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Teaching and Learning Social Studies: An Examination of Pedagogical Practices

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Abstract

Social Studies plays a crucial role in developing learners' critical thinking, civic competence, and social awareness. The effectiveness of Social Studies instruction largely depends on the pedagogical practices employed by teachers in facilitating meaningful learning experiences (Barton & Levstik, 2004). This qualitative descriptive study examined pedagogical practices in the teaching and learning of Social Studies and explored how these practices influence learners' engagement and understanding. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with Social Studies teachers and focus group discussions with learners. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes: learner-centered instructional strategies, contextualization of content, participatory classroom practices, and challenges in implementing effective pedagogy. Findings indicate that learner-centered and contextualized approaches enhance participation, comprehension, and critical engagement with social issues, consistent with constructivist and inquiry-based frameworks (NCSS, 2013; Parker, 2015). However, time constraints, curriculum demands, and varied learner readiness continue to affect pedagogical implementation. The study concludes that effective Social Studies instruction requires active, participatory pedagogy supported by institutional and curricular structures.

Keywords: *Social Studies education, pedagogical practices, learner engagement, qualitative study, secondary education*



1. Introduction

Social Studies education is fundamental in preparing learners to understand social realities, participate responsibly in civic life, and engage critically with historical and contemporary issues (NCSS, 2013). Through the study of history, geography, economics, politics, and culture, learners are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to interpret social phenomena and make informed decisions as members of society. Beyond the acquisition of factual knowledge, Social Studies aims to cultivate higher-order thinking skills, democratic values, and informed citizenship by encouraging learners to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and reflect on social issues from multiple perspectives (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Achieving these goals depends significantly on the pedagogical practices teachers employ in the classroom, as instructional approaches shape how learners interact with content and develop understanding.

Contemporary scholarship in Social Studies education emphasizes learner-centered, inquiry-based, and participatory approaches as essential to meaningful learning (Parker, 2015). These approaches position learners as active participants in the learning process by engaging them in analysis, discussion, and problem-solving rather than passive reception of information. Through inquiry-based tasks and participatory activities, learners are encouraged to examine issues, evaluate diverse viewpoints, and connect classroom lessons to real-world contexts and current social concerns (Levstik & Barton, 2011). Empirical studies consistently show that when Social Studies instruction moves beyond rote memorization toward active engagement, learners demonstrate deeper conceptual understanding, improved critical thinking skills and sustained interest in the subject (Hess, 2009).

Despite these pedagogical ideals, many Social Studies classrooms remain predominantly teacher-centered due to persistent challenges such as extensive curriculum requirements, limited instructional time, and assessment pressures (Cuban, 2013). These constraints often lead teachers to prioritize content coverage over inquiry and discussion, reducing opportunities for active learner participation. Consequently, there is a need to better understand how teachers enact pedagogical practices within these constraints and how learners experience Social Studies instruction in actual classroom settings. Examining these practices is essential for identifying ways to strengthen teaching approaches that promote engagement and understanding. In response to this need, the present study examined pedagogical practices in the teaching and learning of Social Studies and explored their influence on learner engagement and understanding.

2. Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to examine pedagogical practices employed in the teaching and learning of Social Studies. Specifically, it sought to identify dominant instructional strategies used by teachers, explore learners' experiences of Social Studies instruction, examine how pedagogical practices influence learner engagement and understanding, and identify challenges affecting the implementation of effective Social Studies pedagogy.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was employed to capture in-depth perspectives on teaching and learning practices in Social Studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design is appropriate for

examining instructional practices as experienced by teachers and learners in natural classroom contexts.

3.2 Participants and Setting

Participants included Social Studies teachers and learners selected through purposive sampling. Teachers were chosen based on their direct involvement in Social Studies instruction, while learners were selected from classes where varied pedagogical approaches were implemented (Patton, 2015).

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with learners. Interview protocols focused on instructional strategies, classroom interaction, assessment practices, and learning challenges. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following systematic coding, categorization, and theme development procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.5 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data sources, member checking, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4. Results

Theme 1: Learner-Centered Instructional Strategies

Teachers reported deliberately using group discussions, varied questioning techniques, and collaborative activities to promote active participation and sustain learner interest during Social Studies lessons. Group discussions were viewed as effective spaces for exchanging ideas and perspectives, while questioning techniques such as open-ended and follow-up questions encouraged learners to think critically and articulate their understanding. Collaborative activities further supported participation by allowing learners to work together, share responsibilities, and learn from one another in a supportive environment.

