




# Citizenship Education, Democratic School Culture, and Digital Transformation in Primary Schools

## İlkokullarda Yurttaşlık Eğitimi, Demokratik Okul Kültürü ve Dijital Dönüşüm

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### Abstract

This research investigates citizenship education, democratic school culture, and digital citizenship in primary schools amidst 21st-century technological shifts. Employing document analysis and a systematic literature review (2015-2025), this study critically examines policy reforms in Türkiye and the impact of terminating the "School Councils Project" in 2019. The findings reveal structural contradictions between formal "active citizen" goals and hierarchical school structures, with teacher attitudes significantly influencing classroom democracy despite prevalent autocratic tendencies. While perceptions of digital citizenship evolve through blended learning, parental involvement remains a decisive factor. The conclusion highlights that democratic competencies require a lived school culture rather than purely cognitive instruction. Recommendations include reviving student participation mechanisms, integrating digital ethics into core subjects, and reforming professional development to enhance democratic classroom management and awareness of the hidden curriculum.

**Keywords:** Citizenship education, Democratic school culture, Primary school, Digital citizenship, Hidden curriculum.

### Öz

Bu araştırma, 21. yüzyılın değişen toplumsal ve teknolojik dinamikleri ekseninde, ilkökul düzeyinde yurttaşlık eğitimi, demokratik okul kültürü ve dijital vatandaşlık kavramlarını derinlemesine incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma, özellikle Türkiye bağlamında 2015-2025 yılları arasındaki politika değişikliklerini, müfredat reformlarını ve okul içi uygulamaları eleştirel bir perspektifle analiz etmektedir. Araştırmanın temel odak noktaları arasında; "İnsan Hakları, Yurttaşlık ve Demokrasi" dersinin öğretim programındaki yeri, "Demokrasi Eğitimi ve Okul Meclisleri Projesi"nin 2019 yılında sonlandırılmasının etkileri, öğretmenlerin demokratik tutumları ile cinsiyet ve branş değişkenleri arasındaki ilişkiler ve örtük müfredatın değer aktarımındaki rolü yer almaktadır. Ayrıca, dijitalleşen dünyada ilkökul öğrencilerinin dijital yurttaşlık algılarının gelişimi, harmanlanmış öğrenme ortamlarının etkisi ve ebeveyn faktörü de ampirik bulgular ışığında tartışılmaktadır. Yapılan sistematik literatür taraması ve doküman analizi sonucunda, formal müfredatta hedeflenen "aktif yurttaş" kimliği ile okulun hiyerarşik yapısı ve örtük müfredatı arasında yapısal çelişkiler olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Öğretmenlerin demokratik tutumlarının sınıf içi demokrasiyi doğrudan şekillendirdiği, ancak

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otokratik eğilimlerin hala yaygın olduğu görülmüştür. Çalışma, demokratik yetkinliklerin sadece bilişsel düzeyde değil, okulun tüm paydaşlarının katılımıyla oluşturulacak yaşayan bir demokratik kültür içinde kazanılabileceğini savunmakta ve politika yapıcılara yönelik somut öneriler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yurttaşlık Eğitimi, Demokratik Okul Kültürü, İlkokul, Dijital Vatandaşlık, Örtük Müfredat

## Introduction

Throughout history, education systems have functioned as the most fundamental mechanisms ensuring the continuity of societies. With the construction of nation-states, this function evolved into the goal of raising the "desirable citizen"; schools became the primary institutions in which national identity, shared values, and citizenship consciousness were instilled (Tezcan, 1985). However, the 21st century has brought a new social order characterised by globalisation, migration movements, cultural diversity, and the dizzying development of digital technologies. This latter order requires a "global and digital citizen" profile that goes beyond traditional, obedience-based, and nation-oriented understandings of citizenship; one who respects human rights, can live together with differences, thinks critically, and assumes ethical responsibilities in the digital world.

The primary school, as the first public space a child encounters after the family in the socialisation process, constitutes a critical threshold in the construction of this new citizenship identity (Çubukçu, 2012). Primary school years are considered a "critical period" in which individuals define their relationships with authority, concretise concepts of rights and responsibilities, and develop a sense of social belonging. Therefore, citizenship education at the primary level should be handled not merely as a subject of a lesson but also as a matter of "democratic culture" that permeates the entire atmosphere of the school.

