



Review / Derleme

Teacher Academies as a Cultural Learning Community

Kültürel Bir Öğrenme Topluluğu Olarak Öğretmen Akademileri

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the limitations of professional development approaches that define teacher learning in terms of instructional effectiveness, performance, and measurable outcomes. It examines the Teacher Academies model, launched by the Istanbul Provincial Directorate of National Education in 2016 and expanded nationwide by the Ministry in 2023, within a conceptual framework. While professional learning communities are mostly conceptualized in the international literature as school-based, performance- and accountability-oriented arrangements, teachers' search for professional meaning, cultural positioning, and identity construction processes are addressed at a relatively secondary level. This study aims to reframe Teacher Academies as cultural learning communities where teacher learning is shaped through culture, identity, literacy, ethical participation, and collective meaning-making. In line with sociocultural learning theories and the community of practice approach, the article argues that teacher academies offer a unique community model that integrates teacher learning with its ethical, cultural, and human dimensions through their voluntary nature, out-of-school organization, and interdisciplinary content structure. It also argues that the collective relationship forms established with texts and cultural narratives in academies open up a broad field of practice that links literacy to teacher identity and meaning production. The study offers a theoretical contribution to expanding established concepts related to teacher communities and rethinking teacher learning in a context-sensitive manner.

ÖZ

Bu makale, öğretmen öğrenmesini öğretimsel etkililik, performans ve ölçülebilir çıktılar üzerinden tanımlayan mesleki gelişim yaklaşımlarının sınırlılıklarını tartışarak, 2016'da İstanbul Milli Eğitim Müdürlüğüne başlatılan, 2023'te Bakanlıkça ülke sathına genişletilen Öğretmen Akademileri modelini kavramsal bir çerçevede ele almaktadır. Uluslararası alan yazında profesyonel öğrenme toplulukları çoğunlukla okul temelli, performans ve hesap verebilirlik eksenli düzenlemeler olarak kavramsallaştırılırken öğretmenlerin mesleki anlam arayışları, kültürel konumlanmaları ve kimlik inşa süreçleri görece ikincil düzeyde ele alınmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Öğretmen Akademilerini mekân, kültür ve insan temelli etkileşimler aracılığıyla öğretmenlerin

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aidiyet, değer ve mesleki kimliklerini birlikte ürettikleri kültürel öğrenme toplulukları olarak yeniden çerçevelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Sosyokültürel öğrenme kuramları ve uygulama toplulukları yaklaşımı doğrultusunda makale, öğretmen akademilerinin gönüllülük, okul-dışı örgütlenme ve disiplinler üstü içerik yapısıyla öğretmen öğrenmesini etik, kültürel ve insani boyutlarıyla bütünleştiren özgün bir topluluk modeli sunduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Ayrıca akademilerde metinlerle ve kültürel anlatılarla kurulan kolektif ilişki biçimlerinin, okuryazarlığı öğretmen kimliği ve anlam üretimiyle ilişkilendiren geniş bir pratik alan açtığı tartışılmaktadır. Çalışma, Öğretmen Akademilerinin öğretmen topluluklarına ilişkin yerleşik kavramları genişletmeye ve öğretmen öğrenmesini bağlama duyarlı biçimde yeniden düşünmeye dönük kuramsal bir katkı sunmaktadır.

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INTRODUCTION

Within a framework where the meaning of the teaching profession is being re-examined, approaches that define teacher learning solely in terms of instructional effectiveness, performance, or measurable outcomes are increasingly being questioned on the grounds that they neglect the ethical, cultural, and subjective dimensions of teaching (Biesta, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Priestley et al., 2015). The international literature has largely conceptualized collaborative structures supporting teachers' professional development within the framework of professional learning communities, these structures have mostly been addressed as school-based arrangements aimed at improving teaching practices and enhancing student learning. However, this dominant approach often defines teacher learning as a technical, instrumental, and output-focused process, treating teachers' search for professional meaning, cultural positioning, and identity construction processes as secondary.

This article questions the prevailing framework regarding teacher learning and aims to rethink teacher communities within the context of the Teacher Academies model developed under the leadership of Ömer Faruk Yelkenci during his tenure as Istanbul Provincial Director of National Education. It proposes understanding these communities through cultural participation, belonging, professional identity, ethics, and collective meaning-making rather than through technical performance and instructional effectiveness alone. Teacher Academies offer a holistic understanding of professional learning that goes beyond technical competence and focuses on cultural, ethical, and human dimensions.

