

Social Studies in the Back Burner in Jordanian Elementary School: A Phenomenological Examination of Social Studies Teachers and Supervisors

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the perceptions of Jordanian Elementary social studies Teachers and Supervisors towards Social Studies Education, Two group elementary social studies teachers and supervisors were interviewed in the Northern Province of Jordan regarding their perceptions of social studies. Phenomenological method of qualitative analysis used to interpret data. A total of thirty-five teachers and supervisors were selected to participate in this qualitative study. The research revealed that the both teachers and supervisors agree the important of social studies curriculum, while at the same time they did not rank social studies as their most favorite courses. Both teachers and supervisors often selected science and, mathematics, English and Arabic as their first or second choice because of the labor market or economic opportunity. The study recommended that to improve social studies education in Jordan, the Ministry of Education should abandon its role of selecting and controlling subjects included in the social studies curricula. Social studies curricula 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 the new millennium. General speaking, social studies still in the backburner in Jordan elementary school due to the social and economic factors.

Keywords: teacher education, elementary social studies, and elementary curriculum.

Introduction

Schooling in all societies purports to teach students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function as responsible citizens. In a democratic society, schools translate these curricular goals into knowledge of the community, nation, and world. Schooling also translates to the skills required to participate competently within the larger society. It also helps promote and protect one's interests and the democratic attitudes that form the bases for decision making on one's behalf while keeping in mind the larger context of the common good (Parker, 1999) In Jordan, the goal of social studies education is to prepare young people to be good citizens in a world that is becoming increasingly complex. The Jordanian Ministry of Education divides social studies objectives into four categories: knowledge, skills, values, and participation. These four categories require global perspective as an essential tool for performing successfully in a complex and rapidly changing world. (Ministry of Education, 2001)

According to Ministry of education the current curriculum in Jordan, social studies education is an interdisciplinary field Thus, the subjects of social studies include history, geography, and social education, general cultural and civic education. Social studies courses are taught from elementary to middle schools from the first through ninth grades. The purpose of this course is to prepare individuals for life, help them improve their personal skills to be better people, and create base knowledge and skills for science and social studies courses. At the high school level (grades 10–12), some social studies subjects—including history, geography, citizenship education, and general cultural—become discipline-based courses taught independently from each other, and thus, no interdisciplinary social studies course is taught at this level.

The world became more interconnected because of the fast developments in science and technology. Those increase and improve politic, economic, and cultural interactions among people all across the world. Thus, it is imperative for both teachers and supervisors to understand the economic, politic, and cultural connections among the countries and people. It is also important for students to analyze global problems and issues that may be caused because of economic and politic connections among countries (Acikalin, 2010). Educators are not alone in recognizing the importance of updated social studies.

As Jordan moves toward a technology based economy facing worldwide competition, employers will hire workers with analytical thinking skills who can integrate information from a variety of sources and perspectives and efficiently make profitable decisions. Jordan's pluralistic society needs citizens who different perspectives on complex problems. Additionally, making sound personal and civic decisions requires the ability to accurately interpret information filtered by media that may emphasize imagery over reason (Martorella 2004). For teachers, supervisors, and citizens, social studies curriculum is an essential tool for performing successfully in a complex and rapidly changing world (Dower 2003).

Jordanian social studies teacher and supervisors, like many contemporary young adults, are not knowledgeable about democratic principles and do not engage in civic activities or even care about national events and international relationships. Therefore, today's social studies teachers would benefit greatly from an increase of rich and varied opportunities offered within their teacher education programs to delve into various aspects of world social studies relating to their personal lives, professional careers, and pedagogical practices (Gallavan, 2008).

Viewing the Problem

WILKINS (2010) indicated that teachers' "attitudes can and do influence instructional practice. Understanding teachers' attitudes toward all subjects can provide additional information that could help explain differences in the instructional practices associated with the different subject areas" (p.27)

Social studies curriculum and teachers are facing various challenges, and educational difficulties regarding the structure of school system. The success of Jordan's stability and growth relies strongly on its educational system. Teachers and supervisors who have a sound understanding of their needs will be more inclined to address recent societal problems. To help the Jordanian people to cope with rapid challenges, and difficulties, a vital social studies curriculum is needed. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine the attitudes expressed toward social studies by the teachers and supervisors 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 researcher that in order to develop and update the curriculum, an exploration into teachers and supervisors' attitudes toward social studies should be conducted.

