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Thinking together? Teacher autonomy, collaboration and professional development in Turkish lower secondary schools

Abstract

This paper reports on a PhD research which investigates the concept of teacher autonomy in the context of Turkish lower secondary schools. The study uses the English language teaching profession as a focus. There are two primary aims of this study: to explore the extent to which teachers of English exercise autonomy in relation to teaching and assessment, professional development, school management and curriculum development; and to ascertain the factors influencing their exercise of autonomy in these areas. This paper discusses the professional development aspect of this study and, whilst drawing on the literature, argues that teacher autonomy can support meaningful professional development. The following four data collection methods were used: document analysis; classroom and school-wide observations; surveys, and interviews with teachers of English, head teachers, and educational administrators. The participants have reported a strong desire to exercise autonomy in relation to their own professional development. However, there are personal and structural influences; each reproducing the other.

Key words: teacher autonomy, professional development, English language teaching profession.

Context of the research

There is a tendency in the literature to define teacher autonomy using very general terms such as decision-making power (Ingersoll, 1996), or independence and control (Moomaw, 2005). These terms convey the impression that autonomy could be achieved by someone who is able to make decisions independent from others, or is in control of his/her own life. However, these terms are too broad and fall short in thoroughly encapsulating the meaning of autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). This paper sees autonomy as a multi-dimensional concept, defining it as a workplace construct in which teachers can both work together and individually to create spaces to take initiatives and responsibility, to exercise discretion and to participate in decision-making processes in relation to four teacher task areas. These task areas are teaching and assessment, professional development, school management and curriculum development (Freidman, 1999). This paper focuses only on the task area of professional development, when reporting findings obtained from the research undertaken in the context of Turkish lower secondary schools using the English language teaching profession as a focus. Autonomy, in the sense of a collaborative social concept which also involves individual dimensions, is a construct which this paper argues can support meaningful professional development for teachers.

Before discussing the research aims, it is necessary to give some contextual information about the education system in Turkey. The Turkish education system has four main aims. These are: to raise individuals who are committed to Ataturk, the founder of Turkey's reforms and principles; to promote the welfare and happiness of Turkish society; to support and accelerate economic, cultural and social development and, finally, to make the Turkish Nation a constructive, creative and distinguished contributor to contemporary civilization (MoNE, 1973). The education system espouses democratic principles such as equality, the right to education, the needs of individuals and society, school and family cooperation as its base (MoNE, 1973). In addition to these general aims and principles, specific goals are determined for educational institutions of different types and levels. The country has a highly centralised education system. All educational activities for each school in the system function within a framework of regulations set up by the Ministry of National Education

(MoNE) (OECD, 2013). The Turkish education system consists of two main divisions; Formal and Informal Education (MoNE, 1973). As the latter is beyond the scope of this paper, I will provide brief information about the former. Formal Education in Turkey is divided into five levels. These are kindergarten/nursery class, primary school (compulsory education), lower secondary school (compulsory education), high school (compulsory education) and university. Among these, lower secondary school institutions cover years 5, 6, 7 and 8 (from age 9 to 12). The performance of students in a number of centralized exams during year 8 determines the type of high school they can gain admission to. Students taking these exams are also assessed on their English language.

Turkish pupils begin to learn English in year 2 in primary schools. The recent English curriculum programme for lower secondary schools highlights the significance of English learning by stating that “there is no question that the key to economic, political and social progress in today’s society depends on the ability of Turkey’s citizens to communicate effectively on an international level” and “competence in English is a key factor” in this process (MoNE, 2013, p.2). Therefore, there have been continual efforts to improve the effectiveness of English language education, such as the implementation of learner-centred education including the concept of learner autonomy, new curriculum programmes and the introduction of new text books. However, despite these concerted efforts, a significant percentage of students leave school without the ability to interact successfully in an English-language medium (MoNE, 2013)

