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A study on learning environments of elementary school students taking social studies course: Bursa sample

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Abstract

Schools as educational and instructional institutions are expected to be renewable ones where motivation is increased through establishing relationships between students' interests and needs and subject matters of social studies lessons are derived from daily life and events. Finalizing any learning activity at school by realizing it as aimed and hence having students succeed can be achieved only through establishing an effective and positive learning environment. The aim of the present study is to examine the opinions of the elementary school students taking the Social Studies course on learning environments.

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Keywords: Learning environment; student; elementary education.

1. Introduction

Elementary educational institutions are an important period in individuals' educational process and the aim of elementary educational institutions is to have students acquire basic knowledge. During elementary education, children encounter many problems that they are supposed to cope in social sense. For example, communication with adults whom they do not know in a crowd, organizational processes such as stacking, forming a line and waiting in it, being addressed as a member of a group, complying with restrictions regarding matters like movement and hubbub (Dean 2000). Social studies is one of the basic courses in elementary education. Social studies course is taken by students of 10–14 ages. Observations and studies revealed the presence of predispositions and behavior patterns shared by children of certain developmental periods (Yavuzer 1994).

Schools as educational and instructional institutions are expected to be renewable ones where motivation is increased through establishing relationships between students' interests and needs and subject matters of social studies lessons are derived from daily life and events (Güçlü 1998). Finalizing any learning activity at school by realizing it as aimed and hence having students succeed can be achieved only through establishing an effective and positive learning environment. Establishing a positive learning environment is possible only through dealing with

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and arranging many teaching elements together. Completing a learning in a desired way depends on the child's or teacher's being in the center, mental structure of the child, physical condition of the classroom, effective use of time, classroom atmosphere, teaching methods and techniques, forming learning centers, appropriate evaluation, etc (Akyol, 2000). In structuralist teaching practices, active learning carries importance. Therefore, students create their own meanings on their own. A good learning environment forms through exploration and discussion methods (Güçlü, 1998). The question 'Does learning environment have an effect on the teaching of social studies?' is the problem statement of the present study. In addition to this, the followings were also investigated within the scope of the study: 'Main factors affecting students' school success negatively, students' opinions on benefiting from computers, teachers' criteria in grouping students, students' opinions regarding groupings arranged by teachers, students' attributions to rewards given in the classroom, reasons for students' being unsuccessful at subject matters they are good at, time spared by students outside of school for studentship, factors determining the success of homework assignments according to students, students' feelings while teachers evaluate their homework assignments and exam results, students' feelings and expectations while their homework assignments are evaluated, what students think when their attention is distracted, reasons why students' attention is distracted during lesson, common situations distracting students' attention most, reasons for participation in classroom activities, and discussion types that students prefer.

This study falls within the scope of Social Studies Education Discipline. Social Studies course is one of the pivotal courses included in the Elementary Schools Program. The aim of the present study is to examine the opinions of the 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th grade elementary school students taking the Social Studies course on learning environments.

2. Method

In this study, since it is aimed to examine some factors associated with learning environments of elementary school students taking social studies course, the model used in the study falls within the scope of the survey model. 2000 students from 12 classes were reached by randomly selecting three classes from the 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th grades taking social studies course at each school participated to the study. The questionnaire is composed of 15 items formed with the aim of taking opinions of elementary school students having social studies course on learning environments and by taking opinions of those specialized in the field. The answers given by the elementary school students taking social studies course were grouped separately for each group of questions and tabulated in frequency and percentages.

3. Findings

According to the data obtained from the study, the following findings were reached:

Table 1. Main Factors Affecting Students' School Success Negatively

QUESTION	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
Insufficient nutrition	701	35,1	35,1
Restlessness in family	350	17,5	52,6
Not liking lessons	668	33,4	85,9
Not liking the teacher	281	14,1	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

As seen in Table 1, most of the students state that they are unsuccessful because they are not nourished sufficiently (35,1%) and they do not like lessons (33,4%). When the total percentages are examined, it appears that 85,9% of the students are nourished insufficiently, live restlessness in their families and do not like lessons.

Table 2. Frequency Table Indicating Students' Use of Computers

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage(%)	Total Percentage
Playing games only	353	17,7	17,7
Using the Internet	572	28,6	46,3
Writing homework assignments, mails, etc.	885	44,3	90,5
No use of computer	190	9,5	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

When Table 2 is examined, it appears that the majority of the students (44,3%) use the computer to write homework assignments, mails, etc. The ratio of those who never use the computer is 9,5%. However, 28,6% of the students benefit from the Internet. The ratio of those who use the computer “to play games” is 17,7%.

