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Exploring Teacher Autonomy Through Teachers' Perspectives: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract

This study aims to explore teacher autonomy from the perspective of teachers. The study has been designed as a case study and carried out using qualitative research approach. The participants consist of 10 teachers in elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary schools in Milas county of Muğla province in Turkey. The study employed a maximum variation sampling technique to select study participants. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form developed by the authors. Content analysis technique was utilised in the analysis of the data. The results reveal that teachers have autonomy in teaching process and in professional communication with students and parents, but they lack autonomy in curriculum design, professional development, and professional communication with administrators. Teachers' autonomy is hindered by the centralised curriculum, centralised educational policy, and school administration. Enhancing teacher autonomy requires a flexible curriculum, an autonomy supportive environment, participatory decision-making processes, the empowerment of school administrators, and professional development opportunities for teachers. The results also reveal that increasing teacher autonomy will not only enhance teachers' self-confidence, performance, motivation, and sense of responsibility but also support students' achievements and their learner autonomy.

Key Words

Autonomy • Teacher autonomy • Teacher • Turkish teachers

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Introduction

Decision-making is central to administrative processes. The functioning of educational organisations necessitates making decisions in many areas of education and the structural constraints within the education system influence the decision-making of teachers. It is also known that the effectiveness of education systems depends on their ability to create a respected teaching profession with granted autonomy and authority (OECD, 2014). The success of education systems depends on continuously supporting teachers, providing them with professional development opportunities, and seeing them as central agents in educational decisions (OECD, 2010). Providing teachers with sufficient level of autonomy in areas such as administrative processes, curriculum, teaching process, professional development, and professional communication can make significant contributions to their professionalism, educational outcomes and also to organisational effectiveness. For this reason, distributing power and control and giving responsibility to teachers from the planning process to decision-making and implementation of a task remains an important topic of discussion for educational reforms in various countries.

In a general sense, teacher autonomy refers to educators' control over their actions and job environments (Pearson & Hall, 1993). In another sense, it relates to the teacher's influence, flexibility, power, and authority in areas such as teaching, assessment, school management, and reform (Garvin, 2007). The power and authority associated with teacher autonomy does not simply evoke freedom. This autonomy is built on self-determined rules and regulations as well as on requirements of the teaching profession (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). Teacher autonomy requires transparency and accountability, as well (Helgøy & Homme, 2007). In this regard, teacher autonomy means that teachers are held accountable for their decisions and that they exhibit their autonomous behaviors to school administrators and senior managers (e.g. ministry, policy makers) within an accountable framework (Wilkins, 2011). Beyond its definition, teacher autonomy comprises an important aspect of teacher professionalism (Helgøy & Homme, 2007; OECD, 2016). This is because professionalism primarily depends on one's ability to exercise autonomy and discretion in their work (Buyruk & Akbaş, 2021). For this reason, autonomy has an important place in distinguishing professions from other occupations (Ingersoll et al., 1997; OECD, 2020a). Furthermore, teachers' authority to make important decisions empowers them to fulfill their roles as professionals (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010). As can be seen, teacher autonomy refers to an accountable professionalisation process characterised by teachers exercising authority and being responsible for their decision-making.

Recent studies highlight that teacher autonomy goes beyond its traditional meaning and focus. In the traditional sense, teacher autonomy is a state of being based on independence through isolationism and alienation (Willner, 1990). According to this perspective, teachers' making decisions independently from colleagues and administrators and acting alone without the need for collaboration is perceived as autonomy (Çolak et al., 2017). However, in organisations where collaboration becomes gradually important, this isolation-based perspective on autonomy is no longer considered untenable (Vangrieken et al., 2017). Therefore, the "isolation" situation in which teachers do not interact with their colleagues and do not receive meaningful feedback from them should not be considered as autonomy. The newer perspective on autonomy centers around collaborative way of decision-making and "professional" independence in job related choices (Willner, 1990; Xu, 2015). Therefore, professional autonomy is a

situation created by solidarity among colleagues, where employees are in charge on the basis of professional ethical principles (Evetts, 2009). Since collaboration has interrelated benefits for students, teachers, and the school as a whole, teachers are expected to act collaboratively (Vangrieken et al., 2017). As seen, there is a shift in the meaning and focus of teacher autonomy from individualist independence to accountable collaboration so that various stakeholders of education could benefit from the potential profits of autonomy granted to teachers.

