Importance, indifference, or intolerance: A study of preservice educators’ perceptions and attitudes toward teaching social studies in the elementary grades.

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In today’s elementary classrooms, teachers are finding it more difficult to adequately teach all subject matter, and smaller amounts of time are often spent on the teaching of social studies concepts. While social studies is such an important subject to teach young children, many educators feel unprepared to teach the content, and still others have a negative view of social studies or do not understand its relevance. The purpose of this study is to determine preservice teachers’ perceptions of teaching social studies in the elementary classroom. The goal of the study was to determine whether these preservice teachers feel prepared to teach social studies as they leave a postsecondary institution and move into their first year of teaching.

Since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law 107-110), educators spend more time than ever instructing students in the subjects of reading, writing, and mathematics. While knowledge in these subjects is paramount for academic success, many teachers find that increasing instructional time for these academic areas leaves little room in the daily class schedule, and due to such time constraints, many teachers feel that they must sacrifice the instructional time spent on other subject areas, including social studies (Vogler, Lintner, Lipscomb, Knopf, & Heafner, 2007). According to a report by the Center on Education Policy, 44% of school districts surveyed acknowledged that since No Child Left Behind became a federal mandate, the time allotted for the teaching of social studies has been reduced. This percentage increased to 51% for districts with schools that failed to meet Adequately Yearly Progress (McMurren, 2007). Similarly, in a study conducted by the Council for Basic Education, elementary school administrators reported that since the year 2000 there has been a decrease in the amount of instructional time given to the teaching of social studies in grades K-5 (Hinde, 2005).

The results of a national survey of approximately 1,000 educators in second, fifth and eighth grade indicate that the fifth grade teachers devoted more classroom time to the instruction of social studies than the second grade teachers (Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006). Thirty-four percent of the second grade teachers surveyed said that they spent under two hours per week teaching social studies and 29% of the second grade teachers said they spent two to three hours a week on social studies instruction. In contrast, almost one-fourth of the fifth grade teachers surveyed, 22%, designated five hours or more a week to teaching social studies; only 8% of the teachers said that they spent less than two hours a week devoted to the subject (Leming et al., 2006). In another study, 59 kindergarten through third grade teachers were surveyed in the state of Indiana. The survey results showed that on average, these teachers spent only about one hour per week, or about 12 minutes per day, on the teaching of social studies (Van Fossen, 2005). In a similar study conducted in North Carolina, it was determined that on average, K-2 teachers in the state spend much less time teaching social studies than those who teach in higher grade levels (Rock, Heafner, O’Connor, Passe, Oldendorf, Good, & Byrd, 2006). Some school reports throughout the nation
indicate that no social studies instruction is occurring in kindergarten through third grade (Holloway & Chiodo, 2009).

These studies perhaps pinpoint a problem in many elementary schools: The social studies are commonly given less of a priority than other subjects in the early elementary grades. Those who work with primary-aged students devote such inordinate amounts of energy into teaching basic reading and math skills that at the end of the day, there is often little time or vigor left for teaching social studies (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Sadly, this could be detrimental to students as they grow older, as social studies, “like other subjects of the elementary school curriculum, is designed to be taught in increments, or in a developmental sequence” (Ellis, 2007, p. 9). Simply stated, instruction must move from the simple to the more complex, and if teachers of primary grades do not spend appropriate amounts of time on social studies instruction, students may be unable to progress to more intensive subject matter (Ellis, 2007). Therefore, social studies must be an indispensable part of the curriculum in all of the elementary grade levels.

While many teachers, administrators, and lawmakers feel that language arts and mathematics programs are the quintessential foundations in elementary-school settings, it is important to note that social studies is also a basic in elementary education. Social studies lessons teach children about real world scenarios, social issues, citizenship, and encourage higher-level thinking skills; reducing the amount of time spent on social studies concepts greatly minimizes students’ awareness of social issues and keeps children from learning appropriate life skills (Savage & Armstrong, 2008). Having a firm understanding of reading and mathematics is essential, yet Savage and Armstrong (2008) argue that merely learning these skills “will not provide individuals with the concepts and understandings they need to apply them to the serious issues we face as citizens” (p. 4). In addition, Chapin (2009) feels that “a good social studies program can go far toward improving students’ skills in other subjects, including reading, writing, and math” (p. 3).

