

MOST DIFFICULT TOPIC IN SOCIAL SCIENCE CURRICULUM AS PERCEIVED BY ELEMENTARY LEVEL STUDENT-TEACHERS

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The study was conducted to identify the most difficult topic in elementary teacher education first-year social science curriculum as perceived by the student-teachers by using survey research design. The study also investigated the underlying reasons responsible for the student-teachers' difficulties in learning different topics. 218 student-teachers were selected using convenience sampling technique from five District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET), in Tamil Nadu State (India) for the study. The instrument used for data collection was a checklist designed by the researchers to elicit information from the student-teachers. The data collected were analysed using frequencies and percentages. The results showed that the topic namely, 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' was perceived as the most difficult topic in social science curriculum. The results also showed that teaching the topic without using the maps, lack of previous knowledge about the maps, the existence of vague concepts, heavy content load, and lack of interest and motivation to learn map concepts were the main reasons responsible for the student-teachers' difficulties in learning the topic.

KEYWORDS: Difficult Topic, Perception, Social Science Curriculum, Student-Teachers, Teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Social Studies originated in the United States of America at the time when violence, social disharmony and discrimination became a threat to their

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survival. Hence there was the need to introduce an academic discipline into the school curriculum to address these problems and to produce good citizens in the American society through citizenship education (Blege, 2001, as cited in Kankam, 2015). It was this noble and indispensable idea that gave birth to a new academic discipline called Social Studies in the early 20th century. Social Studies, therefore, originated from the need for schools to use a specific subject to prepare their students to become competent citizens. Hence, Social Studies have been included in the school curriculum across the world to enable learners to adapt to their environment and be able to adjust to the stress of rapidly changing society (Abdu-Raheem, 2012).

Social Studies is “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” (National Council for Social Studies, 1993, as cited in Kaf & Uygungul Yilmaz, 2017). The council also states that the primary purpose of Social Studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a diverse, democratic society in an interdependent, global world. Besides, Social Studies enable children to understand the society in which they live and to grow up as active, responsible, and reflective members of society. It is through Social Studies that students will gain knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will help them deal with issues in our contemporary society (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Garcia & Michaelis, 2011, as cited in Abu-Hamdan & Khader, 2014). Further, Social Studies play an essential role in the personality development of the child.

In India, Social Science is included in the school curriculum right from the primary classes to secondary classes to provide social, cultural, and analytical skills required to adjust to an interdependent world, and to deal with political and economic realities (NCERT, 2006). According to the National Curriculum Framework (2005) published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, “the Social Science perspective and knowledge are indispensable to building the knowledge base for a just and peaceful society”. Further, the Social Science classroom is an ideal platform from which students can establish a foundation of critical thinking, problem-solving, decision making, global awareness, civic knowledge, and empathy.

There are some prevailing perceptions of Social Science in India. The popular perception of Social Science is that it is a non-utility subject. From the initial stages of schooling, it is often suggested to the students that the natural sciences are superior to the social sciences. Besides, Social Science is viewed as providing unnecessary details about the past. There is also a perception that only a few desirable job options are open to students specialising in the social sciences. Also, in India, Social Science is perceived as an easy subject when compared to other subjects of study. However, the Social Science curriculum of

the 'Diploma in Elementary Education' (two-year elementary level teacher education programme) in Tamil Nadu State, India is an exception to this general perception.

In Tamil Nadu State, India, the elementary teacher education Social Science curriculum is divided into two sections: content and teaching methods. The first researcher of the present study has taught Social Science to elementary level student-teachers for four years at the District Institute of Education and Training, Uthamapalayam, Theni District in Tamil Nadu State, India. The researcher observed that the student-teachers encounter difficulty to learn some topics under the teaching methods section in the first-year Social Science curriculum. Further, a significant number of first-year student-teachers were failed in the subject 'Teaching of Social Science' in the 'Diploma in Elementary Education' final examinations.

Hence, the researchers have conducted a study to identify the topic which the student-teachers find most difficult to learn in the elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum. The study also discovered the reasons responsible for the student-teachers' difficulties in learning the topic.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Researchers around the world have examined the difficult topics/concepts perceived by the students at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education. Bello et al. (2018) reported that Physics topics such as simple harmonic motion, projectile, waves, and gas laws were considered difficult by senior secondary school students. The results also showed that too many formulae/laws to memorise, worked examples simpler than class exercise, too many calculations, and little practical work were the prominent factors identified to be responsible for students' learning difficulties of Physics concepts.

