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# Nationalism in Secondary Schools: How Do Students Understand and Conceptualize It?

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## Abstract

One of the aims of educational institutions in Turkey is to adopt an understanding of nationalism based on Atatürk's views by students. Atatürk's understanding of nationalism was founded on the unity of culture. It rejects racism. It emphasizes cultural unity rather than blood ties or religious unity. However, various forms of nationalism in Turkey can find supporters. For this reason, it is important to examine how secondary school students understand nationalism and with which concepts they explain it. Qualitative research method was used in this research, which aims to examine how students conceptualize and understand nationalism. Since it is important for the students to express themselves naturally, they were asked to write an essay on nationalism. Student writings were analyzed by content analysis. According to the results obtained within the scope of the study, the students mostly used the expressions "to love homeland and nation" and "to protect homeland and nation" when explaining the concept of nationalism. As the age and grade levels of the students increase, the number of concepts related to nationalism used by students increases. Nationalism is understood differently by male and female students. While female students emphasize the concepts of love and work, male students emphasize the concepts of protecting and independence. Considering the place where the students live, the meaning attributed to the concept of nationalism varies. While the students living in the city center used the concept of love more, the students living in the town focused on the concept of protecting. The most important finding obtained within the scope of the study is that the participants did not base their nationalism on blood ties or religious unity. Students did not use non-inclusive expressions while describing nationalism. For this reason, it was understood that the participants had thoughts compatible with Atatürk's understanding of nationalism.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, Religion, Secondary School Students

## 1. Introduction

The word of "millet (nation)" in Turkish is of Arabic origin. For a long time, this word corresponded to the concept of ummah (Sami, 1978). With Gökalp, the meanings of the words ummah and nation took their present form. According to Gökalp (1970), those who believe in the same religion are called ummah. Nation, on the other hand, is people with a common language and culture. It is a community consisting of individuals who have common language, religion, morality and sense of beauty, and who have received the same education in this sense. Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, has the same understanding of nation as Gökalp. Atatürk defined

the nation as “a community that has a rich common heritage, has the desire to live together and is willing to preserve its cultural heritage” (İnan, 1969). However, what these concepts mean is controversial even today. This situation causes many problems. Today, most of the people over the age of 50 in Turkey still understand the concept of nation as *ummah*. In this context, the understanding of nationalism in Turkey also differs according to various groups. While some individuals and groups base their understanding of nationalism on religion, other groups argue that religion is not important for nationalism.

The equivalent of nationalism in Turkish is closer to the concept of patriotism than nationalism in English. Nationalism is what people who consider themselves to be members of the same nation; together, within the same borders, to lead an independent life and to glorify the society they constitute (Eroğlu, 1997). Nationalism in the broadest sense; It is a sense of loyalty to the society to which the individual belongs with the feelings of love and respect. This commitment manifests itself in the form of having a deep interest in the language, morals, and all moral and material cultural values of the nation, enduring all kinds of sacrifices in order to develop the nation's existence, increase its power and protect the country (Kafesoğlu, 1970; Sarıay, 2004). The basis of the nationalist movement is national independence. This is the movement of nations living under the hegemony of other states to get rid of slavery and establish their own independent states. This movement takes its source from the French Revolution. Just as a human being has some fundamental rights and freedoms due to being human, a nation as a whole has the right to its freedom, that is, its independence (Armaoğlu, 1999).

Turkish nationalism was founded on the concepts of nation and nationality. The people who founded the republic, especially Atatürk, think that being away from national consciousness has great costs. Atatürk said, “Our nation has suffered the bitter punishment of ignoring the importance of nationality. The nations living in the Ottoman lands saved themselves by clinging to their national beliefs. The Turkish nation, on the other hand, realized that it was a foreign nation to them when they were expelled from them” (Karal, 1981). At this point, Atatürk points out that the understanding of the *ummah* cannot meet the national unity. Because most of the societies that declared their independence by leaving the Ottoman Empire were Muslims. The process leading to the Turkish War of Independence after the First World War shaped the understanding of nationalism. In this process, the Turkish nation believed that the only power they could rely on could only be their own national existence, and they saw this through experience. The National Struggle was won with the strength of this belief, and the foundations of the Republic of Turkey, whose political borders were determined with the Lausanne Peace Treaty, were laid on this belief. On the other hand, the years of the National Struggle, in which the Turkish nation saw that there was no power to rely on other than its own power, also contributed to the attachment of the Turks to their national pride and to the riveting of national consciousness.