Research aim

Literature on teacher autonomy largely suggests that it is important to enhance professional autonomy because encouraging and strengthening the power of teachers in the personal and professional sense can improve teaching quality and help them to cope with changes within the educational system (e.g. Marks and Louis, 1997; Friedman, 1999). An investigation into teacher autonomy in the context of Turkey may open up new discussions regarding low levels of achievement in English language learning. This study expands the efforts of research around the concept of teacher autonomy and contributes to enriching our understanding of it in different contexts. The aim of this research is to explore the current environment and existing opportunities as well as constraints for teachers for the exercise of teacher autonomy. I am, for example, interested in the extent to which teachers of English in Turkish lower secondary schools exercise autonomy in relation to their own professional development and what factors influence them in this area. The study is likely to guide us in finding ways to enhance opportunities for more autonomous action.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework I use builds on elements of philosophical theories of autonomy, teacher professionalism and teachers’ roles and the theory of structuration. In order to understand teacher autonomy more in-depth, it is crucial to gain a good understanding of the concept of autonomy itself. With this purpose I traced two specific theoretical strands within thinking and writing about autonomy. The first strand is the individualist approach which sees autonomy as resting completely within the individual and is followed mostly by liberal theorists (e.g. Dworkin, 1976; Christman, 2004). The second strand is a more recent approach by feminist theorists (e.g. Friedman, 1997; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2014) who reconceive autonomy in a more relational or social way. Drawing on

these models, this study looks at autonomy as a construct which involves individual and social dimensions. Individual dimensions include dispositions, beliefs, attitudes; the social aspect on the other hand pinpoints the significance of social relations, power struggles, collaboration and interaction.

Individualistic and relational dimensions of autonomy are germane to teachers and their working lives. When conceptualizing the place of the individual within workplace learning, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2003) comment that seeing only the social and disregarding the individual is a risk. An alternative is to see the individual as separate from the social, but interacting with it. That is, the mind of the individual and the social world are separate but interrelated. When reviewing a number of opinions dominating writings on teachers, Biddle et al (1997) refer to the scholarly vision, which has focussed on role expectations for teachers. They go on to say that according to this vision, teachers are influenced not only by the rights and responsibilities imposed on them because they are employed in school, but also by the expectations that they and important others have for teachers and teaching. In other words, as well as rules and expectations, the principle of the school, curriculum specialists, parents, school board members and teachers' own opinions influence what they do at school. When discussing what determines teachers' practical reasoning, Lindblad (1997) gives the following example;

When we want to understand why teachers give students homework, we might refer to the fact that they are teachers who are expected to do so as that kind of actor in our schools. It is part of school as an institution governed by norms and rules to do so-to act according to such common institutional determinants connected to mutually recognized roles. However, teachers' practical reasons are not only determined by the fact that they participate in the practices of schools based on institutional determinants. If we have a closer look at teachers' practical reasoning and external determinants at work, in particular, we will find professional as well as personal determinants (p. 397).

What we can understand from this example is that teachers are actors with private wants, beliefs that influence their intentions and epistemic attitudes. In addition to these personal determinants; instructional norms, rules and acting in conformity with others can be considered to be of vital importance in the teaching profession. An individual teacher whose mind is creative, generative, proactive and reflective shares the world of school with students, parents, schools heads, colleagues and other stakeholders. Teachers' relationships with others, for example are an important dynamic of school settings and interactions are an important part of school life (Blasé and Anderson, 1995).

In identifying these influencing factors, I use Giddens's theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984), which allows me to look at not only the teachers but also structures when trying to understand the concept of teacher autonomy in the Turkish context. Giddens sees human actors as capable of autonomy and possessing agency. However, he argues that this can be constrained by existing social structures which, conversely, can also be enabling. According to Giddens, the relationship between these two is an inseparable bidirectional cycle.

