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Research Article:

The Future of Religious Education in State Schools in Türkiye: Debates and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the current debates over religious education (RE) in state schools in Türkiye to better understand its future. The focus here is compulsory Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge (RCEK) course in Turkish state schools. This is a qualitative, literature-based study, using official documents, existing studies and reports over the compulsory RE. After the initial analysis, three areas emerged as the most debated issues: the status of RE, its relationship with plurality, and its pedagogical approach. It seems that these issues have a potential to shape the future of RE in state schools in Türkiye. The article suggests that compulsory RE in state school does not seem to contradict basic human rights principles as long as it meets certain standards. Moreover, national policies and realities indicate that leaving RE out of state schools does not seem a viable option for Türkiye. Yet, the debates and local, national and international court cases show that the compulsory RE with its content and approach has failed to satisfy some segments of society in Türkiye. These issues therefore should be resolved if RE has a promising and less contentious future. The article suggests that when these issues are solved, the international human rights framework, RE scholarship and national policies should be taken into consideration to find a right balance. It might mean that for RE to continue as a compulsory school subject, it needs a substantial revision. When revising the compulsory RE a more pluralistic, objective and participative approach should be taken to eliminate the issues and problems raised in the debates and the court cases on RE.

Keywords: Religious education, Türkiye, religious culture and ethics knowledge, compulsory, religious education pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

Religious, historical, social, cultural and political factors have a profound effect on the character of a national education system (Kandel, 1933). As Robertson and Dale (2017, p. 859) argue, these national factors are still important, as education policies "have and continue to be located in national territorial spaces" and the national context is still the primary space where the policy is made. Therefore, political conditions and the character of the country have been decisive in the moulding of the education system, including religious education. In this context, religious education has been expected to contribute to the construction of the national identity and society (Bråten, 2013), e.g., by passing common civic values on students (Van Arragon & Beaman, 2015).

However, in the age of globalisation, international factors, such as the development of key 21st century competencies (OECD, 2005), international human rights framework (Council of Europe, 1950) and international court cases (ECtHR, 2007; 2014), have also an effect on national educational systems, including religious education.

In this article we explore the current debates over religious education in state schools in Türkiye in the context national and international factors to understand its future. Religious education (RE) and related terms can mean different things in different contexts. For example, in some studies, there is a distinction between religious education and teaching about religion. In this distinction, the former denotes religious nurture or education into religion, while the latter means an objective teaching of different religions and worldviews (Gündüz, 2018; Hendek, 2022a; Jackson, 2014; OSCE & Council of Europe, 2011). However, we use religious education as a general term, not as a pedagogical approach. Specifically, in this article religious education (RE) refers to Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge (RCEK, *Din Kültürü ve Ahlak Bilgisi* or *DKAB* in Turkish) a compulsory course, which is taught two-hour a week from 4th to 12th grade. As this course is compulsory it should be taught in an inclusive and non-denominational manner. There are also optional religious courses in lower and secondary schools, such as Holy Qur'an (*Kur'an-ı Kerim*), Life of Our Prophet (*Peygamberimizin Hayatı*) and Basic Religious Knowledge (*Temel Dini Bilgiler*). This article focuses on the RCEK, rather than optional courses, in order to focus on the debates over the compulsory RE. State schools here denotes fully state-funded primary and secondary schools. Imam-Hatip Schools (IHSs), which were initially founded to raise religious officers, and then transformed into mainstream secondary schools with an extensive Islamic education (Aşlamacı & Kaymakcan, 2017; Zengin & Hendek, 2023) are not included here, though they are also fully state-funded schools. This is because the IHSs are a part of a diverse school system which means that families and students can still choose other state schools, but the RCEK is compulsory in every state school, therefore the debates over the IHSs differ to some extent, though there is also considerable overlap, as both issues are related to state's policy towards religion.

This is a qualitative, literature-based study, using official documents, existing studies and reports over the compulsory RE. Documentary studies include "the analysis of written materials containing information about the phenomenon that are investigated" (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013, p. 189). They have important role in educational research as they offer valuable insights into the debates and conflicts that exist around educational policies (McCulloch, 2004). The research question of the article is what are the current debates and what are the potential effects of these debates over the future of the compulsory RE in Türkiye?

