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From Curriculum Beliefs to Teaching Preparedness: Examining the Role of Democratic Tendency in Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract
Understanding how pre-service teachers' curriculum belief orientations relate to their professional preparedness is important for teacher education. This study examined the structural relationships among curriculum design orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness. Data were collected from 287 teacher candidates enrolled in a faculty of education in Türkiye. Participants completed measures of subject-centered curriculum orientation, constructivist curriculum orientation (combining learner-centered and problem-centered orientations), democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness. Structural equation modeling was conducted using Jamovi (Version 2.6.44) to examine the structural relationships among the variables. The results showed that constructivist curriculum orientation positively predicted democratic tendency, whereas subject-centered orientation negatively predicted democratic tendency. Democratic tendency showed a limited and non-significant association with teaching preparedness. Neither constructivist nor subject-centered orientation demonstrated a significant direct effect on preparedness, and democratic tendency did not function as a mediating mechanism. The model explained substantial variance in democratic tendency but relatively limited variance in teaching preparedness. Overall, the findings suggest that constructivist curriculum beliefs are closely aligned with democratic dispositions, while democratic values appear to be associated with broader professional orientations rather than with immediate perceptions of teaching preparedness. The study contributes to the literature by clarifying the distinct roles of curriculum belief orientations and democratic tendency in pre-service teacher development. Practically, the findings suggest that teacher education programs may benefit from integrating democratic participation, reflective dialogue, and learner-centered experiences alongside curriculum-related coursework in order to support broader aspects of professional readiness.

Keywords: Constructivist orientation, Curriculum orientations, Democratic tendency, Pre-service teachers, Structural equation modeling, Subject-centered orientation, Teaching preparedness.

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Introduction

In contemporary educational systems, the role of teachers extends beyond the transmission of subject matter knowledge to include the cultivation of democratic values, critical thinking, and active participation. Education is increasingly understood as a social and moral endeavor in which teachers play a central role in shaping learners' capacities for meaningful participation in democratic societies (Dewey, 1916; Apple & Beane, 2007; Biesta, 2011, pp. 1-5). Accordingly, teachers are expected not only to implement prescribed curricula but also to design learning environments that reflect democratic principles and learner-centered practices.

Within this context, teachers' approaches to curriculum design have gained renewed attention. Curriculum design orientations reflect underlying philosophical beliefs about knowledge, learning, and the purposes of education (Tyler, 1949; Schiro, 2013; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). These orientations shape how teachers interpret curricular goals, select instructional strategies, and interact with students. For teacher candidates, curriculum design preferences constitute a core component of developing professional belief systems during pre-service education and may be related to emerging perceptions of teaching preparedness. Importantly, the present study does not assume that subject-centered and constructivist curriculum orientations are mutually exclusive belief systems. Teacher candidates may simultaneously endorse elements of both orientations to varying degrees, depending on their educational experiences and pedagogical preferences. Accordingly, the structural model treats these orientations as theoretically distinct but potentially coexisting dimensions of curriculum belief rather than as opposite ends of a single continuum (Schiro, 2013; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018).

Educational reforms emphasizing constructivist and student-centered approaches have further highlighted the importance of aligning teachers' beliefs with curricular expectations (OECD, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). Internationally, constructivist curriculum orientations have been reflected in reforms emphasizing inquiry-based learning, student agency, collaboration, and authentic problem solving, whereas subject-centered orientations continue to play an important role in many educational systems through their emphasis on disciplinary knowledge, academic standards, and content mastery. Contemporary teacher education programs increasingly seek to balance these orientations by combining strong subject knowledge with learner-centered pedagogical approaches. However, research consistently indicates that the success of curriculum reforms depends largely on teachers' belief systems rather than on formal policy changes alone (Pajares, 1992; Fullan, 2007). When teacher candidates do not internalize the pedagogical principles underlying such reforms, implementation often remains superficial and inconsistent.

Teacher education programs therefore face the challenge of preparing candidates who are not only pedagogically competent but also capable of fostering democratic classroom environments. Teaching preparedness—understood as teachers' perceived readiness to meet professional demands—has emerged as a key developmental outcome within this process (Darling-Hammond, 2006). At the same time, democratic tendency, including valuing participation, respect for diversity, and shared decision-making, is widely regarded as an essential attribute of effective teaching in democratic societies (Dewey, 1916; Biesta, 2011, pp. 16-20). Recent studies conducted in the Turkish teacher education context have similarly emphasized the importance of democratic values and participatory orientations among pre-service teachers. Existing research has examined democratic attitudes in relation to emotional intelligence, multicultural self-efficacy, educational beliefs, and tolerance tendencies, highlighting the multidimensional nature of democratic dispositions in teacher education (Özaslan et al., 2020; Tican, 2020; Sıvacı & Altaş, 2024; Çelik et al., 2024). Nevertheless, preparedness is a multifaceted construct shaped not only by beliefs but also by practicum experiences, instructional opportunities, and processes of professional socialization.

Although curriculum design orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness have each been examined in prior research, they have rarely been investigated within a single integrative framework. Contemporary curriculum scholarship further suggests that curriculum beliefs tend to cluster into two broader traditions: traditional, subject-centered orientations emphasizing content transmission, and progressive, constructivist orientations emphasizing learner participation, inquiry, and engagement with meaningful problems (Schiro, 2013; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). However, empirical evidence remains limited regarding how these broader belief systems relate to democratic dispositions and how such dispositions, in turn, are associated with teacher candidates' perceptions of preparedness.