Approaches that address teacher learning from this perspective position teachers as subjects who interpret and guide their professional practices in interaction with the context in which they operate. In this context, teachers' professional identities are evaluated as dynamic structures shaped within relational, cultural, and historical processes

beyond individual characteristics (Lasky, 2005). Teacher identity is closely related to teacher learning processes as a fundamental dimension that determines how teachers understand their professional roles and how they define themselves and their profession (Allen, 2018).

In the Turkish context, the Teacher Strategy Document (2017–2023) published by the Ministry of National Education clearly states that the success of planned changes and reform efforts in education depends on teachers embracing these processes. The document emphasizes that changes not internalized by teachers are not reflected in the classroom environment, teachers are positioned as key actors in educational transformation (MEB, 2017). According to Aktekin (2022), this approach aligns with the contemporary understanding of teacher learning, which views teachers as subjects who interpret and reproduce educational processes through their professional knowledge, values, and identities.

Within this framework, it is important to create professional environments that support teachers' professional identities and focus on collective learning and meaning production in pre-service and in-service teacher education. This understanding of teacher learning necessitates approaches that view professional development as enhancing individual competencies and processes of thinking together, sharing experiences, and producing shared meanings about their profession (Biesta et al., 2019).

Professional learning communities are collaborative structures based on research, sharing, implementation, and evaluation processes, where teachers and school administrators come together with the common goal of improving teaching practices (Hord, 1997; Hord, 2008). The fundamental motivation in these communities is to strengthen student learning by supporting teachers' professional development (DuFour, 2004). In the literature, professional learning communities are defined as school-based structures organized around shared values and vision, taking collective responsibility, encouraging continuous learning,

based on collaboration, and where leadership plays a supportive role (Stoll et al. 2006). Therefore, professional learning communities provide a framework that largely links teacher learning to instructional effectiveness and school improvement goals.

Since the 2000s, the international literature on teacher learning has largely addressed teachers' professional development within the framework of professional learning communities. These studies have focused on the effects of teacher collaboration on student achievement, teaching quality, and school improvement processes and have mostly defined teacher learning within school-based, performance-oriented structures aligned with accountability systems (DuFour, 2004; Prenger et al., 2021; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). While this literature highlights the importance of teacher collaboration, it has often positioned teachers as technical practitioners and professionals defined by instructional outcomes.

Research Gap and Purpose of the Study

The professional learning communities literature has long addressed teacher collaboration through instructional effectiveness and student achievement. A parallel line of research has also drawn attention to learning as a culturally constructed process. Culturally responsive teaching approaches have revealed that culture is a fundamental element shaping learning processes. Integrating students' language, identity, family, and community experiences into learning has transformative pedagogical potential (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2000).

Teacher communities are understood as spaces for professional interaction and cultural environments where teacher identities are negotiated, values are produced, and professional meaning is constructed. (Ladson-Billings, 1992; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). These studies have largely focused on teachers' sensitivity to students' cultural worlds, teachers' own cultural identities, affiliations, and searches for meaning have remained relatively in the background. A broader line of research based on sociocultural learning theories emphasizes that teacher learning is a process of acquiring pedagogical knowledge, but it also involves processes of identity, belonging, meaning, and cultural positioning (Haddix, 2015; Hökkä et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2009; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, Trayner & De Laat, 2011). Teacher communities are understood spaces for professional interaction and cultural environments where teacher identities are negotiated, values are produced, and professional meaning is constructed. Wenger's (1998) approach to communities of practice reveals that learning is not so much an individual achievement as a process of "becoming a certain subject" through participation. In this process, teachers are defined by what they do, who they are, their purpose, and how they position themselves.

Research on teacher communities has expanded significantly over the past twenty years. This expansion reflects the growing acceptance that teacher learning is not an individual or technical process, but rather a socially situated, relational, and contextual process. While early studies primarily addressed teacher collaboration as a means of improving teaching practices, supporting school development, and increasing student achievement, more recent research has begun to focus on the professional, emotional, and identity dimensions of teacher communities (Hökkä et al., 2017; Prenger et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2009). Despite this growing emphasis on collaboration and collective learning, dominant professional learning community models continue to conceptualize teacher learning largely through instructional effectiveness, accountability structures, and measurable outcomes. As a result, teachers' cultural identities, ethical orientations, belonging, and meaning-making processes remain relatively under-theorized within the international professional learning communities literature.

