



Teachers' Perceptions of the Curriculum Changes: The Case of the New Social Studies Curriculum in Northern Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine how social studies teachers in Iraq's Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok regions interpret and respond to the newly implemented social studies curriculum. The study was designed using a case study approach within qualitative research methods. Twenty teachers working in public schools in Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Erbil participated in the research. Using semi-structured interviews, the research examines the motivations behind reform efforts, theoretical foundations of curriculum objectives, challenges encountered during development and implementation, and educators' perspectives on anticipated outcomes. The findings provide important insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to improve social studies education to develop civically engaged and socially aware students who can navigate diversity and contribute to community development. Several key patterns emerged, including the multiple ways teachers learned about the new curriculum, their opinions on syllabus and textbook clarity, their understanding of core curriculum goals, their comparisons between former and current curricula, and their views on essential student learning outcomes. The study highlights the complexity of curriculum reform and the need for clear communication, comprehensive educational materials, and an integrated, analytical approach to social studies education. These insights can inform future curriculum revisions, guide teacher development programs, and affect policies aimed at strengthening social studies instruction.

KEYWORDS

Social studies curriculum; curriculum reform; teacher perceptions;
Iraqi education.

INTRODUCTION

Educational systems worldwide are experiencing major transformations through curriculum reform to meet the changing demands of contemporary society. Social studies play a particularly crucial role in this process, as it is tasked with cultivating informed and active citizens who comprehend sociocultural dynamics and geopolitical contexts (Journell, 2019). According to Journell (2019), the effectiveness of civic engagement largely depends on how effectively curriculum content and teaching methods respond to evolving social and political conditions. This adaptation demands thoughtful attention to current societal issues and student needs (Al Salami et al., 2017).

The Iraqi education system is currently implementing comprehensive reforms in key subject areas, particularly social studies, history, civics, and geography education (Wang et al., 2016). These disciplines are fundamental to shaping student identity, developing value systems, and promoting active engagement in civil society (Biesta et al., 2009). However, Zajda (2009) emphasizes that the effective implementation of curriculum goals depends on equitable resource allocation, strengthened teacher capacity, efficient administrative management, and strong assessment mechanisms. Therefore, understanding educators' experiences during this reform process offers essential insights for guiding improvements.

This study examines how social studies teachers in three Iraqi regions—Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok—perceive and implement recent educational reforms. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, the research examines the motivations driving reform, the theoretical foundations of curriculum objectives, challenges in implementation, and expected outcomes. The findings provide important insights for education policymakers and practitioners aiming to strengthen social studies education and foster socially aware, civically active citizens (Journell, 2019). The field of social studies integrates several academic disciplines, including history, law, sociology, geography, political science, and economics (Zarrillo, 2016). This multidisciplinary framework is designed to help students identify core human commonalities despite apparent differences (Ladson-Billings, 2003). According to Ladson-Billings (2003), social studies education also fosters key skills such as empathy, tolerance, and conflict resolution, which are essential for ethical citizenship and active participation in society. However, developing global citizenship requires more than delivering subject content alone (Hanvey, 1975; Merryfield & Kasai, 2004). Hanvey (1975) emphasizes the need to adapt curricula to students' specific historical, cultural, economic, and political contexts. Such localization increases educational relevance and promotes student engagement (Lam, 2015). At the same time, Merryfield and Kasai (2004) stress the importance of incorporating global perspectives, international issues, and cross-cultural understanding into the learning experience. Striking a balance between local relevance and global awareness remains a major challenge in global education reform in social studies (Misco & Shiveley, 2007). In Iraq, curriculum improvements aim to address current civic issues while promoting multicultural understanding (Wang et al., 2016). Wang et al. (2016) documents the increasing use of interactive teaching strategies, such

as peer discussions, role-playing, and collaborative projects. Zajda (2009) emphasizes that effective implementation depends on equipping educators with targeted training and providing students with modern, interactive learning materials that reflect real-world complexity. The Iraqi educational system requires comprehensive reform and improvement of its social studies curriculum to prepare students with the skills needed for active citizenship in today's complex world. Achieving these curricular objectives relies heavily on four key factors: equitable distribution of educational resources, teacher competence and training, effective administrative supervision, and strong assessment systems (Chimbunde & Moreeng, 2024; Mohammed-Marzouk, 2012). Within this framework, several critical issues have surfaced that demand in-depth examination: Insufficient comprehension of the practical experiences of educators who are implementing curriculum changes at the classroom level in Iraq.

This study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of how social studies teachers in Iraq's Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok regions perceive and implement educational reforms. It also examines the driving forces, theoretical frameworks, implementation challenges, and levels of optimism surrounding social studies curriculum reform efforts. Additionally, the study seeks to provide practical recommendations for policymakers and educators working to improve social studies education in Iraq.

