

Research Article:

Geography and Religious Education: “Our Soul Geography” in Turkish Religious Education

Ahmet Çakmak

Faculty of Theology, Atatürk University, 25240 Erzurum, Türkiye

E-mail: ahmetcakmak@atauni.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Religious education (Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge, the RCEK) curriculum was last updated in 2018 in Türkiye. With this update, important changes occurred in the aims and content of the curriculum. One of them is the addition of a unit called “Our Soul Geography”, which was not included in the previous curricula. Research on curricula contributes to the curriculum development. In this context, the research question is “What is the learning-teaching process of the “Our Soul Geography” in Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge?” The term “Our Soul Geography” denotes places where Islamic culture has existed from Hijaz to Andalusia. The research was designed according to the case study, which is one of the qualitative research methods. The study group of the research consists of five teachers who teach at the 9th grade. Content analysis was employed to analyse the data. The curriculum and the textbooks were also analysed. An analysis of the textbooks finds that they contain conflicting information, use irrelevant pictures and have limited number of activities. Participating teachers, on the other hand, pointed out that the unit included too much information, that the unit was usually skipped, that they used various learning-teaching methods and techniques and that the students were uninterested in the unit. In this context, they pointed out that it would be more appropriate to distribute the unit under different units rather than teaching it as a whole.

Keywords: Religious education, geography, religious culture and ethics knowledge, RCEK, Türkiye, the Balkans

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INTRODUCTION

In the literature, the relationship between religion and the environment/geography has been discussed from various angles. Many researchers have stated that religious beliefs have an impact on the deterioration/restoration of ecological balance (Ronan, 2017; Wilkinson, 2012; Ardođan, 2013). In the relationship between the environment and religion, the spiritual dimension of the environment and its contribution to the individual's existence have also been reflected in research (Gearon, 1997). In addition, there have been studies on environment/geography in the field of religious education. While some studies focused on the contribution of religious education in the context of environmental education or environmental protection (Kurttekin, 2024; Çorbacı, 2023), some studies tested the modelling of this theoretical situation (Altmeyer, 2021; Baring et al., 2024). In this research, the use of geography in religious education as an attempt for the construction of identity is explored, focusing on the "Our Soul Geography" unit in Turkish religious education.

Religious Culture and Ethics Knowledge (RCEK) have been compulsory in primary and secondary schools in Türkiye for more than 40 years. The objectives and accordingly the content of this course have been shaped in line with the needs and demands of the international system, state, society, students, and religion as a discipline (Hendek, 2019). The curricula, therefore, have been updated in line with these needs and demands. The RCEK curricula have been updated in 1982, 1992, 2000, 2006, 2010 and most recently in 2018, and there have been significant changes. For example, competencies such as communication in foreign languages, mathematical competence, digital competence, whose relevance to the curriculum is controversial, have been added to the curriculum (MEB, 2018). Additionally, the concept of learning areas was abolished and the number of units in a year was reduced from seven to five (MEB, 2018).

Various changes have also occurred in the objectives of the RCEK curriculum. For example, the aim, that is, "It is aimed that students realise that religion is an important element in the relations between people, societies and nations" is not among the aims of the 2018 curriculum, although it was mentioned under different titles in the previous curricula. This aim can be said to point to the 5th unit of the 9th grade, which is titled "Our Soul Geography". The attainment targets of the unit are "Explains the concept of Islamic civilisation" and "Recognises the effects of Islamic civilisation in different parts of the world" (MEB, 2018, p. 19). In the explanation of these targets, the curriculum stated that the textbooks should include the places of knowledge and culture in various geographies and the scholars, commanders and merchants who pioneered the transfer of Islam to these places. In addition, the textbooks are also expected to include the languages of these geographies and to mention the role of the virtuous people of Khorasan, Anatolia and Rumelia. This change in the curriculum has been interpreted as a new pedagogical experiment and a new construction of identity and geography (Bölükbaşı, 2021, p. 37). In addition to these interpretations, it is important to study the teachers' views on the subject

to give feedback to the curriculum, as feedback is an important factor in the development of the aims and content of the curriculum. For this reason, within the framework of this aim of the curriculum, how the textbooks and the RCEK teachers deal with the relevant unit in the Balkans, teachers' awareness of the subject, teaching activities and students' reactions are worthy of attention. In addition to this, the fact that there has not been any study centred on the subject in this context increases the value of the study.