Within their professional lives, teachers take a number of roles inside and outside the classroom and fulfil a variety of tasks. Friedman (1999) divides these into two activities that teachers perform in their workplace; the pedagogical and the organisational. Friedman also criticizes the fact that pedagogical aspects of teacher activities are emphasised more than the organisational aspect. However, teachers are generally interested in taking part in decisions affecting the whole school, contributing to advancing their professional knowledge

(Friedman, 1999). Friedman's study of teacher autonomy identifies four areas of teacher functioning:

- Student Teaching and Assessment: Classroom practice of student attainment evaluation, norms for student behaviour, physical environment, different teaching emphases on components of mandatory curriculum.
- School Mode of Operating: establishing school goals and vision, budget allocations, school pedagogic idiosyncrasy and school policy pertaining to class composition and student admission.
- Staff Development: determining the subjects, time schedule, and procedures of in-service training of teachers as part of general school practice.
- Curriculum development: introducing new 'homemade' or 'imported' curricula by the teachers and introducing major changes in existing formal and informal curricula (p.70) [original emphasis].

Among these, professional development of teachers is a central goal of all the education systems in the world including Turkey. Teachers in Turkey, for example, are encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning and work with their colleagues collaboratively. Teacher autonomy is a prerequisite for teachers' own professional growth (Kohonen, 2002) and this is heavily emphasised in the literature on teacher professionalism (e.g. Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996).

Methodology

I use a mixed methods design in this study. Mixed methods can be defined as "the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study" (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 17). There are a number of typologies of mixed method designs in the literature (e.g. sequential explanatory, sequential exploratory, sequential transformative, concurrent triangulation, concurrent nested, concurrent transformative). In this research, I use a sequential triangulation method. Morse (1991) brought the typology of sequential triangulation into the mixed methods field. According to Morse, these projects are conducted one after another to further inquiry, with the first project informing the nature of the second project. What Morse suggests may seem as if the main research design involves only the first phase of the study and depending on the results, the nature of second can vary accordingly. However, each PhD research begins with a well-outlined research design. In the case of my own research, the design was not retrofitted to the study, however I was flexible in reshaping it. When needed, I re-evaluated the next research phases and modified the kinds of questions that could be asked of the research participants in the light of the data collected from them in the previous stages.

Advantages of using a mixed methods approach to research have been well documented. Leiber and Weisner (2010) for example explain that qualitative and quantitative methods employed simultaneously or sequentially, are of great value in bringing a wider range of evidence to strengthen and expand our understanding of a phenomenon. This research shares the view that combining quantitative and qualitative research can reveal contrasting dimensions of the phenomena under investigation, and as a result increases the depth of understanding of it. Thus the sequential triangulation method provided me with the flexibility of employing as much direction as needed depending on the results of the first phase. The following diagram shows my sequential triangulation research design.