The scope of teacher autonomy is multifaceted. It could encompass decisions related to administrative tasks, curriculum, instructional methods, and fostering social and academic development, both within the classroom and throughout the school environment as a whole (Gwaltney, 2012). It is also suggested that teachers can be granted autonomy in various areas, including curriculum design, the choice of teaching methods and strategies, classroom management, school administration decisions, and personal professional growth. All of these aspects should be guided by scientific, ethical, and pedagogical principles (Çolak et al., 2017). Such an autonomy can also include school policies and educational planning (Ingersoll, 2007; Ingersoll et al., 1997). According to Friedman (1999), teachers' autonomy-related aspects can include two axes: the decision-level axis and the decision-content axis. The former relates to issues that impact fundamental aspects of education stakeholders' work, such as policy formulation and the establishment of ground rules for professionals within the organisation. The second one is associated with pedagogical issues such as students' needs and problems, relationships with other stakeholders, and curriculum and teaching methods, as well as budget, school working procedures and regulations, and administrative and organisational issues. According to Öztürk (2011), the extent of teacher autonomy can be delineated within a framework that encompasses designing and executing instruction, involvement in administrative procedures, and personal professional growth. Similarly, Çolak and Altinkurt (2017) suggest that teacher autonomy includes various domains, such as teaching processes, curriculum, professional development, and professional communication.

However, the scope and level of autonomy that education systems grant to teachers differs across countries. It is salient that the education systems of countries that are more successful in international exams offer more autonomy to both teachers and schools. For example, education systems that grant schools more autonomy in areas such as student assessments, course offerings, curriculum content, and textbook choices tend to achieve higher results on the PISA (Schleicher, 2018). The school autonomy index, which assesses the autonomy and responsibility of principals, teachers, and school governing boards, confirms that successful countries or regions like China (Macao), Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland, Estonia, and Canada have higher levels of school autonomy (OECD, 2015). Turkey, on the other hand, is one of the countries providing the least autonomy to its teachers. In the OECD's Education Policy Outlook, the country note prepared for Turkey for 2020 indicates that the highly centralised education system is the main problem area in terms of governance (OECD, 2020b). Because of the centralised structure of the education system in Turkey, teachers' autonomy levels in areas such as determining course content, developing curriculum and designing school policies remains well below the OECD average (Schleicher, 2020). Hence, it could be suggested that policy arrangements are quite important in increasing autonomous initiatives and actions of teachers.

In the related literature, numerous research have been conducted on teacher autonomy. Some of these research directly address teacher autonomy (e.g., Strong & Yoshida, 2014; Wermke & Höstfält, 2014), while others

investigate the relationships between teacher autonomy and its correlates like collaboration (Vangrieken et al., 2017), professionalism (Buyruk & Akbaş, 2021; Helgøy & Homme, 2007; Wilkins, 2011), organisational trust (Çolak et al., 2023; Paradis et al., 2019), job satisfaction (Çolak et al., 2017), structural and psychological empowerment (Yorulmaz et al., 2018), professional status (Strong & Yoshida, 2014), and power distance (Çolak et al., 2022). There are also some qualitative studies examining teachers' perceptions towards their autonomy levels as well as the factors affecting their autonomy (Kılınç et al., 2018; Özaslan, 2015). However, in Turkey, no studies have been broached that specifically investigate teachers' perspectives on the limitations, obstacles, and potential outcomes of teacher autonomy. Such studies could provide a deeper understanding of different aspects of teacher autonomy and offer guidance to school administrators and policymakers in taking actions to empower teachers. In light of the aforementioned gap in the literature, the aim of this research study is to investigate teacher autonomy through perspectives of teachers. In alignment with this aim, the following questions serve as the foundation of this study:

1. What are the limits of teacher autonomy according to teachers' perspectives?
2. What are the factors hindering teacher autonomy according to teachers' perspectives?
3. What steps should be taken to enhance teacher autonomy according to teachers' perspectives?
4. What are the outcomes of increasing teacher autonomy according to teachers' perspectives?

