



DOES TEACHERS' INTEREST AFFECT THE FREQUENCY OF TEACHING AND LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM IN EARLY SOCIAL STUDIES?

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Abstract/Izvleček

The article presents the findings of a study aimed at determining whether teachers' personal interests and other factors influence the implementation of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies within primary education. A convergent mixed-method research design was employed. The results indicate that, in practice, teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies is implemented less frequently than would be expected based on the didactic guidelines for early social studies instruction. Most teachers conduct such lessons only once a month or less. Teachers' personal interests emerged as a significant factor influencing the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom.

Ali učiteljev interes vpliva na pogostost izvajanja pouka izven učilnice pri začetnem družboslovju?

V članku so predstavljene ugotovitve raziskave, katere namen je bil ugotoviti, ali učiteljev interes in drugi dejavniki vplivajo na uveljavljanje pouka izven učilnice pri začetnem družboslovju v osnovnošolskem izobraževanju. Uporabljen je bil konvergentni model kombiniranega raziskovalnega pristopa. Rezultati kažejo, da se pouk izven učilnice pri začetnem družboslovju v praksi izvaja manj pogosto, kot bi bilo za pričakovati glede na didaktične smernice poučevanja začetnega družboslovja, saj večina učiteljev izvaja pouk izven učilnice le enkrat na mesec ali redkeje. Učiteljev osebni interes se je izkazal kot pomemben dejavnik, ki vpliva na pogostost izvajanja pouka izven učilnice.

Keywords:

primary Education,
Social Studies,
Experiential Learning,
Teaching and Learning
outside the classroom,
convergent mixed
methods approach.

Ključne besede:

osnovna šola,
družboslovje, izkustveno
učenje, pouk izven
učilnice, konvergentni
model kombiniranega
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Introduction

In the early years of primary education, social studies in Slovenia is taught through two subjects: Spoznavanje okolja (Environmental Studies), taught in grades 1 through 3, and Družba (Social Studies), taught in grades 4 and 5. Based on didactic recommendations from both curricula (Budnar et al., 2011; Kolar et al., 2011) as well as academic and professional literature on social studies teaching methodology (Ellis, 2007; Grant and VanSledright, 2021; Maxim, 2018; Seefeldt and Galper, 2005), it is recommended that both subjects include teaching and learning outside the classroom as an experiential component of instruction. Based on findings from prior research (Jančič Hegediš and Hus, 2017, 2019; Korban Črnjavič and Hus, 2009), it can be assumed that teaching and learning outside the classroom in Environmental Studies and Social Studies is rarely implemented in Slovenian primary schools. Research on the frequency of such instructional practices at the primary level consistently shows that teachers tend to associate teaching and learning outside the classroom primarily with physical education and science. At the same time, its integration into social studies remains limited (Gosenar and Cencič, 2019). In 2019, an expert group comprising Novak, Skribe Dimec, Krajnc Urbanija, Legvart, and Trampuž reviewed the Environmental Studies curriculum. In their Report on the Analysis of the Environmental Studies Curriculum (Novak et al., 2020), they proposed that the curriculum should more explicitly and systematically integrate teaching and learning outside the classroom, recommending that one-third of total instructional hours for the subject be conducted in teaching and learning outside classroom settings. Likewise, the expert group evaluating the Social Studies curriculum, in their Summary of Reports from Curriculum Review Groups for Primary and Secondary Schools (Povzetek poročil skupin za analizo učnih načrtov v osnovni šoli in gimnaziji, 2021) emphasized the need to incorporate a variety of didactic approaches and to promote active learning both inside and outside the classroom.

The purpose of the present study was to determine whether teachers' personal interests and other factors influence the implementation of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies within primary education.

We were interested in the following:

Did teachers implement teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies during the 2023/2024 school year as frequently as they had planned at the beginning of the school year?

How many times did teachers implement teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies during the 2023/2024 school year?

How many class hours do teachers typically allocate for a single implementation of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies?

Is teachers' interest in teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies related to the frequency of its implementation?

According to teachers and principals, which factors most strongly influence the planning of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies?

Teaching and learning outside the classroom

In the English-language references, various terms are used to describe teaching and learning outside the classroom, including:

- *learning outside the classroom* (Beames et al., 2012; Sedgwick, 2012; Waite, 2011),
- *out-of-classroom learning* (Nundy et al., 2020),
- *learning in natural environments* (Edwards-Jones et al., 2018), and
- *teaching and learning outside the classroom education* (Allison, 2020; Borsos et al., 2022; Jirasek and Turčova, 2020; Porter, 2018; Quay, 2020; Sedgwick, 2012; White, 2020).