In this framework, the research question of the article is What is the learning-teaching process of the 'our soul geography' unit of the RCEK course? The sub research questions as follows:

1. How are the Balkans in Our Soul Geography unit presented in the RCEK textbooks?
2. How do the RCEK teachers teach the Balkans in Our Soul Geography unit?

OUR SOUL GEOGRAPHY

There is no definition in the literature on what the concept "our soul geography" refers to. However, in the grade 9 textbook, it is pointed out that the places where the deep traces of Islamic Civilisation are found are defined by Muslims as the soul geography. The textbook pointed to the common future, maintaining communication with those living in these geographies and sharing their joys and sorrows (Bektaş et al., 2021, p. 108). In this study, the concept of our soul geography is considered as all places where Islam has spread. Although the concept is ambiguous, the soul geography can be said to refer to the concept of Islamic Civilisation. In this sense, the concept of our soul geography is the geographical areas where Islam has spread, and the culture and civilisation have been built with the influence of Islam in this area. It refers to all regions of the world where Islam and sometimes the Turkish element are present. (Aşlamacı, 2019, p. 68). In other words, all regions from Andalusia to Malaysia, from Crimea to South Africa should be considered within the soul geography. However, since the study is limited to an article, the questions and analyses of the research are limited to the geography of the Balkans.

Before 2018, there was a learning area of "Religion, Culture and Civilisation" in the secondary school RCEK curriculum. It can be stated that this learning area and the soul geography are partially similar. Because in this learning area, it is aimed to teach students that Turks became Muslims and they contributed to Islamic civilisation. Moreover, it sought to teach the importance Muslims attach to reason and science and their contributions to humanity (MEB, 2010). In the study booklet prepared by the General Directorate of Religious Education, the soul geography is mentioned as a goal that should be read well. The booklet points to the ideal of a youth who analyses the position of Muslims in the world and creates a vision of the future by considering the past and present of our soul geography (MEB, 2021).

METHODS

Research Design

The research was designed according to the case study design, one of the qualitative research methods. The case study involves investigating the experiences of one or more individuals, collecting data by gathering the life stories of these individuals, reporting personal experiences and chronologically ordering the meanings contained in these experiences. (Creswell, 2015, p. 97). There are two situations in the research. The first one is the examination of the 9th grade RCEK textbook. The second situation is the description of the experiences of secondary education RCEK teachers about the unit named "Our Soul Geography".

TEXTBOOKS AND STUDY GROUP

Within the framework of the first sub question, two 9th grade RCEK textbooks were analysed. Textbooks published by the Ministry of National Education and a private publishing house were collected. The related unit was analysed in both books in terms of the Balkans, and the sources, pictures, words and writings used. Within the framework of the second sub question, the RCEK teachers teaching in the 9th grade were selected. The study group consisted of five teachers, two female and three male, working in high schools in Erzurum and Sakarya. The interviews were discontinued after five interviews because of the repetition of the data (data saturation). Therefore, there was no need to interview more participants.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL

Textbook evaluation form was used to analyse the textbooks. In this form, the textbook's use of pictures, maps, the presence of activities, providing information about historical figures, the source of the information and the consistency of the information were examined. Moreover, a semi-structured interview form prepared by the researcher was used as a data collection tool in the interviews with the participant teachers. The interview form consisted of seven questions in total. This form included a series of predetermined questions and addressing some specific issues. These questions were asked to each participant in a systematic and sequential manner (Bruce & Lune, 2015, p. 136).

Data Analysis

Each textbook was analysed according to the textbook evaluation form and the two textbooks were compared with each other and reported. The interviews were firstly transcribed and then content analysed. Content analysis is the careful, detailed and systematic examination

and interpretation of a particular material in order to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings in the literature (Bruce & Lune, 2015, p. 380). In this process, the texts were read several times and various codes were constructed during each reading. These codes were then combined under various themes. For each code, the interviewees' opinions were quoted and given in the text in double quotation marks (“”) and also in the block quotes.