Ekici (2016) developed a valid and reliable instrument to assess why Physics courses are perceived as one of the most demanding courses among high school students. The results revealed that the students emphasised that the content of the Physics course was tricky. A study by Obafemi and Onwioduokit (2013) reported that 50% of the concepts in senior secondary school Physics curriculum were considered problematic by the students, while 44% of the concepts were considered difficult by the teachers. The findings of a study performed by Erinoshio (2013) revealed three significant sources of difficulty in learning Physics i.e. nature of the subject, teaching/teacher factors, and curriculum/assessment.

Akani (2017) conducted a study to identify the areas of students' difficulty

in the Chemistry curriculum at the secondary school level. The results showed that eight topics out of 18 topics listed in the Chemistry curriculum were difficult for the students. Gladys Uzezi et al. (2017) reported that the students perceived 12 chemistry concepts as difficult. A study carried out by Uchegbu et al. (2016) revealed that secondary school Chemistry students perceived some Chemistry topics difficult. Vast Chemistry syllabus, too many calculations, lack of qualified Chemistry teachers, and students' perception of Chemistry as being too abstract were some reasons for the difficulties in understanding the topics.

Fauzi and Mitalistiani (2018) conducted a study to map the difficult topics of Biology in senior high school based on the opinion of undergraduate students. The results showed that topics such as genetics, immune system, and metabolism were considered most difficult by undergraduate students majoring in Biology. A study by Etobro and Fabinu (2017) revealed that senior secondary school students have difficulties in five Biology topics such as nutrient cycling in nature, ecological management, conservation of natural resources, pests and diseases of crops, and reproductive system in plants. The teaching strategies, students' attitude, inadequate learning resources, and students' learning habits were the reasons adduced by the students of the perceived difficult topics. Cimer (2012) revealed that topics such as matter cycles, endocrine system and hormones, aerobic respiration, cell division, and genes and chromosomes were the most difficult to learn in Biology. The nature of the topic, teachers' style of teaching, students' study habits, students' negative attitudes towards the topic, and a lack of learning resources were the primary reasons for the students' difficulties in learning Biology.

Fabiyi (2017) reported that out of 23 geometry concepts in senior secondary school Mathematics curriculum, students perceive eight concepts difficult to learn, which include: construction, coordinate geometry, and circle theorem. Unavailability of instructional materials and teachers' method of instruction were the reasons for the students' difficulty in learning. Charles-Ogan and George (2015) reported that the students identified longitude and latitude, and bearing mensuration as difficult topics in the senior secondary school mathematics curriculum.

The review of past studies shows that the studies on the perception of difficult topics at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels focused on Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Mathematics curriculum. Only a few researchers around the world have attempted to identify difficult topics in Social Studies/geography curriculum (Amosun, 2002, as cited in Amosun, 2016; Amosun, 2016; Mansaray & Ajiboye, 1994; Mwenesongole, 2009;

Okwilagwe, 2012). It was further significant to point out that to date, no study has been conducted to determine student-teachers' perceived difficulty in learning Social Science in the Indian context. The present study, therefore, tends to find out the most difficult topic in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum as perceived by the student-teachers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers used the survey method to study the stated research questions. The survey method was used because the study sought the perceptions of the student-teachers through a checklist designed by the researchers on the identification of the most difficult topic in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum.

SAMPLE FOR THE STUDY

Two hundred and eighteen student-teachers were selected from five District Institutes of Education and Training (DIET) in Erode, Tiruppur, Dindigul, Theni, and Madurai Districts of Tamil Nadu State, India. Convenience sampling technique was used to select the participants. The participants include 200 female and 18 male student-teachers.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENT USED

The self-developed 'Most Difficult Topic Identification Checklist in Social Science' was used to collect the data. The purpose of the checklist was to find out the most difficult topic in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum as perceived by the student-teachers. Besides, it was also intended to find out the reasons responsible for the student-teachers' difficulties in learning the topic. The checklist used in the study involved two parts. The first part of the checklist sought to get demographic information of the student-teachers, such as the name of the District Institute of Education and Training, and gender. The second part contained all the six topics covered in the 'teaching methods' section of elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum. The researchers gave adequate space in the checklist to facilitate student-teachers to write the reasons for their difficulties in learning the topic.

