



Received: 01/10/2024

Accepted: 10/12/2024

Published: 31/12/2024

Teacher Autonomy from the Perspective of Middle School Teachers

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Doğuş, F., & Tabak, S. (2024). Teacher autonomy from the perspective of middle school teachers. *Asian Journal of Instruction*, 12(2), 59-78. Doi: 10.47215/aji.1559266

Abstract

This study aims to examine middle school teachers' perceptions of teacher autonomy in depth. The study was conducted using a phenomenological design, a qualitative research method. The study participants were 17 middle school teachers working in public schools in three provinces located in northern Turkey. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. The results showed that teachers defined the concept of autonomy in the context of autonomy in the educational process, professional development, professional respectability, and freedom of expression. Teachers emphasized that autonomous teachers have characteristics such as pedagogical freedom and creativity, using technology, student orientation, critical and analytical thinking, independence and self-confidence, content knowledge and research ability, social and communication skills, leadership, and problem-solving. Finally, the factors affecting teachers' autonomy were analyzed. In this context, it was concluded that social and environmental factors, personal and professional characteristics, and institutional and system factors are among the factors that affect teacher autonomy.

Keywords: Factors affecting teacher autonomy, middle school teachers, teacher autonomy

1. Introduction

Learner-centered practices and the educational emphasis of student-centered learning and teaching theories have transformed the roles of teachers within the classroom environment. Student-centered practices, which prioritize providing opportunities for students to assume responsibility for their own learning and regulate this process, have necessitated a reorientation of teachers' classroom roles and augmented their responsibilities in this regard. Educators may encounter difficulties in adapting to this shift in classroom roles. Teachers' capacity to address such challenges is significantly contingent on teacher autonomy (Huang, 2005).

Pearson and Hall (1993) conceptualized teacher autonomy as teachers' perceptions of whether they control themselves and their work environments. Little (1995) defined teacher autonomy as a teacher's capacity to undertake self-directed professional action. This definition encompasses teachers possessing a robust sense of personal responsibility for their teaching through continuous reflection and analysis as well as cognitive and affective control of teaching. Smith (2000) characterizes an autonomous teacher as one who performs their duties and maintains a consistent openness to professional development, emphasizing that teacher autonomy is more closely

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associated with professional growth. If teacher autonomy is considered the authority to implement their own choices and decisions regarding teaching and learning activities in the classroom, it can be posited that autonomy is, in fact, a phenomenon that emerges in relation to the general structure of the educational environment (Öztürk, 2011). According to an alternative perspective, teacher autonomy encompasses freedom pertaining to curricula, teaching methods and techniques, student discipline, achievement, measurement and evaluation of behaviors, planning of classroom and activity time, as well as professional development (LaCoe III, 2008). According to Ayril, Özdemir, Türedi, Fındık, Büyükgöze, Demirezen and Tahirbegi, (2014), teacher autonomy refers to the domain in which teachers possess authority in matters, such as determining and implementing the content of curricula utilized in schools, selecting courses and textbooks, determining teaching methods and materials, monitoring and evaluating the teaching process, and school management. However, teacher autonomy does not imply that teachers can act with an unrestricted freedom. In accordance with ethical, scientific, and pedagogical principles, teachers can be granted autonomy in curriculum, method, technique choices, classroom management, school management decisions, and personal professional development (Çolak et al., 2017). In this context, teachers possess limited power and authority in their work. What is perceived as autonomy by one teacher may be interpreted as isolation for another. While one educator may view autonomy as a means of attaining substantial freedom from interference or supervision, another may perceive it as liberty to perform tasks and develop collaborative relationships outside the classroom. While some teachers appreciate autonomy, others regard it as a means of evading principals' responsibilities (Frase & Sorenson, 1992).

Teacher autonomy plays a significant role in educational and training activities. The level of teacher autonomy can substantially influence the attainment of institutional objectives and the efficacy of instructional processes (Maviş Sevim et al., 2017). As teachers' autonomy increases, their responsibilities expand, their duties intensify, and professional development continues. This autonomy, granted to educators, exhibits a strong correlation with student achievement (Ertürk, 2020). As the scope of a teacher's autonomy expands, the independence of their decision making increases, consequently exerting a positive impact on student performance. Ayril et al. (2014) examined the relationship between teacher autonomy and PISA examination results and concluded that it enhanced student achievement. Teachers' autonomous behaviors in instructional activities encourage students to participate more actively in the learning process and positively influence their competence and socialization (Oğuz, 2013).

When teacher autonomy exists within an educational system, educators make decisions collaboratively with their colleagues, school administrators, and students in accordance with their professional expertise, assuming both the authority and responsibility for these decisions (Karatay et al., 2020). In addition to the assertion that teacher autonomy is crucial for the development of teacher professionalism, granting autonomy to teachers and empowering them is emphasized as an appropriate starting point for addressing current school challenges (Melenyzer, 1990; Short, 1994). From these perspectives, it is evident that numerous factors influence teacher autonomy. An examination of the international literature reveals that Pearson and Hall (1993) classify teacher autonomy into curriculum autonomy and general teaching autonomy. Friedman (1999) emphasized the dimensions of teacher autonomy such as planning and implementation of instruction, participation in management processes, and professional development. McGrath (2000) defined teacher autonomy as the educator's ability to operate independently from external control through self-directed activities and development. Another perspective considers the dimensions of teacher autonomy as instructional, managerial, financial, personal, and professional autonomy (Lai-ngok, 2004; Yoon & Thye, 2002).