In Türkiye, primary school programmes have attributed central importance to citizenship education since the foundation of the Republic. This education, conducted under the umbrella of "Life Studies" and "Social Studies" courses, achieved a more distinct structure with the addition of the compulsory "Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy" course at the 4th-grade level since 2010. However, the success of an education system cannot be measured solely by the formal curriculum. The "hidden curriculum", extending from school corridors to ceremonies and from teacher–student communication to decision-making mechanisms, is often more decisive in the transmission of values than textbooks are (Kärner & Schneider, 2024; Tezcan, 1985).

In this context, the abolition of the "Democracy Education and School Councils Project", which started in 2004 and offered students democratic participation experiences through the decision of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) Board of Education and Discipline in 2019, represents one of the most significant breaking points in the field (MoNE TTKB, 2019). This decision narrowed the scope of democratic practice in schools and risked imprisoning citizenship education within a theoretical framework. On the other hand, the prevalence of digital technologies has brought the concept of "digital citizenship" to the fore; primary school students' behaviours in online environments, cyberbullying, digital ethics, and security issues

have become priority agendas for educators (Opria & Momanu, 2024; Ribble, 2015).

### **Purpose and Significance of the Research**

This research aims to address citizenship education in primary schools via a multidimensional approach. The primary objective is to analyse the current situation in Türkiye along the axes of teaching programmes, teacher competencies, school culture, and digitalisation, and to provide a comparative perspective with the international literature. This study not only describes the current state but also answers the following questions: "Why can a democratic school culture not be established?" and "How should citizenship education transform in the digital age?" in light of empirical data from 2015-2025. This study holds unique value in revealing the policy enactment and the "implementation gap" of education policies in the field.

### **Method**

This research is a comprehensive meta-synthesis study designed via systematic literature review and document analysis methods and is grounded in the qualitative research tradition in the educational sciences. As Creswell (2018) stated, qualitative research enables an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena and the identification of contextual factors. In this study, a multilayered phenomenon, such as citizenship education, was examined via a holistic approach rather than with isolated variables.

### **Research Design**

In this research, the "case study" and "thematic analysis" methods were used in an integrated manner. Primary school citizenship education in Türkiye was treated as the "primary case," and its historical development, current status, and future projections were analysed. In the data analysis process, content analysis techniques proposed by Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013) were used to code data from different sources and to combine them into themes.

### **Data Collection Process and Sources**

The research dataset consists of research articles in peer-reviewed journals published between 2015 and 2025, master's and doctoral theses, official institutional reports (MoNE, Board of Education), and reports from international organisations (OECD, IEA).

The primary databases used in the data search were as follows:

- ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre): For international literature and trends (Gezer, 2022).
- DergiPark and YÖK Thesis Centre: For national literature, local practices, and original studies in the Turkish context.
- Google Scholar and ResearchGate: For current articles and conference papers.
- Official websites: MoNE (meb.gov.tr), Board of Education and Discipline (ttkb.meb.gov.tr), and TGNA (TBMM) archives.

## Data Analysis and Synthesis

Hundreds of documents obtained were first filtered according to the "relevance" criterion. Studies outside the primary school level (middle school, high school) and data prior to 2015 (with the exception of the historical context) were excluded. The selected studies were subjected to in-depth analysis within the framework of the following four main themes:

1. Policy and curriculum: Official documents, programme changes, and regulations.
2. School Climate and Culture: Student participation, decision-making processes, hidden curriculum.
3. Teacher Factor: Attitudes, beliefs, and classroom practices.
4. Digital Dimension: Perception of digital citizenship, technology integration.

Data under each theme were synthesised in the context of cause–effect relationships, contradictions, and commonalities; quantitative data (statistics, scale results) were presented and supported by tables. To increase the validity of the research, a "triangulation" strategy was employed, which involves comparing data from different sources (e.g., teacher opinions and student observations) regarding the same phenomenon (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

## Findings

In this section, findings aligned with the research questions are presented in a thematic flow and supported by evidence from the literature.

### Transformation of the Formal Curriculum and Policy Analysis

Citizenship education policies in Türkiye have followed a course parallel to changes in the political conjuncture and educational paradigms. With the transition to the constructivist approach in 2005, citizenship education shifted from "knowledge transfer" to the axis of "acquiring values and skills."

### Comparative Analysis of Teaching Programmes (2018 vs. 2024)

The comparative analysis of the "Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy" course curriculum, updated in 2018, and the draft programme prepared within the scope of the "Maarif Model of the Century of Türkiye" in 2024 reveals some philosophical and contextual differences (MoNE, 2024).