There are various methods to ensure the validity of the study (Creswell, 2015, pp. 250–253). Two of these methods were used in this study. The first one is to present the findings obtained to the interviewed participants and get their evaluations. The second one is to express all steps in a clear and understandable way. In this study, both methods were used, and each step of the research was reported in detail. Afterwards, the data obtained were presented to the participants and their feedback were received, re-analysed and included in the analysis.

In addition, not only participant opinions but also textbooks were considered as a data source in the study. Both the findings obtained from the interviews and the data from the textbooks were analysed. This situation is called triangulation in the literature. Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals (e.g., a principal and a student), types of data (e.g., observational field notes and interviews), or methods of data collection (e.g., documents and interviews) in descriptions and themes in qualitative research (Creswell, 2015, p. 251). The combination of two methods of data collection, namely interviews and documents, helps “to investigate different facets of a phenomenon in order to provide a more holistic and rich account of that phenomenon” (Scott & Morrison, 2006, pp. 251–252). Also this combination is important in order to offset the threats to validity in the research, because the biggest validity threat derives from being based on one method or one type of source (Hammersley, 1990, p. 57).

FINDINGS

Textbooks

Two textbooks from the 9th grade RCEK course were collected and analysed. Both textbooks present the Balkans and Anatolia after Hejaz; Jerusalem and its surroundings; Damascus and Baghdad; Iran, Khorasan, Turkistan and the Indian subcontinent (Bektaş et al., 2021, p. 112; Doğan, 2018, p. 127). In the textbooks, the Balkans are presented together with Anatolia (i.e. the current Turkish geography). As a matter of fact, in one of the textbooks, all of the pictures of mosques and artefacts are from Anatolian geography. Only a picture of the Mostar Bridge specific to the Balkans is included (Bektaş et al., 2021, pp. 120–121). Though the other textbook uses more pictures from the Balkans than from Anatolia (Doğan, 2018, pp. 127–131). The presence of Anatolia in the soul geography unit does not make much sense. Given that students live in Anatolia, know it very well compared to the Balkans and there is another unit in the RCEK curriculum, called Islam

in Anatolia in the 12th grade (MEB, 2018), information about Anatolia in “Our Soul Geography” unit can be repetitive for students.

Although the textbooks are similar in terms of the order in which the places are covered, they differ from each other in terms of content. In both textbooks, after telling the story of the Islamisation of Anatolia, the geographical location of the Balkans is presented, and the process of Islamisation is explained. However, the approaches of the textbooks in dealing with the subject are different. In the textbook written by Doğan, the map of Anatolia and the Balkans was shown, and the Islamisation of the Balkans was covered in detail and with examples, and the information given was based on academic sources (Doğan, 2018, pp. 127–130). However, in the other textbook, no map was used, the process of Islamisation was narrated without any sources, Muslim nations were pointed out and the countries where Muslim populations lived were mentioned. In this textbook, the issue of Western Thrace (a place in Greece where a sizable Turkish minority lives) was mentioned, and it is stated that this issue is dealt with as a state policy (Bektaş et al., 2021, p. 121).

Both textbooks refer to many works produced during the Ottoman period. The differentiation in the content of the two textbooks continues in this section as well. Doğan mentions important architectural monuments from each country in the Balkans (Doğan, 2018, pp. 130–131). However, the other textbook prepared by Bektaş, and his colleagues did not draw attention to this richness and only presented the Stone Bridge on the Vardar River, the Sultan Murat Mosque in Plovdiv, the Mehmet Ali Pasha Madrasah in Kavala and the Mostar Bridge (Bektaş et al., 2021, p. 121). The textbook mentioned that Mostar is currently in Bosnia and Kavala in Greece, but no information was given about the location of other monuments.

