

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL STUDIES:
A STUDY OF MIDDLE SCHOOL AND HIGH
SCHOOL STUDENTS IN JORDAN**

Khaled Alazzi
University of Oklahoma

John J. Chiodo
University of Oklahoma

Abstract

Using a phenomenological research approach, two groups of eighth and 11th-grade students were interviewed in the Zarqa Province of Jordan regarding their perceptions of social studies. A total of 48 students were selected to participate in this qualitative study. The research revealed that the students in both middle school and high school valued social studies, while at the same time they did not rate social studies as their favorite courses. Students indicated that many teachers continued to depend on textbooks and lectures as the main tool for teaching. In addition, students put a high value on teacher enthusiasm and interactive learning. Generally, students were not as negative toward social studies as indicated by previous research studies in the United States.

Familiarizing each generation with a system of beliefs and values pertaining to all cultures provides students with concrete information to help them develop a sound awareness of the world. In our educational system, the social studies curriculum is one of the most influential ways in which we attempt to achieve the goal of exploring these central values with our children.

In 1916, the term social studies was used for the first time in the United States by the National Education Association, which defined social studies as those courses “whose subject matter relates directly to the organization and development of human society” (National Education Association, 1916, p. 9). More recently, The National Council for the Social Studies (1993) developed the following definition:

Social Studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archeology, 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 interdependent world.

In the country of Jordan, the Ministry of Education defines social studies much like it is stated in the United States. The goal of social studies education in both Jordan and in the United States is to prepare young people to be good citizens in a world that is becoming more and more complex. The National Council for Social Studies divides social studies objectives into four categories: knowledge, skills, values, and participation. These four categories of social studies learning are also addressed in the objectives declared by the Jordan Ministry of Education for elementary schools and high schools alike (Ministry of Education, 1988). Each of these categories provides the basis of curriculum development in both United States and Jordan. The Ministry of Education in Jordan requires middle school and high school social studies departments to teach courses in the following subject areas: history, geography, citizenship education, and social education. Textbooks are used in these subject areas, along with teacher developed resources with the primary purpose of achieving the education goals of the Jordanian social studies education program.

Addressing the Problem

Jordan's people are facing various social, economic, and educational difficulties regarding the structure of their school system. As is true for many societies, Jordan is rapidly industrializing; consequently its citizens will need to develop the knowledge and skills to run factories, industries, and businesses. The success of Jordan's stability and growth relies strongly on its educational system. Social studies is a major part of the school curriculum because it explores morals and values, and provides students with the ability to understand the values associated with being a good citizen.

Students who have a sound understanding of their country's culture and historical development will be more inclined to address recent societal problems. To help the Jordanian people to cope with rapid economic, social, and political developments, and to bring about meaningful participatory citizenship among younger students, a vital social studies curriculum is needed. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine the attitudes expressed toward social studies by the students in Jordan's public schools. Since the Ministry of Education in Jordan is currently reviewing the social studies curriculum, it was the assumption of the researchers that in order to develop and update the curriculum, an exploration into students' attitudes toward social studies should be conducted. Undoubtedly, this will trigger an interest in social studies and uncover answers to several puzzling questions.

This study was designed to investigate the attitudes of students towards the social studies who were in middle schools and high schools in Jordan's Zarqa Province. The following

questions were used to direct the research study. What are the perceptions of students toward the current social studies curriculum in their schools? What are the implications for curriculum changes based on these attitudes?

Related Research

A review of the related literature revealed little research about social studies education and the curriculum in Jordan. Most studies focused on higher education; none focused specifically on middle and high school education. Mohammad Khawalidah (1987) conducted an examination of the content in social studies textbooks. His questionnaire addressed curriculum, textbooks, teaching methods, learning objectives, and education experience. Based on his analysis of social studies textbooks, curriculum, and teaching methods, Khawalidah emphasized a strong need for improvement in the current social studies curriculum in Jordan's middle schools. He found that all aspects of the social studies curriculum needed significant improvement based on western standards.

In 1990, Kawood conducted an evaluation of Jordan's 10th grade social studies curriculum which focused on contemporary geography. Kawood discussed both the status of geography, and the problems present in the geography curriculum as viewed by geography teachers, supervisors, and education specialists. The textbooks were studied to determine their strengths and weaknesses. His research suggested that the geography objectives did not assist students in their development of critical thinking or critical inquiry.