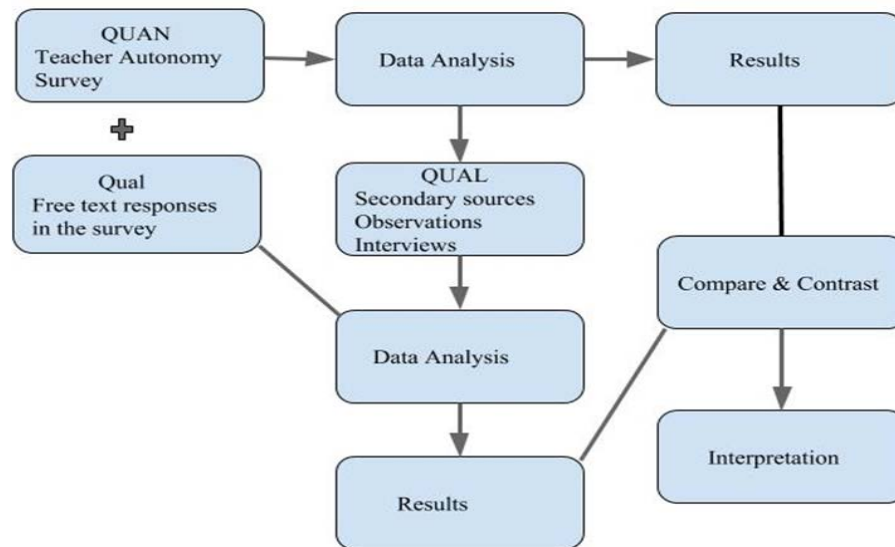


Diagram 1. Research design

I use four data collection methods in my research. These are; documents, a questionnaire survey, observations within schools, and interviews. A number of documents including policy papers, the English language teaching curriculum and newspaper articles were collected and prepared for data analysis. This phase continued until the data analysis process for the other phases was completed. I then surveyed 88 teachers of English using Survey Monkey. In recruiting the respondents for the main study, I used the email list of the English Language Teachers' Association in Turkey that has 300 active members. The survey included 28 Likert type questions and, of these, six were pertaining to professional development. The participants were given the option to make free text comments under each survey section. The final part of the survey invited participants for observation and interview phases of the study. 16 hours of classroom and school-wide observations were undertaken with three different teachers of English. In the final phase of this study, interviews with five teachers of English, three head teachers and two educational administrators were carried out. All the interviews were undertaken in Turkish.

Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately. However interaction between two kinds of data was established as the process continued. Observation data for example were used in order to further analyse and understand questionnaire responses. The first stage of data analysis dealt with quantitative survey responses. In analysing the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire survey, I used the following steps suggested by Creswell and Clark (2010): preparing the data for analysis, exploring and then analysing the data. For the purposes of preparing the data for analysis, I exported the data from Survey Monkey to Excel. I then imported the data into SPSS, the statistical analysis software. The phase of exploring data required a visual inspection of the data followed by a descriptive statistical analysis to determine general trends in the data. This included calculating minimum and maximum values, means and standard deviations. Screening the data through descriptive analysis helped build an honest data analysis (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). The final phase involved analysing demographic data by using descriptive and frequency analysis. Later the frequency values of each question in the four main sections of the questionnaire (teaching and assessment, school management, professional development and curriculum development) were calculated.

In analysing qualitative data, I adapted Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis

guide where data analysis process is divided into six phases. These are: familiarising yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report. As the authors state, these are not rules for doing thematic analysis and these six phases can be applied flexibly according to the needs of a particular research project. I followed a retroductive thinking strategy throughout the whole process. Retroduction refers advancing from one thing (empirical observation of events) and arriving at something different (a conceptualization of deeper structures) (Danermark et al, 2002). The following diagram presents the thematic analysis procedures I followed in this study illustrating the process using a spiral image. This suggests that the process of data collection, data analysis and report writing are interrelated, took place simultaneously and required movement in analytic circles throughout the process rather than using a fixed linear approach (Creswell, 2007). The first loop in the spiral shows the beginning of the analysis.

