



An Examination of Social Studies Teachers' Views on Environmental Education Themed Activities in Textbooks¹

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine teachers' views on environmental education themed activities in social studies textbooks. The study was conducted using a basic qualitative research design, and data were collected through a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers. The study group consists of 17 social studies teachers who agreed to participate voluntarily in the 2023-2024 academic year in Mersin province. The data were analyzed using content analysis, presented in tables according to themes and code, and interpreted. As a result of the study, teachers expressed that the environmental education-themed activities in the textbooks were insufficient. Teachers stated that the activities in the textbooks should be updated in accordance with the principle of learning by doing, student level, and the principle of near to far, and that the number of activities should be increased. Additionally, they indicated that they implemented alternative activities such as environmental cleaning work, afforestation activities, zero waste and recycling activities, showing documentaries and videos about the environment, field trips for environmental awareness, and value teaching activities. Based on these results, it can be recommended to increase the number of activities in the textbooks and update them by considering teachers' opinions.

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INTRODUCTION

The increase in needs due to rapid population growth leads to greater and unconscious consumption of natural resources. The unconscious consumption of natural resources disrupts the ecological balance, giving rise to environmental problems that are difficult to compensate for. The increasing environmental issues that threaten living beings emphasize the importance of raising environmentally conscious and responsible individuals. The deterioration of ecological balance due to the increase in environmental problems has accelerated the search for solutions to these issues. As a result, educators have made efforts to raise awareness and instill responsibility in individuals through education to prevent environmental problems that directly affect all living beings on a global scale (Çoban & Temir, 2018). Environmental education is one of the most effective solutions in preventing environmental problems. The aim of environmental education is to cultivate individuals who have acquired positive attitudes and behaviors towards the environment and can actively participate in solving environmental problems, rather than merely conveying theoretical knowledge (Şimşekli, 2004). It is through environmental education that individuals can actively participate in solving environmental problems and develop environmental awareness. It is extremely important to raise individuals who have gained awareness of environmental issues and contribute to solving problems for a sustainable environment. Therefore, environmental education needs to be included in the curriculum at all levels (Marpa, 2020).

Environmental education aims for individuals to acquire knowledge, gain skills, and actively participate in solving environmental problems (Carleton-Hug & Hug, 2010; Demir & Yalçın, 2014). The increase in environmental awareness along with environmental knowledge and the emergence of positive behavioral changes towards the environment in individuals is an indication that environmental education has achieved its purpose (Kıralioğlu & Ürey, 2023). To prevent environmental problems, individuals should be equipped with environmental literacy skills through effective environmental education (Atabek-Yiğit, et al. 2014). Environmental literacy is the ability to possess basic knowledge about the environment, comprehend problems, and take necessary measures to solve these problems. Environmental literacy skills, which consist of three levels: nominal (knowledge level), functional (comprehension level), and operational (application level), when acquired especially at the operational level, will contribute to individuals taking responsibility in solving environmental problems and developing environmentally friendly behavior (Roth, 1992). Indeed, in the Tbilisi Declaration, which contains the decisions of the environmental education conference held by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] in 1977, the purpose of environmental education was defined as developing environmental awareness in individuals, instilling attitudes and responsibilities towards the environment, and raising individuals who can participate in solving environmental problems in society (Dere & Çinikaya, 2023a).

It is stated that school and classroom environments are important for individuals to acquire environmental literacy skills and for the knowledge they acquire to be transformed into behavior (Tanrıverdi, 2009). From this perspective, it can be said that the social studies course, which has an interdisciplinary structure and aims to raise responsible individuals with civic consciousness, has an important place in environmental education (Turan & Koç, 2021). Considering the objectives, learning outcomes, and skills of the social studies course, it aims to raise individuals with a high environmental awareness who possess a sustainable environmental understanding. Indeed, when examining the specific objectives of the social studies curriculum, it is observed that students are intended to be aware of resource limitations, sensitive to the environment, striving to protect natural resources, and have a sustainable environmental understanding (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2018). One of the purposes of teaching social studies in schools is to raise individuals who have acquired the knowledge, skills, and values required for environmental literacy and who can play an active role in solving environmental problems (Büken & Katılmış, 2022).

