



Edited by: Bernardo Pohl and Sarah M. Straub

Recommended Citation: Shepherd, D., Adams, B., & Yeon S. (2024). The impact of an elementary social studies course on student attitudes. *Journal of Social Studies and History Education*, 8(1), 22-36.

The Impact of an Elementary Social Studies Class on Student Attitudes

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Abstract: This survey-centered study explores the impact of an elementary social studies instructional methods course on pre-service teachers' attitudes toward the social studies as a content area, their self-perceived ability to instruct those topics, and the value they place on the social studies as important areas for elementary student development. Over a period of four years, students were surveyed at the outset of a required instructional methods course in the area of elementary social studies. The course, then, in its implementation, stressed engaging and practical assignments and the fostering of a strong and mutually supportive classroom community. At the end of the course, students were re-surveyed using an identical instrument. These surveys were completed by 93 education department students nearing the end of their teacher training program at a midsized Midwestern, open-enrollment state university. While it was expected that survey findings would show a positive response to the course, the extent to which students now embraced the elementary social studies and perceived them to be valuable for student learning and development was more positive than anticipated. For the post-survey, nearly 100% of students indicated a passionate interest in the elementary social studies, a changed perspective about their importance, and an excitement about teaching them to elementary-aged students. While the numeric data from the survey is instructional, actual student comments also powerfully convey their newfound positive attitudes toward elementary social studies.

Elementary-level teacher education students traditionally are required to complete a course in social studies methods. This survey-based study explores student perceptions of the impact of this required course on their appreciation for the social studies as an

school subject for elementary-age students, on their personal knowledge of the benefits of the social studies on students, and on their self-perceived ability to instruct the social studies in a meaningful way to young children. Over a period of four years and within four

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individual courses, the survey was completed by 93 students nearing the end of their teacher training program of study at a midsized Midwestern university. The same survey was provided to students at the outset of a semester and at its conclusion. In addition to the numeric data this study closely examines, student qualitative comments about the course are also considered. Finally, this report attempts to determine why this course was so effective in benefiting pre-service teachers.

Research Questions

The foundational research question we explored was, “How do teacher education students feel about the content of the social studies, their importance, and their correct instruction?” This research question was posed at both the beginning and end of a semester’s course on elementary social studies methods to determine the effectiveness of the course in changing student attitudes and abilities. A secondary research question for this study’s consideration would ask, “What aspects of this course helped students see the importance of the social studies and beneficial methods for its instruction?” A final research question that is only tangentially addressed by this study asks, “Why do students often report feeling a lack of interest in and ability with the social studies?”

Literature Review

As might be expected, the research related to the elementary social studies and student preferences about that topic are

very extensive. The literature review below strives to provide a summary of that comprehensive field of study that intersects with the specific research questions of this report identified above.

The Importance of Social Studies

While no one would question the fundamental value of teaching social studies for the maintenance of a democratic society, there are other benefits to this subject that augment its innate significance. Researchers determined, for example, that more instructional time at the elementary level, grades one through five, devoted to social studies correlated with improved reading development, and this effect was persuasively significant. In a study of nearly 7,000 students, an increase of 30-minutes of reading in social studies accounted for a 5 times greater improvement in reading over an additional 30-minutes of reading in non-core subjects (Tyner & Kabourek, 2021). Of course, this very positive effect should not argue for the common approach of using the social studies as a supplement to literacy development. A 2015 study (Denton & Sink) found that teachers are unable to integrate completely in this way because of time constraints, insufficient training, and limited curricular and instructional resources, so while an emphasis on social studies in student reading expectations is recommended, it is not recommended to exclude social studies from focused lessons, replacing those entirely with literacy assignments in social studies.

