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Practices and Constraints of Teacher Professional Learning in a Centralized Education System

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Abstract

This study examined Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) practices and obstacles identified by 17 elementary school teachers in Turkey, a country with a centralized education system. The study employed a qualitative method to gather specific reflections from individuals. Research findings revealed that a variety of professional learning activities take place in schools through sharing teaching practices, offering and/or seeking collegial assistance, experimenting with alternative teaching methods, and using the internet effectively. Findings also indicated that several constraints hinder TPL in Turkish schools. First, teachers lack sufficient time at school to collaborate and share regularly. Since teachers see classrooms as private spaces, they do not observe their colleagues' lessons. Second, school-based teacher professional development programs are inadequate and ineffective. Third, bureaucracy causes unnecessary waste of time. Fourth, lack of equipment in some schools makes it difficult for teachers to try new teaching techniques. Finally, meetings for cooperation between schools in the same region are unproductive.

Keywords: professional learning communities; teacher professional learning; centralized education system; Turkish education system

Introduction

Education scholars commonly claim that while typical short-term in-service professional development activities (such as workshops, conferences, and seminars) are ineffective at building teacher capacity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Easton, 2008; Kwakman, 2003), continual workplace teacher professional learning plays a critical role in the development of teachers and schools, as well as student learning (Fullan, 2009; Liu & Hallinger, 2018). The literature shows that learning is more meaningful when teachers engage in formal or informal school-based professional learning activities, such as collaboration, observation, implementation, and reflection, to improve teaching and learning (Easton, 2008). Consequently, there has been a growing interest among

researchers, policymakers, and practitioners around preparing, developing, and sustaining teacher professional learning in schools (Hallinger et al., 2019; Kwakman, 2003).

Although the concept of professional learning has a relatively strong roots in the western literature (DuFour & Eaker 1998; Evers et al., 2016; Kwakman, 2003; Olivier et al., 2003; Opfer & Pedder, 2011), the idea is new to many developing countries (Gu & Wang 2006; Gümüş et al., 2018, Hallinger et al., 2019; Liu & Hallinger, 2018; Liu et al., 2016). Professional development through in-service training has received considerable interest among Turkish scholars (Gönen & Kocakaya, 2006), yet little of this research has focused on workplace teacher professional learning (Bellibaş et al., 2017; Gümüş et al., 2018; Karadağ & Bellibaş 2017). The main reason for this is the nature of the education system in Turkey. The Turkish education system is highly centralized, and the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) is responsible for teacher recruitment and training. The MoNE regularly organizes local and national in-service training programs for teachers. National policy also requires teachers and principals to gather several times each year to discuss students' academic and social development, in addition to exchanging knowledge and academic materials (MoNE, 2019, 2020; Resmî Gazete, 1995). Moreover, with its release of the "Turkey's Education Vision 2023" framework, the MoNE has outlined plans for professional specialization programs, certificate programs, and postgraduate education, as well as legal regulations for ensuring school-based professional development (MoNE, 2018). Since extensive research on teacher learning focuses on Anglo-American-European regions, there is a need for studies from other regions of the world (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020). To this end, we argue for the importance of examining the current practices and obstacles around school-based teacher professional learning to advise policymakers, practitioners, and researchers on possible future challenges surrounding the implementation of nationwide workplace teacher learning reform. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What is the current state and practices of school-wide teacher professional learning activities in primary schools in Turkey?

RQ2: What are the current main obstacles to effective teacher professional learning in primary schools in Turkey?

This study is significant in two ways. First, it intends to provide a snapshot of current professional learning practices and problems in Turkish schools at a time when policymakers are preparing to initiate a nationwide reform that promotes workplace teacher learning. The result of this research could help stakeholders discern potential challenges that could hamper these reforms. Second, teacher professional development is a new concept for many developing nations. The results of this study could help other countries compare the practices and challenges in Turkish schools with schools in their own regions, to better understand the influence of national and cultural contexts on educational issues.

Teacher Learning in the Context of the Turkish Education System

The Turkish education system has generally attempted to follow the example set by modern western education systems (Demirdağ & Khalifa 2020); however, the most prominent feature of the Turkish system remains its highly centralized and hierarchical structure (Belenkuyu et al., 2020; Kondakci & Beycioglu, 2020), with intense bureaucratic work (Gumus & Akcaoglu, 2013). Therefore, the MoNE is responsible for implementing education policies to improve the quality and capacity of principals, teachers, and teaching programs nationwide (Atasoy & Cemaloğlu, 2018). The appointment of teachers in Turkey also involves a specific and rigid process. Those who apply for teaching positions are required to meet certain conditions specified in Law No. 657. Candidates who have graduated from an accredited university and meet the requirements take the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS) exam. Their exam scores determine their appointment within the quota determined by the MoNE, which assigns the candidates by ranking them according to their scores (Polat et al., 2019). No additional education or training is required for school principal positions; thus, principals are selected from among the teachers who meet select special conditions (Gumus & Bellibaş, 2020).