There is a growing literature in RE which discusses the future of religious education from different dimensions. While some studies focus on the status of RE, especially the future of the right of withdrawal from RE in schools (Franken & Lievens, 2022), others explore the future of religious education content and pedagogy in the light of new educational, social and political developments (Barnes, 2015; Chater & Erricker, 2013; Franken & Loobuyck, 2013; Hughes, 2006). In Turkish literature there are few studies which directly analyse the future of RE. These studies either focus only on Imam-Hatip Schools (Zengin & Hendek, 2023) or discuss the future of different forms of religious education in school system briefly (Öcal, 2018). In this study, we examine the future of compulsory RE, namely Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge course, in Turkish state schools.

After the initial analysis of the relevant literature, three areas emerged as the most debated issues over RE: the status of RE, its relationship with plurality, and its pedagogical approach. When these issues are explored, the international human rights framework and national policies are taken into consideration, because as mentioned above, national and international factors have an influence on the formation of RE. It seems that these issues will shape the future of RE in state schools in Türkiye, by affecting status, content and pedagogy of RE. These three issues will be explored, after a brief history of RE in Türkiye, which will help to understand these issues.

A BRIEF HISTORY

The modernisation and westernisation policies and ideas that gained momentum in the late Ottoman period (around the 18th and early 19th centuries) were strictly applied after the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923. Especially the ideas of nationalism such as national self-consciousness, common racial origin, common language and common culture have been important currents of the new nation state. Moreover, as the new state defined itself as secular, the meaning attributed to secularism and the policies pursued in this direction have been decisive in the development and direction of the state institutions.

Like any new nation state (Kandel, 1933), education has occupied a prominent role in building a new nation-state and raising a society and individuals who are compatible with its values and ideas . For the Republic of Türkiye, the single party period (1923–1946)

witnessed strict practices in the realization of these goals and ideas. In line with the mission attributed to modern education, educational institutions and structures that were deemed to be unable to keep up with the system or that were deemed risky in terms of the basic character of the new state were pacified or completely abolished (Kara, 2017).

3 March 1924 can be considered as a turning point in the new state's relation with religion and education. The Caliphate, which Ottoman sultans claimed after the conquest of Mamluks in 1517, and the Ministry of Sharia and the Foundations, the ministry responsible, among others, for religious and foundation schools (e.g., madrasah), were abolished. Instead, a new directorate called the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which had a lower status than a ministry, was established. Moreover, the Unification of Education Law was introduced on the same day, which put all educational institutions, including madrasahs, traditional Islamic educational institutions in the Ottoman Empire, under the control of the Ministry of National Education (*Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, MEB*).

The Unification of Education Law did not include any provisions for religion classes in state schools, but it sanctioned the opening of the IHSs (Zengin & Hendek, 2023) and the Faculty of Theology (Hendek et al., 2022). According to Tosun (2008, pp. 233–234) this shows that the founders of the republic considered religious education as a part of the national education system, as a public service and did not find it contrary to secularism. However, soon madrasah system was abolished in 1924 and all provisions associated with religion (i.e., Islam) were removed from the constitution in 1928. Moreover, religion classes in state schools, the IHSs and the Faculty of Theology were all gradually eliminated from the education system (Ayhan, 2004). Thus, the new education system of the Republic of Türkiye diverged markedly from the traditional madrasah education system of the Ottoman Empire (1299–1922). The most obvious difference was the removal of religion from being a source of legitimacy, as well as aim and content of education and instead the construction of a secular, national and positivist education system (Subaşı, 2005). Yet the Presidency of Religious Affairs has never been abolished. According to Tanör (1987) this reflects the state's policy of controlling the religious sphere and message and utilising it as a legitimising apparatus when needed. Gözaydın (2006, p. 1) even described the Presidency of Religious Affairs as "a religious administration [established] to secure secularism."

Regarding religion classes in state schools, they were removed from the upper secondary schools' curriculum in 1924, from lower secondary schools in 1927, from city primary schools in 1933 and from village primary schools in 1939. After the transition to the multi-party system in 1946, some positive steps regarding religious education were taken in line with the new multi-party political system, which forced the ruling party to heed the needs and expectations of the society. In this context, RE was reintroduced as a voluntary subject in the 4th and 5th grades of the primary schools in 1949 (MEB, 1949). The IHSs and the Faculty of Theology were reopened too. These steps were welcomed by a significant part of the society, especially the conservative segments of society, but there were also those who saw these steps as a deviation from secularism and the objectives of the new nation state. The quarrel between these two segments of society and politics continued to exist,

which has made religious education a contested and ideological field and led to arbitrary interventions especially during the military coup periods (Öcal, 2007).