Textbooks and activities, which are the primary resources for the course and guides for teachers, play a crucial role in raising awareness about environmental issues among students, attracting students' interest to the lesson, and facilitating active learning. Textbooks are important materials that can be effectively used to provide effective environmental education and impart skills to students within the scope of the social studies course. The study conducted by Ergin (2011) concluded that social studies teachers primarily use textbooks as their main resource within the scope of environmental education. Therefore, as expressed in the objectives of the social studies course, textbooks need to have rich content and activities related to environmental education in order to provide students with effective environmental education (Özdemir & Gökçe, 2019). Indeed, in the curriculum for environmental education and climate change course, it is stated that activities and practices in which students actively participate should be carried out within the scope of the course to raise individuals who are sensitive and responsible towards the environment (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2022). From this perspective, in order to provide students with environmental literacy skills, teachers need to implement a planned environmental education and the activities designed within this scope should be prepared and applied in accordance with the intended purpose (Chao, 2024).

The most effective way to instill environmental consciousness in students is through practice-based environmental education (Tanrıverdi, 2009). When relevant studies are examined, it is concluded that activity-based environmental education is effective in developing environmental awareness in students, influencing their attitudes towards the environment, and fostering a sense of responsibility (Aslan & Bulut, 2021; Bozkurt, 2018; Çiftçi, 2019; Ergin, 2011; Gülhan & Yurdatapan, 2014; Kurokawa et al., 2023; Ramos, Radrigues & Rodrigues, 2024; Tırpancı, 2019). In activity-based learning environments, students actively participate in the teaching process instead of being passive listeners (Anwer, 2019). Activity-based teaching allows students to gain experience through active participation in the lesson. By enabling students to think multi-dimensionally, permanent and effective learning takes place instead of memorizing information (Bozkurt, 2018). For learning to occur effectively, activities and materials must be appropriate for the student's level. Activities also increase students' motivation towards the lesson and encourage them to solve problems with their own competencies by arousing curiosity (Batdı, 2014). The study conducted by Anwer (2019) concluded that activity-based teaching had a positive impact on students' motivation towards the course and their academic skills. Additionally, it was stated that teachers have important responsibilities in order for activity-based teaching to achieve its intended purpose. Therefore, determining the opinions of social studies teachers regarding the environmental education-themed activities in textbooks and taking necessary measures based on the obtained results are important for achieving the goal of environmental education provided within the scope of social studies courses.

In the literature, it is observed that studies have been conducted examining social studies textbooks in the context of environmental education (Çoban & Temir, 2018; Demir, 2022; Demirezen & Kaya, 2022; Karakuş & Şeyihoğlu, 2021; Özdemir & Gökçe, 2019; Şeker, 2024), as well as analyzing environmental education and climate change course curricula and learning outcomes (Dere & Çinikaya, 2023b; Er & Yılar, 2024). Additionally, studies have been carried out to investigate teachers' views on environmental education (Altınok, 2021; Erdoğan, 2016; Ergin, 2011), their perspectives on environmental literacy skills (Büken & Katılmış, 2022; Çinikaya, 2022; Şimşek & Yıldırım, 2020), and their environmental education self-efficacy levels (Apaydın-Timur, 2020). However, no studies have been found examining social studies teachers' views on the activities in textbooks and the implementation of these activities. Considering the importance of social studies courses in terms of environmental education, it is thought that examining social studies teachers' views on activities and their implementation will contribute to activity-based environmental education, the development of environmental education-themed activities, and the relevant literature for effective environmental education.

In this research, the aim was to examine teachers' views on environmental education-themed activities in social studies textbooks, and answers were sought to the following questions:

1. What are the teachers' views on the adequacy of the activities?
2. What are the teachers' views on the implementation of the activities?
3. What are the teachers' suggestions for improving the activities?
4. What are the teachers' views on using alternative activities and methods other than those in the textbooks?

METHOD

Research Design

This research was conducted using phenomenology, one of the qualitative research methods. Qualitative research, which employs methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis for data collection, allows for revealing how individuals interpret their experiences and events (Merriam, 2013). Phenomenology aims to investigate situations about which detailed information is not available and assumptions cannot be made. This approach can be used to examine attitudes, experiences, and opinions related to a specific event (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

Research Study Group

The study group of the research consists of 17 social studies teachers who work in Mersin province during the 2023-2024 academic year and agreed to participate in the study based on the principle of volunteerism. The snowball sampling method, one of the purposive sampling methods, was used to determine the teachers forming the study group. The snowball sampling method is effective in identifying individuals who may have rich information about the problem. This allows the researcher to have the opportunity to access more information on the subject (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Care was taken to ensure that the participants in the study group worked in different middle schools, had varying years of professional experience, and had taught social studies classes at each grade level. The demographic information of the study group is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Information about the study group*

		N	%
Gender	Female	6	35,29
	Male	11	64,71
Total		17	100
Professional Experience (Years)	1-5	3	17,65
	6-10	1	5,88
	10-15	6	35,30
	16-20	2	11,76
	21 and above	5	29,41
Total		17	100

When Table 1 is examined, it can be seen that the teachers forming the study group have different years of professional experience. Additionally, it can be stated that the majority of the study group (35.30%) consists of teachers with 10-15 years of professional experience.