The differentiation in the content of the textbooks also continued in the treatment of historical figures. In one of the textbooks, only Saltuk Baba is mentioned. (Doğan, 2018, p. 130), while in the other textbook, Balım Sultan and Aliya Izetbegovic are mentioned (Bektaş et al., 2021, pp. 121–122). Balım Sultan, who was from Dimetoka and has a grave in Nevşehir, Türkiye, was a sheikh of the Bektashi order. A poem (We are the Abdals of Urum) and an image attributed to him were used in the textbook (Bektaş et al., 2021, pp. 121–122). There was no activity related to the poem, it was only asked to be read. Various questions, such as what the poem tells, what its main theme is, why this poem is preferred, remain unanswered. Aliya Izetbegovic’s picture was also used and his statement, “For me, Islam is another name for all that is fine and noble” was quoted. No information was given about the source of the quote. In the textbook, it is stated that Aliya was a Muslim, Bosnian, commander and statesman. However, no literary works written by Aliya Izetbegovic were mentioned (Bektaş et al., 2021) even though he has written numerous books.

Textbooks’ contents are expected to be consistent within themselves. In the textbook, it is claimed that the Balkans had peace and tranquillity for about six centuries, but later the textbook mentions the wars that broke out in the 18th century and points to the deaths and migrations caused by these wars (Bektaş et al., 2021). Thus, the information on peace

in the Balkans geography for six centuries, which was previously stated in the textbook, became meaningless, as the textbooks also mention the wars the Balkans has endured. It is a serious deficiency to provide such contradictory information in a time when it is easy for students to access information.

In the textbooks, various arguments have been put forward for the Balkans being a part of our soul geography. It is noteworthy that the textbooks approach this issue differently. One of the textbooks drew attention to the use of Turkish surnames, Turkish words in Balkan languages, historical bazaars and pointed out the similarity of the cities between Anatolia and the Balkans (Doğan, 2018, p. 130): Doğan (2018) wrote, “When a person goes to a city such as Skopje, Constanta, Komotini, Iskece, Kosovo, Sarajevo, etc., he feels like he has travelled to any city in Anatolia.” The other textbook approached the issue from a very different perspective. Showing a cemetery image in Srebrenica, it pointed out the connection between geographies based on the presence of Turkish names in the cemetery plaques (Bektaş et al., 2021, p. 122).

There are messages from the Quran at the end of each unit in the RCEK curriculum. At the end of this unit, the 13th verse of al-Hujurat was used. This verse reads as follows:

O mankind! We created you from a male and a female and divided you into tribes and clans so that you may know one another. The most valuable in the sight of Allah is the most pious. Allah knows everything and is aware of everything.”

In this verse, it is stated that elements such as nationality, race and language that people belong to cannot be a reason for superiority, and that superiority will be with piety. It is meaningful to use the verse that begins with “O mankind!” in this unit. However, “the soul geography” in the curriculum and textbooks was presented as a cultural and faith similarity/unity rather than referring to all humankind. Therefore, it could be more appropriate to use the 10th verse of al-Hujurat: “The believers are brothers, so make peace between your two brothers and be mindful of God, so that you may be given mercy.” In this verse, the relations between Muslims are pointed out and it is requested to mend the relations between them.

Teachers’ Views on the Unit “Our Soul Geography”

In this part of the article, the opinions of the RCEK teachers interviewed about the unit were presented within the limitation of “the Balkans region”. In this framework, the participants’ definition of the concept of “Our Soul Geography”, their views on the content, the materials, methods and strategies they used while teaching the unit, their competences and suggestions were presented.

Attitude towards the unit

All of the participants understood the concept of “our soul geography“ as the geography where the followers of the same religion are located. For example, one participant exemplified the concept as follows:

We can think of it as covering the whole geography where Islam is active, and Islam is lived ... From Andalusia to the North Caucasus, Central Asia; from India to Malaysia, all the places that are in our hearts. [P3]

Understanding the concept in this way is compatible with the presentation in the RCEK curriculum. Participants think that the subject should be included in the course. For example, one participant explained the unit with religious and national loyalty:

There is national loyalty on the one hand and religious loyalty on the other. It should definitely be there [in the curriculum] to show that there is not a disconnected relationship [between Muslims]. [P4]

It was also reflected in the interviews that the participants evaluated the regions in this geography with the pronoun “we” (P1): “...these places belong to us...” Another participant pointed to this situation as follows (P3): “The people there are a part of us...”

