Teachers' Opinions on the Use of Social Studies Classrooms in Social Studies Education

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Abstract

For students, the need to fully understand the geographical and historical layout of their societies has grown re-markably in today's dwindling world. Social Studies is one of the programs aiming to meet this need. Innovations in technology have led to searching new ways within Social Studies education, and now it seems highly likely to set up branch special classes at schools. This study aims to determine teachers' opinions regarding materials and environment to be used in Social Studies classes. Being qualitative in nature, the research has been conducted through semi-structured interviews. The opinions of social studies and classroom teachers have been investigated via the use of triangulation technique and maximum variation sampling method. The study has been analyzed through descriptive methods. The findings have focused on environment, Social Studies classroom at schools, social and physical environment, and using electronic, graphical, three-dimensional, visual and printed materials within the classroom.

Key Words

Social Studies, Social Studies Classroom, Environment and Materials for Social Studies Education.

Students' need to get to know the world's geographical and historical background has been growing as the world itself has dwindled more and more in recent years. Meeting this need of students' will tremendously contribute to their future efforts in order to make right decisions. Within the scope of Social Studies, which primarily aims to furnish individuals with necessary skills, activities directed to recognizing maps better, questioning the historical events; hence understanding how those events have affected the current life in our world should be conducted (Benscoter & Harris, 2003). Therefore, branch specific classes can be arranged at schools (Martorella, 1998). Being more advanced as opposed to general classroom settings, these classes

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have been suggested to realize skills and aims out-lined in Social Studies instructional program for a long time (Brett, 1996; Martorella). According to Capron and Halley (1972), a Social Studies class can be described as a room where students go during or after school time for Social Studies specific activities. This offers students who are interested in Social Studies a place where they can use their time and energy effectively. The environment and materials inside the class can lessen the load over Social Studies course, and can help students learn more efficiently (Cunningham & Allington, 2003). Technology based learning in the Social Studies class augments students' skills to make decisions, solve problems, search, cooperate and communicate within Social Studies course (Bennett & Scholes, 2001; Mason et al., 2000; Whitworth & Berson, 2003). Being the theoretical background of Social Studies instructional program of 2004, the constructivist approach underpins the importance of student-centered methods. The new program requires that many activities be carried out with specific materials and through various methods

(Tarman, 2011). These indicate that Social Studies class is valuable for the new program as well. Literature holds many studies (Acun & Kamber, 2007; Kaya & Ersoy, 2007) pointing that the inadequacy of materials at schools endangers constructivist teaching of Social Studies. Built in accordance with classical behaviorist approach and teacher centered perspective, general classrooms make it difficult for students and teachers to adapt the constructivist approach. True for most of general classrooms, this reality contradicts with student centered and constructivist educational activities (Çepni, Bacanak, & Gökdere, 2001; Tarman). In this sense, the Social Studies class can be termed as "a dynamic environment suitable to conduct activities in order to equip individuals with knowledge, skills, and values relevant to the course by means of the materials specific to Social Studies instruction".

Based on Dewey (1916), Friedman and Hicks (2006) have stated that education is the process of rearranging, configuring, and converting. Current relation between Social Studies and technology urges Social Studies instruction and classes to change. Therefore, researchers (Bennett & Scholes, 2001; Mason et. al., 2000; Mucherah 2003; Whitworth & Berson, 2003; Wilson & Wright, 2010) underpin that investigation about the use of technology within Social Studies education should be an ongoing process, and studies should be renewed and revised frequently.