With the establishment of the Republic, Turkey adopted an understanding of nationalism based on Atatürk's views. Atatürk bases nationalism not on blood ties, but on cultural unity. With the words "How happy is the one who says I am a Turk," Atatürk placed not having Turkish blood but adopting Turkish culture as the basis of nationalism. Turkish nationalism, defined based on these views, took the form of a social policy principle that directs state activities and entered the Constitution with the 1937 amendment in this form. In this way, Turkish nationalism aims to protect the integrity of the nation, to keep the needs and interests of the community above all personal needs and interests, to create a conscious solidarity and sincere brotherhood and unity between generations (Keskin, 1999). The main goal of Turkish nationalism is to bring the society to political independence and freedom. Over time, new elements were added to this and Turkish nationalism took the form of a movement that values freedom and human personality and whose goal is democracy (Eroğlu, 1997). As such, it was not based on race, and did not follow an aggressive, fanciful and adventurous policy (Feyzioğlu, 1988). Atatürk's nationalism aims to unite every individual who considers the Anatolian land as their homeland and says "I am a Turk," regardless of their race or ethnic origin, under one roof. In this sense, Nationalism, which is one of Atatürk's principles, basically aims to provide an atmosphere of unity and solidarity.

Nationalism, which is among Atatürk's principles, is based on Ziya Gökalp's concept of "cultural nationalism." Accordingly, these lands are the lands of the Turkish nation. The element that creates and keeps the Turkish nation alive is culture. Therefore, it is not necessary to be ethnically Turkish in order to be a part of the Turkish nation. Everyone who adopts Turkish culture and considers himself Turkish is a part of this nation. Atatürk's

nationalism is based on boasting of belonging to the Turkish nation, believing and trusting the Turkish nation. Atatürk summarized as "Turkish nationalism is to preserve the special character and independent identity of Turkish society, while existing in parallel and in harmony with all contemporary nations, on the path of progress and development and in international contacts and relations" (İnan, 1969). The main feature of the Kemalist understanding of nationalism is that it is realistic, acts from the reality of the nation, and evaluates the issues in a rational way (Eroğlu, 1992). Nationalism, which is one of the basic principles of the Kemalist thought system, is rational, modern, civilized, forward-looking, democratic, unifying, humanitarian and peaceful (Feyzioğlu, 1988). In this sense, it is not an aggressive, expansionist understanding of nationalism that demands territory from its neighbors, as in fascist and national socialist nationalism. This understanding of nationalism adopts only the borders of the Republic of Turkey as a political field (MEB, 1983). Another aspect of Atatürk's understanding of nationalism is that he values freedom and human personality and is based on the idea of equality. In addition, Atatürk's principle of nationalism is against class discrimination in society. It has characteristics such as being secular, humanitarian and peaceful. Kemalist understanding of nationalism rejects racism, class consciousness, ummatism, regionalism and separatism (Olcaytu, 1973). For this reason, it can be said that Atatürk's nationalism is based on contemporary views.

Nationalism is a concept that still causes controversy in society today. Although the Republic of Turkey officially adopts Atatürk's understanding of nationalism, various forms of nationalism are seen in society, including approaches based on blood ties or religious beliefs. Such outdated, conservative and reactionary interpretations of nationalism unfortunately still cause problems in Turkey. For this reason, it is important to examine the students' understanding of nationalism that will shape the society in the future. Therefore, in this study, it is aimed to understand the perceptions of nationalism of secondary school students.

## 2. Method

Qualitative research approach was used in this study. Qualitative research is a research approach in which data is produced without statistical processes (Altunışık, Coşkun, Bayraktaroğlu & Yıldırım, 2005). The important features of qualitative research techniques are that they provide sensitivity to the natural environment, the researcher has a participatory role, has a holistic approach, enables perceptions to be revealed, has flexibility in the research design and has an inductive analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2000).