In the United States, Schug, Todd, and Beery (1982) surveyed 23 sixth-grade students and 23 12th-grade students in order to determine their attitudes towards the various academic areas. In the study, English, mathematics, and reading were ranked ahead of social studies. Participants described social studies as boring and far from anything they could relate to in their lives.

Corbin (1994) researched male and female high school students and examined their attitudes toward social studies. Corbin surveyed 370 seniors from New York's urban public high schools (Queens and Nassau County), as well as 167 seniors from suburban high schools. A factor analysis of an attitude scale yielded four dimensions that were used to predict achievement. The tests indicated the following: (a) high school males and females expressed more interest in studies that were strongly associated to social issues; (b) females who expressed a greater interest in social studies possessed a strong command of communication skills; that is, writing and speaking; and (c) four dimensions of learning (general interest, values, presentation, and cooperative learning) were not reflected in the student surveys.

In recent research in the United States on students' attitudes toward social studies, Chiodo and Byford (2004) conducted a study inquiring into the attitudes students possessed regarding social studies. They interviewed eighth and 11th-grade students and found that two themes emerged. The first theme suggested that a teacher's involvement and enthusiasm led to positive images of social studies by middle and high school students. The second theme suggested that students' positive attitudes toward social studies were based on their perceived utilitarian value of the subject matter.

Related to the area of student attitudes toward the social studies curriculum is student attitudes toward the teacher. In 1982, Haladyna founded that the teacher-learning environment

played a key role in shaping students' attitudes about social studies. Teachers who were willing to assist students in learning, showed enthusiasm in the classroom, and paid close attention to student needs had a strong effect on how students felt about social studies. The effective teacher was capable of creating a positive learning climate in the classroom. Both classroom settings and students attitudes could be altered to improve students' thoughts of social studies (Wheeler & Ryan, 1973). Mager (1968) indicated that attitude alone contributed largely to teacher success. First, how a student judged a teacher was linked to the student's potential for developing an open-minded attitude about the subject. Second, students who had a positive attitude toward the subject matter were more likely to continue being focused on that particular subject. Third, students' feelings regarding school helped to positively shape relationships with parents, teachers, and peers. Both Mager (1968) and Haladyna (1982) showed that the approach the teacher takes when teaching social studies had a unique influence on school curriculum.

Beyond the international research cited, there have been few additional studies on the topic. Therefore, a study relating to students' perceptions of social studies in Jordan is important for educational reforms in that country.

Focus of the Research

Building on the previous research, we interviewed public school boys in Jordan to find out: What are the attitudes of eighth and 11th-grade students toward social studies? Specifically, we wanted to know: (a) How does a teacher stimulate student interest in social studies? (b) How does teaching methodology shape the attitudes of students towards social studies? (c) Do students see any correlation between social studies to the present and future? (d) What are some of the students' concerns or recommendations regarding the social studies curriculum and instruction? (e) Do the students' comments and concerns regarding social studies change between middle school and high school? By analyzing the findings of this study, educators will learn new information about students' perceptions of social studies in the country of Jordan.

In Jordan, the Muslim Religion prohibits co-educational schools at the middle and high school level of instruction. However, there are some co-educational elementary schools in the country. For comparative purposes, we chose a middle and high school for boys rather than mixing schools for both boys and girls.

A phenomenological research design was used to capture a student's sense of appreciation for the social studies curriculum. For the purpose of this study, data needed to be gathered in order to explore and interpret student attitudes towards the social studies curriculum and teaching methodology. Phenomenological research involves philosophical roots of phenomenology, focusing on experience and interpretation (Bryman, 1988). When conducting the phenomenological study, the assumption is that there is an essence of a shared experience which is present. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990).

We randomly selected two groups of eighth-grade (middle school) and 11th-grade (high school) male students. They were interviewed on their perceptions of social studies. These particular grades were chosen for the research study taking into account research on brain growth development of middle and high school boys (Bosowski, 1981).

