

## THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY IN THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS<sup>1</sup>

### ÖĞRETMENLERİN PROFESYONEL GELİŞİMİNDE MESLEKİ ÖZERKLİĞİN ROLÜ

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#### ABSTRACT

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This study aims to examine teachers' perceptions of professional autonomy and the role of this autonomy in their professional development processes. A phenomenological design, one of the qualitative research approaches, was employed in the study. The study group consisted of 20 teachers selected through snowball and maximum variation sampling methods. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form and analyzed through content analysis. As a result of the study, the findings were organized under two main themes: domains of teacher autonomy and the effects of professional autonomy. Teachers evaluated curriculum planning, the selection and use of materials, and assessment-evaluation practices as areas within the scope of professional autonomy. It was concluded that teachers had limited autonomy in determining the curriculum; however, they were found to have partial autonomy in areas such as content adaptation, material selection, and assessment and evaluation. The study revealed that teacher autonomy enhances students' motivation and learning outcome during educational processes, provides an inclusive environment, and encourages active participation. In the context of professional development, it was determined that professional autonomy increases teachers' job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity, and also contributes to the development of self-management, self-regulation, and collaborative learning skills.

#### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, öğretmenlerin mesleki özerklik algılarını ve bu özerkliğin mesleki gelişim süreçlerindeki rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmada nitel araştırma yaklaşımlarından fenomenolojik desen kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın çalışma grubu, kartopu ve maksimum çeşitlilik örnekleme yöntemleriyle seçilen 20 öğretmenden oluşmaktadır. Veriler, yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu aracılığıyla toplanmış ve içerik analizi yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda, bulgular öğretmenlerin özerklik alanları ve mesleki özerkliğin etkileri olmak üzere iki ana tema altında toplanmıştır. Öğretmenler, öğretim programı, materyal seçimi ve kullanımı ile ölçme-değerlendirme alanlarını mesleki özerklik kapsamında değerlendirmiştir. Öğretmenlerin öğretim programını belirleme konusunda sınırlı bir özerkliğe sahip oldukları sonucuna ulaşılmış; buna karşılık, içerik uyarlama, materyal seçimi ve ölçme-değerlendirme gibi alanlarda kısmi özerkliklerinin bulunduğu belirlenmiştir. Araştırmada, öğretmen özerkliğinin eğitim-öğretim süreçlerinde öğrencilerin motivasyonunu ve başarısını artırdığı, kapsayıcı bir ortam sağladığı ve aktif katılımı teşvik ettiği ortaya konmuştur. Profesyonel gelişim bağlamında ise mesleki özerkliğin öğretmenlerin mesleki doyumunu, motivasyonunu ve üretkenliğini artırdığı ayrıca öz yönetim, öz düzenleme ve işbirlikçi öğrenme becerilerini geliştirdiği ortaya çıkmıştır.

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## Introduction

Teachers' professional skills and competencies, their working conditions, and their spheres of authority are among the fundamental elements that determine the quality of educational services. Empowering teachers in line with their responsibilities and positioning them as decision-makers in their areas of expertise enables them to fulfill their professional duties more effectively. At the same time, this approach provides meaningful support for their professional development. With increasing societal expectations and the impact of global transformations, the teaching profession has undergone a significant period of change; teachers' responsibilities have expanded, and the necessity for them to have a greater voice in the educational process has emerged (Eurydice, 2008). In this context, autonomy stands out as a key factor influencing teachers' motivation and overall well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2021). Indeed, teacher autonomy is closely related to school effectiveness, strong instructional practices, student learning outcome, and teachers' job satisfaction (Dierking & Fox, 2012; Marshik et al., 2017; Olivant, 2015). Moreover, the autonomy teachers have in classroom decision-making processes plays a significant role among the reasons for remaining in the profession (Park & Johnson, 2019; Tison, 2022).

Autonomy may not always provide advantages for teachers. The effects of autonomy within the educational process can vary significantly depending on teachers' personality traits, levels of professional competence, and existing support systems. According to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2014), autonomy not only grants teachers freedom but also imposes responsibility regarding how this freedom is exercised, which can lead to stress and anxiety for some teachers. Particularly, accountability mechanisms such as centralized examinations cause teachers to perceive autonomy as a contradictory element (Kelly, 2019). Moreover, teachers' preference for centrally prepared materials, due to the workload of curriculum preparation or pressure from parents, demonstrates that autonomy can entail personal costs (Erss, 2018). A study conducted in Türkiye revealed that despite having classroom autonomy, teachers continued to employ traditional methods without considering students' needs, highlighting that the effective use of autonomy is directly related to teachers' professional competence and ongoing development (Öztürk, 2011). Therefore, for teacher autonomy to yield positive outcomes in education, it is critical not only for teachers to possess authority but also to have access to the necessary support and professional development opportunities. In this regard, it is also essential to underline that teaching is legally and institutionally recognized as a professional occupation in Türkiye. The National Education Basic Law No. 1739 clearly defines teaching as a specialized profession that requires both academic formation and continuous professional development. More recently, the enactment of the Teaching Profession Law No. 7528 has further emphasized this professional status, framing teaching not only as a vocation but also as a structured career path supported by legal regulations and state policies. By situating autonomy within this legislative and professional framework, it becomes evident that the discussion on teacher autonomy in Türkiye cannot be separated from the broader understanding of teaching as a regulated and continuously evolving profession.

While the majority of studies in the literature have focused on learner autonomy (Grote, 2019; Keyes, 2018; Lima, 2023; Mendoza, 2024) and principal autonomy (Limon & Aydın, 2020), research on teacher autonomy has remained limited. However, student autonomy is directly related to teacher autonomy. Little (1995) defines teacher autonomy as the ability to act independently, to improve oneself through reflective practices, and to make objective decisions. In this context, various studies have examined the relationship of teacher autonomy with different variables in Türkiye. For example, Karabacak (2014) investigated the relationship between teachers' perceptions of autonomy and self-efficacy; Özdemir and Turan (2018) examined the effects of school principals' manipulative behaviors on teacher autonomy; and Şentürken and Oğuz (2020) explored the relationship between teacher autonomy and job satisfaction. These studies reveal that teacher autonomy interacts with various individual and organizational variables. It can be stated that teacher autonomy is closely related not only to the education system but also to teachers' levels of professional development and the collaborative structure of the school. Therefore, rather than discussing the mere presence or absence of teacher autonomy in education, it would be more appropriate to examine how and under what conditions it emerges. In this context, the present study aims to determine the role of professional autonomy on teachers' professional development, and in line with this general aim, it seeks to answer the following sub-problems:

1. In which domains do teachers possess professional autonomy?
2. According to teachers, what are the effects of professional autonomy?