Table 3. Teachers' Criteria in Grouping Students

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
According to success	726	36,3	36,3
According to aptitude	202	10,1	46,4
According to behavior	882	44,1	90,5
According to other things	190	9,5	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

The majority of the students (44,1%) state that groups are formed “according to behaviors”. However, while some of them (36,3%) state that groups are formed “according to success”, the ratio of those stating that they are formed “according to aptitude” is 10,1%. Again, 36,3% of the students state that groups are formed according to success. When the students' comments on forming groups by teachers are examined, it appears that while 35,8% of the students (f=715) think that it enhances “their working skills”, 22,3% of them (f=445) think that forming groups “creates a competitive environment”. While the ratio of those stating that forming groups by teachers “adds varieties to their school lives” is 21,2% (f=423), that of those thinking that forming groups “develops friendship feelings is 20,9 % (f=417).

Table 4. Table Indicating What Rewards Given in the Classroom Mean to Students

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
Implies that I'm privileged	159	8	8
Implies that I deserve to be praised	347	17,4	25
Implies the reward itself	192	9,6	34,9
Implies the grade I got in the competition	1302	65,1	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

When Table 4 is examined, it appears that a great majority of the students (65,1%) think that “rewards imply their grades and rankings in competitions”. It appears from the table that those thinking that “rewards are given in order to imply that they deserve to be praised” place the second (17,4%), and those thinking that “rewards imply themselves” place the third with the percentage of 9,6. In this context, the ratio of those thinking that “rewards imply that they are privileged” is 8,0%.

Table 5. Reasons Why Students Become Successful in their Best Subjects

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage(%)	Total Percentage
Because my family's interested	147	7,4	7,4
Because I like them	620	31,0	38,4
Because they are easy	69	3,5	41,8
Because I spare time and spend effort	1164	58,2	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

As seen in the above table, a great majority of the students (58,2%) attribute their success to “their sparing time and spending effort”. This is followed by those (31,0%) attributing their success to “their liking them”. As seen, 3,5% of the students find lessons easy. The ratio of those attributing their success to “their families' interest” is 7,4%.

Table 6. Time Spared by Students outside of School for Studentship

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
I spare no time	144	7,2	7,2
One hour	477	23,9	31,1
Two hours	879	44,0	75,0
More than three hours	500	25,0	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

The majority of the students (f:879) (44,0%) spare “two hours” for studentship. When the total percentages are examined, it is seen that 75% of the students spare two hours or less for studentship. The ratio of those who “spare no time” is 7,2% (f:144). Those who spare more than three hours for studentship form 25% of all the students (f:500).

Table 7. According to Students, Factors Affecting the Success of Homework Assignments They Do

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
Appearance	51	2,6	2,6
Length	53	2,7	5,2
Contents	1201	60,1	65,3
All of these	695	34,8	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

Following the examination of the above table, it appears that a great majority of the students (60,1%) accept that “contents of homework assignments” are important. The ratio of those thinking that appearance, length, and contents of homework assignments are all important is 34,8%. The number of those thinking that “appearance of homework assignments” is the determinant factor is 51, and the ratio of them is 2,6%. The students appear to think that appearance and length of homework assignments are not directly related to the success of assignments. The total percentages appear to support this as well (65,3%).

Table 8. Table Indicating What Students Feel While Their Teachers Evaluate Thier Homework Assignments and Exam Results

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
Excitement	1370	68,5	68,5
Guiltiness-Bashfulness	36	1,8	70,3
Self-confidence	292	14,6	84,9
Anxiety – Fear	302	15,1	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

When the frequency table indicating what the students feel while their teachers evaluate their homework assignments and exam results is examined, it appears that the majority of the students (68,5%) state that they “feel excitement”. The feelings of “guiltiness and bashfulness” appear to be at the lowest level (1,8%). It is seen that there is a difference of 0,5% between those feeling anxiety and fear and those feeling self-confidence.

Table 9. What Students Feel and Expect While their Homework Assignments are under Evaluation

QUESTION	Frequency(f)	Percentage(%)	Total Percentage
Expect a grade	757	37,9	37,9
Excited about making a mistake	808	40,4	78,3
Feel ashamed	96	4,8	83,1
Expect a reward when studying hard	339	17,0	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

40,4% of the students state that they are excited about “making a mistake”. 37,8% of the students state that they “expect a grade”. The total percentages, too, indicate that 78,3% of the students provided the same answer. The students stating that they “feel ashamed” is the fewest in number with the ratio of 4,8%.

Table 10. About What Students Think While They are Distracted

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
After school/my family	691	34,6	34,6
Play time/my friends	289	14,5	49
Dreaming	551	27,6	76,6
Other things	469	23,5	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

About 34% of the students think about “after school/their families”. This is followed in order of frequency by those who “dream” (27,6%), then those thinking about “other things” (23,5%) and those thinking about “play time

and friends” (14,5%). When the total percentages are examined, 49% of the students appear to think about play time and families, and friends.

Table 11. Reasons Why Students are Distracted in Lessons

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
Because lessons are boring/difficult	347	17,4	17,4
Under the influence of other students	949	47,5	64,8
Need for a talk	474	23,7	88,5
Other reasons	230	11,5	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

According to the above table, 949 students (47,5%) state that students are distracted in lessons mostly by other children. The ratio of the 474 students stating that students are distracted by their “needs for a talk” is 23,7%. Moreover, 17,4% of the students state that they are distracted because “ lessons’ are boring and difficult”.

