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## Political Literacy Status of Pre-Service Social Studies Teacher

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### Abstract

In this study, it was aimed to determine the political literacy status of pre-service social studies teachers, who are expected to raise active citizens in Turkey. The study used the case study, which is among the qualitative research designs. Study group is consisted of totally 60 pre-service social studies teachers, who receive education at the 4th grade of Ahi Evran University, faculty of education. Content analysis was used during the process of data analysis. Following results were obtained at the end of the study; pre-service social studies teachers seem to be unconcerned about the concepts of policy and political literacy. Pre-service teachers believe that political subjects should be taught in a limited way. Even though the pre-service teachers discuss about the national and international issues, they do not show an active participation in the society.

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### 1. Introduction

Examining the concept of political literacy, different definitions by different persons are observed. Political literacy is briefly the state of having political information (Krosnick, 1990). Zaller (1992) defines the political literacy as individuals' comprehensions regarding a political event and their political awareness. Besides, political literacy could also be defined as the state of individuals to be acquainted with the political process and political affairs as effective citizens in order to fulfill their roles and comprehension of these issues by individuals (Denver and Hands, 1990; Wormald, 1988).

Different definitions of the political literacy emphasize the phenomenon of political knowledge. However, political literacy can not only be defined as knowing the political knowledge or simply the functions of political institutions and government. Political literacy is related not only with knowledge, but also skills and values. Skills require an affective participation in the social life; however, unless the individual is enabled to participate, these

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skills can not be expected to develop. A politically literate citizen is not only an informed beholder. Being a politically literate citizen, the individual is an active participant in social events, regarding her/his own issues (Fyfe, 2007).

A politically literate citizen not only comprehends her/his current state, but also gets involved in the state in an active and effective way and directs it. An individual with the skill of political literacy has the skills of understanding other people's viewpoints, realizing their effect upon her/him and responding to them in an ethical way (Fyfe, 2007). Additionally, a politically literate person has the basic knowledge, skills and values regarding how to express her/himself in everyday life.

In a society that is arrayed with knowledge, skills and values, which are required by the democratic life, and consisted of individuals, it is much easier for the democracy to become a life style. Since this process does not occur automatically, it is necessary to bring at least basic political knowledge in all individuals in the society. However, some historical obstacles were observed regarding this issue in Turkey until the 2000s. Especially due to the youth events that occurred in Turkey during the 1970s and 1980s and the subsequent military coups, the grownups do not even want the youth to be involved in political and social discussions. Students are advised to abstain from political affairs. Teachers are asked not to talk about political affairs in the classroom. This situation poses a great obstacle in front of the political literacy in our country. However, it has been changing slowly in recent years. The interest in these issues has increased again, especially due to the fact that active citizenship has recently been brought to the agenda and emphasized within the system of education again.

Lesson of social studies is considered to be the most convenient lesson, in terms of teaching the political literacy at the primary education level in Turkey. Regarding political affairs, the knowledge, awareness, in other words the political literacy of social studies teachers who teach this lesson affect their instruction as well. Thus, it is required for pre-service social studies teachers to learn these subjects at university. In this study, it was aimed to determine the political literacy status of pre-service social studies teachers.

## **2. Method**

The study used the case study, which is among the qualitative research designs.

### *2.1 Study Group*

The study group is consisted of 4th grade students, who receive education at Ahi Evran University, Faculty of Education, department of Social studies teaching. 32 male, 28 female and a total of 60 students participated in the study. These pre-service teachers will graduate at the end of the terms (June-2013) and those who succeed the national exam will take office as social studies teachers.

### *2.2 Data Collection Tools*

The data that are collected in qualitative studies show diversity. The data being collected could be observation notes, interview records, documents, images and other graphical presentations (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003; Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008). During the attainment process of the data, students were asked seven open-ended questions, which were developed by the researcher as a written text. Questions about the dimensions of both the political knowledge and participation of pre-service teachers were asked in the data collection tool. The dimension of knowledge involved questions such as (what is policy, political literacy?, who is the active citizen?, how is the government formed in our country?, should the political affairs be taught at schools?). The dimension of pre-service teachers' ideas involved questions such as (Do you discuss about national and international issues? Have you ever participated in an activity, which was on behalf of the society or aimed to affect the social politics?). In this context, the essays of students were used as documents and basic data sources in this study.

