

# A Study of Students' Opinions About History Subjects in the Social Studies Curriculum

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Social studies combines social sciences and the humanities, and has the purpose of raising effective citizens. There are many different areas integrated in social studies including history, geography, philosophy and psychology. Social studies is the presentation of the information produced by these areas in framework of a curriculum. Social studies curriculum is a multi-dimensional program. One of the objectives of this program is to raise individuals who know about their past and shape their future with the help of the lessons they learn from history. In this context, the aim of this study is to determine sixth grade students' perspective to the history subjects in social studies curriculum, learn the place of history in their lives and see how history subjects are taught in classrooms. This study is limited to the 2014-2015 academic year. The participants were identified using random sampling, a probability-based sampling method. This is a qualitative study. The study includes interviews with eight sixth graders, of whom four were female and four were male. The study data were collected in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. The study found that the students enjoyed learning history, had positive opinions about their history grades and their teachers continued to teach history using traditional methods. They also felt that history contributed to their lives. Based on the data collected, the study makes specific suggestions.

*Keywords:* history topics, social studies, students' opinions

## 1. Introduction

Social studies is a primary and middle school course. The objective of the course is to teach citizenship skills. Social studies aims to make students learn about their past, present and future and understand human relations as well as their responsibilities as a citizen (Ulusoy & Gülüm, 2009, p. 86). The social studies curriculum was initially developed in the US in the twentieth century to facilitate the assimilation of immigrants and help immigrants gain experience in common rules. This course was added to Turkish curricula in 1968 (Aktan, 2006, p. 97). Social studies is an interdisciplinary course, and its content is derived from social sciences and humanities (Öztürk, 2009, p. 4). Social studies includes history, geography, sociology, psychology, philosophy, economics and law. Social studies is a specific way of teaching the social sciences in a simplified and restructured curriculum. The aim of this course is to teach basic information produced by the social sciences. History is one of

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the foundational branches of social studies. History has been one of the underpinning fields of social studies since the beginning of the twentieth century because it conveys cultural heritage to upcoming generations and contributes to citizenship education (Öztürk, 2006, p. 41). Teaching history is important for the continuity of the state and national culture and because it helps students to make sense of past events. Students should have a deep understanding of past social and economic events to be able to adapt to the needs and requirements of the present (NME, 2006, p. 34). History subjects should have a special place in the social studies curriculum to ensure cultural unity and convey thoughts and feelings to future generations. History will teach students skills that will help them build a connection between the past, present and future, make reasonable comments and more successful decisions in their social lives (NME, 2006, p. 34). Social studies teachers play a major role in teaching history subjects and making students like them. There is a need for new instructional strategies in history teaching. History should be taught as causal relationships, allowing students to understand and interpret historical events. The examinations in the education system as well as the traditional understanding in education lead to the perception of history as a set of information to be memorized. This makes students regard the content of history courses as hard and boring. Students will be entertained while learning and will permanently retain what they learn if this course is taught using strategies and techniques that encourage the students to participate actively in their lessons. Students' thoughts about and perspectives on history are shaped in social studies courses. Thus, the fundamental dimensions this study tried to determine are students' opinions about history, their evaluations about the teaching of history and how they use the information and experiences they obtain while learning history.

## 2. Study Objective

The objective of this study is to determine sixth graders' opinions about the teaching of history in the social studies course, perspectives on history and thoughts about the value of history in their lives. Accordingly, these are its four research questions:

- (1) What are students' opinions about history?
- (2) What do students feel when learning history?  
Do students like learning history?  
Do students get bored learning history?
- (3) What do students say are the methods used to teach history?
- (4) What do students think about the contributions of history education to their lives?

## 3. Methodology

This study used the qualitative research method. Qualitative research is used in the social sciences and humanities. In the social sciences, "There is need for multiple perspectives to be able to have a holistic understanding of any phenomenon" (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008, p. 28). Qualitative research methods make it possible for a study to do deep analyses.

## 4. Study Sample

The sample of the study was determined using random sampling, a probability-based sampling method. Random sampling is the selection of random participants from a given universe to create a sample that is large

enough to represent that universe (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2004a, p. 32). The study sample included eight sixth graders (four females and four males). Since it is unethical to reveal their real identities, the female participants were encoded as A1, A2, A3 and A4, and the male participants were encoded as B1, B2, B3 and B4. The study data were collected in casual conversations to enable students to give sincere responses to the research questions.