In 1956, RE were introduced into the 6th and 7th grades of the lower secondary schools (MEB, 1956), and in 1967 into the 9th and 10th grades of the upper secondary schools (MEB, 1967). As of the 1974-1975 education year, it was decided that compulsory ethics courses would be taught from the 4th grade of primary school to the last grade of upper secondary school (MEB, 1974). All these developments show that it took a long process for RE to find a place in school curricula even after the introduction of the multi-party system in 1946. For example, RE was removed from upper secondary schools in 1924 and reintroduced in 1967, i.e., after 43 years, for the lower secondary schools this took 29 years.

Since the return of RE as a voluntary subject, the question of whether RE in state schools is compatible with secularism has always been raised. The fact that RE was introduced as a voluntary rather than compulsory subject after the introduction of the multi-party system as associated with the secular character of the state. This is indicated by the statements that compulsory teaching of any religion or denomination in schools was not possible due to secularism principle of the state (see for example MEB, 1949). As questions has been raised regarding the legitimacy of RE in secular state schools, religious educators have had to justify the legitimacy and importance of religion classes in a secular state (Bilgin, 2007).

In 1982, right after the 1980 Military Coup, RE was made compulsory with the new constitution (MEB, 1982). This decision was partly as a result of the perceived ineffectiveness of voluntary RE (Aşıkoğlu & Genç, 2012; Bilgin, 2003) and the state's and politicians' willingness to use the compulsory RE for the promotion of social cohesion and integration as Türkiye had experienced turbulent years and even an armed conflict between right-wing and left-wing youth groups during the 1970s.

The name of the RE was changed from "Religion Course" to "Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge" when it was made compulsory in 1982. The change was seen as a shift of the emphasis from "religion", which essentially meant Islam, to "religious culture" which sounded more inclusive and "ethics" to ensure that the course would be conducted on an inclusive and non-confessional manner (Hendek, 2022b). Despite these assurances, and changes in its curricula in 1992, 2000 and 2005/2006, 2010 and 2018 to make it more inclusive, the status of RE, its relationship with plurality and its pedagogical approach have continued to be matters of intense debate, which will be explored as follows.

DEBATES AROUND COMPULSORY RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

As the brief history indicates, Religious Education (RE) in state schools in Türkiye has always been a contentious issue, even when it was voluntary, which means that families could withdraw their children from religion courses, as attendance was dependant on

parental consent. However, the debates have intensified since RE became compulsory. There are especially three issues that have attracted extensive criticism: the compulsory status of RE, its inclusivity, and its pedagogical approach.

Status of Religious Education

It is a matter of fact that each country designs and regulates RE in line with its own historical, social, political and religious realities. In terms of the status of RE, there are different policies and practices. In some countries, RE is not offered as a separate school subject in state schools. For example, in France RE is not taught in state schools, but matters related to religion appear in such courses as history and literature (Dericquebourg, 2013). In contrast, RE is compulsory in some countries, but there are differences. For example, while in Sweden RE is compulsory without the right of withdrawal (Berglund, 2013), in England it is compulsory, but families might withdraw their children from it (Hendek, 2020). There are also countries like Germany, where in some Länder, RE is compulsory elective, meaning that those who do not wish to take RE can take ethics course (Işık, 2018). Yet, in some countries, such as Poland, RE is voluntary (Horowski, 2022).

In fact Türkiye has experienced almost all of these models. RE was compulsory in the early years of the Republic but was gradually removed from the primary and secondary schools during the single party period (Tosun, 2005). As a result, there was no separate RE subject in state schools between 1939 and 1948. RE returned to the curriculum as a voluntary course in 1949 with the transition to multi-party political system and gradually introduced into other grades. Eventually it became compulsory in 1982. With this change, debates on the status of RE have intensified (Koç & Altıntaş, 2020; Yürük, 2011). It can be seen that there are basically three arguments: a) RE should not be taught in state schools at all, b) RE should be voluntary in state schools and c) RE should be compulsory in state schools.