**Table 1.** Comparison of the 2018 and 2024 curricula

Feature	2018 Curriculum	2024 Curriculum
<b>Fundamental Philosophy</b>	Centred on universal values, rights, and freedoms.	Universal values blended with national and spiritual values, virtue-oriented.
<b>Definition of Citizenship</b>	An individual who knows their rights and is responsible.	An individual who draws strength from roots is ready for global competition and possesses moral integrity.
<b>Focus Skills</b>	Critical thinking, empathy, and communication.	Holistic development, digital competence, social-emotional skills.
<b>Content</b>	Unit and outcome-based.	Skill-woven and process-based,

**Structure**

interdisciplinary approach.

The findings indicate that the 2024 programme defines citizenship not only as a legal status but also as a form of cultural and moral belonging. However, researchers emphasise that teacher competencies and material support are critical to the program's feasibility. In particular, how the emphasis on "virtue" will be balanced with universal human rights concepts will become clear during the implementation process.

**The End of a Democratisation Project: School Councils**

The most concrete example of applied democracy education in Türkiye, the "Democracy Education and School Councils Project," was implemented in 2004, with a protocol signed between the MoNE and the TGNA. The project aimed to provide students with the experience of electing, being elected, campaigning, and voting in a hierarchy extending from class representation to the School Council, District Representation, Provincial Representation, and finally the Student Council of Türkiye.

However, this practice, which lasted approximately 15 years, was abolished by the approval of the MoNE Board of Education and Discipline dated 17.04.2019, number 7821597 (MoNE TTKB, 2019). The reason for cancellation was stated as the TGNA presidents' decision to withdraw from the project and the view that the project had completed its function. Studies in the literature show that this decision created a serious void in schools. School councils are platforms where students learn not only to vote but also to negotiate, tolerate different views, and develop a culture of consensus. With the abolition of the project, student representation was reduced to more traditional and limited roles, such as "class presidents", and student participation channels in school management narrowed.

**Democratic School Culture and Student Participation**

A democratic school is not just a place where democracy lessons are taught but also a micro-society where democratic processes are lived. Research has shown that school culture directly affects students' perceptions of "political efficacy."

**Decision-Making Processes and Student Voice**

International civic and citizenship education study data and related academic studies emphasise the importance of the concept of "student voice". According to the findings, there is a strong positive correlation between the level of student participation in school decisions and the quality of teacher–student relationships (Peras & Bezjak, 2025). When students feel that their ideas are taken seriously, they find their teachers fairer and more approachable, which strengthens their sense of belonging to the school.

However, in Türkiye and similar countries with centralised education systems, student participation generally remains formal. While students have a say in "harmless" issues such as uniform color or excursion destination selection, they are excluded from decision-making processes on fundamental issues such as the curriculum, disciplinary rules, or budget.

**Effect of School Climate on Competencies**

Multilevel analyses reveal the effects of school climate on students' empathy and tolerance levels. Students' empathy scores may be lower in urban schools than in rural

areas, but the determining factor is the school's "democratic openness" (Strijbos & Engels, 2023). It has been determined that students raised in environments with a "limited democratic school culture" perform significantly lower in "deliberative competences", such as curiosity and empathy. This situation proves that democracy is an experiential process rather than a matter of cognitive knowledge.

### **Teacher Attitudes: Autocratic Legacy and Democratic Ideals**

Regardless of how perfect the curriculum is, the attitude of the teacher, who is the practitioner, determines the quality of education. As the classroom leader, the teacher models democratic values (a role model). However, research shows inconsistencies between teachers' beliefs and practices.

### **Analysis of Autocratic and Democratic Tendencies**

Research covering the 2019-2024 period revealed significant differences between primary school teachers and subject teachers in terms of democratic attitudes (Çolak, 2024).

- **Primary School Teachers:** Research shows that more than half of primary school teachers carry "autocratic" tendencies. This situation can be explained by the nature of primary school teaching, which tends to establish more intense and long-term authority over students. Classroom management concerns can sometimes take precedence over democratic participation.
- **Subject Teachers:** Compared with primary school teachers, subject teachers have more democratic attitudes. Their movement between classes and more limited but focused interactions with students may facilitate the sharing of authority.
- **Gender Variable:** Gender stands out as an important variable for predicting democratic attitudes. It was observed that female teachers (both primary and subject) adopt a more democratic, participatory, and student-centred approach than their male colleagues do. On the other hand, male teachers were reported to tend to perceive participation processes in management as more hierarchical.