Teacher learning in Turkey does not take place in a qualified way. Compulsory in-service trainings are largely designed and established by the central management (Kalman & Arslan, 2016). However, the “Turkey’s Education Vision 2023” reform movement implemented in 2018 underlined the importance of improving teacher learning at schools (MoNE, 2018). With this document, teachers were given the opportunity to develop and evaluate themselves in the fields of science, culture, art, and sports within the framework of a main theme to improve their teacher learning during mid-term breaks. In addition, the MoNE decided to pay additional tuition fees to encourage teachers to participate in this professional learning between terms (TEDMEM, 2019).

Theoretical Background

Teacher professional learning involves workplace activities aimed at enhancing teachers’ knowledge and practice. The concept of teacher professional learning encompasses many issues, including how and what teachers teach and learn, as well as how teachers help students to improve their learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Workplace teacher professional learning refers to the participation of teachers in different lessons, activities, and collective learning in the environments where they work. This type of professional learning occurs through research groups, mentoring, collaboration, searching for solutions to common problems, observing other teachers, allocating effective time for learning, and planning together (Liu & Hallinger, 2018). In the professional learning process, teachers actively focus on collaboration, boosting quality in education, evaluating real-life experiences, and developing teaching practices (Easton, 2008). Adopting a professional learning orientation means that teachers are open to new ideas and practices, carry out practical studies to improve their teaching, and display receptive behaviors toward evaluating the results of student learning (Hallinger et al., 2019).

Consequently, several specific practices have been associated with teacher professional learning, including collaboration, reflection, experimentation, and reaching out to one’s knowledge base of colleagues and other professional resources (Liu et al., 2016). The present study relies on this four-

part conceptualization of teacher professional learning. The collaboration component of teacher professional learning involves the work carried out by teachers to plan and improve teaching, share different activities, and monitor and evaluate students in the academic field. Reflection refers to considering one's own teaching and learning methods, observing colleagues, developing materials, and integrating teaching feedback according to the learning needs of students. Experimentation refers to trying alternative methods to make teaching more effective, as well as applying new ideas and activities to improve lessons. Reaching out to the knowledge base involves taking into account the views of students and teachers on teaching, as well as accessing professional publications and other information that can be used to improve teaching (Gümüş et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2016; Liu & Hallinger, 2018). In this context, professional learning refers to conducting formal or informal collective research, carrying out studies on classroom practices to improve teaching, benefitting from colleagues' experiences, and using various sources of information for professional development.

One substantial question raised by researchers is how teacher professional learning occurs. Professional learning is based on constructivist learning theory that highlights interpersonal interaction, specifically foregrounding where experiences are considered by a community of practice. Professional learning occurs by examining a problem or subject and producing solutions (Hord, 1997). There are different approaches that explain how professional learning occurs for adults, which can apply in teachers' learning contexts—one of the most common of which is adult learning. Adults can direct their learning in parallel with their own developmental processes. Their experiences, the problems they have faced in real life, and their problem-solving styles also provide a basis for learning. Therefore, adults learn by focusing on practical issues that they think will be useful to them. Internal factors are also an important source of motivation for adults, who are problem-centered and direct themselves to learning (Knowles, 1973). Additionally, teachers can learn by means of socio-cultural interaction through sharing common practices with other teachers (Van Lare & Brazer, 2013).

Another framework for adult learning is workplace learning. In workplace learning, teachers learn by experimenting on teaching in their respective contexts, thinking critically about student learning, and participating in collaborative activities in their schools (Kwakman, 2003). Schools offer a learning environment with high sociality, where teachers collaborate to make plans related to their students' education, ask for help, and solve problems with research groups. In addition to these activities, teachers also monitor and evaluate student learning and carry out improvement and development activities for training programs (Li et al., 2016; Liu & Hallinger, 2018). Teachers learn from a variety of contexts: classroom experiences, the work of other teachers, and professional assistance, for example. This learning is actualized through the combination of on-the-job learning and professional cooperation (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Identifying the ideal forms of learning environments in schools is important for maximizing the effectiveness of teacher professional learning. In this context, learning environments in schools should be designed by considering both the times and spaces that best enable teachers to learn professionally. Research has found that without a well-designed learning environment, few teachers are willing to participate in professional learning activities in their schools (Kwakman, 2003). In this