## 5. The Collection and Analysis of the Study Data

The study data were collected in interviews. The data collection tool was a semi-structured interview form. Interviewing is a data collection method that is used to learn about individuals' thoughts, behaviors and attitudes and helps to see the deeper meaning of what they say (Karasar, 2005, p. 45). A semi-structured interview form is a flexible interview form that facilitates the work of the researcher and makes it possible to clarify unclear responses by asking additional questions (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2004b, p. 233). The research questions were written based on a review of the relevant literature. The interview questions were finalized based on the opinions of two experts, and pilot interviews were held with two students to test the applicability of the questions. The data collection tool was revised and finalized considering the feedback from the pilot test. The researcher held interviews with the eight students included in the study sample. The pilot interviews with the two students were not included as data. The interviews were held in June 2015. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive analysis. The encoding was performed after reading the interview transcriptions and determining the themes for each question. In this study's descriptive analysis, the qualitative data in the documents were processed primarily, and quotations from the data were described and interpreted as findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008, p. 140).

## 6. Findings

This study inquired about sixth graders' opinions about the history subjects in the social studies curriculum, and the data were evaluated in the framework of the research questions. These are presented below.

### 6.1. What Are Students' Opinions About History?

The researcher asked students their opinions about the history subjects in the social studies curriculum. History is described as, "the branch of science that analyzes past events referring to their places, dates and actors based on resources in a framework of causal relationships" (Metin, Date Not Mentioned). Comparing their opinions with the description of history revealed that students did not have sufficient information about the content of history. They had an adequate opinion about history for their grade level. The study found that a majority of female and male students thought that history is made up of past events.

Of the male students:

B3 said, "History is the events and wars in old times."

Of the female students:

A3 said, "It is events that have occurred in the past and present, and it teaches us our history."

### 6.2. What Do Students Feel When Learning History?

#### 6.2.1. Do students' like learning history?

The interviews revealed that all the students liked learning history. Students have a liking for history since the subjects include past events and make students curious. Female students like learning history since it

increases their knowledge, they like the homework and it helps them improve themselves, too. Male students like learning history due to its wars since they get curious and excited about the subjects in the history curriculum.

Of the female students:

A1 said, "Yes, it contributes to my knowledge both in the course and in my relationship with my friends."

A2 said, "Yes, I like it, and I think it is fun. I also like doing the homework."

Of the male students:

B1 said, "I like it very much; when the teacher says that the Ottoman Empire won the war, I feel like I won it myself."

B2 said, "Yes, it contributes a lot to my life and I am interested in history. I also like the wars."

### **6.2.2. Do students get bored when learning history?**

The study found that most students did not get bored learning history. The most remarkable reason for this was that students liked history and thought that the subjects interested them and aroused their curiosity. The students said that they liked learning history in general. However, they also got bored from time to time. The greatest reason for students getting bored was that teachers explained the subjects using the same methods and the same voice all the time. This alienates the students and prevents history from being easily understood.

Of the female students:

A1 said, "No, it makes me very happy. I get very excited while the teacher is explaining the subjects. I wonder what will happen next, and I don't get bored because we play games."

A2 said, "No, the courses are very entertaining. I like playing games while the subjects are explained. I like the 'Magic Bag' game."

A3 said, "It depends on how the teacher explains the subject. I usually get bored because the subjects are usually narrated, and there is a lot of repetition."

A4 said, "I get a little bored because it is not exciting or fun to listen to the teacher."

Of the male students:

B1 said, "I never get bored. The teacher is exciting to listen to, and I picture the subjects in my mind."

B2 said, "I get a little bored. We always read books and have to listen to what the teacher says."

B3 said, "No, I don't get bored. I love history, and I'm interested in the subjects in the history curriculum."

B4 said, "No, I learn more about the past, and my teacher has a good way of explaining the subjects."

### **6.3. What Do Students Say Are the Methods Used to Teach History?**

The findings from the interviews showed that most teachers tried to teach history using traditional methods. Lecturing and the question and answer method are most commonly used to teach history. Some teachers apply the methods of drama, concept maps, the station method and role playing. The subjects in the history curriculum should be taught using modern instructional methods and techniques to make them more fun and understandable. When the students are active during the learning process, the instruction will be more professional and comprehensible. Students also provided their opinions about the teaching of history lessons.

Of the female students:

A1 said, "The teacher lectured, then asked questions and we responded to the questions."

A2 said, "The teacher used the role playing method, and then asked questions."

