Professional Autonomy Visited: Pre-Service Teachers' Perspectives During Practice Teaching

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Abstract

This study focuses on pre-service teacher's professional autonomy in English language teacher education program of a foundation university in İstanbul, Türkiye. It explores whether practice teaching period caused a change in the pre-service teachers' opinions regarding professional autonomy and the factors that might have a role in this change. Thirty-seven pre-service teachers answered the professional autonomy questionnaire, and ten volunteered to participate in the semi-structured in-depth interviews. The overall study findings indicated that the participants had a high level of professional autonomy in terms of internal and external drives and motives, capability and collaboration with colleagues. The practice teaching experience influenced their perspectives about internal and external motivational sources, managing time and their capacity for professional development, whereas their opinions for collaboration did not change over the practicum period. The participants' comments indicated that mentor teachers, feedback and extra teaching experiences were the factors that led to the changes in their perceptions for professional autonomy.

Keywords: Professional autonomy, pre-service teachers, teacher education, practice teaching

Mesleki Özerklik: Öğretmen Adaylarının Uygulama Sırasındaki Görüşleri

Öz

Bu çalışma, İstanbul'daki bir vakıf üniversitesinin İngilizce Öğretmenliği programındaki öğretmen adaylarının mesleki özerkliklerine odaklanmaktadır. Öğretmenlik uygulaması sürecinin öğretmen adaylarının mesleki özerklik algıları üzerinde bir etkisi olup olmadığını ve bu etkide rol oynayabilecek faktörleri araştırmaktadır. Otuz yedi öğretmen adayı mesleki özerklik anketini yanıtlamış ve on öğretmen adayı yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmelere gönüllü olarak katılmıştır. Çalışmanın bulguları, genel olarak, katılımcıların içsel ve dışsal dürtü ve güdüler, yeterlilik ve meslektaşlarla işbirliği açısından yüksek düzeyde özerkliğe sahip olduğunu göstermiştir. Uygulama öğretmenliği deneyimi, iç ve dış motivasyon kaynakları, zamanı yönetme ve mesleki gelişim kapasiteleri hakkındaki bakış açıları üzerinde etkili olurken, işbirliği konusundaki görüşleri uygulama süresi boyunca değişmemiştir. Katılımcıların yorumları, uygulama öğretmenleri, geribildirim ve fazladan kazanılan öğretim deneyimlerinin mesleki özerklik algılarında değişikliğe yol açan faktörler olduğunu göstermiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Mesleki özerklik, öğretmen adayları, öğretmen eğitimi, öğretmenlik uygulaması.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional autonomy (TPA) is identified as the capacity, motivation and availability of teachers for professional development (Okay & Balçıkanlı, 2021). TPA differs from teacher autonomy, which is teacher's freedom and space in their decisions related to mainly within classroom practices. It refers to the teachers' responsibility for their own learning embodied as their "self-directed professional actions" (McGrath, 2000, p.101). In a closer examination of the definition, the first key for TPA is capacity that points to the teachers' capacity with abilities for professional development as autonomous individuals. It involves the resources that would enable development, since it is not possible to expect teachers to utilize resources in case of no access to them. Capacity does not solely ensure that teachers will act in line with the capacity available for TPA. In that sense, motivation is supplementary to capacity as a second key for TPA. It is the inner drive and willingness that makes the teachers wish to develop themselves. The third key term in TPA is the availability of time, finance, and resources. The lack of time due to busy schedules (Pacaol, 2021; Warren, 2018), financial problems such as low salary (Usma, 2007) and no access to technology, materials or collegial support are obstacles for teachers in keeping learning about their profession.