### 2.1 Participants

Purposive sampling method was chosen in the study. In qualitative studies, the sample group was kept small in order to investigate the sample in depth. Therefore, purposive sampling is preferred instead of random sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this sampling, criteria that are considered important for selection are determined (Tavşancıl & Aslan, 2001). For this reason, 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grade students who were able to express their thoughts well were determined by interviewing the teachers in the schools. These students were asked to write an essay stating their thoughts on the principle of nationalism. 183 students participated in the research. 95 of them live in the town and 88 live in the city center.

Table 1: Participants' genders

Grade	Female	Male	Total
4th Grade	22	19	41
5th Grade	20	22	42
6th Grade	22	27	49
7th Grade	26	25	51
<b>Total</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>183</b>

Table 2: The regions where the students participating in the study live

Grade	Rural	Urban	Total
4th Grade	23	18	41
5th Grade	20	22	42

6th Grade	26	23	49
7th Grade	26	25	51
<b>Total</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>183</b>

## 2.2 Data Collection

In the research, the data were collected with the compositions about nationalism written by the students. The compositions written by the students were analyzed by content analysis. Content analysis is defined as a systematic, repeatable technique in which a text is summarized with categories that are formed as a result of coding based on certain rules (Büyüköztürk et al., 2008). The raw data obtained from the interviews were coded by the researcher. The coding and categorization process of the compositions was also carried out by a sociologist and a Turkish scientist in addition to the researcher. The data obtained at the end of the three examinations were compared and given their final form. The data were classified under categories and made meaningful for the reader. As a result, tables were obtained in which each student's views on the subject can be seen separately.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Students' conceptualization of nationalism

The table below shows how the participants conceptualized nationalism in general.

Table 3: Students' conceptualization of nationalism

<b>Students' conceptualization of nationalism</b>	<b>N</b>
Loving Homeland and Nation	103
Protecting Homeland and Nation	85
Working (For nation)	45
Independence	45
Equality (Everyone living within the borders of the Republic of Turkey is equal)	28
National Unity and Solidarity	19
Learning History and Using Turkish Language in the Best Manner	18
Being a Conscious Consumer	17
Protecting the Material and Moral Values Created Throughout Our History	11
Protecting Underground and Aboveground Natural Resources.	7
Being Cautious in Privatization of State Institutions	3
Being honest.	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>383</b>

It was understood that the students used a total of 383 sentences indicating nationalism. Student approaches are classified under a total of 12 categories. The understanding of nationalism that the students explained with their compositions seems to be compatible with Atatürk's understanding of nationalism. Participants mostly explained their understanding of nationalism as protecting and loving the homeland and nation. Afterwards, they used human and cultural elements such as equality, independence, awareness of history and language, and protecting material and spiritual values to explain nationalism. The students participating in the study did not mention concepts such as blood ties or religious union. On the contrary, the participants explained their approach to nationalism with a focus on belonging, culture, and self-sacrifice. These, on the other hand, are parallel to the understanding of nationalism that is built on Atatürk's principles and that Turkey wants to create. 183 students participating in the study used a total of 383 concepts coded in 12 categories to explain their understanding of nationalism. In the tables below, students' perceptions of nationalism on the basis of class, gender and place of residence are examined.

### 3.2 Conceptualization of nationalism by grade level

The table below shows the number of concepts used by students at each grade level.

Table 4: The number of concepts used by students at each grade level

Grade	1 Concept	2 Concept	3 Concept	4 Concept
4th Grade	32	8	1	---
5th Grade	4	33	4	1
6th Grade	3	33	8	5
7th Grade	--	29	13	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>15</b>

According to the table, no fourth grade student used four or more concepts to explain the principle of nationalism. 78% of fourth graders explained nationalism by focusing on a single concept. 78.5% of the fifth graders and 67% of the sixth graders explained the principle of nationalism with two concepts. In the seventh grade, each student used at least two concepts.

