

## A Half Century Journey of Social Studies in Turkey: Reflections from the 7th International Social Studies Education Symposium

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### **1 Introduction**

The seventh International Social Studies Education Symposium [ISSES] (Uluslararası Sosyal Bilgiler Eğitimi Sempozyumu, [USBES]) was held at Kırşehir Ahi Evran University this year and many domestic and international researchers coming from different regions of the world participated<sup>1</sup>. The symposium had two main themes; the first one was "Social Studies Education in Turkey in its 50th Anniversary"; aimed at evaluating and discussing the current status and the future of the Social Studies Education. This theme was dedicated to the 50th anniversary from the first introduction of Social Studies Education as a school subject in Turkey in 1968 (Akpınar & Kaymakçı, 2012). The second theme was "Kemalism/Ataturkism<sup>2</sup> and Democracy in Social Studies Education" which are among the foundational topics of Social Studies Education in Turkey.

During three days, from October 11<sup>th</sup> to October 13<sup>th</sup>, 264 papers were presented, and the sessions were attended by more than four hundred participants, with an increased foreign participation compared to previous years. A wide range of participants from all regions of Turkey attended the symposium, from researchers and members of academia<sup>3</sup> to teachers who attended with the special permission from the Turkish Ministry of National Education. As such, the symposium provided a fruitful environment for academics and practitioners to interact with each other, share knowledge and build collaborations. Furthermore, undergraduate and postgraduate students were encouraged to participate in the symposium and they were given the opportunity to present their work and build their networks, contributing to the development of their early careers.

The first day of the symposium started with the singing of the national anthem and a minute of silence to honour the memory of people who died defending the homeland; these are customary ceremonies repeated every year to open the symposium (see Pamuk & Pamuk, 2017). This was followed by the introductory remarks of Prof. Dr. Vatan Karakaya, the President/Rector of the hosting university. His speech highlighted the importance of Social Studies Education for society and emphasized the necessity to deepen the connections between social studies and other subjects such as math.

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## 2 Keynotes

Throughout the symposium, keynote speakers from the United States, Romania, Italy, Austria, Palestine, and Turkey presented their new perspectives on a variety of topics related to social studies education. On the first day of the symposium Assist. Prof. Dr. Jason Harshman, (College of Education, University of Iowa, USA), gave a speech entitled "Teaching Hope: Social Studies Educator and the Future of Democracy." In his speech, Dr. Harshman discussed the state of democracy both in the world and the United States and highlighted the rise all over the world of right wings administrations which have outspreaded, even in traditionally democratic countries, antidemocratic and oppressive actions such as putting pressure on media, discriminating against minorities, and preventing peaceful parades or rallies of citizens. Dr. Harshman emphasized the role and necessity of critical pedagogy and critical social studies education in order to overcome these threats; he concluded with a message of hope for the future of democracy coming from the key role of teachers and their subjective agency in training students for the democratic processes. The next speaker, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Loredana Ivan (National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Department. of Communication), gave a speech on Democracy Education in Romania. Dr. Ivan first mentioned how citizenship education in Romanian schools was shaped together with the communist ideology and how the regime used education as a means of propaganda. Next, she discussed how this citizenship classes were taught, which teaching strategies were used, how the course objectives were determined, how the student evaluations were made, with focus on the differences between school levels (primary, middle and high school). Dr. Ivan continued her speech explaining the content matter and teaching methods included in the textbooks of this course. Finally, she gave an overview of some of the issues in the textbooks for this course such as lack of depth in presenting concepts, irrelevant and stereotypic content, lack of time references, and anachronisms.

In the same day Dr. Michele Bertani, from the department of economics at the University of Verona (Italy), pointed out in his keynote address the need to focus more extensively on inclusive education and recommended that this topic should be more widely investigated in social studies research. Dr. Bertani, in his speech entitled "Inclusive Education: The Debate at the International Level" provided a general overview of the meaning of inclusive education through the analysis of the three definitions of inclusive education given by UNESCO, the United Nations and the [European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education](#). Reviewing the evidence from the scientific literature, a number of steps to move towards and promote inclusive education were identified; among them, Dr. Bertani listed the importance of recognizing the needs of the pupils and understanding their individual background within a multifaceted approach. The perception of schools' quality amongst European national societies was finally investigated in the conclusive remarks of Dr. Bertani's speech. The following keynote speaker, Dr. Mahmoud Hawamdeh, (Director of Continuing Education and Community Service at the Al-Quds Open University, Palestine), drew attention to the linkages between social studies and technology in a lecture entitled "Digitalization of Education and Its Implications for Values Education." In his speech, he emphasized that the growing popularity of technology has affected the field of education. He stated that this situation started the process of digitalization of education and discussed the effects of this process on values education, a key aspect in Social Studies class.



