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Evaluation of Master's Theses in the Field of Social Sciences Education: 2011-2014

Tugba Unlu^a, Aksaray University, Social Studies Institute, Aksaray, 68100, Turkey

Ayşe Yolatan^b, Aksaray University, Social Studies Institute, Aksaray, 68100, Turkey

Funda Varnacı Uzun^{c*}, Aksaray University, Education Faculty, Elementary Education Program, Aksaray, 68100, Turkey

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study is to evaluate the theses written in the field of social studies education in 2011-2014 in Turkey. Within the context of the current study, totally 307 master's theses written in 2011-2014 in relation to their topic, study group and method were examined. One of the qualitative data analysis techniques, descriptive analysis was employed in the study. While examining the theses, a file was opened for each thesis with a code such as T1, T2 etc, the topic, study group and method of each thesis were recorded in its file and then these data were transferred to NVivo 9.0 program. Then, as a result of the descriptive analysis conducted, the topics of the theses were coded in such a way as to collect them under themes. At the end of the coding process, models including the frequencies of the marking of each code were constructed. The results of the evaluation show that the main focus of the theses is the effect of teaching methods and techniques that can be used in social studies courses on the attitudes, behaviors and academic achievement of students. In addition to this, there are also many theses addressing the efficiency of the social studies course in imparting target skills, values and information to students. Moreover, there are some theses aiming to develop the current social studies program. While usually the students attending social studies classes constitute the study group of the theses, there are also some theses looking at the opinions of teachers and pre-service teachers. In general, descriptive survey and pretest-posttest experimental research design were used in the theses. In the analyses, quantitative data analysis techniques were employed.

Keywords: social sciences master theses; social science education

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Funda Varnacı Uzun**, Aksaray University, Education Faculty, Elementary Education Program, Aksaray, 68100, Turkey

E-mail address: fundavarnaci@hotmail.com / Tel.: 4-345-543-32.

1. Introduction

Social studies course not only prepares students for social life and develop their social aspects but also gives information about history, geography and citizenship (Gundem, 1996). Social studies course covers the topics selected from the disciplines called social sciences such as sociology, economics, politics, psychology, anthropology, law, education but simplified for elementary school students to understand (Tay and Ocal, 2008).

The main objective of social studies in elementary education is to teach responsibilities of citizenship to students, to develop students' awareness of social interactions and the concept of saving and to make them individuals who can contribute to the development of democratic and modern societies. Through social studies instruction, it is aimed to provide individuals with such training that they can be equipped with democratic attitudes and values and universal information and skills/behaviors, behave with the awareness of citizenship responsibilities, are law-abiding, productive and participatory and have problem solving and decision-making skills (Safran, 2008). Social studies course is of great importance to create a "good citizenship" model. Though this citizenship model may vary depending on time and geography, it has many shared features (Sonmez, 1997). The content of social studies course has been a subject of hot debates and many articles and theses have been written on it.

One of the reasons for the incorporation of social studies course into school curriculums is the changes and developments experienced in societies. In America, while addressing the social studies curriculum, the main emphasis was put on history and geography in 1940s and 50s. Up to 1960s and 70s, serious criticisms were leveled at social studies curriculum. The name "social studies" was first coined for this course in America. At first, efforts were put forth to shape the basic definition of social studies and over time these efforts were directed to materials development, teacher training and formation of institutional construction in the field of social studies. In Turkey, on the other hand, initially the topics of social studies were incorporated into the curriculums of other courses after the foundation of the Republic and in 1968; it became separate course with its own curriculum and name (Sonmez, 1997). After that, the weight of history and geography topics gradually decreased in social studies course and more emphasis was put on the topics from sociology, anthropology, economic, political sciences and social psychology. An interdisciplinary approach based on the concepts and methods of social sciences was adopted and the traditional deduction was replaced by induction. Students have been trained as individuals actively receiving information and possessing critical thinking skills. In general research focuses on issues such as how to make social studies curriculums operational.

Modern social studies programs are shaped according to up-to-date issues and its content and methodology are formed depending on changes and developments taking place. As a result of the changes made in social studies curriculum, the tenets of structural approach were replaced by the principles of constructivist approach. When the topics of social studies curriculum are examined, it is seen that the topics are most from the lives of students and their surroundings; thus, the objectives of the program are believed to be accomplished by students more easily. The program trying to keep every student active, with its activities, not only allows students to gain information but also impart pre-set objectives and behaviors to students (Ata, 2009). Most of the research conducted after the renewal of the program focuses on the functionality of the program and evaluation of its effect.