## Conceptual Framework

### Professional Development

The concept of professionalism is based on specific criteria that must be fulfilled for an occupation to be recognized by society. Wilensky (1964), from a sociological perspective, discussed the characteristics of professional occupations and emphasized that any occupation seeking to exercise professional authority must meet certain standards. These standards include possessing a technical foundation, claiming a specialized domain of authority, linking skill and competence to educational standards, and convincing the public that its services are unique and reliable. The recognition of an occupation as a profession grants it autonomy; consequently, its members attain power, prestige, and both material and immaterial rewards (Albayraktaroğlu, 2010). Therefore, every occupational group strives for professionalization in order to achieve both social esteem and institutional strength.

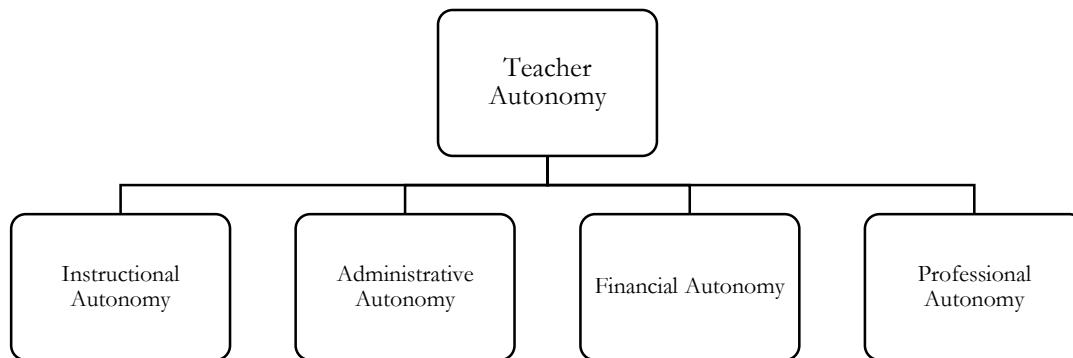
In contemporary society, technological advancements and growing specialization have accelerated the professionalization of many occupations. Within this framework, teaching is increasingly recognized as a professional field. Teacher professionalism is linked to performing instructional duties at the highest standards, enhancing students' knowledge, and striving for excellence in classroom practices (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005). Furthermore, teacher education, professional practice, and institutional structures together foster a coherent professional identity that distinguishes teaching from other occupations (Buyruk, 2015). Research also highlights the multidimensional nature of teacher professionalism, which rests on three core dimensions: the accumulation of knowledge and skills, the balance between responsibility and authority, and professional autonomy (Carlgren, 1999; Furlong, 2001; Lai & Lo, 2007). Consequently, teaching extends beyond individual expertise to encompass institutional, ethical, and social responsibilities. Professional development thus emerges as an essential process for strengthening teachers' professional identity and enabling them to meet societal expectations effectively.

### Teacher Autonomy

Teacher autonomy refers to the scope of authority and freedom that teachers possess in planning, implementing, and making decisions regarding their professional activities. When teachers have a broader range of action and decision-making authority in the educational process, it directly affects the quality of instruction (Ayrar et al., 2014). Little (1995) associates teacher autonomy with the capacity to act independently, to engage in critical reflection, to actively participate in decision-making processes, and to adopt an objective stance. This perspective indicates that teacher autonomy is not limited to individual instructional practices; on the contrary, it encompasses the competence to take an active role in professional decision-making mechanisms and thereby contribute to the education system at a more comprehensive level.

Many researchers (Ingersoll, 2007; Pearson & Moomaw, 2005) emphasize that teaching, as a high-status professional occupation, requires advanced knowledge and skills. Accordingly, they argue that one of the essential components of teacher professionalization is the strengthening of professional autonomy. Various reform initiatives have been implemented in many countries with the aim of recognizing teaching as a professional occupation. However, compared to professionals in other specialized fields, teachers are unable to attain sufficient level of autonomy. According to Ingersoll (2007), in order for an individual to be recognized as an expert in any field, it is imperative that they possess authority and a voice over the practices within that field. Therefore, considering teaching as a profession of expertise, it becomes evident that decisions regarding how instruction should be conducted ought to be made by teachers themselves, who are the experts in this domain (Webb, 2002).

## Dimensions of Teacher Autonomy



**Figure 1.** Dimensions of Teacher Autonomy (Karabacak, 2014)

Teacher autonomy is conceptualized in four dimensions: instructional, administrative, financial, and personal/professional autonomy (Karabacak, 2014), as shown in Figure 1. Instructional autonomy encompasses teachers' authority to make decisions regarding the instructional process, such as setting educational objectives, designing appropriate learning environments, and providing guidance (Wong Lai-ngok, 2004). Administrative autonomy involves the ability to oversee the implementation of decisions related to school operations and to collaborate effectively with school administration (Karabacak, 2014). Financial autonomy refers to teachers' participation in budget planning and resource management processes, as well as the capacity of schools to manage their own financial resources (Gürsoy, 2020). In the context of personal and professional autonomy, teacher autonomy is related to the professional competencies teachers possess, including their values, professional knowledge, and practical skills (Steh & Pozarnik, 2005). Teachers' personal and professional autonomy is directly linked to the level of knowledge and skills they have acquired; thus, high-quality pre-service education plays a critical role in enhancing their professional competencies (Castle, 2004; Webb, 2002). However, autonomy is not a static competence acquired once, but rather a dynamic process that teachers must continuously develop throughout their professional careers (Bustingorry, 2008). For this process to advance effectively, in-service training programs, peer collaborations, and joint professional activities provide significant contributions to strengthening teachers' autonomy and enabling them to make more informed decisions.

## Effects of Teacher Autonomy

The quality of the educational environment depends on teachers' ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities independently and effectively. In this regard, teacher autonomy encompasses elements such as pedagogical decision-making, developing alternative practices, and exercising individual initiative (Friedman, 1999; Ingersoll, 2007). DeVries and Kohlberg's (1987) constructivist approach defines teacher autonomy not merely as a matter of preference, but as a responsibility requiring critical thinking and contributions to pedagogical content. Teaching should be personalized in a way that enables students to acquire skills such as independent decision-making, problem-solving, and knowledge construction; therefore, teacher autonomy directly supports learner autonomy as well. Teachers' professional autonomy is of critical importance, as it allows them to design appropriate learning environments and effectively support their students (Castle, 2004).

Cribb and Gewirtz's (2007, p. 206) assertion that "What is good for teachers is good for learning" strikingly highlights the positive contribution of teacher autonomy to the educational process. When teachers feel autonomous and supported, they increase their professional efforts and are able to provide more effective and inclusive education for students with diverse needs and backgrounds. Furthermore, teacher autonomy enhances classroom learning processes by fostering meaningful and continuous professional development. Teachers who can control their own professional development decisions and act independently are better positioned to engage in deeper learning processes and to develop new instructional strategies tailored to the needs of their students (Chachkhiani, 2023).

