



Normative Pedagogical and Political Limits of Democracy Education in the Social Studies Course Curriculum of the Turkish Century Education Model

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ABSTRACT

Curricula are foundational political texts that reflect societies' ideals for the future and their conceptions of acceptable citizens. This study aims to analyze the normative limits within which democracy education is constructed in the Social Studies Course Curriculum (SSCC) within the scope of the Turkish Century Education Model (Türkiye Yüzyılı Maarif Modeli [TYMM]), which came into effect in 2024, and the pedagogical consequences of this. Normative limits are conceptualized through how the curriculum positions democracy, within which rights and freedoms, what kind of citizen subject it constructs, how it defines legitimate forms of participation, and how it frames democratic conflict. The research is a qualitative study conducted through document review and conceptual content analysis. The findings show that the curriculum establishes democracy not as a universal rights-based framework, but as a form of governance moralized with local/national references, on the virtue-value-action axis. The discourse of active citizenship prioritizes a type of responsible citizen focused on volunteerism, conformity, and service rather than a model of a critical, rights-claiming subject. Despite the emphasis on pluralism, democratic conflict and opposition processes are depoliticized within a discourse of unity and solidarity. Consequently, while the Turkish Social Studies Curriculum produces a narrative of a purely national democracy, it appears to limit the development of universal democratic citizenship capacities such as critical thinking, political literacy, and advocacy. It is suggested that, alongside the emphasis on virtue and values, the curriculum should place a stronger and more independent emphasis on universal human rights documents (e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and citizenship rights in the Turkish Constitution, and that the content should be enriched to enable students to see themselves as part of the global world.

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1. Introduction

Democracy education is not merely the transmission of information about the functioning of the political system (Dewey, 2020), but a dynamic process that provides individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values to become competent political subjects in the public sphere (Biesta, 2011) (Council of Europe, 2015). Curricula, which plan educational processes, are one of the most strategic tools for transmitting the ideal citizen concept to new generations (Apple, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). According to Apple (2004), educational programs function as political texts that define which forms of participation are considered legitimate and desirable and delineate the boundaries of classroom

¹. The concept of *democratic conflict* does not encompass destructive tension; rather, it involves a constructive process where differing viewpoints meet peacefully, respectfully, and dialogically, strengthening critical thinking and democratic learning

discussions. In this context, in Turkey, since the establishment of the Republic, educational curricula have been revised repeatedly in parallel with social and political changes, and the definition of the acceptable citizen has been re-constructed through the curriculum in each period (Üstel, 2019). In this context, the new SSCC published by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) in 2024, in line with the vision of the TYMM, reflects a significant paradigm shift in the approach to democracy education.

Democracy, by its very nature, is seen as an incomplete, dynamic, and continuous way of life with the potential to include contradictions and conflicts (Parker, 2011). John Dewey (2020) defines democracy not only as a form of government but essentially as '*a shared way of life based on coexistence*' (p. 92), emphasizing that schools should become small-scale models of this democratic way of life. Dewey's conceptualization also transforms schools from mere institutions that transmit knowledge into constitutive spaces of democratic socialization. Students' participation in decision-making at school, their experience of negotiating different viewpoints, and their experience of taking responsibility are critical for integrating democracy into daily life practices.

However, democracy education is inevitably a normative field. Educational curricula generally declare, either explicitly or implicitly, the understanding of democracy they embrace and its limits. Mouffe (2000), drawing attention to the tension inherent in democratic society, states that the contradiction between liberal pluralism and collective popular sovereignty is structural for democracy. However, official educational programs often tend to soften this conflictual aspect of democracy, presenting it as a sterile ideal of consensus and harmony. This tension, referred to as the '*democratic paradox*,' is often balanced in curriculum texts by emphasizing the concepts of rights and duty, and by distinguishing them from the discourse of unity (Mouffe, 2000). In other words, democratic processes of conflict and negotiation can be relegated to the background in educational discourse in favour of "order" and "unity." Biesta (2011), while discussing the democratic function of education, draws attention to whether the school is a socialization tool that integrates individuals into the existing order or a space of subjectification that cultivates independent thinking and acting subjects. In this context, the question of whether the 2024 SSCC, positions students as independent political subjects or as objects conforming to the established order is crucial. This research examines the 2024 SSCC in light of these theoretical questions, attempting to reveal how and with what concepts democracy education is addressed.

The study questions how universal standards of democracy (freedom of expression, political participation, pluralism, and the right to dissent) are addressed in the 2024 SSCC and how the curriculum frames the pedagogical and political boundaries of democracy within the normative limits it sets when teaching democracy.

