



Social Studies Teachers' Views on Learning Outside the Classroom

Tuba ÇENGELCİ^a
Anadolu University

Abstract

Learning outside the classroom help students interpret their society, nature, and the world through concrete experiences. Although learning outside the classroom is usually used for environmental education, it is very important for the social studies course which aims to train students as active members of a democratic society. The purpose of this study is to understand social studies teachers' views on learning outside the classroom regarding the social studies course. 15 social studies teachers from low, middle, and high socio-economic levels schools in Eskişehir participated in this qualitative study. The data of the study were obtained from semi-structured interviews and analyzed using descriptive analysis. According to findings of the study, the social studies teachers believed that content of the social studies course was suitable for learning outside the classroom. History and geography topics, local administrations, environmental issues, cooperation, and professions were mentioned as the main subjects for learning outside the classroom. Outside learning activities were exemplified as organizing trips in and out of province, and going to the cinema, interviewing with experts and resource people, or inviting them to the school. Teachers experienced problems about time and students' behaviors as well as economic problems, and bureaucratic obstacles regarding outdoor learning.

Key Words

Social Studies Course, Learning Outside the Classroom, Social Studies Education, Social Studies Teacher, Teachers' Views.

Social studies help students develop necessary knowledge, skills, and values to be active members of their society. Öztürk (2009, p. 4) defines social studies as “a teaching program which integrates knowledge and methods of the social sciences and humanities to train active citizens who decide based on knowledge and solve problems in changing conditions.” The primary purpose of social studies is to develop knowledge based rational decision making skills of the young people as democratic citizens (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 1994). Students gain democratic citizenship skills such as problem solving, social participation, and media literacy through the social studies course (Deveci, 2008).

Students can acquire knowledge, skills, and values of the social studies course if they continue learning social studies outside the classroom. Outdoor education is a multidimensional process which presents study of constructed learning activities in outside places as community and natural settings (Bunting, 2006). Priest (1986, p. 13) defines outdoor education as “an experiential method of learning by doing, which takes place primarily through exposure to the out-of-doors.” Outdoor education can be understood as integrating life and learning in all educational stages. Learning outside the classroom which reflects a broad approach that examines relationships within the context of natural environment and human life

- a Tuba ÇENGELCİ, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of Primary Education. Her research interests include teaching social studies, values education in social studies, social and cultural resources in social studies course. *Correspondence:* Assist. Prof. Tuba ÇENGELCİ, Eskişehir Anadolu University, Faculty of Education, Department of Primary Education, Yunusemre Campus, Tepebaşı, 26470 Eskişehir, Turkey. Email: tubacengelci@anadolu.edu.tr; tcengelci@hotmail.com Phone: +90 222 335 0580/3439.

should be perceived as the integration of learning with life at all levels of education. John Dewey, whose thoughts comprise one of the intellectual foundations of outdoor education, sees school as a model of a small democratic society. Students are prepared to their democratic responsibilities in their local community (Boss, 1999; Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert, 2006; Ford, 1986).

Outdoor education is based on experience. It includes relationship between natural environment and human, and requires experiential learning, using all senses, and focusing on interdisciplinary subjects (Priest, 1986). Outdoor education includes a comprehensive and long process. In this study, "learning outside the classroom" term is adopted to explain learning which occurs in outside environment and resources related with the social studies course. Knowledge selected from social science disciplines as history, geography, psychology etc. is presented in a holistic structure to train effective citizens in the social studies course (Safran, 2008). Social studies includes daily life in terms of its objectives and content. Outside learning activities may be conducted within the scope of social studies course to develop an understanding about society and help students explore abstract concepts. These activities can be exemplified as using a compass and making maps, environmental projects, local history, and archaeological excavations, investigating people's views about a social issue, field trips, and observational studies (Brown, 1998; Conley, 2008; Coughlin, 2010; Knapp, Malcolm, Vogl, & Vogl, 1986; Meydan, 2009). Many of the Social Studies Teaching Program's skills such as observation, social participation, using information technology, perception of place, time, and chronology, change and continuity (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı [MEB], 2004) require outdoor learning and using knowledge outside of the classroom.

Outside environment provides special places and interaction opportunities for learners (Beard & Wilson, 2006). Outdoor learning programs may contain subjects such as knowing and protecting historical, cultural, and natural heritage, and ecological systems, using natural resources in a right and balanced way (Altın & Oruç, 2008). Additionally, technological developments, using computer, media, and internet let educators set various learning environments (Atıcı, 2007; Jonassen & Reeves, 2000; Wang & Manning, 1999). In this context, computer and internet may facilitate learning regarding the places and processes which students cannot interact directly.