Accordingly, the present study examines the structural associations among teacher candidates' curriculum belief orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness. Using structural equation modeling, the study

adopts a relational rather than causal perspective to explore how subject-centered and constructivist curriculum orientations are linked to democratic dispositions and how these dispositions relate to perceived professional preparedness during pre-service teacher education. Understanding these relationships may help teacher education programs better align curriculum beliefs, democratic values, and professional development experiences in ways that support the preparation of future teachers.

Literature Review

Teaching Preparedness

Teaching preparedness refers to teachers' perceived readiness to engage effectively in professional practice, encompassing pedagogical competence, confidence in classroom management, and alignment with professional values (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Rather than representing a purely technical construct, preparedness also involves affective and belief-related dimensions that shape how teachers interpret instructional challenges, make pedagogical decisions, and assume professional responsibility.

Research indicates that teachers' beliefs are among several psychological factors associated with perceptions of preparedness, although beliefs alone are insufficient to account for variation in professional readiness. Teachers who perceive coherence between their pedagogical beliefs and instructional practices tend to report higher levels of professional confidence and instructional effectiveness, whereas misalignment between beliefs and curricular expectations may undermine perceived preparedness (Pajares, 1992). Preparedness has also been linked to related constructs such as teaching self-efficacy and professional identity, suggesting that it reflects a broader psychological orientation toward teaching rather than a direct outcome of any single belief system (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Within teacher education, teaching preparedness is increasingly conceptualized as a developmental outcome shaped through coursework, practicum experiences, institutional conditions, and reflective engagement with practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006). From this perspective, preparedness is best understood as a distal and context-sensitive construct that emerges through the interaction of pedagogical beliefs, experiential learning, and institutional support over time. Examining preparedness in relation to curriculum design orientations therefore offers insight into how foundational belief systems may be associated with, but do not fully determine, pre-service teachers' perceptions of professional readiness.

Curriculum Design Orientations

Curriculum design refers to the systematic organization of educational goals, content, learning experiences, and assessment processes. Classical curriculum theory distinguishes among subject-centered, learner-centered, and problem-centered design orientations, each reflecting distinct philosophical assumptions about knowledge, learning, and the purposes of education (Tyler, 1949; Schiro, 2013; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018).

Subject-centered curriculum design prioritizes disciplinary knowledge and structured content progression. While this orientation supports systematic coverage of subject matter, it is commonly associated with teacher-centered instructional practices and a stronger emphasis on content mastery than on student participation (Tyler, 1949; Schiro, 2013). In contrast, learner-centered and problem-centered orientations are situated within a broader progressive and constructivist tradition. Learner-centered design emphasizes students' needs, interests, and active engagement, conceptualizing learning as an interactive process of meaning making (Dewey, 1938; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Problem-centered design extends this perspective by focusing on real-life and socially relevant problems, encouraging critical thinking, collaboration, and inquiry within authentic contexts, and is frequently linked to democratic and social learning aims (Dewey, 1916; Apple & Beane, 2007).

Although learner-centered and problem-centered designs are conceptually distinct, both share core constructivist assumptions and are often treated as complementary dimensions within progressive curriculum frameworks. Empirical research indicates that teachers who endorse these orientations are more likely to adopt participatory, dialogic, and flexible instructional practices, whereas subject-centered orientations tend to align with more transmission-based approaches (Baş, 2013; Schiro, 2013). Owing to this empirical overlap, several studies have modeled learner-centered and problem-centered orientations as closely related or higher-order constructivist belief structures in structural analyses of teacher beliefs. Similar tendencies have also been observed in studies conducted with Turkish pre-service teachers, where learner-centered educational beliefs were positively associated with democratic values and participatory teaching orientations (Çelik et al., 2024; Kaya et al., 2023).

Recent empirical studies have further linked constructivist educational orientations with learner agency, participation, collaboration, reflective inquiry, civic engagement, and democratic classroom practices. Research conducted across teacher education and problem-based learning contexts suggests that learner-centered and problem-centered approaches may contribute to the development of participatory and democratically oriented learning environments (Alsalihi, 2024; Demirci-Ünal et al., 2024; Riddle, 2024; Rohman et al., 2023).

Curriculum design orientations also shape how teachers interpret and enact curricular reforms, influencing the extent to which reform initiatives are implemented in meaningful and authentic ways rather than at a superficial level (Fullan, 2007). Understanding teacher candidates' curriculum design preferences is therefore essential for examining belief systems that support pedagogical innovation and democratic classroom practices during teacher education.

Democratic Tendency in Teacher Education

Democratic tendency refers to teachers' dispositions toward democratic values such as participation, equality, respect for diversity, and shared decision-making. Democratic education positions schools as key contexts for fostering civic engagement and social responsibility, with teachers serving as central agents in translating democratic ideals into classroom practice (Dewey, 1916; Apple & Beane, 2007).

Research suggests that democratic teaching practices are closely associated with pedagogical approaches that emphasize student voice, dialogue, collaboration, and shared responsibility for learning (Biesta, 2011; Hess & McAvoy, 2014). Teachers who value democratic principles are more likely to create inclusive classroom environments that support autonomy, deliberation, and critical inquiry. However, studies also point to discrepancies between teachers' democratic beliefs and their enacted practices, indicating that democratic tendency frequently operates as a broader value orientation that requires sustained practice, reflective engagement, and supportive institutional contexts to be fully realized (Akbaşlı et al., 2010). From this perspective, democratic tendency is best understood as a dispositional orientation rather than a direct instructional outcome, reflecting teachers' normative commitments more than their immediate pedagogical competence.