Three researchers in Social Science education from three District Institutes of Education and Training in Vellore, Erode, and Madurai Districts in Tamil Nadu State, India established the face and content validity of the checklist. The experts were asked whether the checklist was relevant to the aim of the research and whether it was understandable by elementary level student-teachers.

Revisions were made according to experts' comments and suggestions. The checklist was then pilot-tested on 30 student-teachers at the St. Joseph Teacher Training Institute, Salem District in Tamil Nadu State, India to ensure its clarity. These 30 student-teachers were not used in the final study. The researchers did necessary modifications in the checklist based on the feedback received from the student-teachers.

When the checklist was ready to be used, the researcher visited the selected elementary level teacher education institutions and administered the checklist to the student-teachers. Before student-teachers started responding to the questions in the checklist, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to them. Further, the student-teachers were asked to select any one topic from the checklist, which they consider most difficult amongst other topics. The student-teachers were also asked to write a reason for their difficulties in learning the topic.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Tables 1 and 2 present the results of data analysis according to the research questions.

1) What is the most difficult topic in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum as perceived by the student-teachers?

The responses of student-teachers were analysed, using frequencies and percentages to provide the answer to this research question.

Table 1
Student-Teachers' Perception of the Most Difficult Topic in Elementary Teacher Education First-Year Social Science Curriculum.

S. No.	Social Science Topics	<i>f</i>	%
1	Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas	149	69
2	Meaning, Scope and Objectives of Social Science Teaching	27	12
3	Seminar	20	9
4	Activity -Based Learning	10	5
5	Project	9	4
6	Field Trip	3	1
Total		218	100

N = 218

Table 1 shows the results of the research question 1. The analyses of the data reveals that 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' was the most difficult topic to learn amongst other topics in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum. Of 218 student-teachers, 149 student-teachers (69%) considered it as the most challenging topic. While the topic 'Meaning, Scope and Objectives of Social Science Teaching' was considered as a most difficult topic by 27 student-teachers (12%), the topic 'Seminar' was chosen as a most difficult topic by 20 student-teachers. The topics 'Activity-Based Learning', 'Project' and 'Field Trip' were considered most difficult by some student-teachers. Hence, it can be concluded that the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' was the most difficult topic for the student-teachers in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum.

2) What are the reasons responsible for the student-teachers' difficulties in learning the topic?

The answer to research question 1 reveals that the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' was the most difficult topic for the student-teachers in the elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum. It was clear from Table 1 that 149 student-teachers considered it as the most difficult topic. The researchers analysed these 149 checklists to find out the reasons responsible for the student-teachers' difficulties in learning the topic. The different reasons adduced by the student-teachers are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The Reasons Adduced by the Student-Teachers with Regards to their Difficulties in Learning the Topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas'.

S. No.	Reasons for the Student-Teachers' Difficulties	<i>f</i>	%
1	Not using maps in teaching -learning	51	34
2	Lack of previous knowledge	37	25
3	Existence of vague concepts	27	18
4	Heavy content load	23	16
5	Lack of interest and motivation	11	7
Total		149	100

N = 149

Table 2 shows the different reasons adduced by the student-teachers for their difficulties in learning the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas'.

According to the data analysis, five significant reasons have emerged: not using maps in teaching-learning, lack of previous knowledge, the existence of vague concepts, heavy content load, and lack of interest and motivation to learn the topic. The highest common reason was 'not using maps in teaching-learning' indicated by 51 (34%) student-teachers, while the least common reason was the 'lack of interest and motivation' indicated by 11 (7%) student-teachers.

DISCUSSION

From the data collected, it was revealed that the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' was the most difficult topic in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum. This finding of the study is in line with several previous studies. Amosun (2016) found that map reading was the most difficult component of the geography curriculum. He also submitted that map reading aspect that requires mathematical calculations have been found difficult by the students. A study performed by Okwilagwe (2012) revealed that students face difficulties in map reading and interpretation. Further, Mansaray and Ajiboye (1994) observed that 50% of the topics indicated as problematic by senior secondary school geography students fall in map reading and physical geography.