## Factors Limiting Teacher Autonomy

The increasing standardization in education, competitive educational policies, and the centralist perspective prevalent in administrative approaches significantly constrain teachers' professional autonomy. Elements such as the rigid structure of curricula, the pressure of standardized testing, performance evaluations, and constant supervision restrict teachers' freedom in pedagogical decision-making, confining instruction within a narrow framework (Cerit, 2012). A study conducted in England revealed that current curriculum and assessment arrangements compelled teachers to emphasize standardized outcomes, particularly in mathematics and English, which limited opportunities for engaged learning and undermined students' well-being and social justice. The findings highlighted how the strong focus on attainment rather than participation in learning shaped teachers' instructional planning and narrowed the scope of classroom practices (Hargreaves et al., 2023). A similar situation is observed in Türkiye, where Gürsoy (2020) notes that teachers lack sufficient authority and freedom regarding curriculum and lesson content, which creates various obstacles in preparing materials tailored to students' needs. This situation is considered to transform teachers into passive implementers merely fulfilling assigned tasks, thereby negatively affecting the quality of instruction.

A bureaucratic administrative structure undermines teachers' initiative in decision-making processes, thereby limiting their professional autonomy (Cerit, 2012; Türk, 2010). Additionally, societal attitudes toward the teaching profession and parents' expectations also influence teachers' professional behavior and decision-making processes. Ineffective communication with parents, excessive workloads, and parents' misconceptions about education undermine the meaning of teachers' educational objectives and lead to teachers becoming alienated from their profession (Tsang & Liu, 2016). Presenting teaching not as a specialized profession defined by law but as a job that anyone can perform reduces the social prestige of the profession and weakens its professional identity (Çetin & Özalp, 2019). On the other hand, a reliable and supportive school climate enhances teachers' opportunities to participate in decision-making and to take risks, thereby strengthening their professional autonomy and helping them feel freer in their roles (Sparks, 2012). However, since teachers have the least control over their professional development processes, they tend to exhibit less autonomous behavior in this area, indicating that autonomy in professional development is the most limited dimension of teacher autonomy (Çolak et al., 2017).

## Method

### Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed to examine teachers' views and perceptions regarding their professional autonomy in depth, to incorporate multiple perspectives, to identify the factors involved, and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the problem (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A phenomenological design, characterized by its descriptive nature and focus on individual experiences rather than collective data sources, was utilized (Moustakas, 1994). Accordingly, the present study aimed to determine the meanings teachers attribute to the phenomenon of teacher autonomy based on their lived experiences and to reveal the effects of this phenomenon.

### Study Group

The study group consisted of 20 teachers working in public schools (kindergarten, primary, middle, and high school levels) in Istanbul during the 2023-2024 academic year. The study group was determined using the snowball sampling method. In this sampling method, individuals who are part of the population relevant to the research problem serve as intermediaries to reach other individuals and sources who may have knowledge about the research problem, thereby initiating a chain sampling process (Gürbüz, 2018). This approach is particularly useful in identifying participants who possess rich and experience-based insights on the research topic. In practice, the process began with questions such as "Who might have the most knowledge on this issue?" and "Whom would you recommend I speak with regarding this topic?" (Patton, 1987, p. 56). Furthermore, snowball sampling has been noted as an effective strategy in contexts where trust, accessibility, and sensitivity are critical, since participants are more likely to recommend others within their professional circles who can provide reliable and in-depth perspectives (Punch, 1998). In this respect, the method was preferred in the present study not only

to overcome potential access challenges but also to ensure that participants with direct experience and credibility were included. This strategy enabled the researchers to examine teachers' views and perceptions regarding their professional autonomy in depth, to incorporate multiple perspectives, to identify the factors involved, and ultimately to develop a comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the problem, thereby strengthening the methodological consistency of the sampling process. Participants included in the study group were selected based on various variables such as school level, subject area, seniority, and gender in order to ensure diversity in their working environments and to include unique cases in the research. Accordingly, maximum variation sampling was employed to select individuals capable of describing the main problem of the study and the perceptions related to it. The findings regarding the participants' demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of the Study Group

| Participants | Gender | Educational Level | Subject Area          | Seniority | School Level   |
|--------------|--------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------|----------------|
| T1           | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Preschool Teaching    | 8         | Kindergarten   |
| T2           | Female | Bachelor's Degree | English               | 20        | Primary School |
| T3           | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Mathematics           | 8         | High School    |
| T4           | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Preschool Teaching    | 3         | Middle School  |
| T5           | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Turkish Lan. and Lit. | 3         | High School    |
| T6           | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Classroom Teaching    | 8         | Primary School |
| T7           | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Classroom Teaching    | 12        | Primary School |
| T8           | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Rel. Cul. & Eth. Edu. | 4         | Middle School  |
| T9           | Male   | Master's Degree   | Music                 | 5         | Middle School  |
| T10          | Male   | Bachelor's Degree | Rel. Cul. & Eth. Edu. | 5         | High School    |
| T11          | Male   | Bachelor's Degree | Chemistry             | 9         | High School    |
| T12          | Male   | Bachelor's Degree | Music                 | 1         | High School    |
| T13          | Male   | Bachelor's Degree | Social Studies        | 8         | Middle School  |
| T14          | Female | Master's Degree   | Preschool Teaching    | 8         | Kindergarten   |
| T15          | Male   | Master's Degree   | Classroom Teaching    | 24        | Primary School |
| T16          | Female | Master's Degree   | Classroom Teaching    | 6         | Primary School |
| T17          | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Preschool Teaching    | 7         | Middle School  |
| T18          | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Child Development     | 20        | High School    |
| T19          | Male   | Bachelor's Degree | Science Education     | 30        | Middle School  |
| T20          | Female | Bachelor's Degree | Preschool Teaching    | 15        | Kindergarten   |

As table 1 shows, it is observed that 13 of the teachers participating in the study are female and 7 are male. An examination of the participants' educational backgrounds shows that the study was conducted with 16 teachers holding a bachelor's degree and 4 holding a master's degree. The seniority of the teachers, who work in different subject areas and school levels, ranges from 1 to 30 years.

### Data Collection

Before the data collection process began, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Social and Human Sciences Research of Yıldız Technical University (approval dated 06.06.2024 and numbered 2024.06). Data for the study were collected using a semi-structured interview form developed by the researcher based on the relevant literature and expert opinions. The interview form consisted of two sections: one including demographic information about the participants, and the other comprising pre-prepared questions related to the research topic. The interview form consists of 3 main questions (e.g., 'As a teacher, in which aspects of your profession do you feel autonomous?') and 6 probe questions (e.g., 'In your opinion, how does your professional autonomy affect your classroom management skills?'). The questions were prepared by considering their suitability for the interview technique and their practical applicability; they were first piloted through an initial interview conducted with a participant working as a special education and intellectual disabilities teacher at the middle school level. The data obtained from this pilot interview were not included in the research findings. The final version of the form was revised based on evaluations from field experts. The experts consisted of two academics specialized in educational administration and one academic with experience in qualitative research methods. These experts were consulted regarding the alignment of the findings with the research purpose, the clarity of interpretations, and their relationship with the literature before proceeding to the data collection

process. To elaborate on the data or fill in information gaps during interviews, additional probing questions were asked when necessary (Karataş, 2017). In order to provide flexibility in terms of time and location, interviews were conducted in two formats: some were held online (Yıkıms, 2020), while others were conducted face-to-face. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, with emphasis placed on the voluntary nature of participation. Participants' personal information was kept confidential in accordance with ethical principles, and anonymity was ensured during data analysis and reporting by assigning each participant a code such as T1, T2, T3, and so forth.