The argument that RE should not be taught in state schools at all is generally based on human rights and secularism. As religion and belief are a matter of individual conscience, it is claimed that any kind of RE in state schools is incompatible with fundamental human rights principles, especially the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, enshrined in international human rights conventions (see Council of Europe, 1950, Article 9). It is also argued that as a secular state ('Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye', 1982, Article 2) Türkiye should not teach religion. Rather it should leave teaching of religion to families, and civil and religious organisations (Koç & Altıntaş, 2020). For example, an Alevi (see the next section for more information on Alevi faith) organisation stated that:

> Alevi organizations see 'religion' as a matter of individual conscience and thus want the state to completely stop intervening in this matter. Providing religious education is not a task of a secular state but a matter to be decided by the family. All parents are free to raise their children as they wish. (reported in Yaman, 2021, p. 433)

Those who argue that RE should be voluntary emphasise that within the framework of human rights, secularism, democratic values and freedom of thought, conscience and religion, individuals should not be forced to take a course related to religion. As can be seen this argument is close to the above argument, but here it is claimed that the state can still offer voluntary RE as some families might wish their children to have RE in state schools (Koç & Altıntaş, 2020; Yürük, 2011). This argument has been bolstered with the European Court of Human Rights' case-law which states that "[The] general overview of religious education in Europe shows that, in spite of the variety of teaching methods, almost all of the [Council of Europe] member States offer at least one route by which pupils can opt out of religious education classes" (ECtHR, 2007, para. 34)

There have been also arguments for compulsory RE. Firstly, it is argued that Türkiye has tried and tested different models from total absence of RE to voluntary RE and that all these models reportedly failed (Ayhan, 2004). For example, Bilgin (2007), who surveyed voluntary RE in upper secondary schools in the 1970s claimed that voluntary RE was ineffective and had a polarising effect as students accused each other for opting in or out voluntary RE. Tosun (1996), too, argued that compulsory RE should be understood against the background of different RE models tried and tested in the past. Secondly, it seems that there has been a popular support for compulsory RE in Türkiye (Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 2006; Kaymakcan, 2009; Zengin & Hendek, 2021). For example, a nation-wide survey found that 82.1% of the participants were in favour of compulsory RE (Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 2006).

When we analyse these arguments, it seems that currently the real battle is between the supporters of compulsory and voluntary RE in Türkiye. Those who wish that RE should not be part of state schools remain minority. This seems also the case among countries, especially in Europe where just a handful countries do not offer RE in state schools, while the overwhelming majority offer voluntary, optional or compulsory RE. The argument that any kind of RE is incompatible with human rights principles and secularism seems unfounded as the international human rights covenants (UN, 1966a, 1966b) and courts (ECtHR, 2007) acknowledge the possibility of RE in state schools. What is more is that international human rights organisations have plead for a place for RE in state schools since 1990s (Hendek, 2022a). For example, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) states that "Knowledge about religions and beliefs is an essential part of a quality education" (OSCE, 2007, p. 14). Similarly, the Council of Europe "came to the conclusion that a broad education about religions was a desirable activity for all school students, regardless of religious or non-religious background, to combat prejudice or intolerance and to promote mutual understanding and democratic citizenship" (Jackson, 2014, p. 15).

As stated earlier, every country regulates RE according to its historical, political, religious and societal factors and realities. For Türkiye, leaving RE to civil and religious organisations has never been favoured. This is why there has always been a state organisation, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, to regulate religious services and places. Türkiye even put a

reservation on Article 2 of the Protocol 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights[1], stating that this article cannot violate the provisions of the Unification of Education Law (TBMM, 1954). This indicates that for Türkiye, RE outside state control would have a negative impact on the Unification of Education Law, one of the founding laws of Türkiye (Yürük, 2011). The argument that if the state does not teach a proper RE, families would send their children to other places outside state control and this might pose a threat to national unity has often been mentioned by the supporters of compulsory RE, invoking so-called radicalisation trends in some countries which have religious schools outside state control (Aşlamacı, 2014; Hendek, 2020).

The international human rights framework and local realities indicate that leaving RE out of state schools does not seem a viable option for Türkiye. Therefore, the real issue is whether RE should be compulsory or voluntary (or optional) subject in state schools, and this issue is closely related to the content and approach of RE. In fact, in Türkiye most criticisms levelled at RE are about its relationship with plurality, which will be discussed as follows.