1.2. Literature Review

The concept of democracy, too broad to be defined by a single definition, can be described as a unified way of life characterized by mutual trust and tolerance, where everyone works together within the social order, requiring the defense, protection, and active participation of rights, and encompassing inclusive social and political action methods (Biesta, 2007; Dewey, 2020; Özpölat, 2009, p. 53; Parker, 2011). The literature on democracy and citizenship education is full of theoretical approaches that argue that democratic societies can be sustained only through education (Biesta, 2007; Dewey, 2020; Parker, 2003; Starkey, 2018; Osler & Starkey, 2006). Democratic education theorists consider democracy as a way of life and see education as a rehearsal of democratic life (Biesta, 2011; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Parker, 2011). Dewey argues that democracy is learned through the shared experiences of society members and that schools should function as miniature democratic societies. According to Dewey, the school environment is a laboratory where students can learn to communicate, make decisions together, and take responsibility through experience (2020).

Democratic education theorists have also emphasized that the values and assumptions embedded in educational programs often have an ideological dimension (Apple, 2004; McLaren, 2011). Althusser argues that curricula are not independent of social power relations; states reproduce their own ideological hegemony through official curricula (2019). According to this approach, schools are seen as places where official knowledge and values (Apple, 2004) and the ideal citizen are idealized (Üstel, 2019). Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) Report (Crick, 1998), prepared for the British government, stated that democratic citizenship education should focus on both knowledge of rights and freedoms, the development of shared values and responsibilities, and skills for effective participation. Crick (1998) emphasizes that a good citizen is not merely a passive figure who obeys the law and votes; they should also be individuals who can critically examine what is happening in society and demand change when necessary. However, many official programs, as Crick also criticizes, focus on the dimensions of social conformity and responsibility in citizenship education, thus weakening the political literacy and critical participation aspects of education.

Biesta (2011) places the aims of democratic education within an analytical framework, drawing attention to its three functions: (a) *academic qualification*, (b) *socialization*, and (c) *subjectification*. According to Biesta, every educational program, while carrying the risk of making the individual conform to the existing social order (socialization), should primarily support their capacity for independent thinking and action as a unique subject (the process of subjectification) (2011). Democratic education should not turn the student into merely an object serving to maintain the existing order. Democratic education should also aim to empower individuals as subjects capable of questioning that order (Freire, 1970; Touranie, 2019). From this perspective, the codes that educational programs offer regarding the typology of citizenship, both explicitly and implicitly, are quite important. Biesta (2011) argues that many discourses on democratic education, while claiming to make students good citizens, actually turn them into passive carriers of the existing order. In contrast, democratic potential emerges when students encounter the unknown and step outside of existing norms. This perspective highlights how vital critical thinking (Veugelers, 2023), the ability to encounter differences, and the ability to cope with uncertainty (Banks, 2008) are in democratic education.

In the citizenship education literature, *what kind of understanding of citizenship programs promotes* is an important research topic. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified three different citizenship typologies in the context of democracy education: (a) *personally responsible citizen*, (b) *participatory citizen*, and (c) *justice-oriented/critical citizen*. A personally responsible citizen is an honest, rule-abiding, tax-paying individual who makes voluntary contributions to society; a participatory citizen is an individual who votes, actively participates in social projects, and takes on roles in institutions such as local government or schools when necessary; and a justice-oriented citizen is, citizens are individuals who can delve into the root causes of social, economic, and political problems, analyze structural inequalities, and develop collective action skills to address injustice. According to Westheimer and Kahne, while the first two typologies of citizenship focus more on raising good people and orderly citizens, the third type embodies the critical and transformative capacity necessary for deepening a democratic society. If a curriculum focuses only on personal virtues such as honesty, responsibility, and helpfulness, and limits civic duties to behaviors such as obeying laws/rules and keeping the environment clean, then it may have left democracy education at the level of raising "well-behaved and useful individuals" in its simplest sense (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, pp. 242-245). Therefore, it is argued that civic education that emphasizes only individual virtues is unlikely to produce '*critical and justice-oriented citizens*'. Indeed, programs that promote critical citizenship should be designed and structured to allow students to question existing structures, seek redress through available avenues, and contribute to social change (Apple, 2017; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Johnson & Morris, 2010).

Another important dimension in democracy and citizenship education has been pluralism and cultural diversity. Multicultural education theorists such as Banks (2008; 2017) and Gay (1994) argue that effective citizenship education requires students not only to integrate into the existing system but also to understand the perspectives of different identities and groups and to develop sensitivity to social

