

Comparing 4th Grade Social Studies Textbooks in Türkiye and Finland: Pedagogical and Curricular Insights

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Abstract: This study conducts a comparative content analysis of 4th-grade social studies textbooks from Türkiye and Finland to explore how each education system embeds democratic values, global awareness, and critical thinking at the primary level. By focusing on the pedagogical philosophies, thematic structures, and visual strategies present in the textbooks, the research highlights the formative role these materials play in shaping civic identity and social cognition among young learners. Türkiye's curriculum, rooted in a centralized and tradition-oriented model, emphasizes national unity, moral education, and rote learning. In contrast, Finland's decentralized and student-centered approach promotes inquiry-based learning, environmental sustainability, children's rights, and active participation. The study employs qualitative document analysis with thematic coding, drawing on state-approved 2023 textbooks published by the Turkish Ministry of National Education and Otava Publishing (Finland). Key analytical categories include curriculum content, pedagogical structure, visual literacy, inclusion, and representations of citizenship. The findings reveal distinct approaches to civic education: the Turkish textbook prioritizes conformity and factual recall, while the Finnish counterpart encourages reasoning, reflection, and student agency. Visual and structural design differences further illustrate these pedagogical divergences. This research contributes to comparative education literature by offering a culturally grounded analysis of how foundational values are transmitted through textbooks. It concludes by proposing a hybrid model that integrates Türkiye's cultural heritage with Finland's progressive instructional methods to guide future curriculum reform.

Keywords: Social studies, textbook analysis, democratic education, critical thinking, media literacy, Türkiye, Finland.

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Introduction

Textbooks function not merely as repositories of factual knowledge but as potent ideological instruments that transmit societal values, national narratives, and normative models of citizenship (Apple, 2014). In the context of early primary education, their influence is particularly profound, as they serve as some of the first formal texts through which children engage with notions of history, identity, belonging, and civic responsibility. Through selective representations, omissions, and linguistic framing, textbooks help construct young learners' sociopolitical worldview and shape the boundaries of what is perceived as legitimate knowledge.

Comparative textbook analyses are thus critical in uncovering the pedagogical intentions and ideological underpinnings of different national curricula. By juxtaposing educational content across cultures, such studies illuminate both explicit instructional priorities and the implicit cultural assumptions that guide them. In this regard, Finland and Türkiye represent two pedagogical poles within the global education spectrum. Finland is internationally recognized for its decentralized, learner-driven, and equity-focused educational model, which emphasizes inquiry, critical thinking, and holistic student development (Sahlberg, 2021). In contrast, Türkiye

maintains a centralized, high-stakes assessment system characterized by dense content delivery, didactic instruction, and top-down curricular control (Kösterelioğlu & Bayar, 2014).

This paper investigates how the 4th-grade social studies textbooks in these two countries frame key civic themes such as community life, democratic participation, cultural heritage, and global awareness. Moreover, it explores how differing educational philosophies—progressive and participatory in the Finnish case versus prescriptive and normative in the Turkish case—manifest in the organization of content, use of visuals, and narrative voice. By integrating critical discourse analysis with curricular comparison, this study contributes to the understanding of how national identity, citizenship ideals, and social values are constructed in early educational contexts. Furthermore, it raises questions about the long-term implications of these divergent pedagogical choices on students' civic agency and intercultural competence.

National Educational Frameworks: A Structural Comparison

Türkiye's Educational Approach

Türkiye's national curriculum is developed and administered by the Ministry of National Education (MEB). Textbooks are standardized and distributed across the country,

leaving little room for regional or school-level adaptation. The social studies curriculum emphasizes national history, Atatürk's principles, geographical identity, and moral values. Instruction is largely teacher-led, with a focus on content mastery rather than student inquiry (Sömen, 2020).

The 4th-grade social studies textbook used in this analysis was published in 2023 and includes seven main thematic units:

- Individual and society
- Culture and heritage
- People, places, and environments
- Production and consumption
- Active citizenship
- Science, technology, and society
- Global connections

While the curriculum includes citizenship and global awareness as goals, the textbook content leans heavily toward patriotic themes and traditional family values.

Finland's Educational Approach

Finland's education system is based on decentralization, trust in teachers, and lifelong learning principles. The National Core Curriculum for Basic Education (2016) provides a flexible framework, allowing schools and municipalities to tailor content according to local needs. Finnish education emphasizes phenomenon-based learning, critical thinking, collaboration, and interdisciplinary integration (Niemi & Nevgi, 2014).

The 4th-grade social studies textbook, published by Otava Publishing in 2023, follows four integrated themes:

- Community and cooperation
- Rights and responsibilities
- Sustainable development
- Culture and interaction

The content aims to develop students' understanding of their local community as well as global interdependence. Lessons are structured around real-life scenarios, problem-solving tasks, and project-based learning activities.