Method

Research Design

Qualitative research approach was utilized in the study. The research was designed in the case study model. A case study is the description of a state or the presentation of themes related to a situation by collecting detailed and in-depth information about real life or a limited system through multiple sources of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, "teacher autonomy" was considered as a case and various dimensions of teacher autonomy were revealed by analysing the interview data attained from participant teachers.

Study Group

The study group is comprised of 10 teachers working in elementary, lower and upper secondary schools in Milas county of Muğla province in Turkey. In the identification of the study group, maximum variation sampling technique was employed. In this regard, it was planned to include participants from different school types. In addition, special attention was paid to include teachers with different professional seniority and from different branches. The inclusion of teachers from various branches, different professional backgrounds, and diverse school types in the study group enabled to collect comprehensive data on teacher autonomy. This approach also facilitated the exploration of the perspectives of teachers at different levels of autonomy. In this sense, diversity was ensured in terms of participants. Information about the participants and their background is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Research Participants and their Background

Code	Gender	Seniority (Year)	Branch	School type
T1	Male	34	Turkish Language and Literature	Upper secondary
T2	Female	25	Turkish Language and Literature	Upper secondary
T3	Male	16	Information Technologies	Upper secondary
T4	Male	22	Visual Arts	Lower secondary
T5	Female	13	English	Elementary
T6	Male	23	Mathematics	Upper secondary
T7	Male	26	Classroom Teacher	Elementary
T8	Male	32	Philosophy	Upper secondary
T9	Female	17	Science	Lower secondary
T10	Male	14	Social Studies	Lower secondary

Data Collection Instrument

A semi-structured interview form developed by the authors was utilised in the research. In order to develop the instrument, theoretical explanations in related literature were consulted and the instrument was drafted first. Besides, four field experts were consulted in order to evaluate and improve the draft form. Considering their feedback, the interview form was reorganised and made ready for the implementation. There were a total of five main questions in the interview form. An alternative question was prepared for each original question in case the questions were not sufficiently understood or enough feedback was not received. In addition, probes were prepared to attain an in-depth data from teachers. The instrument's questions can be exemplified as follows: "In what areas do you think you are given autonomy?", "What factors do you believe hinder your autonomous behaviors?", "What steps do you think are necessary for you to act in an autonomous way?"

Procedure and Data Analysis

The data were attained between March and May 2022. Ethics committee approval and institutional permission were obtained for the data collection. Authors held face-to-face interviews with the teachers in a suitable and quiet environment. An appointment was arranged with each teacher who agreed to be interviewed, and authors enlightened them about the scope of the research before the interviews. Participants were asked for permission to record the interviews, and informed consent was obtained. In this regard, a total of 10 interviews were recorded. Modifications to the interview questions were implemented as needed to align with the natural progression of the interview. Emphasis was placed on conducting the interviews in a conversational atmosphere. The length of the interviews ranged from 21 minutes to 61 minutes. The authors subsequently transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews. In order to prevent data loss, all transcripts were compared again with the audio recordings. As a result, a 66 page interview transcript was attained. The data obtained from the interviews were analysed through content analysis.

Content analysis aims to uncover concepts and relationships that can provide explanations for the data. The collected data are conceptualised and organised in a logical manner and themes that represent the data are identified (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). In this regard, the research data were analysed, related concepts were gathered, and themes were formed. When relationships could be grouped under themes, sub-themes were created to present the subject more coherently.

Validity and Reliability

In qualitative research, validity means reflecting the researched phenomenon as it is and in an unbiased manner. Explaining all stages of the research in detail, including direct quotations under themes and expert review can be used to increase validity (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). In terms of validity, the identification of study group, the background of participants, the interview form development process as well as the data collection and analysis procedure were reported in detail. Embedding direct quotations under the themes ensured that the data on which the results were based were conveyed to the reader without adding any interpretations. In addition, the appropriateness of the statements under the themes was evaluated in a meeting involving the authors and a member of faculty with expertise in the field and in qualitative research design. In the so-called meeting, the ability of the themes to reflect the data and the compatibility of the opinions with the theme were discussed and the meeting continued until a consensus was reached. In terms of validity, the formula "Reliability = Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement) x 100" was utilised (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data set uncovered 35 thematic conceptualizations in 31 of which the authors were in agreement. Therefore, the reliability rate between the researchers was found to be 89%. To eliminate any disagreement for the uncovered concepts in between authors, consensus meetings were organised and the authors reached an overall consensus on all of the concepts.