The relation between Social Studies education and technology, including all instructional tools and materials, influences a society's global, political, social, and economic life. However, research on Social Studies classrooms in Turkey is scarce. Following can be stated as reasons to this; ignoring the training of Social Studies teachers for a long time (1986-1998), the instruction of National History and National Geography courses—which replaced Social Studies course—by high school teachers who were reluctant to work at primary schools (Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu [YÖK], 1998), and insufficient amount of research due to lack of social studies departments at universities. The launch of Social Studies teacher training programs at universities in 1998 increased the number of Social Studies teachers at schools; hence, research and studies on settings, tools, and materials for Social Studies proliferated. On the other hand, literature also includes a debate on the necessity of social studies classroom. Those who argue against believe that social studies is an experiment-free course,

that it will enlarge the workload on teachers and managers, that it is not necessary to use social studies tools and materials, and expertise to use them efficiently is lacking. Also, high number of students, dual instruction, lack of room and time, and economic factors are among the other arguments set against social studies classroom. Besides, some studies (Akdağ & Kaymakçı, 2009; Akşit, 2011; Meydan, 2001; Taşkaya & Bal, 2010) point that insufficient amount of tools, materials, and classes hamper teachers' willingness to use them whereas some other findings (Balkı & Saban, 2009; Sözer, 1998) indicate that teachers don't use even the materials already present in their classes, which lays a dilemma behind. Along with this dilemma, one should also consider the infrastructure of schools, urban and rural conditions, first and second echelon system in primary education, students' developmental properties, the differences between the job descriptions of class teachers and social studies teachers, and effective use of time due to single and dual instruction.

This study aims to determine opinions of teachers on how to provide Social Studies education through the use of environment and materials inside the Social Studies classrooms. Along with this general aim, answers to the following questions have been sought:

1. What are the opinions of teachers about providing Social Studies education in Social Studies classrooms at primary schools?

2. What features should a Social Studies classroom have?

3. How should the environment inside the Social Studies classroom be arranged?

4. What materials should be included in the Social Studies classrooms?

Method

Research Model

The study has qualitatively been conducted through interview technique. In qualitative studies, investigating a topic in depth matters more than forming generalizations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). That is why shareholders of Social Studies education have been consulted, and triangulation technique has been utilized. The purpose of person based triangulation is to closely analyze any given topic by determining different and similar perspectives (Berg, 1998; Bogdan & Biklen).

Participants

Maximum variation sampling method has been employed in order to reflect the range of people who can be considered as a relevant party of the problem as much as possible. Here, the main goal is not to reach any generalizations concerning the whole universe, but to identify the common themes, similarities, and differences (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). Accordingly, 24 Social Studies teachers and 20 classroom teachers have been interviewed.

Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews—one of the interview techniques. Firstly, an interview form containing open-ended questions was developed. Interview forms are applied to learn what different people think about similar topics, and they present the opportunity to hold comparisons since they have standard questions (Berg, 1998; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). Formed in accordance with the teacher' opinions, the interview form was finalized after the pilot study following expert consult.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data are digitalized in percentages mainly to identify the participation ratio and to make comparisons (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). Descriptive analysis was utilized for this study. The steps of the descriptive analysis used in this study include (Gery & Bernard, 2000); identification of themes and categories of the analyzed unit based on theory, building the data set through coding (for instance, 25%), marking the opinions on the coding form after reviewing the entire data set, marking the code key by another expert after examining all the data set, and comparing the codes made by the researcher and the expert in order for reliability assessment. The formula used to determine reliability is: Reliability = Agreement / Agreement + Disagreement (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Reliability was calculated as 89%, and this study was accepted to be reliable because the agreement was over 70%. The data collected from teachers has been depicted in frequencies in tables. This helps to see the differences and similarities better. Based on the similarities, inferences regarding the environment and the materials that should be included in the classrooms have been set forth. The findings have been divided into sub-groups in accordance with the themes, and have been supported with direct quotations in order to improve the validity. Quotations do not reveal the participants' names. Subsequently, several results have been deduced from them, and they have been discussed through comparison with the findings of other studies.

Results

The findings reached as a result of the themes shared by most opinions mainly focus on arranging Social Studies classrooms at schools, the features of this classroom, physical and social environment of the classroom, the materials that should be included in the classroom, and the properties of the materials, which are electronic, graphical, three-dimensional, visual and printed.

