and curriculum coordinators are able to meet some of the needs of students by providing learning opportunities which are outcomes based, it may lead to an improvement in student attitudes towards the social studies learning area.
References


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