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Turkish Social Studies Teachers' Thoughts About The Teaching of Controversial Issues

In today's world, one of the primary goals of education is to raise individuals as citizens equipped with the skills of communication, high-level thinking, problem solving and questioning as well as with a global viewpoint. Introducing controversial issues into the classroom environment may be among the steps to be taken to achieve these goals. In this context, this study has the primary goal of revealing Social Studies teachers' thoughts about the teaching of controversial issues in the classroom environment. This study adopted mixed methods. The study participants consisted of Social Studies teachers working in Bursa, which is a large-scale province of Turkey, in the 2014-2015 school year. According to the study findings, while terror was the most controversial issue, faith in creation was the least controversial issue. In addition, teachers mainly preferred to introduce issues related to the Social Studies curriculum and that were appropriate for the students' preparedness. However, another result is that controversial issues contributed to students' acquisition of personal critical skills such as high-level thinking and communication. It was also observed that the teaching of controversial issues was related to the Social Studies lesson and was important for the achievement of the goals of the lesson.

Keywords:

Social studies, social studies teachers, controversial issue, Turkey

1 Introduction

1.1 Controversial Issues

In the current era, every society requires that individuals are raised with advanced communication skills and can think, question and produce. The teaching of controversial issues is important for individuals' development of these skills. But, what is a controversial issue? Which issues are controversial? Controversial issues are defined in various ways in the literature (Seçgin, 2009); however, this article considers two definitions. While Stradling (1984) defined controversial issues as "issues causing the society to distinctly dissent, divide and the groups in society to either make contradictory explanations or develop different solutions based on different values", Harwood and Hahn (1999) defined them as "reflective conversations between students or students and teachers about a conflicting subject". As is evident, there is no commonly accepted definition of controversial issues. It is difficult to give a clear answer to the question of which issues are controversial. Considering the fact that controversial issues originated from differences in religious beliefs, moral values and cultural features (OXFAM, 2006) at the local, national and international levels

(Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004), the controversion of some issues, by nature, may differ across societies and even within an society.

As controversial issues present a factual condition (the fact that controversial issues are introduced into the classroom environment) and serve an educational purpose, they have also been examined in pedagogical studies (Yazıcı & Seçgin, 2010). Starting from the first years of education, children face such issues in different ways and levels in the family environment, in their circle of friends and on the street. Although the classroom environment is separated with physical boundaries, students introduce controversial issues into the classroom environment because they are a part of real life. Such issues could be introduced into the classroom environment by teachers or students either in a planned or an unplanned manner (King, 2009). Moreover, controversions are hidden even in the most positive classroom environments and may be revealed in various ways when least expected. Therefore, it is helpful to discuss the useful aspects of controversial issues, such as the fact that they contribute to a participative classroom culture and make learning enjoyable, rather than focusing on negativities that may be caused by controversial issues (Miller & Flores, 2011). For all these reasons, excluding controversial issues from the classroom environment does not seem to be possible or meaningful. Therefore, it is necessary for educational investigations to examine controversial issues from the perspectives of students, parents, teachers and school management.

It is thought that the teaching of controversial issues will help individuals develop important skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, questioning, showing respect for differences and structuring knowledge, by associating such issues with real life in appropriate learning environments and having a participative sense of controversion. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that freedom of thought and expression are very important for the development of a culture of questioning (Dewey, 1927). In this respect, the following factors are required to have a more efficient controversion: teachers' guidance, students' participation and an appropriate classroom climate (Henning, 2005). Primarily the

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teacher and then the school management, parents, other teachers and researchers have major tasks in creating this appropriate environment.

Social Studies exist for the purpose of facilitating students' basic skills such as participation in democratic processes, encouragement, logical decision making and reasoning to keep democratic principles alive and constant openness to learning to enable them to profoundly understand their social world (Mary, 1996). In addition, controversial issues will help Social Studies promote students' development of knowledge and skills. Moreover, as controversies enable students to obtain the skills targeted by the Social Studies lesson, they are vital to this lesson (Hess, 2004). In this context, Social Studies teachers are recommended to introduce controversial issues into the classroom environment and approach these issues in a free classroom environment. Moreover, education should enable individuals to acquire the skills of consistently and rationally thinking about social issues, gathering and organizing the necessary cases, evaluating knowledge and the source of knowledge, discerning the case view and making conscious decisions (NCSS, 2007). In this context, it could be asserted that individuals who obtain the appropriate skills and knowledge in educational stages such as questioning, problem solving, high-level thinking, showing respect for differences and citizenship literacy could become attuned to the democratic culture more easily. The teaching of controversial issues is important for the development of such knowledge and skills.

In this study, controversial issues were investigated from Social Studies teachers' perspectives. According to this goal, the study's research question was as follows: "What are Turkish Social Studies teachers' thoughts about the teaching of controversial issues?" This question was approached from various perspectives under the following two sub-problems: a) Social Studies teachers' thoughts about the nature of controversial issues and b) Social Studies teachers' thoughts about the teaching of controversial issues.

1.2 Turkey and controversial Issues

Located in an area where Asia, Europe and Africa converge, the Turkish Republic is adjacent to Georgia, Armenia, Nakhchivan and Iran in the east; Bulgaria and Greece in the west; and Syria and Iraq in the south. Turkey acts as a bridge between the Eastern and Western civilizations and their religions due to its geopolitical and strategic position. Half of the country's population, totalling 73 million people, is young. Turkey has undergone a multidimensional process of democratic change and transformation demonstrating both continuity and breaking points from World War I until today. The country has displayed very rapid scientific, technological, social and cultural change within the last 15-20 years. Having four basic cultural identities, i.e., Turkish culture, Islamic culture, settled Anatolian culture and Western culture (Turan, 1990, p. 42), Turkey is a very colourful country with a rich cultural structure. This

cultural variety and rapid change have resulted in a number of problems and controversions.

As studies have presented (Avaroğulları, 2014; Yılmaz, 2012), although Social Studies teachers in Turkey have positive attitudes towards the teaching of controversial issues in general, they have great difficulty in teaching the issues due to reasons such as exam-oriented education, busy program, students' level of preparedness and the reactions of student's parents. Moreover, given that teachers do not receive education regarding the teaching of these issues, it could be suggested that these issues are not efficiently and systematically approached in the classroom environment; rather, superficial discussions are generated via the question and answer method.

The number of studies on the teaching of controversial issues in Turkey has largely increased in recent years. These studies have generally been conducted with pre-service teachers and Social Studies teachers (Avaroğulları, 2014; Ersoy, 2010; Ersoy, 2013; Seçgin, 2009; Yılmaz, 2012). In addition, Kuş (2015) performed a comparative study examining Science and Social Studies teachers' thoughts about controversial issues.

2 Related studies

Examining the literature regarding the teaching of controversial issues in Social Studies or other Social Sciences lessons, it is emphasized that controversial issues are of vital importance for Social Studies lessons because they enable students to obtain the acquisitions of the lessons (Hess, 2004; Soley, 1996). Thus, it is recommended to include controversial issues into curricula in accordance with the students' development and to teach students via scientific teaching methods (Kaya, 2012; Snyder, 1951; Yazıcı & Seçgin 2010). Controversial issues are also considered an important component of citizenship education (Ersoy, 2013; Camicia, 2008; Harwood & Hahn, 1990; King, 2009; Misco, 2014; NCSS, 2003 translated by S. Yazıcı). Similarly, it is emphasized that involving such issues in Social Studies lessons will increase students' citizenship competence. Such issues must be introduced into the classroom environment to raise individuals as effective citizens equipped with the skills of the 21st century (Mhlauli, 2011; Rambosk, 2011). Moreover, the teaching of controversial issues is observed to facilitate students' acquisition of the skills of obtaining, evaluating and questioning knowledge; establishing positive communication; developing empathy; and thinking critically (Cannard, 2005; Dube, 2009; Stradling, 1984; Wolk, 2003;).