Learners expressed greater interest and motivation when they were encouraged to share ideas and engage in dialogue rather than simply listen to lectures. They noted that opportunities to voice opinions, respond to peers, and participate in discussions made lessons more engaging and helped them understand topics more deeply. These interactive practices fostered a classroom atmosphere where learners felt valued and confident to contribute, resulting in increased participation and more dynamic teaching-learning interactions.

Participant responses:

“Mas naiintindihan namin ang lesson kapag may discussion.” (Learner 5)

“Mas nagiging buhay ang klase kapag collaborative ang activity.” (Teacher 4)

“Hindi lang kami nakikinig, nakakapag-isip din kami.” (Learner 11)

These responses indicate that learner-centered strategies significantly enhance engagement by positioning learners as active participants in meaning-making processes rather than passive recipients of information. When learners are encouraged to ask questions, share ideas, collaborate with peers, and reflect on issues, they take greater ownership of their learning. This active

involvement enables learners to construct understanding through dialogue, exploration, and interaction, which deepens comprehension and sustains interest in Social Studies lessons. As learners participate more fully, they are also more likely to connect new information with prior knowledge and personal experiences, resulting in more meaningful learning outcomes.

Such findings are consistent with constructivist views of learning, which emphasize that knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction and cognitive engagement (Levstik & Barton, 2011; Parker, 2015). In learner-centered Social Studies classrooms, teachers function as facilitators who guide inquiry and support discussion rather than solely transmit information. This shift in instructional roles allows learners to engage in critical analysis, consider multiple perspectives, and negotiate meaning collaboratively. Over time, these practices not only increase engagement but also foster critical thinking, communication skills, and civic awareness key competencies that Social Studies education seeks to develop.

Theme 2: Contextualization of Social Studies Content

Participants emphasized the importance of linking Social Studies lessons to real-life experiences, local issues, and current events as a way of enhancing learners' understanding and engagement. Teachers explained that using examples drawn from community life, local history, and ongoing social issues helped learners grasp abstract concepts more easily and see the relevance of the subject to their own lives. Learners likewise reported that lessons became more meaningful when topics were connected to situations they were familiar with, such as community concerns, national events, or issues discussed in the media.

These practices enabled learners to actively relate classroom content to their lived realities, making learning more concrete and accessible. By integrating current events and local contexts into instruction, teachers created opportunities for learners to analyze real-world situations, express opinions, and reflect on social issues critically. As a result, learners developed a deeper understanding of Social Studies concepts and demonstrated increased interest and participation in classroom discussions.

Participant responses:

"Mas malinaw ang lesson kapag may example sa totoong buhay." (Learner 3)

"Inuugnay namin ang topic sa nangyayari sa komunidad." (Teacher 10)

"Mas nakaka-relate kami sa aralin." (Learner 6)

Contextualized instruction makes abstract concepts more meaningful by deliberately connecting them to learners' lived experiences, community realities, and current social issues. When Social Studies lessons are anchored in familiar contexts, learners are better able to understand complex ideas such as governance, social change, and citizenship because these concepts are no longer treated as distant or theoretical. Instead, learners can relate classroom discussions to situations they encounter in their families, communities, and broader society, which enhances comprehension and sustained engagement.

This approach supports principles of situated learning by emphasizing that knowledge is constructed within meaningful social and cultural contexts rather than in isolation (Barton & Levstik, 2004). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2013) also underscores the importance of relevance in Social Studies instruction, advocating for the integration of real-world issues and local experiences to deepen understanding and civic awareness. By contextualizing instruction, teachers help learners

see the practical value of Social Studies, fostering motivation, critical reflection, and a stronger connection between academic learning and everyday life.

Theme 3: Participatory Classroom Practices

Teachers and learners highlighted debates, role-playing, and group presentations as effective instructional strategies that significantly increased classroom engagement and critical discussion. Teachers noted that these activities encouraged learners to move beyond passive listening and take active roles in constructing knowledge, while learners expressed greater interest and motivation when they were given opportunities to speak, perform, and collaborate with peers. Through debates, learners were able to express opinions, defend viewpoints, and critically examine social issues, which fostered deeper understanding and active participation.