regard, it is also necessary to plan and manage processes to provide teachers sufficient time for professional development (Guskey, 2000). To facilitate this type of professional development, working environments need to be arranged in a way that encourages active learning. In addition, principals' support for this type of work environment affects teacher participation in professional learning activities such as assisting colleagues, engaging in independent learning, participating in activities, and making decisions related to teaching and learning (Kwakman, 2003). Supporting these statements, a comprehensive review study that examined the professional development of teachers between 1989 and 2016 identified specific critical factors that shape effective professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), including teachers' focus on the appropriate content for their respective subject areas, the creation of active learning environments for teachers, and the collaboration of teachers through the support of a cooperative culture in which they share their ideas. In addition, teachers must have access to information about best practices in their field(s), receive coaching or expert support, receive notifications about the effectiveness of their studies, reflect upon their teaching practices, and have time and a suitable environment for professional learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Methods

The present study employed a qualitative method to examine specific experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2014) through exploratory interviews with a select number of teachers (Patton, 1987). This design captured the experiences in these individuals' lives, as well as exploring the essence of their experiences. In addition, such interviews enable the researcher to examine the perceptions, emotions, and understandings of individuals who have actually experienced the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The research was carried out with 17 teachers working in one Turkish province. The teachers were interviewed about their professional learning experiences. While the results of this type of research would likely differ between primary and secondary schools due to their distinct structure and culture, for the scope of this study, we solely focused on primary schools to provide a more in-depth analysis of the perceptions and experiences of teachers' professional learning at that level.

This research used purposive sampling to identify participants best suited to the study's aims. Since the goal of the study was to gather detailed and in-depth information about teacher professional learning, individuals who met the criteria related to the research subject were included in the study (Creswell, 2014; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Given these goals, it was important to recruit participants with a certain amount of experience in the teaching profession, to gather meaningful data on teachers' professional learning experiences. Therefore, only teachers with at least five years of experience

were recruited for the study. Consequently, the average experience of teachers in the research group was 19.5 years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic information of participants

Code	Gender	Education	Experience	Age	Num. of Teachers	Num. of students
T1	Female	Bachelor's	14	38	13	230
T2	Female	Bachelor's	24	45	10	170
T3	Male	Bachelor's	15	39	7	100
T4	Female	Bachelor's	12	34	35	1,000
T5	Female	Bachelor's	29	50	40	853
T6	Male	Bachelor's	16	39	12	170
T7	Female	Bachelor's	25	46	14	165
T8	Female	Bachelor's	23	44	9	50
T9	Male	Bachelor's	23	48	15	260
T10	Female	Bachelor's	15	38	10	125
T11	Female	Bachelor's	26	47	9	115
T12	Male	Bachelor's	8	33	4	44
T13	Female	Bachelor's	22	45	22	430
T14	Male	Bachelor's	24	47	10	104
T15	Female	Bachelor's	13	36	20	302
T16	Female	Bachelor's	15	38	10	220
T17	Male	Bachelor's	29	58	5	60

Data Collection

The research involved data collection through a semi-structured interview form. The questions in the interview form were based on the teacher professional learning scale developed by Liu et al. (2016) and adapted into the Turkish language and culture by Gümüş et al. (2018). The questions were prepared in accordance with the four features of teacher professional learning: collaboration, reflection, experimentation, and reaching out to the knowledge base. Experts on teacher professional learning were consulted to develop effective and thorough questions. In addition, we examined the related literature, consulted similar studies, and conducted pre-interviews with the teacher participants to design a study that would produce qualified results. As a result, a draft form was prepared and reviewed after the interviews conducted with experts (Creswell, 2014). Sample questions included: “What kinds of instructional activities do you plan with other teachers? Can you provide some examples?”; “As teachers, do you observe your colleagues’ lessons? How?”; “Do you try new teaching methods in your classes? When and how?”; and “Do you follow up-to-date information related to your field? If so, how do you do this?”

Before the interviews began, we informed participants of the study’s privacy policy and informed consent. All participants consented to voice recordings of their interviews, and observation notes were also taken by the researchers to corroborate these recordings. To maintain participants’ anonymity, their names are not used in any write-ups of this research; instead, teachers were assigned codes such as T1, T2, T3, etc. Teachers were interviewed at their own schools based on appointments made in advance. First, general questions were asked of the participants, before proceeding to questions related to the study’s core concepts. The recordings were audio-recorded and transcribed. For ethical reasons, teachers’ identifying information and their schools are kept confidential.

