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Zafer KUŞ  
*Ahi Evran University*

Durdane Öztürk  
*Kastamonu University*

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## **Social Studies Teachers' Opinions and Practices Regarding Teaching Controversial Issues**

Durdane Öztürk  
Zafer KUŞ  
Ahi Evran University, Turkey

*Abstract: In today's globalised world, many issues have become controversial. These controversial issues affect society and the individuals who form them. It is inevitable that these topics are brought into social studies classrooms, because this learning area is profoundly related to society. Social studies teachers' behaviours, attitudes, and professional knowledge are crucial in teaching controversial issues. The goal of this study was to investigate social studies teachers' opinions and practices regarding teaching controversial issues in Turkey. The study utilised a mixed method in which both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. The quantitative data for this study were collected from 646 social studies teachers in different cities in Turkey. The qualitative data were collected through observation of eight social studies teachers who were working in schools situated in areas at four different socioeconomic levels in the Kirsehir province. The content analysis method was used to analyse the qualitative data. The results indicated that there are differences between the teachers' opinions and their practices in teaching controversial issues. The study also found that teachers are faced with academic, professional, and emotional challenges in teaching controversial issues.*

### **Introduction**

As in every country, there are many issues of a controversial nature in Turkey. The most controversial issues in Turkey originate from its geographical location, its history and its social structure. Turkey is a bridge between Asia and Europe, and it is also country which neighbours the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. This region has seen ongoing religious, political, economic, and international struggles, especially in the Middle East. These events have always set the agenda in Turkey because it has been directly affected by them.

In recent history, after the First World War, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led a struggle in Turkey for liberation at the end of the Ottoman Empire, and a new government was established in 1920 based on the sovereignty of the people. Since then, the constitution has been completely revised four times (1921, 1924, 1961, and 1982) due to political debates, and there were seizures of power by the military in 1960 and 1980, which also forced the entire government to resign in both 1971 and 1997. In the last 15-20 years, Turkey has experienced rapid scientific, technological, social, and cultural change, in common with the whole world (Kuş, 2015).

In sociological terms, there are four origins to Turkish culture and each continues to exert an influence. These are the original Turkish culture (Central Asia), Islamic culture (Arab, Iran), Anatolian indigenous cultures, and the Western (European) culture (Turan, 1990: 42). This combination constitutes the rich cultural diversity currently found in Turkey. All of these geographical, historical, and sociological conditions are sources for many of the most controversial issues in present-day Turkey. As a result of contingent events, the nature of what is controversial can change very rapidly. For example, when terror attacks and loss of life occur in the country, the country intensively discusses terrorism and nationalism. The advantages and disadvantages of the European Union are often discussed during the EU accession process. When there is news of violence against women or about official corruption these issues are widely discussed in the media. There are no lists determining which issues are controversial. Social events, media, and politicians play a significant role in deciding this at any given moment. Issues about which many different value judgments can be made are often most controversial. Naturally, there is no clear definition of controversial issues. However, certain features are required for a topic to be deemed controversial. For example, Wellington (1982) states that a controversial issue involves different value judgments; it is thus not possible to resolve a controversial issue through evidence or experiment alone. In addition, a controversial issue has to be considered important by a considerable number of people. Stradling (1985) defines controversial issues as those issues on which a society is clearly divided and for which significant groups within society advocate conflicting explanations or solutions based on alternative values.

### **Controversial Issues in Social Studies**

The issues causing controversy in the country are naturally brought into the classroom and discussed. In this context, social studies teachers have most responsibility, because most of the controversial issues emerge in the classroom environment during social studies lessons, as it is a subject dealing with daily life. Controversial issues are sometimes mentioned by the teacher or the student and are sometimes found in the curriculum. There is, however, no list of controversial issues in the social studies curriculum in Turkey, and the curriculum does not have a standardised structure. If current issues related to humans, society, and the environment are brought up, the teacher either seeks to relate them to topics in the social sciences or natural sciences, or discusses them with the class by associating them with specific attainments, values or skills. In the 'Explanations' section of the curriculum, the statement is found that, "*Current and controversial issues related to attainments can be conveyed to class by associating them with problem-solving, critical thinking, using evidence, decision-making, and research skills through different methods of debate.*" On the basis of this statement, the teacher becomes the only responsible person who can discuss controversial issues in the classroom. However, controversial issues which are discussed internationally in general terms, such as terrorism, democracy, migration, war, and human rights, are included in the curriculum.

As can be understood from these statements, the fact that controversial issues can be discussed in the classroom in Turkey is of great importance. The following list describes the main reasons for including controversial issues in a curriculum:

- To improve students' critical thinking skills,
- To increase students' social and interpersonal communication skills,

- To enhance students' self-confidence and increase interest and beliefs,
- To encourage active participation,
- To help students to prepare for citizenship roles in a democracy as effective citizens, and
- To internalise democratic values and help students to turn democratic values into behaviour (Yılmaz, 2012; Harwood & Hahn, 1990).

Controversial issues can be discussed in classroom or school settings just like they are in daily life. It could even be said that schools are the best places to discuss these issues because schools have more ideological diversity than a family, a mosque, or social club. This diversity of views can make classes the most powerful place to encourage rational discussions (Hess, 2004). It can also be said that discussing controversial social issues through debate in an environment where students and teachers can freely express their views is vital for a healthy democracy (Alagöz, 2014).

It is necessary for schools to provide an environment in which honest and open discussions about controversial issues can take place. It is also important that schools provide resources for students in order that they can research current and controversial issues, whether political or social. All students should be able to express their views regardless of their level or ability when classrooms have a positive atmosphere and discussions should be welcomed (Berg, Graeffe, & Holden, 2003).

There are many reasons why controversial issues are included within a curriculum. The most common three reasons are (i) to prepare students for their citizenship roles in a pluralistic democracy, (ii) improve critical thinking skills, and (iii) enhance interpersonal communication skills. Preparing students for their citizenship roles in a pluralistic democracy means educating them to be citizens who can deal with social problems in a wide range of areas. Improving critical thinking skills implies the use of controversial issues as a tool to improve students' critical thinking. Finally, enhancing students' interpersonal communication means improving important skills and attitudes such as listening carefully, responding empathically, using persuasive speech, and working together (Harwood & Hahn, 1990).