Findings

In this research, teachers' views regarding teacher autonomy were investigated. The data attained through interviews with teachers were analysed under four themes. These are (1) Limits of teacher autonomy, (2) Factors hindering teacher autonomy, (3) Steps required to enhance teacher autonomy, and (4) Outcomes of increasing teacher autonomy.

Limits of Teacher Autonomy

Under this theme, teachers' perspectives about the limits of teacher autonomy are included. Based on their views, the limits of teacher autonomy were analysed under two sub-themes: Areas where teachers could exercise autonomy and areas where autonomy is not provided to teachers. The views of the teachers on this issue are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Limits of Teacher Autonomy According to Teachers' Views

Limits of Teacher Autonomy	
Areas where teachers could exercise autonomy	Areas where autonomy is not provided to teachers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Classroom management ○ Selection of methods and techniques ○ Use of time ○ Assignments ○ Organisation of subject content • Professional communication with students and parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Determination of subject content ○ Selection of textbook ○ Assessment and evaluation • Professional development • Professional communication with administrators

Participants opined that they were autonomous in terms of teaching process and professional communication with students and parents. With regards to teaching process, participants stated that they were autonomous in classroom management, selecting methods and techniques, using time, assignments, and organising subject content (T1, T3, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10). Besides, in terms of professional communication, participants expressed that they were autonomous in their communication with students and parents (T5, T8). The views of some participants regarding the autonomy in the teaching process and professional communication are as follows:

The environment where I feel most free is in my classroom. When interacting with students, you can see that they are open to receiving anything. It makes me feel more comfortable (T7).

We feel free while teaching in the classroom. I also have the autonomy to determine the teaching strategy, decide which approach to use for a subject, and choose the methods and techniques. It's a completely open space for me (T8).

One area where I feel free is my ability to allocate extra time based on the importance of a topic. I have the flexibility to manage the timing myself, and there are no issues in that regard. Depending on the significance of the subject, you can extend, shorten, or change its placement (T6).

... I give project assignments on different subjects to the students in the ... class. This year I gave them a subject outside their own subjects. I am free in this sense (T9).

Some colleagues stick less to the textbook... I don't follow the textbook 100% either. For example, there are 2-3 pieces, I read one of the texts. If there is a good poem or article on that subject in another source, I read it (T1).

We have the freedom to communicate, and I have full control over it. I decide with whom and how I will communicate with the students. Of course, such communication must adhere to the ethical rules of the profession (T8).

To outline the limits of teacher autonomy, teachers also expressed the areas where they could not act autonomously. In this context, participants were of the opinion that they could not act autonomously in curriculum, professional development and professional communication with administrators. In terms of the curriculum, participants stated that they were not autonomous in determining the subject content, selecting the textbook, and in

assessing and evaluating (T1, T2, T3, T5, T6, T8, T9, T10). While some expressed their lack of autonomy in professional development (T3, T8, T10), others stated that they were unable to communicate autonomously with administrators (T4, T6). The views of some participants regarding these issues in which teachers cannot act autonomously are as follows:

We are not free in the curriculum. Not only the curricular framework, but also the content is determined. We have to stick to that content. Therefore, there is no freedom in the curriculum (T8).

Teachers are becoming hesitant to even recommend resources. You can't even select your textbook. There is no certain flexibility in the curriculum (T2).

There are also problems in terms of assessment and evaluation arising from the curriculum. Think that you are teaching the subject, there are extra topics you give, you cannot include them in the measurement and evaluation. Or, there are subjects that you should not teach, but you are required to include them in the assessment according to the level of the students (T3).

In the professional development part, you say that I prepared such and such seminars at the end of the year, and you should go and comply with them, too. In other words, it is a central seminar program. The fact that the content of these seminars is not determined together with the teachers is actually a problem (T10).

We see that most things lose their importance as long as the teacher cannot explain his own problems or report the problem he has in his lesson to a higher authority. I mean, here we are having trouble expressing ourselves freely. Teachers do not have the courage to say, "You are doing this wrong," without fear, thinking that nothing will happen to me, that I will not be expelled from my profession. In other words, where there is no courage to say that this is wrong, it is not possible for the wrongs to be revealed and corrected (T4).