injustices. Banks (2017) particularly emphasizes the transformative role of education in enabling marginalized groups to become recognized and participating citizens. According to this perspective, democratic citizenship education should go beyond enabling individuals to learn about their own rights and identities, equipping them with the awareness to critique structural inequalities and take action for social justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Similarly, Parker (2003) states that unity and diversity must be taught together in a democratic society. Parker (2003) argues that addressing controversial issues in schools should allow students to develop negotiation skills by confronting different and even conflicting viewpoints in a safe environment. According to him, democratic education should involve raising young people not only as citizens of their own country but also as individuals sensitive to global conditions (Parker, 2003). Similarly, Ross (2008) states that the curriculum should offer an active citizenship experience encompassing all students, and that the goal of democratic education is to cultivate critical and active citizens, not passive and obedient ones. Veugelers (2023) notes that political systems generally aim to cultivate passive citizens who obey the law and vote; however, the real goal of education is to cultivate active and critical citizens who participate critically in social events. In this context, the success of democratic education depends on students being able to move beyond safe topics and engage with controversial and uncomfortable issues (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Otherwise, even if educational programs seemingly encourage critical thinking, they may fall short of fostering a truly democratic culture by limiting it to non-risky topics.

International organizations and comparative education research have provided guiding frameworks for the scope of democracy education. The Council of Europe's *Reference Framework for Competencies in Democratic Culture* defines, in a holistic approach, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary for democratic citizenship. This framework considers democracy not merely as technical knowledge of a form of government, but as a life practice encompassing respect for human dignity and human rights, cultural pluralism, democratic participation, and critical thinking (Council of Europe, 2018). Similarly, the UNESCO *Global Citizenship Education Guide* (GCEG) suggests that students should gain awareness around universal themes such as a culture of peace, sustainability, human rights, and responsibilities (UNESCO, 2015). In light of these international principles, it is questionable which principles and norms of democracy national curricula emphasize. For example, is there more emphasis on social order and institutional participation, or is rights-based critical participation encouraged? Comparative studies have shown that many countries' civic programs give ample space to conventional citizenship practices such as voting, legal participation, and volunteering; however, critical citizenship practices such as seeking and fighting for rights are generally excluded from the curriculum (Johnson & Morris, 2010; McLaren, 2011; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr & Losito, 2010; Veugelers, 2007; 2023). This situation indicates that, although it may vary across countries, the boundaries of democratic participation in educational programs are mostly drawn in ways that reinforce the existing legal and social order (Biesta, 2009a; Zuurmond et al., 2024). This theoretical framework and the literature's findings have guided the analysis of the understanding of democracy in the 2024 Social Studies Program. In particular, the program's idealized type of citizen, its balance of rights and duties, and the extent to which it allows for pluralism and conflict have been evaluated within the framework of the theoretical approaches mentioned above.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This research was designed within a qualitative framework and carried out using the document analysis method. Document analysis is a method that systematically examines and interprets publicly available written materials and is frequently used to evaluate education policy texts. It allows the researcher to systematically reveal the patterns of meaning in existing texts (Bowen, 2009) and to identify the visible and implicit patterns of meaning in texts by organizing meaning units at the category and theme levels (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). In analyzing the program, a conceptual content analysis was preferred to examine the contextual uses of specific concepts and conceptual relationships in the texts.

2.2. Data Sources

The main data source of the research is the official document titled "Turkey Century Education Model: Social Studies Course Curriculum (4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grades)" published by the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey in 2024 (MEB, 2024). TYMM, outlines the aims, values, skills, outcomes, and teaching processes for social studies lessons in grades 4-7. The curriculum text (116 pages) includes learning areas that explain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students are expected to acquire. The model's general aims, learning area descriptions, list of values and skills, and learning areas directly related to citizenship and democracy, such as *Active Citizenship* and *Our Living democracy*, have been examined in detail. Furthermore, all sections (outcomes, learning-teaching processes, value lists, etc.) containing expressions related to democracy (participation, rights and freedoms, responsibility(s), difference, citizenship, national unity, democratic ways, etc.) have been included in the analysis.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis Process

During data collection, the 2024 SSCC text was carefully read, and sections containing concepts related to the research question were identified. The model's general aims, explanations related to learning areas, achievements, and activity examples were reviewed in this context. In addition to sections directly related to democracy, the text also included indirect emphasis on citizenship and values education.

The collected data were analyzed using conceptual content analysis techniques. A coding framework based on the literature was used in the analysis phase. In particular, Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) typology of citizenship, Biesta's (2011) distinction of educational functions, and Mouffe's (2000) emphasis on conflictual democracy guided the data analysis. In this context, the coding process used a mixed strategy that combined deductive categories derived from the literature with inductive themes derived from the text.