Data Analysis

The main dimensions under investigation were identified according to the framework developed by Liu et al. (2016)—collaboration, reflection, experimentation, and reaching out to the knowledge base related to teacher professional learning—and descriptive analyses and content analysis were conducted based on these themes. These dimensions are presented as subheadings in the findings section of this article. Participants were asked questions about these main themes, and their answers were examined. Content analysis was also used to analyze the data. The data were coded by the researchers, and the codes were associated with each other to divide the data into groups. Then, the data were interpreted. At this stage, statements that were irrelevant to the object of study or the themes identified were omitted. Similarities and differences between the participants’ views were identified. Finally, the opinions of the teachers were evaluated together and patterns of meaning patterns coalesced, which were interpreted by the research team (Creswell, 2014; Moustakas, 1994).

To maximize the trustworthiness of this study, steps were taken to ensure the research's transferability, credibility, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the research questions for the study were selected among questions related to teacher professional learning. To situate the study within the existing body of work in this area, the researchers examined the literature to identify the questions of similar studies. Special attention was paid to the research questions posed in studies of professional learning communities. In addition, the theoretical background of teacher professional learning was investigated. Some questions were revised as a result of the pilot interviews. To maximize dependability, goal-oriented direct statements were included in the data analysis. In addition, direct quotations related to themes and subjects were utilized to provide critical context and examples. The member checking method was also employed to ensure that findings were consistent with the intentions of participants. Finally, the proposed study was examined by experts in the field, as well as scholars who had conducted research on this or similar topics. During the coding process, different researchers were consulted for confirmation and correction of the codes (Christensen et al., 2015; Creswell, 2014).

Findings and Discussion

The qualitative dimensions related to teacher professional learning were determined according to the conceptual framework developed by Liu et al. (2016). This framework categorizes teacher professional learning practices under four main dimensions: (i) collaboration, (ii) reflection, (iii) experimentation, and (iv) reaching out to the knowledge base.

Collaboration

The qualitative findings provided consistent evidence of collaboration among teachers on instructional issues. The data also continually suggested that teachers collaborate on several issues, including planning joint activities, monitoring student performance, sharing teaching practices, and providing professional assistance.

Planning joint activities. The teacher participants reported jointly carrying out many activities. They work together to plan and implement specific daily or weekly themes and lessons, arrange joint celebrations and trips, prepare daily and annual plans, and organize social and cultural activities. The teachers do many activities in a coordinated manner.

“During the year, we work with our colleagues to plan the activities (shows) that concern all classes, such as reading day, April 23, graduation ceremonies. We pay attention to ideas of each other while determining the activities and the trips we will do during the year, and the materials we will use in the lessons.” (T16)

However, few teachers assembled in a coordinated fashion for collaborative in-class activities, such as teaching course content and engaging in other classroom practices. Consequently, teachers faced significant issues in the content of the few plans that they made together, including daily plans. Daily

plans involve organizing strategies and methods used in the course, along with student assessment and evaluation to ensure the effective delivery of course content. Although some teachers stated that they prepared daily plans together, they tended to focus on secondary issues, such as coordinating the activities in the plan on the same dates and determining joint activity dates, rather than students' learning.

Monitoring student academic levels. Teachers also collaborated to monitor students' academic performance. The teachers reported planning joint exams, addressing students one-on-one, and evaluating how students achieved learning goals and objectives.

"The branch teacher committee meeting is held at least three times a year (at the beginning of the year, at the beginning of the second semester, and at the end of the year). In teacher committee, students are evaluated not only in academic but also socio-cultural and cognitive levels, and all students are prepared individually for the next semester." (T3)

Sharing teaching practices. Teachers planned both in- and out-of-class activities together. They also prepared exam questions and developed other educational materials together.

"For example, there was a clock- and watch-making activity for telling time. I showed the watches we made to our colleagues. A teacher friend made a very beautiful material about the world layers in science lesson. I borrowed it and then adopted one. We share lesson activities to ensure that everyone could practice." (T5)

Teachers stated that while they share information about improving student learning, they do not do so through systematic meetings at specified times. Instead, they meet with other teachers to talk about improving student learning when they are in the same place during their spare time (e.g., in the teachers' lounge or other school locations during break). Therefore, teachers share information about education and training in informal ways instead of holding regular meetings to improve teaching.

Providing professional assistance. Teachers seek out colleagues' help on many issues, such as ways to deal with problematic students and parents' undesirable behaviors; identify methods applied by colleagues that could improve their own teaching; and solve various problems that they face related to education.