Factors Hindering Teacher Autonomy

The second theme of the study is the factors hindering teacher autonomy. Based on participants' perspectives, the factors hindering teacher autonomy were examined under three sub-themes: Centralised curriculum, centralised educational policies and school administration. The views of teachers on this issue are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Factors Hindering Teacher Autonomy According to Teachers' Views

Factors Hindering Teacher Autonomy		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centralised Curriculum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Centralised learning outcomes ○ Centralised exams ○ Centralised textbooks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centralised Education Policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Administration

Participants opined that teacher autonomy was hindered by the centralised curriculum, centralised educational policies and school administration. In terms of centralised curriculum, participants expressed that centralised learning outcomes, centralised exams and centralised textbooks hindered teacher autonomy (T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9, T10). They also stated that centralised educational policies (T5, T8, T10) and school administration (T2, T3, T5, T6,

T8, T10) hindered teacher autonomy, as well. Some of participants' perspectives on the factors hindering teacher autonomy are as follows:

Teachers in the national education system are never truly free. Everything in the curricular framework, including the learning outcomes... They don't even have the authority to change the methods or to change the level of students in the outcomes... They have no authority to make changes in national education. They do not have the authority to make changes in the curriculum, as well (T2).

In Turkey, there are exams like high school entrance exam (LGS) and university entrance exam (YKS). As long as these exist, it is difficult to talk about teacher freedom. You have to work so that students reaches a certain level (T3).

Course resources we use limit us. Hence, we have to go towards other reference books. Because it is very difficult to prepare for the university exam with the knowledge from these resources.. Or how successful can you be? Yes, books are printed and distributed by the state. I think it is for futile (T6).

It is the same with administrative processes. You have to act according to the legislation. Therefore, we do not have any say in determining the legislation (T8).

Apart from that, the school administration... I think there is a problem because they say this will happen, do it this way. Don't do this, don't do that. For example, the school administrator interferes with your course's assessment and measurement, he is also told this by those with higher authority. There is a situation related to that (T5).

Steps Required to Enhance Teacher Autonomy

The third theme reached within the scope of this research is the steps required to increase teacher autonomy. According to participants' perspectives, the steps required to enhance teacher autonomy were examined under five sub-themes: Flexible curriculum, autonomy-supportive environment, participatory decision-making, empowerment of school administrators, and professional development. The views of teachers on this issue are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Steps Required to Enhance Teacher Autonomy According to Teachers' Views

Steps Required to Enhance Teacher Autonomy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible Curriculum • Autonomy-Supportive Environment • Participatory Decision-Making • Empowerment of School Administrators • Professional Development

In order to increase teacher autonomy, participants suggested that a flexible curriculum (T1, T2, T3, T5, T6, T8, T10), an environment that supports autonomy (T1, T2, T4, T5, T7, T10), participatory decision-making (T4, T7, T8, T9, T10), empowerment of school administrators (T1, T3, T4, T7, T10) and professional development (T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T9, T10) should be maintained. The views of some participants regarding the steps to be taken to enhance teacher autonomy are as follows:

It is necessary to prepare a flexible curriculum in line with the objectives... Teachers must be provided with the opportunity to act freely within this general framework. Learning outcomes should be determined by teachers in accordance with the level of students. How free can the teacher be in a system where even the learning outcomes or textbooks are defined centrally? (T2)

Simply put, teachers need to be provided with the opportunities to teach... All the objectives of national education must be reviewed and revised... When teachers are granted possibilities to teach and live in comfortable institutional culture, the ministry does not need to do anything and success will come by itself (T6).

There will be freedom if the legislation and regulations are created in a participatory manner, from the class passing regulations to the determination of assessment and evaluation principles. Being bound by a rule restricts freedom. But if this rule is created by those who will adhere to that rule, we will ensure self-determination or autonomy as Kant says (T8).

Administrators are quite important. I mean, if there is someone who knows how the school works, how the vocational courses are conducted, this will automatically provide you with freedom. But a person who comes there and has no knowledge starts asking for an account... I think merit is very important here. The one who deserves the most should be the administrator (T3).