Teachers play an important role in teaching controversial issues because they are the ones who put educational programs into practice. Teachers decide whether or not to bring a controversial issue into the classroom. This important role is also emphasised in the revised social studies curriculum. The revised curriculum lists features that a good social studies teacher should have, and one of these is, "A good social studies teacher helps students investigate controversial issues" (MEB, 2005 from Dorow, 1989). Teachers' knowledge about, perception of, and preferred approaches to teaching controversial issues exert a strong influence on how they teach. In this study, we tried to understand the opinions and practices of social studies teachers by using Kelly's (1986) four positions model (exclusive neutrality, exclusive partiality, neutral impartiality, and committed impartiality), which was influenced by Hill's (1982) work. Teachers hesitate to bring up controversial issues in a classroom for a variety of reasons. These may relate to the students, the teacher, the system, parents, or school administration.

Additionally, as Busey and Mooney (2004) maintained, teachers may refrain from discussing controversial issues because of their socio-cultural and divisive nature. Another dimension of controversial issues is the students themselves. Controversial issues are related to student life and they can affect them personally (Cherrin, 1992). Today's children can encounter controversial issues through media and other communication channels even at very young ages (Oxform, 2006). However, students should not be expected to interact with each other during the discussion of controversial issues when they do not feel safe and respected. That said, students,

in general, like lessons that include discussions. Teachers should take this into account because students who participate in regular class discussions are more likely to vote in the future, support basic democratic values, take part in political debates, follow political news in the media, engage in the political process, and influence public policy (McCully & Barton, 2007). Moreover, the teaching of controversial issues helps students to cope with conflicts and contributes to their leadership skills. Yet students may have inadequacies in discussing various issues and defending their own ideas through logical thinking, and may even act on information that does not reflect their own thinking. It also appears that, while students are interested in political and social issues, they often present their parents' or close relatives' opinions as if they were their own (Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009). All these situations prevent students from becoming effective decision-making citizens. However, it is very important that students talk about controversial issues and produce ideas on these topics in order for them to contribute to their solution. Discussing controversial issues in classrooms can reveal students' different opinions about what is true and what is not.

### **Controversial Issues and Democracy Education**

The maintenance of the democratic system in Turkey depends on safeguarding the nation's ability to be a democratic, lawful state and educating effective citizens. Social studies courses play an important role in this effort because these courses' primary goal is educating students to be effective citizens (Safran, 2014). Effective citizens have many characteristics; adopting democratic values and living with these values are among such characteristics. The acquisition of these qualities requires effective citizenship education. In Turkey, the social studies course is the main tool for this purpose (Kus, 2012).

The main goal of effective citizenship education is to educate individuals to be democratic, productive, empathic, responsible, and hospitable, and to be aware of environmental problems (Akyol & Özünal, 2015). Educating individuals to have these characteristics can reduce problems in society and resolve moral issues. Being able to speak with people who have different opinions about the common problems that concern the whole society is an especially pro-democratic skill and activity. Therefore, one of the main objectives of social studies' educators is to teach students how to effectively participate in debates about controversial issues (Hess, 2001). Even though raising controversial issues can threaten the peace and stability of a classroom, debate is what defines social studies in a democratic society (Philpott et al., 2011). Teaching controversial political issues is also inevitable in a democratic education. Teaching these topics in a school can itself provoke debates in the school or community regarding democratic education (Hess, 2004). The main task of democratic citizens is to consult with other citizens about what is in the public interest and how to achieve desired goals. The essence of a healthy democracy is the establishment of open dialogue among people about matters that are of interest to the public. For this reason, citizens should have discussions about social, political, and economic issues.

In the current age, most topics related to scientific and technological developments have become controversial. In addition, the number of these issues is increasing due to the rapid pace of change. An individual in today's complex world is expected to be sensitive to controversial issues and to find solutions to problems. In this context, the role of the social studies course, which focuses on life as it is lived, is vital, because educating individuals who can think

critically, question, and resolve problems is the specific aim of social studies. In a social studies course which aims to instil these characteristics in an individual, most of the controversial issues that an individual may face in his/her life are discussed in the classroom environment (by the teacher, by the students, through the curriculum). It can thus be ensured that students make the connection between knowledge and their daily lives. In addition, teachers should include controversial issues in their courses in order to make the students sensitive to the society and the world they live in. Teachers deliver the program and are thus essential in teaching these subjects in the classroom. This is because even if the controversial issues do arise in daily life and in the program, the teacher decides whether or not to discuss these topics in class, and whether the students can easily express their opinions.

When the literature is examined, there are only a limited number of studies on this subject, and they have often been carried out with prospective teachers and with a limited use of quantitative methods. Since the studies related to classroom practices are inadequate, the challenges that teachers face in teaching controversial issues, the way that teachers discuss them, and how these subjects are taught in the classroom are not clearly known. To address these deficiencies, this study attempted to determine, through classroom observation, the views of the teachers who deliver lessons about controversial issues, as well as their teaching practices.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

An explanatory research design, one of the mixed method research designs, was used in this study to determine the views and practices of teachers of social studies regarding the teaching of controversial issues. Quantitative data were obtained from surveys and qualitative data were obtained through classroom observations.

### **Sample**

A stratified sampling method was used for the quantitative part of the study. NUTS 2 (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics 2), the classification of statistical regions recognised by the European Union, was used to determine the strata. In the process of determining the study's sample, Turkey was divided into 26 regions, based on NUTS 2, and one province was chosen from each region, giving a total of 26 provinces (Adana, Ağrı, Ankara, Antalya, Batman, Bursa, Çanakkale, Diyarbakır, Erzurum, Gaziantep, İstanbul, İzmir, Kahramanmaraş, Kastamonu, Kayseri, Kırşehir, Kocaeli, Konya, Malatya, Manisa, Muğla, Samsun, Tekirdağ, Trabzon, Van, Zonguldak). Overall, 646 social studies teachers were selected from 26 provinces to participate in this research study, with 44% percent of the teachers being female, and 56% male. Some of the participating teachers were working in urban centres and some of them were working in rural areas, with 70% of the teachers selected had 1-9 years of experience, whilst the rest of the teachers, 30%, had 14-19 years of experience.