Relevant studies will only be possible by introducing controversial issues into the classroom environment within the scope of certain principles. These principles include students' level of preparedness, topics of interest, topics' social importance and the expediency of the issue (Gross, 1964; Stradling, 1984), the formation of an appropriate classroom climate (Hahn & Tocci, 1990; Hand & Levinson, 2012; Henning, 2005) and selecting an



appropriate teaching method (Ezzedeen, 2008; Long & Long, 1974; Mary, 1996;). Moreover, by their nature, controversial issues pave the way for different viewpoints. Thus, they will become functional only when teachers and students comprehend these issues via appropriate educational methods (Oulton et al. 2004). Positive controversion environments formed via this understanding are important in terms of developing students' values such as solving disputes by talking and showing respect for differences, which are required for the formation of a culture of tolerance (Avery, 2002; Dube, 2009; Hess, 2002; Soley, 1996).

The difficulties encountered during the teaching of controversial issues signify that teachers experience difficulty in introducing some issues into the classroom environment due to social structure, cultural features and religious beliefs. The teachers considered controversial issues to be complex and time consuming, and these beliefs were associated with their lower levels of self-efficacy (Clarke, 2005; Mhlauli, 2011; Oulton et al., 2004).

3 Method

3.1 Study model

In this study, the researchers preferred the explanatory pattern, which is among the mixed method research patterns, and they collected the data via questionnaires and interviews. The findings being acquired via both methods were used in different weights according to the study objectives. In the study, the qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately; but the findings were interpreted together. Despite everything, the lack of an intraclass observation could be accepted as the limitation of this study.

3.2 Participants

Quantitative Dimension

The target population of the study consisted of 768 Social Studies teachers working in public schools of Bursa, which is among the large-scale provinces of Turkey, in the school year of 2014-2015. The sample was selected via the "convenience sampling" technic, which is among the intentional sampling methods. Even though the questionnaire was conveyed to 300 people who were selected via this method, only 150 people accepted to fill in the questionnaire. As 33 questionnaires had not been thoroughly filled, they were not included in the study. Thus, the study included the remaining 107 questionnaires.

Qualitative Dimension

In the qualitative stage of the study, 10 Social Studies teachers were interviewed (6 male and 4 female). The participants were informed about the framework and the

objective of the study before starting the study and they participated in the study based on voluntariness. Each participant was given a code name in an attempt to protect their identities, which was required by ethical principles. Majority of participants had had a teaching experience of 4 years and above. Table 1 shows little demographic information about the participants.

3.2 Data collection process

A questionnaire and an interview form were used as data collection tools. Following are the relevant explanations.

Table 1 Demographic Features of Participants

Code Name	Gender	Branch (Undergraduate)	Year of Professional Seniority
Merve	Female	History	23
Işıl	Female	History	14
Tuğçe	Female	Social Studies	2
Bilge	Female	History	16
Ömer	Male	History	16
Enes	Male	Social Studies	8
Barış	Male	Social Studies	6
Sezgin	Male	Social Studies	8
Kadir	Male	Psychology	21
Eren	Male	Social Studies	9

In the quantitative dimension of the study, the questionnaire that was developed by Yazıcı and Seçgin (2009) for the purpose of "Examining the perceptions, attitudes and views of preservice teachers regarding the teaching of controversial issues" (Attachment 1) was adapted into Social Studies teachers according to the views of developer researchers and experts. The questionnaire consists of totally 215 items that involve (1) demographic features (gender, professional seniority, graduation branch, whether or not she/he has information about the controversial issue) (2) controversion degree of issues, (3) types of issues to be discussed in the classroom environment, (4) role of controversial issues in the program and in intraclass applications, (5) educational methods and technics being used by teachers in controversial issues, (6) obstacles in teaching the controversial issues. The third part comprises of three point Likert items, whereas the other parts (2, 4, 6,) comprise of 5 point Likert items. The questionnaire was tested in terms of validity and reliability by the developers and it was observed to have an internal and external validity (Seçgin, 2009, p. 41-48).

In the qualitative dimension of the study, on the other hand, a semi-structured interview form that was developed by the researcher was used (Attachment 2). After finishing the formation of the interview form, the form was applied to two teachers in an attempt to determine whether or not it was sufficient in reaching the study data. Following the pilot application, the interview form

was finalized according to the expert opinions and the interview form was applied to 10 teachers.

In order to prove the validity of the study triangulation (diversification), member check, peer evaluation and external supervisor strategies were followed. The analysis results that were obtained in the study were sent to all the participants for the purpose of controlling the members. The analysis was completed after receiving the confirmation of participants. Regarding the peer evaluation, the study data were sustained by two independent researchers until a synchronization was obtained. In order to provide the reliability of the study, it was important to recheck the analyzed data in different times, constantly compare the data so as not to have a deviation in identifying the codes in the coding process and have a crosswise control of the data by another researcher (Gibbs, 2007). According to these suggestions, the data were rechecked and constantly compared for providing the reliability of the qualitative data. In addition to this, another researcher performed the crosswise control of the analyzed data.

3.3 Data analysis

The statistical analyses of the questionnaire data were performed by calculating the (f)frequency, (%) percentage, standard deviation (ss) and arithmetic mean (\bar{X}), which are among the descriptive

statistics methods, via the SPSS software. The data that were obtained as a result of the interview, on the other hand, were profoundly examined via the content analysis method and inter-preted with the questionnaire re-sults.

4 Findings

4.1 What are Social Studies teachers' thoughts about the nature of controversial issues?

The first sub-problem of the study is related to teachers' thoughts about the nature of controversial issues. To address this sub-problem, the teachers were asked the following questions in the qualitative portion of the study: "What does the concept of controversion mean to you? What is a controversial issue? What are the features of controversial issues?". In the quantitative portion of the study, the relevant part of the questionnaire was applied to reveal teachers' thoughts about the controversion levels of various issues, and the acquired findings are discussed under three titles below.

How Do Teachers Define the Concept of Controversion?

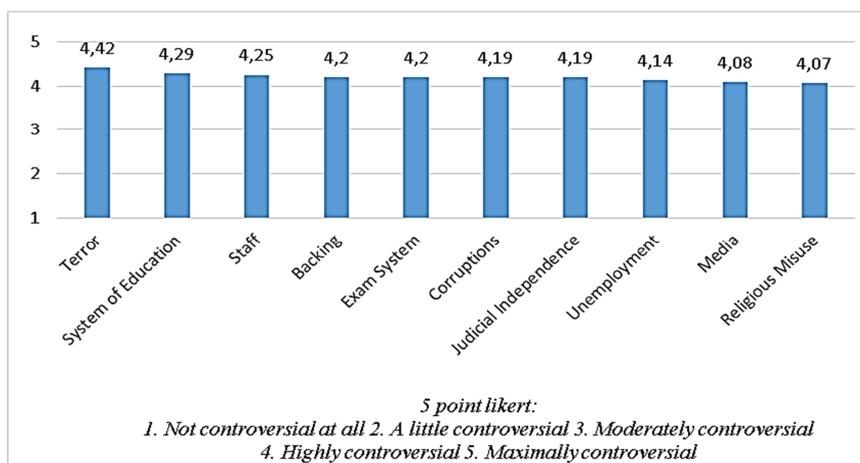
Teachers Merve, Ömer, Barış, Tuğçe and Bilge gave similar answers to the question regarding what the concept of controversion meant to them. For instance, Teacher Merve defined the concept of controversion as follows: "The sharing of different views and transfer of views among individuals in a civilized way". Based on the other

teachers' similar statements about the concept of controversion, the concept of controversion could be defined as follows: "individuals' mutual expression regarding different views about an issue".

What Are Teachers' Thoughts about Controversial Issues?