Effective teachers are always autonomous in the sense of having a strong feeling of responsibility for their instruction (Little, 1995). When the necessary conditions (i.e. capability, motivation and availability) are met, teachers have a higher level of professional autonomy with a potential to catch up with the recent developments in the teaching profession. Although the time spent in teacher education program constitutes a small portion of professional development (Aoki & Kobayashi, 2009), it is the period that pre-service teachers (PSTs) are introduced to the profession through first theoretical and then practical knowledge. It is valuable to understand PSTs' opinions related to professional autonomy and the extent they are aware of this kind of autonomy to be able to predict their actions for further professional learning. Understanding professional autonomy from PSTs' perspectives would also provide insights into any necessary changes in teacher education programs to promote professional autonomy at a very early stage. Thus, the present study primarily aims to investigate the professional autonomy perceptions of PSTs, which is their capacity, motivation and availability for professional development, in a language teacher education program. In order to understand the role of practice teaching for professional autonomy, the second aim of the study is to understand whether there is a significant difference in PSTs' TPA before and after practice teaching. In case of a difference, it also aims to understand what factors related to practice teaching play a role in shaping TPA for PSTs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TPA is discussed in relation to learner autonomy and teacher autonomy in the relevant literature (e.g. La Ganza, 2004). In the field of foreign language learning, a body of research indicated a correlational relationship between teacher and learner autonomy (Cirocki & Anam, 2021; Kong, 2022; Manzano Vázquez, 2018; Yükselir & Özer, 2022). For example, Benson (2011) suggests strategies based on resources, technology, learner, classroom, and curriculum, which should be employed by an autonomous teacher who provides space for students. Through the use of those strategies, a teacher who knows what it means to be an autonomous learner would be able to encourage the development of autonomy in their students (Little, 2000).

Teacher autonomy, on the other hand, is the ability to decide what to teach, how to teach it and how to build teaching methods (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017). Autonomous teachers take the responsibility for their self-directed practice such as the content they teach and the leadership of the learning process independent of other influences. They can lead their students by taking their needs, motivational drives and interests into account when making decisions for learning. This ability of teachers is nourished by their time, resources and motivation (Okay, 2018) and it is fostered by collaboration, development of teaching skills, and reflection on teaching (Pineda & Frodden, 2008).

TPA, as the capacity, motivation and availability of teachers for professional development, and teachers' autonomy in a broader sense of possessing the authority and freedom in teaching profession have not been examined as separate concepts in the literature. The close relationship between the two has led the research to accumulate in perceptional aspects of teacher autonomy and its connection with a wide range of concepts such as teacher identity, reflection, efficacy, agency and job satisfaction. In international context, a great body of research indicates that teacher autonomy is linked with higher levels of job satisfaction (e.g. Chaaban & Du, 2017; Mansfield et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015). For instance, reviewing the studies conducted over fifteen

years in different contexts, Mansfield et al. (2015) concluded that autonomy is an important contextual factor for teachers to confront difficulties. Chaaban and Du (2017) found in Qatari context that lack of autonomy negatively affects both novice and experienced teachers' job satisfaction. Likewise, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2015) investigated the perceptions of Norwegian teachers about autonomy and job satisfaction. The results showed that autonomy was specifically mentioned by one-third of the teachers as a key factor in their job satisfaction. In relation to teacher identity, Iranian EFL teachers were invited by Derakhshan et al. (2020) to examine the connection between success, autonomy, and professional identity. The variables were shown to have a significant and positive correlation among the three constructs.

Among few studies focusing on PSTs, Huang (2011) investigated the future-teacher autonomy of Chinese PSTs of English. He concluded that future teachers' autonomy and identity development have an impact on one another with respect to agency. Smith and Erdoğan's (2008) study in UK context focused on the future-teacher identity formation of PSTs. The interviews conducted with the participants showed that the future-teacher identity formed during the teacher education program promotes teacher agency and autonomy. Referring to the importance attached to autonomy in teacher education in European context, Gabrys-Barker (2016) studied perceptions of PSTs of English about teacher autonomy and the results addressed the need for developing understanding of PSTs on ways of achieving teacher autonomy.

In local context, among the studies conducted on teacher autonomy, Yükselir and Özer (2022) approached teacher autonomy considering its relation to teachers' well-being and efficacy. English teachers from different types of schools were invited to share their perceived level of autonomy, well-being and efficacy through open-ended questions and scales. It was found that autonomy is strongly correlated with efficacy. Dinçer (2019), on the other hand, examined the autonomy and job satisfaction of Turkish EFL teachers. Teachers were found to desire a higher level of autonomy, but no relationship existed between autonomy levels and job satisfaction. In contrast, with a larger participant population, Dilekçi (2022) and Ertürk (2023) reported a strong correlation between the two concepts, suggesting that autonomy was an important predictor of job satisfaction. Okay (2018) included teacher reflection and burnout in her inquiry into teacher autonomy. Developing a professional autonomy questionnaire (TEPAQ), the researcher reported that reflective practices had a positive relationship with autonomy and professional development whereas burnout was negatively correlated with the two concepts. Similarly, Yıldırım (2017) investigated EFL instructors' perceptions of professional autonomy. Teachers were found to have low level of autonomy but they thought that autonomy is crucial for effective teaching and they wish to have more autonomy.