These findings indicate that the participants had a positive attitude towards the unit.

Unit content

Participant teachers had positive and negative opinions about the content of the unit. First of all, the fact that this unit has an interdisciplinary approach was seen positively by the participants. One participant expressed his thoughts on this subject as follows:

It is definitely interdisciplinary, in the context of historical and cultural context, it is good to have sociology in our book with an interdisciplinary educational approach. [P4]

Although the participants had a positive view of the content of the unit, negative criticisms were also expressed. For example, one participant pointed out that the unit was like a unit from a history book and criticised that it only had a cognitive dimension:

...the unit looks like [a part of] a history book. There should be information, but not only at the level of [cognitive] knowledge. They should be able to realise something in the affective sense, they should focus on the unity of differences rather than their separation. But the unit is always focused on information. A religious culture lesson should not be like this. [P2]

Another negative situation expressed by the participants is the information density in the unit. Participants generally complained that the unit was too dense, there was too much compressed information, and there were too many names, events and places. One participant explained this situation with the analogy of an encyclopaedia as follows (p4):

The unit is very intense. It is our last unit. This unit is coming to the end of the semester. We are trying to explain it with compressed formulae. There are too many names, too many architectural structures and historical artefacts. It is very detailed. So to speak, they compressed geographies that would form an encyclopaedic volume into one unit. [P4]

Another participant also complained about the same issue, stating that they had to “skip some parts of the unit” [P5].

This situation was also pointed out by other participants. The fact that it is an information-centred unit was also expressed in different ways. The reasons for one participant’s statement: “It feels like a subject that needs to be memorised and then forgotten” [P4] is important here. The understanding that the unit which contains too much information such as names, places, events, etc., hinders learning leads the participants to think that the content is not compatible with the objectives of the RCEK course. Another issue criticised by the participants is that the Balkans are covered under one title together with Anatolia. For example, one participant expressed this situation with the words “Anatolia is more intense and dominant, so the Balkans melts into the Anatolia” [P4].

Participants expressed their opinions about student interest as well as the content of the unit. The participants complained that the subject did not attract students’ interest and curiosity. For example, one participant drew attention to this situation with the following words:

Students do not research too much. ... Children are not very interested. Their interest is in different directions. [P1]

Another participant drew attention to the fact that there were no questions about the subject from the students (P2): “Students do not ask questions about names.” While pointing out the reasons for the lack of interest, the participants listed the criticisms for the unit just mentioned. One of these reasons is that the subject is knowledge-centred:

It is a compressed unit and there is a lot of information. In other words, there are subjects that correspond to knowledge and theory rather than interpretation. This inevitably makes children tired and bored. It feels like a subject to be memorised and then forgotten. [P4]

In addition to the reasons stemming from the content of the unit, reasons stemming from the teacher were also mentioned by the participants. Because teachers also have hesitations

about the importance of the subject. For example, a participant pointed out the change in his interest in the subject with the appearance of the question related to the subject in the 2022 university exam as follows (P1): “After this question was asked, I focused on the subject. [In the past] I did not care much.” The same participant stated the following about both the coincidence with the end of the semester and the existence of more important subjects:

Since it was towards the end of the semester, we summarised the subject a little. For example, the first topic of our lesson is tawheed, worship, some concepts, and when it is towards the end of the semester, we summarise it a little more. [P1]

This subject is not as important as tawheed and prophethood. These subjects are more important. Tawheed and prophethood are becoming more important because of deviant interpretations. Tawheed, prophethood and worship come first. These subjects [i.e., our soul geography] come afterwards. [P1]

Another participant sought the reason for the lack of student interest in himself:

We do not attract students’ interest. This may be a bit of our problem. [P3]

Another participant, on the other hand, stated that interest emerged when different methods were used:

They are interested when different methods are used. But there is no interest in plain narration. [P2]

Another reason for student indifference was associated with the end of the semester:

This unit is a very intense, very comprehensive unit and it is the fifth [last] unit. It is at the end of the semester. I don’t think it was covered sufficiently and properly. [P2]

Another participants also expressed that it was a unit that was skipped [P3 and P5] with the following words: “...since this unit is the last unit and it coincides with the end of the semester, it can also be a unit that is skipped...” [P3].