Teacher success is often associated with high test scores on standardized tests, and in many states, language arts and math test scores are the gauge by which achievement is measured, for both teachers and students. Because teachers often rank reading/language arts and math as the most important subject areas taught, and because state testing places such an emphasis on the proficiency of these subjects, the teaching of social studies is often less of a priority (Chapin, 2009). According to Grant (2007), even when social studies concepts are included in high-stakes testing, teachers often modify their teaching to content-specific requirements of the test rather than teach the core concepts of social studies in a meaningful and engaging way.

Although educational mandates may require an increased emphasis on language arts and math in the elementary school setting, there are other variables that account for the marginalization of social studies education. Teacher attitude is a tremendous factor in whether the social studies will be taught in a meaningful and appropriate way. Elementary teachers often have negative attitudes toward social studies concepts. Such pessimistic views can frequently be the results of teachers’ own school experiences (Chapin, 2009). Too often, social studies instruction has the stigma of being uninteresting, and in many cases, the memorization of trivial facts and dates is seen as the main objective of the subject. Those who found social studies boring and mundane as a child may consider it a boring and mundane subject to teach, thus potentially thwarting the amount of time that many teachers spend on the preparation and implementation of social studies lessons.

Individuals often “equate the uninteresting with the unimportant” (Owen, 1997, p. 113). One of the goals set by the National Council for the Social Studies (1994) is to ensure that the subject is seen as a vital and necessary curriculum component in all grade levels. Educators who find the concepts of social studies to be inconsequential or of little significance are much less likely to make social studies a valued part of the daily classroom schedule. When the social studies are taught, even on a daily basis, teachers often spend little time on creating engaging and developmental appropriate activities, relying instead on the use of unsuitable textbooks (Zhao &
Hoge, 2005). Many teachers use textbooks as the primary source of information for social studies instruction (Wade, 2002), but this type of instruction does not allow the students to be an active part of the learning process (Holloway & Chiodo, 2009).

Students can be extremely perceptive of the significance placed on subject matters. Even young elementary students can often tell how teachers feel about school subjects by the amount of time and energy that are put into lessons. This knowledge can have a tremendous impact on how children themselves rank the importance of the concepts taught in the classroom. According to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2008), in order for social studies to be understood and appreciated by students, teachers should use a wide variety of materials and resources to allow learning to effectively take place. Therefore, social studies instruction should be engaging and should require active learning.

A lack of adequate training can be a key reason that elementary teachers may have a less than enthusiastic view of teaching social studies. Teachers often feel uncomfortable teaching social studies because of their lack of content knowledge (Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Furthermore, social studies standards and concepts are so numerous that the content can seem overwhelming to those who feel unprepared in their knowledge of the subject matter (Holloway & Chiodo, 2009). Elementary teacher preparation programs frequently only offer one or two courses that concentrate on social studies methods, and some programs even combine social studies methods with other content areas (Owen, 1997). Therefore, preservice teachers generally take few courses that demonstrate how to effectively instruct elementary students in social studies concepts. In addition, many postsecondary institutions require that students only take a few social science or history courses (Chapin, 2009), and these courses are frequently taken semesters, and even years, prior to any social studies methods courses that preservice teachers may take while in their teacher preparatory program.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the attitudes and perceptions of preservice teachers concerning teaching social studies in the elementary setting. Surveys were given to a sample of teacher candidates enrolled in senior-level courses in a dual certification early childhood/ special education program at a postsecondary institution. These surveys consisted of multiple choice questions, questions based on a five-point Likert scale, and an open-ended response question. The open-ended question allowed the preservice teachers to explain, in detail, what they thought might help better prepare them to teach the concepts of social studies. Anonymity was of extreme importance so that participants could give honest and reflective responses. No names or other identifying information were written on the completed survey forms in order to protect the identity of the participants. A copy of the survey instrument can be found in the Appendix.