The last term, teaching and learning outside the classroom education, is predominantly used in the context of science-related content and topics connected to the natural environment.

In this article, we use the term teaching and learning outside the classroom to refer to teaching and learning that occur beyond the traditional classroom setting and include elements of experiential learning.

Spending time outside the classroom and engaging in play within authentic environments are essential for the holistic development of students. The use of teaching and learning outside classroom learning environments has been shown to significantly impact students' academic achievement (Chawla, 2015; Kuo et al., 2019). The knowledge acquired in such contexts tends to be more lasting and meaningful (Mannion et al., 2013, Korošet et. Al., 2009). Research indicates that teaching and learning outside the classroom positively influences students' cognitive, physical, and emotional development by facilitating the attainment of learning objectives in unique educational settings (Acar, 2014; Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Djonko-Moore and Joseph, 2016).

Authors further note that this approach enhances students' self-confidence, collaboration skills, and motivation to learn and contributes to their mental well-being. Behavioural changes have also been observed in students who regularly participate in such learning experiences (Mann et al., 2022). Well-designed teaching and learning that engages and motivates students is less likely to result in classroom management issues (Pšunder, 2004).

Methodology

A convergent mixed methods design was used in the study to ensure a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to cross-sectional data collection. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data collection are equally important, conducted independently, and may occur concurrently (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). Within the quantitative approach, a descriptive and causal-non-experimental method of empirical educational research was applied. As part of the qualitative approach, data were collected through focus group discussions with teachers and interviews with school leadership staff from the participating schools.

Research purpose

This study aimed to examine the frequency of implementing teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies education and to identify the barriers associated with its implementation. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate how often teachers implement teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies, how teachers' attitudes toward this approach are related to its frequency, which factors most influence the planning of such teaching, and what barriers and limitations are encountered by teachers and school leadership staff during its implementation.

Sample

For the quantitative part of the study, 309 primary school teachers from Slovenia were included in the research sample, using stratified random sampling. Sampling was conducted at the primary school level, and the number of teachers in the sample was proportionally distributed according to the share of schools in individual statistical regions, ensuring balanced regional representation and overall sample representativeness.

The highest proportion of participating teachers taught the 2nd grade (22.0%), followed by 5th grade (21.7%), 1st grade (20.1%), 3rd grade (18.4%), and 4th grade (17.8%). Regarding school location, 48.5% of teachers work in urban areas, 35.6% in rural areas, and 15.9% in suburban areas.

Regarding professional titles, most teachers held the title mentor (44.0%). Most respondents had more than 21 years of teaching experience (44.0%), while the fewest had between 11 and 20 years (25.9%).

In the qualitative part of the study, the sample for the focus groups with primary school teachers and the interviews with school leadership staff was drawn from the same schools included in the quantitative phase. The focus groups involved six primary education teachers, and five interviews were conducted with school principals.

Instrument

We used a teacher questionnaire, a focus group with primary school teachers, and interviews with school leadership staff. The questionnaire measuring the frequency of implementing teaching and learning outside the classroom, as well as the influence of teachers' attitudes and other factors affecting planning, was developed based on a review of relevant literature and current theoretical frameworks related to outdoor and experiential learning in early social studies. The focus group for primary school teachers and the interviews with principals were designed as qualitative research instruments aimed at an in-depth examination of teachers' and principals' attitudes, experiences, and practices related to teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies.

Measurement Characteristics of the Instruments

The validity of the questionnaire was ensured through expert evaluation. Two specialists—one in social studies didactics and the other in statistical sciences—assessed the questionnaire, focus group, and interview questions. Before implementation, the questionnaire was pilot-tested and thereby empirically validated. As part of the pilot testing, we received feedback regarding the clarity of the questions, the time required to complete the questionnaire, the content's relevance to the research questions, and the technical aspects of the online format on 1ka. Based on the results, we revised certain questions and appropriately adapted the instruments to ensure their clarity and consistent interpretation among participants.

Reliability was ensured by carefully constructing unambiguous and specific questions, accompanied by clear and precise instructions for all three instruments. The reliability of the section of the questionnaire assessing teachers' attitudes was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (α). For the set of twelve statements measuring teachers' attitudes, the coefficient was 0.834, indicating good internal consistency. These attitude measures were the basis for conducting factor and subsequent regression analyses.

The objectivity of the questionnaire was supported using online (individual) data collection without the presence of an evaluator. The questions were phrased in a neutral manner to reduce the risk of suggestive influence, and the instructions provided were explicit and unambiguous. Likewise, in both the focus groups and interviews, the interviewer refrained from providing any feedback that might influence participants' responses.