On October 12<sup>th</sup>, the first of the two remaining keynote speakers of the symposium, Dr. Pelin Yüksel, (Department of Education, University of Vienna, Austria), gave a speech on digital storytelling. In her presentation entitled "Use of Digital Storytelling in Social Studies", Dr. Yüksel talked about elements of digital stories such as music, visual materials, and the points of view of the narration. She then investigated the following questions: How can a digital story be used as a method in Social Studies? How to create a digital story? What are the types of digital stories? By showing step by step examples of how to create a digital story, she pointed out the benefits of including digital storytelling in class such as increased creativity and self-expression, and a more project-based type of education resulting in better productivity.



Classics that can be used in Social Studies" board filled by participants

On the last day of the symposium, the keynote speaker Prof. Dr. Bahri Ata from Gazi University (Department. of History Education) presented his work entitled "The Classics and Their Significance in Social Studies Education Undergraduate Program." Dr. Ata used a board called "Classics that can be Used in Social Studies" which was placed for two days in one of the main halls in order for the participants in the symposium to list the names of the books which they considered as classics that could be used in Social Studies Education. Dr. Ata then used the results of this experiment in his keynote speech to focus on the definition of classics, to discuss the importance of using classics in education and to name some of the selected classics from the board. He classified the classics according to three main categories: Social Sciences, Literature, and Pedagogy. Then he went on to list several additional books from both Turkish and foreign writers, such as the Man Seeking Water (Suyu Arayan Adam)<sup>4</sup> (Şevket Süreyya Aydemir), The Wealth of Nations (Adam Smith), The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Thomas Kuhn). In addition to this, the reading lists of important social scientists such as Bozkurt Güvenç

([anthropologist](#)), Şerif Mardin ([sociologist](#)), were included. In this keynote Dr. Ata stated that “*Life is the most fundamental source of social studies*” and he concluded that reading important classics could help university students to understand life.

### 3 Overview of Presentations

While the keynote speeches were held at the symposium, the presentations and workshops continued at full pace. Most of the presentations, given by more than four hundred participants, were based on either qualitative or quantitative research designs. Only a few of the studies were based on a mixed design. Surveys, interviews and the analysis of documents were the most predominant methods in the presented studies. The large variety of topics touched in the presentations during the symposium can be broadly classified into eight major areas:

- Examination of curriculum and textbooks from different perspectives
- Social studies education and technology
- Media literacy
- Citizenship, democracy and values education
- Studies on different thinking skills (chronological, creative, etc.)
- Problems in social studies education
- Museum education
- Studies to reveal students and teachers’ perception, success, attitudes and opinion

Due to the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Social Studies course in Turkey, there were also presentations aiming to compare the old and current curricula and reveal the changes experienced over the years. A research entitled, “50-Year Adventure in Social Studies Teaching: The Comparison of the 1968-2018 Curriculums” (7th International Social Studies Education Symposium [ISSES], 2018, p. 437-438) was one of them. In his study, Hamza Yakar, found that, while the 1968 curriculum was more detailed, today's curriculum was more flexible; while the 1968 curriculum was focused on the outcomes, the present curriculum gave more relevance to the process; while the feelings of national identity were at the forefront in the 1968 curriculum, values education was more important in today's curriculum.

Some of the presentations were remarkable in terms of findings. A research entitled "A Critical Overview on Social Studies Education in Turkey" by Gökhan Önal (ISSES, 2018, p.391-392) was one of them. The aim of this study was to evaluate the current status of Social Studies Education in Turkey through the lens of critical pedagogy by interviewing teachers and middle-school students and examining the Social Studies curriculum. Findings of the study indicated that Social Studies teachers mostly relied in their teaching on lecturing rather than using instructional strategies that kept students active, such as argumentations, group work, and project-based education. Thus, Önal concluded that Social Studies Education in middle-school in Turkey is far from developing the students’ critical thinking, problem solving and social participations, all crucial skills for an active citizenship.

In addition to these, it is worth noting that the studies linking the use of technology in the Social Studies course increased this year compared to the previous years. A study entitled "Social Media in Social Studies Education Research" (ISSES, 2018, p.135-136) was one of them. Adnan Altun drew attention to the lack of research using social media as a data collection tool, as skill training and as a subject of teaching and emphasized that the studies evaluating social media critically should be increased. Likewise, Gül Tuncel highlighted the importance and the role of media literacy in Social Studies teaching in her presentation entitled “An Evaluation on the Importance of the Media Literacy in Teaching Social Studies” (ISSES 2018, p.287-288). Nevertheless, she concluded that some social studies teachers did not know how to improve students’ media literacy skills or how to employ these skills within their teaching.

A study by İhsan Ünlü and Alper Kaşkaya, entitled “Examining the Viewpoints of Social Sciences Teachers on Values Education” (ISSES, 2018, p.241-242) was conducted on 46 social studies teachers.



Most of the participants pointed out that it is always expected that only Social Studies teachers must be responsible to teach value education while parents' role in value education is often disregarded. We believe that the finding of this study is very important as it challenges a widespread misperception regarding value education among parents in Turkey. Oddly, parents do not appear to want to take the responsibility of teaching values to their children.