The study also revealed that there are some reasons why the student-teachers find the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' most difficult to learn. The most important reason for the student-teachers' difficulty in learning the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' was the way in which it was taught. Majority of the student-teachers (34%) reported that the topic was taught without using the maps. The National Curriculum Framework (2005, p.54) stressed the importance of using maps in Social Science. However, the study reveals that Social Science teacher educators in the elementary level teacher education institutions were not using the maps for teaching the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas'.

A significant number of student-teachers (25%) reported that lack of previous knowledge about the maps was another reason for their difficulties in learning the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas'. However, basic map concepts were introduced to the students in elementary and secondary schools through Social Science textbook. Hence, the topic of maps was not a new one for the student-teachers because they had gained some previous knowledge about the maps in the schools. Perhaps the student-teachers might forget the map concepts which they learnt in the schools.

Another reason for why student-teachers had difficulties in learning the

topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' was the existence of vague concepts in the Social Science textbook. A notable number of student-teachers (18%) reported that the map concepts presented in the Social Science textbook were hard to understand. The study also reveals that heavy content load (16%) was one of the reasons for the student-teachers' difficulties in learning the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas'. The student-teachers stated that a massive amount of facts and information about the maps was given in Social Science textbook; hence it was difficult to comprehend the map concepts. The last reason for the student-teachers' difficulties in learning the topic according to 7% of student-teachers, was the lack of interest and motivation to learn map concepts.

The results of the present study are similar to some previous studies. Amosun (2016) reported that the factors such as unqualified teachers, inappropriate method of teaching, poor teacher preparation, lack of teaching materials, and lack of in-service training were responsible for the teachers' difficulties in teaching map reading topics. Similarly, the factors such as different mathematical abilities, lack of motivation from the teachers, negative attitudes towards the subject, and lack of learning materials were responsible for the students' difficulties in learning map reading topics. Similarly, the findings of Mwenesongole (2009) shows that most learners do not perform well in map work because they lack motivation in doing map work, and they lack the necessary skills to map reading.

In brief, the student-teachers listed many important reasons for why they had difficulties in learning the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum. The reasons include teaching the topic without using the maps, lack of previous knowledge about the maps, the existence of vague concepts, heavy content load, and lack of interest and motivation to learn map concepts.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study found that the topic 'Reading the Globe, Maps and Atlas' was the most difficult topic for the student-teachers in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum. The student-teachers listed several reasons for having difficulties in learning the topic. The reasons include teaching the topic without using the maps, lack of previous knowledge about the maps, the existence of vague concepts, heavy content load, and lack of interest and motivation to learn map concepts.

The results of the present study are significant to the students, student-teachers, teachers, teacher educators, textbook writers, and curriculum

planners. The results can motivate Social Science teacher educators to go for conferences, seminars, and training programmes on the identified topic which the student-teachers consider most difficult to learn. Participation in the professional development programmes will not only enrich the knowledge and competence of Social Science teacher educators but also help them teach effectively.

With the discovery of the topic which the student-teachers find most challenging in elementary teacher education first-year Social Science curriculum, Social Science teacher educators would improve on their teaching method while teaching map concepts. The results would also be useful to the student-teachers in creating early awareness of careful study and allocation of quality time on such difficult topics in Social Science.

Similarly, the results of the present study would enable Social Science curriculum planners to gain knowledge and disposition to develop the methods and activities that can enhance student-teachers' understanding of Social Science topics. Also, textbook writers would benefit from the study because they may see the need to shift the emphasis from teacher-centred learning activities to student-centred learning activities.

The present study would further assist the authorities of elementary level teacher education system in the allocation of quality time to Social Science topics which the student-teachers consider difficult. The results may help the researchers in the domain of Social Science education by providing useful information upon which further research studies in the area of levels of difficulty of Social Science topics can be based.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the present study, workshops, in-service training programmes, and seminars should be organised for Social Science teacher educators to address the teaching of the topics considered problematic by the student-teachers. Both teacher educators and student-teachers should pay more attention to the teaching and learning of difficult topics to reduce the level of difficulty of these topics and improve the performance of student-teachers in Social Science. The teacher educators should cultivate a positive attitude and commitment towards the teaching of Social Science to encourage the student-teachers to study Social Science with less difficulty. Besides, the outcome of research studies in the domain of Social Science education could be made accessible to the vast numbers of teacher educators through effective in-service training programmes.

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