A deductive approach was followed in the analysis, and readings were conducted based on the literature (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Biesta, 2011; Mouffe, 2000) through the three basic dimensions shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Democracy framework for coding

Normative Limits of Democracy	Pedagogical Limits of Democracy	Limits of The Political and Pluralistic Limits of Democracy
With which concepts is the concept of democracy mentioned in the curriculum?	How is the student conceived as a citizen in the curriculum?	What stance does the curriculum take on pluralism, differences, and social conflicts?
For example, is democracy framed by rights and freedoms, or more by concepts such as order, unity, and harmony? In the curriculum's language, is democracy defined by universal principles or by national and spiritual values?	For example, is the student a passive recipient of information or an active participant? Within what limits is participation encouraged? Is the student given space for critical thinking and dissent, or are they content with the role of a responsible, compliant citizen?	For example, is space provided for different cultural and intellectual perspectives? Are conflicts and disagreements treated as a natural part of the democratic process, or are they suppressed with the rhetoric of "national unity and solidarity"? Furthermore, to what extent are political-ethical themes such as human rights, justice, and inequality addressed in the curriculum?

In line with these defined dimensions, the curriculum text was carefully read, and the relevant sentences and paragraphs were manually coded into the above categories. For example, expressions that included the concepts of rights and responsibilities were coded with the right-duty balance code; emphasis on national unity and patriotism was coded with the unity discourse code; and emphasis on different perspectives and pluralism was coded as pluralism. Complex expressions falling into more than one category were evaluated in terms of each theme they contained. After coding, the findings were examined with an interpretive approach to reveal thematic patterns. Direct quotations from the

curriculum were used as supporting evidence for the findings. Thus, internal and external validity were increased by supporting the interpretations with these quotations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). Finally, in compliance with ethical principles, no student or teacher data was included in the study texts other than official documents; only open-source curriculum texts were used.

3. Findings

Based on the analysis of the 2024 Social Studies Curriculum's content on democracy education, the findings are presented under three main themes. Below, the findings within each theme are given along with sample excerpts from the curriculum text.

3.1. Normative Limits of Democracy

Under this theme, it is explained in which concepts and in what context the concept of democracy is addressed in the curriculum. Figure 1. presents a visual prepared on the concepts frequently used in the curriculum and addressed alongside democracy.

The research findings show that the concept of society (n=191) is the central and most dominant core concept surrounding all political and civic thought. This core structure is strongly supported by high-frequency concepts such as national (n=75), republic (n=50), rights (n=37), freedom (n=26), and respect for differences (n=24). However, concepts such as human rights (n=12), empathy (n=11) and justice (n=9), which are located in the peripheral layers of the conceptual network and represented with lower frequencies, function as supporting elements that complement the value and sensitivity dimensions of the society-centered discourse, despite appearing quantitatively limited. This situation indicates that the conceptual structure is not only related to the institutional and managerial axis; it is also interwoven with ethical and human values in a multifaceted way.

While the data are important, the context in which these concepts are addressed is equally important. The content analysis of the curriculum text presented below provides more explanatory data on this matter.

In the curriculum text, personal virtues such as justice, respect, helpfulness, friendship, and patriotism are frequently emphasized as prerequisites for democratic attitudes and behaviours. For example, in the *Our Living Democracy* learning area in the 4th grade, it is aimed for students to "*recognize the fundamental characteristics of democracy: freedom, equality, the right to vote and be elected, national sovereignty, participation, pluralism, and the rule of law*" (MEB, 2024, p. 104). This statement shows that the curriculum includes classical liberal-democratic values (freedom, equality, etc.) in its definition of democracy. However, when the curriculum's general objectives section is carefully examined, it is evident that the values related to democracy are always balanced with national and spiritual references. Indeed, the first general objective of the curriculum is to educate students as "*active citizens who know and exercise their rights, fulfill their responsibilities, possess national consciousness, and are willing to uphold secular, democratic, national, spiritual, and universally compatible values*" (MEB, 2024, p. 4). While this sentence affirms the use of rights, it also stipulates the condition of fulfilling responsibilities. The phrase "secular, democratic, national, spiritual values" presents universal concepts filtered through the lens of national culture.

The SSCC, while not entirely disregarding universal democratic values in defining democracy, reinterprets these values within a framework of "*Virtue-Value-Action.*" This approach reflects a tendency to present democracy not merely as a form of government, but as a kind of whole of moral virtues. The curriculum demonstrates that a local interpretation of democracy, blended with national and spiritual values, is dominant, rather than universal definitions of democracy.

Another prominent emphasis in the curriculum regarding democracy is the social order, centred on the social aspect. In many learning outcomes and explanations, democracy is presented as a form of government that establishes order and stability in society. For example, in the 5th-grade *Living Democracy* learning area, "*...students are repeatedly asked to list the characteristics of an active citizen and "make assumptions about the importance of being an active citizen in social life"* (p. 54). Rights and freedoms

are discussed in almost every section together with the concept of "social responsibility". Therefore, the balance between rights and duties is a central normative principle in the curriculum. Here, democracy education underlines that students should not only defend their own rights and freedoms but also fulfill their duties and responsibilities completely. The emphasis on social order also stands out as a theme that frames the narrative on democratic participation and rights. The explanation of the 6th grade *Living Democracy* learning area includes the following statement: Students; The curriculum aims to equip students with knowledge and skills in areas such as "*individuals' influence on the decision-making process of governance, the importance of rights and responsibilities in maintaining order in social life, and the effects of digitalization and technological advancements on the exercise of citizenship rights...*" (p. 77). As this quote shows, maintaining social order is explicitly stated as an objective. Therefore, the curriculum's language depicts democracy as a tool that provides order and unity in social life.