Research Instruments and Processes

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form consisting of 7 open-ended questions prepared by the researchers. During the process of preparing the data collection tool, expert opinions were obtained from 3 faculty members working in the department of social studies education. Based on the correction suggestions determined by experts, necessary adjustments were made to the questions in terms of scope and language expression, and after conducting a pilot application with a teacher, the interview

form was finalized. Before proceeding to the interview phase with participants within the scope of the research, necessary information about the study was provided, participants were asked to decide on their participation based on the principle of voluntariness, and it was stated that they could terminate the interview at any stage of the study without giving a reason. The interviews were conducted at the place and time jointly determined by the participants and the researcher. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the teachers and lasted between a minimum of 32 minutes and a maximum of 90 minutes. The answers given by the participants to the questions were noted by the researcher. During the interview, participants were asked to elaborate on their answers to the questions. At the end of the interview, the answers given by the participants were presented for their approval, and the accuracy of the responses was confirmed. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Aksaray University with the decision dated 28/02/2023 and numbered 2023/01-34.

Data Analysis

The research data were analyzed using content analysis. In content analysis, direct quotes from the interviewees' ideas are included, and the findings are interpreted and conveyed in an organized manner (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Through the analysis of the data obtained, themes and code were identified. The data were presented in tables according to themes and code and interpreted (Creswell, 2016). Disagreements between coders were resolved through joint discussions, and the analysis was conducted based on the agreed-upon codes. During the reliability phase, the data obtained were examined in terms of codes and themes, and codes and themes with consensus were identified. At this stage, the review and evaluations of a field expert were also obtained. It is stated that in qualitative research, it is important for reliability to have the data examined by multiple coders and to compare the results to reach a consensus (Creswell, 2016). The formula "Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement)" by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to compare the codes and themes obtained. The calculated reliability value was found to be 87%. Additionally, to increase validity, participants' views were included. To maintain the confidentiality of participants' personal information, codes such as T1, T2, T3,T17 were used when conveying participant views.

FINDINGS

The findings regarding social studies teachers' opinions on whether they find the activities sufficient are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Teachers' opinions on the adequacy of activities in textbooks

Theme	Code	f
Opinions on the adequacy of activities	Insufficient	15
	Sufficient	1
	No opinion (undecided)	1

When Table 2 is examined, 88.24% of teachers stated that the activities in textbooks are inadequate in providing students with environmental literacy skills within the scope of environmental education. Examples of teachers' opinions are given below:

"I think the activities in textbooks are insufficient. The content of environmental education topics requires out-of-class implementation, but this is not possible. I can say that there are not enough in-class application activities in the books" (T5).

"The activities included in textbooks are insufficient. There is more emphasis on topic explanations and theoretical information. Textbooks should contain activities that allow students to actively participate and engage in group work" (T7).

"Textbooks are not sufficient in terms of providing students with environmental literacy skills. Since the activities in the books are insufficient, we try to do alternative activities. However, there is not enough information about environmental education in the books" (T12).

“The activities in textbooks are not sufficient in providing students with environmental literacy skills. Activities need to be appropriate for children’s level. We do different activities considering the students’ interest and the class situation” (T16).

“The activities in the textbook are insufficient. Textbooks contain more theoretical information. The number of activities needs to be increased, and the activities need to be more practice-oriented” (T6).

According to direct quotes from teachers and Table 2, it can be said that the activities in textbooks are insufficient in providing skills to students. Furthermore, teachers state that the activities in textbooks are not at a level that would attract students’ interest and are not suitable for classroom implementation.

The findings related to social studies teachers’ views on implementing activities are presented in Table 3

Table 3. Teachers’ views on implementing activities included in textbooks

Theme	Code	f
Opinions on the implementation of activities found in textbooks during lessons	Positive	13
	Negative	4

When Table 3 is examined, it is observed that 76.47% of teachers find the implementation of activities in textbooks during lessons to be positive, while 23.53% express negative opinions regarding the application of activities in class. Examples of teachers’ views are given below:

“I don’t think assigning activities as homework will be effective. Therefore, I try to implement the activities in the classroom” (T4).

“I believe that assigning activities as homework will instill a sense of responsibility in students. However, students are having difficulty understanding the activities. For this reason, I try to implement the activities I assign as homework again in the classroom” (T15).

“Implementing the activities from textbooks during the lesson is more effective. When given as homework, students don’t show the necessary care for the activities” (T14).