Curriculum Content and Thematic Focus

Curriculum content reflects not only what a nation values but also what it believes its children should know to become productive and responsible members of society. In social studies, this includes historical narratives, societal roles, environmental concerns, and ethical values. The contrast between Turkish and Finnish curricula reveals different national priorities and pedagogical intentions.

Thematic Structure in Turkish Textbooks

The Turkish 4th-grade social studies textbook includes the following primary units:

- Myself and My Environment
- Culture and Our Heritage
- People, Places, and Environments
- Production, Distribution, and Consumption
- Active Citizenship
- Science, Technology, and Society
- Global Connections

Although these units appear comprehensive at first glance, the depth and execution differ. For example, the "Global Connections" unit occupies less than 5% of the textbook and offers limited engagement with actual global issues (e.g., climate change, poverty, or cultural diversity).

The focus remains on nationalistic themes:

- Turkish flag, anthem, and symbols
- National holidays and Atatürk's legacy
- Traditional family structures and respect for elders

While these elements reinforce civic identity, they lack balance in addressing global citizenship, sustainability, and multiculturalism.

Thematic Structure in Finnish Textbooks

The Finnish textbook offers a more integrated and inquiry-based structure. Its core themes include:

- Cooperation and Participation
- Children's Rights and Responsibilities
- Environment and Sustainability
- Cultural Diversity and Communication

Each theme is grounded in real-life contexts, and students are encouraged to explore issues through case studies, role-playing, and group discussions.

Examples from the textbook:

- A lesson on climate action asks students to analyze their own carbon footprints.
- A unit on rights includes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Lessons on cultural diversity include interviews with children from different backgrounds.

The textbook is aligned with 21st-century competencies and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Comparative Overview of Thematic Coverage

Table 1*Comparative Overview of Thematic Coverage in Türkiye and Finland's 4th Grade Social Studies Textbooks*

Theme	Türkiye Textbook	Finland Textbook
National Identity	Strong emphasis	Minor reference
Global Citizenship	Minimal	Core component
Human Rights	Rare mention	Integrated in curriculum
Environmental Sustainability	Mentioned but not explored	Strong, project-based
Digital and Media Literacy	Absent	Present and emphasized
Cultural Diversity	Limited to national scope	Broad and inclusive
Critical Thinking	Low emphasis	High emphasis

Content Depth vs. Content Breadth

While the Turkish textbook covers a wide range of topics, the depth is often sacrificed for the sake of coverage. Lessons are short, declarative, and based on memorization. Conversely, the Finnish Textbook employs fewer themes but explores them in greater depth, with more open-ended questions, activities, and discussion prompts.

Example:

Turkish Textbook: "The Turkish flag symbolizes our independence. We must always respect it." Finnish Textbook: "What does the Finnish flag mean to you? How is your country connected to others through symbols?"

This difference illustrates the contrasting approaches: transmission of values versus construction of meaning.

Pedagogical Strategies and Learning Objectives

Pedagogy is not merely a method of delivery but a reflection of how knowledge, values, and thinking skills are structured within a society. The pedagogical approaches embedded in textbooks can either promote passive absorption or encourage active engagement, critical thinking, and autonomy (Biesta, 2011).

Pedagogy in the Turkish Textbook: Transmission-Oriented Approach

The Turkish 4th grade social studies textbook largely follows a teacher-centered and content-heavy model. Lessons are typically structured as follows:

- A short introductory paragraph defining the topic
- Key points in bullet or boxed format
- A short summary or "Did You Know?" fact
- 2–3 multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank questions

Teaching method: Direct instruction

Learning model: Behaviorist

Student role: Passive recipient

Example activity:

"Match the definition with the correct concept."

While there is consistency in structure, there is limited room for interpretation, dialogue, or personal reflection. Knowledge is treated as fixed and transferred rather than co-constructed.

Pedagogy in the Finnish Textbook: Inquiry-Based Learning

The Finnish textbook emphasizes a constructivist, inquiry-based, and student-centered approach. Lessons often begin with real-life scenarios or open-ended questions such as:

- "Why do some children in the world not go to school?"
- "How can we reduce food waste in our community?"

Learning is designed around exploration, discussion, and collaborative problem-solving. Each lesson ends with student tasks like:

- Interview a family member
- Conduct a survey at school
- Create a poster about your cultural heritage
- Debate: "Should everyone have the right to free internet access?"

Teaching method: Facilitated exploration

Learning model: Constructivist and humanistic

Student role: Active participant and co-creator

This structure cultivates critical and creative thinking, especially in democratic and environmental issues.