This research addresses a key knowledge gap by conducting focused qualitative interviews on social studies curriculum reform in Iraq. The findings offer valuable insights for improving social studies education through culturally relevant and ethically sound approaches that enhance student engagement and community involvement. The study provides policymakers with firsthand perspectives from educators actively implementing reforms, supporting more informed decision-making. It also underscores the crucial need for ongoing professional development and adequate resources to help educators meet curriculum goals related to civic engagement and participatory skills. In terms of limitations, the study is confined to the 2022–2023 academic year, limited geographically to the Iraqi cities of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok, and focused on social studies teachers in the third cycle of basic education schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education systems are fundamentally anchored in their curricula, which provide the essential framework for teaching and learning processes. An effective curriculum reflects community values and needs, offers relevant educational content, and applies evidence-based instructional strategies (Tyler, 2013). In Iraq's Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok regions, recent educational reform efforts have prioritized enhancing both the quality and relevance of instruction. These reforms include the implementation of updated curricula for the third stage of basic education, targeting students aged 13 to 15 in grades 7–9. This analysis examines the key components and theoretical foundations of the revised social studies curriculum at this level, drawing on insights from academic literature.

Social studies is a multifaceted academic discipline that examines the complexities of human societies, social interactions, civic responsibility, and historical development. Barr et al. (1977) define the field as an investigation into human relationships across diverse contexts, including family units, workplaces, communities, and national settings. The primary aim of social studies education is to cultivate informed and responsible citizenship (Dubey & Barth, 1980). Drawing from disciplines such as history, geography, economics, and civic education, social studies integrate diverse methodologies to foster constructive behaviors and socially conscious attitudes. The curriculum's broad scope reflects the interconnected nature of these domains in modern society, with its content and skill development intentionally designed to support wider societal goals (Ross, 2006).

Leading curriculum theorists such as Tyler (2013), Nicholls and Nicholls (2018), and Taba (1962) outline essential stages in curriculum development, including needs assessment, objective formulation, content selection, instructional strategy development, resource management, and evaluation protocols. Danladi (2005) conceptualizes these components as part of an integrated system rooted in the cultural values of society. Need assessment identifies gaps and challenges within existing curricula from both student and societal perspectives, informing the formulation of objectives that reflect community priorities (Danladi, 2005). Content selection involves careful consideration of themes, topics, and materials that align with these objectives. Pedagogical planning addresses instructional methods, technology use, and learning activities tailored to subject matter and student requirements. Resource planning covers human expertise, material resources, and infrastructure necessary for effective instruction. Evaluation measures the attainment of learning objectives and the overall success of the curriculum (Tyler, 2013), ensuring it remains responsive to evolving demands. In addition to these foundational models, modern curriculum theories offer deeper insights into the curriculum's broader role. The curriculum-as-text perspective by Pinar et al. (1995) frames the curriculum as a vehicle for constructing identity, culture, and narrative. Similarly, Schwab (1973) describes curriculum development as a dynamic interaction among teacher, student, and content. These perspectives underscore that the social studies curriculum functions not only as a means of conveying knowledge but also as a cultural mediator within the educational context.

In 2009, the Ministry of Education of Iraq's Erbil Regional Government launched comprehensive reforms to establish a student-centered basic education framework. This reorganization grouped students aged 6–15 into three developmental cycles covering grades 1–9 (MoE, 2009). Social studies were given particular priority as a key subject for reinforcing cultural identity and value systems. The revised third-cycle social studies curriculum integrates history and geography to promote citizenship awareness, analytical thinking, and national identity. It engages students in broad historical studies, from ancient civilizations to Islamic dynasties, while also addressing contemporary issues through a structured progression designed to build analytical and civic engagement skills. This approach aligns with UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (GCED) framework, which aims to instill universal values,

intercultural understanding, and peaceful coexistence. Similarly, the OECD Learning Compass 2030 model highlights the integration of values and attitudes alongside knowledge and skills in education. Iraq's updated social studies curriculum reflects these global objectives by preparing students to be informed and responsible citizens at both local and international levels. The seventh-grade curriculum provides a foundation in ancient history, covering the prehistoric era through the Egyptian civilization in the first semester, followed by key geographical concepts such as cartography, Earth's structure, and human settlement patterns in the second semester (MoE, 2022). The eighth-grade curriculum builds on this foundation by incorporating global historical and geographical perspectives. The first semester traces the development of Islamic history from the prophetic period to the Abbasid era, including regional events in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok. The second semester explores global geography, focusing on the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa. In ninth grade, the curriculum brings students back to their regional roots, emphasizing the historical evolution, cultural traditions, and geographic features of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok. This spiral curriculum design reflects Tyler's (2013) principles of educational continuity and reinforcement. The Ministry of Education (2022) adopts a diverse instructional approach in social studies education, integrating narrative techniques, cartographic tools, visual materials, experiential learning, and analytical tasks. Assessment methods include traditional exams, formative knowledge checks, student presentations, and peer evaluations. Despite the curriculum's strong theoretical foundation, researchers have identified challenges related to teacher preparedness, limited resources, and insufficient oversight (Danladi, 2005; Okam, 2002). Effective implementation requires improved teacher training, broader access to digital resources, and more robust evaluation systems. Beyond knowledge transmission, the social studies curriculum plays a critical role in fostering reflective and socially aware individuals. Freire (1970) emphasizes that education should empower students to become active thinkers rather than passive recipients. From this perspective, social studies should not only teach historical content but also encourage students to critically examine contemporary social issues and develop solutions. Moreover, the curriculum's focus on regional history and culture is closely tied to nation-building efforts, serving as a bridge between regional identity and national consciousness. In conclusion, this literature analysis positions social studies as a progressive curricular field that integrates diverse disciplinary knowledge to strengthen citizenship competencies. It examines key stages of curriculum development, including needs assessment, objective formulation, content selection, instructional strategies, resource distribution, and evaluation practices. The analysis offers a detailed overview of the current state of social studies education for grades 7–9 in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok, showing a deliberate alignment between curricular goals and regional societal needs. These cities were selected due to notable structural and functional differences in educational governance between the central government and the Northern Iraq Regional Government. While areas such as teacher training, digital resource availability, and assessment strategies require further improvement, the overall direction reflects meaningful

progress toward a student-centered social studies curriculum that promotes critical thinking, cultural understanding, and civil participation. The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives of teachers on the newly implemented social studies curriculum in the Iraqi cities of Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Erbil. In this context, the study aims to answer the following research question:

What are the views of social studies teachers in Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Erbil on the new social studies curriculum?

METHODOLOGY

This research was designed as a case study within the framework of qualitative research. Curriculum implementers were asked how the new social studies curriculum introduced in Sulaymaniyah, Duhok, and Erbil is currently perceived, what challenges have emerged, and what improvements they would suggest. A case study is a research method that seeks to examine a specific “case”—such as an event, individual, group, institution, program, or practice—within its real-life context and in depth (Merriam, 2009). The study followed this design by gathering insights from teachers, the key implementers of the curriculum, regarding the curriculum’s functionality, its similarities and differences compared to the previous version, its core principles, and its advantages and disadvantages in terms of teaching and learning during the implementation process.

Design

The structure of this questionnaire is grounded in qualitative research methodology, which is valued for its ability to uncover complex insights and capture the nuanced, context-specific perspectives of participants, particularly in educational contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The use of semi-structured interviews is intentional; as noted by Patton (2014), such interviews ensure methodological consistency and reliability, particularly when collecting data from a diverse range of participants. This design emphasizes rigorous data collection with the goal of achieving a comprehensive understanding of educators' experiences and perceptions of the new social studies curriculum.

Participations

The research population consists of all social studies teachers in the third cycle of basic education within the defined study area. A purposive sample of 20 teachers was selected from this larger group. The selection criteria were comprehensive, prioritizing diversity in gender, teaching experience, academic background, the number of social studies classes taught in the current academic year, and the specific governorate where each teacher is employed.

Participants (coded as f1 to f20) were drawn from three major cities in Iraq: Erbil (f1–f7), Sulaymaniyah (f8–f14), and Duhok (f15–f20). To ensure confidentiality while maintaining clarity in data presentation, each participant was assigned a unique code. Their demographic and professional profiles are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.*Demographic and Professional Characteristics of Study Participants*

Participant Code	Location	Gender	Teaching Experience	Academic Specialization	Classes Taught
f1	Erbil	Male	1 year	Social Studies	3
f2	Erbil	Female	6-10 years	Social Studies	5
f3	Erbil	Female	2-5 years	History	3
f4	Erbil	Male	6-10 years	Geography	4
f5	Erbil	Male	6-10 years	History	5
f6	Erbil	Female	2-5 years	Geography	4
f7	Erbil	Female	>11 years	Social Studies	6
f8	Sulaymaniyah	Male	>11 years	Social Studies	6
f9	Sulaymaniyah	Female	1 year	Geography	3
f10	Sulaymaniyah	Male	6-10 years	Geography	4
f11	Sulaymaniyah	Female	6-10 years	Social Studies	4
f12	Sulaymaniyah	Female	>11 years	History	6
f13	Sulaymaniyah	Male	2-5 years	Social Studies	3
f14	Sulaymaniyah	Male	>11 years	History	5
f15	Duhok	Male	>11 years	Social Studies	5
f16	Duhok	Female	2-5 years	History	3
f17	Duhok	Male	6-10 years	History	4
f18	Duhok	Female	6-10 years	Geography	3
f19	Duhok	Female	2-5 years	Social Studies	4
f20	Duhok	Male	>11 years	Geography	6

The participant distribution showed balanced representation across key demographic and professional variables. The sample consisted of 10 male and 10 female educators, with teaching experience ranging from first-year teachers to those with over eleven years in the profession. Academic specializations were spread across social studies (eight participants), history (seven participants), and geography (five participants). Teaching loads ranged from 3 to 6 classes per academic year, offering a well-rounded view of varying workload conditions within the educational system.

Data Tools

The development process of the measurement tool used in the research is outlined under the following headings:

Translation and Adaptation

-Source Inspiration: The foundational structure of this questionnaire was adapted from Lee's (2003) study, *An Evaluation of the New Junior Secondary Science Curriculum in Hong Kong*.

-Initial Translation: To suit the target demographic, the questionnaire was carefully translated into Arabic. This step ensured both linguistic clarity and cultural relevance within the context of the Social Studies curriculum in the selected regions.

-Back-Translation Process: In alignment with best practices in cross-cultural research, the Arabic version was back-translated into English by an independent linguist unfamiliar with Lee's original work. This step, as emphasized by Brislin (1970), was essential for validating the accuracy and preserving the original meaning of the translation.

-Refinement and Final Translation: Feedback from the back-translation process informed a revised Arabic version of the questionnaire. This iterative translation ensured that the final instrument was both contextually appropriate and faithful to the original research intent.