According to Eurydice (2008), the dimensions of teacher autonomy are categorized as educational services, working time and professional tasks, continuous professional development and reform,

and participation in educational innovations. Strong (2012) emphasized the dimensions of teacher autonomy such as decision-making ability, freedom, and authority. An examination of the national literature on the dimensions of teacher autonomy reveals that these dimensions are emphasized in specific ways. Öztürk (2011) lists the sub-dimensions of teacher autonomy as the planning and implementation of instruction, participation in management processes, and professional development. Üzüm (2014) delineated the dimensions of teacher autonomy as structural dimension (political sense-participation in management processes), individual dimension (psychological sense-autonomous teacher and professional development), and technical dimension (technical sense-planning and implementation of instruction). Boz (2014) and Çelik (2016) identified the dimensions of teacher autonomy as instructional autonomy, administrative autonomy, financial autonomy, and personal and professional autonomy in their literature reviews. Ertürk (2020) posited that teacher autonomy should be examined by considering indicators such as making important decisions regarding education, participation in school management, development of professional competencies in teachers, and contributions to the planning and implementation of teaching.

In the national literature, the dimensions of teacher autonomy were comprehensively investigated by Çolak and Altinkurt (2017), who conducted a scale development study in this context. The scale aimed to determine the dimensions of teachers' autonomous behaviors. Within the scope of the scale, the dimensions of teacher autonomy were identified as teaching process autonomy, curriculum autonomy, professional development autonomy, and professional communication autonomy. Autonomy of the teaching process pertains to teaching lessons and classroom management. This autonomy encompasses the teaching methods and techniques employed by the teacher during the lesson, the teaching materials to be utilized in the lesson, the time to be allocated for activities in the lesson, the implementation of the measurement and evaluation process, communication in the lesson, and classroom organization (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Teachers manage the learning-teaching process and possess the authority to make and implement independent decisions (Çolak & Altinkurt, 2017).

Another sub-dimension, curriculum autonomy, is the autonomy area based on what, how, and when teachers will teach in accordance with the needs of students. Consequently, curricula should provide teachers with necessary flexibility. Curriculum autonomy is associated with teachers' active participation in the curriculum development process and input into the curriculum. Teachers should be able to demonstrate flexibility in updating the curriculum in alignment with the needs of students, changing conditions, and the aims of education and training, as well as utilizing teaching materials appropriate to these conditions (Çolak & Altinkurt, 2017). Professional development autonomy relates to teachers' abilities to act professionally in their work. Teachers should possess the ability to manage their own professional development. The capacity of teachers to attend necessary training in accordance with their needs, benefit from in-service training, and not be subject to the pressure of authority in these processes are considered within the scope of professional autonomy (Çolak & Altinkurt, 2017). Finally, professional communication autonomy refers to the ability of teachers to communicate with other teachers, educational administrators, and parents without apprehension or pressure. Teachers should be able to express their ideas freely and engage in independent thoughts (Çolak & Altinkurt 2017).

Various studies on teacher autonomy exist in the international and national literature. An examination of international research on this subject reveals a study on teacher autonomy in the context of the potential for freedom or control (Lawson, 2004), an investigation examining the relationship between teacher autonomy and stress, job satisfaction, empowerment and professionalism (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005), studies on student autonomy and teacher autonomy (La Ganza, 2008; Lamb, 2008; Smith et al, 2008), research focusing on different aspects of the need and importance of teacher autonomy and professional independence in the education system

(Sehrawat, 2014), an analysis on the role of teacher autonomy in the broader issue of teacher professionalism (Parker, 2015), a study on reflections on the role of teacher autonomy (Ramos, 2006), the first large-scale quantitative study in the UK to examine teacher autonomy and its importance for retention (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020), research that aimed to investigate the direct impact of distributed leadership on teacher job satisfaction and how distributed leadership indirectly affects teacher job satisfaction through teacher autonomy and teacher collaboration (Liu et al., 2021), a study of teacher autonomy in different models of educational management using qualitative data from research on teacher autonomy conducted in Norway and Brazil (Lennert Da Silva, 2022), an investigation into the relationship between mathematics teachers' autonomy over various aspects of their work and outcomes for the students they teach, and the link between teacher autonomy and teacher job satisfaction (Jerrim et al, 2023) and research investigating teacher autonomy in their work and curriculum control in public and independent schools in the context of a country with a long tradition of one public school for all (Dieudé & Prøitz, 2024).

Upon examination of national research on teacher autonomy, several studies have been identified: theoretical studies on teacher autonomy (Ertürk, 2020; Öztürk, 2011), an investigation into the relationship between teacher autonomy and student achievement (Ayril et al, 2014), an analysis of the relationship between school climate and teachers' autonomy behaviors (Çolak & Altinkurt, 2017), an exploration of teachers' views on their professional autonomy (Erbıyık & Şemin, 2024), an examination of the relationship between teacher professionalism and autonomy (Karatay et al., 2020), investigations into the relationship between teachers' autonomy behaviors and job satisfaction (Çolak et al, 2017; Şentürken, 2018), a study on school administrators' perceived management styles and teachers' autonomy (Akçay & Sevinç, 2021), research on teachers' perceptions and expectations of autonomy in planning and implementing instruction (Tokgöz Can, 2019), an examination of teacher autonomy in the context of educational leadership (Öksüz Gül, 2015), an analysis of teachers' autonomy perceptions and curriculum literacy levels (Taşdemircanan, 2023), and an investigation into the effect of teacher autonomy on commitment to the teaching profession according to teachers' perceptions (Ertürk, 2023). Notably, within the national literature, there is a predominance of quantitative studies on teacher autonomy and a limited number of studies (Özaslan, 2015; Kılınç et al., 2018) exploring how teacher autonomy is conceptualized by teachers. Özaslan (2015) conducted phenomenological research with teachers from various disciplines working in primary, middle, and high schools. The results of this study indicate that teachers primarily defined autonomy within the context of professional autonomy, emphasizing the importance of utilizing teaching materials for their own selection, implementing necessary disciplinary measures with students, and having the ability to repeat lessons when deemed necessary. Teachers reported that a lack of professional autonomy resulted in consequences such as diminished professional prestige and reduced efficacy in benefiting their students. In a study conducted by Kılınç et al. (2018), teachers' perspectives on teacher autonomy were examined using a phenomenological design with teachers who had completed their master's degree in educational administration, working in public schools at various levels of seniority.