Attitudes of Students Toward Social Studies

Students considered in this study self-reported negativity and/or indifference to the social studies as a subject for important consideration. Is this attitude, though, consistent with existing research? Unfortunately, it is. A study from Dundar and Rapoport (2014) found that elementary students has significantly less positive attitudes toward the social studies than toward science and mathematics. The students in this study indicated that they put less value on social studies, perceived that it had less usefulness, and approached it with less willingness and enthusiasm, rating the social studies overall as being much less important and worthwhile to them than science and mathematics. A comparable qualitative study (Clark & Hooser, 2018) found that improved impact on social studies knowledge and commitment for elementary students occurred when teachers set aside their personal attitudes, described as fears, about the social studies and embraced new ideas about the importance of the social studies, intentionally planning for meaningful social studies and pursuing more extensive, more powerful resources as a result. When teachers emphasized these steps – changed perspective, intentional planning, and augmented resources, students increased their understanding of and made more personally beneficial connections to the social studies.

Course and Professor Impacts on Student Values and Beliefs

Prudence Dyer's (1972) seminal text *Changing values of students* has influenced much of the educational research to follow. Her seminal 12-year study into how student values evolve over time discerned that younger students are less apt to change their stated values and that older students seem to be more prone to peer influence in the development of their values. In fact, she found that very few upper elementary to high school students retain initially dominant values into their latter years of schooling.

Later researchers expanded Dyer's initial focus on school-aged children's values. Emmanuel (2014) examined student value changes that occur during a single semester. The researcher found that a professor – in just one semester - can have a substantial impact on students' values. While this process is complex and contains numerous variables, in general, she determined that the professor, more than the course or department, had a greater influence on changing values. For example, less religious professors influenced their students to be less religious while religious professors had the opposite effect.

Course Designs that Produce Impact on Student values and Learning

One promising course design approach for

the meaningful engagement and positive influence of students is the ARCS Model of Instructional Design (Yarborough & Fedesco, 2020). ARCS stands for attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. The ARCS Model attention strategies that most informed the design of the course considered by this study include incongruity or conflict, concreteness, variability, humor, inquiry, and participation. Relevance strategies include experience, present worth, future usefulness, need matching, modeling, and choice. Confidence strategies include learning requirements, difficulty, expectations, attributions, and self-confidence. Finally, satisfaction strategies include natural consequences, unexpected rewards, positive outcomes, negative influences, and scheduling. Additional elements emphasized within the ARCS Model include the following teacher attitudes and practices: instructor modeling for student interest, instructor emphasis on the student-professor relationship, frequent use of real world examples, frequent use of a variety of student-engaging instructional activities, inclusion of realistic performance goals, appropriate emphasis on testing and grading, abundant praise with constructive criticism, and ample student control over their own education. All of the attributes listed above have a research-proven impact on the effectiveness of a course to foster deeper student learning and to generate greater student valuing of the content being taught (Yarborough & Fedesco, 2020).

The findings are not perfectly reproduced in other studies, but they are closely

reflected. A 2004 study from Smith and Van Doren found that courses that emphasize reality-based learning using active engagement activities, when coupled with professor clarity and student confidence, yield significant benefits for student achievement and lasting learning. Furthermore, when these authentic instructional activities that require real-world engagement are applied to controversial topics in history and other social studies, students experience transformative learning and fundamental conceptual change (Alongi, Heddy, & Sinatra, 2016).

What, then, are some possibly expected effects of a course design that fosters greater student engagement? Researchers have found that engagement strategies like learner interaction and a strong instructor presence result in significant benefits on student learning (Gray & DeLoreto, 2016). In addition, these focused approaches have proven to have a positive impact on student motivation. More specifically, when teachers emphasize real-life practices and behaviors, students expressed greater interest in engagement and experienced greater effectiveness in learning (Yang & Sanchez, 2023). Of course, the issue of student motivation has been thoroughly studied, and authentic problem-based learning has been repeatedly proven to have a positive impact on students' desire to study and to learn (Fukuzawa, Boyd, & Cahn, 2017).

Method

This project surveyed 93 education students nearing the end of their teacher

training program regarding their perceptions of the importance of social studies in elementary education. It also asked their self-perceived strengths both in social studies content knowledge and in pedagogical effectiveness. The survey was completed on the first day of a major-required course in elementary social studies instructional methods, and the same survey was repeated at the end of the semester.