Validity and Reliability

- Face Validity (Apparent Honesty): To ensure high research standards, the researcher consulted a panel of experts with extensive knowledge in curriculum design, instructional methods, and educational sciences. The feedback provided by this panel was instrumental in confirming the face validity of the questionnaire. This consultative approach, aligned with the recommendations of Patton (2014), ensured that the instrument was both appropriate for the target audience and effective in measuring the intended constructs. Following this process, the questionnaire was determined to exhibit strong face validity.

- Consistency in Data Collection: Ensuring uniformity in data collection was essential to maintaining the study's validity. To achieve this, the researcher conducted all interviews personally, which helped ensure a consistent line of questioning across participants and minimized potential biases or variations that could arise from involving multiple interviewers. This approach aligns with Yin's (2014) recommendations, which emphasize the importance of consistency in qualitative research. Following data collection, the approach was found to show strong validity through its consistent application.

-Reliability through Comparative Analysis: To enhance the reliability of the questionnaire, a systematic comparative analysis was conducted. Considering the unique characteristics of the research context, aligning the instrument with established measures and prevailing insights in curriculum development was deemed essential. Drawing on the methodology outlined by Denzin et al. (2023), the researcher compared emerging themes and participant responses with the broader academic literature. This process confirmed that the questionnaire demonstrated strong reliability in its alignment with existing scholarly frameworks.

-Test-Retest Reliability: To further assess the reliability of the questionnaire, it was administered to a group of eight social studies teachers. After a two-week interval, the same questionnaire was re-administered to the same participants. This test-retest method is a well-established approach for evaluating the temporal consistency of a research instrument (Carmines & Zeller, 1979). The results of this procedure showed that the scale maintained consistent responses over time, confirming its reliability.

- *Reliability through Triangulation*: To strengthen the reliability of the questionnaire findings, a triangulation approach was employed. As defined by Denzin (1978), triangulation involves the use of multiple methods, sources, or perspectives to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a research phenomenon. In this study, data collected through the questionnaire were cross validated with insights from classroom observations and informal discussions with other educators. This multi-source strategy ensured consistency across different forms of evidence, thereby reinforcing the reliability of the study's conclusions. The triangulation process confirmed strong reliability across the various data sources.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was guided by Lee's (2003) framework, with interview schedules distributed to 20 educators selected from the broader population. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews, allowing for more in-depth and interactive conversations while accommodating the availability of both participants and the researcher. Before the interviews began, participants were fully informed about confidentiality protocols and were given an informed consent form outlining the voluntary nature of their participation and the study's objectives. All participants consented to audio recording, which ensured accuracy in transcription and data analysis. This methodological approach facilitated the collection of rich, authentic responses while upholding ethical research standards and maintaining data integrity throughout the process.

Data Analysis

The analytical process began with the full transcription of all audio-recorded interviews to ensure the accurate capture of participants' responses. The study followed the analytical approach outlined by Smith and Osborn (2015), which was recognized for its flexibility and depth in qualitative research. This framework enabled the systematic coding of transcribed data into thematic components, allowing for the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns and emergent themes across participants' responses. The structured design of this method supported a comprehensive and nuanced examination of the data, making it especially well-suited for research seeking to develop a deep understanding of complex educational issues. During the interpretation phase, the analysis was further strengthened by the careful selection of participant quotations, which validated and illustrated the research findings. Incorporating direct quotes enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the results while preserving the authenticity of the educators' perspectives. This systematic and rigorous analytical process ensured both academic depth and integrity in exploring social studies curriculum reform within the Iraqi educational context.

FINDINGS

As education continues to evolve, curriculum reforms become essential, with teachers serving as key agents in implementing these changes. This study focuses on teachers' perceptions of the new social studies curriculum, as illustrated in Figure 1. It explores how teachers were

introduced to the revised curriculum, their views on the clarity of the syllabus and textbook, and their understanding of the curriculum's main focus. The study also examines perceived differences between the new and previous curricula and identifies what educators consider the most important learning outcomes for students at this stage. The insights gained, illustrated in Figure 1, provide valuable guidance for future curriculum development and reform efforts.

Figure 1.

Teachers' Perceptions of the New Social Studies Curriculum

Teachers' Perceptions of the New Social Studies Curriculum				
Sources and Methods	Syllabus/Textbook Clarity	Main Focus of the Curriculum	Differences Between Old and New Curriculum	The most important thing for Students to Learn
School, Social Media, Forum for Social Studies Educators, Ministry of Education website & School principal meeting with teachers	Too broad, lacks focus, Too vague, lacks guidance, Doesn't address diverse needs, Lacks guidance on technology integration, Lacks guidance on assessment., Lacks guidance on current events, Emphasizes critical thinking skills & Lacks resources and support	The Geography and History Maps, Updated book designs, Daily plans, Increased organization and structure, Formative assessment and data & Inspiring curiosity and creativity	Retains foundational principles, Slight modifications/updates to topics, Minor adjustments to content, Variations in structure, organization, and design, Same old objectives, just some adjustments & Emphasis on some historical topics	Understanding historical events, Learning about cultures and communities, Geography and history relationship, Interpreting geographical data & Impact on social and political movements

The sources and methods through which teachers learned about the new curriculum: As illustrated in Figure 1, teachers reported a wide range of sources through which they became familiar with the new curriculum. Responses included "school," "social media," dedicated professional platforms such as the "Forum for Social Studies Educators," the "Ministry of Education website," and direct communication during "school principal meetings with teachers." These varied channels played a critical role in helping educators access information and understand the complexities of the revised curriculum.