A close-up on the findings reveals both similarities and differences between the opinions of social studies teachers and class teachers. It has been determined that the majority of the participants agreed on providing Social Studies education in a Social Studies classroom. On the other hand, it should also be noted that a vast number of those participants are Social Studies teachers. As the findings suggest, participants stated that the social environment of a SS classroom should be suitable to apply new teaching methods. Regarding the social setting, SS teachers emphasize the need for a setting conducive to using new methods and learning through experiencing while class teachers generally underline the importance of a place suitable with new methods and learning corners. Some of the opinions imply that abstract issues in Social Studies can be learned through use of animation and simulation. As for the physical environment of the classroom, participants generally stated that it should be a roomy and luminous place. Findings point that participants mainly underpin the significance of a roomy place admitting enough light. In this sense, SS teachers mostly focused on a wide classroom while class teachers primarily pointed the need for a luminous class.

Regarding the electronic materials, participants generally underlined the need for a computer, CDs-DVDs, projector, and internet access. The teachers emphasized that CDs-DVDs were highly necessary for Social Studies classrooms. It will not be wrong to state that teachers regard the electronic materials as a piece of indispensable equipment for Social Studies instruction. Moreover, television seems to have lost its popularity in Social Studies course due to prevalence of computer and related projection systems.

Among the graphical materials, maps were the most frequently mentioned one by the participants. Analysis of opinions pointed that maps were thought to be highly correlated with the field of Social Studies. The reason why class teachers stated the need for a history banner more often than SS teachers may be because of the frequent use of the banner in the first echelon of primary education. Concerning the three dimensional materials that should be placed inside this class, participants noted that realia and models were necessary. The fact that students in the first echelon of primary education need more concrete objects to learn may be the reason why class teachers emphasized the necessity of realia more than SS teachers.

All teachers mentioned that it would be helpful to have visual materials such as drawings-pictures, billboards, and boards in a SS class. Furthermore, teachers stated that printed materials were also necessary. Since class teachers work on literacy training more often and they may be considering the positive influence of literacy over Social Studies course, they focused on the need for printed materials more than SS teachers.

Discussion

Social Studies Classroom: A great portion of participants underlined the need for a Social Studies classroom at schools. However, it can be seen in the literature that there have been discussions about the necessity of Social Studies classrooms. Those opposing to such an opinion believe that Social Studies is not a kind of lesson in which experiments are performed and that it will bring about additional load for the managers and teachers. On the other hand, the feeling of incompetency at using the equipment and materials, considering such a class unnecessary, limited time and place, economic deficiencies are among the other negative opinions about the Social Studies classrooms. However, the fact that there has been a considerable increase in the number of the studies in the field in Turkey and that the Social Studies lessons in the primary schools are mostly carried out by Social Studies teachers have made it necessary to have proper classroom environment and materials in Social Studies teaching. Despite this, such aspects as the infrastructure of the schools, the different conditions in urban and rural areas, the developmental differences of the primary education students, and various duties of Social Studies teachers should be taken into consideration.

Wilson and Wright (2010) noted that a skill specific classroom at schools in order to combine Social Studies education with technology was essential as part of a systematic educational approach. According to the researchers who point that lack of necessary equipment in general classrooms may give rise to certain difficulties for Social Studies education, technology offers a remarkable chance to bring the whole world into the classroom. The study by Çelikkaya (2002) unfolded that there were a lot of abstract concepts in SS course (border, longitude, plateau, and equator). Considering the developmental features of children, settings conducive to learning through experiencing and contextualizing should be created especially for the first echelon of primary education. Current issues, realia, sphere, and similar materials may be handy in order to achieve this (Yaşar & Gültekin, 2009). SS classroom may be extra helpful for those in the first echelon of primary education since contextualizing bears more importance during that period.