“We don’t have enough time to implement the activities in class. I have to assign the activities as homework, but the students can’t complete them in accordance with their intended purpose” (T10).

According to direct quotes from teachers and Table 3, it is observed that the number of teachers (f=13) who implement the activities in textbooks during lessons is higher than those who do not (f=4). Teachers who apply these activities during class have stated that activities implemented in this manner are more productive and effective. However, teachers who reported trying to implement activities by assigning them as homework expressed that they give these activities as homework due to insufficient time during the lesson.

The findings regarding social studies teachers’ suggestions for improving activities are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Teachers’ suggestions for improving activities in textbooks

Theme	Code	Participants	f
Suggestions for improving activities	It should be appropriate for the student’s level	T4, T8, T13, T14, T15	5
	It should be fun and capture the student’s interest	T4	1
	Visual elements should be emphasized	T2, T6	2
	Current data and examples should be included	T6, T7	2
	It should be in accordance with the principle of learning by doing and experiencing	T1, T3, T4, T5, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12, T16, T17	11
	Activities should be simple and understandable	T15	1

It should comply with the principle of near to far	T3, T8, T10, T11	4
Practical activities outside the classroom should be included	T3	1

When Table 4 is examined, teachers' suggestions for improving activities are concentrated on "Activities should be in line with the principle of learning by doing and experiencing (f 11)", "Should be appropriate for student level (f 5)", and "Should adhere to the principle of near to far (f 4)". However, it has been found that suggestions such as emphasizing visual elements, including current data and examples, and incorporating out-of-class practical activities remain limited. Examples of teachers' views are provided below:

"Activities should be understandable and applicable by students. Instead of activities containing theoretical knowledge, there should be activities where students can practice, participate, and learn while having fun during the application process" (T4).

"Activities should include engaging and attention-grabbing elements such as visuals, graphics, and tables. Examples given in activities should be current. Textbooks should also be updated to include current data and information in activities" (T6).

"Activities should be appropriate for the student level and designed in a way that students can adapt to their daily lives. They should adhere to the principle of near to far" (T8).

"Activities should be designed in a way that students are active and can produce something. They should be focused on knowledge and skills" (T11).

"Care should be taken to ensure that activities are understandable. Particularly for 5th grade students, there should be more concrete activities, and the activities should be diversified" (T15).

Based on the direct quotes from teachers' opinions and Table 4, it can be said that the activities in textbooks need to be improved. Teachers' views primarily focus on the need for textbook activities to be appropriate for student levels, and that activities should be developed in a way that captures students' interest and aligns with the principle of learning by doing and experiencing.

Findings related to social studies teachers' views on activities and methods they use outside of textbooks are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. *Alternative activities and methods used by teachers outside of those included in textbooks*

Theme	Code	Participants	f
Views on using alternative activities and methods	Environmental cleaning, tree planting activities, zero waste and recycling initiatives	T1, T2, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T11, T13, T14, T15	12
	Trips within the scope of environmental awareness	T3, T4, T10	3
	Project preparation and project assignments	T4, T6, T17	3
	Value education activities	T5, T11, T14	3
	Visit to environmental institutions and organizations	T8	1
	Documentary and video screening event about the environment	T6, T10, T13, T14, T17	5
	Instructional practices through presentation	T14, T17	2

When Table 5 is examined, it is observed that within the scope of environmental education, 12 teachers stated that they used environmental cleaning activities, tree planting events, zero waste and recycling activities; 5 teachers used documentary and video screenings related to the environment; 3 teachers used field trips within the scope of environmental awareness; and 3 teachers used value teaching activities. It is seen that project preparation, visits to institutions and organizations, and teaching through presentations are other activities and methods used by teachers. Examples of teacher opinions are given below:

"I conduct environmental cleaning activities in the schoolyard. I organize tree planting activities through the TEMA Foundation" (T2).

"I explain the importance of conservation to students. I conduct tree planting activities and recycling activities using waste materials" (T5).

"We carry out tree planting activities. We did an activity related to street animals, and the students showed interest in this activity. We visited institutions that operate in environmental matters" (T8).

"In my classes, I talk about the importance of conservation. I try to set an example for the students" (T11).

"I try to create awareness about environmental issues among students by showing documentaries and videos related to environmental problems. We conduct activities on environmental cleanliness" (T13).