The purpose of the current study is to evaluate the master's theses written in the field of social studies in 2011-2014 in terms of topic, study group and method. This study is believed to be of great importance to determine up-to-date issues and the gap in the field. Moreover, the current study is believed to provide guidance for future research.

2. Method

Within the framework of the current study, a total of 307 master's theses completed in 2011-2014 in the field of social studies education were evaluated. The theses were reached by entering the key words "social studies education" and "social studies teacher education" into the data base of National Theses Center operated by the Council of Higher Education. The theses not related to social studies education were discarded from the analysis.

The theses were evaluated through qualitative descriptive analysis technique in terms of their topic, method and study group. For each evaluation, theme titles were determined and then codings were performed under these themes. As a result of coding operation, tables showing the frequencies were constructed.

3. Findings

3.1. Evaluation of the master's theses in terms of their topics

When the social studies master's theses completed in 2011-2014 were evaluated in terms of their topics, it was found that the highest number of theses focus on the evaluation of social studies topics (Table 1). In these theses, opinions of students, teachers and pre-service teachers about various topics involved in social studies program were evaluated. In addition to this, some of the theses address the problems encountered in teaching of the topics and solutions to these problems.

Table 1. Evaluation of the Master's Theses in terms of Their Topics

Theme	Topics	Frequencies
Social studies themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Teachers' opinionsPre-service teachers' attitudes,Students' attitudes,Problems encountered in teaching of the topics and learning strategies	110
Materials and instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Use of materials, effects of different methods, self-efficacy in the use of materials	103
Social studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Its effect on students, content, learning-teaching process,Comparison of the program with the programs of other countries	63
Attainments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Accomplishment, achievement	22
Classroom management	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Self-efficacy	4
Measurement-evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Conceptual fallacies, performance assignments	3
In-service training		2

The second most frequently addressed issue in the theses is the effect of materials and different teaching methods on the attitude towards social studies course and academic achievement in the course (Table 1). In addition to this, the extent to which course attainments are accomplished and the content of social studies program are addressed in these theses.

3.2. Evaluation of the master's theses in terms of their methods

When the master's theses are examined in terms of the method employed, it is seen that mostly quantitative research methods are used. Of the quantitative research methods, survey and experimental models are widely used in the theses. The qualitative research methods are observed to be employed relatively less frequently in the theses (Table 2).

Table 2. Evaluation of the Master's Theses in terms of Their Methods

Theme	Frequency
Survey-relational survey model	149
Experimental model (pretest - posttest)	96
Qualitative research	42
Mixed design	20

3.2. Evaluation of the master's theses in terms of study group

As a result of the evaluation of the theses in terms of their study groups, it was found that the study groups of 157 theses are comprised of elementary school students. Elementary school students from grade 4 to grade 8 are evaluated.

Table 3. The master's Theses Evaluation in Terms of Their Study Groups

Theme	Frequencies
Teacher	86
Pre-service teacher	48
Elementary school students	157
Social studies curriculum	14
Students' parents	2

While teachers come to second as the most popular study group, they are followed by pre-service teachers. There are only two theses using students' parents as their study groups (Table 3).

4. Results

In the analyzed theses, it is seen that the topics such as teachers' opinions about social studies course, the effects of social studies course on students, use of materials and different instructional techniques in social studies course, strategies employed by teachers, teachers' state of using methods, their self-efficacies, tendencies, pre-service teachers' opinions about the topics of social studies, their interests in and attitudes towards these topics and elementary school students' knowledge, skills and attitudes relating social studies are frequently addressed topics.

While in general the theses focus on these topics, there are some important topics overlooked. The current study revealed that issues such as shortcomings of teachers and in-service training have hardly been investigated by these theses. In addition, there are few theses looking at the use of technology in social studies instruction. As today we are in a technology age, the number of studies focusing on the use of technology in social studies needs to be increased.

Furthermore, some of the theses investigated the effects of different teaching methods on student achievement in social studies course; yet, there is almost no study investigating how competent teachers who will implement these methods in class are in the administration of these methods. Whether educators need in-service training is another topic to be investigated by future theses and thus some light should be shed on the construction of in-service training programs.

Social studies course is embedded in life itself. Thus, daily events should be included in the course while teaching topics to make learning more permanent. Then, whether teachers follow up-to-date issues in their lessons can also be another subject to be investigated.

In the investigated theses, it was observed that mostly qualitative research techniques were employed. In future theses, mixed methods utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods together should be preferred.

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