

A Qualitative Analysis of Teachers' Views on the Teacher Career Steps System

Öğretmenlik Kariyer Basamakları Uygulamasına İlişkin Öğretmen Görüşlerinin Nitel Analizi

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Öz: Bu araştırmanın amacı, öğretmenlerin öğretmenlik kariyer basamakları uygulamasına ilişkin görüşlerini incelemek ve kariyer ilerlemesinde kullanılan ölçütlere, uygulamanın mesleki yansımalarına ve kariyer sisteminin geliştirilmesine yönelik beklentilerini ortaya koymaktır. Araştırma, nitel araştırma yaklaşımı kapsamında olgubilim deseninde yürütülmüştür. Çalışma grubunu amaçlı örnekleme yöntemlerinden maksimum çeşitlilik örneklemeyle belirlenen 28 öğretmen oluşturmuştur. Araştırma verileri açık uçlu sorulardan oluşan bir form aracılığıyla yazılı olarak toplanmış ve içerik analiziyle çözümlenmiştir. Analiz sonucunda öğretmen görüşlerinin beş temel tema altında toplandığı belirlenmiştir: sınav temelli değerlendirmeye yönelik eleştiriler, kıdem ve hizmet yılı temelli kariyer beklentisi, mesleki ayrışma ve statü kaygısı, akademik, mesleki ve performans temelli alternatif ölçütler ile yapısal ve bütüncül düzenleme beklentisi. Bulgular, katılımcıların önemli bir bölümünün merkezi sınavın kariyer ilerlemesinde tek veya bas-kın ölçüt olarak kullanılmasına eleştirel yaklaştığını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte öğretmen görüşleri kariyer basamaklarının veya sınavın bütünüyle reddedilmesi konusunda homojen değildir. Bazı katılımcılar kariyer basamaklarının gerekli veya teşvik edici olabileceğini ancak değerlendirme sürecinin mesleki deneyim, kıdem, lisansüstü eğitim, bilimsel ve mesleki faaliyetler, sınıf içi uygulamalar ve branşa özgü yeterlikler gibi farklı göstergeleri içermesi gerektiğini belirtmiştir. Ayrıca kariyer unvanlarının öğretmenler arasında statü farklılaşması ve mesleki ayrışma oluşturabileceğine ilişkin kaygılar ile sistemin yapısına ve uygulanmasına ilişkin açıklık, eşitlik, adalet, katılımcılık, mesleki gelişim ve kariyer unvanlarının işlevlerinin belirginleştirilmesi gibi çeşitli düzenleme beklentileri öne çıkmıştır. Sonuç olarak bulgular, öğretmenlik kariyer basamaklarının yalnızca sınav ve unvan odaklı bir yükselme mekanizması olarak değil, mesleki deneyimi, sürekli mesleki gelişimi ve öğretmenlik mesleğinin ilişkisel ve yapısal boyutlarını birlikte dikkate alan çok boyutlu bir kariyer politikası çerçevesinde ele alınmasının önemine işaret etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Eğitim Bilimi, Öğretmenlik Kariyer Basamakları, Öğretmen Kariyeri, Öğretmen Görüşleri, Mesleki Gelişim, Profesyonel Sermaye.

Abstract: The aim of this study was to examine teachers' views on the Teacher Career Steps System and explore their expectations regarding the criteria used for career progression, its professional implications, and the improvement of the career system. The study employed a phenomenological design within a qualitative research approach. The study group consisted of 28 teachers selected through maximum variation sampling, a purposive sampling strategy. Data were collected in writing

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using a form comprising open-ended questions and analyzed through content analysis. The analysis yielded five main themes: criticisms of examination-based assessment, expectations for seniority- and service-based career progression, concerns about professional differentiation and status, alternative academic, professional, and performance-based criteria, and expectations for structural and comprehensive reform. The findings indicated that a substantial proportion of participants were critical of using a centralized examination as the sole or dominant criterion for career progression. However, teachers' views were not uniform regarding the complete rejection of either career steps or examinations. Some participants considered career steps potentially necessary or motivating but argued that assessment should incorporate multiple indicators, including professional experience, seniority, postgraduate education, scholarly and professional activities, class-room practices, and subject-specific competencies. Concerns also emerged that career titles could create status differentiation and professional divisions among teachers, alongside expectations for greater clarity, equality, fairness, participation, professional development, and clearer functions for career titles. Overall, the findings suggest that teacher career steps should be conceptualized not merely as an examination and title-based promotion mechanism, but within a multidimensional career policy framework that integrates professional experience, continuous professional development, and the relational and structural dimensions of the teaching profession.

Keywords: Education Science, Teacher Career Steps, Teacher Career, Teachers' Views, Professional Development, Professional Capital.

Introduction

Teacher quality, professional development, and career opportunities are key policy areas for the quality and sustainability of education systems. Recent international policy documents address teachers' professional development opportunities, career progression, evaluation processes, and working conditions as interrelated dimensions, emphasizing their importance for teachers' professional commitment and the quality of teaching (OECD, 2025). Within this framework, teacher career systems can be viewed not merely as structures regulating professional advancement but also as policy instruments for strengthening teachers' professional capacities and supporting their retention within the education system. Indeed, the OECD (2005) emphasizes that teacher policies should be approached holistically, encompassing the recruitment, development, and retention of teachers.

Teaching is a field of professional expertise grounded not only in subject-matter knowledge but also in pedagogical content knowledge, which integrates subject matter with the processes of teaching, as well as other forms of professional knowledge used in instructional practice (Shulman, 1987). Teachers' professional development, in turn, is a dynamic process that continues throughout their careers and is shaped by professional experience and learning (Day, 2013; Day & Gu, 2010). Supporting teachers' professional development and planning their careers is therefore important not only for individual career progression but also for

enhancing the quality of the teaching profession and educational processes. The *Global Report on Teachers*, published by UNESCO and the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 (2024), similarly identifies support for teachers' professional development, expanded career opportunities, and strengthened professional status as key components of teacher policy.

Teacher career systems are structured differently across countries depending on their education policies, approaches to teacher education, and human resource management practices. Internationally, career progression may be linked to various factors, including professional experience and length of service, teacher competencies, continuous professional development, specialization, and additional roles and responsibilities. Career structures may include vertical pathways, through which teachers progress to different career levels with increasing roles and responsibilities, as well as horizontal pathways that enable specialization in particular areas; some education systems combine both approaches (OECD, 2024). This diversity indicates that teacher career systems can be understood not merely as mechanisms regulating titles and promotion, but within a broader teacher policy framework encompassing professional development, specialization, and professional roles.