Survey Development

To increase the overall content validity of the survey, it was pre-tested with a small sample population of approximately 20 students. Their feedback was instrumental in making beneficial improvements to the survey's wording and presentation. Results from the pilot survey indicated that one primary correction was needed before its actual delivery to students. Students expressed concerns that the key, originally a rating scale of one to 10, was too difficult to complete because they were unable to distinguish between, for example, a four and five on such a scale. To correct this concern, the scale was reduced to only four points and each point was specifically identified for students. Because some students commented that they really did not know what a "3" was, for example, very student centered descriptors were provided. When identifying a personal preference as a "3," students were informed this equated to "loving it," but a "0" was "hating it." When describing something's importance, a "2" would mean "It's probably a good idea, but a "3" would mean "It is so vital."

No concerns were raised by students after these adjustments were made. Additionally, some students expressed concerns about a lack of knowledge of some social studies-related terms. For example, a few said that they were unable to define the word "civics." No change was made here because this lack of knowledge itself was instructive to researchers. The final survey as completed by students is provided as Appendix A of this report.

Sample

Missouri Western State University (MWSU) is an open-enrollment regional public university of about 5,000 undergraduate students near St. Joseph, Missouri, a relatively economically disadvantaged community. The MWSU Department of Education serves over 400 majors, primarily in the areas of early childhood education, elementary education, and secondary education. All elementary education majors are required by the state of Missouri to take an instructional social studies methods course, and because the survey was completed in class, very close to 100% of affected students completed the survey, for a response rate of nearly 100%. Because the survey was always intended as a pre- and post-survey, naturally, there are some differences between the final survey counts as a small number of students exit the course each semester and another small number of students are absent from class on either the day of the initial survey or the day of the final survey.

Within the education department where the survey was administered, students were mostly white (92%), female (85%), and aged 25 years old or less (74%). Additionally, 62% of program participants possessed cumulative grade point averages of 3.0 or higher. Finally, 37% of teacher trainees in this university had household incomes of \$50,000 or less.

Quantitative Analysis

Survey results are very instructive for university-level instructors seeking to develop and to implement a course that positively impacts students ability to know social studies content, to value its importance more deeply, and to instruct it more capably to others. Data charted and analyzed below, taken from course pre- and post-surveys, provides details about student attitudes related to topics within the social studies and the course assignments and approaches used to impact those attitudes positively.

Table 1
Student Response Averages for Survey History Questions (0-3 scale, with 0 being most negative an 4 being most positive

	Pre-Course Survey Average (n=91)	Post-Course Survey Average (n=67)	Average Course Impact
I like history.	1.93	2.16	+0.23
I am prepared to teach history	1.25	2.49	+1.24
I see the importance of history to elementary students.	2.60	2.96	+0.36

Student Pre- and Post-Attitudes Toward History

The growth between student pre-course attitudes about their personal attitudes toward history, their self-perceived attitudes about their readiness to teach history, and their understanding of the vital importance of history as a topic for study and knowledge is presented below in Table 1.

In general, while there was some slight overall growth in student attitudes toward history as a result of this course, this was limited because they were moderately positive about history as they entered the course. Similarly, students were very positive about the importance of history, so little growth was experienced here as well. There are likely numerous reasons for these results. First, history is the most emphasized of the social studies in students' K-12 experience. Second, most college students at liberal arts universities also take both an American and world history survey course as part of their general education requirements. Because of this frequent and repeated emphasis, students expressed a greater appreciation

for and valuing of history as a topic of study.

Nevertheless, while these changes were small, they were positive and, therefore, beneficial, and as expected in an instructional methods course, students expressed more confidence about teaching history as a result of the course’s learning activities and emphases. One interesting feature of the survey results related to history was the post-course average response of 2.96 – with 3.00 being the highest possible rating – in the area of seeing history’s importance across nearly 70 students. In other words, almost 100% of students, after taking the course, understood the vital importance of history in the lives of elementary students.

Student Pre- and Post-Attitudes Towards Geography

Table 2

Student Response Averages for Survey Geography Questions (0-3 scale, with 0 being most negative and 3 being most positive)

	Pre-Course Survey Average (n=91)	Post-Course Survey Average (n=67)	Average Course Impact
I like geography.	1.38	2.18	+0.80
I am prepared to teach geography	1.07	2.65	+1.58
I see the importance of geography to elementary students.	2.48	2.94	+0.46

The growth between student pre-course attitudes about their personal attitudes toward geography, their self-perceived attitudes about their readiness to teach geography, and their understanding of the vital importance of geography as a topic for study and knowledge is presented below in Table 2.