Participants considered that distributing the unit across the grades rather than teaching it as a whole unit in one grade, could be effective in preventing such problems. For example, one participant expressed this thought as follows:

I am in favour of spreading this unit to other units. Since all regions are given, it is very complicated. It would be better if there was a geographical region in each unit. Since all regions are covered in one unit, it is complicated and the student has a lot of difficulty... it cannot be completed. I am thinking of teaching this unit by

adding it to other units. I can teach the Balkans in a different unit. Mostar bridge does not necessarily have to be in the fifth unit. [P2]

Another participant expressed the division of the subject in a different way with the following words:

They should divide them. We are covering 10 topics. What if we divide them into [two] five and five? in 9th [grade] tell the history, in the 10th the cultures, in the 11th the contributions, or they should distribute the topics and regions. [P4]

It was also reflected in the interviews that the unit has been associated with the refugee problem recently. Because the fact that the unit, which is about the soul geography, causes the relationship with people in other geographies to be questioned. For example, one participant expressed the association of the content with the refugee problem and his response to this situation with the following words:

The question is why would they do such a thing [persecutions]? Can such a thing happen at this time? We can say that questions come. There is a refugee problem. They look at Afghans, Syrians, Iraqis as if they are invading our country. [P3]

Learning-teaching process

It can be said that participant teachers used many materials and methods in the teaching-learning process. Participants stated that for example they prepared information notes and ask students to come to the lesson with posters and slogans:

For example, I try to tell the students about very important names such as Aliya. I prepare notes such as where they were born, their important works, their effects, etc. I give these notes to the students. They come to the class with posters and slogans. [P2]

Another participant pointed out that she showed pictures on the smart board and stated that this situation attracted the students' attention:

They were mentioning their names in the lessons. I showed the pictures on the smart board. When I show them pictures, they are very interested. [P2]

Another participant stated that he used the smart board as follows:

Through the smart board, we try to explain the artifacts there, for example, the Mostar Bridge, by associating its historical, cultural and religious structure with the present day. [P3]

Although the map was not shown in the textbook prepared by Bektaş et al. (2021), it was mentioned in the interviews that the teachers compensated for this deficiency: “I first start the Balkans topic with a map.” [P2]. Some participants stated that they benefited from the presentations prepared by the Directorate General of Religious Education (DÖGM in Turkish):

Then there are presentations of DÖGM. I benefit from those presentations. There are interactive presentations and I benefit from them. [P2]

In addition to these teaching materials, it was also mentioned in the interviews that the participants used various methods:

I had them do group work, I used the station method, I had them draw a picture of the Mostar bridge and write various poems in the form of acrostics. [P2]

Another participant stated that he utilised the opportunities of technology with the following words:

We organise virtual trips [via] videos, via the Education Information Network (EBA) or the internet... We show pictures on the internet. Otherwise, we cannot do anything else. [P3]

One teacher stated that she shows videos to better explain the Balkan region and its history (P5). Another participant also stated that he used Web 2.0 tools: “It is very good with visual effects, maps, animations, visuals of artefacts.” [P4]. One participant pointed out that comparisons were made with the works of art in Turkey: “They compare the architectural features with mosques in Turkey.” [P2]. P2 also stated that they play games as follows :

There are games like ‘who am I?’ Children come prepared and ask each other questions. They do not have any prior knowledge about these names. Students heard these names from me for the first time. They don’t recognise them at all. They become aware of the names over time.

