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## Teacher candidates' opinions about being a social studies teacher

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### Abstract

Social studies teachers have a tremendous responsibility in applying the social studies program in a way that will furnish the individuals with survival skills which will lead them to be conscientious citizens. The purpose of this research is to determine the opinions of social studies teacher candidates. Accordingly, 93 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students have been given a questionnaire including open ended questions, and the data have been analyzed through descriptive methods. Findings have revealed that participants believe that a social studies teacher should have a good command of field knowledge, should teach about social life, and should keep him/herself updated about current issues. Furthermore, they have also pointed that they want to be teachers who can effectively communicate with their students, and who believe in constructive approach in education. Teacher candidates have stated that social studies course differs from other courses in being directly related to life and dealing with current issues; on the other hand, they have underpinned that appointment procedure in our country is the biggest problem awaiting them.

*Keywords:* Teacher candidate, social studies, teacher training;

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### 1. Problem

Social studies course has long been in primary education programs with its fruitful contributions. Being a field of study for humans' historical and cultural interactions, social studies course links the past to the present. Differences in life styles, values, cultures, historical events, and geographical variations have been within the scope of social studies (Wade, 2007). Social studies specialists have always emphasized the importance of providing democracy education for future generations, and have constantly underpinned that social studies course should be a process in which students comprehend the world that they live in and join into that world as effective world citizens (Sunal & Haas, 2002). Martorella (1998) grouped the characteristics of a teacher who would direct the social studies program effectively under planning and teaching. *In terms of planning, a social studies teacher;* organizes the purposes clearly; has a solid background about social studies program; chooses topics that will be meaningful for and appeal to his/her students; dedicates his time to underline the key points within the topic; balances the program in terms of reflection, skill, and interest; makes use of various educational sources; and uses both valid and reliable evaluation methods. *In terms of teaching, a social studies teacher;* connects students' existing social information structure with new information; leads his/her students to analyzing significant social issues, values, and ethical issues; provides his/her students with puzzles and problems as a way of investigating social data. Furthermore, the teacher sets the appropriate context for students to construct and apply the social information; improves on his/her students' problem solving abilities; draws attention to the interaction among humans, places, and events; encourages cooperation among students through small group activities where students can improve new opinions and can get engaged in social interaction; and provides opportunities for students to link social data with oral and written communication.

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Social studies course bears paramount importance for the development of nations and for individuals to gain knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. One of the major missions of social studies is to train the youth to become effective citizens within a multicultural society. Therefore, teachers of social studies course should have some special qualities—along with other qualities associated with teachers—needed to raise effective citizens. Hence, this research aims to determine opinions of social studies teacher candidates about the qualities of a social studies teacher, their future profiles as teachers, the qualities that distinguish social studies teachers from other teachers, and the problems that they may encounter as a social studies teacher. This research is expected to shed light on vital mission and significance of social studies teachers.

Main purpose of this research is to identify the opinions of social studies teacher candidates about being a social studies teacher. Accordingly, efforts have been directed to determine their opinions about the qualities of a social studies teacher, their future profiles as teachers, the qualities that distinguish social studies teachers from other teachers, and the problems that they may encounter as a social studies teacher.

## 2. Method

Survey model has been employed, and teacher candidates' opinions about being a social studies teacher have been described through data collected with a questionnaire containing open ended questions. 93 teacher candidates studying 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades at Program in Social Studies Education, Department of Primary Education at Anadolu University, during the academic year of 2009-2010 participated in this research. Of the 93 students, 45 are 3<sup>rd</sup> and 48 are 4<sup>th</sup> graders. Prior to application, the questionnaire was examined by an expert, and administered to 20 students for a pilot study. Following the expertise and pilot study, questionnaire took its final form to be applied. Descriptive analysis techniques—one of qualitative analysis techniques—was utilized for the analysis of the data collected through open ended questions. Results obtained during descriptive analysis was shortly interpreted in accordance with the themes determined beforehand. Another colleague participated and contributed to the descriptive analysis process in order to provide for the validity of the data collected from open-ended questions (Cano, n.d.).

## 3. Findings

In this part, findings are presented as frequency tables. Furthermore, some direct citations from what teacher candidates said are also included.

### 3.1. Teacher candidates' opinions about the qualities of a social studies teacher

Social studies teacher candidates were asked; "Who do you think a social studies teacher is? Describe." The summary of answers is as follows.