### **Hidden Curriculum: The Power of the Invisible**

Beyond the formal curriculum, the "hidden curriculum," which is the set of unwritten rules embedded in the walls of the school, is the most powerful but least supervised dimension of citizenship education. This phenomenon, conceptualised by Jackson (1968), teaches students "how to survive" in school: obeying, lining up, and not questioning authority (Tezcan, 1985).

### **Values, Education, and Rituals**

Qualitative studies (case studies) conducted in primary schools in Türkiye show that character education and value transmission take place mainly through the hidden curriculum (Çubukçu, 2012).

- **Ceremonies and Celebrations:** Flag ceremonies, specific days and weeks, and national holiday celebrations are the most intense moments when national identity and belonging are instilled in students. However, as emphasised by Tezcan (1985) and current studies, these rituals can sometimes take place in an excessively disciplinary and militaristic atmosphere, fostering a culture of

"obedient subjects" rather than democratic individuals.

- **Space use:** Classroom seating arrangements (rows behind rows), the position of the teacher's desk (elevated and central), and the physical structure of the school are elements that silently shout who hold authority. Discussions on democratic school architecture reveal that "U" arrangements or cluster seating increase cooperation and participation, whereas traditional "row" arrangements involve one-way communication.

### **Inconsistency and Conflict**

Studies on teachers' awareness of the hidden curriculum show that teachers are either unaware of the power of these hidden messages or, even if they are, cannot change them due to systemic pressures (Kärner & Schneider, 2024). While "freedom of thought" is explained in the official lesson, shouting at a student who is running in the corridor or silencing a student who expresses a different opinion are the most fundamental conflicts between the hidden curriculum and the official curriculum. This conflict leads to value confusion in the student and reinforces the perception that "what is taught in school is invalid in real life."

### **Citizenship in the Digital Age: Digital Citizenship Education in Primary School**

The penetration of technology into all areas of life has carried the concept of citizenship to the digital dimension. "Digital citizenship" is defined not only as the skill of using technology (digital literacy) but also as the norm for using technology ethically, safely, and responsibly (Opria & Momanu, 2024; Ribble, 2015).

### **Digital Profiles and Competencies of Primary School Students**

Although children of primary school age (6-11 years) are called "digital natives," digital citizenship consciousness does not develop spontaneously. Qualitative observation studies conducted with 6–7-year-olds in Romania and Türkiye have shown that children's digital competencies are directly related to family structure, parental education level, and the variety of devices at home (Opria & Momanu, 2024).

- **Usage Habits:** Most students use the internet for games and entertainment; use for information production or social participation remains limited.
- **Parental Influence:** Children of parents with high education levels use digital tools more consciously and are more aware of digital risk. Parental supervision and guidance are the most important pillars of digital citizenship education outside the school.

### **Curriculum Integration and Implementation Difficulties**

Digital citizenship education in Türkiye is generally provided through information technology courses or units in the social studies course. However, systematic reviews reveal the following deficiencies in current practices (Gezer, 2022):

- **Technical Focus:** Training usually focuses on coding, robotics, and basic computer use; normative issues such as "digital ethics," "digital bullying," "copyright," and "digital footprint" remain in the background.
- **Teacher Inadequacy:** Primary schoolteachers do not feel competent in digital citizenship and need in-service training. Teachers' deficiencies in digital

pedagogy reduce the quality of education (Ata & Yıldırım, 2019).

- **Blended Learning Opportunity:** Experimental studies have shown that blended learning models are effective in digital citizenship education. In environments where online and face-to-face activities are combined, students' perceptions of digital citizenship (DC) develop significantly alongside their digital literacy (DL) and information and communication technology (ICT) skills.

## Discussion

This extensive analysis of citizenship education in primary schools reveals the tension between global trends and local realities, illustrated by the example of Türkiye. The findings obtained can be discussed on four principal axes:

### 1. The Policy-Practice Gap:

Türkiye is making efforts to adapt its curriculum to European Union standards and 21st-century skills. The existence of the "Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy" course and the visionary approach in the 2024 draft programme are evidence of this. However, the cancellation of the School Councils Project is a step in the opposite direction of this vision. While "active citizenship" is targeted on the one hand, the closure of councils, the most important practical area for students, has caused education to move away from the principle of "learning by doing and living." This situation is contrary to Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism and the principle of "student participation" in modern educational science. In the absence of school councils, democracy education risks becoming an abstract "heap of knowledge."