The analysis of the study results revealed that the participating teachers defined teacher autonomy in the context of teaching processes, teachers' sense of freedom, and school climate. Furthermore, the study identified "perceived organizational support, teacher expertise, collegial collaboration, and school environment" as factors influencing teacher autonomy. Examination of the results from both studies indicates that research conducted using phenomenological design is significant in determining how teachers conceptualize and define autonomy, as well as the dimensions of teacher autonomy in Turkey. In addition, the present study is expected to contribute to the literature by examining teacher autonomy and its dimensions. This study, focusing on middle school teachers, is anticipated to contribute to the national literature, particularly in terms of elucidating teachers' perceptions of autonomy and identifying factors that influence their

autonomy. The primary objective of this study was to elucidate middle school teachers' perceptions of teacher autonomy and to explore the factors affecting teachers' autonomy based on their experiences. In alignment with this primary objective, the following questions were formulated.

1. How do teachers conceptualize teacher autonomy?
2. What are the characteristics of autonomous teachers?
3. According to the teachers, what factors influence teacher autonomy?

2. Method

This section describes the research design, participants, data collection tools, data analysis, credibility, and ethics.

2.1. Research Design

A phenomenological design, a qualitative research approach, was employed in this study. Phenomenology is a methodology used to examine the meaning, structure, and essence of a particular experience perceived by an individual or group (Patton, 2014). The philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology focus on the nature of experience and the process by which conscious experience transforms into perception (Merriam 2015; Patton 2014). Furthermore, phenomenological design investigates how participants experience a specific phenomenon (Creswell, 2020). In this study, the phenomenon of "perceptions of teacher autonomy" was subjected to in-depth investigation.

2.2. Participants

This study, conducted during the spring semester of the 2023-2024 academic year, was implemented in districts selected through convenience sampling from three provinces in northern Turkey. The districts were chosen using convenience sampling because of the researchers' professional affiliations and proximity, which minimized time and cost constraints. Given the relatively small population of the three districts, there were few middle schools. A criterion sampling method was employed to identify the participants. The criteria stipulated that teachers must work in public schools affiliated with the Ministry of National Education, represent different subject areas, and possess a minimum of five years of professional experience. In accordance with these criteria, the study's scope was elucidated for teachers employed in middle schools, resulting in 17 voluntary participants constituting the research sample. The research participants comprised 14 females and three males, with professional experience ranging from 7 to 36 years. The subject area distribution of the teachers was as follows: four Social Studies, three Mathematics, three Science, two Turkish, two English, one Visual Arts, one Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge, and one Physical Education.

2.3. Data Collection Tool

In this study, a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers was used as the data collection instrument. The preparation of the interview questions involved an initial literature review and an examination of studies pertaining to teacher autonomy. Subsequently, a semi-structured interview form was constructed to align the study's objectives. The form was electronically transmitted to two faculty members—one specializing in teacher autonomy within the field of educational administration and another expert in curriculum and instruction—to obtain expert opinions. The interview form was finalized based on feedback from experts. A pilot study was conducted with two teachers who were not included among the study participants. The

interview form included inquiries regarding teachers' understanding of the concept of teacher autonomy, the characteristics of autonomous teachers, and the factors influencing teacher autonomy.

For face-to-face interviews with the teachers, requisite permissions were initially obtained from the Ordu University Educational Research Ethics Committee and the relevant Directorate of National Education. Subsequently, an interview schedule was devised and teachers' availability was determined. Prior to the interviews, the teachers signed an interview protocol and, with their consent, a voice recorder was employed during the interviews. Research data were collected in February and March 2023, with each interview lasting between 15 and 20 minutes.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data obtained in the research were transcribed into written text immediately following the interviews. The transcribed data were subsequently analyzed using the content analysis method. An inductive process was employed during the content analysis. In this approach, codes were generated through a detailed examination of the transcribed data by the researchers, with particular attention paid to the teachers' discourse. The codes were independently created by both researchers. Subsequently, a meeting was convened to reach consensus on the codes that would ensure conceptual integrity. The codes were categorized into groups determined by the researchers within the context of the study's fundamental phenomena. Themes were subsequently developed based on these categories. The data were organized and defined according to codes, categories, and themes. These findings have been subsequently reported. The participating teachers were assigned interviewer codes (e.g., T1, T2, T3, T17), which were incorporated into the tables and sample discourses. Direct quotations were used in the study to accurately convey teachers' statements.

2.5. Validity and Reliability

Measures were implemented within the scope of the validity and reliability of the study to ensure credibility, transferability, consistency, and confirmability. To establish credibility, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participating teachers to facilitate direct interaction. During the data collection process, when ambiguities arose in the participants' responses, the researcher sought clarification through probing questions. This approach allowed the verification of participants' statements by the researcher. Furthermore, the interview form developed by the researchers underwent expert review and was subsequently revised based on feedback from the relevant curriculum development specialists. Regarding transferability, the participant selection adhered to the criterion sampling method. Additionally, the researchers provided a detailed account of the entire process and data analysis, incorporating direct quotations from teachers' statements in the Findings section. To ensure confirmability, two independent curriculum development experts, who were not involved in the study, were consulted for their opinions and suggestions concerning the semi-structured interview form developed for the research. Concurrently, an external curriculum development expert was requested to analyze the research data, and their insights were considered. To evaluate the consistency of the study, the research was presented to program implementer teachers, who were not included in the study, and their feedback was solicited to ensure coherence.