Data collection

The data were collected using an online surveying tool, as well as through focus groups and interviews.

Data Analysis Methods

Before the analysis, the collected data were appropriately prepared, which included data screening and cleaning. The data were then processed for statistical analysis using suitable software tools: SPSS for the quantitative part and Atlas.ti for the qualitative part of the study.

In the quantitative part, the data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The following statistical methods were applied:

Frequency distributions (f , $f\%$).

Chi-square test (χ^2) to examine the associations between two nominal variables.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare arithmetic means across independent variables. First, Levene's F test was performed to assess the homogeneity of variances. If the variances were homogeneous ($p > 0.05$), the F -test (ANOVA) assuming equal variances was applied. When the assumption of homogeneity was not met ($p < 0.05$), Welch's test was used instead.

Factor analysis was conducted to explore teachers' attitudes towards planning, implementation, and evaluation of early social studies teaching and learning outside the classroom.

Regression analysis was used to examine the relationships between independent and dependent variables.

In the qualitative part of the study, data were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Flick, 2018; Gibbs, 2018). Qualitative data obtained from focus groups and interviews were triangulated with the quantitative data from the questionnaire. This triangulation approach enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem by allowing separate data sources to complement and reinforce each other, thereby strengthening the validity of the study's conclusions.

Results with Interpretation

Frequency of Teaching and Learning Outside the Classroom

In the first question regarding the implementation of teaching and learning outside the classroom, we were interested in whether teachers conducted such lessons as frequently as planned at the beginning of the school year.

The results show that half the teachers (52.1%) conducted teaching and learning outside the classroom as frequently as they had planned at the beginning of the school year. A good third of the teachers (35.3%) conducted such lessons less frequently than planned, and 12.6% of teachers reported that they conducted them more frequently than initially planned.

To determine statistically significant differences between groups based on grade level, school environment, professional title, and years of teaching experience, we used the χ^2 test. The test revealed no statistically significant differences among teachers based on grade level, professional title, or years of teaching. However, statistically significant differences were found regarding the environment ($p = 0.041$) where the primary school was located. The results indicate that the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom corresponded more closely to the initial plans for teachers working in suburban areas. In contrast, teachers from rural areas taught and learned outside the classroom less frequently than planned at the beginning of the school year.

In the next section, we were interested in how frequently teachers had conducted teaching and learning in early social studies during the past school year (2023/2024).

The results show that most surveyed teachers had conducted teaching and learning in early social studies once a month or less during the 2023/2024 school year. This was followed by teachers (16.8%) who had conducted such lessons twice a year or less. The fewest teachers (11.7%) had conducted teaching and learning outside the classroom once a week or more frequently.

No statistically significant differences were found among teachers based on grade level, school environment, or years of teaching experience. However, a statistically significant difference was found with regard to professional title: counsellors and senior counsellors conducted teaching and learning outside the classroom more frequently than teachers without a title. Similar results regarding the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom for the broader subject of Environmental Studies (not limited to social studies content) were found in a 2016 study, which concluded that teachers most often conducted lessons outside the classroom once a month (Korban Črnjavič, 2016).

All principals interviewed in our study agreed that teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies is implemented too rarely, a concern they explicitly expressed. One principal added that the school actively encourages teaching and learning outside the classroom, but its implementation depends on individual teachers.

We were also interested in how many school hours teachers typically allocate for a single instance of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies. The results show that half the teachers (50.5%) dedicate two school hours (90 minutes) per session. A total of 24.3% allocate one school hour or less. Teachers who dedicate four hours or more account for 13.9%, while the fewest teachers (11.3%) allocate three school hours per session. Further analyses revealed no statistically significant differences among teachers based on grade level, school environment, professional title, or years of teaching experience.

The impact of teachers' interest on the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom

To determine the influence of teachers' attitudes on the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies, it was first necessary to conduct a factor analysis of teachers' attitudes. The attitudes themselves are not presented in detail in this article. However, they are mentioned here because we used the corresponding statements to calculate two dimensions: the teacher's interest in teaching and learning outside the classroom dimension and the perceived outcomes

of teaching and learning outside the classroom dimension. These were computed as the average values of the variables that belong to each factor.

The outcomes dimension received a significantly higher average score ($M = 4.15$) than the interest dimension ($M = 3.69$). This suggests that teachers are aware of the benefits of teaching and learning outside the classroom for their students and their professional development but are less motivated to implement it in practice.