Despite its widely acknowledged significance, democratic tendency has rarely been examined within integrative structural models that consider its positioning alongside pedagogical belief orientations and professional perceptions. Examining democratic tendency within such a framework may deepen understanding of how democratic values align with broader curriculum belief systems and how these value-based dispositions are associated with teacher candidates' perceptions of preparedness over time, without assuming a direct or causal explanatory role.

Curriculum Design Orientations, Democratic Tendency, and Teaching Preparedness

Theoretical perspectives in curriculum studies suggest that curriculum design orientations are closely associated with differing conceptions of teaching preparedness. Progressive orientations grounded in learner-centered and problem-centered traditions are commonly linked to preparedness through their emphasis on flexible instructional thinking, reflective practice, and responsiveness to learners. In contrast, traditional subject-centered orientations prioritize content transmission and curricular coverage, often placing less emphasis on adaptive pedagogy and participatory classroom processes (Schiro, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018). These orientations reflect broader pedagogical belief systems that shape how teacher candidates interpret instructional demands, exercise professional judgment, and construct their sense of readiness for teaching (Pajares, 1992).

Democratic tendency may further intersect with teaching preparedness by influencing how teacher candidates conceptualize professional roles, classroom authority, and relationships with learners. From a democratic education perspective, teachers' commitments to participation, dialogue, and shared decision-making are theorized to inform how they approach classroom practice and professional responsibility (Dewey, 1916; Biesta, 2011, pp. 16-20). However, democratic tendency is often conceptualized as a value-oriented disposition rather than as an immediately operational pedagogical competence, suggesting that its relationship with preparedness may be indirect, developmental, or context-dependent.

Despite these theoretical linkages, empirical research examining curriculum orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness within a single integrative framework remains limited. Existing studies have typically addressed these constructs in isolation or through pairwise associations, leaving their joint structural relationships

underexplored (Zeichner, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2006). In particular, there is limited empirical evidence clarifying how democratic tendency is positioned alongside curriculum belief systems in relation to teacher candidates' perceptions of preparedness, without presupposing direct or causal relationships.

Accordingly, the present study examines a structural model that situates teacher candidates' curriculum design orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness within a unified analytical framework. Using structural equation modeling, the study explores how traditional subject-centered and progressive constructivist belief systems are associated with democratic dispositions and how these dispositions relate to perceived professional preparedness. The model is approached from a relational perspective and does not assume direct, causal, or mediating effects among the constructs.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a correlational research design to examine the structural associations among teacher candidates' curriculum design orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was selected because it enables the simultaneous estimation of multiple latent constructs, accounts for measurement error, and allows theoretically informed examination of complex relational patterns among variables (Kline, 2016; Hair, Babin, Anderson, & Black, 2019). Although the study adopted a correlational rather than causal perspective, SEM was preferred as a confirmatory analytic framework for evaluating the proposed pattern of relationships among the study variables.

The structural model was specified to explore how traditional subject-centered and progressive constructivist curriculum belief systems are associated with democratic dispositions and how these dispositions relate to teacher candidates' perceptions of preparedness for teaching. In line with the cross-sectional nature of the data, all estimated paths were interpreted as associative rather than causal relationships. Although the model included theoretically specified relations among the variables, the results were not interpreted as evidence of causal or statistically substantiated mediating processes.

Participants

The target population of the study consisted of pre-service teachers enrolled in undergraduate teacher education programs at the Faculty of Education of a medium-sized state university located in western Türkiye during the 2024–2025 academic year. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling based on accessibility and voluntary participation. Data were collected during regularly scheduled class sessions, and teacher candidates who were present and willing to participate were invited to complete the study instruments. The study was conducted with 287 pre-service teachers enrolled in teacher education programs at the Faculty of Education of this institution. The sample included 251 females and 36 males, reflecting the gender distribution commonly observed in teacher education programs.

Participants represented several academic departments, including Early Childhood Education, Primary Education, Elementary Mathematics Education, Social Studies Education, Turkish Language Education, and Science Education. Grade-level distribution also varied, with 105 first-year, 74 second-year, 57 third-year, and 51 fourth-year students. The inclusion of participants from all grade levels was intentional, as the study aimed to examine general patterns of association among curriculum beliefs, democratic tendency, and perceived teaching preparedness across different stages of pre-service teacher education rather than focusing exclusively on candidates with extensive practicum experience. This diversity reflects the typical structure of pre-service teacher populations in faculties of education and was considered appropriate for examining general patterns of association among belief- and value-based constructs.

The sample size exceeded commonly recommended guidelines for SEM applications, including the minimum N > 200 criterion and recommendations suggesting at least 10–20 participants per estimated parameter. Given the complexity of the structural model and the presence of multiple latent constructs, a sample of 287 participants was considered adequate for estimating the proposed model and examining the structural associations among the study variables (Kline, 2016; Hair et al., 2019).