Table 1. Teacher candidates' opinions about the qualities of a social studies teacher

<b>Qualities of a social studies teacher</b>	<b>f</b>
.. is knowledgeable about the subject.	71
.. teaches about the social life.	49
.. follows the current issues.	42
.. provides a critical perspective.	35
.. is open to innovations.	30
.. has various skills such as thinking, searching, and interpreting.	26
.. has professional teaching knowledge.	19
.. is free from prejudice.	21
.. is good at personal relations.	19
.. has a broad world view.	19
.. respects different ideas.	18
.. is conscious about democracy and human rights.	16
.. raises effective citizens.	11
.. uses technology.	10
.. practices value teaching.	10

.. has an interdisciplinary and holistic perspective.	10
.. guides the students.	9
.. is a role model for students.	9
.. transfers the cultural heritage.	9
.. is responsible.	9
.. furnishes with social conscious.	5
.. is dedicated to Ataturk's Principles.	5
.. follows the scientific developments.	5

Participants emphasized that social studies teacher should have field, professional, and world knowledge like the other teachers. Although field knowledge is crucially important for all teachers, it is more important for a social studies teacher because the field knowledge covers various fields such as history, geography, sociology, economy, and law. Participating teacher candidates also underlined the importance of field knowledge among other qualities for social studies teachers. Moreover, teacher candidates stated that social studies teachers should have an interdisciplinary and holistic perspective. One of the participants stated; “*social studies teachers should have detailed information about their field, should follow the developments, and should also follow the other fields and connect them to their own field.*” Furthermore, teacher candidates pointed that social studies teachers should teach about social life in order to prepare the new generation for life. Due to the fact that social studies course involves daily issues, participating teacher candidates mentioned following the current issues as one of major qualities of a social studies teacher. One of the aims of social studies instruction is to teach critical thinking skills to students. Similarly, participants stated that a social studies teacher should furnish his/her students with critical thinking skills, and should be talented about thinking, searching, and interpreting him/herself. Participating teacher candidates also pointed some qualities consistent with the aims and content of social studies course; these qualities are being unbiased, having a broad world view, respecting different opinions, and being conscious about democracy and human rights. According to teacher candidates, a social studies teacher practices value education, transfers the cultural heritage to next generations, improves on social conscious, and helps students' personality development. Guiding students and being a role model are both necessary qualities for a social studies teacher whose responsibilities also include raising effective citizens. As for the participants, a social studies teacher should be a responsible person dedicated to Ataturk's Principles, and should follow scientific innovations. According to the teacher candidates, a social studies teacher who furnishes students with significant knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values should have survival skills.

### 3.2. Teacher candidates' future profiles as teachers

Social studies teacher candidates were asked; “How do you think you will be as a social studies teacher?” The summary of answers is as follows.

Table 2. Teacher candidates' future profiles as teachers

<b>Future profiles as teachers</b>	<b>f</b>
.. effectively communicates with students	16
.. is constructivist	14
.. is very good	13
.. tries to teach values	12
.. has funny classes	9
.. is innovative	9
.. I'm not sure if I'll be a teacher	9
.. values student	9
.. is objective	8
.. is against memorization	7
.. raises effective citizens	6
.. teaches about life	6
.. has a good command of field knowledge	6
.. is a favorite teacher for students	6
.. guides students	5
.. copes with the requirements of contemporary life	5

.. uses technology	4
.. is hopeful	3
.. teaches how to learn	2
.. handles problems properly	2
.. is idealist	2

Participants mostly wrote that they wanted to be teachers who could effectively communicate with students and who believed in constructivist principles. A teacher candidate wrote the following about this; *“I want to be a constructivist teacher who incorporates life into the class, enriches students’ abilities, and uses new methods and techniques”*. These findings point that teacher candidates want to be teachers who place the students in the center of the educational process. Likewise, teacher candidates also stated that they want to have entertaining classes, to be innovative, to value students, to discard memorization, to teach how to learn, and to guide their students. These characteristics can also be considered within the properties of constructivist teaching. The content of social studies course is directly related with teacher candidates wishes to be objective, to raise effective citizens, to be competent about their field, and to teach about life. Another participant wrote the following; *“I will be a teacher who conveys the richness within other cultures to his/her students and who teaches values to students”*. Some of the participating teacher candidates stated that they wanted to be teachers who could cope with the requirements of their time and who could use technology. Some other teacher candidates want to be loved by their students. Although they are few (5) in number, some wrote that they wanted to be idealists and hopeful. 9 teacher candidates said that they were not sure if they would be teachers or not.

### 3.3. Teacher candidates’ opinions about the qualities that distinguish social studies teachers from other teachers

Participants were asked; *“What are the qualities that distinguish social studies teachers from other teachers?”* The summary of answers is as follows.