Nearly half of the participants defined controversial issues in a similar way. Teachers Enes, Tuğçe and Barış defined controversial issues as "issues with multiple opinions and multiple results". Bringing a new perspective to the subject, Teacher Eren defined controversial issues as follows: "if there is a problem about an issue, then it is a controversial issue". This teacher emphasized the relationship between controversial issues and problematic issues. Considering these definitions, it is possible to commonly define controversial issues as "issues without a certain truth or result in accordance with different viewpoints". According to teachers' thoughts about this subject, the features of controversial issues could be categorized as follows: a) eliciting different viewpoints, b) having no certain truth or answer, c) having multiple results, d) requiring an explanation, e) differing from person to person, and f) causing trouble

Figure 1 First ten issues with the highest controversial level



What Are Teachers' Thoughts about the Controversion Levels of Various Issues?

Based on the analysis of teachers' answers to the relevant part of the questionnaire, Figure 1 shows the ten issues that are considered to be the most controversial and the ten issues that are considered to be the least controversial.

According to the results presented in Figure 1, teachers considered "Terror" ($\bar{X}=4,42$) to be the most controversial issue. The teachers who were interviewed also considered terror to be the most controversial issue. Teacher Enes expressed his opinions about this subject as follows: "The Turkish-Kurdish question has been brought to the forefront. The issue should be discussed for both sides to understand and know one another, and different opinions should be expressed easily". This statement

underlines the fact that terror is a controversial issue that should be discussed from various perspectives.

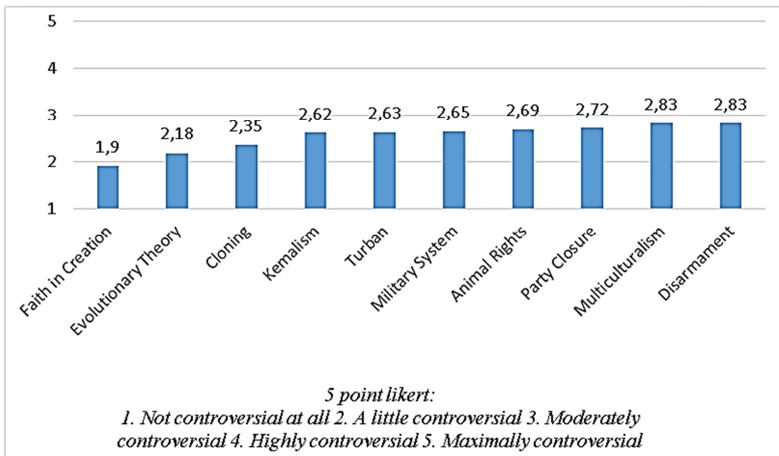
The second most controversial issue according to the teachers was "System of Education" ($\bar{X}=4,29$).

The third most controversial issue reported by the teachers was "Staff" ($\bar{X}=4,25$), which represents "setting up one's own cadre in public offices".

According to the teachers, the fourth most controversial issue was "Back-ing" ($\bar{X}=4,20$), which could be defined as "favouring some-one".

The fifth most controversial issue reported by the teachers was "Exam Systems" ($\bar{X}=4,20$). Regarding this subject, Teacher Bilge expressed the following thoughts: "8th graders will have the TEOG (Transition from Primary to Secondary Education) exam. We fail to teach the lesson with pleasure especially due to the exam anxiety of 8th graders". This statement also reflects the thoughts of other teachers.

Figure 2 Issues with the lowest controversy level



According to the results shown in Figure 2, "Faith in Creation" ($\bar{X}=1,90$) and "Evolutionary Theory" ($\bar{X}=2,18$), which have a resemblance, were the least controversial issues. Another issue that was considered least controversial by the teachers was "Cloning" ($\bar{X}=2,35$). Teachers considered the issues of "Kemalism" ($\bar{X}=2,62$), "Religious Headscarf" ($\bar{X}=2,63$) and "Military System" ($\bar{X}=2,65$) as least controversial issues.

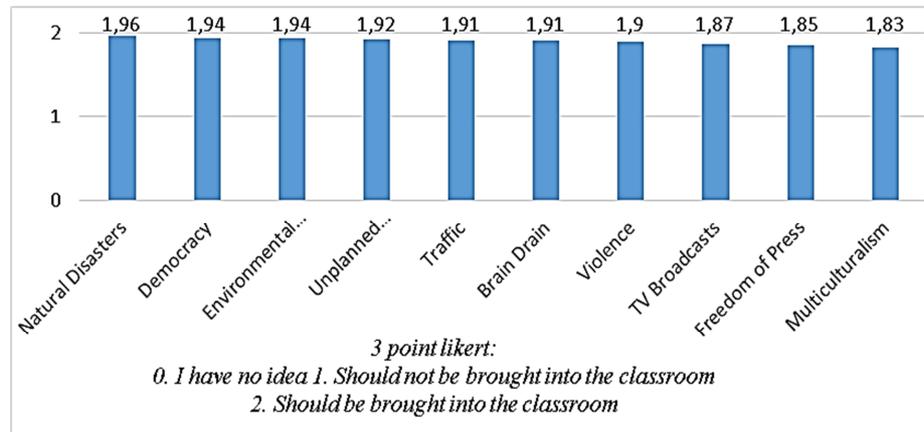
4.2 What are social studies teachers' thoughts about the teaching of controversial issues?

To answer this question, the following questions were asked: What are the controversial issues to be introduced into the classroom environment for educational purposes? What approaches do teachers follow in the teaching process of controversial issues? What are the difficulties being experienced in the teaching of controversial issues? Why should controversial issues be

taught? What are the skills that these issues promote in students? The answers to these questions were analysed, and the findings are discussed under four titles below.

What are the controversial issues that teachers prefer to introduce into the classroom environment for educational purposes?

Figure 3 Issues with the highest level of being approached in the classroom environment



In this section, Social Studies teachers' views about approaching controversial issues in the classroom environment for educational purposes are explained using both qualitative and quantitative data. Based on the data obtained from the questionnaire, Figure 3 shows the top ten issues introduced into the classroom environment, and Figure 4 shows the bottom ten issues.

According to the results shown in Figure 3, "Natural Disasters" ($\bar{X}=1,96$) was the issue that was most often introduced by teachers in the classroom environment.

The second most common issue introduced into the classroom environment by teachers was "Democracy" ($\bar{X}=1,94$). Teacher Ömer's thoughts about this subject

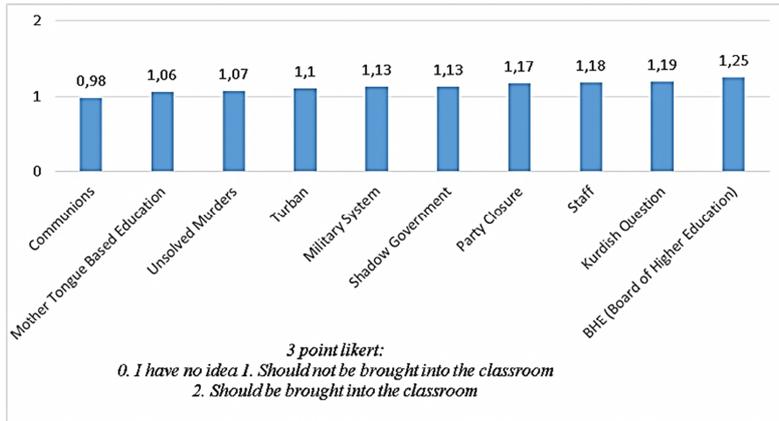
fairly explain the thoughts of the other teachers: "Students are required to acquire the behaviours of accurately using the right to vote and stand for election, understanding the election system and voting consciously, which are among the basic elements of democracy. This should be provided in the classroom environment."