Instruments

Curriculum Design Orientation Preferences Scale

Curriculum design orientations were measured using the scale developed by Baş (2013). The instrument consists of 30 items representing subject-centered, learner-centered, and problem-centered curriculum orientations, scored on a five-point Likert scale. In this study, internal consistency analyses indicated strong reliability across sub-dimensions, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .768 for the subject-centered orientation, .831 for the learner-centered orientation, and .867 for the problem-centered orientation. McDonald's omega coefficients (.767, .844, and .876, respectively) provided further support for dimensional reliability. Confirmatory factor analysis generally supported the three-factor structure, with all standardized factor loadings exceeding .50; however, incremental fit indices suggested notable shared variance among the constructivist dimensions.

Given the substantial conceptual overlap between learner-centered and problem-centered orientations, both of which are grounded in constructivist assumptions about learning, these dimensions were modeled as indicators of a broader constructivist curriculum orientation in the structural model. This approach is consistent with curriculum theory and prior empirical studies suggesting that these orientations frequently co-occur and function as an integrated belief system rather than as fully independent constructs.

Democratic Tendency Scale

Democratic tendency was assessed using the scale developed by Akbaşlı, Yanpar-Yelken, and Sünbül (2010). Although the instrument encompasses four conceptual subcomponents, the developers conceptualize it as representing a single overarching construct. Consistent with this theoretical conceptualization and prior empirical applications, democratic tendency was treated as a unidimensional construct in the present study. Reverse-coded items were recoded prior to analysis, and all items were retained as indicators of the latent democratic tendency construct.

Internal consistency analyses yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .796 and a McDonald's omega coefficient of .829, demonstrating strong reliability. CFA results also supported the single-factor representation, with factor loadings above .40 and acceptable model fit statistics. Treating democratic tendency as a unidimensional latent construct aligns with its conceptualization as a value-based disposition rather than a set of discrete instructional competencies.

Teaching Preparedness Scale

Teaching preparedness was measured using the "Preparedness to Teach Scale," adapted into Turkish by Yıldırım and Kalman (2017). The Turkish adaptation confirmed a 20-item, four-factor structure with strong psychometric properties. However, for analytical parsimony and in line with prior SEM applications that have operationalized teaching preparedness as a global professional readiness construct, the scale was represented as a single latent factor in the present study.

Reliability analyses indicated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .950$; McDonald's $\omega = .951$). CFA results indicated that the items loaded strongly on a single latent preparedness factor, providing an acceptable representation for the purposes of structural analysis.

Although multidimensional structures have been proposed for democratic tendency and teaching preparedness in prior research, these constructs were modeled as global latent factors in the present study. This decision was guided by the study's focus on overall pedagogical orientation, democratic disposition, and perceived professional readiness, consistent with SEM research that conceptualizes teacher belief systems at a holistic level rather than emphasizing subcomponent-specific effects.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected during the 2024–2025 academic year following ethical approval obtained from the Afyon Kocatepe University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Decision No: 2026/100, Approval Date: 18 February 2026). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Prior to analysis, the dataset was screened for missing data, outliers, and violations of normality.

Data Analysis

Preliminary analyses included examination of skewness and kurtosis, both of which indicated acceptable levels for robust estimation. Missing data were handled using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML). Multi-collinearity was examined using variance inflation factors, and the results indicated no collinearity concerns among the variables. To address potential common method bias, both procedural and statistical precautions were considered. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test indicated that no single factor accounted for the majority of variance. In addition, a latent-method factor test yielded no evidence of substantial common variance, suggesting that common method bias was unlikely to threaten the validity of the results.

Confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) were conducted to evaluate the measurement structures of the multi-item instruments. Factor loadings, residuals, and modification indices were examined to ensure construct validity. The measurement models demonstrated acceptable overall fit based on conventional criteria (CFI, TLI, RMSEA, SRMR). Composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) values provided evidence for convergent validity, while discriminant validity was examined using AVE-based criteria and HTMT ratios, which indicated acceptable levels of construct distinctiveness given the theoretical relatedness of the constructs.

Following validation of the measurement models, the structural model was estimated using the robust maximum likelihood estimator (MLR), which provides stable parameter estimates under mild deviations from normality. The structural analysis focused on examining the associations among curriculum design orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness within a correlational framework. Although paths were specified to reflect theoretically informed ordering among the constructs, no causal or mediating interpretations were assumed. Indirect associations were examined descriptively to better understand the positioning of democratic tendency within the model, rather than to test formal mediation effects.

Indirect effects were evaluated using a product-of-coefficients approach and were reported together with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals. Given the cross-sectional and correlational nature of the study, the indirect associations were interpreted cautiously and were not treated as evidence of causal mediation.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. Learner-centered and problem-centered curriculum orientations demonstrated a strong positive association ($r = .798$, $p < .001$), consistent with their shared grounding in constructivist curriculum theory. Subject-centered orientation showed a small but significant negative correlation with democratic tendency ($r = –.159$, $p < .01$) and a trivial, non-significant negative correlation with teaching preparedness ($r = –.069$, $p = .247$). Both learner-centered ($r = .451$, $p < .001$) and problem-centered orientations ($r = .447$, $p < .001$) were positively associated with democratic tendency. Democratic tendency exhibited a small but statistically significant positive association with teaching preparedness ($r = .211$, $p < .001$).