Comparing the Alignment with Learning Objectives in Education

Aspect	Türkiye	Finland
Learning Goals	Content mastery, national values	Skills development, global citizenship
Activity Types	Repetition, matching, Q&A	Inquiry, group work, real-world tasks
Evaluation Focus	Correct answers	Reflections, reasoning, application
Bloom's Taxonomy Level	Mostly Remember & Understand	Analyze, Evaluate, Create

Insight:

While Türkiye's approach aligns more with lower-order thinking skills, Finland encourages higher-order thinking—a key

requirement for 21st-century competencies (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

Sample Comparison: Same Topic, Different Approach

Topic	Türkiye	Finland
Recycling	"Recycling helps protect nature. Glass and plastic must be separated." (<i>Factual</i>)	"What can you and your school do to reduce waste? How would you organize a recycling campaign?" (<i>Action-oriented</i>)
Citizenship	"Good citizens obey the law and respect the flag."	"How do you make your voice heard in society? Write a letter to a local representative."

This comparison exemplifies the pedagogical gap: one tells, the other asks; one expects memorization, the other encourages transformation.

Visual and Graphic Presentation

Visual elements in textbooks are not mere decorations; they serve as cognitive and affective tools that support comprehension, motivation, and conceptual learning (Mayer, 2005). A well-designed textbook integrates visuals to illustrate abstract concepts, trigger emotional engagement, and stimulate curiosity. The differences between the Turkish and Finnish textbooks are particularly noticeable in this regard.

Visual Density and Design Principles

The Finnish Textbook adopts a visually rich and student-friendly layout. Each page includes:

- Real-life photographs
- Illustrated case scenarios
- Color-coded diagrams and icons

- Comic strips and storyboards
- QR codes linked to digital content

The design adheres to Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2011), helping students process and retain complex information through visual scaffolding.

The Turkish Textbook, by contrast, is more static and traditional:

- Clipart-style illustrations
- Few real-life or context-based visuals
- Limited color use (often grayscale maps)
- No interactive or digital elements

Visual density:

- **Finland:** ~6–8 visuals per 2-page spread
- **Türkiye:** ~2–3 visuals, often decorative

Comparing the Visual Types and Their Functions in Education

Visual Type	Türkiye	Finland
Photographs	Formal, symbolic	Real-life, contextual
Infographics	Rare	Frequent
Maps	Static, fact-based	Interactive, activity-driven
Comics / Story Strips	Absent	Used to explain social issues
Digital Extensions (QR)	None	Common
Color Palette	Conservative (e.g. red, gray)	Friendly (blue, green, pastel tones)

Pedagogical Value of Visuals

Finnish visuals support:

- Active learning
- Emotional engagement
- Discussion and reflection
- Empathy and inclusion

Turkish visuals often:

- Reinforce memorization
- Serve symbolic functions (e.g. flag, Atatürk bust)
- Lack interaction or open-ended application

Example:

- “Identify the cities shown on the map.”
- “Trace where bananas are grown and how they reach your city. Create a supply chain map.”

Accessibility and Inclusivity

Finnish visuals:

- Represent ethnic and cultural diversity
- Show children with disabilities
- Reflect varied family types (e.g. single parents, same-sex couples)

Turkish visuals:

- Emphasize traditional nuclear families
- Uniform cultural representation
- Little or no representation of disability or diversity

Summary Insight

The Finnish textbook treats visuals as an active learning tool, promoting visual literacy and student voice. The Turkish textbook, while improving in recent years, still relies on passive, symbolic visuals with limited pedagogical engagement.

Representation of Democratic Values and Citizenship

Citizenship education is a core function of social studies, preparing students to become informed, responsible, and active members of society. However, what defines a "good citizen" varies across contexts. This section compares how Türkiye and Finland approach democratic values, student agency, and societal inclusion.

Türkiye: Obedience, Loyalty, and National Unity

In the Turkish textbook, citizenship is framed through:

- Obedience to laws
- Respect for the flag and national anthem
- Pride in Atatürk’s legacy
- Participation in national holidays

Example excerpt:

“A good citizen follows the rules, shows respect to state symbols, and protects national unity.”

This model reflects a traditional, state-centered concept of citizenship, where the focus is on duties rather than rights or participation.

Notable Characteristics:

- Passive citizenship
- Emphasis on homogeneity
- No space for critical perspectives
- Democratic values are taught as fixed norms

Finland: Participation, Rights, and Pluralism

The Finnish textbook frames citizenship around:

- Children’s rights
- Participation in school decisions
- Awareness of global and local issues
- Critical engagement with society

Example excerpt:

“You have the right to express your thoughts. How can you do this respectfully in your community?”

Students are encouraged to:

- Role-play elections
- Write letters to local representatives
- Debate ethical dilemmas
- Collaborate on community projects

This promotes active citizenship aligned with democratic values and prepares students for pluralistic, participatory societies (Biesta, 2011).

