

## Research Article

# Relevance of social studies in the 21st century society: Students' perspectives

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Social Studies is a key tool in this changing world. It serves as the foundation of social development across the country and acts as an agent of change that transforms an individual into an effective citizen of the nation. Moreover, the Philippine K to 12 curriculum accentuates the role of social studies in developing the learners' literacy and effective engagement as a citizen of the country. This study aims to elicit the junior high school students' perspectives on the significance of social studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. A total of 25 7<sup>th</sup> grade students enrolled in a public secondary school participated in the study. This study used a qualitative descriptive design with a semi-structured interview guide as the primary gathering tool. Thematic analysis was used in analyzing the data. Five major themes emerged from the categorized statements of the participants. Social studies is still relevant today as it encourages community participation, enhances critical and creative thinking, fosters cultural sensitivity, broadens global perspective, and promotes values formation. Moreover, participants claimed that social studies promotes cultural heritage, fosters economic efficiency, serves as a source of meaningful information, and brings people back to the past. The study recommends that teachers should enhance their technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) in Social Studies to keep abreast with the demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Further, teachers are encouraged to make the teaching of Social Studies contextualized, indigenized, and localized to make it responsive and relevant in the current setting.

Keywords: 21<sup>st</sup> century society, social studies, students' perspectives, qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

Social studies is a discipline that deals with the human relationship and the way society works. It has been part of the basic and higher education curricula across the globe. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 1994, p.3) defined social studies as, "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural sciences." The general objective of social studies is to assist young people to craft informed and well-thought decisions for the public welfare as citizens of a multicultural, democratic community in a codependent society (NCSS, 1994).

The subject has a broader scope in different sub-disciplines in which many teachers struggle with the lack of student's interest in the content. This lack of interest translates into a lack of motivation to learn, and so students seem uninterested and perceive it as a boring subject. Several literatures reflected students' disinterest in social studies (Dinc & Uztemur, 2017;

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Musselman et al., 2018; Ozkal et al., 2004; Zhao & Hoge, 2005). Additionally, the changing educational landscapes and Education 4.0 add to the challenges faced by the present social studies curriculum (Rogayan & Villanueva, 2019).

The recent socio-political and economic transformations in the world and within countries have brought about changes in educational thrusts and greater challenges for social studies (Egharevba & Iyamu, 2020). These circumstances ushered the VUCAD<sup>2</sup> world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, disruption, and diversity. Horney et al. (2010) described Volatility (V) as the nature, speed, volume magnitude and dynamics of change; Uncertainty (U) refers to the lack of predictability of issues and events; Complexity (C) pertains to the confounding of issues and surrounding factors; Ambiguity (A) refers to the haziness of reality and the mixed meaning of conditions. Disruption (D) focuses on whether it is about the radical changes in technology, or about products, services, social transformations; and Diversity (D) refers to cultural diversity, generation diversity, gender diversity (Morales, 2020). The present COVID-19 pandemic also aggravated the VUCAD<sup>2</sup> era that we are in. Recent literature also stressed the impact of the current global pandemic on the VUCAD<sup>2</sup> world (Achsan et al., 2021; Hadar et al., 2020; Murugan et al., 2020; Noda, 2020). Through social studies, students can be honed to be global citizens ready to overcome these challenges brought about by the VUCAD<sup>2</sup> world and the new industrial era. Hence, the importance of the social studies curriculum must be accentuated.

Students are being equipped with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as life and career skills, learning and innovation skills, information, media, and technology skills to brace the challenges of the landscapes in education (Rogayan et al., 2021). Through social studies, learners acquire civic competence and understanding of the world they live in to become productive and responsible citizens. It also allows the students to be more conscious and aware of the community issues and problems and engages them to take the right action towards a better and more inclusive society.