When the study was conducted, 340 students were enrolled in eighth grade, while five hundred and sixty students were enrolled in 11th-grade. A total of 48 students (24 male, eighth grade students, and 24 male high school students) were chosen to participate, using a two-phase random sampling from each perspective grade. We selected four classes from each school and then randomly selected students from each class to ensure proper representation.

The participants in the study were randomly selected by “purposeful sampling.” The sampling is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand, and gain insight from a situation. During “purposeful sampling,” subjects are selected according to how they give consideration to the average person and situation (Gay & Airasian, 1999). Therefore, with certainty, we chose to study younger (8th grade) and older (11th-grade) students.

The study was conducted in the Zarqa province in Jordan where schools are required to teach social studies as part of the school curriculum. This requirement comes from the Ministry of Education, where the core curriculums are developed by the government. The Ministry of Education identifies social studies as history, geography, citizenship education, psychology, and sociology. The goal of social studies education in Jordan is to prepare young people to be intelligent and compassionate citizens. Local school districts are responsible for implementing these goals into the social studies curriculum.

Both eighth and 11th-grade participants were located in a community with a population of 150,000 permanent residents. Two universities are located within the community; one university is public and the other one is private. The school district consists of 16,441 male students. The middle school in which the study was conducted was one of 10 similar sized middle schools within the district. The social studies content covered in the school curriculum included citizenship education for sixth grade, ancient civilization for seventh grade, and modern world history for eighth grade.

The high school students who participated in the study were from one of eight high schools located in the community. The particular high school chosen had a student population of nearly 2,500 students. The way Social Studies courses operated in the high schools were similar to the middle schools. The only difference was the content of the courses. Ninth grade students are required to take Arab geography. Tenth grade students are required to take Jordan geography. It is mandatory for 11th-grade students to take Modern Arab History and citizenship education. Finally 12th-grade students are required to take history of Jordan, Arab geography, and World geography. An exception is made, however, for high school students who specialize in a scientific field. They are not required to enroll in the social studies program.

This phenomenological research study was designed to inquire into the attitudes of eighth and 11th-grade students. However, it is important to realize that the data collected and the methods used for both grades were similar, not identical. In both grades, we interviewed each participant, took careful notes, and audio taped individuals as they answered questions. The interviews were transcribed for the participants of both grades.

All interviews were conducted from June to August. The purpose of the interviews was to discover the overall opinions of eighth and 11th-grade students regarding the social studies curriculum and instruction. A number of general questions were used from previous studies to initially guide the interviews (Appendix A).

Interviews were tape recorded to ensure accuracy, and later transcribed. Each transcript was verified by listening to the audiotape while reading the documentation. Data analysis followed the Diener and Crandall’s (1978) model of social and behavioral research. Notes were

taken for each interview, describing nonverbal cues and posture of each student. The text of each interview was then coded and resulting themes were noted. Then, reinforcing themes were established within the bound system (eighth grade) through comparisons with field notes. The same procedure was completed for the second bound system (11th-grade). Neither researcher was employed by the school system or knew the students who participated.

The use of predetermined questions and consistent procedures in coding supported the reliability of the findings. Data findings were given special attention in order to assess previous research. Each group was compared to the other, tracing the development of students' perceptions of social studies through the reaction of the middle school and high school students.

Research findings

This study was designed to explore, in depth, the attitudes of middle school and high school students about social studies in Jordan's Zarqa Province, with teacher and learning variables. As a result of data analysis, two themes emerged from this study. The first theme indicated that teachers' involvement and enthusiasm led to a positive image of social studies by middle and high school students. The second theme indicated if and to what extent both groups valued social studies education.

Throughout their past years in school, students acquired experience, knowledge, and insight related to what they learned in social studies. This insight, in the long run, benefited the researchers who felt that the students gave an honest account of their attitudes toward the social studies curriculum.

All through the interviews the students seemed to be honest, open minded, and expressed a genuine interest for social studies. Other themes mentioned in the interviews, such as an undemocratic educational system, discipline, (pertaining to several topics) and the importance of a clean campus did not change students' perceptions of social studies. During the interviews, students expressed the importance of a solid education, which included social studies education, active learning, and teacher enthusiasm. All these elements helped to instill a positive attitude in the students.

