

The Attitude of Students towards the Teaching and Learning of Social Studies Concepts in Colleges of Education in Ghana

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Abstract

The study was structured within the framework of descriptive survey. Two hundred second year students drawn from four Colleges of Education constituted the sample. The simple random sampling technique was used to select fifty second year students from each of the four sampled colleges.

The instrument of data collection was the questionnaire. Ten items designed on a four-point Likert scale were used to collect data on research question 1. For research question 2, respondents were required to list some factors that facilitated, as well as those that hindered the teaching and learning of social studies.

The study revealed that the college students had a positive attitude towards the teaching and learning of social studies. Factors such as the provision of instructional materials, including computers, and the use of resource persons enhanced the teaching, learning and internationalization of concepts. It also came to light that the attitude of students towards the learning of social studies, lack of funds to organize fieldtrips and lack of well equipped libraries and social studies resource rooms hampered the effective teaching and learning of concepts in social studies.

Key-Words: Attitudes. Social Studies. Social Studies Concepts. Teaching and Learning of Social Studies.

1. Introduction

Attitudinal formation is determined by a number of motivational bases (Russel, 1971). He distinguishes four motivational bases for attitude formation as utilitarian, value-expressive, ego-defensive, and knowledge. Attitude with a utilitarian base is associated with survival, safety and other social needs of the individual. This means that one's attitude towards the teaching and learning of a subject is bound to be favourable if it improves one's survival needs.

Value – expressive attitude is based on a person's motive for self-esteem and self – actualization. People seek to develop an identity and a concept of self-esteem in which they have pride. This implies that attitude that coincides with a person's values and ego-ideals will enhance one's feeling of self-esteem.

Ego-defensive attitude is a mechanism of a sort formed by a person to defend one's anxieties. The implication is that students who become dissatisfied with their learning conditions and environment are likely to express negative attitude towards teaching and learning.

The fourth aspect of attitude formation is based on knowledge. To acquire knowledge, one needs to cope with the attitudes of those around one or by adopting an attitude which is consistent with one's thinking towards the subject matter under study, in this case, the teaching and learning of social studies concepts.

Students in the Colleges of Education in Ghana encounter several concepts in the Social Studies curriculum such as production, nationhood, freedom and justice, rights and responsibilities, and democratic governance. Whereas experience and many events in the environment may provide direct and immediate situations for the teaching and learning of concepts in social studies, the classroom environment, on the other hand, tends to be more symbolic and abstract in nature. It thus appears that students are not able to learn social studies concepts well in the classroom setting and apply them to real life situations, hence, the need for this study.

Specifically, the study sought to examine: (1)The attitude of students of the Colleges of Education towards the teaching and learning of concepts in social studies; and (2) The factors that affect the teaching and learning of social studies concepts in the Colleges of Education

In order to address the research problem, the following research questions were formulated to guide the study: (1) What is the attitude of students in the Colleges of education towards the teaching and learning of concepts in social studies?; (2) What are the factors that affect the teaching and learning of social studies concepts in the Colleges of education?

The study was confined to the Colleges of Education in Ghana. These institutions play a pivotal role in producing teachers for the basic level of education in the country. The study was further restricted to only the teaching and learning of concepts in social studies although there are many other areas of concern in the teaching and learning of the subject.

Since the Colleges of Education in Ghana are similar in terms of curriculum, facilities, students and problems, the study was conducted in four of such institutions. It is hoped that conclusions drawn from the study would constitute an authentic framework from which generalizations could be made. Finally, the study involved only

second year students of the Colleges of Education.

2. Literature Review on Attitudes of Students towards teaching and learning of Social Studies Concepts

The attitudes of students towards concept teaching and learning are related to the kind of environment in which they find themselves. Several studies support the view that the factor most likely to affect positively students' attitudes towards the teaching and learning of concepts is an open classroom climate - an environment whose signifying features are teacher respect for students' ideas and teacher use of democratic leadership behaviours (Angell, 1992; Avery et al., 1993; Ochoa, 1991). The beneficial effects of an open classroom climate are cited by virtually every researcher and reviewer who looked at the relationship between educational practices and student results (Goodlad, 1986; Ross & Bondy, 1993; Newman 1989; Harwood & Hahn, 1990).