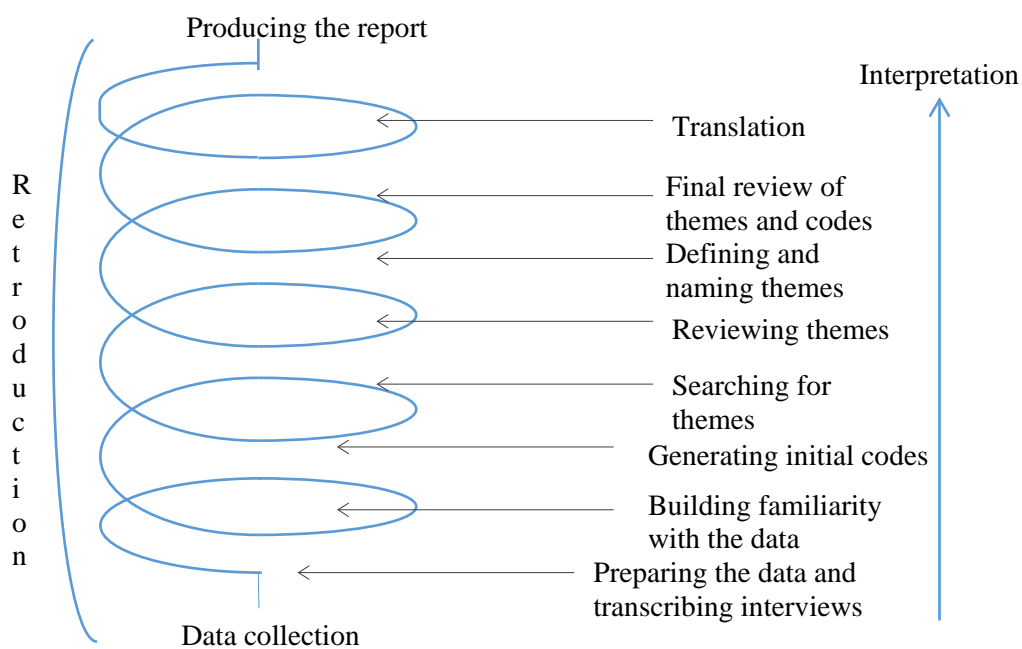


Diagram 2. The phases of qualitative data analysis

The initial data analysis began during data collection. This involved gathering documents and looking at them with a critical eye. Preparing and exploring the data for analysis included transcribing the interviews and reading through the transcripts several times in order to build familiarity. This process continued by reading through field notes several times and organising free-text responses. In analysing qualitative data, I used a software package called NVivo 10. For that reason, preparing data for analysis involved importing data into NVivo and organizing NVivo folders according to the sources uploaded. The next stage involved data categorisation and coding by constantly interacting with the literature. I used a multi stage process of categorisation and coding (Kuckartz, 2014). At stage one, I read (a) teacher interviews, (b) head teacher interviews and (c) interviews with educational administrators respectively. The data was then coded roughly using categories derived from the literature, research questions and survey questionnaire for a, b and c separately. However, I was open to any other code emerging from the data. During the coding process, I worked through the text line-by-line from beginning to end and assigned text passages to categories. Some of the

text passages included multiple topics, hence they were assigned to multiple categories. The second stage was more systematic and I grew more confident in developing codes. Finally, I ran a third analysis and the categories and sub-categories were further developed, revised and prepared for reporting. The same process was employed for the analysis of free-text responses obtained from the survey questionnaire, documents and field notes. After I finished creating codes and themes, I began translating the interview extracts and free-text responses.

Findings

In the professional development section of the survey, respondents were asked to consider six statements and evaluate the extent to which each one corresponded with their own experience, behaviour and attitudes. These six statements can be seen in the diagram below:

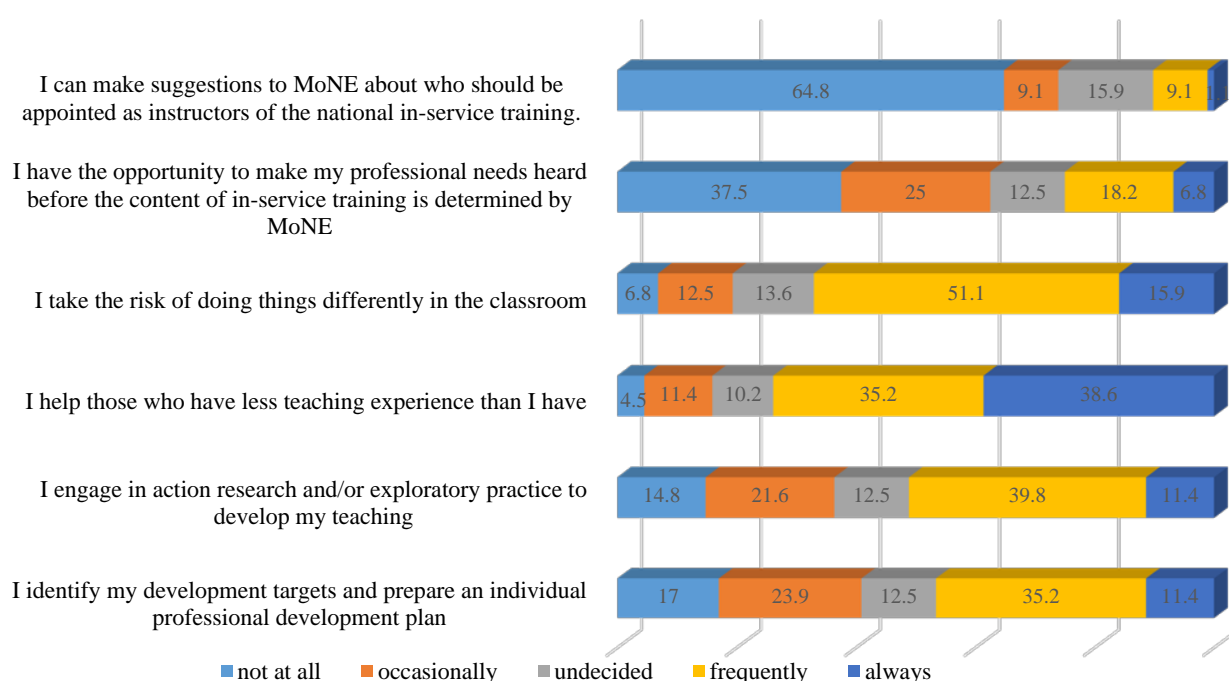


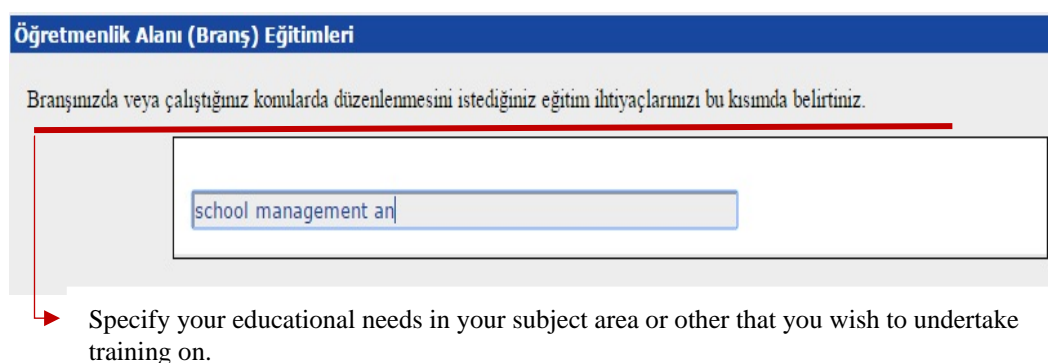
Diagram 3. Survey results in relation to professional development

Respondents were asked to indicate their views using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘occasionally’, ‘undecided’, ‘frequently’ and ‘always.’ The majority of participant teachers indicated that they frequently (51.1%) or always (15.9%) take the risk of doing things differently in the classroom. 73.8% of respondents said they frequently or always help those who have less teaching experience than themselves, which indicates a sense of collaboration among colleagues.

Of the participants, 39.8% said that they frequently engage in action research and/or exploratory practice to develop their teaching, while 11.4% of them indicated that they always did. 35.2% said they frequently identify their development targets and prepare an individual development plan and 23% do this occasionally. The responses so far indicate positive results to some extent in relation to the exercise of autonomy. However, when we look at the first two questions, the picture changes greatly. 64.8% of respondents said they had no opportunity at all to suggest who might act as instructors for their national in-service

training. 37.5% of respondents do not have any opportunity at all to make their professional needs heard before the content of in-service training is determined by MoNE. These results suggest that teachers are able to exercise autonomy both at the individual and social level within their working contexts, but possess very limited agency when it comes to wider structures influencing their professional development which is understandable in the light of the centralised nature of the whole education system. The qualitative data however, reveals a different story.

MoNE is responsible for the professional development of teachers in Turkey and offers a number of training opportunities. The main principle of training is to create uniformity of instruction; rather than promote professional development. MoNE conducts a survey of teachers every year in order to determine their professional needs, in which teachers are asked to choose among a number of predetermined professional development areas. Teachers are given the freedom to suggest any other training areas if they need to; but in order to do so they are limited to only 20 characters! The following image is a screenshot from MoNE's survey illustrating the space restriction.



Öğretmenlik Alanı (Branş) Eğitimleri

Branşınızda veya çalıştığınız konularda düzenlenmesini istediğiniz eğitim ihtiyaçlarınızı bu kısımda belirtiniz.

school management an

Specify your educational needs in your subject area or other that you wish to undertake training on.