2.6. Ethics

All the rules specified in the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive of Higher Education Institutions were followed in the study. The ethics committee approval of this study

was obtained from Ordu University Educational Research Ethics Committee with the letter dated 24/05/2024 and numbered 2024/93.

3. Findings

This section presents how teachers make sense of the concept of autonomy, the characteristics of autonomous teachers, and the factors affecting teachers' autonomy.

3.1. The Concept of Teacher Autonomy

In the first part of the study, teachers' sense of autonomy was analyzed. The findings on how middle school teachers who participated in the study made sense of teacher autonomy are discussed in detail in Table 1.

Table 1

The Concept of Teacher Autonomy

Category	Codes	Participants
Autonomy in the Education Process	To be able to choose teaching methods and techniques	T1, T3, T4, T12, T13, T16, T17
	Identify materials and resources	T4, T6, T12
	To be able to teach lessons by considering the individual differences of students	T1, T12, T17
	Ability to teach without the obligation to adhere to the curriculum	T2, T9, T10, T14, T16, T17
	To be able to take initiative in planning and implementing educational processes	T3, T5, T7, T8, T10, T11, T15
	To be able to shape their own teaching process independently	T7, T11, T15
	The belief that courses grades and assessment processes should not be interfered with	T1
Professional Development	Renewing and developing itself in accordance with the requirements of the age	T8, T16
Professional Respectability	The idea that teachers are discredited	T1
	Teachers' need for professional respect and appreciation	T1
Freedom of Expression	To be able to freely express and discuss their own thoughts	T1, T14

According to the teachers, as a result of the analyses under the theme of 'teacher autonomy concept', the categories of "autonomy in the education process, professional development, professional respectability and freedom of expression" were identified.

Twelve of the teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, T9, T10, T12, T13, T14, T16, T17) provided responses in the category of 'autonomy in the education process.' In this category, teachers emphasized their belief that they should have the ability to select teaching methods and techniques, determine materials and resources, conduct lessons while considering the individual differences of students, teach without strict adherence to the curriculum, exercise initiative in planning and implementing educational processes, independently shape their teaching process, and operate without interference in course grading and evaluation procedures. Representative statements are presented in the following quotations:

- *“An autonomous teacher is a teacher who can teach according to his/her own methods and students' characteristics.” T12*

- *“An autonomous teacher is a teacher who incorporates his/her own ideas, his/her own feelings and even his/her own research and applications into the lesson without being bound to the curriculum.” T9*
- *“A free and independent teacher is a teacher who can control learning and teaching processes and can change them when necessary. A teacher who has no responsibility towards the principal and the curriculum and can shape his/her own teaching process.” T7*
- *“It is the type of teacher who makes decisions on his/her own and puts them into practice. A teacher who is independent and can make decisions and does not pay too much attention to those around him/her.” T15*

Two educators (T8, T16) provided responses within the category of "professional development." In this category, educators emphasized self-renewal and development in accordance with contemporary requirements. Representative statements are presented below as direct quotations.

- *“An autonomous teacher is a teacher who develops and changes himself/herself according to the needs of the age and finds solutions to problems.” T8*
- *“... a teacher who improves himself/herself, is open to innovations and designs his/her own teaching curriculum in different ways.” T16*

One of the educators (T1) provided a response that aligned with the category of "professional respectability." Within this category, the educator emphasized the notion that teachers were discredited and highlighted the necessity for teachers to receive professional respect and recognition. The representative discourse of the educator is as follows:

- *“I don't think we are very autonomous; I think we have been discredited; I don't think we are appreciated as we deserve. There is a huge difference between when I took office 28 years ago and now. I think respect is kept to a minimum.” T1*

Two of the teachers (T1, T14) gave answers in the category of “freedom of expression.” In this category, teachers emphasized the ability to express and discuss their thoughts freely. Sample discourses were expressed using the following direct quotations:

- *“In the teachers' room or in the school, I think that teachers should be able to express their opinions with respect...Everyone has an opinion, and I believe that it should be respected, both in the field of education and in the personal field. We should be able to discuss, talk, and exchange information, and everyone should be able to express their opinions very easily. This is true for the teachers and the administration.” T1*
- *“An autonomous teacher is a teacher who can freely express his/her own thoughts and ideas. When expressing his/her thoughts, he/she is the teacher who thinks, interprets, and applies in a democratic way in accordance with the regulations of the Ministry of National Education.” T14*

Upon analysis of the research findings regarding middle school teachers' conceptualization of teacher autonomy, it was observed that teachers defined this construct in terms of autonomy in the educational process, professional development, professional respectability, and freedom of expression. The results indicated that teachers articulated their perspectives on autonomy in the educational process more frequently than in other categories, predominantly defining teacher autonomy through processes within this domain. Examination of teachers' definitions of autonomy within the context of the educational process autonomy revealed that they primarily conceptualized it in terms of taking initiative in planning and implementing the educational process, conducting lessons without strict adherence to the curriculum, and selecting teaching

methods and techniques. Middle school teachers defined teacher autonomy in the context of professional development as self-renewal and adaptation to contemporary conditions, in the context of professional respectability as the necessity to gain professional esteem, and in the context of freedom of expression as the ability to articulate thoughts without constraint.