I think in-service training of teachers is very important. Teachers' personal development should be supported. What I mention here is not in-service trainings held in the district just for the sake of conversation. Really high quality seminars... There must be something at the level of symposiums held at universities. It must broaden the horizons of teachers. The teachers' horizons will expand so that creativity will come. There will be a motivation for them so that they can bring innovation to the classroom and become a little more free. So, they will be able to say that this is not like this, it can be done like this (T5).

Outcomes of Increasing Teacher Autonomy

The fourth theme reached in the research is the outcomes of increasing teacher autonomy. Based on the teachers' perspectives, the outcomes of increasing teacher autonomy were examined under two sub-themes: Outcomes for teachers and outcomes for students. The views of teachers on this issue are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Outcomes of Increasing Teacher Autonomy According to Teachers' Views

Outcomes of Increasing Teacher Autonomy	
For Teachers	For Learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing self-confidence • Increasing performance • Increasing motivation • Increasing sense of responsibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing success • Supporting learner autonomy • Raising future generations

Participants were of the opinion that increasing teacher autonomy would have outcomes not only for teachers but also for students. The participants expressed that increasing teacher autonomy would increase teachers' self-confidence (T2, T3, T4, T6), performance (T2, T6, T8, T9, T10), motivation (T5, T6, T8, T9) and sense of responsibility (T3, T5, T6, T8, T10). The views of some participants regarding the outcomes of increasing teacher autonomy for teachers are as follows:

If a teacher's freedom increases, his/her self-confidence increases, as well. He/she does his/her job with more pleasure, and if there are only three to five students are interested in his/her lesson, he/she can increase this number to 15-20 and increase the success by 100% (T2).

The teacher begins to practise his/her profession with joy. When he/she feels having autonomy and responsibility in the profession he/she enjoys, he/she will begin to conduct what he/she does more consciously. In something he/she does more consciously, he/she will both contribute to himself/herself and be more productive. If we talk about the product he/she obtained, in other words "the student", he/she will work more devotedly to make that product (student) better (T10).

The teacher works more comfortably. He/she becomes more motivated. He/she feels valuable. I feel satisfied when I do something different in terms of professional development. The teacher gets happy, eager to learn something else, and can improve himself/herself. Autonomy is a good thing in terms of a profession, I think (T9).

Being free places responsibility on the teacher in the first place. This enables him to make an effort outside of school to acquire the necessary professional competencies... If it was a curricular framework, the teacher would have to do the necessary preliminary work to fill the content of the curriculum... As the area of freedom expands, you impose responsibilities on those who will benefit from that area of freedom. The area of freedom also expands the area of responsibility (T8).

In addition, participants opined that increasing teacher autonomy would have significant outcomes for learners. In this context, they stated that teacher autonomy would increase student achievement (T1, T2, T3, T5, T6, T10), support learner autonomy (T3, T4, T8), and ensure the raising of future generations (T2, T6, T8, T10). The views of some participants regarding the benefits of increasing teacher autonomy for learners are as follows:

Both success and quality of education increase... Students already love the lesson, they already love the school... A teacher who has broad horizons and loves his/her job also expands the horizons of the students. Students also enjoy everything. In this way, success comes in a pleasant environment (T5).

If the teacher is confident, it will be much different for him/her to manage the students in the classroom or to give them freedom. Students can also express themselves comfortably. If the teacher is free, he/she will give that freedom to the students in the same way. Even if the student may not learn the lesson, at least there will be great benefits for the student in terms of self-realization, self-confidence and self-expression (T3).

The freedom arising from the curriculum will first affect the teaching process in the classroom. The benefit it will provide to teachers in the teaching process is that we will create the desired social structure in a more liberal environment. In other words, we will be able to acquire a generation that questions and criticises (T8).

Discussion, Conclusion & Suggestions

Within the scope of this research, teachers' views regarding teacher autonomy have been investigated in a multi-dimensional manner. The results reveal that teachers can act autonomously in specific areas, including the teaching process and professional communication with students and parents, but they face limitations in other areas such as curriculum development, professional development, and communication with administrators. It is noteworthy that their autonomous behaviors are hindered by structural factors (central curriculum and instructional programs) and school management. In order to increase teachers' autonomy, curriculum should be designed flexibly, qualified professional development opportunities should be offered to teachers, and school administrators should provide

necessary autonomy supportive conditions. Furthermore, the research has revealed that teacher autonomy has positive outcomes for both teachers and students.