Clearly then, the nature of the learning environment has a direct impact on the attitude of students towards the teaching and learning of concepts. As revealed in Harwood's (1992) view of a research that investigated the relationship between climate measures in social studies classrooms and students' attitudes towards political concepts, open classroom environments featuring student participation and free expression have a positive impact on students' attitudes towards the learning of concepts. This is also confirmed by Blankenship's findings in 1990 that there was a positive relationship between open classroom climates and several civic concepts and attitude measures. The teacher's role in creating such an open and democratic classroom environment cannot be over-emphasised. Hepburns (1982) writes that "the teacher's role is crucial because the teacher's way of managing the class sets the climate of self-direction, free exchange of views, egalitarian treatment of peers and at the same time, maintains order and direction in the group" (p. 26).

The literature includes many kinds of factors that affect the teaching and learning of social studies concepts. The following are some of the factors:

(i) Competence of teachers

Tamakloe (1988) examined the status of social studies in Teacher Training Colleges in Ghana (now colleges of Education) and found out that the subject was ranked in the lower third, just above physical Education and Home Economics. He noted that the College Principals ascribed the situation to lack of competent teachers. The need for well trained teachers to teach social studies has been emphasized by social studies educators including Aggarwal (2001) who made it abundantly clear that social studies more than any other subject requires well trained teachers. Stanton's (1987) research with pre-service teachers revealed that two-thirds of them scored below the mid-point on an instrument that assessed teachers' knowledge about concepts in social studies education, while Kickbusch's (1987) classroom observational study revealed "a paucity of teaching skills with which to support... social studies education goals" (p. 178).

ii. Lack of meaning of concepts

Social studies teachers often present isolated facts with no regard to any context that might give meaning to concepts. Speculating on the reasons for such lacklustre teaching of concepts, Newman (1980) argues that bona fide discussion is usually suppressed by some teachers with the belief that the purpose of teaching is to transmit fixed knowledge to students. This is unfortunate because memorizing a lot of facts as isolated bits of information does not generate the meaning of concepts. As Seefeldt (2001) has pointed out, student teachers who are taught social studies by rote are rather like parrots who have been taught to recite without understanding conceptual issues.

iii. Lack of training in process skills

It has been found out that teachers do not for the most part, provide training or practice in critical thinking, problem solving, decision making or other process skills (Avery et al., 1993; Berman, 1990; Levitt & Longstreet, 1993). In fact, the view that teachers should devote attention and time to teaching students how to think around concepts is popular among many educators today (e.g. French & Rhoder, 1992; Savage & Armstrong, 2000). The latter writers, for instance, stress that learners who leave school with highly developed thinking skills have powerful intellectual skills they can apply or develop and understand other concepts in new situations.

iv. Avoidance of controversial issues

Either out of fear of complaints (e.g. from parents) or out of personal preference, most social studies teachers are unwilling to take up in the classroom the controversies that arise in society that must be addressed in social studies lessons (Eveslage, 1993; Levitt & Longstreet, 1993). The teaching of controversial issues is an integral part of the teaching and learning of social studies concepts and no effective teacher should compromise this on the altar of fear or intimidation in so far as such controversies are not personalized.

v. Limited shallow textbook content

Most social studies texts are restricted in content, superficial in the treatment of concepts, and present facts out of their contexts (Avery et al, 1993; Eveslage, 1993). In Ghana, most social studies textbooks have been written by people with superficial knowledge of the subject, and hence sub-standard, a situation which seriously undermines the effective teaching and learning of social studies concepts.

The limited subject matter and uninspired treatment in social studies textbooks might not matter so much if social studies teachers use a rich array of other instructional resources. Research has indicated, on the contrary, that most social studies teaching is textbook – bound (Boyer, 1990; Eveslage, 1993).

3. Methodology

Cooper and Schindler (2000) refer to research design simply as “the plan and structure of investigation so conceived as to obtain answers to research questions” (p.134). The current research was structured within the frame work of descriptive research. According to Gay (1997), descriptive research involves collecting data in order to test hypotheses or answer research questions concerning the current status of the subject of study. The descriptive design therefore helped the researcher to collect detailed data on student characteristics concerning the teaching and learning of social studies concepts in the Colleges of Education with the intent of employing the data to justify the current conditions and practices or to make intelligent recommendations to improve them. Furthermore, the descriptive design enabled the researcher to collect data on a relatively large sample (Best and Khan, 1998; Cresswell, 2003).