Role-playing and group presentations further enhanced engagement by allowing learners to experience historical events, social situations, and civic roles in an interactive manner. Learners reported that assuming roles or presenting group outputs helped them better understand perspectives different from their own and strengthened their confidence in communicating ideas. These strategies also promoted collaboration, as learners worked together to plan, discuss, and present their work. Thus, the use of debates, role-playing, and group presentations transformed the classroom into a dynamic learning environment where critical thinking, dialogue, and meaningful participation were actively cultivated.

Participant responses:

“Mas confident kaming magsalita kapag may debate.” (Learner 6)

“Natututo silang makinig sa iba’t ibang opinyon.” (Teacher 8)

“Mas nagiging interesting ang lesson.” (Learner 2)

Participatory practices play a central role in fostering critical thinking and democratic discourse, which are core goals of Social Studies education. When learners engage in activities such as debates, role-playing, simulations, and issue-based discussions, they are required to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and articulate reasoned arguments. These practices move learning beyond the recall of facts toward higher-order thinking, as learners must consider multiple perspectives, question assumptions, and reflect on the social and ethical implications of issues being studied. In this way, participatory pedagogy creates opportunities for learners to actively construct understanding rather than passively receive information.

Moreover, participatory practices mirror the processes of democratic participation by encouraging dialogue, respect for diverse viewpoints, and collaborative problem-solving. Hess (2009) emphasizes that classroom discussions of controversial and social issues provide learners with a safe space to practice democratic skills such as listening, deliberating, and engaging in civil discourse. Similarly, Parker (2015) argues that participatory approaches in Social Studies help cultivate reflective inquiry by enabling learners to connect classroom learning with civic responsibilities and real-world decision-making. Through sustained participation in these activities, learners develop not only cognitive skills but also civic dispositions, such as openness to dialogue, respect for others, and a sense of social responsibility. As a result, participatory practices align closely with the broader aims of Social Studies to prepare learners for active and informed citizenship.

Theme 4: Challenges in Implementing Effective Pedagogy

Participants identified limited instructional time, heavy curriculum coverage demands, and varied learner readiness as persistent challenges that affect the consistent implementation of effective

pedagogical practices. Teachers explained that the pressure to complete prescribed competencies within a fixed schedule often leaves little room for in-depth discussions, inquiry-based activities, and reflective learning experiences. As a result, instructional time is frequently devoted to content coverage rather than deeper exploration of social issues and concepts, which constrains opportunities for learner-centered and participatory approaches.

In addition, participants noted that differences in learners' readiness levels further complicate instructional planning and delivery. Within the same classroom, teachers must address varying levels of prior knowledge, skills, and confidence, making it challenging to pace lessons and design activities that are accessible to all learners. These conditions require teachers to balance inclusivity with efficiency, often forcing difficult pedagogical decisions. Collectively, these challenges underscore the need for flexible curricular structures, sufficient instructional time, and targeted support mechanisms to enable teachers to address learner diversity while sustaining meaningful Social Studies instruction.

Participant responses:

"Minsan kulang ang oras para sa activities." (Teacher 9)

"Hindi lahat ng estudyante ay sabay-sabay ang level." (Teacher 2)

"Gusto pa sana naming mag-discussion pero tapos na ang klase." (Learner 14)

These challenges reflect broader structural and contextual constraints that significantly influence the implementation of pedagogical practices in Social Studies classrooms. Curriculum pressure, particularly the expectation to cover extensive content within limited instructional time, often compels teachers to prioritize breadth over depth. As a result, opportunities for inquiry-based activities, extended discussions and reflective learning, key components of effective Social Studies pedagogy are reduced. Cuban (2013) notes that such pressures frequently lead teachers to rely on traditional, teacher-centered approaches as a practical response to time constraints and accountability demands.

In addition, contextual factors such as large class sizes, diverse learner readiness levels, and administrative responsibilities further complicate pedagogical implementation. Teachers may struggle to balance interactive teaching strategies with classroom management and assessment requirements, limiting their ability to sustain participatory and learner-centered practices consistently. These findings echo existing research emphasizing that meaningful pedagogical innovation in Social Studies requires supportive structural conditions, including realistic curriculum pacing, adequate instructional time, and institutional recognition of the value of inquiry-oriented teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Addressing these constraints is therefore essential to enabling teachers to fully enact pedagogical practices that promote engagement, critical thinking, and deep learning in Social Studies classrooms.

5. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that learner-centered, contextualized, and participatory pedagogical practices have a significant positive influence on the teaching and learning of Social Studies. When learners are actively involved in discussions, collaborative tasks, and inquiry-based activities, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with content and develop deeper conceptual understanding. Studies have shown that learner-centered approaches encourage students to analyze historical and social issues, examine multiple perspectives, and construct knowledge through interaction rather than memorization (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Levstik & Barton, 2011). Such practices align with

constructivist views of learning, which emphasize that understanding is built through active engagement with ideas and experiences.

Contextualized instruction further enhances learning by linking Social Studies concepts to learners' lived experiences, local contexts, and current social realities. Research indicates that contextualization makes abstract social concepts more accessible and relevant, thereby increasing learner motivation and comprehension (NCSS, 2013; Gay, 2018). By situating lessons within familiar and meaningful contexts, teachers help learners see the relevance of Social Studies to their own lives, which supports sustained engagement and critical reflection. Participatory strategies, such as debates, role-playing, and issue-based discussions, also promote critical thinking and civic discourse by allowing learners to articulate opinions, evaluate evidence, and listen to diverse viewpoints (Hess, 2009; Parker, 2015).

However, while these pedagogical practices are effective, their sustained implementation depends heavily on supportive institutional conditions. Studies have documented that limited instructional time, rigid curriculum structures, and high content coverage demands can constrain teachers' ability to implement inquiry-based and participatory approaches consistently (Cuban, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Without adequate time for planning, discussion, and reflection, teachers may revert to more traditional, teacher-centered methods. Therefore, institutional support in the form of flexible curricula, reasonable workload distribution, and professional development opportunities is essential to sustaining learner-centered and inquiry-oriented Social Studies pedagogy. Strengthening these conditions ensures that effective teaching practices are not only adopted but also maintained over time, leading to improved learning outcomes and more meaningful Social Studies education.

6. Conclusions

This study concludes that pedagogical practices play a vital role in shaping the overall quality and effectiveness of Social Studies instruction. The ways in which teachers design learning experiences, facilitate classroom interactions, and engage learners directly influence students' levels of participation, comprehension, and critical thinking. Learner-centered and participatory approaches, such as discussions, collaborative activities, and inquiry-based tasks, create opportunities for learners to actively construct knowledge rather than passively receive information. These practices foster deeper understanding of social concepts and issues by encouraging analysis, reflection, and dialogue among learners.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of contextualization in strengthening the relevance of Social Studies instruction. When lessons are connected to learners' lived experiences, local realities, and current social issues, learners are more likely to find meaning in the subject matter and sustain their engagement. Contextualized instruction helps bridge abstract concepts and real-world applications, making Social Studies more accessible and impactful. However, the study also underscores that sustaining effective pedagogy requires addressing both instructional and institutional challenges. Constraints related to time, curriculum demands, and resource availability can limit the consistent application of innovative teaching practices. Addressing these challenges through supportive leadership, flexible curricular structures, and adequate professional support is essential to ensuring that effective Social Studies pedagogy is maintained and continuously improved.

7. Implications

Teachers are encouraged to sustain and further strengthen learner-centered and participatory instructional strategies that actively promote critical engagement in Social Studies classrooms.

Approaches such as guided discussions, debates, collaborative projects and inquiry-based tasks enable learners to analyze social issues, consider multiple perspectives and construct meaning through interaction. By consistently implementing these strategies, teachers can foster deeper understanding, critical thinking and civic awareness, which are central goals of Social Studies education. Continuous reflection on practice and responsiveness to learners' needs can help ensure that these strategies remain effective and inclusive.

At the curricular level, curriculum developers may consider providing greater flexibility within Social Studies frameworks to support inquiry-based instruction. Allowing teachers sufficient time and autonomy to explore issues in depth, integrate current events, and adapt content to local contexts can enhance the relevance and quality of learning experiences. Flexible curricula can reduce the pressure to prioritize content coverage over understanding, thereby enabling more meaningful learning engagements.

School leaders and policymakers also play a crucial role in supporting effective Social Studies pedagogy. Institutional support may include targeted professional development programs that equip teachers with skills in learner-centered, inquiry-based, and participatory teaching methods. In addition, thoughtful instructional time management such as adjusting schedules or reducing non-teaching tasks can provide teachers with the time needed to plan, implement, and reflect on innovative practices. Such systemic support is essential to sustaining high-quality teaching and promoting meaningful learner engagement in Social Studies classrooms.

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