As part of the first objective of the research, the limits of teacher autonomy in Turkey have been identified from the perspectives of teachers. Following semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers, the limits of professional autonomy have been examined under two sub-themes: areas where teachers could exercise autonomy and areas where autonomy is not provided to teachers. Based on their perspectives, the areas in which teachers exercise autonomy include the teaching process (classroom management, selection of methods and techniques, time management, assignments, and organising curriculum content) and professional communication (communication with students and parents). Recent research in Turkey regarding teacher autonomy also highlights that teachers perceive themselves as autonomous in teaching process and professional communication (Çolak et al., 2017; Ertürk, 2023; Yazıcı & Akyol, 2017; Yorulmaz et al., 2018). Indeed, in Turkey, the meaning attributed to autonomy is closely associated with classroom autonomy. Despite the centralised education system and its inherent constraints, teachers can still find areas of autonomy within their classrooms. This is because the classroom environment and the decisions made within it are largely under the control of teachers. The areas where teachers do not have autonomy are the curriculum (determining the content, selecting textbooks, and assessment and evaluation), professional development, and professional communication (communication with administrators). Two main factors could be asserted to have influence on the limits of teacher autonomy. The first is the centralised education system. Because of the centralised structure of education system in Turkey (OECD, 2020b), teaching actors are not granted autonomy in areas such as determining course content, curriculum development, and designing school policies. However, a partial autonomy is granted to teachers in terms of the selection of methods and strategies employed during lessons (Çolak & Altinkurt, 2017; Eurydice, 2008; Schleicher, 2020). The research results also confirm this fact. The second factor influencing teachers' autonomy areas is neoliberal education policies. As a result of the influence of neoliberal policies on education since the 1980s, teachers' influence on the education process and curriculum has been weakened (Çolak et al., 2022). Through neoliberal education policies, teacher roles is redefined within "new professionalism" and greater control and accountability have been imposed on teachers (Robertson, 1996, 2010). The concept of "new professionalism" is characterised by an approach rooted in elements such as management, standardisation, assessment, and performance evaluation (Evetts, 2011). This approach refers to a process where autonomy of workers is limited, but accountability and performance controls over them increase (Evans, 2008; Robertson, 2010). Under the framework of this "new professionalism", the control over teachers is increased, their intellectual roles are neglected, and they are expected to act as qualified technicians (Buyruk & Akbaş, 2021). As seen, both the centralised structure and the implemented neoliberal education policies significantly limit teachers' autonomy.

The second objective of this study is to determine the factors hindering teacher autonomy. The results indicate that teachers believe their professional autonomy is hindered by central curriculum (central learning outcomes, central exams, and central textbooks), central education policies, and also by school management. As previously referred, the centralised structure of the education system limits the professional autonomy of teachers (OECD, 2020b; Schleicher, 2020). Relevant research indicates that a significant problem of the education system in Turkey is

the overly centralised organisational structure and the education process regulated by central authorities (Çolak & Altinkurt, 2017; Yılmaz & Altinkurt, 2011). Additionally, the centralised approach tends to tightly control educational actors (Öztürk, 2012). When all decisions regarding education are made by the central government, teachers cannot go beyond being practitioners and have difficulty in revealing their potential. Research results reveal that teachers' autonomy is also restricted by the school administration. This might be associated with the highness of organisational power distance. Organisations characterized by a high power distance tend to exhibit general traits such as a rigid hierarchical order and a strong inclination for control within an excessively centralised structure (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010). Research on organisational power distance in Turkish educational institutions indicates that it tends to be at a medium level or higher (Çolak et al., 2023; Özten, 2023; Yorulmaz, 2021). Furthermore, it reveals negative correlations between organisational power distance and teacher autonomy (Çolak et al., 2022, 2023). In other words, the more organisational power distance increases, the less teacher autonomy is granted. Therefore, in schools where organisational power distance is high, the control-oriented manners of school administrators restrict the autonomy of teachers.