### *2.3 Data Analysis*

The attained written documents were analysed by using the content analysis. Categorical analysis, which is among the content analysis methods, was used for the analysis of qualitative data and the following phases were

respectively performed during the analysis process; (1) *phase of coding and sorting*, (2) *phase of category development*, (3) *determination of frequencies* and (4) *phase of providing validity and reliability*. The analysis was also examined by another researcher in order to provide the reliability of the study.

### 3. Findings and Interpretation

Table 1. Responses of pre-service teachers to the question, “what is policy?”

| What is policy?          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| Positive Definition (51) | Path that is followed to achieve a certain goal (11), individuals’ state of defending their opinions (10), having certain thoughts (5), representing the public (4), political behaviours of people (3), everything that is done for benefits of the country (2), path that is followed by institutions and politicians (2), solving the problems of a country (2), working for the society (2), individuals’ state of discussing about an issue (2), system of thinking about the governance of a country and social issues (1), different viewpoint of events. (1), a system that concerns everyone (1), art of equating (1), path that is followed by the government (1), individuals’ state of convincing the public with their opinions (1), life style (1), effort for self sustaining (1). |
| Negative Definition (22) | Everything that is done to have the power (7), art of lying/inducing the public (6), state of bureaucrats to act upon their own benefits (4), hypocrisy (2), individuals’ state of leading certain masses (1), inability of governors to consider the governed (1), ambition for power (1).   |
| No Answer (8)            |   |

As is seen in Table 1, pre-service teachers generally made positive definitions about the concept of policy (51). Path that is followed to achieve a certain goal (11), individuals’ state of defending their opinions (10) are among the most frequent definitions. A part of pre-service teachers made a negative definition (22) about the concept of policy. Everything that is done to have the power (7) and art of lying (6) are among the most frequent negative definitions. A part of the pre-service teachers (8) gave no answer to this question.

Table 2. Responses of pre-service teachers to the question, “what is political literacy?”

| What is political literacy? |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Definition (44)             | Reading the writers and articles (news), following the agenda (13), having an opinion (information) about the political affairs (11), discussing the events (3), being involved in the policy (6), understanding the policy (4), lesson of political science (2), announcing the policy to everyone (1), assessing the different viewpoints (1), citing the political affairs to others (1), having knowledge to be a manager (1), having a political approach to events (1). |
| I don’t know (32)           |   |

As is seen in Table 2, pre-service teachers defined the political literacy as following the news about the agenda (13) and having information about the political affairs (11). Half of the teachers, on the other hand, expressed that they had never heard of this concept.

Table 3. Responses of pre-service teachers to the question, “What is the active citizenship, do you consider yourself an active citizen?”

| What is the active citizenship and are you an active citizen? |  |
|---|--|
| Definition (119)  | A person who; follows the problems of the country / serves for her/his country (20), serves for her/his environment (10), is able to criticise/question (9), fulfills duties and responsibilities (13), seeks solution to problems (6), follows the current events (6), shows participation (5), votes (5), gets involved in non-governmental organizations (5), socialises/participates in social activities (5), does something for the society and environment (4), moves without being stable (3), is sensitive about her/his environment (6), expresses her/himself well (3), approaches to political events consciously (2) reads (2), renews her/himself (2), researches, questions (2), is open to criticism (2) and others (8) (a modern and objective person, who seeks her/his right, tries to change the events, uses her/his rights and liberties, has economic freedom, thinks creatively and leads the society) |
| I am an active citizen (20)                                   |  |
| I am partly an active citizen (13)                            |  |
| I am not an active citizen (27)                               |  |

As is seen in Table 3, pre-service teachers defined the active citizen as a person who; follows the problems of the country, serves for her/his country (20), serves for her/his environment (10), and criticizes (9). A part of the pre-service teachers, on the other hand, defined the active citizen as a modern, objective individual who seeks her/his rights.