For the group of PSTs, the studies in local context approached teacher autonomy from learner autonomy perspective considering the close relation between the two. Balçıkanlı (2011) explored PSTs' beliefs on learner autonomy. The findings indicated that the PSTs had positive beliefs about the adoption of autonomy principles, but negative attitudes towards including their future students in the decision-making process. It was concluded that it is necessary to integrate autonomy-promoting tasks into teacher education programs since beliefs on learner autonomy is an important component of their future teaching practices. Öztürk (2019) proposed a course content with in-class tasks and discussions, lecturing, presentations and assignments that would promote autonomy. Learning techniques, learning styles, multiple intelligence, time management, reflective and critical thinking were covered in those practices to help PSTs become more conscious of their own learning. The comparison of perceptions before and after the course indicated a positive change in the participants' autonomy level, especially in their independence of learning.

The variety in variables and concepts linked to teacher autonomy underlines that it is prominent in teacher development. The review of related literature reveals that the studies are mainly centered around the concept of teacher autonomy with a broader sense and the perspectives of practicing teachers. Despite its proven prominence in teacher development, the studies on TPA, as a distinct concept in itself, are rare (e.g. Okay & Balçıkanlı, 2021; Keddie et al, 2023) and professional autonomy among PSTs is yet unknown. For this reason, the current study seeks to understand the PSTs' professional autonomy and specifically to determine whether practice teaching has a role in the development of TPA by comparing the PSTs' reports before and after practice teaching. In addition, it aims to understand what factors related to practice teaching has a role in shaping TPA for PSTs. The following research questions were addressed throughout the study:

- Is there any significant difference between the PSTs' professional autonomy level before and after practice teaching?
- What factors in practicing teaching have a role in PSTs' TPA?

METHOD

The Setting and Participants

The research setting was the English language teacher education program at a foundation university in İstanbul, Turkey. The students in the program are provided with foundations of theoretical and applied areas of language teaching. The program offers courses such as English linguistics and literature, teaching of the four language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), language acquisition, teaching English to young children, material development as well as language testing to prepare them to teach English at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. As commonly practiced in the last year of teacher education programs in Turkish EFL context, PSTs are involved in two terms of practice teaching at the department as a part of practical application. The PSTs are placed in different state and private primary and secondary schools during the practice teaching period in the program. The period includes the participation of three parties, PSTs, school-based and university-based mentor teachers, one of which is the researcher herself. During this period, the PSTs are expected to observe real classroom environment and to plan and perform teaching sessions to be evaluated by their mentors. In the present study, the participants consisted of 37 PSTs in the program, chosen through convenience sampling and their ages ranged between 20 to 22.

In this study, as it was conducted in the setting where the researcher was employed, it was crucial to address her dual role as both researcher and university-based mentor. To mitigate potential biases and maintain rigor, several strategies such as using triangulation to corroborate findings from multiple data sources and conducting member checks to ensure the accuracy of participants' perspectives were used (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the researcher was mindful of creating a comfortable environment for participants to candidly share their experiences to ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Data Collection

This mixed-method design study combines two different methodologies to study the same phenomenon for the triangulation of the data (Denzin, 1978), with an intention to enhance validity and reliability of the data (Mackey & Gass, 2005). As for the quantitative approach in the study, Teachers' Professional Autonomy Questionnaire (TEPAQ) (Okay & Balçıkanlı, 2021) was employed to determine the professional autonomy level of the participants. The questionnaire was developed based on the idea that TPA is the teachers' autonomy to learn for professional development. The instrument was validated with five main factors that address capacity, motives, and availability for teachers' professional development: Internal drives and motives, capability, collaboration with colleagues, time management, external drives and motives. It has 23 items to be answered on 5-point Likert scale. As suggested by the researchers, TEPAQ is an appropriate instrument to understand future professional learning of PSTs and to raise their awareness regarding the importance of developing in their profession.

The PSTs were administered the questionnaire online through Google Forms at the early stage of their practice teaching (October 2022) and at the end of the process (May 2023). To ask participants if they would be interested in participating in an interview regarding their answers, a statement was inserted at the end of the questionnaire in the second administration. The reliability tests were computed by the researcher and overall Cronbach's Alpha value for the questionnaire was found as .87. The reliability tests computed for each factor of the questionnaire also indicated reliability with high values (Internal Drives and Motives α=.75, Capability α=.87, Collaboration with Colleagues α=.83, Time Management α=.80, External Drives and Motives α=.76).