In the Philippines, the social studies curriculum is anchored towards developing 21<sup>st</sup> century-skilled, functionally literate and holistically-developed Filipino learners. The primary aim of social studies is to develop learners to become citizens who are “investigative, critical thinkers, responsible, productive, environment-friendly, patriotic, and values-oriented with a nationalistic and global view and value to social and historical topics” (Department of Education, 2016, p.3). The role of social studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society is crucial as it is a platform to understand better the issues and concerns that are locally grounded and globally connected.

Previous researches have mainly focused on the cultivation of 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in social studies (Farisi, 2016; Rogayan et al., 2021; Sugiyanto et al., 2018), internationalizing social studies education (Boonying, & Chatruprachewin, 2017; White, 2018), 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching strategies in social studies (Egharevba, & Iyamu, 2020), and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century environment (Sunarno et al., 2020; Wahyuningtyas, 2019). However, very little scholarly attention has been given to the relevance of social studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the lens of the students who are considered Generation Z or those born in the internet era.

The researchers are interested to know the students’ point of views on the relevance of Social Studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. It is interesting to document how students see social studies and its role in social transformation and societal development. The study contributes to the dearth of studies concerning students’ viewpoints on the significance of the course in the 21<sup>st</sup> century milieu and the context of the VUCAD<sup>2</sup> world.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Research Design**

This study is qualitative descriptive research. The study is designed to reveal a target audience’s range of behavior and the perceptions that drive it with reference to specific topics or issues. It uses in-depth studies of small groups of people to guide and support the construction of hypotheses. The results of qualitative research are descriptive rather than predictive.

A qualitative descriptive approach does not necessitate the investigator to move as far from the information and does not necessitate a highly abstract interpretation of data compared with other qualitative approaches (Lambert & Lambert, 2012) but does result in some explanation (Bradshaw et al., 2017). The results from these investigations can often be of utmost significance to practitioners and policymakers (Sandelowski, 2000). The present revealed vital contributions of Social Studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

## 2.2. Participants

The study involved 25 Grade 7 students purposively selected from a state-owned secondary school in Zambales, Philippines. Seven (7) of the participants are females, while 18 are males. The participants belong to an intact class. Selection criteria were set as follows: (a) Grade 7 student; (b) enrolled in a social studies subject; (c) proficient either in Filipino or English; and (d) currently enrolled during the school year in the locale. The school was selected based on its accessibility to the researchers and convenience purposes. The study was conducted from November 2016 to April 2017 before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study used the purposive sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method, and it occurs when the researcher's judgment chooses elements selected for the sample. The purposive sampling method may prove effective when only limited numbers of people can serve as primary data sources due to the nature of research design and its aims and objectives. Mainly, this research was a heterogeneous or maximum variation sampling as a category of purposive sampling technique.

## 2.3. Instruments

To identify the current relevance of Social Studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society, the researchers devised a semi-structured interview guide as the primary tool in gathering the data. Sample questions in the interview guide are as follows: (a) Is Social Studies still relevant in 21<sup>st</sup> century society?; (b) how relevant is Social Studies to you as a student and as a citizen of the country?; (c) what is the significance of studying social studies. Follow-up questions were made to dig deeper in the students' responses. Experts in grammar and social studies were tapped to content-validate the instrument.

## 2.4. Data Collection Procedure

After constructing a semi-structured interview guide, the researchers sought the school's approval through its principal, for the conduct of the study. The researchers likewise sought parental consent and participant's assent prior to data collection as part of the ethics protocol. The conduct of the face-to-face interview took place at the participants' most convenient time in the school. Prior to the formal interview, the researchers established rapport to the participants by having a brief informal conversation. Before the interview ended, clarifications were made by the researchers in some statements which are unclear and needed further elaboration. The responses of the participants were translated from Filipino to English for better analysis and interpretation. An interview lasted five to 10 minutes per participant. No incentive was given to the participants in the conduct of the study.