Another noteworthy presentation was from Davut Gürel and Yasemin Büyükşahin and was entitled "Training of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Reflections from Practice" (ISSES, 2018, p.101-102). Although almost four million Syrian refugees live in Turkey, there were only a few studies in the symposium focused on the education of Syrian people. The study indicated that Turkish teachers have been struggling to teach and give psychologic support and guidance to Syrian children who may have been exposed to violence during the civil war. The teachers who participated in the study felt that they did not have appropriate training and experiences to deal with the Syrian refugee students adequately.

While most of the presentations in the symposium were in Turkish, a few studies from international participants were presented in English. One of them, entitled "Infusing Professional Development to Expand Teacher Competencies within a Social Studies Education Program" was presented by William Coghill Behrends (ISSES, 2018, p.319) from the University of Iowa. In his presentation, Behrends mentioned the "Teacher Leader Certificate" program, whose participants are teachers and teacher candidates. He talked about the content of the program, the workshop topics and the duration of the courses. Another English presentation was "Uncovering the Unknown: Creating Spaces in the Social Studies to Develop Global Citizens" by Dr. Harshman (also a keynote speaker) and Jonathan Hamlin (ISSES, 2018, p. 317), graduate student. Their talks focused on the results of a research whose participants were both Turkish and American teachers, and whose aim was to answer questions such as "What is Global Citizenship Education? How should educators address global issues? Do the new standards, especially citizenship education and National History conflict with Global Citizenship Education?"

#### **4 Workshops**

Another element that enriched the symposium was the series of workshops. A total of seven workshops were held during the three days. The topics of the workshops were quite various:

- 1) Futurist Thinking in Social Studies
- 2) On Life Science and Social Studies Education
- 3) Evidence-Based Learning in Social Studies
- 4) Oral History in Social Studies Courses
- 5) Use of Technology in Academic Research-reference Management Software
- 6) Gifted Children in Social Studies, But how?
- 7) Drama Practices in Social Studies Course

Some of the workshops, such as evidence-based learning and drama practices, required an active and direct involvement of the participants. To provide a stimulating learning environment for all participants, different workshops were targeted to different audiences, with some specifically tailored for the participation of undergraduate and graduate students.



### 5 Panel Discussion

In addition to the workshops, a panel discussion entitled "The 50th anniversary of social studies in Turkey and Future Perspectives" moderated by Prof. Dr. Veysel Sönmez on the second day of the symposium (12<sup>th</sup> of October 2018). The panellists were Prof. Dr. Handan Devenci (Eskişehir Anadolu University), Prof. Dr. Akif Akkuş (Hasan Kalyoncu University), Prof. Dr. Ahmet Şimşek (Istanbul University –Cerrahpaşa) and Prof. Dr. Mehmet Açıkalın (Istanbul University –Cerrahpaşa).



*An image from panel speakers*

One of the main topic of the panel was the evaluation of the recent changes in the K -8 Social Studies curriculum and the Social Studies Teacher Education program. The updated Social Studies Teacher Education program was criticized due to the reduction, in comparison to the former program, in the variety of courses on social science subjects. Dr. Şimşek stated that including a number of history and social science courses in the Teacher Education program would contribute to the development of the social and national identity of students/preservice teachers. The role of Social Studies Education in identity development was also highlighted by Dr. Binaya Subedi at the former ISSES / USBES last year (see Pamuk & Pamuk, 2017) and Dr. Şimşek's speech reminded again how crucial Social Studies education is in identity development. Later, the current status of Social Studies education was discussed, and some concern were raised regarding the teaching of Social Studies in Turkey. Dr. Açıkalın pointed out that, although the Social Studies curriculum in Turkey was reformed based on the standards from the National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS] (1994, 2010), this has not been successful enough. He indicated that there has been a major ongoing misperception about how to apply integrative approaches to Social Studies in Turkey. Social Studies teachers in Turkey have been struggling to shift to integrative teaching approaches and still prefer a content-based teaching approach. In order to overcome this problem, the Ministry of National Education has adopted Social Studies textbooks based on an integrative approach (Açıkalın, 2018). According to Dr. Açıkalın, these textbooks based on an integrative approach have also not been working well and cannot work at all in the future unless Social

Studies teachers learn to apply the integrative approach and are able to plan an integrative teaching unit by themselves.

While many issues discussed in this symposium, the next year's host institution has been decided at the closing ceremony. The next ISSES / USBES will be held in Ankara University in October 2019.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Ataturkism: "Worldview developed by M. Kemal Ataturk [the founder of modern Turkey], and his associates. It was the political philosophy behind reforms promoting the westernization of Turkey in the early republic era. The main principles of Ataturkism are republicanism, secularism, nationalism, populism, and revolutionism/ reformism" (Heper, Öztürk-Tunçel, & Criss, 2018, p.67).

<sup>3</sup> Researchers and members of academia refer to teacher educators who work in faculties of education as members of universities. Teacher Education is a four-year program in Turkey and is within the faculty of education. Teacher educators may work in these programs in different academic positions, from research assistantship to full professorship.

<sup>4</sup> Suyu Arayan Adam [The Man Seeking Water] is the author's autobiography. It contains reflections of World War I, the Balkan Wars, Russian Bolshevism and reflects the period in which it was written.