As might be expected, student initial attitudes toward geography as a subject and their self-perceived ability to instruct it were noticeably less positive than their attitudes toward history. Students did, however, perceive a similar necessity for both history and geography. Interestingly, while students started at different places in their attitudes toward history and geography, they ended the course with almost exactly the same more positive attitude toward both, and just as unexpected, though they started at a less positive attitude toward their ability to teach geography versus history, by the end of the course, they were more confident in their ability to teach geography than history. As before, as a result of the course, students grew to nearly 100% fully

embracing the importance of geography for elementary students.

Student Pre- and Post-Attitudes Toward Civics

The growth between student pre-course attitudes about their personal attitudes toward civics, their self-perceived attitudes about their readiness to teach civics, and their understanding of the vital importance of civics as a topic for study and knowledge is presented below in Table 3.

Table 3
Student Response Averages for Survey Civics Questions
(0-3 scale, with 0 being most negative and 3 being most positive)

	Pre-Course Survey Average (n=91)	Post-Course Survey Average (n=67)	Average Course Impact
I like civics.	1.22	2.06	+0.84
I am prepared to teach civics	0.82	2.44	+1.62
I see the importance of civics to elementary students.	2.26	2.95	+0.69

The subject of civics, defined within the course as the study of the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a community, was the lowest rated of the social studies subject on the pre-course survey. Students expressed a greater lack of appreciation for the topic, a personal sense of inability to teach the topic, and a reduced sense of its importance for elementary students. Likely because of the lower starting point, on the post-survey,

civics was rated slightly less than history and geography on students liking the subject and believing that they could teach it capably, but once more, as a result of taking the course, nearly all students gave it the highest rating for its importance, moving the overall average from 2.26 to 2.95.

Student Pre- and Post-Attitudes Towards Economics

The growth between student pre-course attitudes about their personal attitudes toward economics, their self-perceived attitudes about their readiness to teach economics, and their understanding of the vital importance of economics as a topic for study and knowledge is presented below in Table 4.

According to pre-course survey results, the subject of economics was more akin to civics than to history and geography in student appreciation for and ability to teach but was much more similar to those two topics in the area of student understanding of its importance. According to post-survey data, by the end of the course, students rated their appreciation for economics as high as they did history and geography, so more

Table 4

Student Response Averages for Survey Civics Questions
 (0-3 scale, with 0 being the most negative and 3 being the most positive)

	Pre-Course Survey Average (n=91)	Post-Course Survey Average (n=67)	Average Course Impact
I like economics.	1.27	2.15	+0.88
I am prepared to teach economics	0.92	2.58	+1.66
I see the importance of economics to elementary students.	2.54	2.94	+0.40

measurable growth was made in this area than in civics. As before, though, at the end of the course, students rated economics – just like history, geography, and civics – as very important.

Qualitative Data Presentation

While the numeric data are informative, the student open-ended comments are similarly beneficial for teacher preparers. In the student comments provided below, no changes have been made to the student’s actual phrasing. These comments, coupled with the survey data, provide solid reasoning for why the course had effectiveness.

- *Methodological Variety* “Great class! Honestly, I was not very comfortable with the subject matter before taking this course, but now that I’m about to be finished, I feel a lot more excited about it. I have gained lots of new ideas and methods to engage my future students with the content, as well as

helpful tips on handling sensitive topics with respect and grace.”

- *Passion for Content* “Passionate about Social Studies. Makes it real. Uses memorable points for future social studies teachers. Wonderful at making the material interesting to learn. Very passionate in what he teaches, and it’s contagious.”
- *Increased Confidence* “I was nervous to teach social studies before taking this class. I had never learned very much in this subject in school and I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to provide beneficial lessons for my future students. After taking this class, I am more confident in this subject area and I can’t wait to make social studies real for my future students. Loved the amount of group projects and fun activities we did as a class (especially the history newscast). He made history real for us in this way.”