For instance, one respondent noted, *"I learned about the new curriculum from my school,"* highlighting the role of schools as central hubs for distributing critical information. This suggests that information was likely shared through staff meetings or internal training sessions, enabling teachers to adapt effectively to curriculum changes.

Also, another respondent shared, *"The Ministry of Education provided information about the new curriculum on their website,"* emphasizing the importance of official digital platforms. This example shows how the Ministry's website serves as a reliable and accessible source, ensuring consistent and accurate information reaches educators across different regions, thereby facilitating a smoother implementation process.

Table 2.

Teacher's Sources and Methods for Learning New Curriculum

Sources and Methods	Participants
School	f1, f3, f4, f5, f6, f7, f8, f9, f10, f11, f13, f15, f18, f19
Social Media	f2, f16, f20
Forum for Social Studies Educators	f8
Ministry of Education website	f14, f12, f17

Table 2 presents the different sources and methods through which teachers became informed about the new curriculum. The school emerged as the primary source for Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 15, 18, and 19. Social media platforms were significant for Participants 2, 16, and 20. Participant 8 also mentioned using the Forum for Social Studies Educators. Additionally, the Ministry of Education website served as a key information source for Participants 12, 14, and 17.

Teachers' View on Syllabus/Textbook Clarity in Curriculum Reform Direction: As illustrated in Figure 1, teachers expressed a range of opinions regarding the clarity of the syllabus and textbook in the context of curriculum reform. Some described the content as *"too broad and lacking focus,"* while others felt it was *"too vague and lacked clear guidance."* Concerns were also raised about the materials not addressing the *"diverse needs"* of students. Additional criticisms included a *"lack of guidance on technology integration,"* *"assessment strategies,"* and *"current events."* However, a few teachers noted positive aspects, such as the syllabus's emphasis on *"critical thinking skills."* Still, others pointed out that it *"lacks resources and support,"* indicating a need for further development in instructional materials and implementation support.

To illustrate the critique *"too broad, and lacks focus,"* one respondent stated, *"The new Social Studies syllabus/textbook is too broad and doesn't provide enough focus on the areas that need improvement."* This response highlights how the perceived lack of specificity in the syllabus may hinder teachers' ability to target and prioritize key instructional areas essential for effective curriculum reform.

Regarding the concern that the syllabus/textbook “lacks guidance on assessment,” another respondent remarked, “*The new Social Studies syllabus/textbook doesn't provide enough guidance on how to assess student learning and growth under the new standards.*” This observation emphasizes the need for clearer, more structured assessment frameworks within the curriculum to effectively evaluate student progress and the curriculum’s impact.

Table 3.

Teachers' View on Syllabus/Textbook Clarity in Curriculum Reform Direction

Syllabus/Textbook Clarity	Participants
Too broad, and lacks focus	f2, f3, f5
Too vague, and lacks guidance	f1, f4, f6
Doesn't address diverse needs	f7, f12
Lacks guidance on technology integration	f11, f9
Lacks guidance on assessment.	f14, f17, f19, f20
Lacks guidance on current events	f15
Emphasizes critical thinking skills	f10, f16
Lacks resources and support	f8, f13, f18

Table 3 presents the diverse perspectives of teachers regarding the clarity of the syllabus and textbook in supporting curriculum reform. Participants 2, 3, and 5 noted that the content is *too broad and lacks focus*, while participants 1, 4, and 6 described it as *too vague and lacking in guidance*. Participants 7 and 12 expressed concerns that the curriculum *fails to address diverse student needs*. Participants 11 and 9 highlighted a *lack of guidance on technology integration*, and participants 14, 17, 19, and 20 pointed to *insufficient assessment guidance*. Participant 15 specifically noted a *lack of coverage on current events*. On a more positive note, participants 10 and 16 praised the curriculum for its *emphasis on critical thinking skills*. However, participants 8, 13, and 18 expressed frustrations over the *lack of resources and implementation support*.

Teachers' Perceptions of the main focus on the New Social Studies Curriculum: As shown in Figure 1, teachers provided a range of responses when asked about the primary focus of the new social studies curriculum. Recurring themes included “*Geography and History maps,*” “*Updated book designs,*” “*Daily plans,*” “*Increased organization and structure,*” “*Formative assessment and data,*” and “*Inspiring curiosity and creativity.*”

One respondent offered a detailed comment on the theme “*Geography and History maps,*” stating, “*I believe the new Social Studies Curriculum is focusing on the importance of including maps as a way to teach students about the geography and history of different regions.*” This feedback indicates that the curriculum aims to build stronger connections between students and their understanding of geographical and historical contexts through visual and spatial learning tools.

There was also a common recognition of the significance of *“Updated book designs”* in the new curriculum. One respondent explained, *“The main focus of the new Social Studies Curriculum is to make learning more interactive and engaging for students through the use of modern book design techniques.”* This shows an effort to enhance the visual and functional appeal of instructional materials, aiming to create a more engaging and immersive learning environment.