This portrayal pushes the conflictual and deliberative aspects of democracy into the background, aligning it more closely with the concepts of 'responsibility' and 'order'. In the 7th-grade *Our Living Democracy* learning area, students are given the task of "interpreting the impact of antidemocratic practices in our country and the world on the culture of peace and coexistence," while emphasizing national unity and solidarity in this process. The relevant activity examines the coups of May 27, 1960, and September 12, 1980, and specifically emphasizes that "*every person has fundamental rights and freedoms and should not be discriminated against*" (pp. 105-106). This example demonstrates that the curriculum, on the one hand, shows the courage to address antidemocratic practices (coups, racism, etc.); on the other hand, it takes care to frame these discussions within the context of national unity. Even the principle that *all people have fundamental rights* is presented in the curriculum alongside the theme of unity and solidarity; the issue of differences and rights is linked to a discourse of unification around shared values.

The concept of human rights appears six times in the curriculum text. However, none of these repetitions mentions universal human rights, nor do they link these concepts to democracy. The concept is used solely to refer to the course on *Human Rights, Citizenship, and Democracy* (pp. 4, 11, 13, 21, 25, 33). For example, when discussing human rights and democracy, emphasis is frequently placed on "suitability to our culture," "historical heritage," and "national sovereignty." This creates a hierarchy between universal democratic standards (individual autonomy, freedom of expression) and local values (social harmony, culture, tradition), with local values acting as a filter that sifts through universal democratic principles. Although democracy is defined through universal principles (human rights, pluralism), it is localized by emphasizing that these principles must be "compatible with national and spiritual values."

3.2. Pedagogical Limits of Democracy

To understand the citizenship profile outlined in the curriculum text within the context of democracy education, the roles assigned to students in the learning outcomes and explanations have been examined. In the curriculum, students are primarily conceived as 'information recipients' and personally responsible/compliant citizens (following rules) in the 4th and 5th grades; while in the 6th and 7th grades, they transform into more active participants (writing petitions) who analyze governance processes and question digital participation methods. Students are frequently encouraged to be *active citizens* (n=12).

Throughout the program, the duties and responsibilities (n=75) of active citizens are emphasized. For example, in the 5th-grade learning-teaching practices section, students are asked to compare "active and inactive citizens" (SB.5.4.2 p.54); here, the 'inactive citizen' is presented as a negative example of someone who does not fulfill their responsibilities and does not contribute to society. Indeed, the phrase "*active citizens who know and exercise their rights and fulfill their responsibilities...*" (p. 4), emphasized in the program's general objectives, has made the balance between rights and responsibilities a fundamental component of the curriculum.

While participation in democracy (n=6) is an important theme in the curriculum, the forms of this participation are defined within limited and safe areas. Specifically, within the *Our Living Democracy*

learning area, students are taught that they can participate in democracy through activities such as voting in elections, electing school representatives, joining civil society organizations, cleaning up the environment, and submitting petitions through legal channels. For example, in the 6th-grade curriculum, students are asked to consider ways to participate in governance outside of elections (D1.1, p. 79). At the same time, the clues given are limited to methods such as "political parties, civil society organizations, media, public opinion formation" (p. 79). These are, of course, fundamental components necessary for the development of democratic awareness and their inclusion in the curriculum is quite important. However, the critical citizenship literature underscores that active citizenship should not be limited to these alone (Banks, 2008; Parker, 2003). In particular, the justice-focused citizenship approach (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) views critically evaluating existing institutions and policies when necessary, and making one's voice heard peacefully and powerfully, as part of democratic participation (Banks, 2008; Parker, 2003).

The curriculum text expects students to question information sources, evaluate different perspectives, and see the different causes of social problems. For example, one activity states, "a large group discussion is held on the reasons for different perspectives on the same social problem" (p. 66). Such activities are valuable and democratic pedagogical practices that teach students to look at things from multiple perspectives. However, in subsequent activities where groups are asked to brainstorm solutions to problems, the solution proposals are expected to be found more within existing structures. For example, even when students are asked to *put forward original ideas to prevent antidemocratic behaviours* in the fourth learning area of the 7th grade, this is limited to small-group discussions and classroom activities (SB.7.4.4, p. 105). This approach reflects a controlled, critical approach from a pedagogical perspective. Students are expected to identify social problems and antidemocratic situations and generate ideas about them. However, this entire process takes place under the teacher's guidance, within predetermined methodological frameworks. Therefore, while the curriculum includes statements aimed at developing students' critical thinking skills, it significantly weakens the critical action dimension. Although critical thinking is included in the program, it is mostly limited to questioning the accuracy of information and digital literacy. Consequently, the extent to which the program's portrayal of the critical citizen role is questioned is debatable. Nowhere in the curriculum are students directly told to "recognize social inequalities," "question school administration," or "criticize injustices in school and society." Normative duties such as obeying rules, voting, helping others, being responsible, and respecting others' rights are presented as the basic indicators of good citizenship.