In Türkiye, the legal framework governing teacher career steps has undergone significant changes in recent years. Law No. 7354 on the Teaching Profession, enacted in 2022, established three career levels—teacher, expert teacher, and head teacher—and stipulated conditions for progression to expert teacher and head teacher, including professional development programs, length of service, and a written examination. However, Law No. 7354 was repealed by Law No. 7528 on the Teaching Profession, adopted in 2024, which restructured the teaching career framework. Under the current legislation, the profession continues to comprise three career levels—teacher, expert teacher, and head teacher—but progression to the latter two is based on length of service and completion of the relevant training programs, with no written examination requirement as stipulated under the previous legislation (Teaching Profession Law, 2022; Teaching Profession Law, 2024).

This change indicates that debates over the criteria on which teacher career progression should be based remain relevant to education policy in Türkiye.

Studies conducted in Türkiye show that teachers' views on the career steps system vary particularly regarding the role of examinations in career progression, the consideration of length of service, perceptions of career titles, and the potential implications of the system for professional relationships (Güven & Barlas, 2023; Özdemir et al., 2022; Uzun, 2023). In this context, the perspectives of teachers who experienced previous career steps systems are important not only for understanding past practices but also for informing the development of current and future career policies.

How length of service and professional experience should be considered in teaching careers constitutes another important dimension of debates on career systems. The relationship between teacher effectiveness and professional experience is neither simple nor linear: experience is more strongly associated with teaching effectiveness particularly during the early years of a teacher's career, while length of service alone is insufficient to account for teacher quality (Rice, 2010). Rather than treating length of service as the sole determinant, teacher career structures may therefore benefit from a more comprehensive approach that considers professional experience alongside continuous professional development, specialization, competencies, and teachers' roles and responsibilities (OECD, 2024).

Another dimension of the debate on teacher career steps concerns the criteria used to assess teachers' professional competencies. Given the professional nature of teaching, which encompasses multiple domains of knowledge and competence (Shulman, 1987), reducing teacher quality to a single assessment instrument may fail to capture the multidimensional nature of the profession (Darling-Hammond, 2013). An important issue, therefore, is the extent to which career systems consider not only teachers' knowledge and competencies but also their professional experience, practice-based competencies, and professional development.

Teacher career systems should also be considered in relation to teachers' perceptions of professional status and professional relationships within schools, rather than solely in terms of individual career progression. Schools are social systems in which interactions and collaboration among teachers and organizational processes are intertwined with educational activities (Hoy &

Miskel, 1991). Accordingly, how teachers perceive career titles and the distinctions associated with them is relevant to professional relationships within schools. Kemer and Polat (2022), for example, found significant relationships between teachers' perceptions of organizational justice and a positive school climate. This finding underscores the importance of considering career systems not only in terms of individual advancement and benefits but also in relation to teachers' perceptions of fairness and their professional relationships.

The Professional Capital framework developed by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) provides a useful theoretical perspective for understanding the multidimensional nature of teacher career systems. According to this framework, teachers' professional capacity depends on the combined development of human, social, and decisional capital. Human capital refers to teachers' professional knowledge, skills, and capabilities; social capital to the collective capacity developed through professional relationships, collaboration, and learning among teachers; and decisional capital to the capacity for professional judgment and decision-making developed over time through experience (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Thus, the framework conceptualizes teacher quality not solely in terms of individual knowledge and skills but also in relation to professional experience and professional relationships among teachers.

In this study, the Professional Capital framework was adopted as a theoretical lens for interpreting teachers' experiences and evaluations of the career steps system. From this perspective, the criteria used for career progression, the role of professional experience and development within the career system, and the implications of career practices for professional relationships among teachers can be examined in relation to human, social, and decisional capital. This framework therefore provides a holistic perspective for understanding how different dimensions of teachers' professional capacity are reflected in the career system.

International literature addresses teacher career structures, teacher evaluation, and continuous professional development as interconnected dimensions of teacher policy. Recent policy studies indicate that teacher careers should be considered in conjunction with professional development, evaluation, specialization, expanded roles and responsibilities, and conditions that support teacher retention (OECD, 2024, 2025). While this literature provides an important

framework for understanding the structural features of teacher career systems and their relationship with professional development, qualitative examination of how teachers experience career policies and their differing evaluations and expectations can contribute to understanding these systems from the perspective of those directly involved in their implementation.

Studies conducted in Türkiye have examined teachers' views on the career steps system across various dimensions, including examinations and assessment, the perceived necessity of career steps, length of service, professional development, and potential implications for teachers (Güven & Barlas, 2023; İlkin & Çobanoğlu, 2023; Özdemir et al., 2022; Uzun, 2023). However, examining teachers' experiences and evaluations together with the criteria for career progression, the role of professional experience and development, the implications of career titles for professional relationships, and expectations for improving the system may extend the existing literature. From this perspective, teacher career steps warrant examination not merely as a mechanism for promotion and assessment, but as a policy practice connected to teachers' professional development, career experiences, and professional relationships.

The aim of this study was to examine, from a phenomenological perspective, the views of teachers who had directly experienced the Teacher Career Steps System. Specifically, the study explored teachers' experiences and evaluations of the system, the criteria used for career progression, and their expectations for its improvement. By providing qualitative evidence grounded in participants' experiences, the study sought to contribute to the national literature on teacher career steps and to policy and practice discussions on the development of teacher career systems from the perspective of teachers directly involved in their implementation.

Method

Research design

This qualitative study examined teachers' experiences, evaluations, and meanings attributed to the Teacher Career Steps System. A phenomenological design was employed. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design that focuses on individuals' experiences of a particular phenomenon and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yıldırım & Şimşek,

2021). In this study, the phenomenon of interest was the Teacher Career Steps System. A phenomenological design was chosen to explore the perceptions, evaluations, and expectations of teachers who had experienced the system from their own perspectives.