For the qualitative research part of the study, maximum variation sampling was selected from among the purposive sampling methods. Eight teachers were chosen according to the maximum variation sampling method, which requires teachers to have different lengths of experience, be of different genders, and to work at socioeconomically different schools. The surveys were carried out in Kırşehir Province, a small city where the researcher lives which is

located in the middle of the country. Four of the observed teachers were male and four were female. Four of the participants were working in schools at the top socioeconomic level, two in schools at the bottom socioeconomic level, and two in schools at the middle socioeconomic level. The participants were history and social studies teachers, and their experience in the field varied from 12 to 20 years.

### **Data Collection Tools**

Two different measurement tools were used to collect data for the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study. The data for the quantitative dimension of the study were collected by a survey that was developed by Yazici and Seçgin (2010) regarding the teaching of controversial issues. This tool consists of six parts. The first part has demographic questions (gender, experience, school location) while the second part is composed of items that measure the level of an issue's being controversial on a 5-point Likert scale. Controversial issues were identified through a literature review and through the views of teachers and experts in the field. In the third part, the survey includes a 5-point Likert scale items to help researchers understand how often teachers bring up controversial issues in the classroom. The fourth part investigates teachers' goals, and problems regarding teaching controversial issues. The first section of this part of the survey includes ten goals regarding teaching controversial issues and a second section asking teachers to identify the problems they face when teaching controversial issues. In the fifth part, 20 5-point Likert scale items with a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient, .88, (Yazici and Seçgin, 2010) were used to determine teachers' opinions related to the teaching process surrounding controversial issues. The last part of the questionnaire presents Kelly's (1986) four positions model (exclusive neutrality, exclusive partiality, neutral impartiality, and committed impartiality) and asks teachers to select their position when teaching controversial issues.

Qualitative data for this study was collected through semi-structured observation forms developed by the researcher. The observation form that was used in classroom observations consists of two parts. The first part of the form includes information such as date, time, number of observations, school, subject, and information about the teacher. The second part of the observation form includes headings (topics) to be noted while observing the teaching of controversial issues. The headings were determined by reviewing the literature. The topics include: controversial issues that teachers select to discuss in class; the problems teachers face in teaching controversial issues; the methods and techniques they use; the respective positions, classroom, and physical environment, and materials and sources used in teaching controversial issues. The observation form was sent to academics working in the field of social studies at different universities (Ahi Evran University, Kastamonu University, and Gazi University) via e-mail in order to obtain their expert opinions. The final copy of the observation form was created based on feedback received from these experts. A pilot phase using the observation form was conducted for two weeks and no problem was found in practice.

The qualitative data for this study was collected in the spring 2015 semester through the observation form that had been developed. Observations were made in three schools that were at different socioeconomic levels for 192 classroom hours. Observations were carried out in eight social studies teachers' courses (i.e. four males & four females). Observations were performed by the researcher.

Two different official ethical permits were obtained for the implementation of the data collection tools. An "Ethical Research Permit" certificate was obtained from the Ministry of

National Education in Ankara for the implementation of the quantitative data collection tool in schools throughout the country (APPENDIX-A). An “Observation Ethical Permit” certificate was obtained from Provincial Governorship and Provincial Directorate for National Education in order to make observations in the schools mentioned in Kırşehir (APPENDIX-B).

### Data Analysis

SPSS 17 was used to analyse the survey results. Percentage and frequency distributions of each item were calculated. In order to test the differences of the opinions of the teachers on practice of teaching controversial issues according to independent variables, t-test and ANOVA tests were performed. Interval values in grading the survey sections are shown in Table 1.

Threshold	Controversial issues in Turkey	Controversial Issues in Social Studies Classrooms	Teaching of Controversial Issues
<b>4.20-5.00</b>	Most Controversial	Every Class	Strongly Agree
<b>3.40-4.19</b>	Very Controversial	Once a week	Agree
<b>2.60-3.39</b>	Moderately Controversial	Monthly	Neutral
<b>1.80-2.59</b>	Not That Controversial	Each Lesson	Disagree
<b>1.00-1.79</b>	Not Controversial at all	I Never Discussion the Classroom	Strongly Disagree

**Table 1. Offset value of the parts of the survey**

For example, the second part of the questionnaire is the part in which teachers are asked to what extent they perceive the issues to be controversial. This part is graded in the form of 5-point Likert type scale. An average score for the answers given by teachers in the range of 4.20-5.00 is interpreted as “Most Controversial” and it is interpreted as “Not Controversial at all” in the range of 1.00-1.79. Similarly, other sections are interpreted according to intervals.

Qualitative data in the study were obtained using the semi-structured observation form. The qualitative data were analysed by content analysis in four stages. These were:

### *Coding Stage*

Data obtained from the observation forms were classified weekly and transferred into the Microsoft Word environment. Then each teacher’s data were coded separately. At the end, all teachers’ data were coded together.

The researcher examined the data to separate sentences into meaningful parts and determine the conceptual meaning of each part. These parts sometimes included a word or a paragraph, and sometimes a page of data. In this study, coding was done by considering concepts and the meaningful sentences in a section. For example, “issues that are brought into a classroom environment” was coded as a concept while “problems faced when teaching controversial issues” or “teachers’ positions” were coded as sentences. Table 2 shows the data coding.



Statements	Coding (concept)
Guys, I am giving all of you the opportunity to talk. I am creating a democratic environment...Unfortunately, we have not internalised democracy. What do we know about democracy?	→ Democracy

**Table 2: Coding stage**

***Finding the Themes***

Themes were created by examining and gathering the codes that had been made in the coding stage. Thematic coding was carried out with consideration to internal consistency. Similar data underlying the resulting themes were brought together and a meaningful whole was created. Table 3 shows how themes were created.

Expression	Coding (concept)	Theme
Guys, I am giving all of you the opportunity to talk. I am creating a democratic environment...Unfortunately, we have not internalized democracy. What do we know about democracy?	→ Democracy	→ Discussed issue

**Table 3: Theme creating stage**

***Organizing Codes and Themes***

At this stage, the data were organised according to codes and themes, and the findings were defined. As the codes and themes were organised, the findings of each teacher were presented separately under the determined themes, and results were presented in themes.