The third most common issue introduced into the classroom environment by teachers was "Environmental Pollution" ($\bar{X}=1,94$). Nearly half of the interviewed teachers emphasized the need to introduce the issue of environmental pollution into the classroom environment. Regarding this subject, Teachers Merve, Sezgin and Bilge emphasized the importance of introducing the issue of environmental pollution and precautions against environmental pollution into the classroom environment.

The fourth most preferred issue was "Unplanned Urbanization" ($\bar{X}=1,92$).

The fifth most common issue introduced into the classroom environment by teachers was "Traffic" ($\bar{X}=1,91$).

Figure 4 Issues that were least often approached in the classroom environment



According to the results presented in Figure 4, "Communion" ($\bar{X}=0,98$) was the issue that was least introduced into the classroom environment by teachers. An important portion of the interviewed teachers objected to introducing some religious issues such as communion into the classroom environment. Regarding this subject, the teachers expressed the following thoughts: "As religious issues are outside the curriculum, they could be discussed in the Religious Culture and Ethics lesson. Freedom of religion and conscience, on the other hand, could be approached in the classroom" (Teacher Eren) and "...some religious issues like communion do not seem to be convenient for controversy due to the conditions of our country and the limitations of program" (Teacher Sezgin).

"Mother Tongue-Based Education" ($\bar{X}=1,06$) was the second least common issue introduced into the classroom environment. Opposed to approaching ethnic

issues in the classroom environment, Teachers Merve and Ömer similarly stated the following: "Some issues might be very sensitive. For instance; as the issues of ethnicity and mother tongue-based education are sensitive issues, they should be kept out of the classroom environment". Their statements emphasized the need to exclude issues concerning ethnicity from the classroom environment because they could cause a separation in the classroom due to their structure.

"Religious Headscarf" ($\bar{X}=1,10$) was the fourth least common issue introduced into the classroom environment.

"Unsolved murders" ($\bar{X}=1,07$) was the third least common issue introduced into the classroom environment by teachers. The teachers who were interviewed generally thought that "certain political issues should be taught according to the development of

children". For instance, Teacher Ömer expressed his ideas as follows: "Political issues could also be introduced for students to acquire the behaviours of understanding the election system and voting consciously". This statement signified the possibility of introducing political issues into the classroom environment. Teacher Kadir, by contrast, expressed his ideas as follows: "...The dimensions of controversy should be well adjusted while bringing the political issues into the classroom environment." This response drew attention to the possible negative conditions.

What are teachers' thoughts about the teaching of controversial issues?

In this section, the findings regarding teachers' thoughts about the teaching of controversial issues using qualitative data are presented. Figure 5 shows the findings of the questionnaire.

Figure 5 Teaching methods and techniques that teachers use to address controversial issues

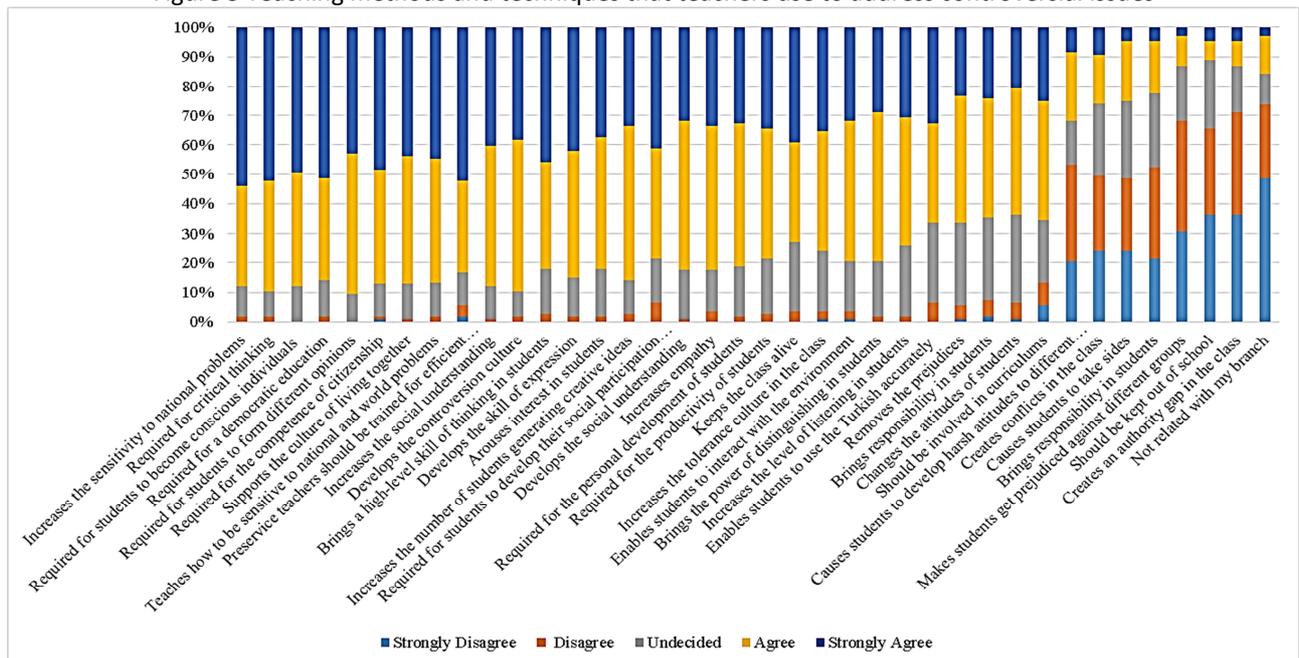


Figure 5 shows that 54,2% of teachers strongly believed that approaching controversial issues would increase students' sensitivity to national problems. A very large portion of the teachers who were interviewed reported thoughts that coincided with these results. Regarding this subject, Teacher Eren expressed his opinions as follows: "Children will be informed about national problems and make a contribution to the solution of problems by producing ideas about how to solve them." Teacher Merve similarly stated the following: "They will realize the national problems and help in solving them." These statements emphasized the fact that approaching controversial issues could increase students' sensitivity to national problems. Approaching the subject using a tangible example, Teacher Enes stated the following:

It has a great effect on the process of providing national peace. For instance, our country has prioritized the Turkish-Kurdish question. It is necessary to address controversial issues and easily express the different opinions for both sides to understand and know one another.

This response emphasized that the teaching of controversial issues could make important contributions to national peace.

Of the teachers, 52,3% strongly believed that the teaching of controversial issues is necessary for students' development of critical thinking. An important portion of the teachers who were interviewed also discussed the positive effects of controversial issues on critical thinking. Regarding this subject, Teachers Işıl and Bilge both stated the following: "Approaching the controversial issues will broaden the horizon of students and develop their critical thinking skills."

Of the teachers, 49,5% strongly believed that the teaching of controversial issues would contribute to raising students as conscious individuals. The interviewed teachers had similar thoughts. Regarding this subject, Teacher Merve stated the following: "We should raise individuals as conscious individuals in terms of both traditions and beliefs rather than with stereotyped values. I observe that such controversial issues increase the level of consciousness." This statement highlighted a significant aspect of the subject. However, Teacher Tuğçe provided another interesting thought about this subject: "...it will enable us to raise socially conscious individuals who could wriggle out of the herd mentality and develop the skill of questioning."

As 51,4% of teachers considered controversial issues as necessary for democratic education and the sufficiency of citizenship, they gave the answer "Strongly agree" to the corresponding survey item. A similar view was evident among the teachers who were interviewed. For instance, Teacher Tuğçe stated the following: "It could develop individuals' democratic citizenship consciousness." Furthermore, Teacher Kadir stated that "It could be useful in terms of citizenship and democratic rights", revealing the importance of controversial issues for a

settled sense of democratic education and acquiring the sufficiency of citizenship.