The qualitative data came from the individual interviews with 10 PSTs who accepted to be interviewed. The number of participants was appropriate for the suggested smallest qualified number of participants (Morse, 1994). The interviews were semi-structured and conducted at the end of practice teaching year (May 2023) since the primary aim to employ interviews is to provide more insights into the possible changes in professional autonomy and its causes. The participants were first explained the definition of professional autonomy and asked two broad questions followed by further questions to clarify the interpretations of interviewees: (1) Compared to the beginning of practice teaching, did professional autonomy you think you possess change after practice teaching? (2) Please describe the changes and causes. The questions were formulated by the researcher to tap into the participants' opinions without leading or limiting them. Prior to data collection, the questions were piloted with one of the PSTs at the same department to make sure whether the questions probed into any possible changes experienced in the practicum process related to professional autonomy and its causes. Each interview lasted for about thirty minutes in Turkish and recorded with the permission of the participants. The member-checking strategy was employed for the trustworthiness of the study (Given, 2008). What the participants meant was

continuously checked with clarification questions during the interview. The participants were shared the categorization records after the data collection for verification to ensure credibility. It allowed the findings to be grounded in authentic participant perspectives, aiding their application to similar contexts, which accordingly increased confirmability by ensuring that interpretations and conclusions were rooted in participants' realities.

Research Ethics

The researcher addressed the ethical concerns before conducting the research to protect the rights and interests of participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Dörnyei, 2007). For the insurance of the ethical integrity, ethical approval was received from the Biruni University Ethics Committee (09/08/2023-2023/83-17) and informed consent was obtained from the participants after they were explained the research aims and procedures. The participants' right to anonymity was highly respected. Numbers were used to identify each instead of real names (PST1 to PST37). All data gathered and analyzed for the purposes of this study were also kept confidential.

The sample and procedures are described here in detail in line with the openness and transparency standards of journal. All data, measures, and analysis codes are available upon request from the corresponding author and the study was not preregistered.

Data Analysis

The level of the PSTs' professional autonomy was identified by computing descriptive statistics using SPSS 29.0. Means and standard deviations were computed for every item in order to determine the tendency of the sample. To determine if the findings about the variation in TPA levels before and after practice teaching could be sufficiently generalized, inferential statistics were also calculated. Since the data were ordinal, obtained from a small number of respondents and not normally distributed, non-parametric procedures were followed (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). Thus, the questionnaire results across the two administration times were compared using the Wilcoxon signed rank test.

The interview recordings were transcribed by the researcher and analyzed using content analysis in three stages (Miles et al, 2013): data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. Following the model, the transcriptions were studied to identify and classify the participants' comments. Then, the relationships between different themes were carefully checked whether they could be placed under the same theme.

Finally, the emergent themes were reexamined to ensure whether they truly reflected the nature of their supporting data. During the analysis, it was observed that the categories reached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) since the data from the seventh to tenth participants did not produce any new code, indicating that the number of interviewees composed an appropriate sampling number for the study. As an important criterion for a scientific inquiry to be trustable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), the same analysis procedure for the data coding was carried out again after a four-week period to ensure intra-rater reliability. After making a few little changes, conclusions were reached after comparing the first and second codes to identify any discrepancies.

FINDINGS

The Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Autonomy Levels

The first research question addressed in the study sought to understand the professional autonomy level of PSTs and whether practice teaching had an influence on their TPA. Table 1 presents the results for Internal Drives and Motives factors of TEPAQ.

Table 1. Statistics for Internal Drives and Motives in TEPAQ

	Before		After		
Items	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p**
1. I want to develop myself professionally because I feel I have to.	4.13	1.07	.37	.714	.003*
2. It is my own wish to continue my professional development.	4.61	.547	.63	.489	.317
3. I am curious about new ways to develop my teaching.	4.53	.687	.58	.552	.157
4. I want to develop professionally because it is a necessity to meet the needs of students.	4.61	.595	4.66	.481	.157
5. I enjoy developing myself professionally.	4.55	.602	4.61	.495	.157
6. I feel obliged to continue my development as a teacher.	3.82	1.205	4.11	.981	.001
7. I constantly look for ways to develop my teaching.	4.39	.638	4.42	.552	.317
8. I want to develop professionally to meet the needs of my students.	4.58	.500	4.58	.500	1.000
9. I want to develop myself professionally to push the limits of my abilities as a teacher.	4.42	.948	4.53	.797	.046*