### **Data Analysis**

In this study, which employed content analysis for data interpretation, interview recordings were first transcribed in accordance with the data analysis stages proposed by Marshall and Rossman (2014). To ensure data familiarity- one of the most crucial steps in data analysis- the transcribed data were read and reflected upon multiple times. This process, also referred to as "immersion in the data" (Barbour, 2014), was followed by the creation of codes from similar and interrelated data segments. In the next stage, the generated codes were categorized under themes and subthemes determined based on the research questions, aiming for a holistic understanding of the data. Participants' similar or recurring views were evaluated under the same themes and presented together as codes in the tables created. While reporting the findings, similarities and differences in teachers' narratives regarding their working conditions, daily practices, labor processes, and the meanings they attributed to professional autonomy were identified and synthesized through the participants' own accounts and interpreted with input from multiple researchers.

### **Validity and Reliability**

To ensure the internal validity (credibility) of the study, the steps proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) for establishing credibility were followed (as cited in Ersoy, 2016). Accordingly, teachers' views on professional autonomy were compared with findings from previous studies on teacher autonomy to establish connections with the literature, and the extent to which the findings answered the initial research questions was evaluated. The accuracy of the findings was verified through expert opinions, and the data were carefully analyzed to identify the main themes and subthemes emerging from teachers' statements. Teachers' thoughts, expressed in their own words, were included in the study to make the findings more comprehensible. Similar views of different teachers on the same topics were compared to check the internal consistency of the findings, and the consistency of the results with findings from other relevant studies was examined. In cases where the findings contradicted those of previous studies, possible reasons for these discrepancies were discussed. Regarding external validity (transferability), Braun and Clarke (2013) state that in qualitative research, the diversity of the sample should be questioned to determine whether it allows for generalization. In the present study, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, the study group was composed of teachers from different school levels, subject areas, and levels of seniority.

As part of the reliability efforts, during data analysis, steps were taken to enhance internal reliability by adhering to a pre-established and thoroughly defined conceptual framework, and by incorporating the perspectives of other researchers during the analysis process (Gagnon, 2010; as cited in Ersoy, 2016). Regarding external reliability- which Lincoln and Guba (1985) define as the ability of other researchers to independently reproduce and verify the results, with intersubjective agreement as its primary criterion- the research process was described in detail. All procedures related to data collection, processing, analysis, interpretation, and drawing conclusions were shared transparently to enable verification.

### **Findings**

The findings of the study, which aimed to identify teachers' views on professional autonomy, are presented below in accordance with the sub-problems determined for the research.

## Findings on the Areas in Which Professional Autonomy Is Practiced

The data obtained from the responses to the interview question developed in line with the relevant sub-problem of the study were analyzed. As a result of the analysis, the areas in which professional autonomy is exercised were evaluated across different dimensions, and teachers' views on these areas were grouped into three subthemes: "curriculum", "selection and use of instructional materials" and "assessment and evaluation". The findings related to these themes are explained in detail below.

### Curriculum

Within the scope of the study, teachers stated that although they felt free to choose instructional materials based on their personal preferences and abilities, they generally had to adhere to the framework provided by the curriculum.

*"The target learning outcomes in our curriculum are mandatory. I select activities that can address the learning outcomes specified in the annual plan. For example, I feel free when it comes to visual and auditory materials. I feel that I choose activities and practices based on my personal skills or areas of interest" (T2)*

Teachers stated that due to limited technological resources, they experienced difficulties in implementing the curriculum content, and therefore, in situations where they were unable to meet the ideal conditions for curriculum implementation, they exercised a limited degree of autonomy by adapting the program. An example of a teacher's statement reflecting efforts to adapt and personalize the curriculum under constrained resources is presented below.

*"I let the students hear the sound of the piano through a piano application on my phone. For instance, there are students who have never heard the sound of a piano. In such cases, I step in and try to reach the students by slightly modifying or adjusting the content of the curriculum." (T12)*

One teacher stated that the curriculum does not sufficiently reflect current developments and scientific understandings, while another teacher indicated that they are compelled to align the instructional content with centralized examinations. Teachers expressed that they do not have the autonomy to act contrary to these requirements, as illustrated in the following statements.

*"There used to be the Theory of Evolution under the topic of heredity; however, they removed the theory somehow. We cannot teach it in class, can we? We don't have any autonomy there. Now, the main topics are provided, and we try to deliver our lessons based on these given topics." (T19)*

*"Because there is a curriculum prepared by the Ministry of National Education, and we are obliged to adhere to it. Moreover, there is also a restriction from the students' perspective, since questions in the centralized exams are based on the curriculum prepared by the Ministry of Education, which means we cannot go beyond it." (T11)*

The participants of the study indicated that they possess only partial autonomy when it comes to personalizing the curriculum content. They stated that the level of this autonomy varies depending on factors such as their professional knowledge and experience, the individual characteristics and needs of their students, the content of the course, and the specific features of the instructional methods employed. Additionally, the type of course, the facilities of the teaching environment, and the adequacy of available technological resources directly affect teachers' capacity to personalize the curriculum content. Teachers emphasized that the combination of all these factors limits the flexibility available for their pedagogical preferences, thereby preventing them from acting completely independently in instructional processes.

### Selection and Use of Instructional Materials

Teachers stated that when they do not have access to various tools and materials, they design and use their own materials, expressing that they feel autonomous in this regard. However, they also pointed out that the prohibition against using resources outside those designated by the Ministry of National Education standardizes their instructional strategies and material usage in the classroom, thereby restricting their professional autonomy.

One participant explained that teacher autonomy is highly limited in terms of textbooks and instructional materials, which constrains teachers' ability to select and use their own methods and materials, as follows:

*"The textbooks come from the Ministry of National Education. There is no chance of having students purchase any additional resources from outside. The books are already sent by the Ministry, and we distribute them. After distribution, we are required to use them. Immediately afterward, we receive an instruction stating, 'Do not ask any parents to buy supplementary materials.' So, in that regard, there is absolutely no autonomy. You don't have the option to decide, for example, 'This year I will teach science using this particular book'; you are obliged to teach with whichever book has been provided." (T19)*

### **Assessment and Evaluation**

Teachers' views on their professional autonomy in the area of assessment and evaluation were generally coded as "I am obliged to comply with common exams" and "I have partial autonomy". The following statements by teachers illustrate this situation.