Study group

The study group consisted of 28 teachers who voluntarily agreed to share their experiences and views on the Teacher Career Steps System. Of the participants, 8 were female (28.6%) and 20 were male (71.4%). Twenty-three participants worked in primary schools (82.1%) and five in lower secondary schools (17.9%), with professional experience ranging from 2 to 37 years. Including teachers with varying levels of professional experience and from different school levels enabled the study to capture diverse experiences and perspectives on the career steps system.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Position	Teacher	28	100.0
Gender	Female	8	28.6
	Male	20	71.4
School level	Primary school	23	82.1
	Lower secondary school	5	17.9

Sampling Strategy

Maximum variation sampling, a purposive sampling strategy, was employed. This approach involves selecting participants with diverse characteristics and experiences to identify both common and divergent patterns related to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Accordingly, variation was sought in participants' professional experience, school level, and gender.

In qualitative research, sample size is determined by the purpose of the study, participants' experience of the phenomenon, and the adequacy of the data for addressing the research questions rather than by statistical representativeness

or generalizability. Throughout data collection, participants' responses were reviewed, and the dataset was considered sufficient when responses from additional participants largely reflected existing codes and themes and the emergence of new codes noticeably declined. Methodological research identifies data saturation as an important consideration in determining qualitative sample adequacy (Guest et al., 2006). On this basis, data collection was concluded with 28 teachers.

Data collection instrument

Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire developed by the researchers based on the relevant literature and the purpose of the study. During its development, the literature on the Teacher Career Steps System was reviewed, and questions were formulated to elicit participants' experiences, evaluations, and suggestions regarding the system. The draft questionnaire was reviewed for content and clarity by three faculty members with expertise in educational administration and qualitative research. Based on their feedback, the necessary revisions were made and the instrument was finalized.

The questionnaire included open-ended questions addressing participants' overall evaluations of the Teacher Career Steps System, its perceived strengths and limitations, their views on the criteria used for career progression, its potential implications for professional development and professional relationships within schools, and their suggestions for improving the system.

Data collection

Data were collected on a voluntary basis after obtaining the necessary ethical approval and institutional permissions. Ethical approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of University (Date:). Before data collection, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of the data solely for scientific purposes, and the confidentiality of their information. Participants provided written responses to the open-ended questionnaire. To protect their identities, no personally identifying information was included in the reporting of the findings, and participants were coded as P1, P2, ..., P28.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using content analysis, which aims to identify meaningful patterns and systematically organize and interpret related data through concepts and themes (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021). Participants' written responses were first read holistically, after which meaningful segments relevant to the purpose of the study were coded. Codes reflecting similar meanings were compared and grouped to develop categories and themes. The resulting codes, categories, and themes were then reviewed against the dataset and refined before the findings were interpreted in relation to the study purpose (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To enhance the consistency of the coding process, two researchers independently coded the data. Following independent coding, the researchers compared their codes and identified agreements and disagreements. Inter-coder agreement was calculated using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula, $\text{Reliability} = \text{Agreement} / (\text{Agreement} + \text{Disagreement}) \times 100$, yielding an agreement rate of 91%. The researchers then discussed and reassessed disagreements until consensus was reached on the final codes, categories, and themes.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were considered. Credibility was supported through expert review of the data collection instrument and the use of direct participant quotations to reflect their experiences and evaluations. To support transferability, the research design, participant characteristics, sampling strategy, and data collection and analysis procedures were described in detail.

Dependability was supported through independent coding by two researchers and the assessment of inter-coder agreement using Miles and Huberman's (1994) formula. To enhance confirmability, the development of categories and themes from the codes was conducted systematically, independent coding was compared, and disagreements were discussed until a final coding structure was agreed upon. In addition, themes and categories were supported by

direct participant quotations to maintain a clear connection between the findings and the data.

Findings

Themes related to the teacher career steps system

Content analysis of the data yielded five main themes regarding teachers' views on the Teacher Career Steps System: (1) criticisms of examination-based assessment, (2) expectations for seniority- and service-based career progression, (3) concerns about professional differentiation and status, (4) alternative academic, professional, and performance-based assessment criteria, and (5) expectations for structural and comprehensive reform. As some participants' statements reflected meanings relevant to more than one theme, their views were coded under multiple themes where appropriate. Table 2 presents the themes, key codes, participants associated with each code, and theme frequencies and percentages.

Table 2: Themes, Codes, and Participants Related to the Teacher Career Steps System

Theme	Key Codes	Participants	n	%
Criticisms of examination-based assessment	Objection to the centralized examination as the sole criterion; inadequate reflection of professional competence; rote learning; stress/fatigue; loss of motivation; criticism of examination quality	P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19, P20, P21, P22, P23, P24, P25, P26, P27, P28	21	75.0
Expectations for seniority- and service-based career progression	Length of service; professional experience; professional effort; recognition of seniority; grade/step progression; consideration of experience in career progression	P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P12, P13, P14, P19, P24, P27, P28	13	46.4

Concerns about professional differentiation and status	Hierarchy; differentiation by title; pay differences; categorization and grouping; parental preferences; divisions in professional relationships	P2, P4, P5, P14, P16, P20, P22, P24, P25, P26, P27	11	39.3
Alternative academic, professional, and performance-based criteria	Postgraduate education; scholarly publications/activities; project development; professional achievement; in-service training; classroom practice; subject-specific assessment; professional record/grade progression; professional development	P3, P4, P6, P8, P10, P15, P18, P21, P23, P25, P28	11	39.3
Expectations for structural and comprehensive reform	Clear and comprehensible regulations; equality and fairness; teacher/stakeholder participation; professional development-oriented structure; employment and financial rights; clarification of system functions; comprehensive reform	P1, P2, P4, P6, P10, P11, P17, P19, P21, P22, P23, P26	12	42.9

Note. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of participants (N = 28). Because a participant's views could be coded under more than one theme, the sum of theme frequencies and percentages exceeds N and 100%, respectively. Theme frequencies are reported to describe the relative prominence of the themes and should not be interpreted as quantitative indicators of their importance.

Criticisms of examination-based assessment

A large proportion of participants ($n = 21$; 75.0%) expressed critical views about the use of a centralized examination in the Teacher Career Steps System, particularly when it served as the sole or determining criterion for career progression. Participants emphasized that the examination did not adequately reflect the multidimensional competencies required in teaching, was limited in assessing professional experience and classroom practice, could encourage rote learning, and could create stress and fatigue. However, views on the examination were not entirely uniform. Rather than advocating its complete removal, some participants suggested that it should not be the sole assessment criterion and should be tailored to subject-specific competencies.