Table 4. Responses of pre-service teachers to the question, “Should the political affairs be taught at schools?”

| Should the political affairs be taught at schools |   |
|---|---|
| Yes it should (44)                                | Nationalism should be taught (1) democratic ideas should be taught (1) without imposing the teacher’s opinions (19), without going into details, in a limited way (13), different viewpoints and tolerance should be taught (7), in order to enable them to understand the events in the country (6), in an objective way (5), in order to enable them to understand the events (4), the country is managed with policy (4), for the future of students (4), in order to enable them to have information about their country (3), since it is up to date (3), in a suitable way for the level (2), in order to raise an effective citizen (3), it should be strained by the teacher (1), in order to enable them to use their political rights (1), students learn how to express themselves (1), in order to enable them to consider the events from a critical aspect (1), in order to enable students to think (1).<br>Problems, dissociations occur between students (7), it is not convenient for the educational environment (3), it should be taught scientifically (3), teacher imposes her/his own opinions to the student (3), discussions might rise (2), it should not be taught directly (1), our country is not ready (1), Turkish history should be taught (1), policy is not performed accurately (1), children get influenced by political ideas (1), Atatürk should be taught (1), education and policy are different concepts (1). |
| No it - +shouldn’t (16)                           |   |

As is seen in Table 4, majority of pre-service teachers think that political subjects should be taught. They state that teachers should not impose their own opinions (19) and the lesson should be taught without going into details in a limited way (13).

A part of teachers stated that political subjects should not be taught at school and they will not teach political subjects after becoming teachers. The reason of this is stated to be the dissociations between students and that the educational environment is not convenient.

Table 5. Discussion and participation status of pre-service teachers regarding national-international issues

| Do you discuss about the country affairs?   |   |
|---|---|
| Country governance/government decisions (27), terrorist incidents (12), about Syria (12), foreign policy (11), educational problems (8), about economy (7), current issues (5), decisions of managers (3), about the new constitution (3), about our future (2), country problems (2), about the opposing party (2) and others (9) (distribution of resources, women’s problems, about the exams, sexual discrimination, income inequality, Atatürk, historical subjects, about the military coups)         | Yes<br>No   |
| Do you discuss about the world affairs?   |   |
| Syrian incidents (14), USA foreign policy (8), about the wars (7), İsrail-Palestine incidents (6), about the global powers (6), arab spring (5), USA elections (4), about terror (4), about the problem of famine (4), Turkey’s position (3), about the elections in other countries (3), about Muslims (2), injustices that were done to our prophet (2), Greek crisis (2), comics incidents (2), about UN and NATO (2), about the global warming (2) and others (3) (earthquakes, EU, Turks in the world) | Yes<br>No   |
| Activity intending to affect the society  |   |
| Republic marches (7), act of 4+4+4 educational reform (3), petition of no to war (2) and others (3) (1st of May, march of women’s rights, university tuitions)  | Yes<br>No, I did not participate (49)             |
| Voluntary Participation   |   |
| Blood transfusion campaign (13), environmental activities (12), campaign of collecting books (12), support campaign for organ donation (8), aid campaign (8), campaigns for the handicapped (8), aid for Van earthquake (6), campaign of no to war (6), activities about health (5), campaigns of martyr families (5), sister school project (1)  | Yes,<br>No (27)<br>No, I did not participate (37) |

As is seen in Table 5, the large part of pre-service teachers stated that they discuss about national issues. Government decisions (27), terrorist incidents and Syrian incidents are among the subjects being frequently discussed. A part of the teachers (15) stated that they do not discuss about national issues.

The large part of pre-service teachers stated that they discuss about international events. Syrian incidents (14), American foreign policy and wars are among the subjects being frequently discussed.

The large part of teachers stated that they had not participated in either an activity intending to affect the society or a voluntary activity on behalf of the society.

Table 6. Responses of pre-service teachers to the question, “How is the government formed in our country?”

| How is the government formed in our country |  |
|---|--|
| Could explain accurately (0)                | -  |
| Could explain (16)                          | In our country, a party that receives the greatest vote in elections is assigned by the president to form the government. Ministers that are selected by that party are approved by the president and the government is formed (example sentence). |
| Could explain partially (27)                | Public is at the bottom of the formation of the government. The party that receives the greatest vote forms the government with the votes, which are determined by the majority of people (example sentence).                                      |
| Could not explain (8)                       | It is formed by the concurrence of ministers (example sentence)  |
| No answer (9)                               | ---  |