While two participants said that the student’s interest was distracted when going into details (P3 and P5), another participant expressed that plain narration did not work with the following words:

It is not like telling a story, theoretically, this one did this, that one did that, but ... using visuals, using a world map. We are focussing on the more liveable part of this. [P4]

Teacher competences

When the participant teachers were asked which events from the Balkans they remember and they teach, P1 said “Political events, wars, treaties that the Ottoman Empire experienced. The culture created by the Ottoman Empire comes to mind. The brutality in the Bosnian War comes to mind.” P2 referred to the Ottoman period and the Bosnian War in the 90s: “The Kosovo War comes to mind. Then the conquest of Serbia comes to my mind. I have not covered such events in the lessons.” P3 stated that he included the population exchange and the events that caused it in his lessons with the following words: “We can talk about issues such as the Balkan wars and population exchange, the massacres committed by the Serbs in Bosnia in the 90s. We somehow refer to the massacres in the Balkans, especially in Bosnia, in our lessons.”

It is meaningful that the events pointed out by the participant teachers mostly refer to the Ottoman conquests, which is one of the reasons why the Balkans are considered within the soul geography in Türkiye. In addition, the Bosnia and Kosovo Wars in the 90s are also reflected in the lessons. This may indicate that the regions in the lessons are evaluated with political dimensions rather than cultural and artistic associations, because such events are political-military events.

This political aspect of the events also manifests itself in the names-persons. When the participant teachers were asked about the names they used as subjects in their lessons, they unanimously referred to Aliya Izetbegovic, nicknamed the “Wise King”. Apart from this name, one participant teacher pointed to “Sarı Saltuk”, the name mentioned in the textbooks. The reason for this was presented by the teacher as a justification for not going beyond the curriculum:

There are unit-based names in our lessons. We do not go out of the curriculum. Sarı Saltuk is mentioned among the saints who were active in the Balkans. We talk about Sarı Saltuk when we talk about the contribution of *Erens*. We talk about the dervish lodge and sufis. [P3]

However, there is a need for information about the nature of institutional structures such as dervish lodges and madrasahs. Aliya and Sarı Saltuk are already included in one of the textbooks. The fact that one participant pointed to Naim Süleymanoğlu and stated that he taught Naim Süleymanoğlu, his life and struggles (P3) shows that sometimes teachers can be innovative, by teaching names which are not mentioned in the textbooks.

The failure to provide the desired diversity in historical figures is also seen in architectural artefacts. Because the only architectural monument mentioned by the participants is the Mostar Bridge. The reason for its mention is the question about the Mostar Bridge in the last university entrance exam “Basic Proficiency Examination” (TYT). P2 mentioned the Ahmet Pasha Palace, “Mostar bridge, Ahmet Pasha palace? [I assume] It exists.”

P2 expresses this situation in names, events and artefacts with the following words:

I don't think a teacher can teach this unit without preparation. I realised that I was very incomplete. Later, I read texts from different sources, took new notes and synthesised them. [P2]

It can be said that the participants' knowledge about the Balkans were limited.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research is limited to the Balkans in the unit of "Our Soul Geography" and the data was collected through two textbooks and five interviews. "Our Soul Geography" unit was not included in the previous RCEK curricula. In 2018, it was added to the curriculum with the secondary RCEK curriculum. This shows that there has been a significant change in the secondary RCEK curriculum in 2018.

The curriculum covers the unit with an interdisciplinary approach. The unit is addressed both historically, geographically, culturally and religiously. This is a situation that transcends the borders of the nation-state and where a new spatial and historical imagination becomes evident (Bölükbaşı, 2021, p. 37) The first RCEK curriculum in 1982 pointed out several principles. One of these principles is as follows (MEB, 1982): "The mentality that one cannot necessarily have good relations with nations of the same religion, but that one can also have goodwill and friendly relations with nations of different religions shall be acquired." This principle is also preserved in the subsequent texts (MEB, 1986; MEB, 1992). The signs of a new imagination that transcends the borders of the nation-state are also expressed in a different way in the objectives of the 2000 Primary RCEK curriculum. Indeed, one of the objectives of that curriculum was as follows (MEB, 2000, p. 915): "Religion is an important factor in relations between people, societies and nations in a universal dimension, and individuals need religious education to be given with scientific method in order to develop these relations in a positive way." This objective was maintained in the following 2010 curriculum (MEB, 2010). In the 2018 secondary education RCEK curriculum, this aim is expressed in a different way (MEB, 2018, p. 9): "It is aimed to make [students] realise that religion is an important element in the relations between people, societies and nations." Reflecting this change, the title of the unit refers to the pronoun "we": "Our Soul Geography". Processes similar to this change in religious education have been studied in different countries. For example, in his study on the historical adventure of religious education in Finland, Poulter (2017) analysed the process with Foucauldian thought and interpreted it as a transition 'from closed Lutheran religious education to closed liberal religious education'.