Additionally, *“Daily plans”* surfaced as another prominent theme. One teacher remarked, *“The main focus in the new Social Studies Curriculum could be on providing teachers with daily plans to ensure effective and consistent instruction.”* This suggests a curricular shift toward offering structured, day-by-day instructional support to promote consistency and clarity in teaching practices.

Table 4.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Main Focus of the New Social Studies Curriculum

Main Focus of the Curriculum	Participants
The Geography and History Maps	f1, f2, f6, f9, f10, f12, f13, f16, f17, f18
Updated book designs	f2, f5, f8, f10, f13, f15, f17, f18, f19
Daily plans	f1, f2, f3, f4, f6, f8, f9, f10, f11, f14, f16, f20
Increased organization and structure	f4, f11
Formative assessment and data	f7, f14
Inspiring curiosity and creativity	f15

Table 4 summarizes teachers' perspectives on the primary emphasis of the new Social Studies curriculum. The inclusion of *“Geography and History Maps”* was underscored by several participants, including Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 6, and others. *“Updated book designs”* also stood out as a key theme, with participants such as Participant 2, Participant 5, and Participant 8 noting its importance. *“Daily plans”* received broad support, with endorsements from Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and others. The themes of *“Increased organization and structure”* and *“Formative assessment and data”* were identified by Participant 4 and Participant 11, and Participant 7 and Participant 14, respectively. The goal to *“Inspire curiosity and creativity”* was uniquely emphasized by Participant 15.

The differences between the new and old curricula: As illustrated in Figure 1, teachers identified several key differences between the new Social Studies curriculum and the previous version. These differences were categorized into the following themes: *“Retains foundational principles,” “Slight modifications/updates to topics,” “Minor adjustments to content,” “Variations in structure, organization, and design,” “Same old objectives, just some adjustments,”* and *“Emphasis on some historical topics.”*

In alignment with the categorizations presented in Figure 1, one respondent stated, *“Ultimately, while there may be some minor modifications or updates, the new Social Studies Curriculum remains rooted in the same foundational principles and objectives as the old*

curriculum." This reflects the perception that the curriculum's core values, and educational aims have been largely preserved, reinforcing the category "*Retains foundational principles*." Addressing the theme of "*Variations in structure, organization, and design*," one respondent remarked, "*The pedagogical approaches used in teaching the new curriculum may vary slightly from the old curriculum, but the overall objectives remain consistent*." This highlights the perception that while instructional methods and curriculum layout may have evolved, the core educational goals have remained largely unchanged. Finally, in relation to the theme "*Slight modifications/updates to topics*," one respondent observed, "*The new curriculum may provide more opportunities for cross-curricular integration, but this is not a significant departure from the old curriculum*." This feedback suggests that while certain updates have expanded the curriculum's scope, they are perceived as incremental improvements rather than fundamental shifts from the previous version.

Table 5.

Comparative Analysis of Teachers' Perceptions on Old and New Social Studies Curriculum

Differences Between Old and New Curriculum	Participants
Retains foundational principles	f1, f10, f12, f15, f18
Slight modifications/updates to topics	f2, f8, f11, f13, f14
Minor adjustments to content	f2, f5, f7, f8, f12, f15
Variations in structure, organization, and design	f4, f5, f6, f7, f9, f11, f15, f18, f20
Same old objectives, just some adjustments	f3, f4, f5, f6, f7, f9, f11, f12, f15, f17, f18, f20
Emphasis on some historical topics	f9, f14, f17

In Table 5, a comparative analysis of teachers' perceptions regarding the differences between the old and new Social Studies curriculum is provided. A significant number of participants—specifically Participants 1, 10, 12, 15, and 18—believed that the new curriculum *retains foundational principles*. Slight modifications and updates to topics were noted by Participants 2, 8, 11, 13, and 14. *Minor adjustments to content* were acknowledged by Participants 2, 5, 7, 8, 12, and 15. Several educators, including Participants 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 15, 18, and 20, emphasized *variations in structure, organization, and design*. A broad consensus—among Participants 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 15, 17, 18, and 20—was that the curriculum maintains *the same objectives with some adjustments*. Lastly, *increased emphasis on certain historical topics* was highlighted by Participants 9, 14, and 17.

Teachers' Perspectives on the Most Important Thing for Students to Learn in Social Studies:

As illustrated in Figure 1, teachers identified several key themes regarding what they believe students should prioritize in the new Social Studies curriculum. These include "*Understanding historical events*," "*Learning about cultures and communities*," "*The relationship between geography and history*," "*Interpreting geographical data*," and "*The impact on social and*

political movements." These areas reflect educators' emphasis on developing students' contextual knowledge, critical thinking, and awareness of the interconnectedness between historical and contemporary societal dynamics.

One respondent's view reflected these themes, stating, *"Both the old and new Social Studies Curriculum aim to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of history and geography."* This response underscores the theme *"The relationship between geography and history,"* highlighting the curriculum's broad educational goals.

Other teachers stressed the importance of critical thinking and analytical engagement with the past. As one educator noted, *"The new curriculum takes a more critical approach to historical events, encouraging students to analyze and question traditional narratives and interpretations of history."* This aligns with the theme *"Understanding historical events,"* emphasizing the curriculum's focus on developing students' analytical skills and fostering a deeper, more reflective understanding of history.