3.3. The Pluralistic and Political Limits of Democracy

One of the critical criteria determining the quality of democracy education is the program's stance on pluralism and diversity. The SSCC includes statements indicating its adoption of the principle of pluralism at the conceptual level. Pluralism (n=3) is explicitly mentioned in the curriculum text when listing fundamental concepts of democracy. The program's general list of values and skills also includes "respect for differences" (n=34), "empathy" (n=11), and "living together" (n=10). For example, in the 4th-grade *Living Together* learning area, activities are conducted to help students "discover the similarities and differences of their peers and realize that differences are a richness" (SB. 4.1.2, p. 15). Similarly, the value of respect for individual and cultural differences is specifically emphasized in the 5th-grade *Living Together* learning area (p. 45). The relevant learning outcome statement includes the phrase, "the importance of respect is emphasized, particularly by focusing on concepts such as empathy, 'you language,' 'I language,' respect for differences, active listening, and body language" (S.B 7.11, p. 91). In this activity, students learn the necessity of accepting people with different cultural characteristics as they are. These findings indicate that the curriculum strives to use a relatively inclusive and positive language, especially regarding cultural differences. Students are told that individual and cultural differences among people are normal and valuable. This is a very positive step toward pluralism, an indispensable value of a democratic society.

The curriculum also includes activities to negotiate different viewpoints. The discussions on "different perspectives on the same issue," exemplified above, make students feel that there is not just one right

answer, but that multiple perspectives can exist (S.B. 6.1.3, p. 64). Even in 7th grade, when discussing the problems encountered in implementing democracy, students are asked to classify antidemocratic practices (coups, racism, discrimination, war, violence, etc.) experienced in different parts of the world (S.B.7.4.4, p. 105). Through this activity, students have the opportunity to learn that democracy is not a one-size-fits-all experience and that problems can arise in different contexts by seeing antidemocratic situations manifest in different ways across countries.

Despite the program's sensitivity to pluralism and diversity, its approach to political pluralism and disagreement is cautious. While the curriculum provides an environment for students to hear different viewpoints and understand why people might think differently, the idea of conflict or disagreement between these views is not adequately addressed. In other words, conflict is not seen as a natural part of democracy. While efforts are made to create environments where students can listen to and discuss different ideas, the curriculum implies that they must ultimately reach a common understanding or solution. The guidelines for discussion activities generally expect students to find common ground or to evaluate and combine everyone's contributions. This raises the question of how students will cope with conflict and disagreement. Therefore, rather than developing conflict-ridden skills, the activities constantly emphasize harmonious environments free from conflict. However, disagreements are constant and inevitable in democratic societies. In a democracy, disagreement is as fundamental a skill to be learned as consensus (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). The curriculum has chosen to remain neutral or avoid delving too deeply into this issue.

Although equality and justice are listed as positive concepts in the curriculum, 'inequality', 'poverty', and 'injustice' are rarely mentioned. While the socioeconomic dimension is implicitly addressed in some activities, these topics are not made explicit learning objectives. For example, when the principle of respect for human rights is discussed in the 7th grade, racism, discrimination, war, and violence are listed among antidemocratic practices in the world. Some of these are actually the result or cause of social inequalities (racism and discrimination are direct examples of unequal treatment). However, the curriculum merely mentions these phenomena within the framework of a general moral wrong and hardly addresses the socioeconomic inequalities and dynamics that underlie them. For instance, issues such as poverty or income inequality are presented as technical aspects of economic problems in the social studies curriculum. They are not directly or indirectly linked to democracy. In the 7th-grade *Economy in Our Lives* learning area, while topics such as wants and needs, production, and consumption are discussed, the relationship between economic problems and democracy is generally ignored. These issues related to social justice are mostly associated with sustainability and the preservation of values (pp. 107-108). This suggests that the curriculum views democracy education as a kind of values education devoid of politics. Indeed, the systemic change or the approach of delving into the root causes of problems, emphasized in Westheimer and Kahne's justice-oriented citizenship model, is largely absent from the program. The curriculum also places little emphasis on tasks such as students researching the causes of injustice in the world or why people might be poor. Therefore, while the curriculum defines the student as a compliant actor, it does not adequately support them in understanding and combating injustices.