Regarding the teaching of controversial issues, 43% of the participants gave the answer "Strongly agree" to the item "It is required for students to form different opinions", 42,1% to "It will develop the skill of expression" and 38,3% to "It will develop the controversy culture". Nearly all the teachers who were interviewed stated that the teaching of controversial issues would increase students' skills such as media literacy and communication skills. Regarding this subject, Teacher Eren stated the following: "It will enable children to develop their communicational skills and increase the culture level of society comprising individuals with advanced communicational skills. Besides, the students will learn the controversy culture." Furthermore, Teacher Merve stated the following: "It will contribute to the development of communication skills". Another interesting comment on this subject was made by Teacher Sezgin, as follows: "I think that it will be useful in opening the students to communication. We aim to open our children to communication and even have a private lesson concerning the formation of a society open to communication."

Regarding the teaching of controversial issues, 45,8% of participants gave the answer "Strongly agree" to the item "It will develop students' high-level thinking skill". The teachers who were interviewed had similar thoughts. Regarding this subject, the interviewed teachers mainly thought that controversial issues would make a contribution to raising individuals who could freely think and express their thoughts and question, reason and find solutions to problems.

Regarding the teaching of controversial issues, 44% of participants gave the answer "Strongly agree" to the item "It will teach students how to be sensitive to national and world problems". A number of teachers stated that the teaching of controversial issues would contribute to the solution of both national and international problems via the resulting global viewpoint of students. Regarding this subject, Teacher Işıl stated the following:

"We will understand each other better. We can see that people from different countries consider the common problems of the world (hunger, wars) and try to generate solutions. It could remove the hatred of years. For instance, the Armenian question..."

This response emphasized that controversies would make a contribution to the solution to the common problems of the world and world peace. Similarly, Teacher Barış stated the following: "I believe that it will be useful in promoting international peace because as long as the ideas are shared, there will be no more hostilities due to the culture of mutual respect." This statement emphasized the importance of controversial issues in promoting international peace.

The participants gave the answer "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to the items "It does not concern my branch" (73,8%), "It will create an authority gap in the classroom" (71%), "It will make the students prejudiced towards different groups" (68,2%), "It should be kept out



of school" (65,4%), "It will cause the students to develop a stricter attitude towards different groups" (53,3%), "It will create a conflict in the classroom" (49,5%) and "It will make the students take sides" (48,6%).

What approaches do teachers employ in the teaching of controversial issues?

This section presents the approaches that Social Studies teachers employ in the teaching of controversial issues using both qualitative and quantitative data.

As shown in Figure 6, 62,6% of teachers gave the answer "Always" to the item "I provide a democratic environment". An important portion of the interviewed teachers also emphasized the importance of preparing a democratic environment for the teaching of controversial issues. Summarizing the thoughts of other teachers, Teacher Enes expressed his thoughts as follows:

I try to form a democratic environment in the classroom to encourage my students to participate in controversial issues. Children should easily express their

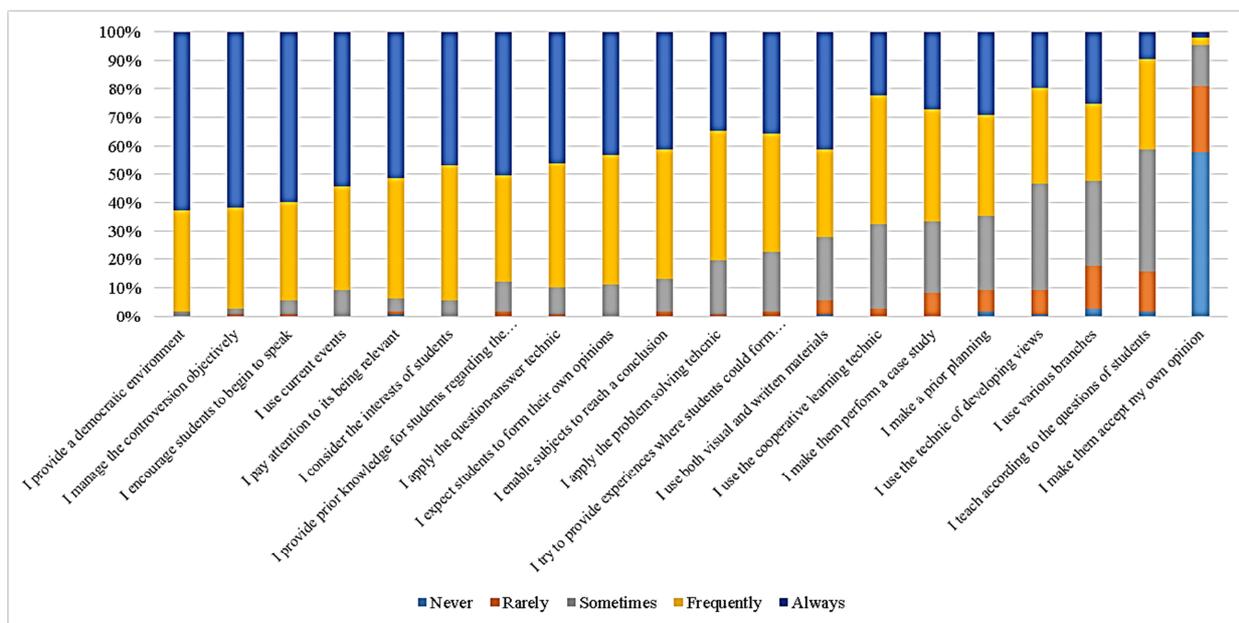
opinions and know that they have the right to democratically express their different emotions and thoughts about an issue.

Of the teachers, 61,7% gave the answer "Always" to the item "I manage controversy in an objective way". Regarding this subject, Teachers Enes and Kadir stated that they preferred to remain as objective as possible during controversy and manage controversy.

Of the teachers, 59,8% gave the answer "Always" to the item "I encourage students to begin to speak". Regarding this subject, Teacher Sezgin remarkably stated the following:

Should teachers appreciate and encourage the students? They should appreciate their way of expressing their thoughts and their courage in beginning to speak rather than what they say. They should encourage the students to speak with the help of statements like 'You are very good at expressing your thoughts, well done'.

Figure 6 Approaches that teachers follow in the teaching of controversial issues



Supporting the thoughts of Teacher Sezgin, Teacher Bilge stated the following: "I elicit children's opinions regarding the subject. I try to recognize everyone to enable them to participate in the lesson".

More than half of the teachers (54,2%) gave the answer "Always" to the item "I use current events". The majority of the teachers who were interviewed stated that they used current events and that their students mainly introduced current events into the classroom environment. Regarding this subject, Teacher Merve stated the following: "The issues must be current. We cannot create a controversial issue from issues revealed via historical documents". This response emphasized the importance of current issues in forming a controversy environment.

Of the teachers, 51,4% gave the answer "Always" to the item "I pay attention to relate these issues with the issue being taught".

Nearly half of the teachers (45,8%) gave the answer "Always" to the item "I apply the question-answer technique". The question-answer technique could have been preferred mainly because it reveals the issue from all aspects, guides the students when the controversy gets blocked and provides feedback. Regarding the purpose of using the question-answer technique, Teacher Eren stated the following: "I get the opinions of children through questions and answers. I want them to create their own thoughts and to speak them out". Furthermore, Teacher Kadir stated the following: "We should bring the question-answer technique to the forefront. Children should be able to ask questions without limitations".



Nearly all of the teachers gave the answer “Never” or “Rarely” to the item “I make them accept my opinion”, which contains a negative judgement. The fact that teachers did not make others accept their opinions could signify that their sense of education complied with democratic principles.

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I try to form a democratic environment in the classroom to encourage my students to participate in controversial issues. Children should easily express their opinions and know that they have the right to democratically express their different emotions and thoughts about an issue.

Of the teachers, 61,7% gave the answer “Always” to the item “I manage controversion in an objective way”. Regarding this subject, Teacher Enes and Kadir stated that they preferred to remain as objective as possible during controversion and manage controversion.