3.2. Autonomous Teacher Characteristics

This section analyzes the teachers' responses regarding the characteristics of autonomous teachers. The findings pertaining to the attributes of autonomous teachers, as identified by the participating middle school teachers, are presented and discussed in detail in Table 2.

Table 2

Autonomous Teacher Characteristics

Category	Codes	Participants
Pedagogical Freedom and Creativity	Can make their own decisions and apply original teaching techniques	T3, T5, T10, T11, T14, T17
	Create his/her own world in the classroom	T6
	Adopting innovative and creative teaching techniques	T4, T7, T10, T11, T12, T16
	Original in materials and methods	T5, T14
Using Technology	Able to use technology well	T1, T2, T7, T8, T10
Student Orientation	Observing students' individual differences and teaching according to their characteristics	T1, T8, T9, T17
Critical and Analytical Thinking	Free of ideas and thoughts, not bound by molds	T9, T11
	Able to make split-second decisions and predict outcomes	T4
Independence and Self-Confidence	Self-confident, independent in their decisions	T6, T15
Content Knowledge and Research Ability	Knowledgeable in the field, researcher and open to learning	T3, T4, T7, T13, T14, T16, T17
Social and Communication Skills	Social, communicative, able to exchange information with his/her environment	T7, T4
Leadership and Problem Solving	A pioneer in solving problems in their environment	T8

According to the teachers, as a result of the analyses under the theme of "autonomous teacher characteristics," the categories of "pedagogical freedom and creativity, using technology, student orientation, critical and analytical thinking, independence and self-confidence, content knowledge and research ability, social and communication skills, leadership and problem solving" were identified.

Ten of the teachers (T3, T4, T5, T6, T10, T11, T12, T14, T16, and T17) provided responses in the category of 'pedagogical freedom and creativity.' In this category, teachers emphasized characteristics such as making independent decisions, implementing original teaching techniques, establishing their own pedagogical environment in the classroom, employing innovative and creative teaching methodologies, and demonstrating originality in materials and methods. Representative statements are presented below as direct quotations.

- "A teacher who can take his/her own decisions while planning and implementing learning processes, who is liberal, who has managerial and academic knowledge and skills." T3

- *“I perceive a teacher who is original in terms of the materials, methods and techniques he/she will use in the school and classroom, in the educational environment, and who has authority in his/her field.” T5*
- *“A teacher who has created his/her own world in the classroom.” T6*
- *“A teacher who is free, comfortable, self-confident, social, researching, able to observe the developmental processes of his/her students, able to direct the lesson, creative, open to innovation, open to development, follows technology, has strong communication, original, has meaningful voices in the classroom.” T7*

Five of the teachers (T1, T2, T7, T8, T10) provided responses within the category of "using technology". In this category, teachers emphasized the importance of proficiency in technology utilization. Representative statements are presented below as direct quotations.

- *“As I said at the beginning, an autonomous teacher should be able to use technology well. They should be able to know their students well and take an attitude according to their characteristics.” T8*
- *“I think they should support themselves with things like technology and STEM.” T10*

Four of the teachers (T1, T8, T9, T17) provided responses within the category of "student orientation." In this category, teachers emphasize the importance of recognizing individual differences among students and adapting instructional methods according to their characteristics. Representative statements are presented below as direct quotations.

- *“I leave the subjects free in the classes from time to time, I tell everyone to do what they want. I mean, I have students weaving carpets, painting, cutting paper, oil painting in the same class hour.” T1*
- *“First of all, they should be free in their thoughts and ideas. He should not stick to the mold. They should be open to innovation. Also, the teacher should be a teacher who can act together with the students but at the same time allow independence.” T9*

Three of the educators (T4, T9, T11) provided responses within the category of "critical and analytical thinking." In this category, educators emphasized the characteristics of possessing independent ideas and thoughts, not being constrained by established patterns, making prompt decisions, and anticipating outcomes. Representative statements are presented below as direct quotations.

- *“He must be able to make instant decisions. Because or she will act within the framework of the curriculum and use new techniques. While using new techniques, he is acting in an area he does not know; in an area he has not experienced before, so he needs to be able to make instant decisions at that time. You need to have the ability to make instant and correct decisions.” T4*

Two educators (T6 and T15) provided responses within the category of "independence and self-confidence." In this category, educators emphasized the importance of self-confidence and independence in their decision-making processes. An exemplary statement is presented below:

- *“She has high self-confidence and has a decisive and independent spirit. He/she does not like taking orders and sometimes he/she may even like himself/herself too much. Even when he/she has problems, instead of getting help from his/her environment, he/she can continue to proceed in the wrong but right way.” T15*

Seven educators (T3, T4, T7, T13, T14, T16, and T17) provided responses within the category of "content knowledge and research ability." In this classification, educators emphasized the attributes of being knowledgeable, research-oriented, and receptive to learning. Representative statements are presented below as direct quotations.

- *"First of all, he/she should have a good command of all kinds of subjects, he/she should be able to organize well and present different perspectives." T13*
- *"They should improve themselves, be open, do research and investigation, know their students well, know their environment well, use the school facilities and conditions very well, and have the ability to change and transform all the materials they find." T17*

Two educators (T4, T7) provided responses within the category of "social and communication skills." In this category, educators emphasize social and communication skills and the ability to exchange information with others. An example of an educator's discourse is presented through the direct quotation below:

- *"A teacher who is free, comfortable, self-confident, social, researching, able to observe the developmental processes of his/her students, able to direct the lesson, creative, open to innovation, open to development, follows technology, has strong communication, original, has meaningful voices in the classroom." T7*

One of the educators (T8) provided a response within the category of "leadership and problem solving." In this category, the educator emphasized the importance of being proactive in addressing issues within their immediate environment. The following is a verbatim quotation from the educator's discourse.