- *Changing Opinions* “Specifically, for this course, he has completely changed my views and opinions on teaching social studies. I started this course out terrified of teaching social studies because my foundation in LEARNING social studies was...shakey at best. However, due to how skillfully he constructed this course mixed with his obvious passion for the subject and for creating success for his students, I feel as if I now have a toolbox of strategies to pull from in my future classroom and that I can truly make social studies meaningful to MY future students.”
- *Student-Centeredness* • The professor “truly cares about his students and wants what is best for them. He really loves social studies and that shines through in his teaching. He has truly made me excited to teach social studies and that excites me. I love how you exemplify everything we should be as teachers every day in class. I helps me understand how to apply myself as a teacher and be the best for my future students.”
- *Organized Delivery* “He runs this class like an orchestra- everything makes sense, it harmonizes, and people are engaged. I have had more fun taking hours on his assignments than I have in any other class, because he has made this content worthwhile for me. He makes it real.”
- *Real World Emphasis* “I truly enjoyed taking this course this semester. I learned a lot and how to make Social Studies REAL. I am excited to start

teaching and apply the knowledge that you taught me to my future students.”

- *Instructional Modeling* “He modeled what great social studies teaching was and I feel much more prepared to teach the social studies after this course.”

Course Inclusions and Emphases to Garner Positive Attitudinal Results

In summary, the course experienced measurable effectiveness in increasing student appreciation for the social studies, in increasing student confidence for teaching the social studies, and in increasing student embrace of the social studies as important within the elementary curriculum. How was this accomplished? Several features of the course, indicated above, answer this fundamental research question.

First, the course focused on the central theme of “Make it real.” This motto meant that the social studies, when taught for impact, connected the content to students’ actual lives. For example, one major course assignment asked students to study the history of an important recent event and then interview someone close to them who lived through this event. To complete this learning activity and to make the history more “real” for herself, one student closely studied 9-11 and then interviewed her father who was actually on a plane during the event. Other students have interviewed soldiers who experienced combat in America’s recent wars like the Vietnam War and the Gulf War.

This central course focus was also explored in more creative, student-engaging ways. Another primary learning activity for the course asked students to create a modern videotaped newscast of an event. Group members in this project were assigned the roles of news anchor, on-scene reporter, eyewitness interviewee, and historical expert interviewee. Another student-engaging project required students to attend a cultural event in the area outside their own usual experience. White students, for example, might attend a predominantly African-American church, or a group of non-German friends might attend the local Oktoberfest celebration.

It is probably worth noting that the most frequently repeated student comment about the course was the instructor's passion for them and for the content. Obviously, students respond more positively in learning environments where the teacher heartily embraces the content, strongly believing in its importance and value, and where students themselves feel respected, appreciated, and liked.

Finally, the course's delivery was obsessive about connecting all social studies content to student lived experiences. The foremost question of the course was, "How does this academic standard relate to you?" For the topic of geography, students were not asked to identify capitals or river locations but instead were asked to present the culture of a self-chosen country. During these student presentations, classmates were introduced to exotic foods, were shown compelling videos of breathtaking locations, and were taught local folk

dances. In the subject of economics, the impact of decision-making on personal finance was stressed. Students calculated how much their daily cups of Starbucks coffee added up to over a period of time and what that amount could have alternatively been used for.

Student Objections

While students were, as demonstrated by both the summary data and student comments provided above, very positive about the course and its beneficial impact on them, they did provide two important caveats for course improvement. First, many students commented that the course did not provide sufficient content review. They plainly stated that their existing knowledge of the social studies was lacking and needed this last course before program conclusion to do more for them in gaining increased social studies knowledge. A recent iteration of the course added a brief five-minute partner-completed web search review of vital social studies content like *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Bill of Rights. Second, many students commented that the course, a two-college credit hour course that met twice a week for 55 minutes, was insufficient. They indicated that the class period often felt rushed and that more time was needed to explore course content in greater depth.

Limitation

Several limitations are evident from this study. First, the total number of survey respondents is limited. Because the target audience for the survey was only students

nearing completion of a mid-sized teacher education program, the number of participants in the study is necessarily small. As a result, the applicability of the study to other areas is reduced. A larger scale study, though, including a similar student population would enhance and reinforce the findings included herein.

