

AN EXAMINATION OF THE NECESSITY AND FUNCTIONALITY OF COURSES REQUIRED IN A SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

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Abstract

This study was carried out to examine courses required in an undergraduate program for social studies teachers in terms of their necessity and functionality, as perceived by preservice social studies teachers. The data were collected from 178 preservice social studies teachers enrolled in the faculty of education at a state university in Turkey at the end of the 2016-2017 academic year. Of the participants, 94 (52.8%) were female, and 84 (47.2%) were male. Forty of the participants (22.5%) were freshmen, 45 (25.3%) were sophomores, 42 (23.6%) were juniors and 51 (28.7%) were seniors. The findings showed that the preservice social studies teachers considered pedagogical courses to be more necessary than both subject-matter and subject-matter education courses and general culture courses. They also thought that subject-matter and subject-matter education courses were more necessary than general culture courses. Concerning the functionality of the courses, preservice social studies teachers thought that pedagogical courses were more functional than the subject-matter and subject-matter education courses and general culture courses; moreover, they considered that subject-matter and subject-matter education courses were more functional than general culture courses. Some significant differences were also found between female and male students. Female preservice social studies teachers, compared with males, thought pedagogical and general culture courses to be more necessary and pedagogical courses to be more functional. The study also showed that preservice social studies teachers who rated the necessity and functionality of courses more highly had higher grade point averages than those who gave them a low rating.

Keywords: preservice social studies teachers, social studies teacher education, social studies teacher education program

1. INTRODUCTION

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (1994) in the United States has defined social studies as “the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence” (p. 3). Social studies play a critical role in preparing students to become a responsible member in their social life and to be active citizens of a democracy (Sunal & Haas, 2002). While doing this, the social studies curriculum includes three components as “the knowledge component,” “the skills component,” and “the valuing component” that teach the students the knowledge, skills and values that will help them to become effective and responsible citizens (Naylor & Diem, 1987, pp. 10-14). However, in order for any course and school to achieve its goals, the existence of qualified teachers is a necessity, which depends on effective teacher preparation programs

(Goodlad, 1984).

In Turkey, candidates who want to become a social studies teacher have to take the university entrance exam to be accepted onto the program and to complete the social studies teacher education program, which lasts four years (Açıklan, 2011).

In Turkey, *the Undergraduate Program for Social Studies Teachers*, revised and introduced in the 2006-2007 academic year (Higher Education Council [YÖK], 2007), is currently used for training preservice social studies teachers (YÖK, n.d.). The program consists of 66 courses (a total of 156 credits) classified into three groups, as follows: **1.** Subject-matter and subject-matter education courses, **2.** Pedagogical courses, and **3.** General culture courses (YÖK, 2007).

Subject-matter and subject-matter education courses provide preservice teachers with the extensive knowledge needed in their teaching field (Küçükahmet, 2007; Şimşek, 2010). These courses (e.g., Foundations of Social Studies, Social Psychology, Archeology, General Physical Geography, Philosophy, Economy, Introduction to Political Science, Anthropology, Ottoman History and Civilization I-II, Modern World History, and History of the Republic of Turkey I-II) comprise 56% of the courses in the social studies teacher education program (YÖK, 2007).

Pedagogical courses give preservice teachers knowledge and skills about teaching and learning, planning, classroom management, measurement and evaluation of the teaching and learning process, guidance, teaching strategies and methods, etc. (Şimşek, 2010). In these courses, preservice teachers learn how to teach and how to measure and evaluate whether they have reached their objectives (Küçükahmet, 2007). Pedagogical courses (e.g., Introduction to Educational Sciences, Educational Psychology, Teaching Principles and Methods, Instructional Technologies and Material Design, Classroom Management, Measurement and Evaluation, Curriculum Development, and School Experience) comprise 23% of the social studies teacher education program (YÖK, 2007).

General culture courses help preservice teachers gain a general perspective on and give meaning to the world around them (Küçükahmet, 2007; Ministry of National Education [MEB], 1982; Şimşek, 2010). These courses (e.g., Turkish I: Written Expression, Turkish II: Oral Expression, Computer I-II, Foreign Language I-II, Principles of Atatürk and History of Revolution I-II, and Scientific Research Methods) comprise 21% of the social studies teacher education program (YÖK, 2007).