Table 6.

Comparative Analysis of Teachers' Perceptions of the Most Important Thing for Students to Learn in the New Social Studies Curriculum

The most important thing for Students to Learn	Participants
Understanding historical events	f5, f9, f12, f15, f19, f20
Learning about cultures and communities	f1, f2, f7, f11, f14, f18
Geography and historical relationship	f3, f4, f6, f8, f10
Interpreting geographical data	f3, f7, f13, f16
Impact on social and political movements	f17, f19

A comparative review of teachers' perspectives revealed diverse views on the most important areas for student learning in Social Studies. *"Understanding historical events"* was highlighted by Participants 5, 9, 12, 15, 19, and 20. *"Learning about cultures and communities"* was emphasized by Participants 1, 2, 7, 11, 14, and 18. The theme of *"Geography and history relationship"* was considered essential by Participants 3, 4, 6, 8, and 10. *"Interpreting geographical data"* was identified as a priority by Participants 3, 7, 13, and 16. Finally, Participants 17 and 19 focused on the *"Impact on social and political movements,"* reflecting an emphasis on civic understanding and critical social awareness.

DISCUSSIONS

Teachers' perceptions of the new Social Studies curriculum in Northern Iraq offer meaningful insights into its reception, implementation, and areas for future improvement. The wide range of sources through which teachers learned about the curriculum underscores the importance of diverse communication channels in delivering curricular updates. This finding suggests that future reforms should prioritize ensuring equitable access to curriculum information for all educators. Achieving this may require more effective communication strategies that integrate

both offline methods—such as school meetings and internal training—and online platforms, including official websites, social media, and professional forums.

The diversity of sources and methods through which teachers became informed about the new curriculum underscores the importance of a multifaceted communication strategy during periods of curricular change. This finding highlights the essential roles played by schools, professional educator forums, and the Ministry of Education's website in delivering timely and accurate information. According to Tyler's (2013) model of curriculum development, teachers' active participation in determining objectives, selecting content, developing instructional strategies, and planning evaluations is vital to the successful implementation of reform. As the individuals most closely attuned to students' needs and learning processes, teachers should occupy a central position in both the design and execution of curricular changes (Priestley & Biesta, 2013).

Teachers' perceptions of curriculum reforms are closely linked to school-level knowledge sharing and curriculum alignment, highlighting the importance of teacher involvement and inclusion in decision-making for effective implementation (Sullanmaa et al., 2021). A comparative study in Turkey and Sweden further reveals that teachers' responses to curriculum changes are shaped by existing cultural norms and professional routines. In this context, prior understandings and cultural expectations considerably affect how teachers interpret and apply new curricula (Bümen & Holmqvist, 2022). Two key issues emerge from these findings. First is the need to diversify information channels to ensure teachers are well-informed about reforms. More importantly, teachers' active participation throughout the reform process is essential. Excluding teachers can negatively impact teaching quality, diminish professional motivation and status, and weaken the overall effectiveness of educational management.

Feedback on the clarity and comprehensiveness of the curriculum reveals several areas in need of improvement for future revisions. Teachers pointed to the need for a more focused syllabus, clearer guidance on critical areas such as technology integration and assessment, and better accommodation of diverse student needs. Concerns were also raised about the lack of sufficient instructional resources and support for teachers. Although some praised the emphasis on critical thinking skills, many noted gaps related to content breadth, limited practical guidance, and the absence of references to current events. These issues suggest that the current curriculum may not fully align with classroom realities. The criticisms have sparked debate among educators about whether existing infrastructure and implementation conditions were adequately considered during the reform process. Nelson and Slavit (2007) emphasize that successful curriculum reform requires providing teachers with focused guidance, sufficient resources, and strong support systems throughout the implementation phase. Participating teachers acknowledged that the new curriculum introduced innovations in several areas, including updated textbooks, structured daily plans, enriched map usage, and enhanced visual materials. The incorporation of pedagogical concepts such as curiosity and creativity was also recognized as an important advancement, contributing to the development of a more student-