In the literature, there are some studies deal with efficacy of outdoor activities, and assessing outdoor learning environments in environmental education and science education (Carrier, 2009; Dillon et al., 2006; Orion, Hofstein, Tamir, & Giddings, 1997; Özdemir, 2010). In the scope of the social studies course, some studies focus on using historical places and museums (Dönmez, 2009; Gökçaya & Yeşilbursa, 2009; Güleç & Alkış, 2003), organizing field trips (Açıkgöz, 2006; Coughlin, 2010; Nabors, Edwards, & Murray, 2009), and exploring local community (Morris, 2006; Selanik Ay & Deveci, 2011).

The content of the social studies course reflects life. Therefore, it should be learned in life. Learning outside the classroom may influence students' perceptions towards the course positively. Moreover, outside activities may help them transfer their knowledge to real life situations. Awareness of social studies teachers regarding learning outside the classroom is important. They are expected to organize outside learning activities to support social studies teaching. This study is based on the need to understand how social studies teachers perceive learning outside the classroom and their views about advantages and problems of learning outside the classroom.

Purpose

The present study aimed to understand social studies teachers' views on learning outside the classroom. The following questions were addressed in the study:

1. How do social studies teachers define learning outside the classroom?
2. What do social studies teachers think about learning outside the classroom?
3. What are social studies teachers' views about subjects in which learning outside the classroom is used in social studies course?
4. What are social studies teachers' views about activities conducted outside the classroom for the social studies course?
5. What are social studies teachers' views about assessment of learning outside the classroom in the social studies course?
6. What are social studies teachers' views about problems regarding learning outside the classroom in the social studies course?
7. What are social studies teachers' suggestions for the problems regarding learning outside the classroom in the social studies course?

Method

Research Model

Qualitative research methods, which try to understand facts from the viewpoint of participants (Merriam, 1998), were used in the study. Interviews provide information about individuals' experiences, interests, beliefs, values, knowledge, and their perceptions about others' views and acts (Schostak, 2005). Social studies teachers' views on learning outside the classroom were explored through semi-structured interviews in this study.

Participants

The study group included a total of 15 social studies teachers from primary schools in the central city of Eskişehir. Maximum variation sampling (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005) was used to select teachers who would be willing to participate in the study. The criteria determined by the researcher included teachers' years of teaching, and different socio-economic status. A total of 15 teachers, 6 of whom were from middle, 5 of whom from low socio-economic status, and 4 of whom were from high socio-economic status, participated in the study.

Data Collection

The research data were collected via semi-structured interviews. An interview form was prepared by the researcher. One the interview form was examined by field experts, their corrections and additions were considered. After the review of the form, a pilot interview was conducted with a social studies teacher. Questions were redesigned after the pilot interview. Research was conducted through the formal permission of the Provincial National Education Directorate. Teachers who would participate in the study were called and appointments were made with them. The researcher explained the purpose of the research to each participant, and asked them to sign personal permission text before the interviews. Participants were required to exemplify their views to get data in detail. Interviews were conducted in the spring term of 2010-2011 academic years.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis method was used to analyze the data. A framework was formed in light of the research questions, and themes were described to organize data of the research. The interview

audio-records were transferred to the computer from digital sound recorder and transcribed by the researcher. Participants were assigned code names and their code names were recorded to cite their views in the results. The analyses were done by the researcher and another field expert independently. Then, researchers compared their thoughts and reached an agreement on the points they had differing views about. The reliability of the study was calculated with the use of Agreement / Agreement + Disagreement X 100 suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The reliability of the study was found 98%.

Results

Results of the study revealed that teachers understand learning outside the classroom as learning through the field trips and observation. All teachers agreed on the idea that the content of the social studies course is suitable for learning outside the classroom. Teachers usually used outside learning activities in historical and geographical issues. They said that they organize field trips to the historical places, and use environmental sources in geographical issues as climate, flora, and mine. Outside activities were listed as organizing trips in and out of province, and going to the cinema, interviewing with experts and resource people, or inviting them to the school. According to results of the study, learning outside the classroom was assessed as performance tasks. Teachers experienced problems about time, students' behavioral problems, economic problems, and bureaucratic obstacles. Teachers put forth suggestions for the problems regarding learning outside the classroom.