"Especially, we help each other during parental problems. One of the biggest problems is the polemics we encounter with parents. We do not have problematic students, but problematic parents. If we could discuss the problem of our students with their parents and find solutions, the disciplinary problem would be eliminated and only academic success related problem would remain." (T5)

Nearly half of the teachers reported seeking the opinions of their colleagues on how to address problematic student and parent behaviors, rather than seeking feedback on lessons or teaching practices. Though some of the teachers shared pedagogical advice, these subjects of teaching and learning were rarely discussed, signifying an important challenge.

These findings support those of both national (Bektaş et al., 2020) and international researchers (Liu et al., 2016) who report that teachers generally collaborate on several matters within their schools (Liu et al., 2016). However, key obstacles to collaboration activities emerged in our analysis. Despite the teachers' agreement on the importance of collaboration among staff, many highlighted barriers to effective collaboration. For instance, several teachers indicated that they could not get together with their colleagues very often due to bureaucratic hurdles, lesson planning, and personal matters in school. However, the most important factor preventing teachers from working together was the intensity of the curriculum. Moreover, their course schedules also typically overlap with those of their colleagues, which causes less communication and interaction. One of the teachers said,

"I do not have time to meet with my colleagues as I am a classroom teacher and attend all classes myself." (T16)

Other studies have also highlighted such obstacles associated with the bureaucratic structure of schools in Turkey (Bümen et al., 2012; Dervişoğulları, 2014; Karadağ & Bellibaş, 2017). In addition, teachers' heavy course loads and the conflicts between their courses could pose additional barriers to their opportunities to spending time with colleagues improving teaching and learning (Halis, 2010).

Reflection

The second dimension of teacher professional learning is reflection. The present study indicates that primary school teachers in Turkey use multiple means to reflect on their instructional practices, including *receiving peer advice, seeking alternative teaching practices, receiving feedback from students, and observing the lessons of colleagues*.

Receiving peer advice. Teacher participants reported receiving suggestions from other colleagues to improve their skills in teaching and learning, as well as sharing their teaching activities and practices. In addition, they shared both materials for lessons and their own experiences of solving problems related to teaching and learning.

"Of lesson, my colleagues' suggestions are always important and valuable to me. For example, one of my friends said: 'Primary school students do not know equations with an unknown and do not express the unknown with x. How can we solve the problem without using x?' I explained all the details to him." (T12)

Seeking alternative teaching practices. Both in and out of school, teachers research different activities they can integrate into their teaching. Some teachers indicated, for instance, that they revised their teaching methods by reading books and participating in seminars in their respective fields.

"I read books and magazines on education, ask questions to my colleagues, follow the sharing of related groups on social media for my class, search for different activities, and try to apply fun learning." (T16)

Receiving feedback from students. Teachers usually receive informal feedback from their students about their lessons to improve their teaching methods. They explained that their students' academic, social, and psychological backgrounds all informed such changes in their teaching methods. In addition, after gaining familiarity with their students, teachers changed the methods they used in lessons according to those students' interests and needs. A small number of teachers stated that they directly asked their students how they could make their lessons more effective and redesigned their teaching according to the feedback they received.

"I pay attention to students' opinions. I try to develop different teaching methods and techniques by asking their opinions when they have understanding problems." (T1)

All the participants also articulated beliefs that student test scores could provide feedback for their teaching. They used student achievement data to evaluate and modify their teaching practices.

"Of lesson, I question. We cannot understand the reason for failure or success if we don't get feedback. If most of the students did not gain x according to feedback, I teach x with different methods." (T3)

Observing the lessons of colleagues. A small number of teachers stated that they observed their colleagues teaching, and that they found these activities useful. Particularly, they described lesson observation and monitoring as useful tools for learning in-class activities and teaching techniques. Most of the teachers stated that they did not observe their colleagues teaching, however, citing various reasons such as lack of time, colleagues feeling disturbed by observations, and not being welcomed into colleagues' classrooms. Since most teachers see the classroom as a private space, they prefer not to watch their colleagues' lessons in their classrooms, instead finding it more reasonable to visit during breaks between classes.