Participants particularly questioned the examination's capacity to assess teachers' professional experience and development. Some argued that professional expertise could not be evaluated solely through academic knowledge or examination performance and that teachers' classroom experience and practices should also be considered. P24 emphasized the experience-based nature of teaching and commented on the examination's contribution to professional development as follows:

"Teaching is a profession grounded in experience. Teachers engage in all kinds of activities related to their classrooms and continuously improve themselves. I do not think the examination contributes to this development in any way." (P24)

P24's account explicitly highlights professional experience, classroom-based development, and the perceived lack of contribution of the examination to such development.

Another criticism concerned the stress and fatigue associated with the examination. Some participants described preparing for an examination after many years in the profession as an additional burden and noted that time that could otherwise be devoted to students had to be spent preparing for the examination. P20 explained:

"Having to prepare for another examination after working in the profession for a certain number of years is stressful. Life is already demanding, and when we should be

spending more time with our students, having to deal with the additional stress of an examination is exhausting.” (P20)

P20's account indicates that the examination was criticized not only as an assessment instrument but also in terms of the psychological and professional burden it placed on teachers.

However, some participants did not reject examinations altogether, instead arguing that they should not serve as the sole criterion for career progression and should account for subject-specific characteristics. P21 clearly reflected this perspective:

“Career steps may encourage teachers to be more effective. However, they should not be determined solely by an examination and should be based on objective criteria. The examination system should also be designed with teachers' subject areas in mind.” (P21)

Similarly, P6 did not reject the use of an examination but argued that it should be aligned with teachers' areas of specialization:

“If there is specialization, there should also be an examination, but assessment and evaluation should be conducted using formats and scales appropriate to the subject area.” (P6)

This view suggests that criticism of examination-based assessment may concern the nature and design of the examination rather than its mere existence.

Another distinction emerging from participants' accounts was between the idea of career development and the existing examination system. P23 explicitly opposed not the career system itself but an examination system perceived as heavily reliant on memorization and having limited applicability:

“I am not against the teacher career system; I am against an examination system based on 500 pages of material that requires memorization, has limited applicability, and ultimately provides teachers with additional pay. Teachers are not opposed to innovation, learning, or self-development; they are opposed to rote knowledge.” (P23)

P23 also suggested alternative pathways for professional development, such as postgraduate education that would allow teachers to advance in their own fields, and indicated that an examination-based system could reduce teacher motivation.

Overall, criticisms of examination-based assessment centered on its perceived limitations in representing teaching competence, recognizing professional experience and classroom practice, its emphasis on rote learning, and the stress and fatigue it could create. At the same time, the accounts of P6, P21, and P23 demonstrate that these criticisms did not necessarily imply rejection of career development or examinations altogether. Rather, some participants acknowledged the need for assessment in career progression while advocating a multidimensional approach that considers subject-specific characteristics and different dimensions of teaching.

Expectations for seniority- and service-based career progression

Thirteen participants (46.4%) stated that seniority, length of service, and professional experience should be considered in determining teacher career steps. Seniority was viewed not merely as time spent in the profession but also as an indicator of the experience and professional knowledge accumulated over the years. However, participants differed in the weight they assigned to seniority within the career system. While some argued that length of service should directly determine career progression, others suggested that professional experience and seniority should be considered alongside indicators of professional development and competence.

Participants who favored seniority as a primary criterion emphasized that many years of teaching contributed to professional experience and expertise. P9 argued that experience accumulated over many years should itself be recognized as evidence of professional expertise:

"Teachers who have worked for 10-15 years or more have already developed expertise in their fields. After so many years of effort, there is no point in requiring a career examination. This is not an examination for expert teacher status; it is an examination that devalues and discredits teachers who have worked and served for so many years." (P9)

P9's account reflects a view of length of service not merely as a quantitative indicator of seniority but as recognition of professional effort and accumulated experience. Similarly, P12 argued that professional experience and seniority should directly underpin career progression:

"Professional experience and years of seniority should be the basis for planning teacher career steps." (P12)

P12's account clearly positions seniority and experience among the primary criteria for career progression.

Participants' accounts also reflected the view that teaching is grounded not only in knowledge but also in professional practice and teaching experience. P13 emphasized the importance of professional experience and seniority in career planning:

"Teaching is not merely a profession of knowing; it is a profession of teaching. Professional experience and years of seniority should be among the criteria used in teachers' career planning." (P13)

This account indicates that some participants viewed time spent in the profession as an indicator of professional knowledge and expertise developed through teaching experience.

Nevertheless, participants differed in how seniority and length of service should be incorporated into career progression. While some regarded seniority as a primary criterion, others argued that professional experience should be considered alongside professional development, professional activities, and other indicators of competence. Thus, although participants shared an expectation that experience accumulated throughout teachers' careers should be recognized within the career system, they differed regarding the extent to which it should determine career progression. The findings should therefore not be interpreted as indicating that all 13 participants supported a career system based solely on seniority.

Concerns about professional differentiation and status

Eleven participants (39.3%) expressed concerns that the Teacher Career Steps System could lead to status differentiation, hierarchy, categorization, grouping, and professional divisions among teachers. Participants particularly emphasized that career titles such as expert teacher and head teacher could create different status positions among members of the same profession, that title-based pay differences could affect collegial relationships, and that career steps could result in teachers being perceived as belonging to different categories within schools.

Some participants argued that classifying teachers according to career titles could create a hierarchical structure within the profession. P2 described this concern as follows:

"I do not think it is appropriate to divide teachers into levels using titles such as expert teacher and head teacher or to subject them to such a hierarchy. The regulation on teacher career steps, which undermines the prestige of the teaching profession, should be repealed immediately. The employment and financial rights of all teachers should be improved without distinctions such as expert teacher or head teacher." (P2)

P2's account indicates that career titles may be perceived not merely as a means of professional advancement but also as a mechanism that creates hierarchical differentiation among teachers.

Title-based pay differences also emerged as a concern. Some participants criticized differences in remuneration among teachers who performed similar duties and responsibilities but held different career titles. P16 stated:

"I do not think the career steps system is appropriate. I do not think it is right for one person in the staff room to be a probationary teacher and another a contract teacher, or for one to be an expert teacher and another a head teacher. It is not right for teachers who teach in the same classrooms to receive different salaries." (P16)

This account shows that participants could perceive status differentiation associated with career steps as intertwined with economic differentiation.