### 2. The Role of the Teacher and the Problem of Autocracy:

The findings show that a significant portion of primary school teachers still display autocratic attitudes. This situation can be associated with cultural codes in Türkiye (patriarchal structure, age hierarchy) and the education system's centralised structure. When the teacher expects "obedience" from the system, they also expect "obedience" from the student. The more democratic tendencies among subject teachers and female teachers can be understood as reflecting different pedagogical approaches and gender roles in education. Without creating a democratic classroom climate, it is not possible to raise democratic citizens. As seen in Vietnam, the search for a balance between "socialist morality" and the "democratic school environment" is also evident in Türkiye between "national values" and "universal democratic values".

### 3. Dominance of the Hidden Curriculum:

Everything from the architecture of schools to ceremonies conveys a message. Research shows that students model what the teacher does, not what they say. While "equality" is explained in the official curriculum, the school management creating classes according to parent donations or the teacher favouring a successful student conveys the message that "there is no equality in the real world." This hidden learning renders official citizenship education ineffective.

### 4. Transition from "Protection" to "Empowerment" in Digital Citizenship:

The current digital citizenship education paradigm predominantly adopts a "protectionist" approach (protection from cyberbullying and a safe internet). However, the literature emphasises that children are not only "at risk" in the digital

world but also "actors." Digital citizenship education should be built not on prohibitions but on ethical decision-making skills. Projects supported by the Council of Europe, such as "Digi-Nauts," and blended learning models offer promising examples in this regard (Richardson & Samara, 2022).

## Conclusion

This research revealed that the process of constructing citizenship education and a democratic school culture at the primary level presents a multidimensional and complex structure. Analyses conducted specifically for Türkiye have allowed the following fundamental conclusions to be reached:

- Structural erosion: Although the "Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy" course provides theoretical ground, the tripod of practice collapsed with the removal of School Councils. Schools have moved away from being areas of democratic practice.
- Criticality of the Teacher Factor: Teachers' democratic attitudes are more decisive than the curriculum is. Autocratic teacher attitudes render the democratic curriculum dysfunctional. Gender and subject are variables that significantly influence teacher attitudes.
- Dominance of the Hidden Curriculum: The hidden curriculum produced by the social and physical environment of the school leaves more permanent traces in values education than does the official curriculum. Inconsistencies lead to erosion in the student's value system.
- Digital Unpreparedness: Digital citizenship education is still in its infancy. The lack of teacher competence and the reduction of education to a technical dimension delay the goal of raising ethical and responsible digital citizens. The family's socioeconomic status continues to be a determinant of digital competence.

In conclusion, democratic citizenship education is not just a matter of textbooks but also of the school climate, teacher education, and education policy. To raise individuals with the competencies required by the 21st century, the democratisation of all components of the school is essential.

## Suggestions

Based on the research findings, the following suggestions have been developed for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers:

For Policymakers (MoNE, Board of Education):

- Revival of Participation Mechanisms: New "Student Advisory Boards" or "School Parliament" models with a legal basis, where students can have an active say in school management, should be implemented urgently to fill the gap created by the cancellation of the School Councils Project.
- Updating the Curriculum: Digital citizenship education should be moved beyond information technology lessons and placed at the centre of life studies and social studies lessons, with a focus on "digital ethics" and "digital rights."

- In-service Training Reform: In-service training for teachers should be organised not only as a form of technical knowledge transfer but also as workshops on "democratic classroom management," "conflict resolution," and "hidden curriculum awareness."

For School Administrators and Teachers:

- Classroom Democracy: Teachers should determine classroom rules together with students (collaborative rule-making) and provide the practice of solving problems through democratic means by organising class meetings.
- Hidden Curriculum Audit: School management should subject the physical structure of the school, the functioning of ceremonies, and disciplinary processes to the filter of "democratic values"; militaristic and authoritarian elements should be weeded out.
- Family Cooperation: Information seminars for parents on digital citizenship should be organised, and the consistency of digital rules between home and school should be ensured.

For Researchers:

- Longitudinal Impact Analysis: There is a need for longitudinal studies that will measure the long-term effects of the abolition of school councils on students' political participation and democratic attitudes.
- Qualitative Deepening: Ethnographic and phenomenological studies aimed at understanding the perception of digital citizenship through the eyes of children should be prioritised.

## Declarations

**Ethics Committee Approval Information:** Since this study did not use any methods requiring ethics committee approval, ethics committee approval is not necessary.

**Author Conflict of Interest Statement:** The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Author Contribution:** The article is single-authored.

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