Plurality and RE

RE in schools might have different forms and adopt different approaches. One can broadly divide these approaches into two: confessional and non-confessional. Confessional RE often includes an extensive teaching of one particular belief system and aims at increasing pupils' religious beliefs and commitment. Non-confessional RE, on the other hand, includes, in varying degrees, the objective study of different religions and beliefs without seeking to nurture pupils in a particular belief system. Denominational and non-denominational are also used in RE research. Denominational RE is based on and often prefers a specific denomination while non-denominational (or supra-denominational) RE avoids denominational differences or study them without propagating or denouncing any of them (Hendek, 2020). Even though these dichotomies have a degree of oversimplification and RE in some countries can be considered to have a mixed approach, these are approaches found in Europe and elsewhere.

In Türkiye, there have been arguments that the compulsory RE does not reflect the religious culture of Turkish society with its all religious and secular beliefs and values. The most discussed issue in this respect is the teaching of Alevism[2] in compulsory RE. There have been numerous local, national and international court cases on the teaching of Alevism in which the litigators argued that compulsory RE in Türkiye has violated their rights to education (AYM, 2022; Danıştay, 2007; ECtHR, 2007, 2014). For example, an Alevi family brought a case before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), claiming that "the religious diversity which prevails in Turkish society is not considered. In particular, pupils receive no teaching on the confessional or ritual specificities of the Alevi faith" (ECtHR, 2007, para. 18).

It should be noted that these court cases have led to RE curriculum and textbook revisions, and eventually topics related to Alevism was added to the curriculum, initially in 2005 (MEB, 2005) and later these topics were expanded in 2010 (MEB, 2010). Yet these revisions have not found satisfactory enough by some Alevis, and this has led to further national and international court cases (AYM, 2022; Danıştay, 2007; ECtHR, 2014).

Criticisms regarding the teaching of Alevi faith in the compulsory RE are twofold. Some Alevi organisations find the coverage of Alevi faith in RE unsatisfactory. For example, one Alevi group claims that "[After the revisions] Curriculum is basically the same with very minor insertions to text; such as only 20 pages mentioning Alevism among 1782 pages of religious culture and ethics courses curriculums of 8 [sic][3] years from the primary 4th class to the end of high school education" (Alevi Philosophy Center, 2020, p. 4).

Currently, the Alevi faith and other different interpretations within Islam are covered in the RE curricula and textbooks, which define Alevi faith as a Sufi (mystic) interpretation within Islam (MEB, 2018). For example, in grade 12, unit 3, entitled "Sufi Interpretations within the Thought of Islam" Alevism is given more space than other Sufi interpretations such as Naqshbandi (see Zengin, 2017a). However, these Alevi organisations claim that the rest of the curriculum and textbooks teach Sunni interpretation of Islam, therefore this relative attention within the context of Sufi interpretations make little difference. Moreover, these organisations also oppose the way Alevism is taught in compulsory RE. As seen above, the curriculum defines Alevism as a Sufi interpretation, but some Alevis do not see Alevi faith in this way: "First and foremost, the classification of Alevism as a Sufi interpretation of Islam, that is, as a cult, is a Sunni understanding of Alevism. Whereas the Sunni understanding of Islam, its practices, and traditions are thoroughly detailed in the course books, mentioning Alevism in a superficial way along with Naqshbandiyya, Qadiriyya etc. is a reflection of this sectarian understanding." (Yaman, 2021, p. 429).

The problem here partly is about how to define Alevi faith. For the curricula and textbooks, Alevism is simply as an interpretation within Islam and mention it along with Sufi interpretations. However, there are different definitions and interpretations within Alevi community regarding how to define Alevism, and it is a challenge for the compulsory RE to choose one of them. The compulsory RE defines itself as "supra-denominational", meaning that it is not based on any denomination, rather it includes the common Islamic beliefs and practices (MEB, 2005, 2010, 2018). However, Islamic education in the Seljuks and the Ottomans had always been based on the Sunni interpretation of Islam, and it seems that this has not disappeared in the Republic of Türkiye, even after RE became compulsory in 1982. Bilgin (2002) claimed that this could be overcome over the years, but it seems that this have not been achieved yet. One reason for this is that the vast majority of the Turkish population is Muslim, and the majority follows the Sunni interpretation of Islam. This has undoubtedly influenced the way the compulsory RE deals with the plurality within Islam.