*"I used to determine the assessment criteria for my course independently. However, this year, a standardized assessment process was implemented. Since the number of exams, the number of questions, and even the distribution of questions across topics were predetermined by a certain group, the assessment process was somewhat lacking in comprehensiveness." (T18)*

*"We do not have a high degree of autonomy. Although it is stated to the students that formal exams have been abolished, we are still required to assign grades through formative assessment activities. Did I choose this practice myself? No." (T16)*

Based on participants' statements, it can be understood that teachers' autonomy in assessment and evaluation processes is limited. Although teachers report having a certain degree of freedom in determining the criteria related to course content, they indicate that this autonomy has been significantly restricted with the introduction of common examinations. It can be stated that the centralized determination of factors such as the number of exams, the number of questions, and the content in common assessments narrows teachers' decision-making authority in the assessment process and standardizes the process, thereby reducing teacher initiative.

### **Findings Regarding the Effects of Professional Autonomy**

The second sub-problem of the study aims to identify teachers' views on the effects of professional autonomy. In this context, the collected data were analyzed, and as a result of the analysis, teachers' views on the effects of professional autonomy were categorized under two sub-themes: "instructional processes" and "professional development." The findings related to these themes are presented in detail below.

#### **Instructional Processes**

Teachers state that professional autonomy in instructional processes enhances student motivation and learning outcome, promotes inclusivity, and encourages active student participation. They also highlight positive effects such as the adoption of innovative and creative teaching practices, the development of effective classroom management skills, and the ability of teachers to serve as role models. Some examples of teachers' views in this regard are presented below:

*"The more competent and effective the teacher's actions are, the more students recognize the teacher's authority and effectiveness. Consequently, they place greater importance on the learning process and understand the necessity of acquiring the knowledge." (T18)*

*"Certainly, having professional autonomy enables me to be more productive and allows the methods I employ in teaching to become more innovative and effective. I do not feel compelled to adhere strictly to traditional methods." (T8)*

*"When I establish my own rules or implement plans I have developed independently of the curriculum, classroom management becomes significantly more effective. It becomes easier for me to establish coordination among the students, and it facilitates their quick understanding and application of the classroom rules." (T1)*

A teacher advocating a balanced and pragmatic approach to autonomy expresses that autonomy should possess a structure that both encourages freedom and ensures order in classroom management, as stated in the following words:

*“Individuals who feel a sense of freedom are particularly better able to manage their classrooms, which encompass multiple dimensions such as behavioral management and time management. From this perspective, I believe that when teachers feel autonomous, it positively contributes to classroom management. However, I also think that this autonomy should not be perceived as entirely limitless, as an excessively broad scope of autonomy may lead to difficulties in maintaining effective classroom management.” (T15)*

Overall, teachers argue that having autonomy, particularly in classroom processes, enhances the quality of educational services in multiple ways. Teacher autonomy enables the adoption of innovative and effective instructional methods, freeing teachers from the obligation to adhere to traditional patterns and thereby improving the quality of lessons. In terms of classroom management, the ability of teachers to establish their own plans and rules facilitates the coordination of student behavior and the adoption and implementation of classroom rules. However, teachers also emphasize the importance of a balanced approach to autonomy, noting that a perception of unlimited autonomy may lead to confusion in classroom management. Therefore, autonomy should have a structure that supports freedom while maintaining a certain level of order.

### ***Professional Development***

According to the findings under the sub-theme of professional development, teachers believe that autonomy enhances job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity, while also improving self-management and self-regulation skills, and strengthening their research abilities and creativity. Additionally, opportunities and benefits such as the expansion of academic career prospects, collaborative learning, gaining experience, and increased levels of self-confidence and self-esteem are also associated with autonomy by teachers. Some examples of teachers' views in this regard are presented below:

*“I genuinely appreciate having the freedom to teach in a way that sustains my motivation and allows me to enjoy my work. This sense of autonomy also creates a more comfortable environment for the students. Over the course of twenty years, I feel that I have developed my own system, which has made me more efficient and improved my ability to find immediate solutions. It has enabled me to feel more at ease in classroom management and in maintaining student motivation. When I feel free, I also engage in research, observe, read, and explore what others are doing, selecting and adapting the positive aspects to develop my own teaching methods through experimentation.” (T2)*

*“The teacher should identify the specific needs of their own class. In the process of determining the needs of the students, the teacher also recognizes their own areas for improvement and thus engages in self-development accordingly.” (T7)*

*“Currently, teachers pursuing postgraduate education are allowed to take days off, which, in my opinion, provides them with an opportunity to deepen their expertise if they wish to further develop themselves in their field. This enables teachers to transform their work into a personal source of satisfaction. Therefore, it is also significant in terms of job satisfaction; in fact, I feel more fulfilled. Being able to design my lessons as I wish naturally increases my motivation. For me, making and implementing my own decisions leads me to love my job more and strengthens my commitment to it.” (T9)*

*“Professional autonomy allows me the freedom to determine my own pedagogical approaches and instructional methods. Being able to make my own decisions and freely exercise my creativity increases the enjoyment I derive from my work. This, in turn, enhances both my job satisfaction and motivation.” (T6)*

The findings obtained in the context of professional development indicate that teacher autonomy is a significant factor in enhancing job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity. Teachers report that autonomy provides them with opportunities to develop their own pedagogical approaches, experiment with new methods through research, and freely exercise their creativity; these processes strengthen their professional competencies and make their lessons more effective. Accordingly, it can be stated that autonomy not only enables teachers to better analyze their students' needs but also helps them recognize their own shortcomings and improve themselves accordingly.

### **Discussion**

This study aimed to identify teachers' views on professional autonomy. The findings revealed that teachers experience professional autonomy mainly in three areas: curriculum planning, material selection, and assessment and evaluation. The research findings indicate that teachers possess a certain degree of flexibility in the curriculum, which is shaped by factors such as student needs, course content, and available technological

resources. Studies in the literature show that even in the most centralized and controlling education systems, the closed structure of the classroom environment grants teachers a certain level of freedom and decision-making authority. Although teacher autonomy can be limited by the education system and school policies, teachers retain some control over participating in decision-making processes within the classroom and creating suitable learning environments for their students. Within the closed structure of the classroom, teachers can guide the instructional process based on their professional experience and their students' needs. According to the findings of Bümen et al. (2014), despite Turkey's centralized education system, teachers are able to personalize the Ministry of National Education's curricula by considering students' individual differences and their own teaching experiences. Similarly, Canbolat (2020) emphasized that even though teachers have limited authority, they take responsibility for making adjustments to the curriculum by considering students' needs. In line with this, Çolak et al. (2017) noted that teachers exhibit greater autonomy particularly during the implementation phase of the curriculum, and that their authority over aspects such as deciding on course content and duration, as well as student assessment, are key elements strengthening their perceptions of autonomy.