The target population consisted of Social Studies students in all the Colleges of Education in Ghana. However, the accessible population comprised social studies students in all the seven Colleges of Education in the Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions of Ghana.

The study involved 200 Second Year Social Studies students selected from four Colleges of Education. This included 133 males and 67 females. The sample size was in line with the opinion of Frankael and Wallen (2000) that a minimum sample size of 100 is essential for descriptive research. The second year students were purposively selected for the study in view of the fact that they had experienced two academic years of social studies teaching and learning. They were therefore deemed suitable to bring their experiences to bear in responding to questionnaire items regarding the teaching and learning of concepts in the subject.

In each of the four Colleges of Education, the simple random sampling technique involving the use of a table of random numbers was adopted to select two second year classes from a number of such classes. In each of the two second year classes sampled, the simple random sampling, specifically, the lottery method, was used to select 50 students to be included in the study, giving a sample size of 200. The two classes were also purposively selected. This is because the third year students were on teaching practice and the first year students had not gained enough experience in the learning of concepts in social studies. Table 1 below shows the colleges, particular classes and number of students sampled.

Table 1
 Colleges, classes and number of students sampled

College	Classes	No. of Students	No. Sampled
Gbewaa College of Education	2 Art A, C	70	50
St. John Bosco's College of Education	2A, C	84	50
Tamale College of Education	2Arts, Agric	68	50
Bagabaga College of Education	2E, F	80	50
TOTAL		302	200

In order to obtain the most comprehensive and dependable data pertinent to the research questions, the questionnaire was used because of the research design employed in the study. In every descriptive research, an attempt is made to elicit opinions of as many respondents as possible. The questionnaire therefore enabled the researcher to collect data from a large number of respondents with a view to describing their attitude towards the teaching and learning of social studies concepts. The responses to the questionnaire items were designed on a four-point Likert –type scale and coded, Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). Upon administration of the instrument, however, three were not returned thus reducing the sample size to 197.

To ensure validity, the instrument was first scrutinized by senior faculty members and then field-tested at Fosu College of Education in the Central Region. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to 20 social studies students. The pre-test was to help remove ambiguities, poorly constructed items, clarify unclear choices and to ascertain whether the instrument was generally clear to the respondents. The reliability of the instrument was established by using the test-retest method and the Cronbach alpha statistical measure, which was computer-generated. The measure yielded reliability co-efficient of 0.79. This was considered much acceptable because according to Fraenkel and Wallen (2000), reliability should be at least 0.70, and preferably higher.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Research question 1

What is the attitude of students of the Colleges of Education towards the teaching and learning of concepts in social studies?

There were ten questionnaire items altogether to determine the attitude of students in the sampled institutions towards the teaching and learning of social studies concepts. The respondents were required to select the extent to which they agreed to each item. The mean scores were rated 4.0 – 3.1 (Strongly Agree); 3.0 – 2.1 (Agree); 2.0 – 1.1 (Disagree); 1.0 – 0.1 (Strongly Disagree). The mean of means of all the individual reactions to the items served as an indicator of the overall attitude of the students towards the teaching and learning of social studies concepts. These are indicated in Table 2.

Table 2: Attitudes of students towards the teaching and learning of concepts

Items	Sa(4)	A(3)	D(2)	Sd (1)	Mean	Remarks
Learning concepts as basis of understanding	88	93	6	10	3.3	SA
Showing enthusiasm in learning concepts	18	20	87	72	1.9	D
Interested in learning concepts without using resources	160	22	8	7	3.7	SA
Not paying attention when concepts are taught	27	48	61	61	2.2	A
Always happy when social lesson ends	12	27	52	106	1.7	D
Enjoy learning concepts using a variety of resources	160	22	8	7	3.7	SA
Learning social studies only to acquire factual knowledge	41	54	48	54	2.4	A
Learning concepts for attitudinal development	130	61	4	2	3.6	SA
Not regular at social studies lessons	22	55	76	44	2.3	A
Not interested in social studies because of the concepts	21	18	55	103	1.8	D
Total mean	26.6					
Mean of means	2.66					

Table 2 shows that the students were aware that learning concepts facilitates the understanding of lesson content. Their reactions to the first item gave a mean of 3.3, which is Strongly Agree. Certainly, when students understand concepts in a topic, their understanding of the entire lesson is greatly enhanced. Novak (1977), in support of this assertion, posits that although concepts change in time and may vary from culture to culture, a person's grasp for a subject's concepts is the basis of understanding in that subject. He stresses that concept – based learning has three advantages: first, knowledge is retained much longer; second, it adds to the capacity for easier learning of subsequent related materials, and third, it facilitates new related learning even after forgetting what has occurred.