As is seen in Table 6, none of the pre-service teachers could accurately explain the formation process of the government. Approximately half of the pre-service teachers could explain it partially. One third of pre-service teachers could not explain or answer the formation process of the government.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this study that researched the political literacy status of pre-service social studies teachers, the following results were obtained: In general, pre-service teachers could not even accurately define the concepts of policy and political literacy. While half of the pre-service teachers defined the concept of policy negatively, the other half stated that they had never heard of the concept of political literacy. The pre-service teachers, who tried to define the concept of political literacy, defined this concept as following the agenda or political knowledge in general. Neglect in policy and political subjects is not encountered only in Turkey. A number of studies being performed in the international area show that there is a neglect in policy in many countries. For example, in a study that was performed by the International Education Success Assessment Organization (IEA), it was determined that there is a decreasing interest in policy and political affairs in many countries including England, the number of young people who take responsibility in official or non-governmental organizations decreases, and there are some deficiencies regarding the comprehension of both the concept of democracy and basic democratic institutions by students (Kerr et al. 2002).

Pre-service teachers defined the active citizen as an individual, who helps her/his country, environment or fulfills her/his duties and responsibilities, in general. They never talked about the local, national and international participations, which are among the most important qualifications of an active citizen. Only one third of pre-service teachers defined themselves as active citizens. The reason of this was stated to be following the agenda and fulfilling the civic responsibilities. The main emphasis on the citizenship education in Turkey is upon the fulfillment of duties and responsibilities, rather than rights and active participation. As a result of this, pre-service teachers generally made definitions in this direction. Raising active, participant individuals who are aware of their duties and responsibilities in the democratic society was expressed to be among the main goals of the social studies program, which was put into practice in Turkey in 2005 (MEB, 2005). It is seen that the pre-service social studies teachers, who will fulfill this mission, have not reached the required level yet. In many studies being conducted in different countries, it is stated that young people abstain from the policy and they have a low level of knowledge and participation (Fyfe, 2007; Angvik and von Borries, 1997).

Pre-service teachers generally stated that political affairs should be taught at schools. Turkey witnessed the intervention of the military government in the governance of the country in various ways from the 1960s to the 2000s. Following these military coups, authoritarianism was declared and the policy was tried to be controlled in the country. A reflection of this is the thought that young people are still required to abstain from the policy. Even the pre-service teachers, who state that political affairs should be taught, abstain from affecting the children politically and they insistently express that these subjects should be taught in a limited way.

Pre-service teachers stated that they discuss about national and international issues in general. They expressed that they usually discuss about the government decisions and terrorist incidents nationally and about the Syrian incidents and USA foreign policy internationally. However, regarding the active participation in the society, majority of pre-service teachers stated that they had not participated in either an activity intending to affect the society or a voluntary activity on behalf of the society. The pre-service teachers, who stated that they had

participated, expressed that they participate in an activity which is required by the “lesson of social service” in general. It is understood that pre-service social studies teachers have a very low level of active participation in the society.

In fact, participation is very important in democracies. Verba and Nie (1972) emphasized the importance of participation as follows; “participation is the heart of the democratic theory”. Pre-service teachers generally regard the participation only as voting. However, there are some indicators that express the social responsibilities of individuals, outside of voting. As well as voting, these indicators include being informed about the political process and following the national and international events, techniques of thinking, participation in the media, skills of interaction and discussion, participation in voluntary activities (Schusler and Krasny, 2008: 270).

None of the pre-service teachers were able to explain the formation process of the Turkish government accurately. Half of the pre-service teachers partially explained the formation process of the government. The fact that pre-service teachers are not acquainted with such basic knowledge seems to be quite thought-provoking. Because the social studies lesson includes acquisitions especially regarding this subject. For example, the 7th grade unit entitled “Living Democracy” includes an acquisition as follows “*It analyses the governing structure of the State of the Republic of Turkey within the frame of the concepts of executive, legislative and judicial powers.*” (MEB, 2005). Teachers should have sufficient knowledge on this subject in order to narrate the students.

To sum up, this study determined that pre-service social studies teachers, who will raise active citizens for the future and teach political affairs, have deficiencies regarding the political literacy. Thus, the pre-service teachers who are expected to raise active, participant citizens should definitely be taught the political literacy.

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