Table 3. Teacher candidates’ opinions about the qualities that distinguish social studies teachers from other teachers

Qualities that distinguish social studies teachers from other teachers	f
.. is inside the life	40
.. is concerned about current issues	17
.. has interdisciplinary knowledge	15
.. believes in value education	12
.. helps personality development	9
.. is concerned with human	9
.. shapes the future	8
.. provides various skills	7
.. is multi dimensional	6
.. teaches how to be conscious citizens	4
.. is innovative	4
.. transfers culture	2

A great majority of participants stated that social studies teachers differ from others since their subject matter is highly correlated with life. A candidate wrote; *“Social studies is the life itself because the findings of social sciences shape the world. Therefore, a social studies teacher has to renew him/herself constantly and keep the pace of current events”*. According to participants, other characteristics that make social studies teachers different from other teachers are to be concerned about current issues, to have interdisciplinary knowledge, to teach how to be conscious citizens, and to transfer culture. A teacher candidate stated the following about having interdisciplinary knowledge; *“social studies teacher is interested in every event taking place in the world. Since sciences like geography, history, and psychology are part of everything, social studies teacher integrates all the social sciences”*. Another quality specific to social studies teachers is the effort they exert on providing various values and skills. Helping personality development, studying human in general, and shaping the future generations can be considered to be specific to social studies. Finally, participating candidates wrote that social studies teacher is multidimensional, innovative, and has a lot of responsibilities unlike other branch teachers.

### 3.4. Teacher candidates’ opinions about the problems they may encounter as teachers

Participants were asked; “What kind of problems do you think you may encounter as a teacher of social studies? The summary of answers is as follows.

Table 4. Teacher candidates’ opinions about the problems they may encounter as teachers

Possible problems	f
Appointment of teachers	25
Inadequate technological equipments at schools	25
Students’ and families’ negative perceptions about social studies	24
Multicultural structure of he society	15
Objectivity	14
Class management	10
Using materials	8
Tailoring in accordance with the age group of students	6
Application of theory into practice	4
Width of the content	2

Appointments of teachers is one the most frequent possible problems that participating teacher candidates mentioned. One participant wrote; “*I know that being appointed will be a big problem for me as a social studies teacher. There is no bigger problem I can think of*”. Inadequacy of technological equipment at schools was the second most frequent possible problem verbalized by teacher candidates. As mentioned by the candidates, parents’ and students’ perception about social studies course as a course that needs lots of memorization is another serious problem that teachers may encounter. A candidate wrote the following about this; “*Social studies course has always been neglected in Turkey. Generally, parents and students show more interest in math and science classes. Therefore, I may have troubles with my students, parents, and other branch teachers*”.

Since social studies course is also concerned about the cultural heritage, candidates stated that multicultural structure of the society might lead to some problems. Being objective and unbiased were considered as other possible problems that may arise during classroom studies. Moreover, other problems that any teacher can encounter (such as class management, use of materials, tailoring in accordance with the age group of students, and application of theory into practice) were also mentioned by the participants as possible problems.

#### 4. Result and Suggestions

Participants listed the following as the qualities that a social studies teacher should have; field knowledge, teaching about life, following the current issues, and having a critical perspective. Some other qualities (such as field knowledge, professional knowledge, and world knowledge) that should be owned by any teacher were also mentioned by the candidates. Furthermore, participants emphasized that a social studies teacher should raise effective citizens, should respect different opinions, should be unbiased, should teach various skills and values, and should transfer cultural heritage. Teacher candidates stated that they wanted to be teachers who have effective communication with students, who believes in constructive principles, who struggles to teach values, who have entertaining classes, and who are innovative. Moreover, they also pointed that they would be objective teachers who discard memorization, teach about life, are competent in the field, and who are loved by the students. The qualities that distinguish social studies teachers from other branch teachers were listed by the participants as follows; being directly related with the real life, being concerned with current issues, having interdisciplinary knowledge, emphasizing value education, and helping with personality development. Some other characteristics outlined by the participating candidates as distinguishing features are being concerned with human, shaping the future, providing various skills, and being multidimensional. Teacher candidates underlined that appointment of teachers would be the biggest problem awaiting them as social studies teachers.

Findings point to the necessity of reviewing both pre-service and in-service training curricula in order to furnish social studies teachers with solid field knowledge, interdisciplinary perspective, and habit of following current issues. Concerning the qualities that distinguish social studies teachers from other branch teachers, some changes that would improve social studies teachers’ competence in raising effective citizens and teaching about life can also

be carried out within the undergraduate social studies teacher training programs. The number of social studies teachers that will be appointed by the Ministry of National Education can be increased as much as the need for social studies teachers at schools. Moreover, lessening the number of students placed within social studies teacher training programs at universities can also help solve the appointment problems and raise more qualified teachers.

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