According to Kaymakcan (2006, pp. 32–33), one possible solution might be to include major Alevi interpretations into the RE curriculum without defending or criticising any of them. After presenting the common aspects of Islam, different interpretations within Islam can be mentioned. The presentation of these interpretations, Kaymakcan (2006, pp. 32–33) argues, should be based on how these groups define themselves, and the focus should be on the "lived" aspects, instead of theological ones. In other words, different interpretations within Islam including Alevi interpretations can be presented with a phenomenological approach. This might contribute to the better understanding among pupils, helping them understand the differences along with the common aspects of Islam (Kaymakcan, 2006).

Of course, whether this proposal will satisfy all Alevi groups is a matter of debate, as some court cases show that what the litigators oppose is not really the content of compulsory RE, but rather the compulsory RE itself (see dissenting opinion in AYM, 2022, paras 39–49). This then brings the issue to the status of RE again. Even though in Türkiye RE is compulsory, there are some exemptions. According to the Supreme Council for Education's decision in 1990, Christian and Jewish parents can withdraw their children from compulsory RE (MEB, 1990). Some Alevis (and also some non-believers such as atheists) demand that this right should be extended to them as well without declaring their faith or providing any reason. The current exemption system in the compulsory RE in Türkiye has been criticised in international and national court's judgements, because, it was argued, it is limited to Christian and Jewish families, and that these families must disclose their religious beliefs to get exemption for their children from the compulsory RE (AYM, 2022; ECtHR, 2007, 2014). Especially the ECtHR's 2014 judgement, which found that Turkish RE violated the Alevi litigators' right to education, called for an introduction of an exemption system which will "remedy the situation without delay"[4] (see also Hendek & Fancourt, 2021; Keskiner, 2018). Türkiye, however, has preferred not to revise the exemption system, rather focused on making RE course more inclusive, pluralistic and objective.

Indeed, the curriculum and textbook revisions made so far are important steps towards more inclusive compulsory RE. For Türkiye like other societies, there is always a risk that sectarian differences might turn into conflicts. Bilgin (1981) claims that even though Islam is a religion that aims to unite all people in believing in Allah and the Last Day, it is ignorance which lead people to denominational loyalty and prejudice. Therefore, Bilgin (1981) argues that it is important for the compulsory RE in Türkiye to adopt a supra-denominational approach. Developing respect and understanding for people who follow different religions and preventing hatred and marginalisation are also important dimensions for the compulsory RE. Of course, there might be debates over when different interpretations and religions should be taught in RE. A piece of research found that RE teachers favoured that different interpretations within Islam should be taught at the upper secondary stages of compulsory RE, but different religions might be taught at the lower secondary (Zengin & Hendek, 2021).

For Türkiye, then, if RE will continue as a compulsory subject, its content and approach should be revised, as the previous revisions do not seem enough in terms of inclusive RE (Furat, 2020; Hendek, 2022b) and do not seem to satisfy some Alevis and international human rights organisations.[5]

As stated in the previous section, the international human rights covenants and courts acknowledge the possibility of RE in schools and international human rights organisations plea for a place for RE in schools. However, they also make it clear that RE must meet certain criteria. The European Court of Human Rights states that compulsory RE should be "conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner" and should not "pursue an aim of indoctrination" (ECtHR, 2007, para. 52). Similarly, the Council of Europe and the OSCE's publications mention, among others, "objective" (Council of Europe, 2005, para. 7) and "inclusive" (OSCE, 2007, p. 13) RE. Then for RE to be compulsory, it must fulfil certain criteria according to the international human rights standards.

In fact, this is also the case for the Turkish national law. Article 24 of the Turkish Constitution sanctioned an inclusive RE, describing it "religious culture and ethics education" ('Constitution of the Republic of Türkiye', 1982). According to the Constitutional Court of Türkiye, religious culture and ethics education was made compulsory "in order to provide objective and descriptive information about religions and to instil moral values" (AYM, 2022, para. 163). In other words, what was made compulsory was an inclusive and objective RE. According to Bilgin (1999, p. 1), who was one of architects of compulsory RE in Türkiye, argued that any RE course which aims to instil a certain religious or denominational belief and practices should be voluntary, but she claimed that compulsory RE in Türkiye is about religious culture and ethics, and every child must be educated about religious culture and ethics, because "ignorance [should] not be voluntary in this field."