Representation of Marginalized Voices in Textbooks

Dimension	Türkiye Textbook	Finland Textbook
Gender Equality	Traditional roles	Gender-balanced representation
Minority Groups	Rarely mentioned	Visibly included (ethnic, linguistic)
Disability Representation	Symbolic or absent	Integrated and normalized
Religious Diversity	Homogeneous (Sunni-Islam focus)	Acknowledged with comparative approach

Finland makes intentional efforts to include diverse voices and identities, helping students develop empathy and understand pluralism.

Civic Engagement and Student Voice

Türkiye:

- Students are told what “good citizenship” is.
- Participation is defined as following rules.
- No mention of protest, advocacy, or critical action.

Finland:

- Students are co-constructors of civic life.
- Encouraged to speak up, collaborate, and act.
- Learn about both rights and responsibilities.

Finland aligns with Westheimer & Kahne’s (2004) model of the “justice-oriented citizen”, while Türkiye promotes the “personally responsible citizen.”

Critical Thinking and Media Literacy

In the digital age, critical thinking and media literacy are not optional—they are essential skills for citizenship, education, and personal agency. This section compares how each textbook cultivates students’ ability to analyze, question, and evaluate information.

Critical Thinking in Turkish Textbooks: Limited Engagement

The Turkish textbook provides **fact-based, closed-ended questions**, such as:

- “When was the Republic founded?”
- “Which of the following is a national holiday?”
- “Match the concept with its definition.”

There is minimal opportunity for analysis, discussion, or argumentation.

Observations:

- No open-ended prompts
- No debates or ethical dilemmas
- No reflection tasks
- Critical thinking is assumed, not explicitly taught

As a result, students are positioned as consumers of information, not creators of knowledge.

Critical Thinking in Finnish Textbooks: Central and Active

Finland embeds critical thinking within each lesson. Students are regularly asked to:

- Evaluate news sources
- Identify bias and perspective
- Reflect on different viewpoints
- Discuss moral questions

Example questions:

- “Whose voice is missing from this story?”
- “Can people interpret the same event differently?”
- “How can you tell if a news item is fake?”

Activities:

- Analyzing political cartoons
- Creating posters about social issues
- Group debates on rights and responsibilities

This approach fosters metacognitive awareness, empathy, and intellectual autonomy (Flavell, 1979).

Media Literacy: The Digital Divide

Media Literacy Criteria	Türkiye	Finland
Explicit Instruction	Absent	Present and emphasized
Digital Ethics	Not addressed	Age-appropriate guidance included
Fake News Awareness	Not mentioned	Regular exercises and projects
Critical Source Evaluation	Absent	Integrated into lessons
Social Media Use	Ignored	Explored critically

In Finland, media literacy is treated as a citizenship skill. In Türkiye, it is largely overlooked in the curriculum.

Reflection and Metacognition

Finland goes further by encouraging students to reflect on their own thinking:

- “What surprised you today?”
- “How did your opinion change after this activity?”
- “What new questions do you have?”

Such metacognitive prompts are essential for long-term learning and transfer of knowledge (Zimmerman, 2002).

Türkiye’s textbook, in contrast, offers no reflection activities, focusing instead on recall and repetition.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of the 4th-grade social studies textbooks from Türkiye and Finland reveals deep-rooted differences in educational philosophy, content structure, and

pedagogical intent. The Turkish textbook, while strong in promoting national unity and moral values, follows a content-heavy, teacher-centered model. It lacks emphasis on critical thinking, diverse perspectives, and global citizenship. Visuals and learning activities are often symbolic and passive. In contrast, the

Finnish textbook adopts a student-centered, inquiry-driven approach, embedding 21st-century skills such as media literacy, sustainability, and participatory citizenship throughout its curriculum. Visuals are vibrant and purposeful, and lessons are grounded in real-world contexts.

Comparing the Key Takeaways in Education

Dimension	Türkiye	Finland
Curriculum Philosophy	National identity, discipline	Global citizenship, agency
Pedagogy	Transmission-based	Constructivist and reflective
Student Role	Passive learner	Active participant
Visuals and Media	Decorative, low interactivity	Interactive, inclusive, digital
Democratic Education	Obedience and respect	Dialogue, participation, rights
Critical Thinking	Rare and implicit	Central and explicit

Recommendations:

- Türkiye should modernize its textbooks by incorporating real-world relevance, open-ended inquiry, and diversity-conscious visuals.
- Finland serves as a model in many respects, but both systems could benefit from ongoing, culture-sensitive curriculum renewal.
- A hybrid model that blends Türkiye's cultural richness with Finland's progressive pedagogy could pave the way for a more balanced and transformative education.

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