"After a certain amount of teaching experience, visiting another class is not possible, but the exchange of ideas is always available. Since everyone has a certain amount of teaching experience, they may not be prone to talk or to share." (T5)

The findings provide many examples of reflection practices in schools, which could be attributed to the prevalence of teachers' lounges across Turkish schools. During lesson breaks, teachers often gather in the lounge and engage in informal conversations regarding issues related to teaching, the school environment, and students' academic development (Yeşil & Korkmaz, 2012). It is assumed that such opportunities positively influence teachers' knowledge and experience (Turhan et al., 2015). However, we still do not fully understand the nature of these meetings, conversations, and collaborations. Therefore, we recommend that future observation-based qualitative research should specifically analyze such informal conversations to illuminate their impact on reflective practice.

Our findings provide evidence that reflection impacts teaching and learning practices. Our data consistently suggest that classroom observations are one of the most problematic areas in the professional development of the teachers in the study sample. Some teachers stated that their colleagues were unwilling to be observed, as it exerts psychological pressure on them. This pressure makes other teachers feel inadequate. Thus, the main barrier to observing colleagues is expressed as follows: "When the teacher comes to my lesson, he/she can see the areas I am inadequate." There is also a hidden competition among teachers, who appear not to want other teachers to learn what they do to make their students successful. One teacher explained,

“There is also serious competition among classroom teachers. In addition, there is a psychological pressure on teachers while being observed.” (T5)

This reluctance to observe colleagues’ teaching may also stem from the learning culture of particular schools. In schools where a traditional and individual learning culture is predominant, colleagues may be unwilling to observe each other’s classes (Schaap et al., 2019). This phenomenon could also derive from the availability of the teachers’ lounge (Turhan et al., 2015). The teachers’ lounge provides the opportunity for informal sharing to help teachers learn about effective classroom practices from one another; therefore, teachers might not need additional classroom visits. Furthermore, intense competition exists among teachers in Turkey due to the national test system, which ranks teachers based on their students’ achievement (Buyruk, 2014). Such classification could create a potential barrier by discouraging other teachers from making classroom observations. In Turkey, school principals supervise teachers at various times throughout the school year (Yeşil & Kış, 2015). This existing expectation of supervision in schools may lead to negative perceptions around teachers’ attending classes. In this respect, teachers, administrators, and policymakers should create a learning culture to change this perception. School principals play a key role in this change (Hallinger, 2005).

Most of the teachers stated that they needed professional development in some key areas, including the use of technology, new teaching methods and strategies, creative ideas for teaching, and communication management. Most of the respondents attempted to make up for these deficiencies on their own, since their schools offered few seminars or applications for such activities, and they viewed seminars held outside of school as inadequate. Thus, primary school teachers in Turkey do not receive enough support from their schools and regional education directorates, and they often feel left alone in their professional development.

Experimentation

Three key themes in the qualitative data emerged as sources of experimentation: trying new teaching methods, using information and communication technologies, and using alternative teaching materials.

Trying new teaching methods. Most of the teachers in the study sample reported trying new teaching methods in their lessons, which typically focused on hands-on learning. Teachers integrated techniques such as gamification, concrete methods, smart boards, project work, and practices for developing new materials.

“I try new teaching methods. I aim to create environments where children will engage in hands-on learning activities. In my methods, I take into consideration children’s active participation in the lessons. In this way, I try to concretize the topic so that students can understand the subject better.” (T16)

In addition, teachers stated that when they noticed students experiencing difficulties with learning, they used different methods to teach the topics. These approaches included the use of new

methods, researching effective methods used by others, consulting with colleagues, or creating individualized lessons for struggling students.

“I try to identify the cause of the problem I have encountered. I try different ways when the students can’t learn. First, I restate the topic. I ask questions about the subject to draw students’ attention to the important points and take notes based on the responses. I also organize events that will contribute to their full learning. For example, I divide the students into groups and distribute the subject and let them work in collaboration.” (T1)

Using information and communication technologies (ICT). The findings suggest that teachers used information technologies in their lessons as a form of experimentation. Smart board applications, online readings and resources, and projectors were among the most frequently used technologies. Particularly, teachers reported frequently integrating ready-to-use applications on the internet, specifically designed for lessons in schools.

“I have a smart board in my classroom, and I always use it. There are several sites; I get support from them. Okulistik, Morpakampüs, EBA, etc. There are many studies here such as narration with video, narration with games, narration with puzzles and so on.” (T4)

Using alternative teaching materials. Most of the teachers stated that they found “the officially recommended sources” inadequate; therefore, they preferred additional resources. Teachers explained that they asked students to buy additional materials for their courses, since the books officially recommended by the MoNE were insufficient.

“I definitely feel although my priority is the schoolbooks, different sources are always needed. Our education system is based on exams, so schoolbooks are insufficient. For children not to struggle in exams, they need to encounter different styles of questions. Therefore, I feel that it necessary to use additional materials.” (T4)

Teachers also found the course textbooks quite inadequate. They explained that the pictures, texts, or formality in these textbooks were low quality.