- *"An autonomous teacher should be both a pioneer and a guide in solving the problems in his/her environment." T8*

Upon analysis of the research findings regarding middle school teachers' definitions of autonomous teacher characteristics, it was observed that teachers conceptualized these characteristics within the frameworks of pedagogical freedom and creativity, technology utilization, student-centered approaches, critical and analytical thinking, independence and self-assurance, content knowledge and research proficiency, social and communication competencies, and leadership and problem solving abilities. The results indicated that teachers articulated a greater number of perspectives concerning autonomous teacher characteristics in the categories of pedagogical freedom and creativity, technology utilization, content knowledge and research proficiency, and student-centered approaches.

3.3. Factors Affecting Teacher Autonomy

In the last part of the study, teachers' responses to factors affecting teacher autonomy were analyzed. In this context, the findings of the middle school teachers' views on the factors affecting teacher autonomy are discussed in detail in Table 3.

Table 3*Factors Affecting Teacher Autonomy*

Category	Codes	Participants
Social and Environmental Factors	Society's perspective	T1, T4
	Parent interaction	T1, T4
	Geographical and economic situation	T1, T5, T7, T17
Personal and Professional Characteristics	Personality characteristics	T2, T6, T8, T15
	Education and experience	T12, T13, T14
	Professional motivation	T2, T8
Characteristics of the Institution And System	School management	T2, T7
	Education system	T10, T11
	Financial resources	T4, T7, T16, T17
	Legal regulations	T10, T11, T15
	Student characteristics	T2, T4, T9, T11

According to the teachers, the analyses conducted under the theme of "factors affecting teacher autonomy" yielded categories of "social and environmental factors, personal and professional characteristics, characteristics of the institution and system".

Five teachers (T1, T4, T5, T7, T17) provided responses within the category of "social and environmental factors." In this category, teachers emphasized societal perspectives, parental interactions, and geographical and economic situations. Representative discourses are presented in the following direct quotations:

- *"The perspective of the society and the perspective of the parents. If the parent imposes on his/her child only an exam according to the branches, your autonomy does not work there anyway. Because you are not accepted. However, my opinion was not accepted. The child does what he/she knows because he/she is asked to solve a hundred tests. The child is channeled to this, so your lesson is not important."* T1
- *"The pressure to complete the entire annual plan, time pressure, insufficient financial means of the students, and difficulties in accessing the desired resources make it difficult. In other words, one cannot realize exactly what one wants and plans. For example, if financial resources cannot be provided, every student should go to Çanakkale and see it. But there is no such possibility, basically everything is based on money."* T17

Seven of the educators (T2, T6, T8, T12, T13, T14, T15) provided responses within the category of 'personal and professional characteristics.' In this category, educators emphasized personality structure, educational background, experience, and professional motivation. Representative statements are presented below as direct quotations.

- *"Personality traits are very important, if he/she lives his/her life like that, I think it affects his/her teaching. The characteristics of the teacher also affect what kind of teacher they are, and you know that not all teachers are the same. I would like to say that there are no teachers who are only concerned with the materialistic aspect of the job; unfortunately, there are. Therefore, there may be those who say that I only teach what is in the book and the rest is not necessary."* T2
- *"I can say that the quality of the pedagogical education received by the teacher, the experience of the teacher, the attitudes of the school administration, the self-confidence of the teacher, in other words, self-confidence affects the teacher."* T12

- *“So here, the teacher's idealism first affects his/her characteristics. His/her personality... Having his/her own goals will cause him/her to improve himself/herself and his/her perspective towards his/her environment will also be effective.” T8*

Nine of the teachers (T2, T4, T7, T9, T10, T11, T15, T16, T17) provided responses within the category of "characteristics of the institution and system." In this category, teachers emphasized factors such as school management, the education system, financial resources, legal regulations, and student characteristics. Representative statements are presented below as direct quotations.

- *“First of all, the school administration is very important for the teacher to be autonomous in this regard, that is, if they follow what the teacher teaches or does not teach, the teacher feels stuck, but if they leave the education and training to the teacher and deal only with paperwork, the teacher always moves more easily....Therefore, the climate of the school, your colleagues, and their relationships with them are also very important. If those people are like you, you exchange ideas more, you know better what to do and what to do.” T2*
- *“Since teachers are civil servants, their autonomy is restricted in certain areas. They cannot engage in politics, speak to the press without permission, criticize political authority, etc. In addition, systematic mobbing and pressure in schools also prevents teachers from becoming autonomous. Legislation or excessive bureaucracy are also attitudes that prevent autonomy.” T15*

Analysis of the research findings pertaining to middle school teachers' perspectives on factors influencing teacher autonomy shows that educators identify social and environmental factors, personal and professional characteristics, and institutional and systemic attributes as significant determinants. The study concludes that teachers emphasize geographical and economic conditions as more influential among the social and environmental factors affecting teacher autonomy. Furthermore, personality structure, education, and experience have been highlighted as the predominant personal and professional characteristics that impact teacher autonomy. Additionally, financial resources, student characteristics, and legal regulations were identified as the most significant institutional and systemic factors that influence teacher autonomy.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

In this study conducted in the context of teacher autonomy, findings were obtained in the themes of "The Concept of Teacher Autonomy," "Characteristics of Autonomous Teachers" and "Factors Affecting Teacher Autonomy." The findings obtained from each theme reveal a comprehensive perspective on how teachers conceptualize teacher autonomy according to the characteristics of autonomous teachers and the factors influencing teacher autonomy.