4. Discussion

The research findings show that the 2024 TYMM Social Studies Curriculum's approach to democracy education remains within certain normative limits. Although the curriculum presents the concept of democracy on paper with a broad range of values (freedom, equality, participation, rule of law, pluralism, etc.), it is observed that these values are mostly limited to responsibility, order, and conformity. The results reveal that the tendency to blend the discourse of rights and duties, frequently seen in the tradition of citizenship education in Turkey (İnce, 2012; Kancı, 2009; Şen, 2019), and the understanding of pluralism (Akarsu, 2025a; Ceylan & Korkmaz, 2021) continue in the new program. In other words, the 2024 SSCC, like its predecessors, prefers to conduct a rights-based democratic discourse together with a discourse of duty and conformity. This situation demonstrates that, as Westheimer and Kahne (2004) emphasize, the goal of raising good people is prominent in democracy

education. The program's virtue and value-oriented approach provides a strong foundation for character education. Students are encouraged to be honest, helpful, patriotic, and responsible individuals. These are, of course, desirable qualities for societies. However, being a good person and being a good citizen do not always coincide. Democratic citizenship, which will move a society forward, sometimes requires challenging norms considered good and being critical in the face of injustice (Kim & Kwon, 2023; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Veugelers, 2023). The 2024 curriculum's reduction of democracy education largely to the axis of moral virtues and social harmony leads to the moralization of public and political problems and, consequently, to the narrowing of the scope of democracy. Students learn many concepts related to democracy in the program, but they rarely find environments where they can confront the concrete social contradictions of these concepts. For example, the curriculum touches upon pivotal moments in the history of democracy, such as coups. However, in analyzing these moments, the emphasis shifts to a discourse of unity and harmony. This indicates that the critical aspect of democratic education—inquisitive and transformative learning experiences—is relegated to the background.

At the same time, the curriculum views the student as an active and participatory subject pedagogically; however, this participation is largely limited by institutional frameworks deemed legitimate. Critical thinking is encouraged at the individual and cognitive levels; however, it is rarely taken to the level of critical citizenship (questioning the existing system and opposing it if necessary). While equipping students with democratic life skills such as cooperation, teamwork, project work, and discussion, the curriculum also guides students toward being rule-abiding and responsible citizens in their interactions with authority. This situation parallels Biesta's (2009a) argument that citizenship education programs often prioritize secure, system-bound citizenship, with their goals of qualification and socialization, thereby narrowing the scope of critical political literacy. Furthermore, it exhibits a pedagogical approach largely parallel to the "personally responsible" and partly "participatory citizen" types in Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) typology. The individual who contributes to society, participates in volunteer activities, and takes part in democratic processes is idealized. At the same time, the type of critical citizen who criticizes injustices, tries to transform the existing order when necessary, and focuses on justice is clearly relegated to the background. Indeed, similar findings in the literature exist regarding previous citizenship education programs (Akarsu, 2025a; 2025b; Caymaz, 2008; Çayır, 2011; İnce, 2012; Şen, 2019). For example, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) and Ross (2008) stated that citizenship education programs focusing only on individual virtues produce well-behaved and helpful individuals; however, they are insufficient in raising critical and justice-oriented citizens. The findings of this research also show that the curriculum in Turkey is along similar lines. The curriculum prepares the student. It tends to shape individuals as 'active' but 'compliant' citizens.

The program's failure to address democratic conflict and negotiation processes evokes Biesta's (2009b) concept of "sporadic democracy." According to Biesta, democracy is learned not only when institutions like elections function, but primarily when routine is disrupted, when people encounter unusual situations and the 'other.' The 2024 program, however, has ignored conflict, effectively overlooking the opportunity to prepare students for real-world polarization and sharp disagreements. However, in contemporary societies, disagreements and differences of opinion are a part of life. When educational programs exclude these, students will struggle to acquire the skills to manage the democratic tensions they will face in the future. If democracy is reduced in school to a procedural practice in which only rules are learned, and minor debates take place, young individuals will face the limitation of understanding democracy only through the ballot box and protocol. Indeed, the picture presented by the curriculum views democracy as a set of values and rituals, and distances it from the feeling that democracy is a field of struggle. This situation could downplay democracy's transformative impact and reduce it to a mere ritual of voting and being elected.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The TYMM vision sets forth a new educational ideal for Turkey's new Century. While the curriculum glorifies a citizen profile committed to traditional values and fulfilling duties and responsibilities, it

addresses critical thinking and global awareness (Kim & Kwon, 2023; Johnson & Morris, 2010; Veugelers, 2023) in a controlled manner. The curriculum points to democracy as a form of governance moralized on the axis of virtue and values; participation as conformity and service, and pluralism as disciplined within normative boundaries under the discourse of national unity. This approach is open to questioning in terms of the universal principles of democracy education. In this respect, while constructing a local and national narrative of democracy in line with the "Turkish Century" vision, the curriculum limits the scope for developing universal democratic citizenship skills, such as critical thinking, political literacy, and advocacy.