Considering the grade levels, the diversity of the concepts used to explain the principle of nationalism increases as the grade level increases. Seventh grade students were able to compose compositions using at least two concepts, while fourth grade students were able to explain nationalism with a maximum of two concepts. It can be said that as the grade level of the students increased, the meanings attributed to the principle of nationalism diversified in terms of quantity.

Table 5: Students' conceptualization of nationalism by grade

Categories	4th Grad e	5th Grad e	6th Grad e	7th Grad e
Loving Homeland and Nation	15	25	32	31
Protecting Homeland and Nation	19	22	20	24
Working (For nation)	8	10	13	14
Independence	7	13	16	9
National Unity and Solidarity	--	5	6	8
Equality (Everyone living within the borders of the Republic of Turkey is equal)	--	3	11	14
Protecting the Material and Moral Values Created Throughout Our History	1	--	7	3
Learning History and Using Turkish Language in the Best Manner	3	3	--	12
Being a Conscious Consumer		5	5	7
Being honest.	2			
Protecting Underground and Aboveground Natural Resources.	--	--	3	4
Being Cautious in Privatization of State Institutions	--	--	--	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>126</b>

To explain nationalism, the total number of concepts used is 55 in the fourth grade, 86 in the fifth grade, 113 in the sixth grade, and 126 in the seventh grade. However, the number of different concepts used to explain nationalism is 7 in the fourth grade, 8 in the fifth grade, 9 in the sixth grade, and 11 in the seventh grade. When the total number of concepts used and the number of concept diversity are examined, an increase is observed as the grade level rises. According to this result, it can be said that as the age and grade levels of the students increase, the way of defining the principle of nationalism also diversifies in terms of quality and the meanings they attribute to this principle diversify and develop.

### 3.3 Conceptualization of nationalism by gender

The table below shows the students' conceptualization of nationalism by their gender.

Table 5: Students' conceptualization of nationalism by gender

Categories	Female	Male
Loving Homeland and Nation	76	37
Protecting Homeland and Nation	15	60
Working (For nation)	26	9
Independence	19	36
National Unity and Solidarity	8	11
Equality (Everyone living within the borders of the Republic of Turkey is equal)	15	13
Protecting the Material and Moral Values Created Throughout Our History	4	7
Learning History and Using Turkish Language in the Best Manner	6	12
Being a Conscious Consumer	8	9
Being honest.	1	1
Protecting Underground and Aboveground Natural Resources.	2	5
Being Cautious in Privatization of State Institutions	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>202</b>

In Table 5, the concepts used by the students regarding the principle of nationalism were examined in terms of gender. The frequency of use of some concepts varies according to gender. While 76 female and 37 male students used the concept of "loving homeland and nation"; The concept of "protecting homeland and nation" was used by 15 female and 60 male students. It is important that female students explain nationalism as "loving the homeland" and male students explain nationalism as "protecting the homeland." On the other hand, while male students mentioned the concept of independence more, female students associated the concept of working with nationalism. From this point of view, it can be said that female students consider nationalism more culturally, while males approach nationalism with a focus on self-sacrifice. The fact that the concepts used by female students mostly focus on love and diligence, while male students focus on protection and independence may be related to gender roles gained at an early age. The reason for the concepts that females frequently use can be thought of as a result of their upbringing in accordance with the role of maternity from an early age. The fact that male students generally use the expressions of protection and independence may be due to the fact that they have been seen as "soldiers" by their families and society since childhood.

### 3.4 Conceptualization of nationalism by place of residence

The table below shows the students' conceptualization of nationalism by their place of residence.

Table 7: Conceptualization of nationalism by place of residence

Categories	Rural	Urban
Loving Homeland and Nation	39	64
Protecting Homeland and Nation	47	38
Working (For nation)	21	24
Independence	25	20
National Unity and Solidarity	11	8
Equality (Everyone living within the borders of the Republic of Turkey is equal)	10	18
Protecting the Material and Moral Values Created Throughout Our History	6	5
Learning History and Using Turkish Language in the Best Manner	6	12
Being a Conscious Consumer	4	13
Being honest.	2	0
Protecting Underground and Aboveground Natural Resources.	1	6

Being Cautious in Privatization of State Institutions	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>210</b>

In the table above, students' nationalism approaches are examined in terms of the variable of place of residence. According to these results, an important finding is that children living in rural areas understand nationalism more as protecting the homeland. On the other hand, children living in the city center explain nationalism mostly by loving their homeland. It is clear that children in rural areas live under more difficult conditions. These conditions may create a need for children to protect what they have.