The research findings indicate that teachers have partial autonomy in the selection of instructional materials. The financial resources of the school and the students play a decisive role in teachers' material choices. Although participants reported that they did not face difficulties in developing and using their own materials, they noted a lack of autonomy regarding the use of supplementary resources, emphasizing that it is prohibited to require students to purchase books other than those designated by the ministry. This lack of autonomy undermines teachers' sense of professionalism and restricts their ability to address diverse student learning styles through creative approaches. In Türkiye, teachers are granted limited authority over course content, materials, and instructional methods, and they are expected to strictly follow detailed curricula and are subjected to supervision throughout this process (Özaslan, 2015; Öztürk, 2011). In contrast, in countries where teacher autonomy is valued, instructional content is defined more flexibly, and teachers are granted a voice in content selection (Eurydice, 2008). Based on this, it can be stated that the ability of teachers to flexibly adapt course content is of great importance in addressing students' varying learning speeds, interests, and learning styles, and that centralized curricula constrain this flexibility.

When teacher autonomy is examined in terms of assessment and evaluation practices, it becomes evident that the obligation to comply with centralized and standardized examinations leads to significant problems. The predetermined criteria in the centralized exam system constrain teachers' evaluation processes within rigid frameworks and prevent them from acting flexibly. This situation limits teachers to assessing only whether students have acquired specific objectives and behaviors, making it impossible to evaluate moral values, virtues, and other holistic developmental areas. Furthermore, the centrally determined exam content and scheduling hinder teachers from using their own unique assessment tools and from considering students' diverse learning styles. In particular, the predominant use of multiple-choice questions proves inadequate for measuring students' higher-order thinking, analytical, and problem-solving skills. Additionally, external factors such as pressure from parents and school administrators weaken teachers' perceptions of autonomy, causing them to focus solely on exam results during the assessment process. In this respect, alternative assessment approaches such as portfolios, performance-based tasks, and authentic assessment methods can play a vital role in enhancing teacher autonomy and providing a more comprehensive evaluation of student learning. These methods allow teachers to exercise professional judgment, design context-sensitive assessment tools, and capture students' progress across cognitive, affective, and social domains. Moreover, by enabling the measurement of critical thinking, creativity, and real-world problem-solving skills, alternative assessments not only reduce the restrictive influence of centralized examinations but also empower teachers to align evaluation practices with broader educational goals. Thus, incorporating such approaches alongside standardized testing may strengthen both the validity of assessment processes and teachers' sense of professional autonomy.

The research findings revealed that professional autonomy provides numerous positive contributions to the instructional process from teachers' perspectives. Teachers stated that autonomy increases students' motivation and learning outcome, strengthens student-centered approaches, and plays a significant role in addressing students' individual expectations and needs. They believe that the autonomy they possess will enhance their professional competencies, thereby improving the quality of education and academic success. The primary goal of teachers should be to provide equitable and fair education to students, who are the most important element

of the instructional process. In this context, Şahin (2011) emphasized that teachers should effectively consider students' individual differences and determine appropriate learning paces and methods for each student. Çelikten et al. (2005) highlighted that knowing their students, monitoring them to contribute to their individual development, and preparing them for society are fundamental elements of teachers' professional responsibilities. The findings of Kılınç et al. (2018) also demonstrated that teacher autonomy increases the effectiveness of classroom management by creating a student-centered classroom environment. From this perspective, the results of the present study indicate that teacher autonomy supports student-centered instructional processes by enabling individualized education.

Most teachers participating in the study expressed their belief that professional autonomy would have positive effects on the instructional process, particularly by increasing pedagogical diversity and enriching teaching practices. Teachers noted that autonomy provides them with opportunities to implement different instructional methods, better respond to students' individual needs, and create a more creative classroom environment. However, a limited number of teachers expressed concerns that teacher autonomy could lead to uncertainty and chaos in classroom management, cause deviations from the objectives of the curriculum, and consequently increase inequalities among students. The research conducted by Cribb and Gewirtz (2007) on autonomy in education also supports these concerns, indicating that autonomy may negatively affect equal opportunities in classrooms and deepen disparities among students through teachers' practices. These findings demonstrate that although teacher autonomy offers significant advantages in pedagogical processes, it also carries potential risks that could undermine the principle of equity in education if not carefully planned.

From the perspective of professional development, the research findings indicate that teachers, through autonomy, feel more competent in their profession, achieve job satisfaction, and experience increased motivation. This facilitates their active participation in continuous learning processes, experimentation with new pedagogical approaches, and, consequently, their professional growth. Autonomy has been found to enhance teachers' self-management and self-assessment skills, enabling them to develop a more independent and responsible professional identity. Autonomous teachers enrich their learning environments by employing their research skills and creativity, which contributes both to their academic careers and positively influences students' learning experiences. As Şen and Erişen (2002) emphasized, effective teachers are known for their openness to innovation, which is a significant source that nurtures their autonomous behaviors. Teachers in the present study also stated that they value autonomy as a source of personal fulfillment. The evidence obtained in this research is consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2013) and Bandura's (1997) explanations of motivation and self-efficacy and their relationship with autonomy. Teachers view autonomy as a factor influencing their passion for their work, professional development, and commitment to their organizations. In line with Self-Determination Theory, autonomy represents a fundamental psychological need that nurtures intrinsic motivation and fosters sustained engagement in professional tasks (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Self-Determination Theory highlights the centrality of autonomy alongside two basic psychological needs: competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017, 2020). Autonomy involves experiencing one's actions as self-directed rather than externally controlled; competence refers to feeling effective in meeting challenges; and relatedness reflects the need for supportive, meaningful social connections. From this perspective, autonomy is a natural human necessity, requiring individuals to feel capable and responsible for the outcomes of their actions (Deci & Ryan, 2013). When teachers perceive themselves as autonomous agents, they are more likely to experience a sense of competence and relatedness, which strengthens their professional identity and enhances long-term commitment to educational goals. Applied to teaching, this suggests that autonomy is not only vital for effective instructional practices but also for enhancing teachers' job satisfaction, sustaining motivation, and supporting long-term career development. Bayraktar (2019), in his study examining the relationship between teacher autonomy and organizational commitment, also reached similar conclusions. Within the scope of this research, teachers indicated that by evaluating feedback from students, they reassessed their instructional methods and developed new strategies, thus fostering a reciprocal learning process with their students. This reciprocal learning process increases teachers' professional satisfaction and extends their tenure in the teaching profession (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Warner-Griffin et al., 2018). Therefore, it can be argued that teacher professional autonomy has a transformative potential in education. However, it is important for teachers to balance autonomy with responsibility and to align student-centered approaches with the objectives of the curriculum. This underscores

the necessity for teachers to continuously prioritize their professional development and for schools to provide adequate support to teachers.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