In the textbook analysis, it was seen that there were significant differences between the two textbooks. The textbook written by Doğan does not have any problems except for the preferences in the use of the names of the Balkans. However, significant deficiencies

and inconsistencies were identified in the textbook written by Bektaş et al. The first of these is the lack of a map in the textbook. The distance of Skopje and Tirana or another capital city in the Balkans to Istanbul or Ankara could have been presented visually. In addition, there could be more attention to the principle that distance does not matter for the soul geography. In the textbook, it was argued that there was a peace at the time of the Ottoman Empire for a period of 600 years, but this is not the case in reality, as many wars were fought at the time of the Ottoman Empire. Thirdly, the mention of the Balkans together with Anatolia has melted the Balkans into Anatolia, as can be seen in the pictures used. On the contrary, various architectural works from the Balkan geography could have been included. Fourthly, it is not clear for what purpose the words and poems given with reference to Balim Sultan and Aliya are given and there are no activities on these words and poems. However, it would have been possible to have various discussions on these texts, especially Aliya's texts. Moreover, the fact that there is no reference to the book in which the quote is mentioned can be said as a separate problem area. In addition, the fact that the information in the textbook is presented without references can be mentioned as another problem area. Finally, Aliya's works and life story are not mentioned in the text. One of the pedagogical implications of the research is that the students pay adequate attention if the textbooks do not include enough activities, as teachers noted. In addition, various quotations can be made from his books. A similar suggestion was shared in a study on information, media and technology literacy in religious education. In this suggestion, in order to make suggestions for strengthening the cultural and historical ties between Turkey and the soul geography, students should not be contented with the information in the literature, but should consider the news, documentaries, publications, etc. in the visual and written media on this subject, which can help them access richer content and support the development of media literacy skills (Ünal & Furat, 2022, p. 26).

Teacher interviews reveal that firstly, teachers complained that the unit was not taught at the desired level because it is taught at the end of the term. This situation cannot be solved by replacing the unit with a different unit. Because this time, the replaced unit will face the same problem. The main problem here is that the unit is knowledge-centred as pointed out by the teachers. Secondly, as pointed out by the teachers, there are too many places and names in the textbooks. It was also stated by the participants that this situation caused the student's interest to decrease. However, it was reflected in the interviews that this was overcome and that teachers increased interest through various learning-teaching methods and techniques. In addition, it was also stated that the fact that there were questions from the Our Soul Geography unit in this year's university entrance exam caused an increase in the interest of teachers and students. This is similar to the findings that the most important reason for students' lack of interest in RCEK course is that "there are not enough questions in the university entrance exams" (Zengin & Hendek, 2021, p. 150). Thirdly, teachers' competences in the subject are limited, because they have limited knowledge about the Balkans. Although the teachers complained about too many names and places, when asked which names, events, places come to your mind, the participants could only limited number of names, events and places.

Some of the pedagogical implications of the research could be as follows. Firstly, it is necessary to update the textbook by eliminating the aforementioned limitations. In this way, more attention-grabbing content can be created for students. Secondly, it is necessary to improve the awareness and competences of the RCEK teachers about the unit “Our Soul Geography”. Within the framework of this suggestions, in-service trainings for teachers on the Balkans or school trips like Balkan trips can be considered.

There can be more research on how other regions are covered in the unit of “Our Soul Geography”. Moreover, there needs more research on why such regions as Malaysia and Indonesia, which are parts of Islamic civilisation, are not covered in the unit of “Our Soul Geography”.

NOTE

1. In Tükiye, the abbreviation for the Ministry of National Education is MEB.

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