#### 4. Discussion

It is seen that the students explain nationalism well according to their age group. Statements about nationalism were coded under 12 themes as a result of data analysis. Fourth grade students explained nationalism with one concept at most. In addition, among the fourth grade students, no one explained nationalism with four concepts. In the fifth and sixth grades, nationalism was explained with two concepts at most. The fact that the fifth and sixth graders explain nationalism with two concepts at most is an indication that they are in the transition from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage. The high number of students explaining nationalism with four concepts in the sixth grade shows that some students pass the formal operational stage earlier than their peers. The number of students explaining nationalism with four or more concepts is higher in the seventh grade. This situation shows that seventh grade students are now leaving the concrete operational stage and moving to the formal operational stage.

Female and male students conceptualize nationalism in different ways. While the female students used the expressions "to love homeland and nation" and "to work" while explaining nationalism, the male students used the expressions "to protect homeland and nation" and "independence." The difference in the expressions of male and female students can be explained by their upbringing. In Turkish society, female students are trained in accordance with the mother figure, while male students are trained in accordance with the soldier figure. For this reason, it can be said that females used the expression to love and males used the expression to protect. Students' approaches to nationalism also vary according to the region they live in. While those living in the city center used the expression "to love homeland and nation," those living in the towns mostly explained nationalism with the expression "to protect homeland and nation." The way students explain nationalism varies according to their transition from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage, their gender and the place they live.

According to the results of the study, it is seen that the students' perceptions about nationalism developed from the fourth grade to the seventh grade, depending on the topics related to Nationalism in the Social Studies courses. Therefore, we can say that students have gained important achievements about Nationalism with the effect of social studies lessons. It is extremely important that nationalism, which is closely related to the survival of the society, is internalized by children, who are also the future of the nation. However, it is important for a healthy society that the understanding of nationalism adopted by the students is in the direction desired by the state. Because differences in the understanding of nationalism and religion lead to important differences in national identity, domestic and foreign policy (Huntington, 2004). According to Rousseau (2008), religion (Christianity) may have a structure that sabotages social unity. However, according to Rousseau, there is no state in which religion did not play a role in its establishment. Therefore, it is important to be careful in establishing the link between religion and nationalism. The relationship between religion and nationalism is multidimensional. Religion can strengthen nationalist sentiments. Even in situations where the state faces problems, the recipe for salvation may be the combination of religion and nationalism (Albayrak, 2005). Religion can also function in this direction in Turkey, where the majority of its population is Muslim. However, the definition of nationalism based on religion is not an inclusive approach. Such an understanding of nationalism can cause problems in secular nation states such as Turkey. For this reason, Turkey has adopted the understanding of nationalism based on Atatürk's views. The thoughts of the students participating in the study are also compatible with Atatürk's understanding of nationalism. The students showed that they do not have a religion-oriented understanding of nationalism.



According to modern approaches, nationalism is a product of modern society (Saygi & Aslan, 2020). Accordingly, nationalism is not a legacy, but an idea produced by society. The Republic of Turkey has been aiming to bring Atatürk's understanding of nationalism to the society since the day it was founded. In this understanding of nationalism, blood ties and religious union are not a necessity. However, Turkey's large conservative population raises some questions about the establishment of this understanding. 71% of people in Turkey state that religion is very important in their lives. 18% of the population state that religion is important in their lives (PEW, 2020). Despite these data, it is an important finding that children do not include religious elements in their compositions while explaining nationalism. The understanding of nationalism in Turkey rejects racism, fascism and nationalism based on religion. It is understood that the students participating in the study also have thoughts compatible with this understanding.

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