

# The Role of Geography in the Primary Schools curriculum: Example of Turkey

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the role of Geography in primary education Life Studies (k1-3) lesson curriculum. This curriculum has been in effect since 2005. The reason of examining the Life Studies curriculum is that geographical skills and knowledge is part of this lesson. Life Studies curriculum is examined in terms of standards and teaching and learning process. In every class levels which geographic skills and knowledge are planning to gain in the curriculum? In Life Studies lessons students recognize their familiar environment. Map skills like plan, scale, perspective, map reading are in Life Studies lesson. Also in this study, while teaching geography, which method, technique and strategies are recommended in the curriculum is determined.

**Keywords:** Geography education, primary education, curriculum, Life Studies lesson

## Introduction

The “Life Studies” lessons are always open to changing with technology. In last decades some developments occurred in the world have affected education. In the information age changes occurred in society and its expectations. The aim of education is to educate the people with the help of science and technology. In education changing human behaviour is very important. Education is an organized and planned process. Because education is aiming to realize planned activities education curricula must also be organized.

In Turkey formal education includes pre-primary education, primary education and secondary education and higher education institutions. The purpose of primary education is to ensure that every Turkish child acquires the basic knowledge, skills, behaviour, and habits to become a good citizen, is raised in line with the national moral concepts and is prepared for life and for the next education level parallel to his/her interests and skills.

Primary education is compulsory for all citizens, boys or girls, and is given free of charge in public schools. Primary education is compulsory for children of ages 6 – 14 and primary education contains k1-8 (MEB, 2009).

The most important aim of primary education is to educate the students as effective and responsible citizens in the society. To reach this aim and give students basic knowledge Life Studies lesson takes part in primary education curriculum at 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades. “Life Studies” lesson is one of the first lessons that students meet at school. In this lesson the main aim is to educate students to become effective citizens and concretize the life. Therefore, new ideas are seen in this lesson. So, the curricula of this lesson must be carefully chosen. In this study, geographical topics in Life Studies lessons will be analyzed.

## Life Studies Lessons

This lesson can be seen in the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grades and it is the basic of the social studies and science and technology lessons in the primary school. Çilenti (1998), described Life Studies lessons as basic step of acquiring aspects like creative thinking and problem solving. According to Erden (1993), Life Studies lessons provide the basic steps to be in harmony with the environment and to become a good citizen.

Life Studies lessons have some characteristics based on the student's age and their development characteristics. Köken (2003) declared some characteristics of these children were the students think concretely, show individual differences, have no concept of time and are active.

In Turkey, Life Studies lessons are a basic and important lesson in primary education. According to Ergun and Özdaş (1997) some aims of the lessons are:

- With regard to develop knowledge and skills of being familiar with their environment: Children make sense of natural events in their familiar environment, know the effect of these events, know the environment, love natural beauty and they gain social development conscious.
- With regard to developing life skills: They know feeding, health and traffic rules. They try to reach a level better of life. They are interested in cultivation, commerce and industrial activities.

According to Bartt and Demirtaş (1997), the aim of Life Studies lessons is that children know themselves, understand the events in their familiar environment, know social environments and develop themselves. According to Öztürk and Dilek (2003), the primarily aim of Life Studies is to have natural and social environment examined carefully. By this children know environment and live peacefully with the environment. They learn some aspects of behaviour and skills.

Since the beginning of 2005/2006 in the new program collective teaching approach was fulfilled. The vision of the Life Studies curriculum is to educate students:

- who like learning
- who are at peace with themselves, social environment and nature
- who know, preserve and develop their country, nation and themselves
- who have some characteristics like life skills and basic information
- who are happy individuals (MEB, 2005).

## **Life Studies Curriculum and Geography**

The main aim of these lessons is to help the students in the life for gaining basic life skills. These skills are important skills for students in order to understand their familiar environment and to be young geographers. Some skills aimed in this lesson are critical thinking, research, communication, problem solving, decision making security, self direction, using sources effectively, knowing the basic concepts of science. These skills are very important in learning Geography at the same time. For example in knowing the basic concepts of science skills students realize changing, interaction, cause and effect relation, similarity, mutual dependency concepts. These concepts are also important in learning geographic knowledge and geographic skills.

In research skills students gain some acquisitions like asking questions, observation, estimating, data collecting, declaring data and presenting research results. In problem solving

skill students also gain these acquisitions. Also, developing environment conscious and using the sources in the environment effectively are other skills aimed to gain in this lesson. With the developing of these skills students will realize that environment and human beings are a part of whole, see the mutual effect between human beings and environment. These skills are also important in learning geography. With the help of Life Studies lessons students gain these skills from the beginning of formal education.

## **Themes of Life Studies Lesson and Geography**

Themes of Life Studies lessons are: “My school excitement”, “My perfect home” and “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow”. A thematic approach is used in Life Studies lessons because this helps the students see the entire world. These themes can be converted to lots of disciplines and Geography is one of them.

### **Concepts**

As a basis of social studies and science and technology lessons many concepts are found in the 2005 Life Studies curriculum. Some of them are geographic concepts. These are:

- 1<sup>st</sup> grade: Natural hazards, resource, environment, seasons, weather conditions, earth, sky, world and day
- 2<sup>nd</sup> grade: Transport wheels, sun, east, west, land, natural environment, cultured environment
- 3<sup>rd</sup> grade: Plan, direction, location, south, north, earthquake, map, globe, nature, graphic, meteorology, weather forecast.