None of the five participants I interviewed used this space to insert an additional development area. One of the survey respondents commented that “Teacher opinions and experiences aren’t cared [=taken into account].” Another one commented, “Even if I had the chance to give my opinion, this wouldn’t make any difference.”

The educational administrators and head teachers who participated in the study understandably see professional development as crucial to improving the quality of English teaching. When asked to describe a good teacher of English, all of them pinpointed the significance of professional development. Among teachers of English on the other hand there seemed to be concerns about the quality and scarcity of professional development programs organized by MoNE. One of the teacher interviewees for example made the following comment: “The number of in-service training sessions for teachers of English are really limited and they lack quality. Lack quality because the instructors who run these sessions for teachers of English are themselves teachers of English who work under same conditions at similar type of schools as we do. For that reason I find them futile.” Most of the teacher participants argued that there are not enough training opportunities for teachers of English. An interesting response to this claim came from an educational administrator responsible for training teachers, who said “If a group of teachers of English request a particular kind of training, we are ready to make all the arrangements, but this has never happened before.” This prompts the question of whether the problem is the scarcity of professional development opportunities or limited teacher agency. However, the following quote drawn from a teacher interview illustrates a different angle; “If we knew that we will receive an answer, I think we would request or suggest new professional training topics [experience tells us that], we

wouldn't get any response, we wish we would. Positive or negative any sort of reply." These comments are very important not only in relation to my first research question which investigates the current environment; but it also gives us significant hints about the factors that influence teachers' exercise of autonomy. There seem to be structural influences, but teacher agency can also be an enabling factor as well as a constraint factor in the exercise of teacher autonomy.

In addition to in-service teacher seminars, the school-based development model emerged as an important topic during the analysis of documents. MoNE introduced this model in 2007 with the aim to promote both individual and collective professional development; and encourage teachers to take more responsibility for their own professional development. None of the teachers I interviewed or school head teachers were aware of such a development model. This indicates a communication gap between MoNE and teachers. Furthermore, teachers also have the opportunity to come together in teacher meetings in their working contexts. However, even though collaboration is valued by all the participants, some of the teachers do not seem to fully take advantage of working, thinking and developing together; "I meet once or twice a year with teachers of English from different schools within this district. These are more like social gatherings. We talk about past days, ex-boyfriends." Such an attitude towards teacher meetings has important implications for how teachers see themselves as professionals in their work. There is insufficient space here to explore teachers' professional identity. However, it is important to note that teachers are in continuous interaction with their social context and this is likely to have influence on how they see themselves as professionals, too (Kelchtermans, 2013).

Conclusion and implications for teacher education

To summarise, the purpose of this paper has been to report my PhD research, which set out to investigate the concept of teacher autonomy in the context of Turkish lower secondary schools, using the English language teaching profession as a focus. The study looked at teachers' exercise of autonomy in four teacher task areas which are; teaching and assessment, professional development, school management and curriculum development. The aims of this study were to assess the extent to which teachers of English exercise autonomy in these teacher task areas and to identify the factors that influence their exercise of autonomy. This paper presented the result on the professional development aspect of the study only. The study found that most of the participant teachers exercise autonomy both at the individual and social level within their working contexts. However, a different picture emerged when it came to wider structures influencing their professional development. It was found that the participants possessed very limited agency. Limited teacher agency can be taken as one of the consequences of centralised education systems. However, it was observed that the existing opportunities allowing teachers to create spaces for autonomy were dismissed by the participants. The exercise of autonomy can be influenced by personal factors and by environmental factors both in school and at national level (Ball, 1987). There seems to be a link between these two. Each is reproducing the other. The established ways of doing things can be changed and people can reproduce the environment. This is particularly the case in relation to data presented on professional teacher development in this paper. This study suggests that teachers should be given the opportunity to identify their developmental needs collectively at local levels so that their sense of collaboration can be developed. Additionally, more professional development courses need to be organised in line with local teacher needs and more importantly teachers need to be active participants in constructing and tailoring courses to their needs. Communication between MoNE and teachers is very poor, but should

be strengthened because thinking together can be the key to success. Finally, it is important to encourage teachers to collaborate both in school and at district level.

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