It is a well-established fact that teacher autonomy becomes functional through the continuous development of the social and cultural dynamics within the education system. This situation necessitates profound changes in educational processes to support teachers' professional development. Historically, teachers have not only transmitted knowledge but have also been active participants shaping the learning process. At this point, it should be noted that teacher autonomy is a complex concept that requires a balance between complete independence and managerial support. While full autonomy may be exhausting for teachers due to increased responsibilities, a professional balance should be maintained to support teachers' participation in decision-making processes and their access to professional development opportunities. Especially, granting teachers a say in curriculum decisions will not only enhance the quality of pedagogical practices but also increase their level of professional satisfaction. Nevertheless, managerial support and a consistent structure are also essential to expand teachers' areas of autonomy while ensuring accountability. Understanding the limiting factors of teacher autonomy and adopting a solution-oriented approach are critically important to support teachers' professional development and to improve efficiency in education. In this regard, when the recently introduced Maarif Education Model in Türkiye is evaluated in the context of teacher professional autonomy, it can be observed that teachers' perspectives have not been sufficiently represented and that the process could have been conducted with broader participation. The model has been presented as an approach emphasizing values education and a local-national perspective within the Turkish education system. While it aims to equip individuals with moral, spiritual, and cultural values, it also provides a specific framework to guide teachers. However, when considered in terms of teacher autonomy, this model becomes open to debate. It can be argued that the framework offered by the Maarif Education Model has the potential to limit teachers' individual decision-making processes and pedagogical autonomy. The model requires curriculum content and methods to be structured around certain values, which may restrict teachers' autonomy in selecting pedagogical methods suitable for students' needs, designing course content, and developing innovative practices. Within this scope, policies that both strengthen teachers' autonomy and encourage a critical perspective could be developed. Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are considered important for contributing to the development of professional autonomy, strengthening teachers' professional identities, and improving the quality of the instructional process:

- It is recommended that teachers' opinions be taken into account when preparing curricula, and that teachers be granted greater decision-making authority in areas such as determining course content, selecting materials, and adapting instructional methods.
- It is suggested to establish advisory boards that will ensure the active participation of teachers in the process of formulating educational policies; to base decisions on scientific data supported by field research and pilot implementations; and to develop long-term strategic plans to ensure sustainability in education, which will contribute to strengthening teacher autonomy at the institutional level.
- In order to support teachers' autonomous practices by encouraging them to take on more responsibility, it is essential to increase opportunities for their professional development. Accordingly, it is recommended to create an environment where teachers can continuously renew themselves by offering various training programs and platforms tailored to their demands and areas of interest. Unlike the current Teacher Information Network [Öğretmen Bilişim Ağı] system, which primarily provides standardized and centrally designed content, the proposed approach emphasizes flexibility, personalization, and teacher agency by allowing educators to select and engage in programs aligned with their individual needs and professional goals.
- It is proposed that teachers take greater initiative and work in collaboration with parents to better meet the individual expectations and needs of their students.

### Limitations

The findings obtained in this study are limited to the views of the teachers included in the research group. Additionally, the focus of the study on the experiences of teachers working in public schools, the limited generalizability inherent in the phenomenological research design, and the confinement of the study to a specific time period- which prevented the examination of potential changes in teachers' perceptions of professional autonomy at different stages of their careers- are among the limitations of this research. Furthermore, the measurement tool used in the study is open to subjective evaluations, which constitutes another limitation.

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### Statements of Publication Ethics

We hereby declare that the study has not unethical issues and that research and publication ethics have been observed carefully.

### Researchers' Contribution Rate

The study was conducted and reported with equal collaboration among the researchers.

### Ethics Committee Approval Information

Ethics committee approval was obtained for this study from the Yıldız Technical University, Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee, with its decision dated 06/06/2024 and numbered 2024.06.

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## GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Artan toplumsal beklentiler ve küresel dönüşümlerin etkisiyle öğretmenlik mesleği önemli bir değişim sürecine girmiş, öğretmenlerin sorumlulukları artmış ve eğitim sürecinde daha fazla söz sahibi olmaları gerekliliği ortaya çıkmıştır (Eurydice, 2008). Bu bağlamda özerklik, öğretmenlerin motivasyonunu ve genel iyilik halini etkileyen temel bir unsur olarak öne çıkmaktadır (Ryan & Deci, 2021). Nitekim öğretmen özerkliği, okulun etkililiği, güçlü öğretim uygulamaları, öğrenci başarısı ve öğretmenlerin iş tatmini gibi unsurlarla yakından ilişkilidir (Dierking & Fox, 2012; Marshik vd., 2017; Olivant, 2015). Ayrıca öğretmenlerin sınıf içi karar alma süreçlerinde sahip oldukları özerklik, meslekte kalma nedenleri arasında önemli bir yer tutmaktadır (Park & Johnson, 2019; Tison, 2022).

Literatürdeki çalışmaların büyük bölümü öğrenen özerkliğine (Grote, 2019; Keyes, 2018; Lima, 2023; Mendoza, 2024) ve yönetici özerkliğine (Limon & Aydın, 2020) odaklanırken, öğretmen özerkliği konusundaki araştırmaların sınırlı kaldığı dikkat çekmektedir. Oysa öğrencinin özerkliği, öğretmenin özerkliği ile doğrudan ilişkilidir. Bu bağlamda Türkiye’de öğretmen özerkliğinin farklı değişkenlerle ilişkisini inceleyen çeşitli çalışmalar mevcuttur. Örneğin, Karabacak (2014) öğretmenlerin özerklik ve öz yeterlik algıları arasındaki ilişkiyi; Özdemir ve Turan (2018) okul müdürlerinin manipülatif davranışlarının öğretmen özerkliği üzerindeki etkilerini; Şentürken ve Oğuz (2020) ise öğretmen özerkliği ile iş doyumu arasındaki ilişkiyi ele almıştır. Bu çalışmalar, öğretmen özerkliğinin çeşitli bireysel ve örgütsel değişkenlerle etkileşim halinde olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Öğretmen özerkliğinin, eğitim sistemi kadar öğretmenin mesleki gelişim düzeyi, okulun işbirlikçi yapısı ve fizikî olanaklarıyla da yakından ilişkili olduğu söylenebilir. Bu bağlamda, mevcut araştırmada öğretmenlerin profesyonel gelişiminde meslekî özerkliğin rolünü belirlemek amaçlanmış ve bu genel amaç doğrultusunda aşağıdaki alt problemlere yanıt aranmıştır:

1. Öğretmenler hangi alanlarda mesleki özerkliğe sahiptirler?
2. Öğretmenlere göre mesleki özerkliğin etkileri nelerdir?