Pedagogical Approach and RE

The compulsory RE was envisaged as an inclusive and non-confessional subject when it was made compulsory in 1982. Yet, whether this has been achieved is a matter of debate, as the previous sections show. Indeed, the RE curriculum in 1982 was similar to the previous ones. The 1982 curriculum emphasised that students should know the principles of Islamic belief, worship and morality, that the concepts of God and the prophet should be introduced and internalised, that respect and tolerance should be shown for others, that good relations should be developed with members of different religions and beliefs, that no one should be forced to practice worship, and that false and superstitious beliefs should be corrected (MEB, 1982). In this curriculum, the influence of the previous curricula of voluntary RE which centred on Islam and prepared with a catechism-cantered approach can be seen. However, the inclusion of the teaching of other religions and the aim of developing tolerance and respect for different religions and beliefs can be considered as a positive step in terms of the new status of the compulsory RE (Zengin, 2017c). The revised 2000 curriculum looked very similar to the 1982 curriculum in terms of content, but the

new curriculum also reflected the new approaches (MEB, 2000) as it emphasised that the compulsory RE was based on the main sources of religion, indicating that it sought to develop a supra-denominational approach, and that religions should be studied in the light of scientific data, meaning that it no longer followed the catechism-centred / confessional approach (Yürük, 2011). In the 2005 curriculum the pedagogical and theological approaches of the compulsory RE were explicitly mentioned for the first time. Pedagogically, the curriculum stated that constructivism, theory of multiple intelligence and student-centred learning approaches were adopted. Theologically, the curriculum mentioned that a Qur'anic-cantered, unifying, and supra-denominational approach was adopted in the teaching of Islam. Denominations and religious interpretations were defined as a cultural richness and it emphasised that care should be taken not to turn the compulsory RE into a denominational RE (MEB, 2005). The 2010 revised curriculum expanded the coverage of different interpretations within Islam. Especially the content related to Alevism was increased (MEB, 2010). The latest curriculum, which was published in 2018, had new contents and fewer units but in terms of the philosophy and the approaches, it followed the 2010 curriculum. It stated that the theory of multiple intelligence, student-centred learning and skill-based learning approaches that support the constructivist learning model are taken into consideration; and aimed to teach Islam and other religions with a descriptive approach, the basic principles of the Qur'an and Sunnah are taken as references in the teaching of Islam, and the interpretations within Islamic thought are presented with a scientific method and a supra-denominational approach (MEB, 2018).

As can be seen the 2005 and 2010 curricula stated that constructivist approach, which is based on the idea that students should construct their own knowledge, was considered. Some studies argued that constructivist theory might have some limitations and problems in terms of religious education. This is partly because constructivism, which expects students to make their own knowledge, might yield relativism (Zengin, 2017b). In this sense no religion, or no religious principle can be universally true or acceptable to all students.

Indeed, when the RE curricula are analysed, it is seen that the objectives and content of RE curricula are not fully compatible with constructivism, as they leave little room for students to construct their beliefs. This might mean that the curricula take the learning-teaching process of the constructivist theory into account, not its philosophical foundations such as post-modernism and relativism (Zengin, 2017b). The 2018 curriculum, therefore, directly stated that "In the development of the Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge Course (Grades 9-12) Curriculum; Approaches such as multiple intelligences, student-cantered learning, and skill-based learning that support the constructivist learning model were taken into account." (MEB, 2018, p. 8)

This means that the curriculum still claims to follow constructivism, but it follows its "learning model", indicating that its philosophical foundations, which might lead to relativism, are not considered.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As can be seen RE has always been a contentious issue in Türkiye. Many models have been tried, from an outright ban on RE in the school system to offering it as a voluntary and later compulsory subject. RE is currently a compulsory subject, but Christian and Jewish families have a right of withdrawal. Even though this withdrawal system is open to debate and seems problematic, compulsory RE in state school does not seem to contradict basic human rights principles as long as it meets certain standards (ECtHR, 2007). Moreover, due to public demand, national educational policies and RE's contribution to national and cultural identity, it is projected that the course will continue to be compulsory in schools. Furthermore, the religious education models implemented throughout the Republic period and the results obtained from these experiences also support this projection.