Some studies (Çoban, 2010; Kaymakçı, 2012) have reported that the social studies undergraduate program introduced in 2007 contains more courses and is more comprehensive in subject-matter and subject-matter education, pedagogical and general culture courses compared to the previous program (i.e., 1998 program). Since “social studies is a rich and fertile area of study” (Naylor & Diem, 1987, p. 11), it is necessary to include a variety of courses in social studies teacher programs in order to meet the objectives of social studies courses in schools (Yılmaz, 2009). However, it is also important to understand what preservice social studies teachers think about the courses they are required to take. Several studies (Akhan, 2015; Yılmaz, 2009) reported problems in relation to the social studies undergraduate program. For example, in a qualitative study, Akhan (2015) found that preservice social studies teachers thought that the courses they took in the undergraduate social studies teacher education program were mostly theoretical, and the number of practical courses was too low. They considered the student teaching course and other practical courses to be their best experiences while theoretical courses were generally their worst experiences. They also reported the courses they would not need to use in elementary schools as one of the worst experiences. Moreover, they thought that the number of courses not useful for their teaching was too many, of which some were subject-matter courses. On the other hand, they thought student teaching, practical courses, and pedagogical courses were useful (Akhan, 2015). Similarly, in the study of Yılmaz (2009), preservice teachers indicated that there were too many courses in the social studies teacher education program and that the number of courses unrelated to the subject-matter was also excessive.

The current study, drawing upon previous studies evaluating the necessity and functionality of courses in the Elementary Teacher Education Program (Kılıç & Acat, 2007; Süral, 2015), Computer and Instructional Technologies Teacher Education Program (Acat, Kılıç, Giremen, & Anagün, 2007), and Elementary Science Teacher Education Program (Anılan & Balbağ, 2014), examines the courses in a social studies teacher education program in terms of their necessity and functionality from the perspective of preservice social studies teachers. The research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1: Are there any significant differences between the subject-matter and subject matter education courses, pedagogical courses, and general culture courses required in a social studies teacher education program in terms of their necessity and functionality as perceived by preservice social studies

teachers?

Research Question 2: Are there any significant differences between preservice social studies teachers' opinions by gender about the necessity and functionality of the subject-matter and subject matter education courses, pedagogical courses, and general culture courses required in a social studies teacher education program?

Research Question 3: Are there any significant differences between preservice social studies teachers' grade point averages by their perceptions of the necessity and functionality of courses required in a social studies teacher education program?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study used the causal-comparative research design (Büyüköztürk, Kılıç Çakmak, Akgün, Karadeniz, & Demirel, 2012) to explore whether preservice social studies teachers' perceptions about the necessity and functionality of courses in a social studies teacher education program differed by gender and whether their grade point averages differed according to their necessity and functionality perceptions of the courses.

2.2. Participants

The data were collected from 178 preservice social studies teachers enrolled in the faculty of education at a state university in Turkey at the end of the 2016-2017 academic year. Of the participants, 94 (52.8%) were female, and 84 (47.2%) were male. Forty of the participants (22.5%) were freshmen, 45 (25.3%) were sophomores, 42 (23.6%) were juniors and 51 (28.7%) were seniors. The mean age of the participants was 21.17 ($SD = 1.88$).

2.3. Data Collection

The data were obtained through a questionnaire prepared based on previous studies (Acat et al., 2007; Anılan & Balbağ, 2014; Kılıç & Acat, 2007; Süral, 2015). In the questionnaire, the courses required in the social studies teacher education program were listed. However, some changes were made to the course list according to the courses required in the education faculty where the data were collected. The changes were: 1. A different course instead of "Art and Esthetic" in YÖK's (2007) program was required in the social studies teacher education program at the faculty where the data were collected. Therefore, this alternative course to "Art and Esthetic" was included. 2. Elective courses were not included since students' opinions might be affected by the number of elective courses offered in the program (Akhan, 2015). Overall, the questionnaire included 35 subject-matter and subject matter education, 13 pedagogical, and 11 general culture courses. Participants indicated their opinions about courses they had already taken and courses they were taking at the time the data were collected.

The participants indicated their opinions about the courses on a 5 point Likert scale (for Necessity: 1 = *not at all necessary*, 5 = *completely necessary*; for Functionality: 1 = *not at all functional*, 5 = *completely functional*). The participants also gave information about their grade point averages and some demographics (e.g., gender, age) on the questionnaire.

For the necessity measure, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were found to be .95 for all courses, .93 for the subject-matter and subject-matter education courses, .88 for the pedagogical courses, and .86 for the general culture courses; for the functionality measure, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .95 for all courses, .93 for the subject-matter and subject-matter education courses, .89 for the pedagogical courses, and .83 for the general culture courses.