Within the scope of the study, when the perspectives of teachers on the concept of teacher autonomy were analyzed, it was concluded that teachers predominantly interpreted teacher autonomy as autonomy in the educational process. In this context, teachers desire the ability to freely select teaching methods and techniques, exercise initiative in planning and implementing educational processes, independently shape their own teaching processes, determine materials and resources in the teaching process, and conduct lessons considering the individual differences of students. In addition, some teachers expressed the belief that course grades and evaluation processes should remain free from external interference. These results can be attributed to the teaching process autonomy dimension of teacher autonomy. According to Pearson and Moomaw (2005), teaching process autonomy pertains to lesson instruction and classroom management, wherein the teacher is the individual who independently determines the methods to be employed in lesson instruction, the teaching materials to be utilized, the time allocation for the lesson, the management of assessment processes, communication within the lesson, and classroom

management. Lai-ngok (2004) defined autonomy in the teaching process as the capacity of a teacher to exhibit autonomous behaviors while planning, implementing, and evaluating educational activities. From this perspective, teachers assume responsibility for planning instruction, organizing activities, managing assessment processes, selecting teaching methods, and utilizing teaching materials in alignment with the aims of education.

An additional outcome that educators interpret as part of their autonomy in the educational process is their desire to teach without being constrained by centrally mandated curricula. This result may be associated with the curriculum autonomy dimension of teacher autonomy. Curriculum autonomy should provide teachers with necessary flexibility. In the curriculum development process, teachers should collaborate with colleagues and input into the curriculum design. Educators should have the flexibility to update curricula in accordance with changing conditions, student needs, and educational objectives (Çolak & Altinkurt 2017). According to Taba's (1962) curriculum development model, teachers should play an active role in the curriculum development process. From this perspective, the curriculum is developed by those who implement it and teachers are considered integral to the curriculum development process. When examining the results in the context of teachers' instructional process autonomy and curriculum autonomy collectively, it is evident that teachers desire autonomy in organizing, implementing, and evaluating learning and teaching processes within the curriculum. This is an anticipated outcome for educators, as they are the implementers of the curricula, and it is challenging for teachers to adhere strictly to the prescribed curricula. Teachers are expected to view centrally mandated curricula as a framework and make adjustments in alignment with the needs of students, schools, environments, and regions. While curricula serve as a framework, this situation underscores the need for curricula to be flexible. However, the flexible nature of curricula does not imply that teachers have unrestricted freedom in curriculum implementation. This is because teacher autonomy is not perceived as an unlimited freedom, where educators can act without constraints (Gürsoy, 2020).

Another finding related to teachers' definitions of autonomy is professional development. Several educators have emphasized that teachers need to update and develop their skills in accordance with contemporary requirements. This result aligns with the dimension of professional development autonomy of teacher autonomy. Educators should be capable of facilitating professional development in subjects pertaining to their respective fields and pedagogical skills. Teachers should have the opportunity to receive necessary training aligned with their needs, attend scientific conferences, and participate in in-service training without external pressure from authorities (Çolak & Altinkurt 2017). Another perspective emphasizes that continuous professional development is associated with teachers' professional growth and instructional competencies (Eurydice, 2008). Within the scope of this research, it was also concluded that one teacher interpreted the concept of teacher autonomy in the context of professional prestige. This view highlights the perception that teachers are undervalued and emphasizes the need for educators to be respected and esteemed professionally. This perspective is supported by the observation that the teaching profession has experienced a significant decline in its societal esteem in recent years. Finally, it was determined that teachers interpreted the concept of teacher autonomy as freedom of expression. In this context, educators have emphasized that teachers should be able to freely articulate and discuss their thoughts. This finding relates to the professional communication autonomy dimension of teacher autonomy. According to Çolak (2016), teachers should be able to express their opinions and thoughts freely and act without constraints while communicating. Educators should be able to communicate with colleagues, administrators, and parents without experiencing pressure or anxiety.

Upon examination of the results pertaining to the second research question, it was determined that teachers predominantly emphasized the characteristics of pedagogical freedom and creativity,

utilization of technology, student-centered approach, content knowledge, and research aptitude as essential attributes of an autonomous teacher. In this context, an autonomous teacher is defined as an educator who can make independent decisions, implement innovative and creative teaching methods and techniques, establish a unique classroom environment, demonstrate originality in the selection of learning and teaching materials, effectively utilize technology, consider students' individual differences, adapt lessons according to student characteristics, possess comprehensive field knowledge, and maintain a research-oriented and learning-receptive disposition. According to Phan (2012), autonomous teachers still instill a sense of responsibility for individual learning in students and guide them through their behaviors. In classrooms led by autonomous teachers, students anticipate guidance from their instructors to determine activity goals, allocate time to the teaching-learning process, and identify problems. Lamb (2008) posits that the freedom of teachers to select their preferred teaching methods and techniques is characteristic of an autonomous educator. In addition to these perspectives, the literature suggests that teacher professionalism is fully realized when teachers exhibit autonomous classroom characteristics. A reduction in teacher autonomy leads to a decrease in professionalism (Jeong and Wermke, 2019; Jeong & Luschei, 2018). Consistent with this view, a professional teacher who excels in their role is expected to possess the general competencies of the teaching profession. The Ministry of National Education has delineated in detail the characteristics that teachers should possess within the scope of general competencies in the teaching profession. The attributes encompassed within the competency areas of professional knowledge, professional skills, attitudes, and values are among those that can enhance a teacher's autonomy. In this regard, the characteristics that a teacher should possess include possessing advanced theoretical, methodological, and factual knowledge in the field to incorporate a questioning perspective; mastering the curriculum and pedagogical content knowledge of the field; effectively planning education and training processes; selecting appropriate materials; managing the evaluation process in accordance with its purpose; utilizing technology effectively in the learning and teaching process; considering the individual differences and needs of students in learning environments; communicating and collaborating effectively with students, colleagues, families, and other stakeholders in education; and conducting self-evaluation and pursuing personal and professional development (MoNE, 2017).