***Defining and Interpreting Findings***

At the final stage, relations between the findings were explained, cause-effect associations were established, and results were extracted from the findings. Each of the results obtained was evaluated separately and also compared with the quantitative research results. The details were interpreted by the researcher and discussed in line with the related literature.

**Survey Findings**

**Controversial Issues in Turkey**

According to the teachers, controversial issues in Turkey are the education system, terrorism, congregations, the Kurdish problem, string-pulling, favouritism, KPSS (a nationwide examination to select people for the civil service), religious abuse, judicial independence, and other examination systems. Teachers who noted that the above-mentioned issues were the most controversial also thought that issues such as cloning, the theory of evolution, creationist beliefs,

natural disasters, animal rights, the Cyprus problem, dissolution of political parties, disarmament, the 'brain drain', and migration were less controversial issues under discussion.

### **Controversial Issues in Social Studies Classrooms**

Most of the teachers expressed the notion that democracy is the most commonly discussed controversial issue in classrooms. Other than this, teachers stated that the most commonly discussed controversial issues were environmental pollution, human rights, the internet, TV broadcasts, and violence. Teachers also stated that they either rarely or never brought up some of the controversial issues, such as the theory of evolution, cloning, the Deep State, unsolved murders, dissolution of political parties, creationist beliefs, the wearing of headscarves, the Council of Higher Education, religious denominations, and issues about the military system issues. These issues were the less commonly brought up controversial issues. We noticed that the most commonly discussed controversial issues were the ones included in the curriculum, while the least commonly discussed issues were not included in the curriculum.

### **Aims of Teaching Controversial Issues**

Teachers stated that the primary aim of teaching controversial issues is to create a democratic classroom environment. The other purpose is to educate students to think scientifically and to be active citizens. The other aims of teaching controversial issues were to increase students' knowledge and analytical thinking skills, teach students to respect different ideas, and to change student behaviour. The less commonly stated aims of teaching controversial issues were changing the students 'values, improving students' study skills, and changing their attitudes.

### **Problems in Teaching Controversial Issues**

Teachers stated that there were some problems in teaching controversial issues. The problems expressed by the teachers were generally problems related to the students. Foremost among them were students' lack of knowledge about or not following current issues, students' lack of concern about the subject, students not expressing their thoughts, not listening each other, and being intolerant during the teaching of controversial issues.

Less common problems encountered by teachers were that the controversial issues made class management difficult, the emergence of disputes in the classroom, getting off topic, facing problems such as reaction from parents and the school administration.

### **Teaching of Controversial Issues**

Successfully teaching controversial issues is as necessary as bringing these topics into the classroom in the first place. Achieving the goals of teaching controversial issues is related to teachers' instructional methods, techniques, and approaches. Therefore, teachers' views about

the practice of teaching controversial issues are crucial. The arithmetic mean and standard deviations of teachers' opinions about teaching controversial issues are presented in Table 4.

Order	Items	X	Sd
1	I encourage students to express their opinion.	4.48	0.693
2	I manage the debate in a neutral way.	4.47	0.721
3	I benefit from current events.	4.39	0.67
4	I provide a democratic environment.	4.39	0.695
5	I take students' interests into consideration.	4.35	0.738
6	I make an effort to stay on the topic.	4.34	0.784
7	I provide preliminary information about the subject to students.	4.26	0.77
8	I lead the students to develop their own thoughts.	4.26	0.816
9	I use the question-and-answer method.	4.25	0.771
10	I provide experiences for students to develop their own opinions.	4.06	0.87
11	I make sure issues reach a conclusion.	3.99	0.92
12	I use visual and written materials.	3.93	0.917
13	I use the problem-solving method.	3.91	0.89
14	I use case studies.	3.85	0.933
15	I use the collaborative learning method.	3.74	0.917
16	I use the thought-construction method.	3.53	0.97
17	I plan ahead.	3.5	1.08
18	I benefit from other subjects.	3.48	1.042
19	I revise my instruction according to students' questions.	3.44	0.953
20	I make students accept my opinions.	1.81	1.212

**Table 4: Social studies teachers' opinions on educational practices regarding controversial issues**

Teachers expressed their opinions about the educational process regarding controversial issues, and they stated that they encourage students to express themselves, managed debates neutrally, used current events, and provided a democratic environment. Looking at these items, we can say that the educational practices regarded controversial issues are very important and directly related to the aims of teaching these issues.

In order to test the differences of these views of teachers according to independent variables, the t-test and ANOVA tests were performed. According to the results of this analysis, teachers' opinions regarding the teaching process of the controversial issues did not show significant differences according to gender [ $t(644) = 4,410; p < 0.05$ ].

The social studies teachers' opinions about the practice of teaching the controversial issues did not show significant difference according to professional seniority [ $F(3-642) = 1,883; p > 0,05$ ] or the place where they worked [ $F(2-643) = 2,389; p > 0,05$ ].

### Positions

Teachers play a crucial role in teaching controversial issues because they are the practitioners of the curriculum. This is why this study tried to determine which positions teachers

take in the teaching of controversial issues. Teachers' preferred positions are presented as percentages in Table 5.

Positions		%
<b>1<sup>st</sup> position</b> (exclusive neutrality)	As a teacher, I do not bring any controversial issues into my classroom and I do not express my own thoughts on such issues.	9
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> position</b> (exclusive partiality)	With a controversial issue, I try to persuade students to accept one of the preferred correct positions. I express my positions for students to accept, as the teacher.	5
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> position</b> (neutral impartiality)	I encourage classroom discussions on a controversial issue. I do not express my opinions, but I encourage students to express their opinions.	34
<b>4<sup>th</sup> position</b> (committed impartiality)	I encourage classroom discussions on a controversial issue, express my opinion and position, and also encourage students to express their positions.	27
I do not select a position.		25

**Table 5: Teachers' preferred positions**

As can be seen in Table 5, the teachers 'most preferred position in the teaching of controversial issues was the third position (34%), which is the neutral impartiality position. In this position, teachers encourage classroom discussions, do not express their own opinions or positions, but do encourage students to express their opinions.