2.4. Data Analysis

SPSS was used to analyze the data. Using the classification of YÖK (2007), a total score was obtained for each of the three groups of courses, i.e., subject-matter and subject-matter education, pedagogical, and general culture. All analyses were carried out using the total scores. Paired-samples *t* test and independent samples *t* test were performed to analyze the data. To make comparisons for grade point averages by the perceived necessity and functionality levels of the courses, the participants were divided into two categories—*low* and *high*—based on their scores from the necessity and functionality measures using the median split method (Büyüköztürk, 2014; Field, 2009; Iacobucci, Posavac, Kardes, Schneider, & Popovich, 2015).

3. FINDINGS

Necessity and functionality differences between subject-matter and subject matter education, pedagogical, and general culture courses: For comparisons between the subject-matter and subject matter education, pedagogical, and general culture courses required in the social studies teacher education program in terms of their necessity and functionality as perceived by the preservice social studies teachers, paired-samples *t* test analyses were performed. Results are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Paired-samples <i>t</i> test results between course groups for perceived necessity					
Courses	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Subject-Matter and Subject-Matter Education Courses	3.89	.66	176	-3.52	.001
Pedagogical Courses	4.10	.93			
Subject-Matter and Subject-Matter Education Courses	3.89	.66	177	4.22	<.001
General Culture Courses	3.61	.84			
Pedagogical Courses	4.10	.93	176	6.10	<.001
General Culture Courses	3.62	.84			

As seen in Table 1, there are significant differences between the course groups in terms of their perceived necessity. Preservice social studies teachers considered pedagogical courses to be more necessary than both subject-matter and subject-matter education courses [$t(176) = -3.52, p < .01$] and general culture courses [$t(176) = 6.10, p < .001$]. In addition, they thought that subject-matter and subject-matter education courses were more necessary than general culture courses [$t(177) = 4.22, p < .001$].

Table 2. Paired-samples <i>t</i> test results between course groups for perceived functionality					
Courses	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Subject-Matter and Subject-Matter Education Courses	3.67	.68	176	-2.57	.011
Pedagogical Courses	3.84	1.04			
Subject-Matter and Subject-Matter Education Courses	3.67	.68	177	3.43	.001
General Culture Courses	3.46	.78			
Pedagogical Courses	3.84	1.04	176	4.81	<.001
General Culture Courses	3.46	.78			

As seen in Table 2, there are significant differences between course groups in terms of their perceived functionality. Preservice social studies teachers thought that pedagogical courses were more functional than the subject-matter and subject-matter education courses [$t(176) = -2.57, p < .05$] and general culture courses [$t(176) = 4.81, p < .001$]. Moreover, they considered that subject-matter and subject-matter education courses were more functional than general culture courses [$t(177) = 3.43, p < .01$].

Necessity and functionality differences by gender: To test whether the opinions of preservice social studies teachers on the subject-matter and subject matter education, pedagogical, and general culture courses' necessity and functionality in their programs differed by gender, independent samples *t* test analyses were performed, and the results are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Independent samples *t* test results for necessity and functionality of courses by gender

Measure	Courses	Female		Male		df	t	p
		M	SD	M	SD			
Necessity	Subject-Matter and Subject-Matter Education Courses	3.90	.62	3.87	.71	176	.24	.810
	Pedagogical Courses	4.27	.85	3.90	.97	175	2.73	.007
	General Culture Courses	3.75	.75	3.46	.90	176	2.29	.023
Functionality	Subject-Matter and Subject-Matter Education Courses	3.73	.65	3.60	.70	176	1.28	.202
	Pedagogical Courses	4.03	1.00	3.62	1.04	175	2.70	.008
	General Culture Courses	3.56	.73	3.35	.83	176	1.80	.073

As shown in Table 3, female preservice social studies teachers, compared with males, thought that pedagogical [$t(175) = 2.73, p < .01$] and general culture courses [$t(176) = 2.29, p < .05$] were more necessary. However, there was no significant difference between female and male participants' opinions about the necessity of the subject-matter and subject-matter education courses [$t(176) = .24, p > .05$]. As for functionality, females thought pedagogical courses [$t(175) = 2.70, p < .01$] to be more functional. However, for the functionality of the subject-matter and subject-matter education courses [$t(176) = 1.28, p > .05$] and general culture courses [$t(176) = 1.80, p > .05$], there were no significant differences between female and male participants.