However, it is observed that the compulsory RE with its content and approach has failed to satisfy some segments of society in Türkiye. So much so that it has led to various local, national and international court cases. It is telling that Türkiye "is [currently] the only country that has twice lost cases concerning the violation of parents' freedom to ensure their children an education in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions at [the ECtHR]" (Kaymakcan & Hendek, 2022, p. 444). The implication of this research is that these issues should be resolved if RE has a promising and less contentious future. When these issues are solved, the international human rights framework and national policies should be taken into consideration in order to find a right balance. It means that for RE to continue as a compulsory school subject, it needs a substantial revision. This is important not only in terms of international human rights framework, but also for national policies, social peace and integration. Moreover, as mentioned above, there have been optional religious courses such as Holy Qur'an, Life of Our Prophet and Basic Religious Knowledge in state schools in Türkiye since 2012. The fact that these courses offer more in-depth teaching on the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad and the Islamic creed respectively offer the compulsory RE an ideal opportunity to become more inclusive and pluralistic.

Even though the debate around RE in state schools has been mostly ideological in nature as the previous sections show, the revision of RE curricula and textbooks should be based on sound scholarship and cooperation in order to make RE more pluralistic and inclusive. Various stakeholders including the Presidency of Religious Affairs, Alevi groups, religious and non-religious organisations, non-governmental organisations and education unions interested in RE can be incorporated into the policy and curriculum making process of RE (Kaymakcan & Hendek, 2022). Pedagogical implication is that in this way a more pluralistic, objective and participative approach can be taken and this might help to eliminate the issues and problems raised in the court cases. If these issues and problems about RE are not solved, debates regarding the legitimacy of the course will continue, which will make it difficult to achieve the expected benefits from the course and cause more lawsuits to be filed.

The limitation of this research is that it focuses on only one country, Türkiye. However, it is seen that similar problems are experienced in different countries and various policies are produced (Barnes, 2015; Chater & Erricker, 2013; Franken & Lievens, 2022; Franken & Loobuyck, 2013; Hughes, 2006). These issues are specifically related to pluralism and human rights. In this context, international organizations such as the Council of Europe seek to include pluralistic religious education within the school system as a component of intercultural education and produce guidelines and recommendations (Council of Europe, 2005; Jackson, 2014; Keast, 2006; OSCE, 2007). It is anticipated that these developments will be an important factor in shaping the future of religious education in Türkiye.

RE has a potential to develop tolerance and respect and to combat ignorance, misunderstanding and prejudice (Hendek, 2022a; Jackson, 2014; OSCE, 2007), if it is properly developed and conveyed. The compulsory RE in Türkiye as an inclusive subject, therefore, can contribute to mutual respect and tolerance and help pupils from different religious backgrounds to live together in a plural society. In the last two decades, the curricula and textbook revisions can be considered as positive steps towards more inclusive compulsory RE, but more should be done to secure a bright future for the compulsory RE in Türkiye. It is therefore recommended to conduct more studies with students, parents and different stakeholders including religious groups to identify their needs and expectations in order to shape the future of RE.

NOTES

1. Article reads that "No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions." (Council of Europe, 1950).

2. Alevism can be defined as a heterodox and syncretic Islamic tradition. The word Alevi itself comes from Ali, the nephew and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, and it means "pertaining to Ali" Whether Alevism is a discrete belief system, a sect, a Sufi interpretation within Islam or just a cultural Turkish-Islamic identity is a matter of debate.

3. RCEK is compulsory from the 4th to 12th grades, which means that it is compulsory for 9 years, not 8.

4. https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=003-4868983-5948734.

5. The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which supervises the execution of the ECtHR's judgements notes that "noted with deep regret that the authorities failed to take any measure to address the shortcomings identified by the Court as regards the compulsory religious culture and ethics classes; therefore

strongly urged the authorities to take the necessary measures to ensure that the Turkish education system fulfils the State's duty of neutrality and impartiality towards the various religions, denominations and beliefs, respecting the principles of pluralism and objectivity, and offers appropriate options for the children of parents who have a religious or philosophical conviction other than that of Sunni Islam to opt out of compulsory religious education, without pupils' parents being obliged to disclose their religious or philosophical convictions" see https://hudoc.exec.coe.int/eng?i=CM/Del/Dec(2023)1468/H46-32E.

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