As part of the third objective of the research, the steps required to enhance teacher autonomy were identified according to teachers' opinions. Interviews with teachers reveal that a flexible curriculum, an autonomy-supportive environment, participatory decision-making, empowerment of school administrators, and professional development are necessary to increase teacher autonomy. Related research results also reveal that teachers feel less autonomous in the field of curriculum and professional development while they desire to be autonomous in these areas (Çolak & Altinkurt, 2017; Tokgöz Can & Bümen, 2021; Yazıcı & Akyol, 2017; Yorulmaz et al., 2018). Since the central education program does not offer flexibility to teachers, teachers can make adaptations to the program only to a very limited extent, without disclosing it in their plans (Tokgöz Can & Bümen, 2021; Yazıcılar & Bümen, 2019). In this sense, teachers demonstrate limited autonomy behaviors in the implementation of curriculum by taking risks and assuming substantial responsibility (Çolak & Altinkurt, 2017). On the other hand, professional development is a necessity for teachers to act autonomously (Haapaniemi et al., 2021). In other words, for teachers to make autonomous decisions in line with educational goals, they must be competent in their field. However, teachers may perceive a lack of autonomy in their professional development. This perception arises from the fact that in-service teacher training in Turkey is typically centrally planned and executed. However, this prevents in-service training programs in Turkey from being adapted to local teacher needs (Yolcu & Kartal, 2017). When teachers who do not feel autonomous in terms of professional development cannot find an autonomy-supportive environment in their schools, their areas of autonomy narrow further. However, Darling Hammond et al., (2017) emphasise the key value of both teachers' professional development and educational systems' creating environments where teachers can employ their skills effectively for the overall effectiveness of education systems. In the case of schools, the school administrators are the main actors responsible for ensuring such an environment. Considering this, it is crucial that they are first and foremost qualified. In addition, as Yukl (2006) stated, school administrators' displaying transformational leadership characteristics based on empowering their employees and directing them to think as “subjects” will make significant contributions to teachers' autonomy.

The final purpose of the study is to reveal the outcomes of increasing teacher autonomy based on teachers' perspectives. Teachers think that increasing teacher autonomy will enhance teachers' self-confidence, performance, motivation, and awareness of responsibility, and that it will increase students' achievements and support learner autonomy. As seen, there are various benefits of supporting teachers' autonomy. Furthermore, relevant research confirms that an increase in teacher autonomy will enhance their self-efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Valckx et al., 2020) and strengthen their motivation (Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021; Wu, 2015). Undoubtedly, the advantages of teacher autonomy extend beyond the findings of this study. Teachers who have control over their work feel that they work in a more creative environment, can put their skills to work more easily, and achieve greater satisfaction in their profession (OECD, 2020a). For this reason, teachers highly value autonomy as a favourable aspect of their work environment, and they perceive that it contributes to their job satisfaction and professional status (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005; Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Teachers who are granted more autonomy could organise the teaching process in line with the needs of the students, which contributes ensuring their students achieve greater success. Ayral et al.'s (2014) research conducted with PISA exam data also confirms that teacher autonomy has been associated with improved student achievement. Moreover, it is a prerequisite in terms of learner autonomy (Little, 1995). Given that teachers are responsible for fostering learner autonomy (Yazıcı, 2016), it is reasonable to suggest that supporting teacher autonomy is essential for them to fulfill this responsibility.

Drawing from the research findings, some recommendations could be offered for promoting teacher autonomy. In Turkey, there is a need for legal regulations to guarantee teacher autonomy. For teacher autonomy, teachers must be given rights through laws and regulations. Teachers can thus reflect their experience and expertise to student needs at the local level. School administrators can ensure teachers' participation in decisions regarding school policies and contribute to teachers' revealing their potential by creating an open school climate. However, it is quite important that teachers are given legal rights within the framework of the legislation. Hence, school administrators can play a more active role in creating an environment that supports teacher autonomy.

As with other studies, this research has some limitations. The limitation of this research is that the research data have been collected from teachers working in Milas county of Muğla in Turkey. Because of the higher seniority of teachers in this region, the study have not included teachers who are new to the profession. Future qualitative research studies on teacher autonomy could be designed including teachers from different regions with various characteristics. Conducting such research with various teachers in different regions and countries can contribute to an in-depth understanding of teacher autonomy. In addition, future research could be structured to reveal the relationships between teacher autonomy and various variables, including learner autonomy, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship, and teacher empowerment.

Ethic

Ethics committee approval was obtained from Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Date: March 05, 2022, No: 36). Also, the authors declare that the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with

the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Author Contributions

This article is the result of a collaborative effort between the two authors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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