The results showed that the teacher played a major role in how well the students learned. They could make students love social studies or hate it. If the teacher's enthusiasm for the lesson being presented was noticed by the students, they would most likely feed off the teacher's energy. Of course, possessing knowledge of the subject would also make students perk up and listen. But knowledge is only half of what it takes to spark a student's curiosity. Both middle and high school students expressed their concerns regarding teaching methodology and how boring it was when the teacher had little knowledge about instruction.

All students expressed the need for thought-provoking activities, such as discussion or debate, as well as contests, and games for being able to answer challenging questions about their culture or another culture. For eighth grade students, the main concern regarding teaching styles was teachers who lecture from only the textbook. The students' reactions reflected Siler's (1998) research regarding teachers who used one method of instruction. This limited way of teaching inhibited student motivation, as it lacked a variety of teaching techniques—techniques every teacher must bring into the classroom. Eighth grade students, for the most part, were very enthusiastic about classroom discussion and debate. For high school students, there was a great

desire for new instructional techniques. They wanted teachers to involve students in class discussions, letting them express their opinions on the subject matter. They felt that the teacher should not dominate the class discussion and should allow and encourage students to voice what they feel about a particular story/lesson. For them, class must be about positive interaction between teacher and student (Personal interview with Mohamed).

Social studies was viewed by the students as being in a rut. The reason so many students said they had a hard time enjoying it was the curriculum is restricted to a traditional system—the same traditional system that uses tests to measure how much a student has retained. This system also uses textbooks, with little thought-provoking material. The majority of students responded that their social studies teacher relied on the text, lecturing, video, worksheets, and traditional tests as methods of learning.

Students seemed to support Hess's (2001) statement that teaching with discussion and allowing students an opportunity to give feedback will enhance their desire for knowledge. Furthermore, teaching with discussion allows students to develop personal skills and enhances critical thinking and self-confidence.

I loved last year's history teacher, who made me feel passionate about history. Before that lingering experience, I took a history class with outdated information, lectures that practically put me to sleep; the class was not even worth my energy. However, that kind of teacher (last year's teacher) is not common; and that kind of teacher makes people appreciate motivated teachers. Last year's teacher engaged students in the history of events. It seemed like he took his students back to the past. He made history my first choice, not my last. (Personal interview with Zoher)

Students agreed they enjoyed class when a teacher was enthusiastic and excited about the subject. Moreover, according to the students, enthusiasm and excitement is what brings students to feel motivated and have a strong desire to learn. Students also said when they enjoyed the class, they treated teachers with respect.

I dislike teachers who are rigid and narrow minded, even if that teacher is knowledgeable about his subject; it still doesn't mean the students will learn. I like teachers who are tolerant and calm and teachers who treat their students with respect, greeting them each day with a warm smile. (Personal interview with Yanal)

The comments by the students seemed to agree with Fouts (1987), Fouts, Chan, and Biao (1993), and McGowan, Sutton, and Smith (1990). Their arguments were that teachers' positive perceptions in the classroom may be more effective than any one method of teaching.

In these studies we did not find negative perceptions toward social studies education being expressed by middle and high school students. Evidence of this was gathered from both informal conversations and questions addressed to all students. This supports Chiodo and Byford's (2004) research regarding the subject. These researchers found no negative perception toward social studies in the middle and high school students in a southwestern school system in the United States.

Conversations with 37 students indicated that social studies was useful and of great importance for their future. Eighteen out of the 24 middle school students were pleased with the

social studies curriculum taught in school. Students also revealed that they learned from their citizenship education class about patriotism and supporting the country. This contradicts studies conducted by Khawlidah in Jordan (1987) regarding what is learned from the social studies curriculum. We found that the content areas of the social studies curriculum were valued by the students.

I find it very important that I took citizenship and history classes. I learned from the citizenship class how the governmental system operates and I learned about the Constitution of Jordan, about my responsibilities and my duties to my country. I learned from history class about the history of my country, the history of the Arab world, and the history of the world. (Personal interview with Waled)

Students revealed that an interest in social studies, in both the middle and high school, resulted in progress, ultimately preparing them for the future. These comments, however, contradict research findings by Haladyna (1982) and Schug et al. (1982) that suggested middle school and high school students saw little relevance in social studies, and that it was boring. Also, previous studies in the United States revealed students' interests dropped with every grade level (Greenblatt, 1962; Haladyna & Thompson, 1979; Herman, 1965; Jersild, 1949).