Concerns about professional divisions extended beyond differences in titles and pay. Some participants suggested that career steps could affect communication and collegial relationships among teachers and that different career categories could lead to group formation within schools. P26 explained:

"Teacher career steps will categorize teachers and create communication problems among them. Salary differences will lead to group formation among teachers doing the same job. Parents, particularly when choosing a teacher for first grade, will distinguish between expert teachers, head teachers, and regular classroom teachers; this will create professional difficulties among teachers performing the same work." (P26)

P26's account links the potential implications of career steps not only to communication and group formation among teachers but also to parental preferences in teacher selection.

Some participants were also concerned that parents might perceive career titles as indicators of teacher quality. For example, P14 suggested that career steps could create distinctions among teachers and lead parents to prefer those at higher career levels. Similarly, P5 stated that career steps could result in discrimination among teachers and influence parents' decisions when selecting teachers. These accounts suggest that participants perceived the potential implications of career titles as extending beyond collegial relationships within schools to how teachers might be perceived by external stakeholders.

Some participants also expressed concerns that the system could create a climate of differentiation within schools. P25 stated:

"The examination administered as part of these career steps will certainly not assess our area of expertise. Once the examination results are announced and implemented, a climate of distinction and differentiation among teachers will be created in schools." (P25)

Overall, concerns about professional differentiation and status centered on career titles, pay differences, the categorization of teachers, group formation among colleagues, and the possibility that parents might consider career titles when selecting teachers. Importantly, these accounts do not demonstrate that the career steps system actually produced such outcomes; rather, they reflect participants' perceptions and concerns about its potential consequences. The findings should therefore be interpreted as perceived potential implications for professional relationships and status.

Alternative academic, professional, and performance-based criteria

Eleven participants (39.3%) argued that a centralized examination should not serve as the sole criterion for determining teacher career steps and that indicators reflecting teachers' academic, professional, and practice-based competencies should also be considered. These included postgraduate education, scholarly publications and activities, project development, professional achievements, in-service training, classroom practices, professional development, and subject-specific assessment criteria. Rather than replacing the centralized examination with another single criterion, participants generally favored combining multiple indicators that reflect different dimensions of teachers' professional experience and competence.

Some participants emphasized that assessment should account for the characteristics of teachers' subject areas, arguing that applying identical content and criteria to all teachers might not adequately reflect differences across areas of specialization. P6 explained:

"There should be an examination, but what kind of expertise would it assess? Everyone has a different area of expertise. There should be questions specific to each subject area. Teacher career steps should be structured according to subject area. If there is specialization, there should be an examination, but assessment and evaluation should use formats and scales appropriate to each subject area." (P6)

This account reflects an expectation that assessment instruments should be differentiated according to teachers' areas of expertise rather than a complete rejection of examinations.

Other participants argued that teachers' academic and scholarly activities should also contribute to career progression. They emphasized that neither examination performance nor a single academic qualification was sufficient and that scholarly output and professional achievements should be incorporated into the assessment process. P15 stated:

"I think a career steps system is necessary. However, rather than a system based solely on an examination or a master's degree, I believe that criteria such as articles, published books, participation in scholarly meetings, and professional achievements should also be taken into consideration." (P15)

P15's account reflects an expectation for a broader assessment approach encompassing teachers' scholarly and professional activities rather than relying solely on a centralized examination or postgraduate education.

Project development, postgraduate education, and professional development activities also featured prominently among the suggested alternative criteria. P18 noted that teachers could be evaluated based on their field-based work and professional development activities:

"Assessment could be based on a project carried out in practice, postgraduate education, and professional development activities." (P18)

P18's account reflects an expectation that career progression could be based not only on an examination administered at a particular point in time but also on

indicators of development accumulated throughout a teacher's professional career. Similarly, some participants suggested incorporating subject-related activities, projects, national and international achievements, and scholarly activities into the assessment process. P28 described this multidimensional approach as follows:

"The result of a single examination does not make someone an expert. Activities and projects undertaken by teachers in their fields, national and international achievements, and participation in scholarly activities could provide more meaningful criteria." (P28)

P28's account clearly reflects an expectation that different academic and professional activities should be considered together in assessing career progression.

Overall, participants' expectations for alternative criteria extended beyond academic achievement to include professional development, projects, professional accomplishments, classroom practices, and subject-specific competencies. Taken together, the findings indicate a preference for a more comprehensive assessment approach that reflects the academic, professional, and practice-based dimensions of teaching rather than relying on a single assessment instrument.

Expectations for structural and comprehensive reform

Twelve participants (42.9%) expressed various expectations regarding the structure and implementation of the Teacher Career Steps System. These included clear and comprehensible regulations, adherence to principles of equality and fairness, teacher and stakeholder participation in decision-making, clarification of the professional functions of career steps, support for teachers' professional development, and consideration of employment and financial rights. Some participants further argued that career steps should not be addressed in isolation from other dimensions of the teaching profession, calling for more comprehensive reform. Thus, this theme reflects expectations for improvements across multiple dimensions of the career system rather than a single structural change.

One of the most comprehensive proposals was offered by P4, who emphasized that career steps should not be considered independently of other

aspects of the teaching profession and highlighted the importance of teacher participation in policymaking:

“Change should not be limited to form and appearance but should address the substance through a holistic perspective. Teachers’ voices should be heard. If such changes are designed only by those sitting behind desks, they will not be sustainable and will turn into a patchwork of measures. A professional law focused solely on careers will remain inadequate. A lasting professional law should comprehensively address everything from appointment and relocation to teacher education and professional development, as well as teachers’ rights and responsibilities.” (P4)

P4’s account reflects an expectation that career steps should be situated within a broader professional policy encompassing teacher education, appointment and relocation, professional development, and teachers’ rights and responsibilities rather than being treated solely as a promotion mechanism. The emphasis on teachers’ voices also highlights the participatory dimension of the expected reform.

Some participants emphasized that the system should be based on clear rules and that equality and fairness should guide career progression. While viewing the existence of career steps positively, P17 expressed concerns about the conditions under which the system was implemented:

“As in every profession, I was pleased to see such a system introduced in education. However, implementing it immediately before the system has been clarified and the necessary infrastructure established will create problems. I therefore regard it as an appropriate practice, but I believe that progression through the career steps should be clearly regulated by legislation and implemented without discrimination, in accordance with the principles of equality and fairness.” (P17)

P17’s account demonstrates that a positive view of career steps can coexist with criticism of their implementation and expectations for reform. In particular, the participant emphasized regulatory clarity, adequate preparation, and adherence to equality and fairness.