*p<.05

As can be seen in Table 1, the participants' high ratings before practice teaching showed that they had agreement with most of the statements about internal drives and motives for professional development. They revealed that they had a wish for professional development because they both felt obliged to develop and they enjoyed the development. They thought that professional development was necessary for them to meet students' needs, to learn about new ways of teaching and to improve teaching abilities. Overall, the participants' answers for this factor did not differ significantly. Although it is possible to infer a slight increase in their ratings for the seven of the items (Item 2, Item 3, Item 4, Item 5, Item 6, Item 7, Item 8), the results indicated significant differences only for two of the items (Item 1 and 9). It was found after practice teaching that the PSTs felt the obligation for professional development more and they believed more in the necessity of development to push the limits of teaching abilities.

Table 2. Statistics for Capability in TEPAQ

Items	Before		After		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p**
10. I am able to search out information about teaching.	4.50	.507	4.50	.507	1.000
11. I can find profession-related materials (i.e. books, journals, etc.) about teaching.	4.42	.642	4.50	.507	.083
12. I have the ability to develop my teaching.	4.32	.873	4.42	.758	.046*
13. I am able to identify my weaknesses/strengths as a teacher.	4.21	1.044	4.39	.823	.008*
14. I am able to use technology to develop my teaching.	4.45	.602	4.50	.507	.157
15. I can adapt to recent developments in teaching.	4.37	.589	4.42	.500	.157
16. I have access to technology to continue my development as a teacher.	4.55	.555	4.58	.500	.317

*p<.05

For capability factor of TEPAQ, as shown in Table 2, the participants agreed that they had materials and technology necessary to improve their teaching abilities. They also believed that they had the ability to adapt for and improve their teaching as well as to identify their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. It was found that the practice teaching process was found to change PSTs' opinions for two items. The significant increase found in Items 12 and 13 showed that the participants became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses as a teacher after practice teaching, which they believed gave them the ability to improve their teaching.

Table 3. Statistics for Collaboration with Colleagues in TEPAQ

Items	Before		After		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p**
17. I can work with my colleagues to develop my teaching.	4.37	.852	4.39	.790	.317
18. I like to learn from my colleagues to develop my teaching.	4.34	.909	4.42	.793	.083
19. I have colleagues whom I can consult when I need help about my professional development.	4.32	.842	4.39	.755	.083

*p<.05

When Table 3 above is examined, the high ratings for the items show the PSTs' positive attitude for collaboration with colleagues. They stated that they could work with and would like to learn from their colleagues to develop their teaching. Besides, they believed that they had colleagues for consultation about professional development. The PSTs' opinions did not change significantly after practice teaching. There was only a slight increase in their ratings, revealing that they still believed in necessary existence of collegial assistance for their development.

Table 4. Statistics for Time Management in TEPAQ

Items	Before		After		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p**
20. My workload is too heavy to engage in activities to develop myself as a teacher.	.18	1.136	.76	.913	.001*
21. I find very little time outside the school for professional development activities.	.32	1.165	.76	.820	.001*

*p<.05

Table 4 above shows the results for the time management factor of TEPAQ. The ratings showed that the PSTs' position was almost neutral regarding the time component of professional autonomy. Their answers indicated that time management was not either positive or negative factors that influenced their professional development before the practice teaching but changed significantly later. After practice teaching, they were closer to an agreement that time management could be a hindrance in engaging in professional development activities.

Table 5. Statistics for External Drives and Motives in TEPAQ

Items	Before		After		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*p**
22. I want to develop myself professionally to better my financial condition.	3.87	1.143	4.16	.855	.001*
23. I want to develop myself professionally for a chance of getting promoted to a better position.	3.82	1.036	4.13	.665	.001*

*p<.05

Table 5 illustrates the results for external drives and motives factor of professional autonomy. The ratings revealed that the participants' agreement with external drives and motives were not as high as internal drives and motives for professional development. They almost agreed that professional development was necessary for the improvement of financial condition and promotion to a better position. The significant change after practice teaching process indicated that although the PSTs did not believe in the impact of better financial conditions and position for professional development much, they were found to agree more with the role of promotion and economic conditions for being motivated to develop themselves at the end of practice teaching year.