## Observation Findings

### Controversial Issues in Social Studies Classrooms

In the classes observed, we found that teachers brought topics such as state management/administration forms, the environment and environmental pollution, and democracy into the classroom. These topics were followed by other controversial issues such as foreign policy, the economy and economic problems, imperialism (colonialism), elections and the election system, health, human rights, and values. These controversial issues have been found to be more or less related to the standards in the curriculum. Controversial issues that teachers were not willing to bring into classrooms were not included in curriculum and not directly related to students. These issues include corruption, bribery, military service, joint heritage, religious denomination, disarmament, the Kurdish issue, women's rights, the internet, and favouritism.

### Problems

We found some problems in the teaching of controversial issues during the observation sessions. These problems have been classified into three categories: teacher-based problems, student-based problems, and other problems.

### *Teacher Based Problems*

Teacher-based problems arise due to teachers' academic, occupational, and emotional inadequacies. In general, teachers had a difficult time managing a scientific debate on a controversial topic. It was observed that teachers did not provide ideas supported by scientific arguments in discussions arising from a controversial issue, and they did not expect students to provide scientific arguments either. Additionally, teachers lost their focus on controversial issues during the discussions. Hence, the issues discussed would keep changing without a discussion ever going deeply into the main issue under consideration. Instruction was teacher-centred during the teaching of controversial issues, as in other subjects. As a result, teachers spoke more than students, revealing their position on the controversial issue, and students' opinions were affected by their teachers' ideas. Some teachers perceived teaching controversial issues in the classroom as a waste of time and kept the discussions reserved to out-of-classroom times. The most common problem arising from teachers' emotional inadequacies was seen in their showing excessive reactions to students. Another problem arising from teachers' emotional inadequacies was the fear of teachers regarding the perception of the school management and parental reactions.

One of the negative situations that arose during the teaching of controversial issues was that during the discussions, more noise was generated than in other processes. This was usually noise generated by the students talking among themselves on the topic discussed in the classroom. In this case, the student standing up to speak in front of the class was not heard by other students. Teachers were uncomfortable with this situation and often raised their voice to admonish students. In particular, women and teachers with more professional experience reacted more to the noise emerging. These teachers wanted the discussion to be carried out traditionally in a disciplined way, and if this was not the case, the discussion process was ended without any conclusion being reached.

### *Student-Based Problems*

The students of the teachers observed were between the ages of 11-14 and in the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. Although the schools of the students differed in socioeconomic terms, similar problems were recorded during the observations. It was observed that most of the problems related to the students were caused by the problems associated with students' difficulties in interpersonal communication. Effective communication is one of the purposes of the social studies curricula in Turkey and in Turkish lessons. When this aim is taken into consideration, it can be observed that students were not able to act appropriately and were inadequate. For example, students were not able to use Turkish correctly, clearly and effectively. Speaking at the same time, not listening to each other, and not being able to express themselves were all issues that negatively affected the teaching of controversial issues. The students lacked the research, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills necessary for a useful scientific debate. To elaborate on this: students were not able to give scientifically correct examples to support their claims, or their examples were not related to the topic under discussion. It was also found that the students stated their parents' opinions or opinions that they had learned from media as their own when discussing controversial issues.

### *Other Problems*

The teachers thought that the examination-centred education system in Turkey was an important problem that prevented the effective teaching of controversial issues. They also thought that the physical environments of the classrooms were not suitable for teaching controversial issues. For example, crowded classrooms, the use of traditional seating forms in classrooms, and distractions from external stimuli all had negative effects on the teaching of controversial issues.

### **Instructional Methods and Techniques**

Teachers' instructional methods and techniques are important elements in teaching controversial issues. Therefore, the methods and the techniques used by the teachers in teaching controversial issues were examined to the extent that this was possible. It was found that all eight of the observed teachers utilised the lecture method in teaching controversial issues. The question-and-answer method was also used by the teachers. Discussion, construction of opinions, and case study methods were rarely used. It was surprising to find that the teachers rarely used the discussion technique in teaching controversial issues.

### **Positions**

The four different positions used in the observation form have specific criteria. Teachers marked the relevant box according to the criteria of the position that they took while teaching controversial issues. Although the teachers were observed in different classes and different subjects, it was found that they generally preferred to adopt the same position in different classes.

The position of the teachers was determined according to the criteria for each position itself. For example, if the teacher expressed his/her own opinions and encouraged the students to explain their own opinions, this was the criteria for the fourth position (committed impartiality). In general, teachers adopted the fourth position. In other words, s/he definitely expressed his/her own ideas during the discussion process and encouraged students to express their views. However, there were cases where the teachers could not be clearly said to be taking a particular position, because while they expressed their own opinions, they did not encourage students to express their opinions and they did not allow enough time for students to express themselves.

Only one teacher preferred to use, partially, the first position (exclusive neutrality). He partially brought up controversial issues in the classroom, and these topics were the ones included in the curriculum. Three teachers preferred the third position (neutral impartiality). Teachers who use neutral impartiality encourage classroom discussions, do not express their own opinions, and encourage students to express their opinions. The survey indicated that the teachers preferred the third position (neutral impartiality) in teaching controversial issues. However, the observation showed that the fourth position (committed impartiality) was the most commonly adopted position.

### **Classroom Environment and Materials**

We observed that the teachers did not want to make changes to the physical environment of the classroom when teaching controversial issues. It was observed that teachers mostly used traditional seating positions for teaching both regular subjects and controversial issues. Only one teacher (SBO8) used a horseshoe form (U-shaped) seating arrangement during the teaching of controversial issues. Teachers did not use different materials and resources during the teaching of controversial issues. The teachers always used course books, both during the teaching of regular subjects and in controversial issues. Additionally, some of the teachers used supplementary books, computers, and projection devices. We also found that the teachers did not use scientific arguments that were directly related to controversial issues in order to support their arguments.

### **Results and Discussion**

This study, which aimed to identify the opinions and practices of social science teachers regarding the teaching of controversial issues, found the following: Teachers thought that the education system, terror, religious differences, the Kurdish problem, and corruption were the most controversial issues in Turkey. A closer look at the results of the quantitative dimension of the study reveals that the above-mentioned issues were mostly social issues specific to Turkey, involving questions of how the country is governed and the education system. Other studies conducted in Turkey have found that violence against women, the education system, terrorism, nationalism, favouritism, corruption, examination systems, corruption, judicial independence, unemployment, and KPSS are the most controversial topics (Kus, 2015; Avaroğulları, 2015; Seçgin, 2009). In Turkey, many studies with different research participants have been conducted to determine controversial issues. Social problems such as terrorism, the education system, unemployment, and corruption are commonly accepted to be controversial issues.