Information was gleaned from a total sample of 39 teacher candidates (n=39). All participants were on a trajectory to become state certified to teach in Pre-K through fifth grades. At the time of completing the survey, all of the volunteers for this study had several semesters of clinical experiences in local elementary school settings. All who completed the survey were seniors who were set to graduate a few months after the surveys were completed. A sample population of those enrolled in senior-level courses was asked to participate because of their numerous experiences in elementary classrooms; as well, these seniors would soon be finishing their undergraduate coursework and would begin their own teaching careers. In addition, these teacher candidates had all taken the social studies methods course required in their respective program. The majority of the volunteers (n=26) were between the ages of 23-30 at the time of participation.
The Results

Although this study focused on a small total sample, meaningful information was garnered through the participants’ responses on the survey instrument. The purpose of this section is to summarize the data found through the responses. Important findings concerning how the participants feel about social studies, the amount of time being spent on social studies in the elementary grades, and the participants’ preparedness to teach social studies concepts are emphasized throughout this section.

Only one participant said that “social studies” was his or her favorite subject in elementary school; however, 18 of the teacher candidates said that it was one of their favorite subjects. Eight specified that social studies was one of their least favorite subjects, three participants considered social studies to be their least favorite subject in the early grades, and seven felt indifferent toward the subject matter. Therefore, almost half of the teacher candidates who completed the survey indicated either negative or indifferent feelings toward the social studies instruction they received as a child (n=18), indicating that this group seems to be evenly divided in how they felt about social studies when they themselves were in elementary school; while some liked the subject, others disliked or felt indifference toward it.

When asked how important the teaching of social studies is to elementary students, none of the participants thought that it is “extremely important.” Twenty-six said that the subject is “somewhat important,” 12 said that it is “not very important,” and one participant circled the response of “unimportant.” The participants’ reactions to this question was very insightful and may possibly give a glimpse into the importance that social studies content will have in these preservice teachers’ own classrooms.

In response to the question of how much time was spent on social studies in their field and clinical placements, three participants said that they saw, on average, social studies being taught less than 30 minutes per week, with seven saying that social studies was taught less than an hour a week and 10 saying that they saw social studies being taught an average of an hour per week in their field and clinical experiences. The greatest number of participants, 13, said that they saw social studies being taught two hours per week. Only one preservice teacher saw social studies being taught five or more hours per week in field and clinical settings.

Thirty survey participants indicated that more time should be spent on the teaching of social studies in elementary classrooms. Only three participants considered additional instructional time used to teach social studies unnecessary in today’s elementary setting, and six indicated that they were “not sure” as to whether more time should be spent teaching the subject matter. However, the teacher candidates who expressed a need for more time devoted to the teaching of social studies were divided on exactly how much additional time should be added; 11 felt that an additional 30 minutes to an hour of instruction per week would suffice, while 13 participants felt that an additional two to three hours should be spent teaching social studies. Five participants felt that four more hours of instructional time is necessary to cover the content. Interestingly, 10 of the teacher candidates who had seen very little time devoted to social studies in field and clinical placements did not feel that much more time, if any, should be devoted to the subject.

At the time of completing the survey, none of the participants had recently taken a required history or political science core curriculum college course. In fact, 35 of the 39 participants had not taken such a course in one to four years, and three of the contributors stated that it had been seven or more years since they had taken a social science course in college. Even though a considerable amount of time had passed, eight of the participants said that they remembered a “great deal” from the last social science course they took. However, most participants felt that they remembered “some, but not much information” (n=12) or “a fair amount of information” (n=18).
Likert Scale Questions

A Likert scale was used in this study to gage preservice teachers’ feelings of preparedness in teaching various social studies concepts (history, geography, government, economics, and cultural perspectives). A scale from “extremely prepared” to “extremely unprepared” was used. The results were very helpful in determining any areas of social studies that these candidates may struggle with when teaching in their own elementary classrooms. The results, in chart form, are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likert Scale Questions and Participants’ Responses</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How prepared do you feel to teach _____ in your own classroom:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Prepared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concepts of Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
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<tr>
<td>About other Cultures</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

These results show that while the majority of the participants feel “somewhat prepared” to teach various components of social studies, there are areas in which the teacher candidates feel more comfortable in their skillsets than in other content areas. It is interesting to note that fewer participants feel prepared to teach economics and about other cultures, while a larger number of participants do feel a sense of preparedness in teaching historical concepts and government. It is also interesting that there are very few participants who feel “extremely prepared” to teach in any of the content areas.