The Factors for The Pre-Service Teachers' Professional Autonomy in Practice Teaching

The third research question addressed the practice teaching factors that might have a role in PSTs' TPA. The data obtained from the interviews overall supported the quantitative findings. That is, as quantitative data showed, the changes reported by the PSTs were centered around capability, external drives and time factors. During the interviews, the participants elaborated on those changes they thought they experienced in their autonomy and the reasons behind those changes (See Table 6).

Table 6. Categories and Codes

Main categories	Codes	Sub-codes
Changes in TPA	Capability	Teaching abilities
	External drives	Financial condition Better teaching position
	Time management	Teachers' workload
The factors in TPA	Mentor teachers	
	Teaching experience	
	Feedback	

Changes in TPA

The first main category, changes in TPA, describes the reported differences between the PSTs' TPA before and after practice teaching. The participants' answers for this category were centered around capability, external drives and time management, with no references to the other two factors of TEPAQ, collaboration with colleagues and internal drives and motives. Capability-related factors during the interviews were mainly referred as *teaching abilities*. All 10 PSTs stated they felt a change regarding their ideas about their own teaching abilities, underlining that practice teaching process made them realize their potential to develop their teaching skills. They reported that they had not been aware of their own capacities for improvement. For example, PST6 explained this awareness as follows:

I had some concerns about my teaching abilities since I spent very limited time teaching in the class. I had questions about how to act for example when a younger student asks a question etc. Towards the end of the year, I realized that I could manage my teaching concerns and as I spend more time in the class, I become more self-confident in making decisions during teaching.

When the PSTs were talking about the change in their teaching abilities, they also specifically addressed their improved awareness about weaknesses and strengths as a teacher. Teaching at practicum schools and experience "…showed what is missing, which parts need improvement" (PST16) as well as "…positive sides in teaching abilities" (PST31). They thought that they had difficulty "…in understanding why the activities did not work with the students and the feedback from my mentor" (PST7) in the beginning of the teaching practice, but they were able to identify the negatives in their teaching and assume possible problems that they might experience over time.

In relation to external drives, eight PSTs stated during the interviews that their ideas about *financial conditions* and *better positions* changed at the end of practice teaching. Financial concerns were found to be highly cited by the participants as a reason for professional development. After practice teaching experience, the PSTs

"… understood that teachers should be strong in their profession to improve their financial conditions", although they thought "teaching is already a rewarding job" (PST3) in the beginning. They reported that they did not know how much "professional development is related to teachers' financial conditions" (PST8). As prospective teachers, they learned that "it is an obligation to develop professionally to get a better position in the profession" (PST22).

Seven of the PSTs also mentioned the change in their understanding of *teachers' workload*. Before the practice teaching, they thought that teachers, "especially the ones working at state schools" (PST4), had enough time to participate in professional development activities. During their time at schools, they came to understand that "teachers have a busy schedule, they have papers to grade, duties to fulfill assigned by the school administrator, questions to answer in the break time" (PST6), so time management was a challenging task for them. They further explained that "it seems impossible for a private school teacher who may have to work even at weekends to go to seminars or workshops" (PST19). Their comments indicated that the opportunity to observe a working teacher in a school changed their opinions about a teacher's work life as they observed teachers' challenges related to time management and financial satisfaction.

The Factors in TPA

The second main category, the factors in TPA, describes the factors that led to the reported differences between the PSTs' TPA before and after practice teaching. The participants' answers for this category revealed three factors: Mentor teachers, feedback and teaching experience. When explaining the changes, all PSTs emphasized the roles their *mentor teachers* and other teachers played at the practicum school. The participants argued that "the mentor teacher's teaching attitude and lesson design" (PST7) made them focus more on their teaching abilities. Through observing the mentors' practices, they "compared their own teaching performance with the mentors' and understand in what ways they should organize the flow of activities and what the students were eager about most" (PST6). The PSTs were able to detect their mistakes in teaching and come up with solutions. They stated that this way of observing and learning about new teaching practices were essential for professional development. The observations of mentor teacher also showed the PSTs that "teaching is more than being in the classroom" (PST16). That is, the mentor teacher made the PSTs aware that they may need to be alert about students' needs and allocate time to listen to their problems or fulfill school-related duties, which is related to teachers' heavy workload reported above. This was referred to as the most important factor by the PSTs in engaging professional development because they "…had time for improvement in this practice teaching time and that is the only task expected but teachers seemed to have no extra time to spend on…" (PST12) development.