Of the teachers, 59,8% gave the answer “Always” to the item “I encourage students to begin to speak”. Regarding this subject, Teacher Sezgin remarkably stated the following:

Should teachers appreciate and encourage the students? They should appreciate their way of expressing their thoughts and their courage in beginning to speak rather than what they say. They should encourage the students to speak with the help of statements like ‘You are very good at expressing your thoughts, well done’.

Supporting the thoughts of Teacher Sezgin, Teacher Bilge stated the following: “I elicit children’s opinions regarding the subject. I try to recognize everyone to enable them to participate in the lesson”.

More than half of the teachers (54,2%) gave the answer “Always” to the item “I use current events”. The majority of the teachers who were interviewed stated that they used current events and that their students mainly introduced current events into the classroom environment. Regarding this subject, Teacher Merve stated the following: “The issues must be current. We cannot create a controversial issue from issues revealed via historical documents”. This response emphasized the importance of current issues in forming a controversion environment.

Of the teachers, 51,4% gave the answer “Always” to the item “I pay attention to relate these issues with the issue being taught”.

Nearly half of the teachers (45,8%) gave the answer “Always” to the item “I apply the question-answer technique”. The question-answer technique could have

been preferred mainly because it reveals the issue from all aspects, guides the students when the controversion gets blocked and provides feedback. Regarding the purpose of using the question-answer technique, Teacher Eren stated the following: “I get the opinions of children through questions and answers. I want them to create their own thoughts and to speak them out”. Furthermore, Teacher Kadir stated the following: “We should bring the question-answer technique to the forefront. Children should be able to ask questions without limitations”.

Nearly all of the teachers gave the answer “Never” or “Rarely” to the item “I make them accept my opinion”, which contains a negative judgement. The fact that teachers did not make others accept their opinions could signify that their sense of education complied with democratic principles.

According to the findings shown in Figure 7, 51,4% of teachers stated that they “Always” considered exam-based education an obstacle to approaching controversial issues in the classroom environment. A large portion of the interviewed teachers had similar thoughts. For instance, Teacher Bilge expressed his thoughts about this subject as follows: “We fail to teach the lesson with pleasure especially due to the exam anxiety of 8th graders”. Furthermore, Teacher Barış stated the following: “Exams (TEOG) also pose an obstacle; controversial issues are considered unnecessary as we have an exam-based system of education”.

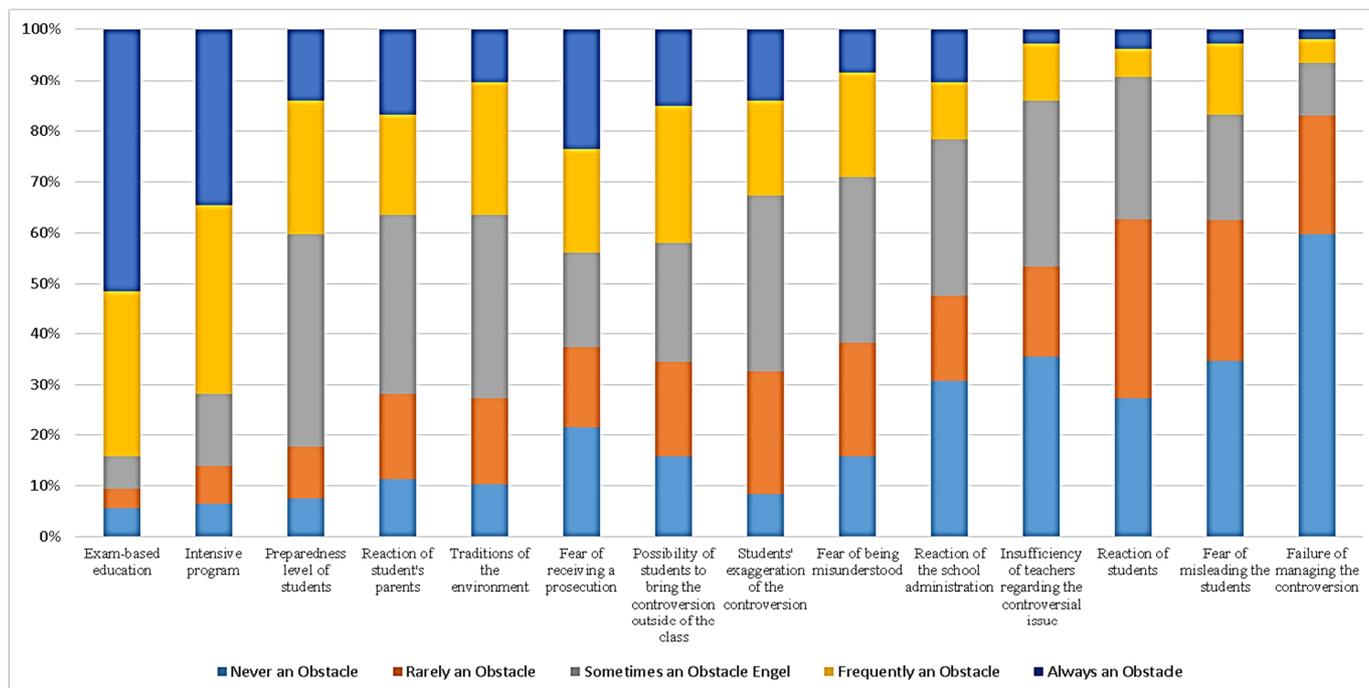
Of the teachers, 37,4% believed that the intensity of the curriculum generally posed an obstacle to approaching controversial issues in the classroom environment. Nearly all of the interviewed teachers had similar thoughts. Regarding this subject, Teacher Işıl stated the following: “In order to have a controversion, a less intense and a more flexible curriculum is required”. Furthermore, Teacher Kadir stated the following: “As the curriculum is intense, teachers feel a pressure to catch up with subjects”. This statement emphasized the fact that the intensity of the curriculum posed an obstacle to the teaching of controversial issues.

Of the teachers, 42,1% “occasionally” considered students’ level of preparedness to be an obstacle. Regarding this subject, Teacher Eren stated the following: “I believe that we could discuss about anything, of course, according to the level of students”. This response emphasized the need to approach the issues according to students’ level of preparedness.

Of the teachers, 35,5% “occasionally” considered the reactions of parents to be an obstacle. A large portion of the teachers who were interviewed stated that they avoided the reactions of parents. Regarding this subject, Teacher Merve stated the following: “Children may misperceive what you say and take home a very different statement from yours. We generally feel anxious about the reactions of families”. Furthermore, Teacher Enes stated the following: “We generally remain within the limits of the curriculum so as not to have any problems. Children directly talk about it with their families, and the families may talk to the administration”. These

statements emphasized that families' reactions could pose as an obstacle to the teaching of controversial issues.

Figure 7 Difficulties Experienced in the Teaching of Controversial Issues



Of the teachers, 36,4% occasionally considered the customs of the region to be an obstacle. Regarding this subject, Teacher Kadir stated the following: "My school is a closed environment with cultural or regional differences and mainly immigrant families. It is very difficult to open up a child who is raised in a closed family and draw her/him into the process". This statement fairly explained why customs were considered an obstacle.

Of the teachers, 23,4% "Always" considered the fear of prosecution to be an obstacle. The interviewed teachers also expressed this concern. Regarding this subject, Teachers Enes and Bilge displayed a similar attitude and stated that the fear of prosecution posed as an obstacle to approaching controversial issues.

5 Discussion and suggestions

This section will discuss the findings of the study from various perspectives and present recommendations in light of this discussion.