To examine the effect of teachers' attitudes on the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom, a new numerical variable was created: the frequency of early social studies lessons conducted outside the classroom. This frequency was calculated based on two survey questions—one regarding how often teachers conduct early social studies outside the classroom and the other about the hours typically devoted to a single such session. Response values were standardized and multiplied to obtain an annual number of hours. This resulted in a numerical indicator representing the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies, measured in hours. The results show that, on average, teachers dedicate approximately 25 hours per year ($M = 24.59$) to such teaching. The significant standard deviation indicates considerable variation among teachers. One-third (33.7%) of them reported only up to 10 hours per year, just over a third (35.9%) reported between 11 and 20 hours, and slightly less than a third (30.4%) reported more than 20 hours annually.

We then performed a regression analysis to assess the role of teachers' attitudes toward teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies in predicting its frequency. As independent variables, we included the two attitude dimensions—interest and perceived outcomes—and two statements related to perceived support from school leadership and collaboration with external experts.

Table 1

The role of teachers' attitudes in the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies – results of the regression analysis

	Unstandardized beta	Standardized Beta	p	VIF
constant	-21.81		0.028	
interest dimension	9.37	0.29	<0.001	1.54
outcomes dimension	1.31	0.03	0.638	1.62
support from school leadership enables more frequent implementation of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies	0.92	0.04	0.530	1.17

collaboration with external experts is important in planning and implementing teaching and learning outside the classroom	0.92	0.04	0.542	1.19
adjusted R-squared	0.093			

As shown in Table 1, only the interest dimension plays a significant role in teachers' implementation of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies. A positive and statistically significant beta coefficient was confirmed for this dimension ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that teachers who are personally interested in conducting such lessons are more likely to do so. In contrast, their perception of student benefits, support from school leadership and collaboration with external experts do not significantly influence their decision to implement teaching and learning outside the classroom ($p > 0.05$). A study on the influence of teachers' values on teaching and learning outside the classroom also found that personal values strongly affect the implementation of teaching outside the classroom (Waite, 2011).

Teachers in the focus group emphasized the importance of personal interest, regardless of organizational or content-related challenges. One participant stated: *"I still think, you know, even though it's not always possible, if you really want to, you can find a few opportunities during the year. If you truly want to, of course."* Another teacher added: *"We really try—I think most of us want to do more outside the classroom."*

One of the interviewed principals noted: *"The main obstacles are mostly that teachers see teaching and learning outside the classroom lessons as the extra effort they would rather avoid."* According to the principals, this is partly because teaching and learning outside the classroom is only recommended in the curriculum and is therefore not mandatory for teachers. The teachers in the focus group also highlighted the role of individual interest. Although they held positive views about teaching and learning outside the classroom, one participant pointed out a generational difference, particularly in her experience with younger colleagues, whose attitudes she perceived as different. Two other teachers mentioned peer pressure as a barrier—especially from colleagues teaching in parallel classes who prefer more traditional forms of instruction. Resistance from colleagues was also identified as a barrier to teaching and learning outside the classroom by Šebjanič and Skribe Dimec (2019).

Factors Influencing the Planning of Teaching and Learning Outside the Classroom

In the questionnaire, teachers were presented with thirteen factors that might influence the planning of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies. For each factor, they were asked to indicate how much it affected their planning on a scale from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important).

The results show that teachers ranked colleagues' availability for student supervision as the most influential factor ($M = 4.47$). Principals interviewed in the study also identified supervision as one of the significant challenges in organizing teaching and learning outside the classroom. They agreed that they were responsible for assigning accompanying staff for such lessons. While some principals reported no issues assigning staff, others noted a lack of available teachers. They consider assigning supervisors a key step in ensuring student safety and support during teaching and learning outside classroom activities.

"One of the biggest obstacles is the lack of teachers, which also affects the organization of accompanying staff. The regulations make it difficult to assign a teacher who can supervise students for an entire morning without missing scheduled classes."

Teachers in the focus groups repeatedly emphasized difficulties related to supervision:

"Supervision is always an issue—first and foremost. I have to say that we are running very tight in schools. We're all overloaded, we have increased workloads, and it's really difficult to additionally burden those already working in after-school care. It's definitely a problem."

According to the questionnaire data, the number of students in the class ($M = 4.39$) and the location of the lesson ($M = 4.39$) also significantly influence planning. Both were rated as important or very important by the majority of teachers. Fourth in rank was the factor of student characteristics ($M = 4.27$), followed closely by time available in the schedule ($M = 4.24$).

