

The Status of Teaching Social Studies in Fiji

Satish Prakash Chand

Fiji National University
E-mail: satish.chand@fnu.ac.fj

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ABSTRACT This research was carried out to explore the teaching of social studies in Fiji classrooms. One hundred and ninety-four teachers represented the study. Data was collected using a semi structured questionnaire. An analysis of the results indicated that majority of social studies teachers did not have a prescription or teacher's handbook in their classrooms, had not attended any workshop since they joined teaching and were taking either too little or too much time teaching the subject. Contrary to the Ministry of Education directive, teachers were also found to be using pupil's workbook written by different local authors. In line with the result, recommendations are made to improve the teaching of social studies in Fiji classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Education is affected by various developments and changes happening around the world (Gultekin et al. 2010). It is important to arrange the education programs in alliance with the development so that individuals are skilled according to the needs of the society (Yasar et al. 2005). Yeager (2000) posits that teachers must ensure that social studies is an active learning experience through their development of curricula that encourages students to discover knowledge, to use a variety of instructional materials and authentic activities to relate the content to their own lives, to assume responsibility for their own learning and to develop new understandings through a process of active construction of meaning. The subject matter of social studies lessons are derived from daily life and events (Guclu 1998). Sunal and Haas (2002) assert that social studies specialists have always emphasized the importance of providing democracy education for future generations and have constantly underpinned that social studies course should be a process in which the students comprehend the world that they live in and join into that world as effective world citizens.

Burstein et al. (2006) after a survey of seventeen elementary teachers concluded that teachers were dissatisfied with the time they spent teaching social studies. State policies impact how teachers teach core subjects in Elementary school. Past studies have tried to determine how much time is needed to teach social studies curriculum. A task force sponsored by Carnegie foundation (1990) reported that teachers in Grade K – 3 classrooms spent 1.9 hours per week

whereas grade 4-6 teachers taught approximately 3 hours per week. Perie et al. (1997) on the other hand found that public school teachers in grades 1- 4 spent an average of 2.7 hours per week in 1987 – 1988 to 2.9 hours per week in 1993 – 1994 teaching social studies.

Hope (1996) assert that although some social studies teachers have made efforts to invigorate their students through experiential learning, add real world relevance to their teaching, too many are yoked to the textbook, captive to chalk and talk and unwilling to connect objectives with the real world. The teacher is seen as the pivotal personality in the classroom, the one who make things happen. To transform social studies teaching, teachers need to implement experiential learning in classrooms. The new focus of instruction will permit students to become active learners. Burstein et al. (2006) also reported that almost half of the teachers spent less than an hour teaching social studies each week. Their findings also revealed that only 53% of the teachers use text books on a regular basis and show satisfaction if they are well trained and have materials readily available to them.

Social studies teachers have a tremendous responsibility in applying the social studies program in a way that will furnish the individuals with survival skills which will lead them to be conscientious citizens (Deveci 2010). This can only take place if the social studies curriculum is relevant, ongoing professional development training is provided to teachers and there is uniformity across towards the implementation of the prescribed curriculum. Hence this research aims to determine if the teaching resources used

by teachers in classroom is current, if there is uniformity in the time allocation for social studies and whether ongoing professional development is provided to teachers.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to explore the text resources used in classroom, the time allocation to teach social studies and professional development opportunities for social studies teachers. Methodology used was a semi-structured questionnaire to derive both quantitative and qualitative data. The following research questions were answered by the teachers:

1. Do you have a prescription and/or teachers handbook in class? If yes, state the year they were published?
2. Do you use pupil's workbook written by local authors? If yes, name the author
3. When did you last attend a workshop in social studies?
4. How much time do you devote teaching social studies in a week?

Design and Participants

The participants were primary school teachers who taught classes 1 – 4 as social studies is taught in those classes alongside with other subjects. Nine schools from each seven education district were selected on the basis of their location; three from urban, three from semi urban and three from rural making it a total of 63 schools. The schools were visited and upon the head teacher and teachers consent the questionnaire was given to class 1-4 teachers. The completed questionnaire was collected after two days.

The teachers surveyed had a good number of teaching experiences. One hundred and ninety four teachers represented the survey. Out of this, 41 had taught for up to 5 years, 38 had taught between 6-10 years, 35 between 11-15 years, 54 from 16-25 years and 26 above 26 years.

RESULTS

The data summarized in Table 1 show that majority of the teachers do not have prescription or teachers handbook in their classroom. Prescription is the official document from which the topics are derived from for the teaching of Social Studies from classes 1-4. Sixty- five percent (65%) of the teachers do not have prescription or teacher's handbook in their classrooms while the rest; thirty - five percent (35%) stated they had prescriptions or teachers handbook in their classroom. The most recent prescription published in 2004 (not yet implemented) was available with 2% of the teachers while the other 33% had the teachers handbook published in early 1970's. However, a careful analysis of their responses revealed that 85% of them were not using the prescription or teachers handbook available in their classroom

Table 1: Availability of prescription and teachers handbook in classrooms

	<i>Tally</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Have Prescription or Teachers Handbook	68	35
No prescription or Teachers Handbook	126	65

Table 2 shows the time spent on the teaching of Social Studies. Though the prescription indicates that the weekly recommended time should be at least 45 minutes for classes 1-4, teachers were found to teach from as low as 30 minutes per week to as much as 4 hours a week. Majority (35%) of the teachers teach Social Studies for an hour in their classrooms while 5% of the teachers teach from 2-4 hours of Social Studies in their classrooms.