Open-Ended Response

Study participants were asked what, in their opinion, could better prepare them to teach the concepts of social studies. This question garnered some interesting answers. While it is important to note that not everyone responded to this open-ended question, the majority of the participants, 80%, did provide a written comment. The following are samples of the participants’ responses:

- “We are going to be in elementary school[s] where we are asked to teach social studies. This is a very broad area and I do not feel prepared. It would be very difficult to teach us everything we need to know to teach each grade level, but additional courses and more hands-on activities would have prepared me more for social studies.”
- “I believe we need [additional] content courses for social studies. Social studies is a course that I feel is [as] important as all the other courses. I do feel that if I had more courses in social studies I would feel more prepared to teach some areas.”
- “I think I’d feel better if a social studies content class was taught. I took history three years ago, but I haven’t taken geography or economics since high school, so it’s very easy to forget over such [a] long time span.”
• “It’s been such a long time since I have had some of the content. I think some research and lesson plan design would be enough to jog my memory. Offering more subject matter would help.”

• “I think that we should have more classes on teaching us “how” to teach social studies versus teaching us the concepts of it. I think that additional classes would’ve helped. I feel extremely unprepared to teach lower grades history.”

• “I don’t think additional courses would help. An overload of courses tends to make things confusing. I do feel like memorizing skills would help with teaching because it helps to transfer the information. I think if a person has not had a great deal of exposure to social studies perhaps more classes would help. As for myself, I feel prepared to teach, and whatever information or knowledge I may be missing will be made up in research.”

• “I think we need more content area courses in general! I am fairly good at remembering facts from history, but I saw many of my fellow classmates struggle and have heard them say that they do not feel prepared to teach it.”

• “The social studies [methods] class we took was great since social studies and science [has] been cut down (in regards to time). I believe that we were rightly taught how to integrate these subjects into other subjects. I, of course, will have to refresh my memory on certain topics, but I’m ready to do so to ensure the students are taught correctly.”

• “I feel additional courses should be offered to better our understanding of social studies.”

• “[We need] more courses about social studies later on in our course work (closer to graduation). [We need] more practice implementing our ideas with students.”

• “Social studies seems to be a subject that was left behind. We focus on reading, special education, and a little on math and science. I think if we pinpoint social studies a little more people will be more excited about it.”

• “I would like a big picture of exactly what standards are covered in the K-5 setting and brief overviews of key events or concepts covered.”

• “I feel that the social studies [methods] course was great and I learned a lot from it.”

• “I do feel that I would be better prepared if more courses were offered in the area of social studies. The courses I have taken didn’t prepare me as much as I would have liked.”

• “I believe that the majority of my preparation for teaching social studies happened during my field experience. I had to figure out what I need to teach and do a lot of research. I do believe that having an additional course could have been more beneficial. However, I don’t think it should be a content course.”

• “Because I do not feel “extremely prepared” in every concepts of history, I feel that I could have benefitted from additional history classes. I would have especially enjoyed a course over “teaching history” and ways to make teaching history fun and engaging.”

• “I’d be better prepared if professors were more excited about the subject and used more fun activities instead of just reading the text and having a test over the content.”

The participants were quite varied in their responses. While some wanted additional courses, others did not feel that additional social studies courses would be beneficial. Some preservice teachers felt that they had enough knowledge of the subject matter to effectively teach in an elementary classroom setting, yet others were concerned about their lack of knowledge and understanding in social studies content. Because of their feelings of inadequacy in the subject matter, several of the participants expressed plans to research information prior to teaching concepts of social studies. While all educators should strive to be continuous learners in order to successfully teach the content and engage learners, the idea of constantly having to “look up” information prior to teaching social studies concepts does raise some troubling questions: Will these preservice teaches continue to seek out the information in which they are unfamiliar? Will
they become too busy with the pressures of teaching to constantly research the information they do not know, or will they simply decide to spend less time teaching social studies because it is “too much trouble”? And will a lack of knowledge lead to feelings of burn-out and frustration?