The curriculum has a moderately pluralistic, non-conflict-based approach to political/ethical boundaries. Cultural and individual differences are appreciated within the context of education; pluralism is taught to students as a democratic value, and the need for non-discrimination is explicitly emphasized. Indeed, the principle that *"every person has fundamental rights and freedoms and should not be discriminated against"* is explicitly stated in the curriculum text (MEB, 2024, p. 106). However, all these positive messages of pluralism are almost always conditioned by the values of unity, togetherness, and social harmony. The message conveyed is that differences exist, but unity under a common identity is paramount. In parallel, more "sharp" democratic themes, such as inequality and conflict, are not prominently featured in the curriculum. Democracy education is framed in the curriculum as an "ideal social order" in which differences exist, but everyone ultimately finds common ground, and in which major injustices are rarely discussed. Students raised within this framework are likely to become polite, tolerant, helpful, and respectful of differences. However, it is unlikely that these individuals will be willing to question local and global issues (war, environment, justice, neoliberal policies, global hunger, income inequality, etc.) and demand radical change.

Democracy is presented in the curriculum as a way of life, as Dewey expressed it. However, the plural voices and diverse colours within this way of life are largely limited to folkloric elements. As Veugelers (2023) emphasizes, citizenship education is discussed critically within a framework that views citizenship as an ethical-political process of becoming rather than individual conformity, with a focus on democracy and social justice. Democracy is not merely about creating a coherent and harmonious community. If democracy is the ideal of building a social order that can criticize itself, confront its mistakes, and make room for difference (Dewey, 2020; Biesta, 2007; Veugelers, 2023), then it is suggested that educational programs in Turkey should take the following bold steps to improve the quality of democracy education:

Strengthening a rights-based approach: In addition to emphasizing virtue and values, the curriculum should place greater emphasis on universal human rights documents (e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and on the citizenship rights enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey. It is important to create spaces where students are not only aware of their duties but also conscious of their rights, able to exercise them, and learn about mechanisms for seeking redress through concrete case studies. Topics directly relevant to students' own experiences, such as children's rights, environmental rights, and animal rights, can be linked to and concretized through quotations that define the concept of rights.

Conflict and negotiation-focused pedagogy: Transforming the classroom into a learning environment where controversial topics are addressed, even in a controlled manner, is crucial for establishing and sustaining a democratic understanding. Therefore, curriculum outcomes can include statements or examples that allow for experiences where different viewpoints clash and are negotiated. For example, scenarios can be created, even at a simple level, that allow students to experience disagreement over a social issue. The curriculum should include concrete situations and case studies that allow students to understand that democracy is not only about compromise but also about legitimate disagreement, by discussing what constitutes a democratic stance in situations of conflict (e.g., respecting the majority decision, respecting minority rights, the right to object, etc.).

Critical media and political literacy: In the digital age, a crucial aspect of democratic citizenship is media literacy and the critical examination of the information ecosystem. The curriculum should be updated to equip students with critical media literacy and the ability to analyze power relations, rather than relying on the discourse of virtue. For example, the curriculum could include topics such as the role of media in democratic societies, combating misinformation, and recognizing propaganda techniques. These topics will enable students to participate more consciously in current democratic processes, elevating them not only to well-meaning citizens but also to conscious and critical citizens (Johnson & Morris, 2010).

Expanding forms of participation: The curriculum's concept of *active citizenship* should not be limited to voting or civil society activities. Legitimate forms of participation widely accepted in modern democracies (e.g., petition campaigns, peaceful protests, boycotts, advocacy activities via social media, etc.) should also be introduced to students at appropriate levels. In this way, students can learn about different forms of democratic rights advocacy and participation and become aware of ways to make their voices heard on social issues they will encounter in the future. Of course, such topics should be explained using non-violent methods and peaceful examples appropriate to the students' age level.

Balancing the global perspective: While it is important to raise citizens who uphold Turkey's national and spiritual values, it is also important to enrich the content so that students see themselves as part of the global world. In addition to addressing topics specific to Turkey, such as July 15, the curriculum can also include global success stories or examples of universal democratic struggles. In this way, students can develop a sense of global citizenship by understanding the universal dimension of the struggle for democracy and human rights.

As we enter the Turkish Century, our goal in democracy education is to raise individuals whose roots are in the past, whose eyes are on the future; who uphold their own cultural values but also internalize universal human rights; The goal should be to raise citizens who know and exercise not only their duties but also their rights; who respect differences and are sensitive to injustice. It should not be forgotten that young people who think critically and speak out for their rights are the greatest guarantee of a democratic society.

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