Although the magnitude of this correlation is high, it aligns with curriculum theory that conceptualizes learner-centered and problem-centered orientations as closely related dimensions within a broader constructivist belief system, thereby supporting the use of latent-variable modeling to examine their shared and unique contributions.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Inter-Correlations Among Study Variables (N = 287)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Subject-centered	2.89	0.56	—				
2. Learner-centered	4.21	0.49	.045	—			
3. Problem-centered	4.26	0.48	.181**	.798***	—		
4. Democratic tendency	4.31	0.42	–.159**	.451***	.447***	—	
5. Teaching preparedness	3.86	0.63	–.069	.208***	.130*	.211***	—

Note. *Values represent Pearson correlation coefficients. Learner-centered and problem-centered orientations are conceptually related dimensions within constructivist curriculum theory. Their relatively high correlation is therefore theoretically expected; however, they were retained as distinct constructs in accordance with the original scale structure and subsequent validity analyses. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.*

Measurement Model

The revised measurement model, which conceptualized curriculum orientations under two broader belief systems—subject-centered and constructivist orientation—demonstrated an overall acceptable approximation to the data. Given the substantial empirical overlap between learner-centered and problem-centered orientations, these dimensions were modeled as indicators of a broader constructivist orientation rather than as fully independent latent constructs. This specification was informed by both curriculum theory and the strong shared variance observed between the two dimensions. Although the incremental fit indices (CFI = .816; TLI = .807) remained below commonly recommended thresholds, the RMSEA (.061, 90% CI [.058, .065]) and SRMR (.089) values suggested an acceptable level of approximate fit. Given the theoretically driven nature of the measurement structure and the large number of observed indicators, the model was retained for substantive interpretation. Nevertheless, the measurement model should be interpreted with caution, and future research may benefit from examining alternative measurement specifications and more parsimonious factor structures.

Beyond global model fit, item-level evidence supported the construct validity of the measures. All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$) and in the expected direction. Factor loadings ranged from moderate to high across subject-centered items ($\beta = .20–.67$), constructivist items ($\beta = .37–.79$), and teaching preparedness indicators ($\beta = .48–.84$), indicating substantively interpretable relationships between latent constructs and their observed indicators.

Composite reliability values and average variance extracted were examined to evaluate reliability and convergent validity. All constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency ($CR \geq .78$). Although some AVE values fell below the conservative .50 criterion, they exceeded .30 and were accompanied by strong composite reliability coefficients and theoretically coherent factor structures. In the context of complex latent-variable models with conceptually related constructs and multiple indicators, convergent validity may be reasonably inferred from the combined evidence of factor loadings, reliability estimates, and theoretical coherence (Hair et al., 2019).

Discriminant validity was examined using multiple criteria. The constructivist and subject-centered belief systems, while situated within the same curricular domain, demonstrated empirical distinctiveness at an acceptable level given their theoretical relatedness, with interconstruct correlations remaining below unity and HTMT values below recommended liberal thresholds. Taken together, these findings suggest that the revised measurement model was sufficiently coherent to support subsequent structural analyses, with results interpreted cautiously in light of model complexity.

Table 2. Measurement Model Fit Indices for the Revised Latent Structure

Fit Index	Value
χ^2 (df = 1215)	2406***
CFI	.816
TLI	.807
RMSEA	.061
RMSEA 90% CI	.058–.065
SRMR	.089

Although incremental fit indices fell below conventional cutoff values, error-based indices (RMSEA and SRMR) indicated acceptable model approximation. Given the conceptual breadth of the constructs and the large number of observed indicators, the measurement model was retained as theoretically coherent rather than optimized solely for incremental fit indices.

Structural Model

The structural model illustrating the relationships among curriculum orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness is presented in Figure 1. This figure provides a visual representation of the hypothesized and estimated associations among the latent constructs.

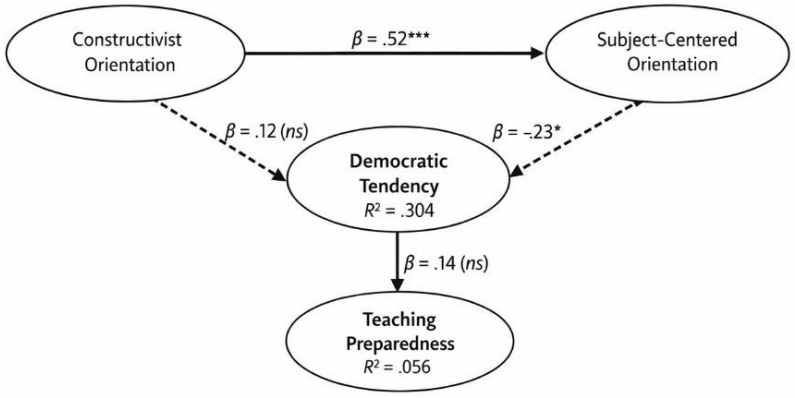

Figure 1. Structural model of relationships among curriculum orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness (standardized estimates)

As illustrated in Figure 1, constructivist curriculum orientation demonstrated a strong positive association with democratic tendency (β = .52, p < .001), indicating that teacher candidates who endorsed progressive, learner- and problem-centered curriculum beliefs reported stronger democratic dispositions. In contrast, subject-centered curriculum orientation demonstrated a statistically significant negative association with democratic tendency (β = −.23, p = .007), suggesting that traditional content-focused orientations were associated with lower endorsement of democratic values. With respect to teaching preparedness, democratic tendency exhibited a small positive association; however, the relationship did not reach statistical significance (β = .14, p = .063). Accordingly, democratic tendency did not emerge as a statistically supported correlate of perceived teaching preparedness in the present model. Neither constructivist curriculum orientation (β = .12, p = .157) nor subject-centered curriculum orientation (β = −.07, p = .321) demonstrated a statistically significant direct association with teaching preparedness.

