

A Study on Learning Environments of Elementary School Students Taking Social Studies Course: Bursa Sample*

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Schools as educational and instructional institutions are expected to be renewable ones where motivation is increased through establishing relationships between students' interests and needs, and subject matters of social studies lessons are derived from daily life and events. Finalizing any learning activity at school by realizing it as aimed and hence having students succeed can be achieved only through establishing an effective and positive learning environment. The aim of the present study is to examine the opinions of the elementary school students taking the social studies course on learning environments.

Keywords: learning environment, student, elementary education

Introduction

The elementary educational institutions are an important period in individuals' educational process and the aim of elementary educational institutions is to have students acquire basic knowledge. During elementary education, children encounter many problems that they are supposed to cope in social sense. For example, communication with adults whom they do not know in a crowd, organizational process, such as stacking, forming a line and waiting in it, being addressed as a member of a group and complying with restrictions regarding matters like movement and hubbub (Dean, 2000). Social studies is one of the basic courses in elementary education, which is taken by students of 10 to 14 ages. Observations and studies have revealed the presence of predispositions and behavior patterns shared by children of certain developmental periods (Yavuzer, 1994).

Schools as educational and instructional institutions are expected to be renewable ones where motivation is increased through establishing relationships between students' interests and needs, and subject matters of social studies lessons are derived from daily life and events (Güçlü, 1998a). Finalizing any learning activity at school by realizing it as aimed and hence having students succeed can be achieved only through establishing an effective and positive learning environment. Establishing a positive learning environment is possible only through dealing with and arranging many teaching elements together. Completing a learning in a desired way depends on the child's or teacher's being in the center, mental structure of the child, physical condition of the classroom, effective use of time, classroom atmosphere, teaching methods and techniques, forming learning centers, appropriate evaluation, etc. (Akyol, 2000). In structuralism teaching practices, active learning carries

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importance. Therefore, students create their own meanings on their own. A good learning environment forms through exploration and discussion methods (Güçlü, 1998b). The question “Does learning environment have an effect on the teaching of social studies?” is the problem statement of the present study. In addition to this, the followings were also investigated within the scope of the study: Main factors affecting students’ school success negatively, students’ opinions on benefiting from computers, teachers’ criteria in grouping students, students’ opinions regarding groupings arranged by teachers, students’ attributions to rewards given in the classroom, reasons for students’ being unsuccessful at subject matters they are good at, time spared by students outside of school for studentship, factors determining the success of homework assignments according to students, students’ feelings while teachers evaluate their homework assignments and exam results, students’ feelings and expectations while their homework assignments are evaluated, what students think when their attentions are distracted, reasons why students’ attentions are distracted during lesson, common situations distracting students’ attentions most, reasons for participation in classroom activities, and discussion types that students prefer.

This study falls within the scope of social studies education discipline. Social studies course is one of the pivotal courses included in the elementary schools program. The aim of the present study is to examine the opinions of the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grade elementary school students taking the social studies course on learning environments.

Method

In this study, since it is aimed to examine some factors associated with learning environments of elementary school students taking social studies course, the model used in the study falls within the scope of the survey model. Two thousands students from 12 classes were reached by randomly selecting three classes from the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grades taking social studies course at each school participated to the study. The questionnaire was composed of 15 items formed with the aim of taking opinions of elementary school students having social studies course on learning environments and taking opinions of those specializing in the field. The answers given by the elementary school students taking social studies course were grouped separately for each group of questions and tabulated in frequency and percentage.

Findings

According to the data obtained from the study, the following findings were reached.

Table 1

Main Factors Affecting Students’ School Success Negatively

Question	Frequency (<i>f</i>)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
Insufficient nutrition	701	35.1	35.1
Restlessness in family	350	17.5	52.6
Not liking lessons	668	33.3	85.9
Not liking the teacher	281	14.1	100
Total	2,000	100	

As seen in Table 1, most students stated that they were unsuccessful because they were not nourished sufficiently (35.1%) and they did not like lessons (33.3%). When the total percentages were examined, it appeared that 85.9% of the students were nourished insufficiently, lived restlessness in their families and did

not like lessons.

Table 2

Frequency Table Indicating Students' Use of Computers

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
Playing games only	353	17.7	17.7
Using the Internet	572	28.6	46.3
Writing homework assignments, mails, etc.	885	44.3	90.6
No use of computer	190	9.4	100
Total	2,000	100	

When Table 2 is examined, it appeared that the majority of the students (44.3%) used the computer to write homework assignments, mails, etc., the ratio of those who never use the computer is 9.4%. However, 28.6% of the students benefit from the Internet. The ratio of those who used the computer to play games is 17.7%.