## 2.5. Data Analysis

The responses of the students from the open-ended questionnaire were individually encoded. In analyzing the data, the responses were subjected to thematic analysis to cull out the underlying themes and code the significant statements, and the resulting significant statements were clustered into underlying themes (Rogayan, 2018). A phenomenological reduction was used for the extended text through a repertory grid. This enables the researchers to observe both the cool and warm analyses of the information collected from the participants. The cool analysis part consisted of the participants' significant points or statements. These statements were the basis for the warm analysis stage wherein the categorization of data was formulated and that the themes were evolved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell (2013) mentioned that the validation in a qualitative investigation is an effort to gauge the truthfulness of the discoveries, as best defined by the investigator and the subjects. Hence, in this study, informant feedback was made to ensure the trustworthiness of the collected data.

## 3. Results and Discussion

Social Studies students' perspectives on the relevance of social studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society are presented in the text table (Table 1).

The students reported various perspectives on the relevance of social studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Five major themes emerged from the categorized statements of the participants. They cited that Social studies is still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century society as it provides knowledge, promotes values formation, fosters cultural sensitivity, encourages community participation, and broadens global perspective.

Table 1

*Perspective of Social Studies Students on the Relevance of Social Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Society*

| <i>Emerging Theme</i>                   | <i>Selected Transcripts</i>   | <i>Codes</i>   | <i>f</i> |
|---|---|--|----------|
| Encourages community participation      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It is important because it encourages us to take part in social issues and contribute to the solution of different societal problems</li> <li>It gives us a sense of community as it teaches us the principles of civic engagement [P25, Female].</li> <li>Provide opportunities on how can we help the community in our own little ways [P1, Male].</li> </ul>          | P2,M;<br>P3,M; P6,M; P7,M; P12,M;<br>P13,M; P14,M; P18,M;<br>P22,M<br><br>P5,F; P9,M;<br>P10,M; P11,M; P15,M;<br>P19,F; P25,F<br><br>P1,M; P4,M; P8,M; P16, F;<br>P17,F; P20,M | 22       |
| Enhances critical and creative thinking | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social studies molds the minds of the youth based on the lessons we learned from it. In this subject, we learned how our ancestors fought against the oppressors and gave us insights into how we live and act in the present.</li> <li>It is important because it broadens our way of thinking and makes us more critical about what is happening around us.</li> </ul> | P6,M; P7,M; P8,M;<br>P9,M; P12,M; P14,M;<br>P15,M; P17,F;P23,F;<br>P25,F<br><br>P10,M; P11,M; P13,M;<br>P16,F; P18,M; P19,F;<br>P20,M; P21,F; P22,M;<br>P24,M                  | 20       |
| Fosters cultural sensitivity            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social studies is still very relevant in today's society as it provides us a better understanding of our own identity as a nation and other nations' identities.</li> <li>It gives us a better understanding of our rich cultural heritage, traditions, and belief systems despite technological advancement.</li> </ul>   | P1,M; P2,M; P3,M; P4,M;<br>P5,F; P17,F; P19,F;P20,M;<br>P21,F; P23,F<br><br>P6,M; P13,M; P12,M;<br>P14,M; P15,M; P16, F;<br>P18,M; P22,M                                       | 18       |
| Broadens global perspective             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It provides awareness on the different events that are happening in the country and in the different parts of the world.</li> <li>It helps me understand how different countries support each other and how different global movements work.</li> </ul>  | P8,M; P9,M; P11,M;<br>P12,M; P13,M; P14,M;<br>P20,M; P24,M<br><br>P2,M; P3,M; P10,M; P16,<br>F; P17,F; P18,M; P19,F;<br>P21,F  | 16       |
| Promotes values formation               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Social studies is still relevant today because we learn to appreciate our value system as Filipinos and apply them in our lives.</li> <li>It teaches us to be a more responsible member of society.</li> <li>It helps us remember the different important values for us to grow and develop as one community.</li> </ul>   | P5,F; P15,M; P16, F;<br>P17,F<br><br>P1,M; P2,M; P3,M; P23,F;<br>P24,M<br><br>P9,M; P10,M; P11,M;<br>P14,M   | 13       |