According to direct quotes from teachers and Table 5, it can be said that teachers implement alternative activities and practices in addition to those found in textbooks within the scope of environmental education. When examining teachers' opinions, it is observed that these practices and activities are predominantly focused on environmental cleaning efforts, tree planting activities, zero waste and recycling initiatives, as well as documentary and video screenings aimed at raising awareness among students.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study, conducted to examine social studies teachers' views on environmental education-themed activities in textbooks, concluded that the activities were inadequate based on the teachers' responses. Considering this result and the findings of similar studies (Altınok, 2021; Büken & Katılmış, 2022; Karakuş & Şeyihoğlu, 2021; Özdemir & Gökçe, 2019), it can be said that the activities in social studies textbooks are insufficient in imparting environmental literacy skills to students in the context of environmental education. Indeed, the study conducted by Demir (2022) concluded that textbooks mostly contain knowledge-level topics related to environmental education, while activities that would activate students' psychomotor skills were not adequate. Furthermore, Öztürk and Öğreten (2017) concluded in their study that the activities in social studies textbooks were inadequate in imparting skills to students. Similarly, the study conducted by Şeker (2024) indicates that social studies textbooks are inadequate in meeting the objectives of the curriculum within the scope of environmental education, and that the visuals and activities in the textbooks do not take into account students' learning styles and individual differences. The study conducted by Demirezen and Kaya (2022) suggested that textbooks should include more practical activities focused on environmental education. It is thought that teachers' views of textbook activities as inadequate are influenced by the fact that the activities are not planned in a way that would attract students' interest in the lesson and allow them to actively participate in the activities.

As a result of examining teachers' opinions on the implementation of activities, it was determined that 76.47% of teachers applied the activities in class, while 23.53% could not apply them in class. Additionally, teachers stated that implementing activities in class increased students' motivation towards the lesson. Similarly, a study conducted by Gürbüz and Kışoğlu (2017) found that environmental education supported by in-class activities increased students' interest in the lesson. Considering that activity-based teaching is effective in developing skills in students (Anwer, 2019), it can be said that implementing environmental education activities in the classroom environment is more effective in terms of providing students with environmental literacy skills. Research conducted by Al Shloul et al. (2024) indicates that activity-based teaching positively affects students' learning motivation, class participation, and academic achievement. Additionally, it is stated that this approach improves critical thinking and literacy skills.

Teachers have expressed that activities in textbooks should be planned and developed considering factors such as their appropriateness to student levels and the principle of learning by doing and experiencing. Fidan, Çelen, and Kanat (2018) concluded in their study that activities in textbooks need to be improved. Moreover, it is stated that activity-based teaching, where students are active in

environmental education, is effective in fostering environmental sensitivity and responsibility (Çiftçi, 2019). Similarly, a study conducted by Tırpancı (2019) concluded that activity-based environmental education, in which students actively participate, is effective in creating environmental awareness. Therefore, for effective environmental education, it can be said that planning activities in textbooks by considering principles such as level appropriateness, learning by doing and experiencing, and moving from near to far, as well as ensuring students' active participation in activities, is important in achieving the desired goals in environmental education. Indeed, Kocagul (2024) states that for designing effective learning environments, activities should be planned considering students' developmental characteristics, and should be engaging and encouraging student participation. Additionally, he emphasizes the importance of student-teacher interaction in the implementation of activities.

The teachers participating in the research stated that they tried to develop environmental literacy skills by conducting alternative activities in which students could actively participate, apart from the activities in the textbooks. It is thought that the inadequacy of the activities in the textbooks was influential in the emergence of this result (Table 2). The study conducted by Malkoç (2014) concluded that teachers carry out alternative activities in out-of-classroom school environments as it provides an opportunity for permanent learning and learning by doing for students. The study conducted by Büken and Katılmış (2022) states that teachers should use different methods and activities within the scope of environmental education and carry out field trip and observation activities. Similarly, the study conducted by Kırallıoğlu and Ürey (2023) emphasized the importance of implementing out-of-school learning activities within the scope of environmental education. The study conducted by Aslan and Bulut (2021) concluded that activity-based teaching is effective in developing environmental literacy skills in students. Considering the importance of activity-based teaching in environmental education and taking into account teachers' opinions, it is possible to say that the activities in social studies textbooks are inadequate in providing students with environmental literacy skills.

As a result of the research, it was concluded that teachers found the activities insufficient and that the activities should be developed in a way that students can learn by doing and experiencing. Additionally, it was determined that teachers tried to help students acquire environmental literacy skills by conducting alternative activities and applications besides those in the textbooks. Within the framework of these results:

- The number of environmental education-themed activities in textbooks should be increased.
- Textbooks should include activities that will attract students' interest and enable their active participation.
- Teachers should be provided with administrative and financial support to conduct original activities and applications both inside and outside the school.
- Teachers' opinions on preparing and implementing environmental education activities can be examined.

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