Educators also emphasized the characteristics of autonomous teachers in terms of critical and analytical thinking, independence and self-assurance, social and communication skills, leadership, and problem-solving abilities. In this context, according to educators, an autonomous teacher is one whose ideas and thoughts are unrestricted; they do not adhere to rigid patterns, who can make immediate decisions and anticipate the consequences, who is self-assured, independent in their decisions, socially adept, communicative, capable of exchanging information with their environment, and who is a pioneer in addressing problems in their surroundings. According to Ramos (2006), teacher autonomy develops through self-awareness, environmental sensitivity, participation, and problem-solving. Self-evaluation, adaptation to changing needs, collaboration, and creative thinking are significant factors that enhance teachers' autonomy.

Analysis of the results pertaining to the final research question of the study revealed that the factors influencing teacher autonomy were social and environmental factors, personal and professional characteristics, and institutional and systemic attributes. Within the context of social and environmental factors, teachers emphasized societal perspectives, parental interactions, and geographical and economic conditions. It was determined that circumstances such as parental evaluation of teachers based on their subject areas, societal acceptance of teachers according to their disciplines, unfavorable geographical conditions, insufficient financial resources of students, and difficulties in accessing desired resources negatively impacted teachers' autonomy. Regarding personal and professional characteristics, the teachers highlighted personality, education, experience, and professional motivation. It was concluded that factors such as the teacher's

personality type, self-confidence, multidimensional thinking, idealism, goal setting, environmental perspective, self-education, subject matter expertise, achievements, quality of pedagogical education, and experience influence teachers' autonomy. Teachers' continuous professional development positively affects their autonomous behaviors in the teaching-learning process. These teachers can create more effective and efficient learning and teaching environments for their students (Çolak, 2016). Teachers' competence in their areas of expertise positively influenced their self-confidence and motivation. High motivation and professional competence enable teachers to act with greater sense of responsibility, creativity, and innovation. This, in turn, leads to more effective and efficient autonomous behaviors (Pearson & Moomaw, 2005). Concerning the characteristics of the institution and system, teachers emphasized school administration, education systems, financial opportunities, legal regulations, and student characteristics. One of the findings of this study is that constant supervision of teachers by the school administration creates a sense of constraint and negatively affects their autonomy. School administrations are expected to comprehensively support teachers. The leadership behaviors of school administrations have a significant impact on teachers' autonomy. According to Garvin (2007), a school environment in which school administrators exhibit supportive leadership behaviors positively affects teacher autonomy. School administrators' provision of collaborative learning and teaching environments and the implementation of practices that support professional development increase teachers' autonomy levels. Benson (2010), however, stated that parental complaints and the school administration's authority over teachers create a sense of constant supervision, which limits teachers' autonomy, decreases teachers' self-confidence and self-efficacy in such an environment, and leads teachers to avoid autonomous behaviors.

Another conclusion drawn from this study is that curricula compel teachers to serve the examination system. The aims of administrators, institutions, and educational authorities to regulate teachers' actions are factors that limit their autonomy. These can be regulations such as mandatory exam practices, curricula, and administrator demands (Ramos, 2006). According to Çolak (2016), educational policies exert pressure on teachers and negatively affect their autonomy. This situation impedes teachers from making decisions freely and diverts them from taking responsibility for education. One of the most significant results of this study is the negative effect of legal regulations on teacher autonomy. It was concluded that the inability of teachers to criticize political authority due to their status as civil servants, the prohibition on speaking to the press without permission, legislation regulated by laws and regulations, and excessive bureaucracy negatively affect teachers' autonomy. Benson (2000) states that constraints from sources outside the school through policies and procedures limit teachers' autonomy. Ingersoll (2007) argues that excessive external control hinders teachers' ability and flexibility to work effectively and reduces teachers' motivation. Çolak and Altinkurt (2017) stated that teacher autonomy is limited within the framework of previously agreed norms, universal ethical codes, laws, and scientific and pedagogical principles for the school to achieve its goals. In line with these views, it is possible to assert that legal regulations limit teacher autonomy. It is probable that teachers' autonomy will increase in institutional and systemic contexts when strict legislative regulations that limit teachers' autonomy are made more flexible.

Another result of this study is that material resources negatively affect teachers' autonomy. Material shortages in schools due to limited financial resources negatively impact teachers' autonomy. In his 1997 study, Crookes emphasized that one of the factors affecting teacher autonomy is the lack of sufficient financial resources for curriculum. The final and noteworthy result obtained in this study is that student characteristics affect teacher autonomy. The psychological, sociological, and economic conditions of students and their levels of readiness are factors that influence teacher autonomy. It is posited that if students in a school are in a favorable condition in every aspect, it will positively affect the teacher's autonomy. Each student is unique

as an individual and possesses different types of intelligence. This implies that teachers should organize learning-teaching processes according to student characteristics, and in this context, they should be able to select various activities according to students' individual differences and make their decisions independently in the teaching process. In this context, the diversity of student characteristics is related to teachers' autonomy.

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Ethics Committee Permission:

All the rules specified in the Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive of Higher Education Institutions were followed in the study. The ethics committee approval of this study was obtained from Ordu University Educational Research Ethics Committee with the letter dated 24/05/2024 and numbered 2024/93.