Participation in decision-making emerged as another dimension of structural reform. Some teachers argued that the views of teachers directly affected

by the system, as well as those of other educational stakeholders, should be considered when developing career step regulations. P19 stated:

"There are many shortcomings and unfair aspects in the regulations. It would be more appropriate to seek the views of educational stakeholders and take them into account in the evaluation process." (P19)

P19's account reflects an expectation for greater stakeholder participation in decisions concerning the development of the career system.

Some participants also considered it insufficient to associate career steps solely with titles and financial benefits, arguing that the professional functions attached to career titles should be more clearly defined. P22 explained:

"Career steps are certainly an important professional practice for teachers, but tying them solely to an examination and having those who reach certain career levels view them merely as a source of financial gain is inconsistent with the spirit of the profession. What will expert teachers and head teachers actually do in practice, and how will they contribute? What will their position be within the institution, and how will their relationships with colleagues be structured? These issues need to be defined. The career steps system needs substantive content." (P22)

P22's account reflects an expectation that career titles should be defined not merely in terms of increased pay or changes in status but also in relation to teachers' duties, responsibilities, and professional roles within schools.

Overall, expectations for structural and comprehensive reform encompassed regulatory clarity, equality and fairness, stakeholder participation, clearly defined professional functions for career titles, support for professional development, and greater integration of career steps with other dimensions of the teaching profession. These findings indicate that some participants viewed career steps not merely as a means of obtaining titles but as a career system that should be developed in connection with the broader processes of the teaching profession.

Discussion

The findings indicate that teachers did not view the Teacher Career Steps System merely as an administrative mechanism for professional advancement. Rather, their accounts reflected interconnected concerns regarding assessment criteria, recognition of professional experience, professional status and collegial

relationships, alternative pathways for career progression, and the structural features of the career system. Importantly, participants generally focused less on rejecting career progression itself than on how professional experience and development should be recognized, which criteria should guide advancement, and how career structures might affect teachers and professional relationships within schools. From this perspective, the Teacher Career Steps System emerges as a multilayered structure involving professional identity, status, organizational justice, and professionalization, while also revealing a potential tension between the standardized assessment of individual performance and the preservation of professional belonging. These findings underscore the importance of approaching teacher career systems not solely through assessment criteria but in relation to teachers' professional experience, development, and organizational context.

Criticisms of examination-based assessment

A major finding was participants' criticism of the centralized examination as the sole or dominant criterion for career progression. Participants questioned its capacity to reflect the multidimensional nature of teaching, emphasizing professional experience, classroom practice, teaching competence, and professional development alongside knowledge. Some also associated the examination with rote learning and stress. Importantly, however, these views did not amount to a uniform rejection of examinations. Some participants supported retaining an examination provided that it was subject-specific and complemented by other assessment criteria. The central concern, therefore, was less the existence of assessment itself than reliance on a centralized examination as the primary basis for career progression.

This finding is consistent with approaches emphasizing the multidimensional nature of teacher quality and assessment (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Teaching requires not only knowledge but also the capacity to integrate that knowledge effectively into instructional practice. Recent TALIS findings similarly situate teachers' professional learning and development, working conditions, and professional practices within interconnected dimensions of the teaching profession (OECD, 2025). From this perspective, participants' concerns about the capacity of a single examination to represent teaching competence align with broader

approaches that call for multiple dimensions of teacher professionalism to be considered in evaluation.

The findings also partially converge with İlkin and Çobanoğlu (2023), who reported that teachers did not consider the career steps examination necessary. The present study, however, adds nuance by showing variation in teachers' positions: some participants advocated not the elimination of examinations but their redesign according to subject-specific characteristics and their integration with other criteria. Accordingly, the findings do not support a normative conclusion that centralized examinations should necessarily be removed from the career system. Rather, they indicate concern about examinations becoming the sole or dominant criterion and point to expectations for more multidimensional assessment.

This interpretation is also consistent with the Professional Capital framework. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) conceptualize professional capacity through the interaction of human capital, social capital, and decisional capital, thereby extending teacher professionalism beyond individual knowledge and skills to include professional relationships and judgment developed through experience. Participants' emphasis on professional experience, practice-based competencies, and continuous professional development therefore supports a broader understanding of teacher quality than can be captured through a single knowledge-based assessment. From this perspective, teacher career systems may benefit from considering how examinations can be combined with indicators of professional experience, practice-based competence, and continuous professional development rather than functioning as the predominant measure of career advancement.

Expectations for seniority- and service-based career progression

Nearly half of the participants ($n = 13$; 46.4%) emphasized seniority, length of service, and professional experience in career progression. Their accounts framed seniority not merely as time spent in the profession but as recognition of accumulated experience, professional knowledge, and effort. This finding can also be considered in relation to organizational justice. Greenberg (1990) identifies perceptions concerning the distribution of outcomes and rewards as an important dimension of distributive justice. From this perspective, participants' emphasis on

recognizing seniority, experience, and professional effort may reflect expectations of fairness in career progression. However, participants differed in how such recognition should operate: while some favored length of service as a primary criterion, others argued that experience should be considered alongside postgraduate education, scholarly activities, projects, and other indicators of professional development.

Research on the relationship between professional experience and teacher effectiveness suggests that these expectations require careful interpretation. Evidence does not support treating length of service alone as a sufficient indicator of teacher performance (Rice, 2010; Rockoff, 2004). Although experience may be associated with teaching effectiveness, particularly at certain stages of a teacher's career, the relationship is neither simple nor linear (Rice, 2010). Accordingly, participants' emphasis on seniority is better interpreted as an expectation that professional experience and accumulated effort should not be overlooked in career progression rather than as a uniform preference for seniority as the sole indicator of performance.

This interpretation is consistent with İlkin and Çobanoğlu (2023), who found that teachers favored considering length of professional service when determining career steps. The present findings extend this observation by revealing variation in how teachers believe experience should be incorporated into career progression. While some participants considered completion of specified periods of service sufficient for progression to expert teacher or head teacher status, others favored combining experience with academic and professional development indicators. Thus, the shared emphasis appears to concern the institutional recognition of professional experience rather than uniform support for a seniority-only career model.

The findings can also be interpreted through the Professional Capital framework. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) conceptualize professional capital as encompassing not only teachers' knowledge, skills, and expertise as human capital, but also social capital developed through professional relationships and collective learning and decisional capital developed through experience-based professional judgment. Participants' emphasis on seniority and experience can therefore be understood particularly as a desire to recognize expertise and

professional judgment accumulated through practice. At the same time, their references to academic, professional, and practice-based indicators suggest a broader expectation that career progression should reflect multiple dimensions of professional capacity rather than length of service alone.