The findings show that the need for a SS classroom was verbalized mostly be SS teachers. Examining the results of several studies in this sense indicates that SS teachers and class teachers have a different perspective about this. Some researchers (Akşit, 2011; Kaya & Ersoy, 2007; Meydan, 2001; Sözer, 1998; Taşkaya & Bal, 2010) unveiled that class teachers were having difficulties in using tools and materials for SS instruction due to reasons such as inadequacy of materials, feeling incompetent about how to use materials, and seeing no reason to make use of the materials. For the solution of this problem, the same researchers made several suggestions such as in-service training for class teachers, instruction of social studies by branch teachers, and establishment of SS classrooms at schools. Moreover, class teachers have a class of their own which they can arrange in any way they like while SS teachers do not have such a thing. As supported by several researchers (Akşit, 2011; Meydan, 2001; Taşkaya & Bal, 2010), SS teachers see the lack of materials and practice field as a major problem of their profession. That they need a special place where they can belong and arrange in accordance with their needs can be deduced from their opinions. They almost always complain about this in their forums on the Net as well (Sosyal Bilgiler Öğretmenleri Bilgi ve Belge Paylaşım Forumu, 2011). According to Dinç and Onat (2002), class teachers have a negative attitude towards SS class since it will bring extra workload and mobility on them.

Major factors influencing the formation of an educational setting are students, school, environment, economic sources, and the program (Alkan, 1987). It is well known that the constructivist approach adopted within the Social Studies instructional program of 2004 serves as the basis for use of various tools and materials. However, some teachers are reluctant to use the equipment and materials at some schools because they feel incompetent (Balkı & Saban, 2009) whereas some other teachers cannot access relevant tools and equipment although they want to use them. Moreover, some teachers do not invest any effort for the provision and use of tools and materials (Sözer, 1998). Therefore, teachers should be trained and motivated during establishing SS classes.

Social Studies Classroom Environment: Regarding the social environment of Social Studies classroom, participants' opinions can be grouped under new methods, learning through experience, classroom layout, learning corners, entertaining atmosphere, and the number of students in the classroom. Rice and Wilson (1999) and Öztürk and Otluoğlu (2003) emphasize that Social Studies education is generally conducted through traditional methods. However, National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) advises that Social Studies course should be taught and learned in a constructivist environment. Since the nature of Social Studies field does not always allow visiting the real time and place of events, Social Studies classroom should be the chance to learn through experience, animation and simulation. Animations can be dramas performed by using stage, costumes, and masks etc. or computers (Martorella, 1998), smart boards, and other related software. Simulations in Social Studies course provide students with the chance to learn geographical and historical events through animations. This especially helps students learn social facts and events better, and build empathy. Furthermore, students are motivated by this way, and they gain real life experience. They can carry out research at poles, protect the environment by tackling the traps in the simulations, and develop environmental awareness by picking up places suitable for establishing plants without threatening the life (Braun, Fernlund, & White, 1998). Instead of banning games that serve as a basis where students can play and learn, it may be a better idea to convert them to be used for Social Studies education, which requires cooperation of Social Studies experts and computer specialists.

Concerning the physical environment, participants mainly underpinned the importance of size, lightning, cleanliness, silence, warmth, color, and texture. The size of the class is not only important for lightning, heating, and ventilation, but also for functional use of materials, students' mobility, and activities. As for Jacobs and Sargo (2005), lightning and colors also affect students' performance and their desire to stay in the classroom. According to Savage and Armstrong (1987), different parts of Social Studies classroom such as the ground, walls, materials, and learning corners should be well-organized for various activities. Since students like their projects to be displayed, appealing walls can be influential over their desire to come to school, and the classroom can be decorated with clipboards and bulletin boards containing attractive visuals about Social Studies subject and students' works. According to Karabey (2004), covering the walls with qualified sound absorbing boards may be helpful.