Conclusions

Why should the components of social studies be a critical focus in the curricula of every elementary classroom? This is a question that many preservice teachers cannot truly answer due to a “limited understanding of the purposes and nature of social studies” (Savage & Armstrong, 2008, p. 4). Teachers need a clear understanding of why the content of each school subject is essential; without such a perception, teachers will have difficulty preparing meaningful and beneficial lessons for the students in their care. Yet many begin their teaching careers with little interest in social studies concepts and with only a vague recall of the subject matter (Savage & Armstrong, 2008). The teaching of social sciences is paramount, as it is with social studies that children learn about themselves and about the world around them. Devoting little to no time to the teaching of social studies can be detrimental to our society (Savage & Armstrong, 2008).

The information taken from this study indicates that these preservice teachers have mixed personal feelings toward social studies. The majority of the participants consider social studies to be somewhat important to teach, yet 33% of the participants find social studies to be either not very important or unimportant. While approximately one-half of the participants stated that “social studies” was one of their favorite subjects in elementary school, another portion of the subjects responded with dislike or indifference. Indifference toward a subject area can often be as detrimental as negativity. When teachers do not care about a school subject, do not see the benefit of teaching the subject, or dislike the subject matter in any degree, often little time is placed into the planning of the instruction or the instruction itself. It can be difficult to help students appreciate the value of information presented when teachers themselves find the subject matter to be boring or unimportant.

The data from this study show that the majority of the participants do believe that more social studies instruction is needed in today’s elementary classrooms and that more time should be set aside to teach social studies concepts. While this is a very positive sign, the question is whether or not the participants will indeed make the teaching of social studies a priority in their own elementary classrooms. The National Council for the Social Studies (2008) has stated that daily time should be allocated for elementary social studies instruction. Time constraints often keep teachers from fully engaging in in-depth and powerful social studies lessons, yet social studies provides students critical life skills that, when developed, can help produce functioning members of a democratic society. Social studies should not be seen as a subject one teaches for a few minutes at the very end of the school day or whenever time permits. Instead, social studies should be seen as a critical part of the school curricula.

Interweaving social studies themes in subject matter throughout the school day can be extremely beneficial for elementary learners. Social studies lessons should be engaging and interactive. According to Sunal and Haas (2011), when teachers reduce social studies to rote memorization or fact finding, the impact on students is nominal at best. But when social studies is “perceived as an integral part of the intellectual development of students, and as a set of relevant experiences, it becomes an essential part of the curriculum” (p. 23). Using cross-curricular means of bringing social studies topics to light throughout the school day can help children gauge the importance of the concepts. When teachers integrate the curriculum, individual concepts are no longer taught in isolation; this allows the students to see the vitality of all subject areas (Holloway & Chiodo, 2009). In order to devote appropriate time to the content, social studies can, and should, be integrated with other disciplines. Integrating social studies with other subject
areas can help to ensure that social studies concepts are taught in an engaging and interactive manner (Holloway & Chiodo, 2009).

Institutions of higher learning cannot adequately reference every aspect of teaching in the confines of a college classroom; most of what teachers learn comes from life experiences and “on the job training.” Due to the vast amount of classwork that must be taken in teacher preparation programs, adding additional courses may not be feasible, yet colleges and universities must ensure that preservice teachers graduate with an understanding of social studies in both the knowledge of content and the skill set to teach the subject matter (Owen, 1997). This may mean that teacher preparation programs must be creative in how instruction is presented. It may also mean that schools of education must be mindful of course offerings in order to keep social studies methodology fresh in the minds of candidates as they enter into the elementary classroom. As well, the K-12 and postsecondary settings must work together to ensure that teachers are prepared to give the highest quality of instruction to their students.