“Especially, I found this year’s textbooks very inadequate. Outcomes are unnecessary. The Turkish program, where topics such as spelling, punctuation, are intense, should give more attention to studies that include comprehension, expression, interpretation, following the instruction, and attention. At first, I didn’t buy any supplementary books. However, I felt obliged to use them during the process.” (T2)

In addition to key practices, several obstacles to experimentation emerged in the qualitative analysis. The interviews revealed that the most prominent problem was related to ICT integration. Many teachers face difficulty when using new digital teaching methods, due to the rapid advancement of technology. Teachers voiced a need to improve themselves and their practice in this area. Some teachers complained about feeling quite inexperienced at using technology, such as one teacher, who said:

“I have insufficient technology knowledge. I want to be good at using technology to make teaching more efficient. I sometimes have difficulties in running the necessary applications on the smart board and enriching my lesson with these applications.” (T1)

The main problem associated with technology integration can be attributed to the lack of professional learning opportunities in this area. The Turkish government has made substantial investment in educational technologies by providing schools with internet and interactive smart boards but provided few professional learning opportunities to help teachers effectively incorporate such technologies into their teaching (Akcaoglu et al., 2015).

Moreover, financial problems created a challenge for teachers' practices in some schools. Although the MoNE provides financial support for the development of classroom materials, many of the teachers stated that this money was insufficient. Most of the teachers compensate for these deficiencies by receiving financial support from students' parents or dipping into their own salaries when necessary. In addition, the lack of equipment and infrastructure in some schools (for example, computers and laboratories) posed a serious challenge for teachers to provide qualified teaching.

Reaching out to the Knowledge Base

The teachers rarely felt that developing such knowledge through classroom observations was accessible or feasible. However, they did benefit from their colleagues and internet resources to increase their subject-matter knowledge. The findings suggest that participant teachers engaged in personal development aimed at spreading knowledge across their profession by *using the internet for research and seeking the advice of experienced teachers*.

Using the internet for research purposes. Teachers stated that they use online resources for professional learning. To develop in-class activities, they followed guides, training websites, and videos prepared by the MoNE. The data indicated that they used such online resources effectively to prepare their lessons.

"I use online resources for professional learning. I follow the shares of the groups which can provide activities related to my class. I search internet blogs to find useful presentations and videos for my class. This allows student to enjoy the lessons and paves the way for them to have fun, which makes the learning to be permanent." (T16)

Most of the teachers indicated that they followed professional groups or news related to their field through social media and used social media platforms to share information related to their profession. They also indicated that they could watch and use videos about education or other subjects for their teaching.

"I follow primary school teacher groups from social media. I follow the teacher platform, the class teacher sharing page. Thanks to professional blogs and personal pages, I am aware of the practices carried out in different provinces and regions. I also apply some activities to my own students. For example, we did 3D narration activities of proverbs and idioms." (T3)

Benefiting from experienced teachers. Participants indicated that they maintained channels of communication with colleagues on different topics and shared information about teaching with

these colleagues. In particular, teachers with less experience benefitted from the experience of senior teachers.

“We have teachers who have 40-year experience in our school. We discuss on necessary topics. Particularly, we benefitted from the experience of our experienced teachers in the schools.” (T5)

The previous section on “experimentation” highlighted teachers’ experiences with ICT problems in the classroom, while the “reaching out to the knowledge base” section demonstrated how the same teachers used computers and the internet to successfully access knowledge. This means that these teachers face obstacles when integrating technology into their teaching but typically do not experience any issues when using technology to seek out new knowledge. In support of this finding, prior research has showed that teachers use new technologies such as blogs, Twitter, and Facebook as platforms to enhance their knowledge regarding the subject matter they teach, as well as the teaching profession in general (Baydaş et al., 2013; Turan et al., 2015). One possible reason for this regular use of technology for the purpose of improving learning could be the ICT-related projects carried out at the national level. The MoNE has instituted multiple initiatives aimed at disseminating ICTs within schools that have facilitated the adoption of technology by schools across Turkey (Arslan & Şendurur 2017).

District- or province-wide meetings held between schools have an important function in terms of modeling good teaching practices for schools. However, most of the teachers in this study felt that these meetings were dysfunctional, that they attended solely out of obligation, and that they did not learn much from them. These meetings often covered crucial topics such as making teaching more effective, implementing new methods and techniques in lessons, and overcoming problems in the classroom. However, teachers’ perceptions of the meetings as useless and ineffective represent an important obstacle for teachers’ learning since strong cooperation with other schools is among the factors that make schools successful. In this respect, future research should investigate interventions for improving the effectiveness of these meetings.