Grade point average differences by necessity and functionality of courses: To test whether preservice social studies teachers' grade point averages differed by their necessity and functionality perceptions of the courses required in the social studies teacher education program, independent samples *t* test analyses were performed for both necessity and functionality perceptions. Results are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Independent samples *t* test results for grade point averages by necessity and functionality of courses

	Necessity				df	t	p
	Low		High				
	M	SD	M	SD			
Grade Point Average	2.77	.36	2.91	.33	176	-2.91	.004
	Functionality				df	t	p
	Low		High				
	M	SD	M	SD			
Grade Point Average	2.76	.34	2.92	.34	176	-2.99	.003

As shown in Table 4, preservice social studies teachers in the high category for both the necessity measure [$t(176) = -2.91, p < .01$] and functionality measure of courses [$t(176) = -2.99, p < .01$] had higher grade point averages than those in low category.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was carried out to examine courses required in an undergraduate program for social studies teachers in terms of their necessity and functionality, as perceived by preservice social studies teachers.

Findings of the current study showed that preservice social studies teachers perceived pedagogical courses to be more necessary than both subject-matter and subject-matter education courses and general culture courses. Also, they considered the subject-matter and subject-matter education courses to be more necessary than general culture courses. Similar patterns were also found for the functionality of the courses. In accordance with the findings of the current study focusing on social studies majors, other studies with samples from different fields also showed that preservice teachers thought pedagogical courses more necessary and functional, followed by subject-matter courses and general culture courses (Acat et al., 2007; Anılan & Balbağ, 2014; Kılıç & Acat, 2007; Süral, 2015).

The findings showed that general culture courses are at the most disadvantaged in terms of their perceived necessity and functionality. The negative state of the general culture courses can be explained by the fact that some of these courses, under different names, are included in school programs as early as elementary school. Thus, preservice social studies teachers may think that they already know the content of these courses, which in turn causes them to consider these courses less necessary and functional than others. Supporting this is Akhan's (2015) study showing that some preservice social studies teachers recommended the number of pedagogical courses be increased since these are more useful when being appointed as a teacher and while working as a teacher. On the other hand, some recommended removing theoretical and subject matter courses such as history, geography, and economics because they were thought unnecessary and had been studied since high school (Akhan, 2015). As argued by Tonga (2012), preservice social studies teachers have to learn too much theoretical knowledge to use in social studies classes in schools. Even if the preservice social studies teachers gain extensive knowledge with the courses offered in their programs, this could cause new problems to emerge if they do not learn how these topics are related to the social studies topics in schools (Tonga, 2012). In one study, Yılmaz (2009) also found that preservice social studies teachers were not satisfied with courses that were not directly related to their field of study.

If courses are directly related to the teaching profession and there is a connection between theory and practice, preservice teachers tend to see these courses as more necessary and functional; on the other hand, if courses are based on theory without application, they tend to see these courses as less necessary and less functional (Kılıç & Acat, 2007; Süral, 2015). However, it is important to mention that believing pedagogical courses are more necessary than general culture courses and subject-matter courses can be an obstacle to maximizing learning from these courses (Joram & Gabriele, 1998). Findings from the comparisons of grade point averages according to the necessity and functionality of courses support this comment. Preservice social studies teachers' grade point averages showed significant differences in terms of their perception of the necessity and functionality of courses that preservice social studies teachers who rated the necessity and functionality of courses more highly had higher grade point averages than those who gave them a low rating, suggesting that those who thought courses more necessary and functional had higher grade point averages. Since preservice social studies teachers considered that some courses would be more useful in their profession, they might have put more effort into succeeding in them, which might have resulted in higher grade point averages.

In this study, some significant differences were also found between female and male students in that female preservice social studies teachers, compared with males, thought pedagogical and general culture courses to be more necessary and pedagogical courses to be more functional. This finding could be explained by perceptions of teaching, professional motivations, attitudes, and beliefs about the teaching profession (Kılıç & Acat, 2007). For example, in their study of preservice social studies teachers' attitudes towards the teaching profession, Dönmez and Uslu (2013) found that female preservice teachers' attitudes were more positive than males.

In conclusion, students have negative opinions about their general culture courses compared to the subject-matter and subject-matter education and pedagogical courses. The teacher education program recommends that teacher educators should link the course topics to the related school curricula (YÖK, 2007, p.10). Revising the contents and/or linking the topics of these courses to the topics of the social studies curriculum in schools might help reduce these negative opinions (Acat et al., 2007; Akhan, 2015; Anılan & Balbağ, 2014; Kılıç & Acat, 2007; Süral, 2015). In addition, changing the teaching methods in these courses (Akhan, 2015; Yılmaz, 2009) and emphasizing the importance of these courses (Joram & Gabriele, 1998) might also help students revise their adverse opinions about general culture courses.

Using a convenience sample, this study was conducted in the faculty of education at a state university. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings is subject to this limit. Also, the current study did not examine the factors that might affect preservice social studies teachers' opinions on the necessity and functionality of courses. Therefore, studies with this aim might usefully be carried out.

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