Feedback was the second factor mentioned by all PSTs in the formation of TPA understanding. They stated that the comments of mentor teachers and university supervisors in feedback sessions changed their understanding of the profession and contributed to their understanding of professional development. Earlier, they believed that "… classroom experience was enough to improve teaching abilities and in time they would be more familiar with all teaching dynamics" (PST31). As a result of discussions with both school-based and university-based mentors, they realized that "…it is not possible to experience everything in one class. Feedback should be continuous in teaching" (PST8). PST16 exemplified the effect of feedback as follows:

Our teachers at the department always talked about the importance of development for teachers but I realized that I had not understood what they meant until this practice teaching year. When I started teaching at practicum school and talked about my performance with teachers, I understood the importance of feedback to correct my mistakes and why feedback should not be limited to practice teaching year. I should continue learning after graduation.

During the interviews, it was found that the PSTs' *teaching experience* other than the practice teaching period was a factor in their perceptions of TPA. When elaborating on their answers, eight of the PSTs made references to extracurricular teaching experiences such as tutoring and teaching at language schools. They stated that they made connections between both experiences, and "this helped to understand the necessities of teaching profession" (PST32). Teaching at an institution "…completed the missing parts in teaching increasing the time spent in front of a class" (PST7). Besides, they used this experience to "…refine practices, decide what to teach and how to teach" (PST3). They commented that professional development activities became more important for them, especially after starting to teach.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The study sought to understand professional autonomy from the PSTs' perspectives. The quantitative analysis of PSTs' perceptions revealed a high level of professional autonomy. The reason behind the reported high levels of professional autonomy was found as PSTs' additional teaching experience. The PSTs interviewed

declared that they were teaching English in one-to-one classes or at language schools as part-time teachers for two to three years. Later, the researcher contacted the other participants to learn whether they had a similar experience. This little inquiry led the researcher to find out that 33 out of 37 PSTs were engaged in similar activities. It shows that the part time teaching experiences introduced them into the profession earlier than the last year of teacher education program and thus raised their awareness about the need for professional development. As a great body of research underlined the correlation between identity and autonomy in various contexts for both in-service teachers (Derakhshan, 2020) and PSTs (Huang, 2011; Smith & Erdoğan 2008), it can be suggested that their high level of autonomy also shaped their identities as future teachers. In addition, this contribution of extra teaching experience to TPA showed that teacher preparation should include maximum number of teaching opportunities. However, it is necessary to compare the PSTs' TPA levels with and without extra teaching experience to be able to attribute the high level of TPA to this variable.

The participants' answers suggested that they were internally motivated for further learning about teaching profession, which might be due to the positive learning experiences during preparation for teaching or already existing motivation for the profession. Considering that autonomous teachers are the creators of autonomous learners (Little, 2000), the internal drives for the professional autonomy are promising and should be kept alive through autonomy-promoting tasks (Balçıkanlı, 2011), such as the ones including learning techniques, learning styles, multiple intelligences, time management, reflective and critical thinking (Öztürk, 2019). The professional autonomy level was found as even higher after practice teaching especially in terms of feeling compelled to improve as a teacher and the necessity of development to push the limits in teaching. Although they did not refer to any changes in their motivations during the interviews, the classroom experience throughout teaching practice seemed to contribute to their motives for professional development. It is possible to state that practice teaching time strengthened the feeling of responsibility for instruction to become an effective and autonomous teacher (Little, 1995).

The positive effect of practice teaching on the beliefs about teaching abilities was also reflected in their answers for the capacity component of professional development. The PSTs reported that they had more capacity to assess and improve their teaching abilities after practice teaching. In this way, they demonstrated that they could enhance their instruction, locate resources and information pertinent to their line of work in order to advance their careers. The reason behind this positive effect was already explained by the participants themselves as mentor teachers. Their comments pointed the important role of mentor teachers in improving their teaching abilities through observing a real-world application. Feedback provided by school-based and university-based mentors helped them diagnose their strengths and weakness in teaching, revealing the positive impact on the professional autonomy development of prospective teachers. Given that TPA is ingrained in various contexts, institutional relationships, and professional responsibilities (Keddie et al, 2023), in the present study context, the reflective practice through feedback positively influenced their understanding of autonomy and professional development (Okay, 2018). In this way, mentors and feedback become instrumental in shaping TPA through individualized support and gradual release of responsibility. The finding indicates that mentor teachers should be exclusively trained on how to improve and model autonomy to strengthen the positive impact of practice teaching on the ability to decide what to teach, how to teach it, and how to promote continuous professional growth (Dikilitaş & Griffiths, 2017).