Taken together, the results indicate that curriculum belief orientations are strongly associated with democratic dispositions, whereas their direct associations with perceived teaching preparedness are limited. The marginal association between democratic tendency and preparedness suggests that democratic values may be related to perceptions of readiness in a more gradual or developmental manner rather than functioning as an immediate competence-related factor.

The structural model accounted for a substantial proportion of variance in democratic tendency (R^2 = .305), whereas the variance explained in teaching preparedness was considerably lower (R^2 = .058). The standardized path coefficients for the structural model are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Standardized Path Coefficients for the Structural Model (Associational Estimates)

Outcome	Predictor	β	SE	z	p
Democratic Tendency	Subject-centered orientation	−0.232	0.090	−2.68	.007
Democratic Tendency	Constructivist orientation	0.519	0.113	4.80	< .001
Teaching Preparedness	Democratic tendency	0.140	0.112	1.86	.063
Teaching Preparedness	Subject-centered orientation	−0.074	0.116	−0.99	.321
Teaching Preparedness	Constructivist orientation	0.117	0.129	1.41	.157

Note. Coefficients represent standardized associations estimated within a correlational structural equation modeling framework. Given the cross-sectional design, coefficients should not be interpreted as causal effects. The structural model explained 30.5% of the variance in Democratic Tendency (R^2 = .305) and 5.8% of the variance in Teaching Preparedness (R^2 = .058).

Mediation Analysis

Indirect associations among curriculum design orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness were examined using a product-of-coefficients approach. Statistical inference was based on bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals and associated significance tests.

The indirect association between constructivist curriculum orientation and teaching preparedness through democratic tendency was positive but did not reach statistical significance (β = .072, 95% CI [−0.018, 0.254], p = .087). Similarly, the indirect association between subject-centered curriculum orientation and teaching preparedness through democratic tendency was negative and non-significant (β = −.032, 95% CI [−0.138, 0.008], p = .184). Because both confidence intervals included zero, the indirect effects were not statistically supported. These findings indicate that democratic tendency did not emerge as a statistically substantiated explanatory factor linking curriculum belief orientations to perceived teaching preparedness within the present model.

Taken together, the pattern of findings suggests that while curriculum belief systems are closely associated with democratic dispositions, perceived teaching preparedness is likely shaped by a broader constellation of experiential, contextual, and developmental factors. Given the cross-sectional design of the study and the dispositional nature of democratic values, any indirect associations between beliefs, values, and preparedness should be interpreted cautiously and may become more evident in longitudinal or practice-based research contexts.

Table 4. Indirect Effects of Curriculum Orientations on Teaching Preparedness Through Democratic Tendency

Path	Estimate	SE	95% CI	β	z	p
Subject-centered → Democratic Tendency → Teaching Preparedness	−0.051	0.038	[−0.138, 0.008]	−0.032	−1.330	.184
Constructivist orientation → Democratic Tendency → Teaching Preparedness	0.113	0.066	[−0.018, 0.254]	0.072	1.711	.087

Note. Indirect effects were estimated within the structural equation model. Confidence intervals including zero indicate non-significant indirect effects.

Discussion

The present study examined the structural associations among pre-service teachers' curriculum design orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness. By integrating pedagogical belief systems and value-oriented dispositions within a single structural model, the study contributes to the literature by clarifying how curriculum-related beliefs and democratic values relate to pre-service teachers' perceptions of preparedness during initial teacher education.

A central contribution of the study is the clarification of how traditional subject-centered and progressive constructivist curriculum orientations relate differently to democratic tendency and teaching preparedness within a single structural model. The findings indicated that constructivist curriculum orientation was strongly and positively associated with democratic tendency, whereas subject-centered orientation showed a negative association. This pattern suggests that curriculum beliefs emphasizing participation, inquiry, and engagement with meaningful problems are more closely aligned with democratic values than content-oriented perspectives. These findings are consistent with theoretical accounts that associate learner-centered and problem-centered pedagogical principles with democratic educational practices (Dewey, 1916; Apple & Beane, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Comparable patterns have also been reported in recent studies conducted within the Turkish teacher education context, where democratic values and participatory orientations were positively associated with learner-centered beliefs and reflective teaching tendencies (Kaya et al., 2023; Tican, 2020).

Recent empirical research further supports this distinction by conceptualizing learner-centered and problem-centered orientations as interrelated components of a broader constructivist belief system aligned with democratic educational aims. Studies conducted in experimental and quasi-experimental contexts have shown that learner-centered instructional environments foster learner agency, participation, collaboration, and engagement—pedagogical features associated with dialogic interaction and shared responsibility for learning (Alsalihi, 2024).

Within teacher education contexts, such environments have been reported to encourage pre-service teachers to assume more active instructional roles, attend more closely to student voice, and engage in reflective inquiry processes (Demirci-Ünal et al., 2024). Rather than implying immediate instructional outcomes, this body of research highlights how constructivist learning environments may support the gradual development of participatory dispositions that align with democratic classroom values.