In Jordan, high school students also expressed the value of social studies education. Students realize the importance of learning and understanding government systems; they were aware that they had a responsibility toward their country. Twenty of the 24 high school students described the importance of citizenship education and history. Students said that history and citizenship classes touched their daily lives and helped link them to their heritage.

I think the citizenship class has given me background knowledge of how a democratic government operates, especially in the democrat world. This class will help me and my classmates, who want to study political science and history in college. (Personal interview with Omar)

This contradicts Kawood's (1990) study conducted in Jordan, which revealed that social studies objectives did not assist students in their development of critical thinking or critical inquiry in the area of social studies.

In our research, 12 high school students out of 24, and 21 middle school students out of 24 rank social studies as one of their three or four favorite classes. Both middle and high school students often selected science and mathematics, English, and Arabic as their first or second choice because of the labor market or economic opportunity. These rankings support Chiodo and Byford's (2004) and Schug et al.'s (1982) research regarding the subject.

Implications

The research we have conducted in the Jordanian schools reveals that students in both middle school and high school valued social studies, while at the same time they did not rate the courses as their favorite choice among classes. Students also believed that social studies was a

good option for an elective course. Class climate, teacher enthusiasm, methodology, and previous experience were the main factors found that improve the image social studies as part of the curriculum. Students revealed that many teachers continue to depend on textbooks and lectures as main tools for teaching. These two methods focus traditionally on presenting information rather than taking an interactive approach.

In interpreting the findings of our research, we believe that social studies teachers in Jordan should not focus exclusively on lectures and memorization; students should be given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss their answers. Students should be introduced to a practical application of the content related to the Jordanian society through field trips and other “hands-on” experiences. In addition, Jordanian teachers need to be aware of individual differences among students: different levels of intelligence, different learning styles, and differences relating to comprehension of understanding subject/material. Because of these differences, teachers must not only realize, but also study the differences and use a variety of teaching strategies to ensure that all students have a quality education. It is very important that teachers evaluate various methods, applying them to each student as they see fit. It is important for teachers to understand that the teacher is the key factor in a students’ perception of social studies. When teachers use different teaching strategies to improve the learning climate, it is possible that a positive attitude about social studies will transpire (Siler, 1998).

As a result, the social studies curriculum in Jordan should be revised to include the most recent available information and to reflect contemporary research in social studies education in order to prepare young Jordanians for living in the 21st century. The failure of these implications could cause a decline in the positive attitudes toward social studies in the country.

Conclusion

In closing, the researchers believe that the participants’ experience described in this study represent what might occur in any middle or high school in Jordan. Additional re- search is needed to add or refute the conclusion of this study. This study was conducted in two schools in the same school district and this could be a potential deficiency. Further studies are needed from different districts in order to analysis a broad base of students. The expectation, environment, and socioeconomic statuses may not be the same from different school settings. Therefore, the attitudes of the students, teachers, and parents may all vary. Although this study was conducted on only male students, future studies should be conducted on female students. Indeed, these two bound systems (8th and 11th-grade students) may be the exception and not necessarily the rule.

Since this research used phenomenological method of qualitative analysis, quantitative methods should also be conducted. Although we are satisfied with the facts and findings, the limitation of qualitative studies are recognized. A broad quantitative survey may further assistant to the understanding of student’s perception toward social studies.

Regardless of the limitations found in this study, the researchers still believe that findings add to our understanding of a student’s perception toward social studies in Jordan. These perceptions need to receive attention on a regular basis in order to make sure we have progress in assisting our students in acquiring knowledge, skills, and a healthy perception toward social studies.

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Appendix A
Student Interview Question

1. What do you think the ideal social studies classroom is like?
2. Some students would say that social studies courses do little to help them in preparation for the future. Would you agree with them or disagree with them? Please explain.
3. How would you rate your social studies classes using a scale of favorite to least favorites? Please explain.
4. Suppose you could change anything about social studies class. What would it be?
5. What do you think the best method or way to learn social studies?
6. How important is the teacher in your attitude toward social studies? Please explain.