Concerns about professional differentiation and status

Eleven participants (39.3%) expressed concerns that the career steps system could contribute to status differentiation and professional divisions among teachers. Their concerns centered on the possibility that titles such as expert teacher and head teacher could create hierarchical perceptions, that title-based pay differences could affect relationships among teachers performing similar duties, and that career categories could encourage group formation within schools. Some participants also suggested that career titles might influence parental preferences, making status distinctions among teachers more visible. These concerns are consistent with findings from previous studies of teacher career steps in Türkiye (Güven & Barlas, 2023; Özdemir et al., 2022), with similar concerns also reported by Uzun (2023).

From an organizational perspective, these findings suggest that career systems may have implications extending beyond individual advancement to professional relationships within schools. Participants' concerns regarding hierarchy, pay differences, and categorization are particularly relevant to organizational justice and school climate. Kemer and Polat (2022) found significant relationships between teachers' perceptions of organizational justice and a positive school climate. Accordingly, how fair and non-divisive teachers perceive a career system to be may be relevant not only to individual career outcomes but also to professional relationships within the school.

The findings are also relevant to the social capital dimension of the Professional Capital framework. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) argue that teachers' professional capacity derives not only from individual knowledge and skills but also from relationships, trust, collaboration, and collective learning among colleagues. Participants' concerns about status differentiation, hierarchy, and group formation therefore highlight the potential relevance of career structures to social capital within schools. In particular, differentiating teachers working in the same organizational setting through titles and pay categories may have

implications for collaboration and collegial relationships, suggesting that career policies should not be considered independently of the relational dimensions of teachers' work.

These findings should not, however, be interpreted as evidence that the Teacher Career Steps System actually causes professional divisions, group formation, or deterioration in school climate. They reflect participants' perceptions and concerns about potential consequences rather than demonstrated causal effects. Career systems may therefore need to balance support for professional development and advancement with attention to collaboration, professional solidarity, and perceptions of fairness among teachers.

Alternative academic, professional, and performance-based criteria

Eleven participants (39.3%) argued that career progression should not rely solely on a centralized examination but should also consider indicators such as postgraduate education, scholarly activities, project development, professional achievements, in-service training, classroom practices, and subject-specific competencies. The diversity of these proposed criteria suggests a broader conception of teacher competence encompassing professional development, practice, and subject expertise rather than academic knowledge or examination performance alone. This finding is consistent with approaches emphasizing the multidimensional nature of teacher quality and the need to consider multiple indicators of professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2013; OECD, 2025).

Participants nevertheless differed in the types of alternative criteria they prioritized. Some emphasized academic activities, including postgraduate education, scholarly publications, books, and participation in academic conferences, whereas others focused on practice-based indicators such as projects, professional achievements, classroom practices, and teaching competence. Others advocated subject-specific criteria to reflect differences across areas of expertise. Taken together, these views suggest a preference not for replacing the centralized examination with another single measure, but for combining indicators that capture different academic, professional, and practice-based dimensions of teaching.

This finding can also be interpreted through the Professional Capital framework. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) conceptualize teacher professionalism

through the interaction of human, social, and decisional capital. The criteria proposed by participants—particularly postgraduate education, scholarly activities, professional development, subject expertise, and classroom practice—relate most directly to human capital and decisional capital by reflecting professional knowledge, skills, expertise, and experience-based judgment. Importantly, the proposed criteria do not represent all dimensions of professional capital equally; within this theme, they primarily concern individual professional development and practice-based competence rather than social capital.

Although these findings point toward an expectation for multidimensional assessment, the use of multiple criteria also raises practical questions concerning how such criteria should be defined and weighted and how objectivity and reliability should be maintained. The findings therefore do not establish the superiority of any particular assessment model. Rather, they highlight the need to consider approaches capable of representing teachers' professional development, subject expertise, and practice-based competencies more comprehensively.

Expectations for structural and comprehensive reform

Twelve participants (42.9%) expressed expectations concerning the structure and implementation of the Teacher Career Steps System. These included clear regulations, equality and fairness, teacher and stakeholder participation in decision-making, clearer professional functions for career titles, support for professional development, and consideration of employment and financial rights. Some participants also argued that career steps should be integrated with broader dimensions of the teaching profession, including appointment and relocation processes, professional development, and teachers' rights and authority. These views suggest that participants regarded career policy not merely as a technical mechanism regulating individual advancement but as a broader policy area connected to multiple dimensions of the teaching profession. Their emphasis on stakeholder participation further indicates that both the content of career policies and the processes through which they are developed and implemented matter to teachers.

This broader perspective is consistent with Fullan's (2007) argument that sustainable educational change requires more than regulatory reform and should incorporate professional capacity building and implementation processes. Recent

international policy documents similarly emphasize the interconnectedness of continuous professional development, career opportunities, working conditions, and the status of the teaching profession (OECD, 2025; UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). From this perspective, participants' expectations suggest that teacher career policies may need to be considered within a broader framework that connects career progression with professional development and the structural conditions of teaching rather than focusing solely on requirements for advancement between career levels.

The findings also highlight expectations for clarity, fairness, participation, and clearer professional functions for career titles. Participants' calls for transparent regulations and stakeholder involvement indicate that the perceived quality of a career system may depend not only on its substantive criteria but also on how it is designed and implemented. Similarly, expectations that expert teacher and head teacher titles should correspond to clearly defined roles and responsibilities suggest that career progression is viewed as more than a change in title or financial benefits. Taken together, the findings point to the importance of considering assessment, professional development, professional roles, fairness, and participatory policymaking as interconnected dimensions in the design of teacher career systems.

Overall Discussion

Taken together, the findings converge around three broader issues: the multidimensional assessment of professional competence, recognition of professional experience and effort within the career system, and the need to situate career progression within a framework attentive to professional development, professional relationships, equality, and fairness. Participants' accounts therefore suggest that teacher career steps are understood not merely as mechanisms for individual advancement and the acquisition of titles but as a policy structure in which assessment criteria, professional experience and development, collegial relationships, and structural conditions are interconnected. In this sense, the debate extends beyond a simple choice between examination- and seniority-based progression toward the broader question of how different dimensions of teacher professionalism should be recognized within a career system.