Conclusion

Considering the growing research on teacher learning, as well as Turkish policymakers’ interest in transforming schools into learning communities, we focused the present study on the current state and practices of professional learning opportunities in Turkish primary schools, as well as the obstacles that impede such opportunities. In terms of our first research question regarding the state and practices of school-wide professional learning, we concluded that a variety of professional learning activities take place in schools, including collaboration on planning, monitoring student progress, sharing teaching practices, investigating and experimenting with alternative teaching methods, soliciting student feedback, observing other teachers, using alternative teaching materials, integrating technology into the classroom, and seeking other teachers’ advice as a source of knowledge. However, none of these practices were pre-planned or systematically organized; rather, they depended substantially on teachers’ willingness and endeavors to collaborate, reflect on current teaching practices, experiment with new teaching methods, and reach out to their

knowledge base. We therefore recommend that for national policymakers to transform schools into learning environments, systematic mechanisms facilitating teacher professional learning should be established. School leadership teams—including the principal, assistant principal, and department or grade-level heads—could play a key role in establishing such structures within the school.

The second research question focused on obstacles to school-wide professional learning. Our study revealed that teacher professional learning at Turkish schools faces several constraints. First, the intensity of the curriculum, coupled with a focus on secondary issues rather than teaching and learning, can be considered an important challenge for collaboration in schools. Second, most of the participant teachers needed professional development in areas such as the use of technology, new teaching methods and strategies, creative ideas for teaching and communication management. However, teachers do not receive sufficient support from their schools and regional education directorates, and thus, they often feel left alone. Therefore, teachers try to make up for these deficiencies using their own resources and funds. Third, in some schools, financial problems create a challenge for teachers' practices and thereby their professional learning. Most of the teachers make up for these deficiencies by receiving financial support from their students' parents or by dipping into their own salaries. In addition, the lack of equipment and infrastructure in some schools creates a serious challenge for teachers to provide qualified teaching. Finally, the meetings held between schools in districts or provinces are seen as useless and ineffective, which hinders cooperation between schools that could bolster teacher professional learning.

We conclude that our findings indicate a lack of collaboration and classroom observations among teachers. These issues are substantial, as they constitute the core practice of professional learning identified in the literature (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997; Olivier et al., 2003). In this regard, we believe that the recent reform movement should consider the lack of time for teacher collaboration in current daily and weekly teaching schedules. A revised teaching schedule that allows teachers to engage in continuous collaboration during the school day may be necessary for the success of these reforms. Indeed, the MoNE initiated midterm breaks in 2019 to provide sufficient time during which teachers could collaborate with colleagues at school (MoNE, 2018). When more systematically organized, such meetings could create opportunities for teachers to spend more time together and learn more from their colleagues. In addition to midterm breaks, daily school programs should be rearranged in such a way that affords learning opportunities for teachers during the week (Olivier et al., 2003).

The lack of teacher motivation to engage in classroom observation could be related to the previous practices of school inspection, in which the MoNE sent inspectors to detect teachers' instructional problems. If current reforms seek to encourage classroom observations as a part of teacher professional learning, administration and policymakers need to focus on factors promoting a positive school climate and culture. Echoing previous research in this area, we argue that classroom observations can be enhanced by creating a safe and respectful school climate (Dinham et al., 1995; Stoll et al., 2006). School principals should be the main agents who develop school climates conducive to productive teacher observation and learning. In addition, we believe that the policymakers at the MoNE level need to clearly emphasize in policy documents that the purpose of the classroom observations is not to stigmatize teachers but rather to improve teaching practices.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the main findings of this study. First, the literature provides varying definitions of professional learning. In this study, we gathered data based on the conceptual framework developed by Liu et al. (2016), meaning that the findings are shaped by their conceptualization of professional learning. Second, this study was carried out using a convenience sample strategy that included schools located in city or district centers. To diversify the data in future studies, factors that facilitate or limit teacher professional learning can be examined in disadvantaged schools outside the city center, as well as in schools with varying degrees of academic achievement. Finally, the role of principal leadership in supporting professional learning in schools was not investigated within the scope of this study, whereas the literature provides evidence that these school administrators could be the main source for professional learning within schools (Liu et al., 2016; Tran et al., 2020). We recommend that future qualitative studies focus on how available professional learning practices are developed, influenced, and maintained by school leadership.

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