\*P-Participant; M-Male; F-Female

### **3.1. Encourages Community Participation**

Social Studies promotes civic competence. It encourages students to take part in social issues and discussions. It serves as a catalyst to enable students to initiate actions for community-centered development. One male participant shared that social studies is “important because it encourages us to take part in social issues and contribute to the solution of different societal problems (P22).” It accentuates the people's role in solving societal problems and issues towards building a more humane, inclusive, and just community. Another participant stated that social studies is still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because it “gives us a sense of community as it teaches us the principles of civic engagement (P25, Female).” This connotes how the subject teaches the students the rudiments of civic engagement and societal participation.

Several studies affirm that social studies has a significant impact in developing students' community participation or civic engagement (Kenna, & Hensley, 2019; Maguth, & Koskey, 2019; Matto et al., 2017; Stefaniak et al., 2017). High social studies environment has the power to increase the negative reality by vigorously promoting civic-mindedness regarding political engagement in students before students enter the real world (Parker & Lo, 2016).

Furthermore, Dewey as cited in Kenna & Hensley (2019) stated that the core objective of social studies is to prepare young people with the necessary foundational and skills essential to address and deliberate community issues confronted by the society and encourage political participation and societal engagement, and this objective remains relevant for today's Generation Z.

### **3.2. Enhances Critical and Creative Thinking**

Social Studies provides knowledge about the current and past events in which students reflect on and think critically and creatively. The past events being discussed in social studies subject are connected to the present situation of the country. Hence, social Studies helps in molding 21<sup>st</sup> century learners to be critical and creative thinkers.

“Social studies molds the minds of the youth based from the lessons we learned from it. In this subject, we learned how our ancestors fought against the oppressors, and that gives us insights on the way we live and act in the present (P23).” This statement from a female participant mirrors how social studies influence her to think beyond borders and to reflect critically on how past circumstances can shape the present and the future. Social studies, therefore, is an excellent avenue to cultivate one's sense of thinking that can transcend beyond limitations.

Yilmaz-Ozcan, and Tabak (2019) mentioned that having certain high-level thinking skills such as critical thinking, deliberation skills, judgment making, and systematic thinking are necessary for people to formulate solutions to the societal upheavals that they encounter at present. Previous researches also revealed that learners who have higher levels of self-efficacy in social studies subject could be assumed to have higher critical thinking skills (Lee et al., 2016; Meral, & Tas, 2017).

### **3.3. Fosters Cultural Sensitivity**

Social Studies promotes cultural awareness and sensitivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century milieu. Through the subject, the students get to know more about their own culture and the culture of other races, thus contributing to their awareness and holistic development. Schools should also ensure that learners are given the best avenue for their holistic development (Rogayan, 2019).

Students are being exposed to become stewards of cultural heritage. Social studies also enhances the learners' attitude towards promoting the Philippines' rich culture as they become proud Filipinos. As mentioned by one participant, social studies “gives us a better understanding of our rich cultural heritage, traditions, and belief systems despite the technological advancement that is happening around us (P13, Male).” The response suggests that amid the 21<sup>st</sup> century environment, social studies is still relevant in fostering awareness among people on the different cultural traditions and belief systems.

The idea of cultural sensitivity necessitates making sense of culture (Volckmar- Eeg, 2021). Cultural sensitivity fosters consciousness of personal cultural philosophies and practices and sharing open-minded and respectful interactions with people of other cultures (Anonson et al., 2014). Hence, social studies is essential in fostering cultural awareness, socio-cultural belief systems, and cultural heritage.

### **3.4. Broadens Global Perspective**

The relevance of social studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that it contributes to broadening one's global perspective. Since the social studies subject does not only focus in the Philippines but also in

other neighboring countries, it gives the impression to the learners that they need to think globally, not just locally. This is manifested in the subject's different topics, including Asian studies, world history, economics, and the current trends and issues in the contemporary world. Therefore, social studies is an essential element in developing learners who are globally ready and globally conscious. A male participant shared, "social studies provides awareness on the different events that are happening not only in the country but also in the different parts of the world (P20)." This implies that people are becoming more aware of the global issues and trends through social studies and influence them to take action and take part in the different global movements. In this way, the people uphold the traits of being global citizens.