centered educational model. Teachers who observed increased student engagement noted that such reforms should be sustained to support long-term educational progress. In light of 21st-century skill demands and global educational trends, the shift toward a comprehensive, student-centered curriculum is seen as a positive step for schools in Northern Iraq. However, concerns persist. Despite structural changes, several teachers observed that the curriculum still reflects the same foundational principles as its predecessor. This perceived continuity may be attributed to the limited involvement of teachers in the curriculum development process. Their reservations suggest that an overreliance on traditional frameworks could hinder innovation and contribute to resistance among educators. For curriculum reforms to succeed, meaningful teacher inclusion is essential to ensure both buy-in and the practical alignment of reform goals with classroom realities. This situation highlights the complex context in which educational curriculum development occurs. A collaborative approach involving educational philosophers, curriculum experts, teachers, parents, and policymakers is essential for addressing criticisms and concerns effectively. However, even well-structured curriculum development teams may face limitations. Factors such as political instability, ideological impacts, deeply rooted social and cultural norms, inadequate infrastructure, limited financial resources, and traditionalist attitudes among academics, educators, and bureaucrats can considerably hinder innovation. Priestley and Humes (2010) acknowledge that while introducing new ideas and practices into curricula is vital, preserving connections with past practices can also offer value. This balance between innovation and continuity may help ensure both relevance and feasibility in curriculum reform. According to Pinar et al.'s (1995) curriculum-as-text approach, the curriculum is not simply a tool for transmitting content, but also a means of shaping identity, culture, and narrative. From this perspective, the social studies curriculum in Northern Iraq serves not only as a medium for knowledge delivery but also as a cultural mediator. Teachers' emphasis on themes such as the relationship between geography and history, cultural understanding, and the interpretation of data illustrates the curriculum's multidimensional role. Schwab's (1973) view of curriculum development as a dynamic interaction among teacher, student, and content further reinforces the importance of teachers as central agents in shaping and implementing curriculum in meaningful and contextually relevant ways. The findings of this study reveal that teachers in Northern Iraq view changes to the social studies curriculum not merely as content revisions, but as tools for advancing a more holistic approach to education. Their perspectives show that the curriculum's increased emphasis on skills such as understanding historical events, fostering sensitivity to cultural diversity, interpreting geographical data, and analyzing socio-political processes enhances the interdisciplinary character of social studies education. These insights are consistent with Mansilla and Jackson's (2022) holistic and critical framework for social studies instruction, supporting teachers in more effectively internalizing and implementing curriculum goals. The study's outcomes offer valuable guidance for future curriculum development within the Iraqi context. They also highlight the need to restructure teacher education programs and revise educational policies to support the ongoing

transformation of social studies education. As a result, effective communication, inclusive and transparent content, and the adoption of critical-reflective pedagogical approaches emerge as essential elements for achieving meaningful and sustainable reform in Northern Iraq's social studies curriculum.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This research examined social studies teachers' perceptions of the new curriculum in the Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Duhok regions of Northern Iraq. The primary objective was to understand how teachers perceived and implemented the revised social studies curriculum. The findings offered valuable insights into how teachers accessed information about the curriculum, their views on its clarity and comprehensiveness, its perceived core focus, the differences between the old and new versions, and the key learning areas they considered most important in social studies education. In light of the findings and discussions, ensuring teacher participation in the development and introduction of the new social studies curriculum in Northern Iraq is essential for its successful implementation. Teachers noted that the curriculum is overly broad, with major gaps in areas such as assessment strategies, technology integration, and coverage of current issues. While the emphasis on critical thinking was positively acknowledged, many viewed its treatment as superficial. The continued dominance of history and geography suggests a strong connection to the previous curriculum, indicating limited innovation in content structure. Overall, teachers' perspectives offer valuable guidance for future efforts related to content design, implementation strategies, and evaluation processes in curriculum reform initiatives.

This study emphasizes the central importance of teacher perceptions in the successful implementation of curriculum change. From the perspective of Priestley and Minty's (2013) concepts of "first-order" and "second-order" curriculum evaluation, it is essential to understand how teachers interpret curriculum changes at both surface and deeper levels. In this context, teachers exhibited cautious attitudes when assessing the fundamental objectives and philosophical underpinnings of the curriculum (second-order), while responding more positively to concrete changes such as updates to materials and resources (first-order).

Research findings reveal that teachers are not sufficiently informed about curriculum changes, which may lead to challenges in implementation. To address this, teachers should receive clear and consistent information through channels such as school meetings and the Ministry of National Education's official websites. As emphasized by Chimbunde and Moreeng (2024), teacher participation is a key factor in ensuring the sustainability of curriculum reform. Enhancing teacher participation in the implementation process not only improves the quality of reform execution but also contributes to greater professional satisfaction among educators.

Based on the research findings, it is essential to ensure that the physical infrastructure is adequate to support the effective implementation of the new curriculum. Key elements such as technological integration, the availability of teaching materials, and the role of textbooks are

critically important in this context. As Nelson and Slavit (2007) emphasize, technology integration should go beyond simply introducing technological tools into classrooms; it must involve using these tools in pedagogically meaningful ways. Therefore, teachers should be provided with comprehensive professional development opportunities focused on the effective application of the curriculum's technological components to enhance instructional quality and student engagement.

The final recommendation from this research is that new curriculum practices should be thoughtfully aligned with the region's cultural context, historical background, and geographical realities. As highlighted by Wang et al. (2016) and Zajda (2009), effective curriculum reforms require careful consideration of local context. In Northern Iraq, specifically, it is vital to integrate the region's unique sociopolitical and cultural conditions throughout curriculum development and implementation. Such an approach ensures the curriculum meets global educational standards while remaining deeply connected to local values, identities, and educational priorities.

For future research, a deeper examination of teachers' professional development needs and how these needs support the effective implementation of the new curriculum would be valuable. Additionally, studies that evaluate students' responses to the new curriculum and its impact on learning outcomes could offer important insights into its effectiveness. Finally, developing strategies and models that promote more meaningful teacher involvement in the curriculum reform process could significantly enhance the sustainability and success of educational reform initiatives.

In conclusion, effective curriculum reform is a complex, multidimensional process that necessitates the active involvement of teachers. This study, by examining the perceptions of social studies teachers in Northern Iraq regarding the new curriculum, has offered valuable insights to inform future curriculum development efforts and teacher education programs. In the process of transforming educational systems, incorporating teachers' voices and perspectives is essential for achieving meaningful, successful, and sustainable change.

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