Problem-centered approaches can be understood as extending constructivist pedagogy into socially meaningful and civically oriented learning contexts. By situating learning around real-life issues and shared problems, problem-based learning environments invite deliberation, negotiation of meaning, and collective decision-making, allowing democratic principles to be experienced in practice rather than treated as abstract ideals (Dewey, 1916; Apple & Beane, 2007). Prior research has associated such contexts with outcomes related to critical thinking, civic engagement, and social responsibility (Riddle, 2024; Westheimer, 2022). Across diverse educational levels, engagement with authentic problems—such as considering multiple perspectives, justifying positions, and working cooperatively toward shared solutions—has been linked to the development of civic awareness and participatory orientations (Lim, 2011; Erdem & Eğmir, 2020; Rohman et al., 2023).

In the present study, however, the association between problem-centered orientation and democratic tendency was not statistically significant. This finding should be interpreted in light of the very strong overlap between learner-centered and problem-centered orientations. The high shared variance suggests that their common constructivist core may already be captured within higher-order pedagogical belief structures, limiting the ability to detect distinct effects at the structural level. Such shared-variance dynamics are frequently observed in models of teacher belief systems and do not necessarily contradict theoretical expectations regarding the democratic potential of problem-centered pedagogy.

In contrast, subject-centered curriculum orientation was negatively associated with democratic tendency. This finding aligns with theoretical arguments suggesting that transmission-oriented and content-oriented pedagogical approaches are less compatible with participatory and dialogic classroom practices (Apple & Beane, 2007; Biesta, 2011; Suissa, 2023). Subject-centered approaches typically prioritize curricular coverage, teacher control, and adherence to predetermined content, potentially constraining opportunities for student agency, shared decision-making, and open dialogue. Critical curriculum scholarship has similarly linked highly standardized and centrally controlled curricula to reduced teacher autonomy, limited student participation, and constrained dialogic interaction (Cantoni et al., 2017; Fitz & Nikolaidis, 2020; Wahlström, 2020). The negative association observed in the present study is therefore consistent with broader critiques highlighting tensions between content-focused curriculum structures and democratic educational purposes.

At the same time, these findings should not be interpreted as suggesting that subject-centered curriculum orientations are inherently less valuable for teacher preparation. In many professional and technical fields, strong disciplinary knowledge, structured instruction, and content mastery are regarded as essential foundations for competence, professional responsibility, and instructional effectiveness. Subject-centered orientations may therefore contribute to dimensions of teacher development that were not directly captured in the present model, particularly those related to content expertise, academic rigor, and professional preparedness. The present findings merely indicate that such orientations were less strongly aligned with democratic tendency within this sample of pre-service teachers.

With respect to democratic tendency, the results indicated a small positive association with teaching preparedness; however, this relationship did not reach statistical significance. While democratic values are often regarded as central to inclusive and supportive learning environments (Darling-Hammond, 2006), the present findings suggest that democratic tendency was not significantly associated with pre-service teachers' perceptions of teaching preparedness within the current sample. This result may indicate that the relationship between democratic values and perceived preparedness is more complex and may depend on additional contextual, experiential, or developmental factors. As Pajares (1992) notes, value-oriented beliefs often operate at a more abstract level and may not translate immediately into perceived instructional competence.

This interpretation is consistent with research emphasizing the contextual and practice-dependent nature of democratic dispositions in teacher education. Although democratic values are frequently endorsed at an attitudinal level, their relevance for professional confidence and classroom practice appears to become more salient through sustained engagement in teaching contexts, reflective opportunities, and supportive institutional environments (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Zeichner, 2010). Research on democratic citizenship education similarly suggests that democratic sensitivity does not necessarily correspond to high levels of perceived instructional preparedness in the absence of targeted preparation and structured program experiences (Grubišić & Rajić, 2015; Biseth et al., 2018; Westheimer, 2022). Accordingly, democratic tendency may be understood as a normative and developmental orientation rather than an immediately operational belief system.

Contrary to the hypothesized model, democratic tendency did not function as a statistically supported mediator between curriculum design orientations and teaching preparedness. This pattern is consistent with prior research

indicating that value-oriented constructs often show limited explanatory power for proximal indicators of professional readiness, particularly in cross-sectional designs (Zeichner, 2010). From a methodological perspective, the absence of indirect effects should be interpreted in relation to the design and analytic scope of the study rather than as a rejection of the underlying theoretical framework. Mediation processes involving distal predictors may require longitudinal or practice-based data to capture developmental and delayed associations (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Finally, the modest proportion of variance explained in teaching preparedness underscores that perceptions of readiness are shaped by a broader constellation of factors beyond curriculum design orientations and democratic tendency. Prior research has highlighted the importance of teaching self-efficacy, practicum experiences, mentoring quality, and reflective capacity as contributors to preparedness (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Taken together, the findings suggest a differentiated pattern in which constructivist curriculum orientations are closely aligned with democratic tendency, whereas democratic values relate to preparedness in more indirect and developmental ways. This distinction carries important implications for teacher education, indicating that while pedagogical orientations may be addressed through coursework and instructional design experiences, the cultivation of democratic dispositions may depend on sustained, practice-based learning environments and supportive institutional cultures.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationships among pre-service teachers' curriculum design orientations, democratic tendency, and teaching preparedness using a structural equation modeling framework. By integrating pedagogical beliefs and value-oriented dispositions within a unified analytical model, the study aimed to clarify how different dimensions of teacher belief systems are positioned relative to perceived professional preparedness during initial teacher education.