Second, the student population surveyed was very homogeneous in demographics. Almost all students were; as previously specified; female, white, and lower middle class. Other voices were simply not included in the sample. It would be interesting to know if minoritized or other diverse students perceive field experiences similarly, but this study was clearly limited by its tightly focused group of students.

Third, as with all survey studies, there are questions about the benefit of self-perceptions. Related to this caveat is the concern that pre-service teachers who have very limited school experience truly know what is in the best interests of their professional development as teachers. Even though the survey was entirely anonymous, some students may have intended to provide answers that they thought their professor wanted to hear. Others may have simply worked rapidly through the survey because of other priorities, not really carefully providing accurate replies to the survey's questions.

Finally, this survey simply caught a single moment in time. While it is reasonable to assume that these results would be repeated: students generally always state a

preference for real world learning over classroom-based learning. That assumption may not necessarily be true. The partiality toward field experiences may be cyclical, or it may just be generational with current Generation Z. If the same survey were given now, it is very unlikely that identical numeric results or comments would be garnered.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Existing social studies instruction, for the most part, is not accomplishing its stated purposes with many students. They arrive at the university expressing a lack of knowledge about and commitment to the social studies. Fundamentally, this study argues for an approach to the teaching of social studies that is student-centered, instructionally varied, and fully applicable to the lived experiences of students themselves. Improved social studies courses are led by skilled educators who are passionate about the topic and who provide opportunities for students to explore the social studies in creative and personally meaningful ways.

- In the area of history, students need to connect the important events with their own lives. This can be accomplished through interviews and through the creation of "historical newscasts."
- Improved geography instruction focuses on people as much as on places. Students learn about locations by exploring the unique ways people in those locations live. In this

paradigm, geography becomes more about culture than about map awareness.

- As is well known, there is tremendous need for improved economics instruction. Students who explore the stock market, for example, are astounded by the power of interest to grow money, especially when compared to the deleterious impact of credit card debt.
- Finally, service-based learning should form the foundation for civics instruction. Students at all ages can learn about being better citizens by serving their community. Elementary pupils can clean up around their schools, and secondary students can help the needy in their neighborhoods.

For Future Research

Several possible lines of research appear evident from this initial study. First, this and other similar studies tend to focus tightly on a demographic group, in this case middle class white females (for the most part). A broader study with more participants would make these findings much more transferrable to more teacher training settings and provide more credence to the argument that teacher training should evolve, as much as possible, to include higher and higher percentages of applied learning experiences in actual school setting with real P-12 students.

Finally, this study was entirely survey-based and, while it did include some numeric data for consideration, it was as much qualitative than quantitative. This

approach, therefore, did not measure actual effectiveness, only perceived effectiveness. A follow-up study to measure actual instructional and content growth would be beneficial. While it is assumed that students trained in this course become better elementary social studies teachers, if actual standardized assessments taken by their own elementary social studies students indicate otherwise, teacher training institutions should know this before the course implementation changes recommended by this study are implemented.

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APPENDIX A

EDU 340 • ELEMENTARY SOCIAL STUDIES METHODS STUDENT INTEREST SURVEY

Key Code: 3 = loved it, world class at it, it is so vital
2 = liked it, I'll do well, it's probably a good idea
1 = OK with it, I'll take it, not really
0 = hated it, bad at it, probably a waste of time for most students

Your Responses:

	1. I liked history as a student.
	2. I am ready to teach history.
	3. I really see the importance of history in students' futures.
	4. I liked geography as a student.
	5. I am ready to teach geography.
	6. I really see the importance of geography in students' futures.
	7. I liked civics as a student.
	8. I am ready to teach civics.
	9. I really see the importance of civics in students' futures.
	10. I liked globalism/international studies as a student.
	11. I am ready to teach globalism/international studies.
	12. I really see the importance of global knowledge in students' futures.
	13. I liked economics/personal finances as a student.
	14. I am ready to teach economics.
	15. I really see the importance of economics in students' futures.

Your Comments: