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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Teacher attitudes on teaching social issues in the elementary school

J. A. Spinthourakis and P. Papoulia-Tzelepi
University of Patras (Greece)

Introduction

Education is based on knowledge, beliefs and the values of a society. Through formal and informal means, the education system promotes the learning of elements of its culture to develop productive members of society. The nature of the world challenges our schools in terms of the curriculum, instructional techniques and the training provided for educators.

The degree to which elementary school teachers are prepared to undertake the teaching of social issues rather than just historical facts is part of the overall transmission of culture at the local, national and regional level. Narrowly focused history teaching that simply promotes nationalistic pride can lead to boundaries to knowledge, that limit examination and inquiry into issues. Past studies on the teaching of nationalistic history and civics in schools show that societies have manipulated their histories and perpetuated ethnocentrism through schooling (Nelson 1996). As new knowledge is revealed, there will be change in values.

Social studies attempts to teach children about the problems of the individual and her/his relation to others. The underlying premise of social studies instruction is to develop competent civic participants, and it builds on the earliest human experiences (Nelson, 1996). Social studies teach skills of living together, identity, problem solving, research skills, scientific investigation and a scientific attitude towards life problems. The challenges are to identify how to teach teachers to become critical thinkers in a changing multicultural society as how to involve students in this process.

This paper presents preliminary findings from a study conducted at the University of Patras. It focuses on the attitudes and degree to Greek elementary school teachers are prepared to teach social issues.

The teacher's role in teaching social issues

We need to allow teachers and curriculum developers to arrange, organise topics and to select the content for the teaching of social issues. A variety of structures may be used, such as using structures that allow for the incorporation of history as a means of presenting the social and historical concepts underlying citizenship. According to Wraga (1993), the study of social issues is often most productively pursued through interdisciplinary and extradisciplinary inquiry.

Teachers play a critical role; their knowledge, training and openness are fundamental to success. Effective teaching of social issues revolves around the premise that issues-centered curricula should be constructed to promote depth of understanding. This can be challenging to teachers accustomed to following a preset curriculum and textbook (Apple, 1988). Topics need to be studied in ways that introduce children to important complexities and details, connected through different structures. The cognitive structures needed to organise and think about relationships among various issues and contrasting realities are not mastered by using instructional processes that rely on studying one issue after another (Corretero and Voss, 1994).

Hirsch (1996) has pointed out that an issues-centered program needs teachers who are confident that their students learn a common core of knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Using issues as the focus in teaching can lead students to an awareness of differences, but more importantly to identify the similarities and principles that bind people together as citizens (Avery et al., 1993).

Evans (1989), as cited by Ochoa-Baker (1996), sees the social studies curriculum as a means of learning to become a democratic citizen. One does not study history just to learn certain facts. Instead, the issues-centred educator uses these facts as a means of relating the issues underlying the situation to their role in the historical context. Engle and Ochoa (1988) argue that democracy as a preferred form of government has the potential to afford dignity through values such as freedom, equality, and justice, and criticise current practices in social studies that emphasise textbooks, lectures, and memorisation because such practices contradict democratic beliefs and practices. Instead they promote a curriculum centred on issues linked to intellectual processes that contribute to reflective decision-making abilities (Ochoa-Baker, 1996).

Many teachers however feel comfortable with the traditional history/social studies teaching of factual information. The material can be made into set work and memorisation tasks. Issues are more complex and demanding.

A number of studies have found that history courses do not teach how to use the knowledge learned to make critical decisions, and that students find history and social studies boring and meaningless (Schug, Todd and Berry, 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985; Newmann, 1986). One of the teacher's roles is to provide the means for comprehending and dealing with the world around the student with respect to personal and social issues. Schools need to be places where issues are given thoughtful consideration and where potential answers and consequences are analysed in a setting of freedom. The potential benefits of social issues teaching are opportunities to model democratic discourse in a pluralistic society, stimulate student interest, and develop tolerance of diverse views. Educators who make a commitment to social issues instruction are likely to find students becoming more interested in and knowledgeable about the issues studied, and developing a greater sense of political efficacy (Hahn 1996).

Purpose of the Study

How elementary school history and social studies should be taught is often discussed but there has been little cumulative research (Hahn 1991, 1996; Angell and Avery 1992). In Greek elementary schools, history is taught rather than social studies. Social issues and values are taught in history, and also in civics education (taught in the upper elementary school), religion and language arts readers. The Hellenic Ministry of Education recently introduced changes to the curriculum and teaching including history, social issues and intercultural education (Pedagogical Institute, 1999).

In preparing the study we found little elementary school based research on the subject. Most literature dealt with middle and secondary education classes (Hahn, 1996) although Angell and Avery (1992) mention elementary teacher designed interdisciplinary issue units.

The purpose of our study was to:

- (a) identify the conceptions and attitudes of Greek elementary school teachers on the teaching of history and social studies;
- (b) determine what training they had and record what they wanted in terms of further training;
- (c) document their assessment of the appropriateness of current Greek history and social studies textbooks;
- (d) request proposals about how social issues should be included in their teaching.

For this study we adopted Hahn's (1996) social issues instruction definition which sees it as a teaching approach that uses social issues to emphasise reflective and often controversial questions in contemporary and historic contexts as the core of teaching social studies and history. We believe this definition is in line with the proposals discussed by Cogan and Derricott (1998) and others who promote multidimensional citizenship education. We see it as a productive and creative approach to teaching social studies and history.

Looking into the attitudes, opinions and proposals of teachers on the subject of teaching social studies, history, and citizenship is relevant as teachers are charged with imparting and influencing our future citizens with respect for the values and visions of our society within the local, national and united European framework.

Methodology

The study was conducted during April 2001 in the Department of Education of the University of Patras. The population consisted of 100 teachers attending the University of Patras' Didaskaleio, a two-year continuing teacher education institute. Thirty-one of the 100 teachers currently enrolled were included in the study.

The students were given a closed question-type questionnaire that included a few open-ended questions. The questionnaire sought to identify their attitudes, experiences and training in teaching elementary school history and social studies/issues. The statistical analysis was completed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Presentation and discussion

The 31 respondents were Greek state school teachers attending the Didaskaleio: 17 were male and 14 female. Their ages ranged from 34 to 47; their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 25 years. 52% had fifteen or less years of teaching experience, 23% had seventeen years of teaching experience and 25% had 19 to 25 years of teaching experience. The majority (90%) were graduates of a two-year course at elementary school teacher training academies. The remainder had also graduated from these academies but additionally held either a university degree or had completed a university program which raised their teacher academy degree to a qualification equivalent to that of graduates of university departments of education.

Six questions were asked:

- What social issues have teachers taught?
- What training have they received on teaching history/social studies (issues)?
- To what degree are they prepared to teach these subjects?
- What needs to be done to be appropriately prepared to teach these subjects?
- What approaches do they employ in the teaching of history/social issues?
- How do they perceive the teaching of history/social issues?

Responses to the following two questions are also discussed:

- Are current school texts appropriate for teaching history and social issues?
- How should we teach social issues?

With respect to the first question, *What social issues have the teachers taught?*, 12 social issues were provided. In the bracket beside each issue is the respondent percentage that taught the issue at some time:

Interculturalism	[55%]	Social education	[22%]
Racism-xenophobia	[48%]	European identity	[19%]
Human rights	[45%]	Justice	[19%]
Hunger in the world	[42%]	National identity	[16%]
Democracy-		Economic	
oppression	[35%]	cooperation/competition	[16%]
Social welfare	[23%]	Minority education	[13%]

In response to the second question, *What training have they received on the subject of teaching history/social studies (issues)?*, 54% indicated that methods of teaching history had been part of their initial training, in contrast to 32% who had a methods course in teaching social issues during initial training. 65% claimed methods of teaching social issues course as part of their continuing education courses, while 26% responded that they had taken part in training programs/seminars on teaching history. At first glance these responses, taken in tandem with teachers' past experiences in teaching social issues, give the impression that many of these teachers were able to mesh theory (the courses) with practice (teaching experience). However, the 'methods' courses indicated were courses on socially oriented topics rather than course dealing with methods for teaching them. Only one teacher had attended an actual history/social issues teacher training program.

The responses to the third question, *To what degree are they prepared to teach these subjects?*, present two extremes. For both history and social issues, the respondents were either *a little* (42% and 45% respectively per subject) or *quite* prepared to teach (55% and 52% respectively per subject). These responses are slightly more in line with their actual training experiences. None of the social issue categories indicated by the respondents received a higher than 55% response: racism-xenophobia and intercultural issues scored 48% and 55% response and 42% indicated that they had taken courses in teaching culture.