Cloning, the theory of evolution, creationist beliefs, natural disasters, and animal rights are the least discussed controversial issues in Turkey. This finding is similar to the results of other studies conducted in Turkey (Avaroğulları, 2015; Çopur, 2015; Seçgin, 2009; Kus, 2015). On the other hand, Walsh's study (1998), conducted in another country, found issues such as creationist beliefs, the theory of evolution, animal rights, disarmament, and multiculturalism to be the most controversial. It seems that one of the least controversial issues in one country might be the most controversial issue in another country. We can conclude that what is controversial may differ because different societies have different values.

The results of the observation showed that democracy was the most controversial issue teachers brought up in classroom environments. This was followed by environmental pollution, human rights, the internet, TV, and violence. Looking at these results, it can be concluded that the teachers preferred to discuss controversial issues that are included in the curriculum, at a level appropriate to the students' level (Gross, 1964), although these may be less common issues in their society (Hess, 2004). As can be seen, the teachers did not discuss the most controversial issues in their society in a classroom environment. Perhaps they did not want to take risks by bringing issues of high sensitivity into the classroom. Similarly, in Çopur's (2015) study, teachers discussed controversial issues such as democracy, violence, TV, natural disasters, and environmental pollution in class, all of which were less sensitive issues within the specific society. Kuş and Tarhan (2016) concluded that while some political concepts are defined

and brought to agenda in social studies classes; political knowledge, political subjects and political processes are not mentioned. Teachers do not take risks on this subject.

The results of the observation indicated that the teachers discussed controversial issues regarding the management of the state, democracy, environmental pollution, foreign policy, and human rights. The results of the survey and the results of the observation were similar in terms of the issues discussed in class (democracy, environmental pollution, and human rights). It was observed that teachers sought to develop students' knowledge when teaching controversial issues that were included in the curriculum. Hess (2001) suggests that any controversial issues taught should be related to the curriculum, which justifies the Turkish teachers' practice. However, if an issue is not included in the curriculum, the teachers did not spend much time on the issue and they kept the discussions very short. The reason for this might be that the teachers had the view that, "If it's not in the curriculum then it is not related to subject," and also their rush to teach all of the subjects listed in the curriculum. However, when filling out the surveys, most of the teachers stated that controversial issues are related to their subject and should not be excluded from the classroom. Researchers observed that the teachers even hesitated to bring up controversial issues that were included in the curriculum. The results of the observation also showed that teachers even hesitated to discuss controversial issues included in the curriculum, issues that interested students but that were outside of the curriculum or newly emerging issues (Busey & Mooney, 2014).

The other result of the quantitative dimension of the study was that the controversial issues (the theory of evolution, cloning, the Deep State, unsolved murders, the dissolution of political parties, and creationist beliefs) that teachers rarely brought into the classroom were issues not directly related to the curriculum. Similarly, Secgin (2009) found that fanaticism, community, the military system, unsolved murders, dissolution of political parties, the theory of evolution, and the Deep State were the least controversial issues that were brought into classrooms by prospective teachers. Çopur (2015) concluded that teachers did not discuss less controversial issues (creationist theory, the theory of evolution, cloning, headscarves, and the military system) in the classroom in Turkey.

The study found that there were teacher-based, student-based, and other problems in teaching controversial issues. Although the teachers stated that problems were mostly student-based, the observation showed that there were also some teacher-based problems. Many international studies (Segall & Gaudelli, 2007; Busey & Mooney, 2014; Camicia, 2008; Hess, 2005; Journell, 2011; Harber & Serf, 2007) found that teacher-based problems were more common than student-based problems in the teaching of controversial issues. According to the results of the observation, a majority of the teachers were not able to manage the teaching of controversial issues and they did not have sufficient skills and experience in this field. However, Secgin (2009) found that prospective teachers did not think this situation was a problem in teaching controversial issues. Similarly to the results of the observation, Yilmaz (2012) concluded that students are willing to learn about controversial and taboo issues, but that teachers avoided discussing such issues in the classroom because they did not have enough social and communication skills. Demircioğlu (2016) also found that history teachers did not have enough education and skills to teach controversial issues. Similarly, Clabough, Philpott, McConkey and Turner (2010) found that one of the reasons that teachers avoided teaching controversial issues is that they did not think they were skilful enough to handle controversial issues. Many studies (Segall & Gaudelli, 2007; Busey & Mooney, 2014; Camicia, 2008; Hess,



2005; Journell, 2011; Harber & Serf, 2007) found that teachers faced problems teaching controversial issues and these issues arose from their academic and occupational inadequacies.

The main reason for this problem may be a lack of training about how to teach controversial issues in teachers' pre-service programs. Oulton et al. (2004) found that teachers did not receive any formal training on teaching controversial issues. It is known that teacher candidates do not feel ready to teach controversial issues (Ersoy, 2013, Holden & Hicks, 2007; Misco & Patterson, 2007) and that they lack the necessary knowledge and skills in teaching controversial issues (Robbins, Francis and Elliot, 2003).

The results of the observation showed that teachers did not prepare themselves or their students before teaching controversial issues. Oultona, Dayb, Dillon and Graced (2004) found that teachers faced many problems related to their not being ready to teach controversial issues. Controversial issues are sometimes brought into the classroom because they are included in the curriculum or sometimes by chance, by either the teacher or the student. However, studies (Washington & Humphries, 2011) have indicated the importance of preparing to discuss controversial issues with students, and establishing relationships with the students before talking about such issues, as well as planning how students should talk about controversial issues.

The quantitative dimension of the study also found that the teachers perceived parental and administrative reactions and the examination-centred education system as problems in teaching controversial issues (Seçgin, 2009; Çopur, 2015). Many other studies (Hess, 2004; Seng & Jaffar, 2014; Zemblas & Kambani, 2012; Philpott, Clabough, McConkey & Tunner, 2011) have also found that teachers face parental and administrative pressures in teaching controversial issues, and that they fear losing their jobs. As a result, teachers hesitate to bring controversial issues into the classroom (Camica, 2008; Hess, 2005; Journell, 2011). During the observations, the teachers expressed their fears of losing their jobs due to the reactions of school management and parents.