This study was designed to investigate the attitudes of teachers and supervisors' towards the social studies who were in elementary schools in Jordan's Northern Province. The following questions were used to direct the research study. What are the perceptions of teachers and supervisors toward the current social studies curriculum in their schools? What are the implications for curriculum changes based on these attitudes? Such information is important to fulfill our responsibilities as teachers who educate knowledgeable, thoughtful, committed, and participatory citizens (Chiodo and Martin, 2007). It is important to know how these teachers and supervisors view social studies if we are to improve the social studies curriculum and develop teaching strategies to improve this curriculum in our schools. With this in mind, a study was designed to investigate the attitudes of teachers and supervisors, who teach in elementary public schools in Jordan's Northern Province toward social studies.

Related Studies

A review of the related literature revealed little research about social studies education and the curriculum in Jordan. Most studies focused on secondary education; none focused specifically on elementary school education from qualitative analysis.

Alazzi (2008) captured the essence of why social studies are one of the least liked courses. He interviewed secondary social studies teachers in Jordan about social studies subject matter and teacher preparation. The researcher concluded that instruction tends to be dominated by lecture, textbook, or worksheets and social studies do not inspire students to learn.

Khawalidah (2001) examined the content in social studies textbooks. His questionnaire addressed curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, learning objectives, and education experience. Based on his analysis of social studies textbooks, curricula, and teaching methods, Khawalidah emphasized a strong need for improvement in the current social studies curricula in Jordan's middle schools. Alajaji (1999), Banjar (1984), and Al-Thuwaini (1986) conducted studies on teacher's and supervisors attitudes towards social studies curricula. The three studies concluded that social studies teachers believe all aspects of social studies curricula need to be improved and developed.

Al-Ghzawat (1992) examined the attitudes of male and female teachers toward social studies. His questionnaire addressed curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, learning objectives, and education experience. Based on his study, two dominant themes emerged: first, a negative attitude towards social studies exists among teachers and second, all aspects of the social studies curricula need significant improvement based on western standards. In 1992, Al-Aklobi examined the attitudes of social studies teachers and supervisors toward social studies education in boys' secondary schools in the Saudi Eastern Province. He found that the teachers and supervisors have negative attitudes toward social studies. Saada (1990) surveyed 151 teachers, 43 principals, and 11 supervisors to discover their attitudes toward social studies curricula in Jordan public schools. He found the teachers, principals, and supervisors were not as negative toward social studies as previous research studies in Jordan indicated.

Haladyna (1982) 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 students' 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.

Related to the area of student attitudes toward the social studies curriculum is student attitudes toward the teacher. Alazzi and Chiodo (2004) interviewed eighth and eleventh grade students in Jordan to examine their perceptions toward social studies curriculum. The research revealed that the students in both middle school and high school valued social studies. Chiodo and Byford (2004) conducted a study in the United States inquiring into the attitudes students possess regarding social studies. They interviewed eighth and eleventh grade students and found that two themes emerged. The first theme suggests that a teacher's involvement and enthusiasm led to positive images of social studies by middle and high school students. The second theme suggests that students' positive attitudes toward social studies were based on their perceived utilitarian value of the subject matter.

A large portion of research related to this topic was conducted in the 1990s, and 2000s. For example, studies, completed by Krasha (1997) and Marie (1995), examined the relationship between student attitudes toward social studies curricula and their achievement in the subject. However, little qualitative research has been conducted about this topic in the last 10 years. In light of the many curricula changes that have taken place during the last 10 years and the changing attitudes of educators and parents toward social studies education, it is appropriate to once again revisit this area of research.

Methods

Phenomenological Approach

When conducting a phenomenological research study, the main researcher personal experiences with the phenomenon under investigation typically serve as the major motivating factor in conducting the research. The purpose is to gain a greater understanding of the textural and structural characteristic of the phenomenon. Though the primary researcher experiences with the phenomenon compose the important part of the data collection (Brkich & Washington, 2011).