Discussion

Results of the study revealed that teachers understand learning outside the classroom as learning through field trips and observations. It can be said that descriptions of teachers from high socio-economic status schools regarding learning outside the classroom overlap much more with the literature. Learning outside the classroom can be defined as learning about the world by seeing places and processes to acquire knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ford, 1986; Richardson & Simmons, 1996). Teachers from low socio-economic status schools defined learning outside classroom as learning in the family and social environment. It can be said that this is a result of lack of outside activity opportunities in these schools.

Learning outside the classroom can be conducted in the social studies course from the viewpoint of teachers. If the social studies course does not reflect real life, students cannot comprehend the importance of the course, and associate it with their lives (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Therefore, outside activities can help educators point relationship with the social studies and life.

All of the participants depicted that they use outside activities mostly in teaching history and geography. They explained that they organize field trips to the historical places, and use environmental sources in geographical issues as climate, and flora. There are some studies (Beames & Ross, 2010; Potter & Henderson, 2004) focusing on field trips for historical and geographical investigations. Additionally, Boss (1999) explains outdoor education as one of the effective ways to teach civic participation and responsibility. It can be said that learning outside the classroom presents wider perspective than interviewing administrators. Teachers from middle socio-economic status schools stated that they use outside learning activities in subjects about environmental pollution, and recycling in the close environment.

In the literature, there are some studies (Harrison, 2010; Stewart, 2008) which combine the terms of "outdoor education" and "environmental education" as "outdoor environmental education." It can be said that environmental education is one of the most suitable subjects for learning outside the classroom. Teachers from low socio economic status schools indicated that they use current events to teach cooperation and unity after an earthquake. There are some studies on using current events in the social studies course (Alazzi, 2008; Deveci, 2007, 2008). However, there isn't any study about using current events in the learning outside the classroom. In this respect, it can be said that using current events is not directly serve to the learning outside the classroom which is based on examining facts and events in the real places.

Teachers primarily mentioned field trips as one of the outside learning activities. There are some studies (Açıkgöz, 2006; Ayva, 2010) about the positive effects of field trips in social studies. It can be claimed that field trips have advantages for teaching-learning process in the social studies course. As well as field trips, inviting an author or an expert from the specific profession was explained as one of the activities of learning outside the classroom by some teachers from high socio-economic status schools. Teachers from middle socio-economic status

schools said that they invite field experts to the school for outside learning studies. Students from low socio economic status schools were required to interview with people from different professions in the scope of outside learning activities. It is seen that students generally do individual activities in low socio-economic status schools. However, one of the characteristics of the learning outside classroom is the interaction of students with each other and with their teachers, as well as developing communication skills (Humberstone & Stan, 2011; Rickinson et al., 2004). Therefore, it can be said that individual activities or inviting experts to the school or classroom are not appropriate ways for learning outside the classroom. Group activities can be recommended in the outside environments for the social studies course.

Outside learning activities can be evaluated through reflective field notes, observation, and attitude scales (O'Brien, 2009; Sukhontapatipak & Srikosamatara, 2012). In the study, it is understood that teachers assess outside learning activities as performance tasks. It can be said that teachers prefer to use assessment methods to figure out students' gains, thoughts, and emotions regarding the outside learning experience.

The results of the study showed that organizing time is one of the important problems faced with by teachers. It can be claimed that teachers from high socio-economic status point problems in outside learning process. Dillon et al. (2006) states that outside learning activities should be planned, practiced, and evaluated carefully to be effective. Teachers from middle and low socio-economic status schools mentioned about the problems regarding the preparation and planning stages of the outside learning as economic problems, bureaucratic obstacles, family cooperation and organizational problems. Similarly, the main problems regarding field trips in the social studies course are defined as economic problems, and bureaucratic obstacles in some studies (Demir, 2009; Güleç & Alkış, 2003). It can be said that all stages of learning outside the classroom should be handled in planning practice and evaluation process in detail, and necessary measures should be taken to solve the problems.

Regarding the findings of the present study following suggestions can be offered; seminars regarding the purpose, scope, planning, practice, and assessment of learning outside the classroom can be organized for teachers. Especially, low and middle socio-economic status schools can be

supported financially. The bureaucratic process for learning outside the classroom can be facilitated for teachers. School, family, governmental and non-governmental organizations can cooperate for organizing outside learning activities.

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