5.1 Discussion

According to the results of the study, while teachers considered "terror, system of education, staff, backing and exam system" to be the most controversial issues, they considered "faith in creation, Evolutionary Theory and cloning" to be the least controversial issues. Similarly, in the study that Seçgin (2009) conducted with preservice teachers, "terror" was the most controversial issue and "faith in creation" was the least controversial issue. In a study performed with preservice teachers in the state of Florida, Rambosk (2011) observed that faith in creation was among the most controversial issues, contradicting the current study's findings. Considering

the fact that controversial issues originated from differences in religious beliefs, moral values and cultural features at the local, national and international levels (OXFAM, 2006) (Oulton et al., 2004), it is possible to associate these differences with religious differences. Thus, the controversy of some issues, by nature, may differ across societies and even within a society. However, it is possible to assert that some issues such as "environmental pollution" and "terror" are considered controversial worldwide. In his study, Sharp (2006) suggested that the issue of terror was examined in 38 articles in journals focusing on Social Education, Social Studies, and primary and secondary education and in 60 articles in the Journal Times between 2000 and 2003. These results show a parallelism with study findings because terror is among the most controversial issues. In this context, it is possible to assert that terror is among the continual common problems of our country and the world and, thus, is among the most controversial issues. However, another interesting point is that teachers in the current study considered issues such as "system of education, staff, backing and exam system" to be the most controversial issues and issues such as "Evolutionary Theory and cloning" to be the least controversial issues, coinciding with the results of the study conducted by Seçgin in 2009. By contrast, issues such as "unemployment, Turkey-EU relations and economic crisis" were considered among the most controversial issues in the study of Seçgin (2009) but were considered less controversial by the teachers in our study. This contradiction could be associated with the decrease in unemployment rates and the progress in Turkey-EU relations resulting from the economic development in

our country. As a consequence, it could be asserted that these issues are considered controversial likely because they are discussed in the national and the world agendas via media outlets and social media tools.

According to the study's findings, teachers prefer to introduce social subjects that are related to the Social Studies curriculum and are appropriate for the preparedness level of students such as "natural disasters, democracy, environmental pollution, unplanned urbanization, and multiculturalism". Furthermore, they avoid introducing subjects that are not as related to the Social Studies curriculum and not appropriate for the students' developmental level such as "communion, mother tongue-based education, unsolved murders, secret government, and party closure". Rambosk's (2011) study, which was conducted in Florida, determined that preservice teachers preferred introducing social issues that were appropriate for the students' developmental level into the classroom environment such as "illegal migration, genetic studies and juvenile crimes" and avoided approaching issues such as "abortion, faith in creation and euthanasia". It is possible to assert that these results show a parallelism with the current study's findings in terms of the criterion used to select issues. In another relevant study, while issues such as "human rights, system of education, environmental pollution, democracy and global warming" were the most popular issues introduced into the classroom environment, issues such as "fanaticism, communion, military system, unsolved murders and secret government" were the least popular issues (Seçgin, 2009). Although the findings of this study show great parallelism with the results of our study, a remarkable point is that 60,7% of participants in our study wanted to introduce fanaticism, which was the least popular issue introduced into the classroom environment by participants of Seçgin's study. This result could be due to the increase in the phenomenon of fanaticism in a number of fields (such as sports, politics, ethnicity) in Turkey in recent years. As a consequence, the issues introduced into the classroom environment are social issues (violence, multiculturalism, migration) mainly related to the Social Studies curriculum (democracy, freedom of press, brain drain, natural disasters, unplanned urbanization and environmental pollution). In this context, it is possible to assert that teachers select the issues to be introduced into the classroom environment for educational purposes based on certain principles such as appropriateness for students' level of preparedness, social importance (Gross, 1964) and appropriateness for the acquisitions of the Social Studies lesson (Hess, 2004). Because issues that are selected according to certain principles and introduced into the classroom environment will enable students to actively participate in the process, they will be useful in reaching the targeted acquisitions.

Another remarkable finding of the study is that while the most controversial issues such as "terror, system of education, staff, backing, exam system, corruption, judicial independence, unemployment and religious abuse" had a lower level of controversion, issues such as "faith

in creation, Evolutionary Theory, cloning, Kemalism, religious headscarf and military system" were not preferred to be introduced into the classroom environment by participants. In this respect, it could be asserted that there is no direct relationship between the controversion level of issues and the desire to introduce the issues into the classroom environment. Similar results were obtained in studies performed with preservice teachers (Rambosk, 2011; Seçgin, 2009), and no direct relationship was observed between the controversion level of issues and the desire to introduce the issues into the classroom environment.

Another result of the study is that students mainly introduce current issues that are discussed in media outlets (Syrian civil war, ISIS terror), political controversions (Gezi Park events) and problems that occur in their immediate surroundings (problems in the family or neighbourhood) into the classroom environment. This result could be explained by the effect of the conflict of different interests and values, political sensitivity, stimulation of wild feelings and current approach to events that reveal controversial issues (Berg, Graeffe & Holden, 2003) to students. In this respect, students come to the classroom environment affected by various sources such as their circle of friends, family environment and media outlets. Moreover, because students bring various experiences and preferences into the school environment, they may start arguments about many events or issues that are encountered in the school environment (King, 2009). Consequently, as children encounter controversial issues via the media and developing communicational technologies at nearly every age (OXFAM, 2006), it is inevitable that these issues will be introduced into the classroom environment. Thus, approaching these issues in a libertarian classroom climate via appropriate methods instead of attempting to avoid such issues in class will increase students' comprehension and the efficiency of the Social Studies lesson (Long & Long, 1974).

Another result of the study is that controversial issues enable students to not only acquire skills that are critical for their personal development such as high-level thinking and communication but also hear different opinions and become equipped individuals. Moreover, such issues are observed to be very important also in terms of acquiring citizenship competence, sensitivity to national and world problems, the culture of living together, which are necessary for the people of our country and the world to live in peace. In their study that was conducted in 2004, Oulton et al. concluded that the teaching of controversial issues remarkably enabled students to not only acquire the skills of obtaining information and thinking analytically but also develop positive attitudes and behaviours. In his study, Seçgin (2009) concluded that according to preservice teachers, controversial issues contributed to students' attainment of important acquisitions such as "critical thinking, skill of expression, skill of high-level thinking, obtaining a democratic consciousness and having an increased sensitivity to national and world problems". These results

show a parallelism with the study results. In another relevant study, the teaching of controversial issues was considered useful in terms of raising students who are efficient citizens, learn the content data, acquire the thinking skills required to participate in social decisions, take an active role in the processes of forming a social conformity and manage differences via negotiations (Soley, 1996). Moreover, controversial issues must be taught systematically on an educational basis to raise students as global citizens of the future (Reitano, Kivunja & Porter, 2009). In this respect, the teaching of controversial issues is important for promoting citizenship and democracy education, developing students' personal skills and raising individuals with a global perspective and a sensitivity to national and world problems. As a consequence, introducing controversial issues into the classroom environment systematically is generally considered effective in terms of students' affective and behavioural acquisitions.

According to the study results, teachers associated the teaching of controversial issues with the Social Studies lesson and emphasized the importance of approaching these issues within the scope of the goals of the lesson. Relevant studies have supported this finding and emphasized the need to introduce controversial issues into the classroom environment (e.g., Avaroğulları, 2015; Rambosk, 2011; Hess, 2004). In light of these results, it is necessary to include controversial issues in the Social Studies curriculum and to train preservice Social Studies teachers to teach these issues.

According to another result of the study, while approaching a controversial issue, teachers prefer various methods/techniques and approaches such as providing a democratic environment, managing the controversy objectively, encouraging the students to begin to speak, using current issues, associating controversial issues with the subject being taught and using the question-answer technique. Approaching controversial issues with a questioning and democratic method will lead to the formation of a democratic citizenship culture (Misco, 2014). In this context, it is important for teachers to introduce the controversies in a democratic environment to enable students to experience the characteristics of the democratic life. One remarkable finding is that nearly all of the teachers that participated in the study (97%) preferred to manage the controversy objectively. Although some studies in the literature support the current study's results, other studies present a contradictory view. While Asimeng and Boahene (2007), Lockwood (1995) and McBee (1996) stated that teachers were not supposed to express their personal opinions in the process of controversy, Malikow (2006) stated that teachers were required to approach controversial issues from a unique and integrated perspective and to confidently express their opinions in the classroom environment. In this respect, it could be asserted that an intraclass controversy that is not performed in a democratic classroom environment via methods and techniques that are appropriate for the structure of the

issue will remain incapable of achieving the expected result.