Previous studies revealed that social studies could develop global citizenship through various pedagogical strategies such as critical media literacy (Harshman, 2018), videoconferencing (Krutka & Carano, 2016), and critical knowledge (Myers & Rivero, 2020). Moreover, due to the nature of the progressively different and universal 21<sup>st</sup> century society in which the students live, it is pivotal to enhance and develop students' global citizenship capabilities (Holmes, 2019).

### 3.5. Promotes Values Formation

Social Studies likewise promotes values formation in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Learners can learn the past lessons and process these values towards contributing to the nation's greatness. As claimed by one participant, "social studies is still relevant today because we learn to appreciate our value system as Filipinos and apply these values in our lives (P5, Female)." This implies how critical social studies in cultivating the Filipino values such as *malasakit* (empathy, sympathy, compassion), *utang na loob* (norm of reciprocity), *lakas ng loob* (courage), *pakikisalamuha* (act of mixing), and *pakikisama* (being united with the group), among others.

Another participant (P24, male) also stated that social studies teaches people to be more responsible members of society. This bespeaks the role of social studies to develop responsible, law-abiding and community-oriented individuals.

Norms, values, and behaviors change in a given society (Valeeva et al., 2016). With social studies, these values could be preserved and further embodied by the people despite the changing times brought about by the new industrial era and age of digitalization.

In summary, the social studies subject is very relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century landscape as reflected in the students' perspectives. The researchers crystallized a conceptual framework that shows the relevance of social studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society based on the study results.

Figure 1 shows the extracted themes from the interview transcripts on the relevance of social studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. Social studies encourages community participation, enhances critical and creative thinking, fosters cultural sensitivity, promotes values formation, and broadens global perspective. It can be deduced that the relevance of social studies in the current era is undeniably present.

Figure 1  
Relevance Social Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Society



Several studies conform to the results of this qualitative inquiry. Nwankwo (2016) studied the role of social studies as an antidote against corrupt practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unimna & Ameh (2018) reiterated that the knowledge of Social Studies promotes economic development and national progress to brace the 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges. Social studies is relevant to society because it helps students learn about societal values and different cultures (Kudawe et al., 2020) and contributes to developing a good societal value system (Eduviere, 2018).

The crystallized conceptual framework may inform the curriculum developers and education policymakers on the relevance of social studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

#### 4. Conclusions

The study explored the students' perspectives on the relevance of social studies subject in the 21<sup>st</sup> century milieu. Based on the findings, social studies remains a relevant discipline in 21<sup>st</sup> century society as it encourages community participation, enhances critical and creative thinking, fosters cultural sensitivity, broadens global perspective, and promotes values formation. Moreover, participants claimed that social studies promotes cultural heritage, fosters economic efficiency, serves as a source of meaningful information and brings people back to the past. The study also revealed positive contributions of the subject to societal development, cultural preservation, values regeneration, and civic participation.

The study has important implications for policy and pedagogy. First, the study recommends that teachers should enhance their technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) in Social Studies to keep abreast with the demands of 21<sup>st</sup>- century society. Second, teachers are encouraged to make the teaching of Social Studies contextualized, indigenized, and localized to make it responsive and relevant in the current setting. Third, social studies students may be given authentic learning experiences in the social studies classrooms to be equipped with the foundational knowledge and technical know-how in the 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace.

A series of capability-building activities may be crafted for the students to sustain their positive perspective on the relevance of social studies in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. The said program may highlight workshops, forums, and outdoor activities that can broaden their global perspective, encourage their involvement in community affairs, enhance their way of thinking, enhance their disposition and foster cultural consciousness.

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