The findings indicate that constructivist curriculum orientation is strongly associated with democratic tendency, highlighting its role in supporting participatory and value-oriented dispositions among pre-service teachers. However, its direct association with teaching preparedness was limited, indicating that constructivist beliefs may not translate directly into perceived instructional readiness within the context of the present study.

In contrast, democratic tendency demonstrated only a marginal direct association with preparedness and did not function as a mediating mechanism linking curriculum orientations to perceived readiness. From a theoretical perspective, democratic values may become more salient through sustained pedagogical practice and professional experience; however, longitudinal research would be needed to examine this possibility directly.

Taken together, the findings underscore the multidimensional nature of teacher belief systems. Pedagogical orientations related to curriculum design and broader democratic value orientations appear to be associated with different aspects of teacher development and professional formation. By empirically situating these belief dimensions within a single structural model, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of how pedagogical and value-based orientations intersect during the early stages of teacher formation. Although the proposed model explained a substantial proportion of variance in democratic tendency, its explanatory power for teaching preparedness was more limited. Future research should examine these relationships using longitudinal designs, more diverse teacher education contexts, and alternative measurement approaches in order to better understand how educational beliefs, democratic values, and professional readiness develop over time.

Recommendations

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings of this study offer several implications for teacher education programs. First, the strong association between constructivist curriculum orientation and democratic tendency underscores the importance of pedagogical approaches that emphasize active participation, inquiry, and learner engagement. Teacher education programs may therefore benefit from systematically integrating constructivist instructional practices—such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities, and reflective coursework—to support the development of participatory dispositions.

Democratic values remain an important dimension of teacher professionalism and may contribute to the development of inclusive, participatory, and supportive learning environments. Teacher education programs may therefore benefit from providing sustained and practice-based opportunities—such as practicum experiences, collaborative projects, and participatory classroom tasks—that allow candidates to enact democratic principles in authentic teaching contexts. This recommendation is particularly relevant given the present findings that constructivist curriculum orientations were strongly associated with democratic tendency, whereas democratic tendency showed only a limited association with perceived teaching preparedness. Creating opportunities to translate democratic values into enacted teaching practices may help bridge the gap between value-oriented dispositions and perceptions of professional readiness.

The negative association between subject-centered beliefs and democratic tendency further highlights the need for critical engagement with transmission-oriented pedagogical assumptions. Encouraging teacher candidates to critically examine the strengths and limitations of different curriculum orientations while exploring dialogic and participatory practices may contribute to the development of a more balanced and democratically informed professional identity. Such reflection should not be interpreted as a rejection of content-focused approaches, which remain essential in many disciplines requiring strong subject-matter knowledge, professional competence, and adherence to established standards.

Beyond teacher education programs, the findings suggest that curriculum frameworks and teacher education standards may benefit from giving greater attention to democratic dispositions alongside pedagogical competencies. Policies that encourage participatory learning environments, reflective practice, and democratic engagement throughout teacher preparation may support the development of both professional and civic dimensions of teaching.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the exclusive reliance on self-report measures may increase susceptibility to social desirability bias and may not fully capture behavioral or performance-based aspects of teaching preparedness. Future studies could incorporate observational data, supervisor evaluations, or performance-based assessments to strengthen validity.

Second, the cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation, particularly for developmental constructs such as democratic tendency. Longitudinal research designs would be better suited to examining how curriculum orientations, democratic values, and preparedness evolve over time and interact dynamically.

Third, the study was conducted within a single institutional context using convenience sampling, which may limit the generalizability of the findings across different institutional and regional contexts in Türkiye. In addition, the predominance of female participants in the sample reflects the gender distribution commonly observed in teacher education programs; however, this imbalance may still restrict the representativeness of the findings across gender groups. Replicating the proposed model across diverse teacher education programs and cultural contexts would enhance external validity.

Finally, the modest proportion of variance explained in teaching preparedness suggests that additional factors—such as teaching self-efficacy, practicum quality, mentoring support, and program structure—should be incorporated into future models to develop a more comprehensive understanding of teacher preparedness.

The relatively weak association between democratic tendency and perceived teaching preparedness may also reflect the conceptual distinction between value-oriented dispositions and self-perceptions of instructional competence. Teacher candidates may evaluate their preparedness primarily in terms of pedagogical skills, subject-matter knowledge, and teaching experience rather than democratic values. In addition, the predominance of early-year students in the sample may have limited the extent to which democratic dispositions are reflected in perceptions of professional readiness. Future research should examine whether this relationship becomes stronger as candidates accumulate greater practicum and classroom experience.

An additional limitation concerns the measurement model fit. Although RMSEA and SRMR values indicated acceptable approximate fit, the CFI and TLI values remained below commonly recommended thresholds. Accordingly, the structural relationships reported in this study should be interpreted with appropriate caution, and future research should explore alternative measurement specifications and more parsimonious factor structures to improve overall model fit.

Several methodological issues also warrant consideration in future research. First, measurement invariance across gender, program, or year level was not examined, and future studies should assess whether the measurement and structural relations operate equivalently across subgroups. Second, the use of global latent factors may have obscured subdimension-specific relationships, and alternative measurement approaches such as bifactor or ESEM models could provide further insight into shared and unique variance components.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval (Decision No: 2026/100, Approval Date: 18 February 2026) was obtained from the Afyon Kocatepe University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee for this research.

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