Responding to the item, “showing enthusiasm in learning concepts” the mean of the responses indicated disagreement. This implies that the students were not enthusiastic about learning social studies concepts. With regard to showing interest in learning concepts in the absence of resources, the mean indicated that students very much liked learning concepts in the abstract. This revelation is surprising because several writers maintain that the use of resources enhance the learning and understanding of concepts (Aggarwal, 2001; Banks, 1990; Dynneson & Gross, 1999; Parker, 2001). Parker is categorical that the impact of a message is stronger if more than one sensory organ is involved in receiving it. It is indeed paradoxical that the students who showed no enthusiasm in learning concepts in one breadth would in another breadth show interest in learning concepts in the abstract.

The mean for the item “Not paying attention when concepts are taught” yielded a mean score of 2.2, which falls within the range for Agree. This implies that the students paid no attention whenever concepts were being taught during social studies lessons. This confirms the fact that the students had no enthusiasm in the learning of social studies concepts. However, responses to the next item showed that the students were not always happy when social studies lessons were over. If the students had no enthusiasm in learning the concepts, one wonders how they could not be jubilant at the sound of the bell to end Social Studies lessons.

To the item “Enjoy learning concepts with a variety of resources”, the respondents strongly agreed. This indication is, however, a contradiction to the earlier indication in which students strongly agreed to the learning concepts in the absence of resources. In the view of Mehlinger (1981), while it is possible to teach and learn

Social Studies without resources, it is easier when they are available. The respondents also agreed that they learn only to acquire factual knowledge. However, learning should not be just for the sake of acquiring factual knowledge. Admittedly, factual knowledge is important in helping students to learn; but such factual knowledge becomes meaningful only within the context of a concept. The National Council for the Social Studies (1994) admonishes that when the teaching and learning of social studies is organized around concepts, learners will be able to make sense of abstract ideas and begin the life long process of acquiring knowledge. The item “Learning concepts for attitudinal change” attracted a mean score of 3.6, indicating strong agreement. It has been suggested that a person’s attitude is directly related to the amount of exposure that person has with learning concepts” (Blege, 2001). Regarding irregularity at social studies lessons, it was revealed that respondents sometimes absented themselves from social studies lessons. Absenteeism limits students’ capacity to learn and understand concepts. The nature of concepts makes it difficult for most students to learn and understand them personally without the guidance of the teacher. Since people perceive concepts differently (Martorella, 1994), it is important that students attend social studies lessons regularly so they can have a common experience and perception of concepts under the guidance of the teacher.

Reactions to the item “Not interested in social studies because of concepts” yielded a mean value of 1.8 which falls within the range of scores for Disagree. In other words, the students were not interested in learning social studies for reasons other than the presence of concepts. Several studies (e.g. Angell, 1992; Avery et al. 1993; Ochoa, 1991) suggest that the factor most likely to affect students’ attitude towards the teaching and learning of concepts is an open classroom climate whose signifying features are teacher respect for students’ ideas and teacher use of democratic leadership behaviours.

Out of the ten items for the research question, 4 means are related to Strongly Agree, 3 to Agree, another 3 to Disagree, and none to Strongly Disagree. This indicates that 7 out of the 10 means are positive (Strongly Agree and Agree), while 3 are negative (Disagree). The mean of means of the individual items is 2.66, which belongs to the group of positive means. Generally, therefore, the respondents and for that matter, students of the Colleges of Education had a positive or favourable attitude awards the teaching and learning of concepts in social studies

4.2. Research question 2

What are the factors that affect the teaching and learning of social studies concepts In the Colleges of Education? Certain factors positively or negatively affect the teaching and learning concepts, especially in social studies. Hence the formulation of this research question to investigate them. A questionnaire item required students to list five factors that facilitate the learning of social studies concepts. The recurrent factors given are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Factors that facilitate the teaching and learning of social studies concepts

Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Use of appropriate techniques	14	7.1
Going on fieldtrips to places of interest	12	6.1
Resourcefulness of teachers to motivate students	19	9.6
Providing textbooks for both students and teachers	21	10.7
Establishment of social studies laboratory	21	10.7
Provision of help by resources persons	22	11.2
Provision of TLMS, including computers	34	17.3
Group learning	8	4.1
Use of real objects and examples in teaching	10	5.1
Teacher’s good attitude towards the subject	5	2.5
No Responses	31	15.7
Total	197	100.0 (100.1)

Table 3 suggests that the provision of TLMS, including computers (17.3%), the use of resource persons (11.2%), provision of textbooks for both students and teachers (10.7%), establishment of a social studies laboratory (10.7%) and resourcefulness of social studies teachers (9.6%) greatly facilitate the teaching and learning of social studies concepts. Other factors that play a significant role are the use of appropriate techniques to teach social studies (7.1%) and going on fieldtrips to places of interest (6.1%). All these factors imply that the successful teaching and learning of social studies concepts depends largely on the availability of required instructional resources and the teacher’s commitment and enthusiasm in the teaching of the subject. No one can deny the vital role that instructional resources play in ensuring the understanding and internalization of concepts. As pointed out by Tamakloe, Atta and Amedahe (2005), teaching-learning materials facilitate the learning and understanding of concepts by students. Similarly, the use of resource persons in teaching social studies not only

breaks boredom but more importantly adds meaning, vitality and interest to the regular classroom experiences. On factors that hinder the effective teaching and learning of concepts in social studies, the respondents identified those presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Factors that hinder the effective teaching and learning of social studies concepts

Factor	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Attitude of students towards the subject	38	19.3
Lack of funds to organize fieldtrips	34	17.3
Inadequate number of seminars and workshops	24	12.2
Lack of well equipped libraries and resource rooms	36	18.3
Infrequent use of problem –solving techniques	20	10.1
Lack of journals, magazines and newspapers	18	9.1
No response	27	13.7
Total	197	100.0

From Table 4, among the factors that hinder effective teaching and learning of concepts in social studies, the attitude of students towards the subject (19.3%), lack of funds to organize fieldtrips (17.3%) and lack of well-equipped libraries and resource rooms (18.3%) were ranked high. The importance of fieldtrips, well-equipped libraries and social studies laboratories cannot be over-emphasized. Educational trips beyond the regular classroom encourage students to become active learners, and provide a way of relating theoretical study to practical problems in the world, thus enhancing the learning experience. The teaching and learning of Social Studies should not therefore be confined to the four walls of the classroom because every community, however small it is, has resources that can be used to strengthen the learning of Social Studies. With reference to the provision of well-equipped libraries, Parker (2001) points out that “the collection of resources in the school library makes it one of the teacher’s best friends when it comes to social studies teaching and learning” (p. 286) while Aggarwal (2001) observes that the social studies laboratory provides a pleasant social and co-operative environment for effective teaching and learning. Other significant factors are the infrequent use of problem-solving techniques to teach social studies (10.1%) and lack of journals, newspapers and magazines (9.1%). Problem – solving constitute an integral part of the teaching and learning of social studies (ASESP, 1990). The African Social and Environmental Studies Programme (ASESP) in 1990 stressed the need for social studies teachers to “abandon the traditional method of transmitting information and adopt the method of problem – solving” (p.17). In the view of the programme, the teacher using the problem-solving method “should not furnish students with the data but rather help them to identify problems and make decisions” (p.17). This method of teaching social studies shifts the role of the teacher from an expository one to the role of a guide and resources person; and it shifts the role to the learners from being passive recipients of pre-packaged information to that of active, direct problem solvers. As a result of its contribution to developing essential skills and promoting worthy values for democratic living, many social studies educators regard problem solving as an integral part of the teaching and learning of social studies (Savage & Armstrong, 2007). The use of journals, news-papers and magazines are equally important in social studies. Parker (2001) reminds social studies teachers that newspapers, journals and magazines are ideal resources for teaching current events in social studies.

5. Conclusions

The study revealed that students of the Colleges of Education had a favourable attitude towards the teaching and learning of social studies.

It was indicated that factors such as the provision of instructional materials, including computers, provision of appropriate and adequate textbooks for both tutors and students were the top factors that facilitated the teaching and learning of social studies concepts.

It also came to light, ironically, that the attitude of students towards the learning of social studies, as well as lack of libraries and social studies resource room were the top factors which greatly hampered the teaching and learning of social studies concepts.

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