When asked about the number of workshops the teachers attended in Social Studies, it was surprising to note that 86% of the teachers had never attended any workshop in social studies ever since they joined the teaching profession.

Table 2: Time spent in teaching social studies

<i>Time</i>	<i>Tally</i>	<i>Teachers (%)</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Tally</i>	<i>Teachers (%)</i>
30 minutes	37	19	80 minutes	8	4
40 minutes	2	1	90 minutes	42	22
45 minutes	23	12	120 minutes	4	2
60 minutes	68	35	135 minutes	2	1
70 minutes	2	1	160 minutes	2	1
75 minutes	2	1	240 minutes	2	1

Some even with over 26 years of teaching experience had never taken part in any Social Studies workshop to date. Comments like “I can’t remember attending any workshop”; “Never attended any in 20 years of teaching” were gathered. Interestingly those teachers who stated that they had attended some workshop in Social Studies (14%) had done them in various cycles of the BEMTUP (Basic Education Management and Teacher Upgrading Project) programme (Table 3). This BEMTUP training was to up-skill teachers for teaching Social Science in the upper primary classrooms and concentrated solely on teaching strategies used in classrooms. Only a single teacher stated that she had attended a workshop in social studies that was involved with implementation of a new programme that she was trialing with her students.

Table 3: Workshop awareness

	<i>Tally</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Workshop attended	27	14
No workshop attended	167	86

While the Ministry of Education through its circular 5/2000 has clearly asked the head teachers and teachers to only use the curriculum materials recommended by them, it was found that there are still some schools which use Pupil’s workbook written by numerous local authors. 130 (67%) of the teachers stated that they do not use any pupils workbook as per the instruction from the Ministry of Education and their head teachers. However the remaining teachers stated that they used pupil’s workbooks written by 8 different authors (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed some enlightening information on the status of teaching social studies in classrooms in Fiji. While teachers must teach using the prescription provided by the Ministry of Education, it appears

that 65% of the teachers do not have the required prescription or the teachers handbook to carry out effective teaching of social studies in their classrooms.

While professional development is important for the upgrade of the teachers competency in the teaching of the subject of social studies, most teachers have not been subjected to this opportunity. 86% of the teachers, though most of them very experienced, had never attended any workshop or professional development in social studies.

Another important issue was the allocation of time for the teaching of social studies in Fiji classrooms. While 45 minutes per week is recommended for the teachers, they either use too much or too little time in teaching the subject. Little time may not inculcate the required knowledge effectively while too much time can cause boredom amongst the students. Proper planning and the use of correct strategies within time frame will help impart necessary knowledge amongst the students.

Also of concern is the use of curriculum materials written by local authors. The Ministry of Education recommended their own prescribed text to be used in the classroom and have informed head teachers and teachers of the same. However the study has revealed that pupil’s workbooks written by 8 different authors are used by the teachers in the classrooms. The use of too many pupils’ workbooks written by local authors may not meet all the required objectives that the Ministry of Education expects teachers to achieve in the classrooms.

CONCLUSION

As a consequence of this study, it was revealed that social studies curriculum is using an archaic teacher’s handbook published in early 1970’s, teachers lack professional development training and various pupil’s workbook by different local authors were used. It also includes diverse time allocation in its delivery by the teachers.

Table 4: Use of pupils workbook in classrooms written by local authors

<i>Name of author</i>	<i>Tally</i>	<i>% Teachers</i>	<i>Name of author</i>	<i>Tally</i>	<i>% Teachers</i>
P.R.Sen	19	10	Mustafa Khan	6	3
Ashwin Maharaj	4	2	M. Taiyas	6	3
Abdul Hameed	9	5	Om Prasad	2	1
Narayan Swamy	8	4	Author unidentified	6	3
Mrs. M. N. Swamy	4	2			

The Curriculum Development Unit of the Ministry of Education is tasked with developing curriculum to be used by the schools in Fiji. However the first social studies teachers guide that was published in 1970's still remains and used by many schools. The only review of the social studies subject done in 2004 was not implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the results of the present study, the following recommendations are made:

- The social studies curriculum should produce learning experiences that encourages creative activities and leads to all round physical, emotional and intellectual development of pupils in Fiji classrooms. The social studies that is being used in schools should be urgently revised to cater for these needs
- There must be uniformity in time allocation for the teaching of social studies across schools
- The Ministry of Education must screen all the curriculum materials used in schools.
- Curriculum materials that are taught in classrooms must be contextualized.
- Regular professional development must be conducted to up skill teachers on changes in both the teaching methods and teaching content.

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