In the quantitative aspect of the study, teachers stated that the students' lack of information and their not having up-to-date information about controversial issues were some of the student-based problems involved in teaching controversial issues. Ersoy (2013) stated that having information about controversial issues greatly influenced student participation in discussion. Similarly, Hess (2001) mentioned that the most important factors influencing verbal participation in such a discussion are being informed about the debate, the students' interest in the controversial issue, and having time to think before discussion. Another issue that the teachers expressed as being a problem was a lack of student interest in controversial issues; this finding is similar to Hess's (2001) findings. The result of the observation also showed that students were not interested or willing to discuss controversial issues.

The teachers perceived that the influence of their surroundings on students was a problem in teaching controversial issues. This result is parallel to the study's qualitative aspect. During the observation sessions, it was observed that students stated their parents' or relatives' ideas and opinions as their own when discussing social and political issues (Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009). It was also observed that the students preferred to bring issues from their own lives into the classroom, and they used explanations and examples from their own lives in discussing controversial issues. Similarly, Hess and Posselt (2002) found that students preferred and like to discuss controversial issues that were related to their lives.

The teachers' most important goal in teaching controversial issues was to create a democratic classroom environment. Producing critically-thinking and active citizens was another goal. Kus (2015) also found that the teachers' goals in teaching controversial issues included

creating active citizens and a democratic classroom environment. However, the results of the observation showed, contrary to the results of the survey, that the teachers were not able to create open and democratic classroom environments when teaching controversial issues. This may have been due to the teachers' perceptions of the difficulty of creating a classroom atmosphere appropriate for such discussions (Yılmaz, 2012). However, discussion in a democratic classroom environment is an important process to help students acquire democratic skills (Harwood & Hanh, 1990; Berg, Graffe & Holdon, 2003; Hess, 2004; NCCS, 2007; McCully & Barton, 2007). Changing students' values and attitudes, and improving students' study skills, were the least commonly expressed goals of teaching controversial issues. However, the results of the observation showed that teachers were mostly aiming to increase student knowledge about controversial issues (Kus, 2015). Oulton et al. (2004) also showed that teachers' goals in teaching controversial issues were to change students' knowledge, analytical skills, study skills, attitudes, and values. Oxform (2006) claimed that students need to find their own values and develop their own skills, and that teaching controversial issues can help students do this.

The results of the survey indicated that the teachers mostly wanted students to gain critical thinking skills through their teaching of controversial issues. Seçgin (2009) also found that prospective teachers perceived teaching controversial issues to be the most important method of teaching critical-thinking skills. However, the observation showed that the teachers' practices were significantly different than their opinions. It was observed that most of the teachers did not lead students to make reasoned or logical judgments through the teaching of controversial issues. Hence, students did not make an effort to improve their critical-thinking and high-level thinking skills. Many studies (Oxfam, 2006, Philpot et al., 2011; Harwood & Hanh, 1990; Hess, 2004; NCCS, 2007) found that discussing controversial issues with students in a classroom environment improved students' rational and critical thinking skill, as well as contributed to research, inquiry, and scientific-thinking skills.

Another interesting result of the survey was the gender difference related to teaching controversial issues. The female teachers were more positive than the male teachers with regard to teaching controversial issues. However, the observation showed that male teachers more often bring controversial issues into the classroom. Yazici and Secgin (2010) found that female teacher candidates had a higher level of anxiety than male teacher candidates in dealing with controversial issues. It seems that gender is one of the factors that influences participation in the discussion of controversial issues (Haste & Hogan, 2006; Larson, 2000; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2002), and this factor should be investigated in future studies.

The teachers stated that they mostly prefer the third position (neutral impartiality) in teaching controversial issues. Related research (Miller-Lane, Denton & Andrew May, 2006; Misco & Patterson, 2007) also found that teachers preferred the third position. Teachers that utilise this position encourage classroom discussions on a controversial issue. They do not express their own opinions, but encourage students to express their own opinions. Contrary to the above findings, however, the observations suggested that the majority of teachers preferred to adopt the fourth position (committed impartiality). Teachers in this position encourage classroom discussions on a controversial issue, express their opinion and position, and also encourage students to express their own positions. However, the observations showed that the teachers only partially applied this position. We observed that the teachers explained their own opinions on a controversial subject, but they do not encourage students to explain their personal opinions. It was observed that when teachers expressed their opinion from a position of committed impartiality, the classroom developed a consensus about the opinions of the teacher, which were

accepted without students questioning them. This may be due to the fact that the teachers presented their opinions as the single correct opinions instead of as some of many opinions. However, it is important for teachers to participate in discussions and contradict any consensus to deepen a debate. Harwood and Hahn (1990) stated that a teacher who takes a side in a controversial topic must clearly state that his or her opinion is only one of many options. Some research has suggested that teachers should explain their own opinions (Locke, 1995; McBee, 1996; Asmeng & Boahene, 2007), while some has argued that teachers should not express their own opinions on controversial issues (Malikow, 2006; Kelly, 1986; Hess, 2004). It was also observed that the students did not question their teachers' opinions. Thinking that their teachers' opinions are not open to question negatively affects student participation in discussing controversial issues (Lusk & Weinberg, 1994). On the other hand, Harwood and Hahn (1990) stated that teachers should allow students to challenge their own thoughts or attitudes, since all views and thoughts surrounding controversial issues are subject to questioning and examination.

It was also observed that some of the teachers judged their students' opinions based on the student's personalities, rather than on the content of the opinions. These teachers also failed to show enough tolerance to the students in discussing controversial issues. However, Cherrin (1992) maintained that the most important principle in teaching controversial issues is responding with respect and understanding, and being able to distinguish opinions from personalities. The results of the observation also indicated that the lecture method was the most common instructional method used to teach controversial issues, followed by the question-and-answer method. However, Freire (1972) and Rogers (1983) stated that teachers should use an interactive participatory method to encourage students to participate and express their thoughts on controversial issues. Teachers strive to control a class and transfer knowledge. Similar results were found in Mirembe's (2002) study. It was observed that the teachers did not use many different instructional methods. However, it was determined that other teachers did use a variety of strategies, methods, and techniques in a wide variety of fashions (discussion, role-playing, resource-based learning) in their work (Oulton, Dillon & Grace, 2004). In addition, Berg, Graffe, and Holdon (2003) stated that talking about contemporary and controversial issues should be done in an authentic context using active learning methods.