Table 3

Teachers' Criteria in Grouping Students

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
According to success	726	36.3	36.3
According to aptitude	202	10.1	46.4
According to behaviors	882	44.1	90.5
According to other things	190	9.5	100
Total	2,000	100	

As seen in Table 3, the majority of the students (44.1%) stated that groups were formed "according to behaviors". However, while some of them (36.3%) stated that groups were formed "according to success"; the ratio of those stating that they were formed "according to aptitude" is 10.1%. Again, 36.3% of the students stated that groups were formed according to success.

Table 4

Table Indicating What Rewards Given in the Classroom Mean to Students

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
Implies that I'm privileged	159	8	8
Implies that I deserve to be praised	347	17.4	25.4
Implies the reward itself	192	9.6	35
Implies the grade I got in the competition	1,302	65	100
Total	2,000	100	

When Table 4 is examined, it appears that a great majority of the students (65%) thought that rewards imply their grades and rankings in competitions, those thinking that rewards are given in order to imply that they deserve to be praised place the second (17.4%), and those thinking that rewards imply themselves place the third with the percentage of 9.6%. In this context, the ratio of those thinking that rewards imply that they are privileged is 8%.

As seen in Table 5, a great majority of the students (58.1%) attributed their success to their sparing time and spending effort. It is followed by those (31.0%) attributing their success to their liking them. As seen, 3.5% of the students found lessons easy. The ratio of those attributing their success to their families' interests is 7.4%.

Table 5

Reasons Why Students Become Successful in Their Best Subjects

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
Because my family's interested	147	7.4	7.4
Because I like them	620	31.0	38.4
Because they are easy	69	3.5	41.9
Because I spare time and spend effort	1,164	58.1	100
Total	2,000	100	

Table 6

Time Spared by Students Outside of School for Studentship

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
I spare no time	144	7.2	7.2
One hour	477	23.9	31.1
Two hours	879	44.0	75.1
More than three hours	500	24.9	100
Total	2,000	100	

As seen in Table 6, the majority of the students ($f = 879$) (44.0%) spared two hours for studentship. When the total percentages are examined, it is seen that 75.1% of the students spared two hours or less for studentship. The ratio of those who spared no time is 7.2% ($f = 144$). Those who spared more than three hours for studentship form 24.9% of all the students ($f = 500$).

Table 7

According to Students, Factors Affecting the Success of Homework Assignments They Do

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
Appearance	51	2.6	2.6
Length	53	2.7	5.3
Contents	1,201	60.1	65.4
All of these	695	34.6	100
Total	2,000	100	

Following the examination of Table 7, it appears that a great majority of the students (60.1%) accepted that "contents of homework assignments" are important. The ratio of those thinking that appearance, length and contents of homework assignments are all important is 34.6%. The number of those thinking that "appearance of homework assignments" is the determinant factor is 51, and the ratio of them is 2.6%. The students appeared to think that appearance and length of homework assignments are not directly related to the success of assignments. The total percentage of content appears to support this as well (65.4%).

When the frequency table indicating what the students feel while their teachers evaluated their homework assignments and exam results was examined, it appears that the majority of the students (68.5%) stated that they felt excitement. The feelings of guiltiness and bashfulness appear to be at the lowest level (1.8%). It is seen that there is a difference of 0.5% between those feeling anxiety and fear and those feeling self-confidence (see Table 8).

According to Table 9, 40.4% of the students stated that they are excited about "making a mistake". Thirty seven point nine percent of the students stated that they "expect a grade". The total percentages, as well,

indicate that 78.3% of the students provided the same answer. The students stating that they felt ashamed are the fewest in number with the ratio of 4.8%.

Table 8

Table Indicating What Students Feel While Their Teachers Evaluate Their Homework Assignments and Exam Results

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
Excitement	1,370	68.5	68.5
Guiltiness and bashfulness	36	1.8	70.3
Self-confidence	292	14.6	84.9
Anxiety and fear	302	15.1	100
Total	2,000	100	

Table 9

What Students Feel and Expect While Their Homework Assignments Are Under Evaluation

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
Expect a grade	757	37.9	37.9
Excited about making a mistake	808	40.4	78.3
Feel ashamed	96	4.8	83.1
Expect a reward when studying hard	339	16.9	100
Total	2,000	100	

It can be seen in Table 10 that, about 34.6% of the students thought about after school/their families. This is followed in order of frequency by those who dream (27.6%), then those thinking about “other things” (23.3%) and those thinking about “play time and friends” (14.5%). When the total percentages are examined, 49.1% of the students appear to think about play time with families and friends.

Table 10

About What Students Think While They Are Distracted

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
After school/my family	691	34.6	34.6
Play time/my friends	289	14.5	49.1
Dreaming	551	27.6	76.7
Other things	469	23.3	100
Total	2,000	100	

According to Table 11, 949 students (47.5%) stated that students were distracted in lessons mostly by other children. The ratio of the 474 students stating that students were distracted by their needs for a talk is 23.7%. Moreover, 17.4% of the students stated that they were distracted because lessons were boring and difficult.