Social Studies Classroom Materials: Participants suggested that electronic, graphical materials, three dimensional, visual materials, and printed materials should be placed into a Social Studies classroom. Among the electronic materials, computers, CDs-DVDs, projector, internet access, slide machines, smart boards, television, and meteorological instruments take the lead. It has been noted that participants mostly meant the computer whenever they mentioned about electronic devices. Recent research indicates that computers (Bennett & Scholes, 2001; Ledford, 2000; Whitworth & Berson, 2003) bear a pioneering role in integrating Social Studies with technology, and other materials can only be developed in accordance with the presence of a computer in the classroom. It was reported that teachers taking part in Mucherah's (2003) study had stated that computers helped students gather their attention and be motivated. According to Whitworth and Berson (2003), computers and the Internet aid students improve their knowledge and offer them new perspectives through interaction with the global world. As for Mason et al. (2000), the Internet serves as a powerful tool to equip young citizens with insights regarding the past, present, and the future within the Social Studies course aiming to raise informed citizens. Tarman (2011) stated that such materials can help teach the difficult subjects by contextualizing and visualizing them. On the other hand, some experts (Meydan & Akdağ, 2008; Nas, 2003) hesitate to use computers for SS course due to the fact that related softwares are scarce and very expensive and they may lead to psycho-social problems since they hinder sensation, mobility, creativity, and interaction.

Participants also proposed that several graphical materials such as maps, sphere, time line, tables and graphics should be used in a Social Studies classroom. Barth and Demirtaş (1997) reported that maps and spheres were indispensable instruments of Social Studies instruction. By means of them, students can read symbols and learn about the relation among landforms, climate, settlements, and distance; and they can also enhance their awareness about other countries. Moreover, use of maps on cellphones, computers, navigation instruments, and CBS software may motivate students for Social Studies course. According to Crowe (2004), using such technology in Social Studies course may encourage students to view facts from many different angles and to learn and correct their mistakes regarding political, economic, and environmental issues.

Realia are the three dimensional materials that participants proposed to be placed in the Social Studies classroom. Barth and Demirtaş (1997) stated that use of models that convert some of the abstract subjects into tangible ones in Social Studies course may offer paramount benefit for some students. Similarly, Cunningham and Allington (2003) noted that Social Studies concepts could only be constructed by means of real objects. Among the visual materials proposed by the participants are pictures, photos, clipboard, and blackboard. According to Barth and Demirtaş (1997) as well as some participants, some wall pictures related to past and present daily life and scenes from Turkey can be used in the Social Studies classes. As for Savage and Armstrong (1987), the interesting and motivating materials, current news, instructions, models, the products of students and assignments can be presented on the clipboards. Exhibiting the students' products will motivate the students.

Not only the participants, but also many other sources suggested the use of printed materials such as encyclopedia, Geography and History books, magazines, newspaper extracts, brochures, and atlas in Social Studies classrooms. As for Öztürk and Otluoğlu (2003), literature is a rich source that can enhance Social Studies course. According to Cunningham and Allington (2003), some knowledge and skills such as understanding continents, states, administrators, wars, historical figures, and citizen rights—which are included among Social Studies Course aims—can be taught by resorting to books. NCSS (2011) publishes a revised and updated list of recommended books on its site every year. Something similar can also be applied in

Turkey. Moreover, e-book application offering the chance to have a library of thousands of books in a classroom can also be activated. Yet, some printed materials picturing and idealized world, especially story books, may induce students to form bias and clichés. Unplanned and unquestioned materials that are not chosen in accordance with educational principles may not produce desired outcomes and success on behalf of students. Students may take the information in a literary product they like as for real, which may restrain their critical thinking skill. Bringing such materials into the SS class entails meticulous consideration of educational principles (Simşek, 2009).

Öztürk and Otluoğlu (2003) advised that teachers should let go their traditional role to deliver a certain amount of knowledge to students, and should include as many activities and materials that direct students to actively participate in the lesson. In this sense, Social Studies classrooms and materials similar to labs designed for Science classes can be established. Social Studies classes built at primary schools can also be used for other social courses in primary school. Based on the findings of this research, one can suggest that Social Studies classroom with proper social and physical environment be established at schools, and field specific electronic, graphic, three dimensional, visual, and printed materials be placed inside that classroom. In this regard, new methods such as drama, or maps, computers, CDs-DVDs, projector, and the Internet may be functional for animation and simulation.

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