To the fourth question, *What needs to be done to be appropriately prepared to teach these subjects?*, we found that the teachers positively favored a variety of proposed means to help prepare them to teach both subjects (see Table 1).

Table 1 Proposed means of assuring preparedness to teach history/social issues

Program/Service	History	Social Issues
Observing alternative teaching approaches modeled by experts	75%	71%
Regularly scheduled training courses	66%	61%
Seminars/lectures	52%	50%
Annotated bibliographies and information dissemination	52%	52%

Note: The percentages indicated are for the response 'Agree completely'

It is interesting that the teachers, while supporting the idea of regularly scheduled training courses, strongly favor seeing the 'teaching' of alternative approaches. We sense that teachers perhaps want programs high on action/practice and low on talk.

The teachers' responses to the fifth question *What approaches do they employ in the teaching of history/social issues?*, are presented in Table 2. These responses are of particular interest in terms of teacher attitude and demeanor in relation to the teaching of the two subjects. It also enables us consider how their approaches mesh with an issues-centered, reflective classroom construct.

Table 2 Approaches employed in teaching history/social issues

Teaching Approaches	History		Social Issues	
Openness towards divergent ideas and opinions	58%	23%	65%	23%
Sees each unit as an object for exploration	52%	26%	55%	29%
Promotes dialogue	48%	39%	52%	42%
Provides ample opportunities for discussion and exchange of ideas between students	45%	26%	48%	29%
Encourages different approaches to the subject by students	36%	61%	29%	68%
Actively pursue student involvement in subject related activities	26%	74%	29%	71%
Values student involvement	19%	81%	13%	87%

Note: The percentages represent 'Often' and 'Always' responses respectively.

On the whole it appears from the responses that the teachers are closely aligned with approaches that promote active student engagement in the lesson structure. These findings are similar to those cited by Hahn (1996) in her review of research conducted in middle and secondary level social studies classes. What would be of interest for future research is to revisit these questions with respect to teaching specific topics partnered with actual observation of student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction.

Finally, with respect to the sixth question, *How do they perceive the of teaching of history/social issues?*, we found that the teachers saw teaching history as:

- Historical knowledge through an examination of interrelationship of historical phenomena and conflicts;
- Discovery of knowledge versus providing ready facts;
- Critical attitude through understanding of cause/effect;
- Correlation of historical choice-present realities.

On the other hand, they saw teaching social issues as:

- Social knowledge through an examination of the interrelationship of social phenomena and conflicts;
- Cognitive process wherein student opinions used to shape democratic attitude;
- Opportunity for students to undertake social action.

It is interesting that only with the first response is there a degree of relatedness between the two subjects. It would appear that the teachers see history and social issues as separate topics and that, unlike some of the other paradigms proposed by Cogan and Derricott (1998) and Angell and Avery (1992), Greek teachers do not tend to favor an interdisciplinary approach. However, caution should be exercised at this point. The issue will be more closely examined in the next phase of the research, which aims to extend the study nationally.

Responses to the two additional questions posed:

- *Are current school texts appropriate for teaching history and social issues?*
- *How do they propose the teaching of social issues be incorporated in the school curriculum?*

were as follows. To the first, 65% said no to the texts used to teach history and 87% said no to those used for teaching social issues. The teachers detailed what they thought the texts promoted - these findings are not reported here but the answers tended to conflict with earlier responses in relation to what they believed the subjects sought to teach. With regard to the second question, 27 of 31 respondents suggested ways to incorporate social issues into the school curriculum. Nine teachers recommended doing so through another subject, three through an interdisciplinary approach and two as a separate course: the remainder favoured either student-initiated prompts or current events. Three offered no proposals whatsoever.

Conclusion

Teachers need to be open to the new ideas and challenges that changing values and societal realities bring. The participants in our study gave us an opportunity to look at the attitudes, experiences and training of Greek elementary school teachers on teaching history/social issues. We found awareness on their part of the need for change and an understanding that this change is an ongoing process. The majority of the respondents employed teaching approaches that engage students in the active process of learning and development of critical thinking.

Training teachers to involve students in content and intellectual processes is a complex and multi-layered endeavour. It means initiating change in the ways we teach and what we teach. All participants need to become engaged in providing the appropriate tools, training and resources required if our future citizens are to be equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

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