Table 12 indicates that 1,452 of the students thought that they were distracted because their classmates talked to one another. The reason, such as their teacher’s way of doing lessons was boring and topic under discussion is too long and detailed place the second (10%). The ratio of those thinking that they were distracted because of “noise outside the classroom” is 6.7%.

Table 11

Reasons Why Students Are Distracted in Lessons

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%0)
Because lessons are boring/difficult	347	17.4	17.4
Under the influence of other students	949	47.5	64.9
Need for a talk	474	23.7	88.6
Other reasons	230	11.4	100
Total	2,000	100	

Table 12

Common Situations in the Classroom Distracting Students' Attention Most

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
When my classmates talk to one another	1,452	72.6	72.6
When topic under discussion is too long and detailed	200	10	82.6
Noise outside the classroom	133	6.7	89.3
When I think our teacher's way of doing lessons is boring	215	10.7	100
Total	2,000	100	

Those who preferred to participate in group discussions form the majority (32.5%). However, those who did not like to participate in discussions were not few in number (29.2%). It also appears that the ratio of those who preferred to participate in class discussions is 26.3% and that of those who preferred to participate in "one-to-one discussions" is the lowest (12%) (see Table 13).

Table 13

Discussion Types That Students Prefer

Question	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total percentage (%)
I participate in group discussions	649	32.5	32.5
I participate in one-to-one discussions	239	12.0	44.5
I participate in class discussions	525	26.3	70.8
I do not like to participate in discussions	587	29.2	100
Total	2,000	100	

Discussion, Conclusions and Suggestions

One of the most important needs of students is to become successful. When they are given the opportunity which is suitable to their developmental levels to become successful, they will become successful and their negative attitudes towards the course will decrease. Pollard and Triggs (2000) stated that home, heredity, self-evaluation, spending effort, practicing or not practicing, liking or disliking and being easy or difficult are among the factors affecting students' success. A child's unknowing what to do during his/her work may lead to his/her becoming unsuccessful. Children's becoming unsuccessful may lead to disliking, uninterestness, and in the end, spending much effort. Moreover, Elmacioğlu (2000) emphasized that children's school successes are closely related to family environment. It is necessary that children should not use the computer just for playing games. According to the data obtained from this study, the computer is used not only for performing operations like writing but also for entering the Internet. Roldan (2003) stated that current formal computer programs can help schools benefit from computer facilities and direct students to use them in the very short run. In the study by Scott and O'Sullivan (2000), it was found that majority of the students used the Internet for research purposes. Teachers' preferring student behaviors as the most important criterion in grouping students emphasize the importance of acquisitions. In group works, everybody should perform their tasks. Especially, the criterion of success might have been taken by the teachers into account, because the students exhibited

similar performances while they fulfilled these tasks. The students' working in teams, their making division of labor and sharing the responsibilities might have played an effective role in their acquiring working habits and skills. In learning environments, the way of having small children working with their classmates in a certain classroom arrangement acquire knowledge more effectively is to form small groups (Proctor et al., 2001). Most students like competitions. Feeling of achievement and feeling of winning mean the same to them. Findings revealed that those playing video games watch television programs based on competition and struggle, such as sport programs, more frequently. These findings are supported by some researchers (Alantar, 1999). According to Dean (2000), children generally like subject matters and courses that they find easy and those at which they become successful. Next come being interested and having fun. In this context, family's interest and support appeared to be important. Students usually did homework during the period of two hours a day spared for studentship. After the completion of homework assignments given by their teachers, children became individuals aiming at life-long learning. When the relationships among students' reactions against evaluation of students' works are examined, those feeling excitement formed the majority. Although it was found in this study that students felt excitement most of the time, 70% of them were found in the study by Pollard and Triggs (2000) to feel worried, be negative and in mixed feelings about the matter. At school, in lesson environment, classroom atmosphere may also lead to distraction. Besides, internal reasons resulting from a person's own mind, such as dreaming and worrying, and external ones, such as television, telephone and music, may play a role in distraction as well (Elmacioğlu, 2000). In social studies course, it is aimed to have students express their thoughts in a proper way. Regarding the method of discussion, it is remarkable that there are negative thoughts in students' approaches concerning discussion types. Students' preferring to participate in group discussions is related to their being in a small group and desire to act with a psychology of sharing joint responsibility and authority. However, students who did not like to participate in discussions formed the majority.

Under the light of these results, the followings can be suggested: Teachers can contribute to students' successes and progresses by encouraging them in areas they are good at; feedback and rewards obtained as a result of homework assignments, group works, etc., are likely to motivate students to perform better; children who are very good at using computers can help those who do not know well; qualities of homework assignments performed during the time spared for studentship should be dealt with as well; different working groups can be formed during in-class activities; related to homework assignments, families should be asked for support.

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