### **Standards**

Life Studies lesson are multidisciplinary lessons teaching students about the society that they live in and the world (MEB, 2004). Piaget's mental development model the students who take Life Studies lesson are at concrete operation stage. The average age of this stage is 7-11. Children develop relations, number concepts, process and similarities (Charles,2003). In preparing the Life Studies curriculum, the development characteristics of students are considered. So a spiral program method is selected. In this spiral programs students learn the basic knowledge and skills firstly and then topics get hard in next grades. The topics extend in a way from the simpler concepts to more complex topics, from the known to unknown. Upper grade students learn the subjects in more detail and complexity (Öztürk, 2007). According to this subjects are given from the first grade in expanding way. Also in this lesson standards are connected with other lessons and real life. In Life Studies lessons standards are prepared in order to give knowledge, skill and attitudes. Standards are related to the real world and other lessons.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Grade (Table 1)**

Students learn the concepts which are about location in the first grade. These students are in the concrete operation stage yet. Therefore, to make location concrete firstly they must learn about a familiar environment. For example, the pupils try to express features of their class and desk location. They use basic concepts (right, left, beside, behind, in front of, on, under) for finding their place and desk in the class. At the same time it is an appropriate principle of education: teach from familiar to unfamiliar. Students begin to identify their environment and produce new knowledge about their environment by using their senses.

In this grade students learn the effects and reasons of the natural hazards. They get information about natural hazards that may occur in their familiar environment. They learn these both visual and auditory not only by written information. Also, students make research

from magazines, newspapers, TV, etc.. Students bring photos to class and examine them. This is very important for active participation of students to lessons.

First grade students observe the daily weather, report on it and make graphics about these reports. In this way student's observation skills and graphic skills develop. The other subject taught in first grade is earth movements. This area is taught in a practical fashion according to the mental development characteristics of this age of students. Pupils observe earth movements from a model and notice the results.

Table 1: Standards about geography in 1<sup>st</sup> grade

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Standards</b>
<i>My School Excitement</i>	Use basic concepts (right, left, beside, behind, in front of, on, under) for finding their class and desk.
	Notice the damage of natural hazards using audial and visual materials
	Notice which sense organ is used knowing school and school environment
<i>Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow</i>	Use the calendar for observing daily weather conditions and show the results in the graphics.
	Notice the results about earth movement from by observing a model.
	Notice how natural hazards change the environment.
	Examine and express how people changed the environment and for changing the environment what they do

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade (Table 2)

In the second grade students show their class and their desk by drawing. These drawings are simple drawings. Also, they learn the direction concept in this grade. By observing the sun they learn east and west and explain their home by using directions. On a pictorial map which shows their home and school they explain their home by using basic concepts (right, left, in front of, behind, etc.). In this way their map reading skills develop.

Students give examples of hazards that occurred in their country. And they learn preserving methods from natural hazards. Second grade students observe the daily and weekly weather, report them and make graphics about these reports. According to expanding curriculum principles students examine the movement of Earth around itself and around the sun. And notice the result of these movements and the difference and similarities between them.

Table 2: Geography standards in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Standards</b>
<i>My School Excitement</i>	Show their class and their desk by drawing.
<i>My Perfect Home</i>	Learn west and east concept by observing sun return.
	Explain their home by using basic concepts (right, left, in front of, behind, etc.).
	Give examples of hazards that occurred in their country and learn preserving methods from natural hazards.
<i>Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow</i>	Examine the movement of Earth around itself and around the sun and notice the result of these movements and the difference and similarities between them.
	Observe the daily and weekly weather by using calendar, report them and make graphics about these reports.
	Examine the precautions against natural hazards taken by other country and

	compare the precautions taken by our country.
	Express similarities and differences between natural and cultural environment.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade (Table 3)

Students draw the plan of their school and class. They learn the bird's eye view concept. They explore and research materials and methods used for finding their way. Direction concept is taught better than 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. They recognize the water and lands on map or globe. Their map and globe skills develop.

3<sup>rd</sup> grade students observe weather conditions monthly and compare with forecast of meteorology. They report on this information and make graphics about these reports. And also they observe the moon's phases. They perceive the change and continuity in the seasons.

Table 3: Standards about geography in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade

Themes	Standards
<i>My School Excitement</i>	Draw their school and class plan
<i>My Perfect Home</i>	Explain their home by using basic concepts (right, left, in front of, behind, etc.) according to their familiar places.
	Wonder and examine materials and methods used for way finding.
	Recognize the water and lands on map or globe.
<i>Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow</i>	Observe weather conditions monthly and compare with forecast of meteorology. Report them and make graphics about these reports.
	Observe the moon phases.
	Perceive the effects of Earth movement.
	Perceive the change and continuity in the seasons.

### Conclusion

Life Studies lessons help students to gain basic life skills. These skills are also necessary to learn and understand Geography. It is important to know their familiar environment and being little geographers. From this point of view Life Studies lessons are important for teaching Geography from a young age. When we analyze the 2005 Life Studies curriculum we see Geography topics in themes, concepts and standards. In the Life Studies curriculum geography is placed in 1<sup>st</sup> grade in two themes in seven standards; in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade in three themes in eight standards and in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in three themes, in eight standards. In three classes there are many geographical concepts. Life Studies lessons teach Geography through a multidisciplinary approach.

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