The PSTs had a positive attitude toward collaboration with colleagues. Since there was no reference to collaboration with colleagues during the interviews, the group of colleagues meant probably their collaboration with other PSTs. Thus, they believed in necessary existence of collegial assistance for their development, without any change after practice teaching time. The consistency in their positive attitudes for professional collaboration predicts that they are ready for productive teamwork. According to Pineda and Frodden (2008), teachers can foster teacher autonomy while addressing issues through collaborative work. Therefore, the willingness for collaboration should be emphasized in teacher education programs through teamwork and collaborative tasks so that they would also be prepared for the future cooperation in their careers and accordingly increase job satisfaction (e.g. Chaaban & Du, 2017; Dilekçi, 2022; Ertürk, 2023; Mansfield et al., 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2015) as well as well-being and efficacy (Yükselir & Özer, 2022).

As for the time factor of professional autonomy, the study found that the PSTs were undecided, but they agreed that time management could be a hindrance in engaging in professional development after practice teaching experience. They stated in the interviews that teachers' workload is too intense to find time for professional development. The time spent at practicum school made the PSTs think that finding the time to participate in professional development programs may sometimes be challenging for practicing teachers. Similarly, Pacaol

(2021) asserts that teachers spend their after-school hours preparing for tests, marking papers and assignments, speaking with students' families, and creating lesson plans. The workload at school may impede teachers' efforts to advance their professional development and promote the best instruction for the students (Warren, 2018). As a result of their extensive workload, the PSTs in this study seemed to conclude that it is not always possible to find free time for professional development. Thus, the findings suggested that PSTs should be prepared for the realities of workload management and time constraints they may encounter in their future careers. Teacher education programs should emphasize strategies for effective time management and finding a balance between teaching responsibilities and professional development. Incorporating training on self-directed learning could equip PSTs with the skills to continue their professional growth. Moreover, offering early exposure to flexible professional development opportunities, such as online courses or peer collaboration, could help PSTs adapt to the challenges of maintaining professional autonomy while managing the demands of teaching.

In the study, the participants' agreement with external motivational sources were not as high as internal drives for professional development. Although the PSTs did not believe in the impact of better financial conditions and position for professional development much, at the end of practice teaching year, they were found to agree more with the role of promotion and economic conditions for being motivated to develop themselves. The experience with teachers at school, as emphasized during the interviews, made the PSTs aware that intrinsic motivation may not be enough to develop a greater sense of professional autonomy. The finding suggests that the willingness to engage in "self-directed professional actions" (McGrath, 2000, p.101), as well as to improve the delivery of instruction, should be supported by external drives such as better financial circumstances or promotion (Usma, 2007).

As one of the few inquiries into professional autonomy, the study offered valuable perspectives into the PSTs' TPA levels and the practice teaching factors that might have a role in the development of TPA at an early stage in the teaching profession. Considering the proven desire of EFL teachers to improve professional autonomy in the relevant literature (Dinçer, 2019; Yıldırım, 2017), the study provided some evidence for the importance of developing an understanding of PSTs about teacher autonomy (Gabrys-Barker, 2016). Yet, it is not without limitations. First of all, it was conducted with the participation of a limited number of PSTs, calling for cross-cultural studies with more PSTs in different teacher education programs for a comprehensive picture. Secondly, longitudinal studies that include observation of practices should be conducted to understand the change or development in TPA by following the same group of PSTs since the time spent in teacher education program constitutes a small portion of professional development (Aoki & Kobayashi, 2009). Besides, empirical research is needed for the exploration of dynamics in TPA and the relationship between factors such as type of practice teaching schools, the amount of time spent teaching and TPA level of mentor teachers with their teaching backgrounds.

Statements of Publication Ethics

All procedures used in this study involving participants are in accordance with the ethical standards of the authors' institution and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

Researchers' Contribution Rate

The whole work belongs solely to the author.

Conflict of Interest

This study has no conflict of interest.

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