Table 12. Common Situations in the Classroom Distracting Students’ Attention Most

QUESTION	Frequency (f)	Percentage(%)	Total Percentage
When my classmates talk to one another	1452	72,6	72,6
When topic under discussion is too long and detailed	200	10	82,6
Noise outside the classroom	133	6,7	89,3
When I think our teacher’s way of doing lessons is boring	215	10,8	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

The table above indicates that 1452 of the students think that they are distracted because “their classmates talk to one another”. The reasons such as “their teacher’s way of doing lessons is boring” and “topic under discussion is too long and detailed” place the second (10%). The ratio of those thinking that they are distracted because of “noise outside the classroom” is 6,7%. When the reasons for participation in in-class activities are examined, it appeared that 52,5% of the students (f=1050) participate in in-class activities because they find opportunity to “express what they think”. The ratio of the students participating in in-class activities because they are “good at that subject” is 24,3% (f=485) and that of those participating in in-class activities because “they desire to be together with their friends” is 12,6% (f=252). And the ratio of those participating in in-class activities because “their teacher asks them to do” is 10,7% (213).

Table 13. Discussion Types That Students Prefer

QUESTION	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)	Total Percentage
I participate in group discussions.	649	32,5	32,5
I participate in one-to-one discussions.	239	12,0	44,4
I participate in class discussions.	525	26,3	70,7
I do not like to participate in discussions	587	29,4	100
TOTAL	2000	100	

Those who prefer to participate in “group discussions” form the majority (32,5%). However, those who “do not like to participate in discussions” are not few in number (29,4%). It also appears that the ratio of those who prefer to participate in “class discussions” is 26,3% and that of those who prefer to participate in “one-to-one discussions” is the lowest (12%).

4. Discussion, Conclusion and Suggestions

One of the most important needs of students is to become successful. When they are given the opportunity which is suitable to their developmental levels to become successful, they become successful and their negative attitudes towards the course decrease. Pollard and Triggs (2000) state that home, heredity, self-evaluation, spending effort, practising or not practising, liking or disliking, being easy or difficult are among the factors affecting students’ success. Children’s not knowing what to do during their work may lead to their becoming unsuccessful. Children’s becoming unsuccessful may lead to disliking, uninterestness and in the end spending much effort. Moreover, Elmacioğlu (2000) emphasizes that children’s school success is closely related to family environment. It is necessary that children should not use the computer just for playing games. According to the data obtained from this study, the computer is used not only for performing operations like writing but also for entering the Internet. Roldan

(2003) states that current formal computer programs can help schools benefit from computer facilities and direct students to use them in the very short run. In the study by Scott and O’Sullivan (2000), it was found that majority of the students use the Internet for research purposes. Teachers’ preferring student behaviors as the most important criterium in grouping students emphasizes the importance of acquisitions. In group works, everybody should perform their tasks. Especially, the criterium of success might have been taken by the teachers into account because the students exhibited similar performances while they fulfilled these tasks. The students’ working in teams, their making division of labour, and sharing the responsibilities might have played an effective role in their acquiring working habits and skills. In learning environments, the way of having small children working with their classmates in a certain classroom arrangement acquire knowledge more effectively is to form small groups (Proctor et al. 2001). Most students like competitions. Feeling of achievement and feeling of winning mean the same to them. Findings revealed that those playing video games watch television programs based on competition and struggle such as sport programs more frequently. These findings are supported by some researchers (Alantar 1999). According to Dean, children generally like subject matters and courses that they find easy and those at which they become successful. Next come being interested and having fun (Dean 2000). In this context, family’s interest and support appear to be important. Students usually do homework during the period of two hours a day spared for studentship. After the completion of homework assignments given by their teachers, children become individuals aiming at life-long learning. When the relationship between student reactions against evaluation of student works are examined, those feeling excitement form the majority. Although it was found in this study that students feel excitement most of the time, 70% of the students were found in the study by Pollard and Triggs (2000) to feel worried, be negative and in mixed feelings about the matter. At school, in lesson environment, classroom atmosphere may also lead to distraction. Besides internal reasons resulting from a person’s own mind such as dreaming and worrying, external ones such as television, telephone and music may play a role in distraction as well (Elmacioğlu 2000). In Social Studies course, it is aimed to have students express their thoughts in a proper way. Regarding the method of discussion, it is remarkable that there are negative thoughts in students’ approaches concerning discussion types. Students’ preferring to participate in group discussions is related to their being in a small group and desire to act with a psychology of sharing joint responsibility and authority. However, students who do not like to participate in discussions form the majority.

Under the light of these results, the followings can be suggested: Teachers can contribute to students’ success and progress by encouraging them in areas they are good at; feedback and rewards obtained as a result of homework assignments, group works, etc. are likely to motivate students to perform better; children who are very good at using computers can help those who do not know well; qualities of homework assignments performed during the time spared for studentship should be dealt with as well; different working groups can be formed during in-class activities; related to homework assignments, families should be asked for support.

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