A phenomenological research design was used to capture a teachers and supervisors 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 teachers and supervisors attitudes towards the social studies curriculum and teaching methodology. Phenomenological research involves philosophical roots of phenomenology, focusing on experience and interpretation (Creswell, 2003). When conducting the phenomenological study, the assumption 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, p.70).

We interviewed public school teachers and supervisors in Jordan to find out: What are the attitudes of teachers and supervisors toward social studies? Specifically, we wanted to know: 1) How does a teacher stimulate student interest in social studies? 2) How does teaching methodology shape the attitudes of teachers and supervisors towards social studies? 3) Do teachers and supervisors see any correlation between social studies to the present and future? 4) What are some of the teachers and supervisors concerns or recommendations regarding the social studies curriculum and instruction? 5) Do the teachers and supervisors comments and concerns regarding social studies change between elementary school and middle school? By analyzing the findings of this study, educators will learn new information about teachers and supervisors perceptions of social studies in the country of Jordan.

Sample and Procedures

We randomly selected two groups of elementary social studies teachers and supervisors (1-6 grads). They were interviewed on their perceptions of social studies. A total of thirty-five teachers and supervisors (25, elementary social studies teachers, and 10 elementary social studies supervisors were chosen to participate, using a two-phase random sampling from each perspective. We selected teachers and supervisors from four school and then, randomly, selected teachers and supervisors from each district 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, 1999). Therefore, with certainty, we chose to study younger (teachers) and older (supervisors).

The study was conducted in the Northern 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, and citizenship education. The goal of social studies education in Jordan is to prepare young people to be intelligent and compassionate citizens. Teachers and supervisors are responsible for implementing these goals into the social studies curriculum. The social studies content covered in the school curriculum included citizenship education for fifth grade, geography, history, and citizenship education for six grades.

This phenomenological research study was designed to inquire into the attitudes of teachers and supervisors. However, it is important to realize that the data collected and the methods used for both teachers and supervisors were similar, not identical. In both teachers and supervisors, we interviewed each participant, took careful notes, and audio taped each individual as they answered questions. The interviews were transcribed for the participants of both teachers and supervisors. All interviews were conducted from March to May 2011. The purpose of the interviews was to discover the over- all opinions of teachers and supervisors 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 teachers and supervisors. The text of each interview was then coded and resulting themes were noted. Then, reinforcing themes were established within the bound system (elementary teachers) through comparisons with field notes. The same procedure was completed for the second bound system (supervisors). Neither researcher was employed by the school system, or knew the teachers and supervisors who participated. The use of predetermined questions and consistent procedures in coding supported the reliability of the findings. Data finding was given special attention in order to assess previous research. Each group was compared to the other, tracing the development of teacher's perceptions of social studies through the reaction of the supervisors.

Research findings

This study was designed to explore, in depth, the attitudes of elementary social studies teacher and supervisors toward social studies in Jordan’s Northern Province, with teacher and learning variables. As a result of analysis of data two themes emerged from this study. The first theme indicated that teachers’ involvement and enthusiasm led to a positive image of social studies as indicated by social studies supervisors. The second theme both groups valued social studies education in general but they did not rank it ahead of other subject matters. Throughout their past years in school, teachers and supervisors acquired experience, knowledge, and insight related to what they experienced in social studies.

This insight, in the long run, benefited the researchers who felt that the teachers and supervisors gave an honest account of their attitudes toward the social studies curriculum. All through the interviews the teachers and supervisors 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, teachers and supervisors expressed the importance of a solid education, which included social studies education, active learning, and student's 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 supervisors, 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 teachers and supervisors expressed their concerns regarding teaching methodology and how boring it was when the students had little knowledge about instruction. All teachers and supervisors 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 supervisors, the main concern regarding teaching styles was teachers who lecture from only the textbook. The supervisor's reactions reflected Stiller's (1988) 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. Elementary teachers, for the most part, were very enthusiastic about classroom discussion and debate.

For supervisors, there was a great desire for new instructional techniques. They wanted teachers to participate students in class discussions, letting them express their opinions on the subject matter. They encourage teacher not dominate the class discussion and should allow and enthusiastic students to express themselves by open debates, discussion, and projects. For supervisors, teachers must be coordinator and facilitator for students (interview with supervisor # 1).