This overall pattern is consistent with the Professional Capital framework. Participants' emphasis on professional knowledge, skills, academic development, and subject expertise relates primarily to human capital; their emphasis on experience and practice-based professional judgment to decisional capital; and their concerns about status differentiation, hierarchy, and group formation to the relational dimension represented by social capital. The findings therefore broadly align with Hargreaves and Fullan's (2012) conceptualization of professional capital as the combined development of human, social, and decisional capital, while illustrating how these dimensions may become relevant to different aspects of teacher career policy.

Importantly, participants did not express a single or homogeneous position on teacher career steps. Some opposed centralized examinations or career titles, whereas others regarded career steps as potentially necessary or motivating but called for different assessment criteria and implementation arrangements. Similarly, views varied regarding the relative importance of seniority, academic and professional activities, classroom practice, and subject-specific competencies. Teacher perspectives on career systems should therefore not be reduced to a simple acceptance-rejection or "examination versus seniority" dichotomy. Rather, they reflect differing expectations concerning the purposes, criteria, and implementation of career progression. Attending to these experiences and expectations may provide a valuable practitioner perspective for the development and evaluation of teacher career policies.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study examined teachers' views on the Teacher Career Steps System and identified five interrelated themes concerning examination-based assessment, recognition of seniority and professional experience, professional differentiation and status, alternative assessment criteria, and structural reform. Overall, participants viewed career steps not merely as a mechanism for promotion and the acquisition of titles but as a broader policy issue involving professional development, experience, assessment, professional relationships, and the structural conditions of the teaching profession.

The most prominent theme concerned examination-based assessment, with 21 participants (75.0%) expressing criticism of the use of a centralized examination

or its dominant role in career progression. Participants emphasized that teaching competence extends beyond knowledge that can be assessed through an examination and encompasses professional experience, classroom practice, professional development, academic activities, and subject-specific competencies. However, these views did not constitute a uniform rejection of examinations: some participants favored subject-specific examinations combined with other criteria. Similarly, although 13 participants (46.4%) emphasized seniority, length of service, and professional experience, they differed in the weight these factors should carry. While some favored service-based progression, others supported combining experience with academic and professional development indicators. The broader expectation was therefore that accumulated professional experience and effort should be recognized rather than that seniority should necessarily serve as the sole criterion.

The findings also highlighted relational, multidimensional, and structural aspects of career progression. Eleven participants (39.3%) expressed concerns about potential status differentiation, hierarchy, categorization, and group formation associated with career titles and related pay differences. These findings represent perceived potential consequences rather than evidence that the system actually produces such organizational outcomes. Another 11 participants (39.3%) advocated incorporating multiple indicators—including postgraduate education, scholarly activities, projects, professional achievements, professional development, classroom practices, and subject-specific competencies—rather than replacing the centralized examination with another single criterion. In addition, 12 participants (42.9%) emphasized structural issues such as regulatory clarity, equality and fairness, stakeholder participation, clearer professional functions for career titles, professional development, and employment and financial rights, with some calling for career policy to be integrated more broadly with other dimensions of the teaching profession.

Taken together, the findings suggest that debates over teacher career steps cannot be adequately reduced to an “examination versus seniority” dichotomy. Although participants did not articulate a single or homogeneous model of career progression, recurring expectations concerned recognition of professional experience, support for continuous professional development, consideration of academic, professional, and practice-based competencies, attention to collegial

relationships, and the development of career policies through clear, fair, and participatory processes. The Teacher Career Steps System may therefore be more appropriately considered not merely as a technical mechanism for assessment and promotion but as a broader area of education policy connected to teachers' professional development, career experiences, and professional relationships.

Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was limited to 28 teachers selected through maximum variation purposive sampling. Although participants varied in professional experience and subject area and included teachers from both primary and lower-secondary schools, the findings reflect only their experiences and perspectives. Moreover, the predominance of primary school teachers limited the balanced representation of experiences across educational levels. Given the qualitative design and characteristics of the study group, statistical generalization was neither intended nor warranted, and teachers working in different regions, school types, and educational levels may hold different perspectives on the career steps system.

Second, data were collected through written responses to open-ended questions, which did not allow researchers to probe participants' responses through follow-up questions or clarify particular experiences in greater depth. Variation in the length and detail of participants' responses may also have affected the depth of the data. Consequently, experiences and meaning-making processes that might have emerged through in-depth interviews may not have been fully captured. The study was also limited to teachers' perspectives and did not include school administrators, local education administrators, policymakers, or other stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of the career system. The findings therefore do not provide a comparative account of how the system is perceived across different stakeholder groups.

Third, the findings are based on participants' self-reports and should not be interpreted as evidence of the actual effects of the career steps system on teacher performance, professional development, school climate, or collegial relationships. In particular, accounts concerning status differentiation, hierarchy, group formation, and professional relationships represent participants' perceived or anticipated consequences rather than demonstrated causal effects.

Future research could examine teacher career steps across different regions, school types, and educational levels and employ in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations, or multiple data sources to provide richer accounts of teachers' experiences. Comparative studies involving teachers, school and education administrators, and policymakers could further illuminate differences across stakeholder perspectives. Longitudinal and mixed-methods research may also help examine how the career system and its potential implications for professional development, professional relationships, and school contexts evolve over time.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Rather than relying on a centralized examination as the sole or dominant assessment instrument, teacher career systems could adopt multidimensional approaches incorporating professional experience, continuous professional development, postgraduate education, scholarly activities, projects, professional achievements, and classroom practices. Mechanisms supporting teachers' participation in such professional development activities could be strengthened, and transparent criteria could be established for linking them to career progression.
- Given differences across teachers' areas of expertise, the feasibility and applicability of subject-specific assessment criteria that reflect the distinctive characteristics of different teaching fields could be considered.
- In light of participants' concerns about status differentiation, hierarchical perceptions, and group formation, career systems should emphasize clear, transparent, objective, equitable, and fair criteria. The potential implications of career titles and related practices for professional collaboration, solidarity, and collegial relationships should also be considered in policy design and implementation.
- To ensure that career titles such as expert teacher and head teacher extend beyond status and financial benefits, their associated professional roles, duties, and responsibilities could be more clearly defined. The ways in which career

progression is expected to contribute to teachers' professional development and educational practice could also be made more explicit.

- Participatory mechanisms could be established to systematically incorporate the experiences and perspectives of teachers and other educational stakeholders into the development and revision of teacher career policies and regulations.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Firat University Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Document date and number: 27.07.2026-50009). All participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of the data solely for scientific purposes, and the confidentiality of their information. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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