Statistically significant differences between teachers based on grade level were found for the factor cost of implementation ($p = 0.015$), which ranked sixth in overall importance. Teachers of fifth-grade classes rated this factor significantly higher ($M = 4.22$) compared to teachers of first ($M = 3.69$) and second grades ($M = 3.99$). Principals emphasized that high transportation costs and entrance fees greatly limit the feasibility of teaching and learning outside the classroom. They noted that parents cover most expenses. One teacher in the focus group stated:

"Now we must always ask parents' permission—whether they will fund it. It is not a huge cost, just a few euros, but still."

These costs typically include transportation, admission fees, and other direct expenses related to teaching and learning outside the classroom.

Štemberger (2012) also identified additional financial burdens as barriers to implementing teaching and learning outside the classroom. According to principals, funds for teaching and learning outside the classroom are often drawn from school funds, which are supported through voluntary contributions, donations, and various project-based grants. This was confirmed by teachers in the focus groups, who also noted that they try to obtain as much donor funding as possible. The lack of systemic funding for such activities frequently discourages teachers from organizing teaching and learning outside the classroom lessons.

Ranked fourth in importance was the factor of student characteristics ($M = 4.27$). Focus group participants agreed that implementing teaching and learning outside the classroom is heavily influenced by the specific needs of their students, which can present challenges in planning and execution. One teacher shared: *"It depends on the specific challenges you are dealing with. This year, I have a child with ADHD and autism, and I don't really dare go outside every day."* Two other teachers reported having students in wheelchairs in the past. They explained that they often had to improvise or adapt quickly to find suitable solutions. Some teachers felt left alone, as systemic support was lacking. Despite these challenges, they expressed willingness to find appropriate solutions through adaptations and collaboration.

In fifth place was the factor availability of time in the schedule ($M = 4.24$). Teachers in the focus groups also emphasized time constraints. One participant said:

"Above all, time—as has already been mentioned. Preparing for teaching and learning outside the classroom lessons requires much more effort than traditional classroom teaching. And that is probably why teaching and learning outside the classroom lessons aren't that frequent."

Another added that she often runs out of time for reflection and assessment. As noted earlier, half the surveyed teachers reported that they would dedicate more time to teaching and learning outside classroom teaching if they had more time for planning. Previous studies identified time constraints as a barrier to implementing teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies (Cengeli, 2013). The factors identified as significant in implementing teaching and learning outside classroom teaching in early social studies point to a complex interplay of organizational, systemic, and personal elements. International authors conducting reviews of research on teaching and learning outside classroom teaching have also found that we still lack a complete understanding of the barriers teachers face.

Moreover, there are still no clear strategies or solutions for overcoming these barriers to ensure more frequent implementation of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies (Patchen et al., 2024).

Conclusion

The study found that teachers' interest significantly affects the frequency of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies. Therefore, we recommend that future primary school teachers become familiar with teaching and learning outside the classroom practices during their university studies, including within regular course content.

It would also be meaningful for practising teachers to dedicate a thematic session within professional learning communities to sharing best practices in teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies. Such exchanges could empower teachers and increase the visibility of those who successfully implement teaching and learning outside classroom lessons, which might, in turn, help foster greater interest among their colleagues.

Concerning the organizational and systemic barriers identified in the study, we propose that teaching and learning outside the classroom be formally integrated into national curricula with clearly defined minimum annual implementation standards. At present, it is mentioned only as a didactic recommendation. However, considering the current situation and supervision requirements for teaching and learning outside classroom activities, the most significant challenge remains the provision of adequate adult supervision. This issue could be partially addressed by scheduling some teaching and learning outside-the-classroom lessons in advance, even before the school year begins. If the main difficulty lies in escorting students from the school to the final location—where an external expert is involved in the lesson—a potential solution could be establishing a volunteer network to assist with student supervision en route.

Regarding the funding of teaching and learning outside the classroom, which is currently covered mainly by parents or through school funds, the government must ensure stable and sufficient dedicated funding. Teaching and learning outside the classroom are a regular and integral part of the curriculum, and the many associated benefits for students should motivate policymakers to secure continued access to these learning opportunities throughout primary education.

Finally, we would like to add limitations of the research that we identified. Although a stratified random sample of 309 teachers was used, uneven distribution across grade levels and professional titles may limit the generalizability of the findings. A broader and more balanced sample could improve representativeness. Furthermore, the regression model shows additional variables influencing teaching and learning outside the classroom practices that were not captured. A further longitudinal study could clarify the relationships better. In the future, it would be useful to upgrade this research, considering these limitations, which could enhance the validity and depth of understanding of teaching and learning outside the classroom in early social studies.

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