Social studies were viewed by the teachers as being in a dull. The reason so many teachers said they had a hard time enjoying it was the curriculum is outdate and not fixable. The majority of supervisors responded that their social studies teacher relied on the text, lecturing, and traditional tests as methods of teaching and still used the memorization as method of learning.

Supervisors seemed to support Chiodo and Alazzi (2004) 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 knowledge skills and enhances critical thinking, problem solving and self-stems.

I like teacher, who made students feel passionate about classroom that is familiar with his or her subject matter and have good experience, who can transformer outdated information into current information by connect from outdate to update like history class when teacher instruct about old civilization teacher in this way can connect the old information to current information by comparing between old and present civilization (Interview with supervisor # 8).

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

I heat student who are trouble maker, even if that students is do his work assignment and pay attention to his or her teacher. I admire student who are positive, calm and students who treat their teachers with respect, nice, and friendly like treat their father (interview with teacher # 4).

The comments by the teachers seemed to agree with Fouts (1987), Fouts, and Biao (1993), and McGowan, Sutton, and Smith (1990). Their arguments were that students positive attitudes in the classroom maybe more effective than any one method of instruction. In these studies we did not find negative perceptions toward social studies education being expressed by teachers and supervisors. Evidence of this was gathered from both informal conversations and questions addressed to all teachers and supervisors.

This supports Chiodo and Byford's (2004) research regarding the subject. These researchers found no negative perception toward social studies in the high school students in a southwestern school system in the United States.

Conversations with participants (30 teachers and supervisors) indicated that social studies was useful and of great importance for their future. Twenty out of the 25 elementary social studies teachers were satisfied with the social studies curriculum taught in school. Teachers also revealed that they teach students citizenship education class about patriotism and loyalty to their nation. This contradicts studies conducted by Alazzi in Jordan (2008) regarding what is learned from the social studies curriculum. The study found that the content areas of the social studies curriculum were valued by the teachers. One teacher indicated that "social studies only the subject matter who can educate students about their right and responsibilities I think who is studies social studies more aware of national and international events. Other teacher said

"I find it very important that I taught national citizenship classes. I taught citizenship class how the governmental system operates, Constitution of Jordan and rights and responsibilities (interview with teacher # 3).

Both teachers and supervisors revealed that an interest in social studies, important of social studies and ultimately preparing students for the future. These comments, however, contradict research findings by Haladyna (1982) and Schug (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 and Thompson, 1979; Herman, 1965; Jersild, 1949).

In Jordan, teachers and supervisors also expressed the value of social studies education. Supervisors realize the importance of learning and understanding world systems; they were aware that they had a responsibility to understand the world history. Nineteen of the social studies supervisors described the importance of citizenship education and history. Supervisors said that history and general culture touched student's daily lives and assist link them to other world.

I belief the history class has given students good information and critical thinking of how a political and economic system work, especially in the western nations (Interview with supervisors # 9).

This contradicts Alazzi (2008) 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 this study fifteen elementary social studies teachers out of twenty-four, and eighteen social studies supervisors out of twenty-four rank social studies as one of their three or four favorite classes. Both teachers and supervisors 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 the research conducted by (Chiodo, Byford, 2002; Alazzi, Chiodo, 2004; Schug, Todd, and Beery's 1982).

Discussion

The research reveals that both teachers and supervisors value social studies, while at the same time they did not rate the courses as their favorite choice among classes. Teachers also believed that social studies were 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. Supervisors revealed that many teachers continue to depend on textbooks and lectures as a main tool 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 (Stiler, 1988).

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 twenty first century. The failure of these implications could cause a decline in the positive attitudes toward social studies in the country.

Conclusion

In closing, the researcher believes that the participants' experience described in this study represent what might occur in any elementary school in Jordan. Additional research 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 supervisors may all vary. Indeed, these two bound systems teachers and supervisors 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.

To improve social studies education in Jordan, the Ministry of Education should leave its role of selecting and controlling on the social studies curriculum. In addition, Ministry of Education should be allowed to teachers and supervisors to participate of social studies curriculum planner and design. Social studies curricula should be revised to include the most recent available information and to reflect contemporary research in social studies education in order to prepare young Jordanian in the new interconnected world.

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Appendix A

Teachers and Supervisors Interview Question

1. What do you think the ideal social studies classroom is like?
2. Some teachers 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.