Another important result of the study is that teachers thought that the most important obstacles to approaching controversial issues in the classroom environment were the exam-based education, intensive curriculum, students' level of preparedness, reactions of students' parents and traditions of the environment. In his study that was conducted in 2009, Seçgin reached results supporting the results of our study. Specifically, the participants considered exam-based education to be the most important obstacle to approaching controversial issues and thought that both the traditions of the environment and the reactions of students' parents could also pose as obstacles. This result could be explained by the fact that controversial issues are, by nature, time consuming (Clarke, 2005; Soley, 1996; Werner, 1998). In this context, it is very important to free education from the exam-based structure and decrease the intensity of the curriculum to introduce controversial issues into the classroom environment. Students' level of preparedness was also considered among the obstacles to approaching controversial issues. Because controversial issues are "sensitive" issues, they may elicit emotional reactions from students (Philpott, Clabough, McConkey & Turner, 2011) and cause students to display a reluctance to actively participate in the process of controversy. In this respect, it is very important to know the developmental features of children of specific ages and to consider their prelearning while selecting the issues (Asimeng & Boahene, 2007). However, another remarkable result is that teachers also considered the reactions of parents to be an obstacle. Teachers who participated in the study stated that they avoided encountering the reactions of parents due to a possible misunderstanding. The study that was conducted by Soley in 1996 suggested that the risk of harmful accusations by family was among the difficulties that teachers experienced in the teaching of controversial issues. Werner (1998) associated the disharmony between the ideal thing and the teaching of controversial issues with teachers' anxiety regarding families' reactions. In this respect, it is considered important to provide a multiple communication between school, families and teachers for teachers to bring the controversial issues into the classroom environment and approach them from all aspects. Another remarkable result is that teachers considered the traditions of the environment to be an obstacle to discussing controversial issues. Reaching findings in parallel with the current study's results, Mhlauli (2011) determined that teachers considered the teaching of controversial issues useful but experienced difficulty in introducing some issues into the classroom environment due to the social structure, cultural features and religious beliefs. In this context, teachers are required to consider the traditions of their environment while selecting controversial issues.

The current study found that the teaching of controversial issues contributed to students' development of some skills such as obtaining information, media literacy



and communication, thinking and problem solving, interpersonal and self-control skills, global view-point and citizenship literacy. In this context, controversial issues must be taught systematically on an educational basis to raise students as global citizens of the future (Reitano et al., 2009). Accordingly, we included two goals (goals 14 and 17), which clearly aim at the teaching of controversial issues, into the general objectives of the Social Studies curriculum of our country and revealed the determination to raise individuals with acquisitions such as critical thinking, a unique view and sensitivity to national and world problems, which were among the goals of the lesson. In this context, it is possible to claim that controversial issues will enable our students to become efficient citizens of the future who will be able to work in harmony with others, have an internalized sense of social equality and democratic participation, and solve problems in the social and global contexts (Cogan & Derricott, 2014).

In the light of these statements, we can assert that controversial issues must be taught in curricula to raise our students as individuals equipped with the skills of our era and who are aware of their democratic rights and could generate solutions to national and inter-national problems from a global point of view.

5.2 Suggestions

According to the findings, results and experiences acquired from this study, the following suggestions could be made.

1) According to the study results, teachers associated the teaching of controversial issues with the general objectives of the Social Studies lesson and education and they emphasized the importance of approaching them within the scope of the lesson in terms of the lesson goals. In this context, it is suggested to consider the importance of controversial issues in terms of the general objectives of education and the general objectives of the Social Studies lesson and involve such issues in the Social Studies Curriculum in accordance with the developmental features of grades at a higher level.

2) In our study, the teachers considered the exam-based education, intensive curriculum, preparedness level of students and reactions of students' the most important obstacles in approaching the controversial issues in the classroom environment. In this respect, it is suggested to conduct studies approaching the teaching of controversial issues also in terms of school managers, parents and students so as to decrease the obstacles in teaching the controversial issues.

3) During this study, we realized the necessity of revealing the application dimension of controversial issues more clearly via observations. From this point of view, it is suggested to conduct studies that would reveal the educational dimension of issues from various perspectives.

It is suggested to prepare a textbook approaching every dimension of controversial issues so as to ground the issues on a systematic foundation.

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Attachment 1: Samples from the questionnaire parts

PART 1: Demographic features

1) Your Gender: ()Female ()Male

2) Your Professional Seniority(Year): () 1-5 () 6-10 ()11-15 ()16 and above

PART 2: Controversion degree of issues

The following table shows the controversial issues in alphabetical order. Please circle the choice that best reflects your opinion for determining their controversion degree.

(5) The Most Controversial, (4) Highly Controversial, (3) Moderately Controversial, (2) A Little Controversial, (1) Not Controversial at All

1. Education in the Mother Tongue	5	4	3	2	1
2. Military System	5	4	3	2	1
28. Animal Rights	5	4	3	2	1
52. Violence	5	4	3	2	1

PART 3: Types of issues to be discussed in the classroom environment

You may think about bringing or not bringing some controversial issues into the classroom. Please circle (2) if you think the following controversial issues should be brought into the classroom, (1) if you think they should not be brought and (0) if you have no idea.

(2) Should Be Brought, (1) Should Not Be Brought, (0) I Have No Idea

4. Freedom of Press	2	1	0
55. Disarmament	2	1	0
67. Faith in Genesis	2	1	0

PART 4: Role of controversial issues in the program and in intraclass applications

The following items inquire your thoughts about approaching the controversial issues in the classroom. Please circle the choice that best reflects your opinion.

(5) Strongly Agree, (4) Agree, (3) Neutral, (2) Disagree, (1) Strongly Disagree

Approaching or teaching the controversial issues in the classroom...

1. They should be involved in curricula.	5	4	3	2	1
2. They are not related with my branch.	5	4	3	2	1
28. They teach us how to be sensitive toward national and world problems.	5	4	3	2	1
29. They increase the listening level of students.	5	4	3	2	1

PART 5: Educational methods and technics being used by teachers in controversial issues

The following items inquire your thoughts about the teaching methods and technics of controversial issues. Please circle the choice that best reflects your opinion.

(5) Always, (4) Frequently, (3) Sometimes, (2) Rarely, (1) Never

In order to bring controversial issues into the classroom...

7. I use the cooperative learning technic.	5	4	3	2	1
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18. I apply the problem solving technic. 5 4 3 2 1
20. I expect students to form their own thoughts. 5 4 3 2 1

PART 6: Obstacles in teaching the controversial issues

What are the obstacles in efficiently teaching the controversial issues? Please circle the choice that best reflects your opinion about the obstacles you abstain from or encounter with while bringing the controversial issues into the classroom.

(5) Always an Obstacle (4) Frequently an Obstacle, (3) Sometimes an Obstacle, (2) Rarely an Obstacle, (1) Never an Obstacle

1. Reaction of school administration. 5 4 3 2 1
11. Manners and customs of the hometown. 5 4 3 2 1

Attachment 2: Sample questions from the interview form

2. What is a controversial issue in your opinion? What are the features that separate a controversial issue from other issues?
4. Which controversial issues should be brought into the classroom environment for education and why?
6. What kind of a lesson process do you follow in teaching the controversial issues?
14. Why should the controversial issues be taught? What could be their acquisitions for children?