Nitel bir araştırma deseni benimsenen çalışmada, öğretmenlerin meslekî yaşamlarında özerkliği nasıl deneyimlediklerini derinlemesine anlamak üzere fenomenolojik bir yaklaşım kullanılmıştır. Katılımcı grubu, kartopu ve maksimum çeşitlilik örnekleme yöntemleriyle seçilen 20 öğretmenden oluşmaktadır. Veriler, ilgili literatür ve uzman görüşleri doğrultusunda geliştirilen yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu aracılığıyla toplanmış ve içerik analizi yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir.

Araştırma sonucunda, bulgular öğretmenlerin özerklik alanları ve meslekî özerkliğin etkileri olmak üzere iki ana tema altında toplanmıştır. Araştırma kapsamında elde edilen veriler, öğretmenlerin meslekî özerkliğe sahip oldukları alanların özellikle öğretim programı, materyal seçimi ve kullanımı ile ölçme-değerlendirme boyutlarında yoğunlaştığını göstermektedir. Öğretmenlerin öğretim programında belirli bir esnekliğe sahip oldukları ve bu esnekliğin öğrenci ihtiyaçları, ders içeriği ve teknolojik olanaklar gibi etkenlere bağlı olarak şekillendiği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Araştırma bulguları, öğretmenlerin materyal seçiminde kısmi bir özerkliğe sahip olduklarını ortaya koymaktadır. Okulun ve öğrencilerin maddi imkânları, materyal seçiminde belirleyici rol oynamakta; öğretmenler kendi materyallerini geliştirme ve kullanmada genellikle sorun yaşamazken, ek kaynak kullanımı konusunda sınırlamalarla karşılaştıklarını belirtmektedir. Bu durum, öğretmenlerin profesyonellik algısını zedelemekte ve yaratıcılıklarını kullanarak öğrencilerin farklı öğrenme stillerine hitap etmelerini kısıtlamaktadır. Ölçme ve değerlendirme açısından öğretmen özerkliği incelendiğinde, merkezî ve ortak sınavlara uyma zorunluluğunun önemli sorunlara yol açtığı belirlenmiştir. Merkezî sınav sisteminde ölçütlerin önceden belirlenmesi, öğretmenlerin değerlendirme süreçlerini kalıplara sıkıştırmakta ve esnek hareket edebilmelerini engellemektedir. Bu durum, öğretmenleri yalnızca öğrencilerin belirli hedef ve davranışları kazanıp kazanmadığını ölçmekle sınırlı bırakmakta; ahlâki değerler, erdemler ve diğer bütüncül gelişim alanlarının değerlendirilmesini ise neredeyse imkânsız hale getirebilmektedir. Ayrıca sınav içeriği ve zamanlamasının merkezden belirlenmesi, öğretmenlerin özgün değerlendirme araçları geliştirmelerini ve öğrencilerin farklı öğrenme stillerini dikkate almalarını güçleştirmektedir. Araştırmada, öğretmen özerkliğinin eğitim-öğretim süreçlerinde öğrencilerin motivasyonunu ve başarısını artırdığı, kapsayıcı bir öğrenme ortamı sağladığı ve aktif katılımı desteklediği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Profesyonel gelişim bağlamında ise meslekî özerkliğin öğretmenlerin mesleki doyumunu, motivasyonunu ve üretkenliğini artırdığı; ayrıca öz yönetim, öz düzenleme ve işbirlikçi öğrenme becerilerini geliştirdiği belirlenmiştir. Özerk öğretmenlerin araştırma yetenekleri ve yaratıcılıklarını kullanarak öğrenme ortamlarını

zenginleştirdikleri, bu yolla hem akademik kariyerlerine katkıda bulundukları hem de öğrencilerin öğrenme deneyimlerini olumlu yönde etkiledikleri tespit edilmiştir.

Araştırma bulgularına göre, öğretmen özerkliğinin tam bağımsızlık ile yönetsel destek arasında dengeli bir yapı gerektiren karmaşık bir kavram olduğu vurgulanmalıdır. Tam özerklik, öğretmenler için artan sorumluluklar nedeniyle yorucu olabileceken, dengeli bir yaklaşım ile öğretmenlerin karar alma süreçlerine katılımlarının ve mesleki gelişim fırsatlarına erişimlerinin desteklenmesi önem arz etmektedir. Özellikle öğretmenlerin eğitim programı kararlarında söz sahibi olmaları, pedagojik uygulamaların kalitesini artıracak gibi mesleki tatmin düzeyini de yükseltebilir. Bununla birlikte, yönetim desteği ve tutarlı bir yapı, öğretmen özerkliğinin genişlemesine katkı sağlarken hesap verebilirliği de mümkün kılabilir. Dolayısıyla, öğretmen özerkliğini kısıtlayan unsurları doğru şekilde anlamak ve çözüm odaklı bir yaklaşım benimsemek hem öğretmenlerin profesyonel gelişimi hem de eğitimde verimliliğin artırılması açısından kritik bir öneme sahiptir. Araştırma sonuçlarına dayanarak meslekî özerkliğin geliştirilmesine katkı sağlayabilecek aşağıdaki öneriler hem öğretmen meslekî kimliğini güçlendirmek hem de eğitim-öğretim sürecinin niteliğini artırmak açısından önemli görülmektedir:

- Eğitim programları hazırlanırken ders içeriklerinin öğretmen görüşleri dikkate alınarak belirlenmesi; materyal seçimi ve eğitim yöntemlerinin uyarlanması gibi konularda öğretmenlere daha fazla karar verme yetkisi tanınması önerilmektedir.
- Eğitim politikalarının belirlenmesi sürecine öğretmenlerin aktif katılımını sağlayacak danışma kurulları oluşturulması; kararların saha araştırmaları ve pilot uygulamalarla desteklenen bilimsel veriler göz önünde bulundurularak alınması ve eğitimde sürdürülebilirliği sağlayacak uzun dönemli stratejik planlamalar yapılması öğretmen özerkliğinin kurumsal düzeyde güçlendirilmesi açısından önerilmektedir.
- Öğretmenlerin daha fazla sorumluluk alarak özerk çalışmalarını desteklemek için, öncelikle mesleki gelişimlerine yönelik fırsatların artırılması gerekmektedir. Bu doğrultuda, öğretmenlerin talep ve ilgi alanlarına uygun çeşitli eğitim programları ve platformları sunularak kendilerini sürekli yenileyebilecekleri bir ortam yaratılması önerilmektedir. Mevcut standartlaştırılmış ve merkezî olarak tasarlanmış içerikler sunan Öğretmen Bilişim Ağı (ÖBA) sisteminden farklı olarak, önerilen yaklaşım; öğretmenlere kendi bireysel ihtiyaçları ve mesleki hedefleri doğrultusunda programları seçme ve bu programlara katılma imkânı tanıyarak esnekliği, kişiselleştirmeyi ve öğretmen özerkliğini vurgulamaktadır.
- Öğretmenlerin, öğrencilerinin bireysel beklenti ve gereksinimlerini karşılayabilmeleri için daha fazla inisiyatif almaları ve velilerle iş birliği içinde çalışmaları önerilmektedir.