This study allowed me the opportunity to glean insight into teacher candidates’ feelings and perceptions of teaching social studies. As someone who works with teacher candidates on a daily basis, I recognize the significance of ensuring that novice teachers are competent and confident in their abilities in the classroom. All school disciplines have merit and value and are vital in teaching the whole child. Because of this, I do recognize that further research on this topic will be extremely beneficial. I would like to see how these teacher candidates, who are now embarking on their first year in the classroom, are teaching social studies and if their feelings toward social studies have in any way changed. I would also like to research how the role of school administration sets the tone for whether or not teachers find relevance in teaching the social studies. As well, conducting more research on the amount of social studies instruction that occurs in the primary grades may prove to be very insightful.

The primary purpose of social studies is civic education (Chapin, 2009). Quality social studies instruction can contribute to producing responsible citizens, and it is of the opinion of many that without proper instruction at an early age, students may struggle in their quest of becoming functioning members of society. Therefore, it is critical that novice educators are prepared to teach this invaluable subject in all grade levels, but perhaps especially in the elementary grades. Helping preservice teachers to see the value in social studies instruction is of the utmost importance, and preparing them to teach social studies concepts with knowledge in content pedagogy can help ensure great success for both teachers and students.

References

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**Appendix: Survey Instrument**

Perceptions of Teaching Social Studies Survey Instrument

**Directions:** Please answer each question listed below by circling the response most appropriate or by providing an answer in the space provided. Please do not put your name or any other identification on this form. Thank you for your participation.

What is your age?

- a. 18-22 years of age
- b. 23-26 years of age
- c. 27-30 years of age
- d. 31-34 years of age
- e. 35-38 years of age
- f. 39 years or older
When was the last time you took an “Area E” history or political science class? (These classes are offered in the “Core” curriculum, which you completed prior to getting accepted into the School of Education program.)

a. Less than one year ago  
b. 1-2 years ago  
c. 3-4 years ago  
d. 5-6 years ago  
e. 7 or more years ago

What do you remember from the last “Area E” history or political science class you took?

a. Little to no information  
b. Some, but not much, information  
c. A fair amount of information  
d. A great deal of information

Complete this sentence: When I was in elementary school, social studies was:

a. My favorite subject  
b. One of my favorite subjects  
c. One of my least favorite subjects  
d. My least favorite subject  
e. I feel indifferent toward the subject and have no opinion either way

You have spent several semesters in elementary classrooms for your field and clinical placements. From your experiences, how much time, on average, was spent on the teaching of social studies?

a. Less than 30 minutes a week  
b. Less than an hour a week  
c. 1 hour a week  
d. 2 hours a week  
e. 3-4 hours a week  
f. 5 or more hours a week

In your opinion, should more time be spent on social studies in classrooms today?

a. Yes  
b. No  
c. Not sure

If your answer to the previous question is “yes,” have much more time per week do you think should be spent on teaching social studies?

a. 30 minutes more a week  
b. 1 hour more a week  
c. 2 hours more a week  
d. 3 hours more a week  
e. 4 hours more a week  
f. 5+ hours more a week

In your opinion, how important is the teaching of social studies concepts to elementary students?

a. Extremely important  
b. Somewhat important  
c. Not very important  
d. Unimportant
e. Extremely unimportant

For this portion of the survey you will complete a Likert scale. Please circle your response, noting that the scale goes from “extremely prepared” to “extremely unprepared.”

1. How prepared do you feel to teach history (historical concepts) in your own classroom?
Extremely prepared Somewhat prepared Neutral Unprepared Extremely unprepared

2. How prepared do you feel to teach geography skills in your own classroom?
Extremely prepared Somewhat prepared Neutral Unprepared Extremely unprepared

3. How prepared do you feel to teach concepts of government in your own classroom?
Extremely prepared Somewhat prepared Neutral Unprepared Extremely unprepared

4. How prepared do you feel to teach economics in your own classroom?
Extremely prepared Somewhat prepared Neutral Unprepared Extremely unprepared

5. How prepared do you feel to teach about other cultures in your own classroom?
Extremely prepared Somewhat prepared Neutral Unprepared Extremely unprepared

This last question is open-ended. Remember that your answers will remain anonymous:

What could better prepare you to teach the concepts of social studies? For example, do you think that you would be better prepared if you had been offered additional courses in the concepts of social studies?