We also did puzzles. The teacher also used puzzles, the station method and concept maps.”

Of the male students:

B1 said, “The teacher uses lectures and demonstration, makes us write down the information, and also uses the role playing method.”

B2 said, “Our teacher uses lectures and the question and answer method.”

#### **6.4. What Do Students Think About the Contributions of History Education to Their Lives?**

History education teaches individuals how to understand the past, interpret events and make evaluations about the future. All the participating students thought that learning history would make contributions to their lives. They also said that learning history would increase their achievement at school and in social life. This shows that students care about history and are eager to learn history. Here are the students' opinions about the contributions of learning history to their lives:

Of the female students:

A1 said, “Yes, it contributes to my life. It makes me a hardworking person in society.”

A3 said, “Yes, we can learn about the past and tell our friends or the future generations about it.”

A4 said, “Yes, it helps me be more successful in exams and make connections between historic events and places.”

Of the male students:

B1 said, “Yes, it makes me excited to learn about how we came to the present and about heroes in the past. It also makes me more ambitious.”

B2 said, “Yes, it contributes to our lives. It makes us more careful and improves our opinions.”

B3 said, “Yes, it contributes to our lives. It helps us become more knowledgeable than our friends. It is necessary to know about history to be a good person.”

B4 said, “Yes, it contributes to our lives. It helps me be more successful.”

### **7. Interpretation and Discussion**

This study inquired sixth graders' opinions about learning history at school. According to the study results, students have certain opinions about history. They know that history analyzes the wars, events and artworks in the past.

The findings indicate that the sixth grade students like learning history. Kaya and Güven conducted a study entitled “Seventh Grade Students' Opinions About Teaching History In Social Studies Course and the Value of History,” and found that students enjoyed learning history (Kaya & Güven, 2012, p. 180). There are many reasons why students like learning history. Some of these reasons include their love for history, enjoying learning about their ancestors and wars in the past. A study by Kaya and Güven entitled, “Seventh Grade Students' Opinions About Teaching History In Social Studies Course and the Value of History,” found that students liked learning history since they thought the courses were enjoyable and entertaining, and they liked learning about their past, their ancestors and past events (Kaya & Güven, 2012, p. 680). This study's results are consistent with their results.

This study also found that students did not get bored as long as their teachers performed enjoyable activities that helped students be active during classes. This means that teachers should use more constructivist methods to

help students be more active while learning. A study by Ayva entitled, "Students' Opinions About the Teaching and Learning Process In Social Studies," found that students did not get bored when teachers used constructivist methods to help them be more active during lessons (Ayva, 2010, p. 278). A Ph.D. dissertation written by Dündar entitled, "An Analysis of Primary School Level Social Studies Learning Environments Regarding Constructivist Aspects," also found that students wanted lessons to be taught using methods that made them more active, and that this prevented them from getting bored (Dündar, 2008, p. 85).

Students said that history was mainly taught using lectures and the question and answer method. Kurtulgan and Köstüklü conducted a study to evaluate history instruction in sixth and seventh grade Social Studies classes based on the opinions of teachers and supervisors and found that these lessons were mainly taught using lectures and the question and answer method (Kurtulgan & Köstüklü, 2010, p. 181). This result is also consistent with the results of this study. It is necessary to use more diverse teaching methods and techniques in courses to be able to make students understand the subjects well. Students love and understand history when they are taught using engaging methods and techniques. Students believe that learning history will make positive contributions to their lives and enhance their school achievement. A study by Kaya and Güven entitled, "Seventh Grade Students' Opinions About Teaching History in Social Studies Courses and the Value of History," also found that students thought learning history would make a positive contribution to their lives (Kaya & Güven, 2012, p. 682).

### 8. Suggestions

Teachers should avoid using traditional methods for history teaching. Strategies that prevent students from memorizing and make them understand history as causal relationships should be popularized. Using period-specific stories, novels and memoirs will entertain students more than using only the textbook in lessons. It is important to make connections between the past and the present events to achieve the objective of teaching history at school.

### Conclusion

With this research, the following conclusions are made on 6th grade students' perspective on historical topics in social sciences and on how historical topics are taught in the classroom. Students do not have enough knowledge of the content of history topics. However, they are aware that history topics are related to events of the past. Students enjoy learning history regardless of gender. In teaching history, teachers use conventional methods such as question and answering, while they do not use methods that involve active participation of the students. Students think that learning history will contribute to their lives, and their success in their studies and lives.

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