Another finding of the observation was that a traditional seating arrangement was frequently employed while teaching controversial issues. The teachers were unable to organize students in accordance with their instructional method or purpose. It is well known that the physical environment in a classroom affects teaching and learning activities. Traditional seating positions are not appropriate for student communication and do not promote interaction when teaching controversial issues. Teachers may need to include silent students and limit talkative students in discussions in order to ensure a balanced level of participation (Harwood & Hahn, 1990). Instead of traditional seating arrangements, teachers should use a horseshoe (U-shaped) form. In horseshoe seating forms, students can interact with each other and actively participate in the classroom, and unwanted behavior can easily be detected (Tabançalı, 2009). Unfortunately, the teachers were highly dependent on textbooks in teaching controversial issues and only rarely used supplementary books, computers, projection devices, maps, and globes.

The teachers did not use any other resources beyond these materials. However, teachers, in preparing students for the controversial issue to be discussed, should provide some information so that students can have an opportunity to obtain prior knowledge of the issue. Teachers can provide background information through passages of reading, lectures, films, guest speakers, or field trips (Harwood & Hahn, 1990).

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**APPENDICES :**

**APPENDIX-A: Ethical Research Permit**

**T.C.  
MÜLLİ EĞİTİM BAKANLIĞI  
Temel Eğitim Genel Müdürlüğü**

Sayı : 70297673/<.>.<.>  
Konu: Konu: Araştırma İzin

**KASTAMONU ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜNE  
(Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdürlüğü)**

İliği: a) Kastamonu Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdürlüğüne 20/01/2015 tarihli ve 26359463.044/16 sayılı yazısı.  
b) Durdane ÖZTÜRK'e ait 10/03/2015 tarihli dilekçe ve ekleri.

Üniversitemiz İktisadî İktisatî Anabilim Dalı Sosyal Bilimler Eğitimi Doktora Programı Öğrencisi Durdane ÖZTÜRK'ün, Genel Müdürlüğünüze bağlı ilerde "Sosyal Bilimler Öğretmenlerinin Tartışmalı Konuların Öğretimine İlişkin İnanç ve Uygulamaları" isimli tezine ilişkin araştırma için anket yapmasını istediğine ilişkin ilgili (a) yazınıza ve ekleri, Genel Müdürlüğünüzde oluşturulan Komisyon tarafından incelenmiştir.

Söz konusu araştırmamın eğitim ve öğretimle alakalı olmayacağı ve bilimsel amaçla yapıldığına ilişkin olarak uygulanması, uygulamalarında sadece yazınızla öngörülen maddeleri kullanılması ve araştırma sonucunda elde edilmiş raporun, basılı ve dijital ortamda Genel Müdürlüğümüze teslim edilmesi şartı ile araştırmamın yürütülmesinde bir sıkıntı bulunmamaktadır.

Bilgilerinizi rica ederim.

Funda KOCABIYIK  
Bakan a.  
Genel Müdür

Ek: Mühürlü Anket formu (6 sayfa)

Dağıtım:  
Gereği:  
Kastamonu Üniversitesi Rektörlüğüne  
(Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdürlüğü)


Bilgi:  
Adana, Afyon, Ankara, Antalya, Balıkesir,  
Bursa, Çankırı, Çarşamba, Diyarbakır,  
Erzurum, Gaziantep, İstanbul, İzmir,  
K.Maraş, Kastamonu, Kayseri, Kırşehir,  
Kocaeli, Konya, Malatya, Manisa, Muğla,  
Samsun, Tokat, Trabzon, Van,  
Zonguldak Valiliğine  
(İl Millî Eğitim Müdürlüğü)

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**APPENDIX-B: Observation Ethical Permit**

**T.C.  
KIRŞEHİR VALİLİĞİ  
İl Millî Eğitim Müdürlüğü**

Sayı : 24512418 /605/3756739  
Konu: Durdane ÖZTÜRK'ün  
Araştırma İzin

08/04/2015

**VALİLİK MAKAMINA**

Kastamonu Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü İktisadî İktisatî Anabilim Dalı Doktora öğrencisi Durdane ÖZTÜRK 06.04.2015 tarihli dilekçesi ile "Sosyal Bilimler Öğretmenlerinin Tartışmalı Konuların Öğretimine İlişkin İnanç ve Uygulamaları" konulu gözlem yapma isteği bildirilmektedir.

Kastamonu Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü İktisadî İktisatî Anabilim Dalı Doktora öğrencisi Durdane ÖZTÜRK'ün ilimiz merkez 24 Aralık Atatürk, Apakpaşa, Atatürk, Cacıbey, Cumhuriyet, Prof.Dr.Erol Güngör, Sırrı Kardeş ve Zahide Zehra Garring Ortaokullarında görev yapan Sosyal Bilimler öğretmenlerine, "Sosyal Bilimler Öğretmenlerinin Tartışmalı Konuların Öğretimine İlişkin İnanç ve Uygulamaları" konulu gözlem yapmasını, Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı Yenilik ve Eğitim Teknolojileri Genel Müdürlüğününün 07.03.2012 tarih ve 3616 sayılı (2012/13) no'lu genelge esaslarına göre uygulanması müdürlüğümüzce uygun görülmektedir.

Makamlarınızca da uygun görülmesi halinde olurlarınıza arz ederim.

Osman ELMALI  
İl Millî Eğitim Müdürü

OLUR  
08/04/2015  
Arif YALÇIN  
Vali a.  
Vali Yardımcısı

Terme Cad. 40200 Merkez/KIRŞEHİR  
Elektronik Ağ:kirsehir.meb.gov.tr  
e-posta: kirsehir@meb.gov.tr

Ayrıntılı bilgi için:Hayrettin ŞAHİN Şube Mtd.  
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