Current literature conceptualizes professional learning communities as structures that develop pedagogical skills, while also shaping teachers' sense of belonging, job satisfaction, and perception of professional meaning. Studies based on large-scale and comparative data sets such as TALIS reveal that participation in professional learning communities is more strongly associated with teachers' professional commitment, job satisfaction, and collective sense of belonging than with direct teaching outcomes (Christensen, 2025; Vescio et al., 2008). These findings suggest that the primary function of teacher communities may be to provide emotional support, relational continuity, and a sense of shared purpose, rather than to produce short-term changes in classroom practices.

Recent studies highlight shared vision, collective responsibility, and meaning-making processes as central elements in teacher communities. Rather than the frequency of collaboration or structural arrangements, the emphasis is on the quality of teachers' shared meaning-making processes and the extent to which a sense of "we" is constructed (Haddix, 2015a; Stoll et al., 2006; Webb et al., 2009). This approach views teacher communities as cultural environments where teacher identities, normative expectations, and professional values are negotiated and reinforced.

The decisive role of cultural and contextual factors in the functioning of teacher communities is increasingly recognized. Comparative and international studies show that professional learning community models do not produce the same meaning and impact in different national contexts; these structures are experienced in different ways depending on education systems, school cultures, and broader sociopolitical conditions (Coburn & Russell, 2008). Research conducted in the Turkish context has largely focused on multicultural education, inclusive education,

the education of migrant and refugee students, and teacher attitudes and competencies (Acar-Çiftçi, 2019; Damgacı & Aydın 2013; Sağlam & Kanbur, 2017; Sarier, 2020). While these studies point to the importance of teachers' cultural awareness and sensitivity, they focus only to a limited extent on how teachers develop this sensitivity and within which collective learning structures this process takes place. Indeed, the national literature shows that studies addressing teachers' development of sensitivity to cultural values through professional learning communities are quite limited at the international level, research examining this relationship is few in number and contextually scattered (Alhanachi et al., 2021; McCormick, Eick & Womack, 2013; Nilsson, Kong & Hubert, 2016). One reason for the limited visibility of voluntary, out-of-school, and culturally oriented teacher communities in the international literature is the dominance of school-centered accountability systems and performance-oriented reform traditions. As professional learning communities have increasingly been aligned with institutional improvement agendas and measurable instructional outcomes, forms of teacher collaboration grounded in cultural participation, intellectual inquiry, and voluntary engagement have remained relatively underexplored.

This picture points to a significant theoretical gap in the literature on teacher communities: Community models that focus on teachers' cultural and identity development and address teacher learning within school-based performance goals and a broader cultural and social context have not yet been sufficiently theorized. This study aims to make this gap visible and to rethink teacher communities beyond instructional effectiveness, through processes of meaning, belonging, and cultural positioning.

In the Turkish context, the emphasis on preserving and sustaining culture, identity, and values has become increasingly visible in educational policy discourse in recent years. As frequently emphasized in various speeches, particularly those delivered by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan during cultural and arts award ceremonies (Erdoğan, 2026, January 20), it is of great importance to preserve national and cultural values, live them in daily life, and pass them on to future generations. This discourse shows that culture is viewed as a dynamic structure sustained through social practices rather than as an abstract heritage. When education is considered one of the fundamental grounds for this transmission, teachers are positioned as important actors in this process of cultural transmission (Yelkenci, 2024).

Teaching is approached as an area of responsibility associated with cultural continuity and value transfer within this discourse. Therefore, Teacher Academies stand out both for their unique structure, which contributes to the international professional learning communities literature, and for their repositioning of teachers as subjects centered

on meaning, culture, and identity. Teacher Academies do not limit teacher learning to the development of pedagogical skills or the improvement of teaching outcomes; they focus on the relationship teachers establish with people, culture, space, cities, texts, and "grand narratives".

In this respect, the Academies offer a model of a teacher community that views teachers as bearers of cultural continuity, producers of social memory, and living subjects of values. With their volunteer-based, school-external, and space-based structure, Teacher Academies remove teacher communities from the axis of performance, measurement, and accountability, they highlight the cultural and identity-based dimensions that are relatively less emphasized in the professional learning communities literature. The academies construct the teacher community as a technical collaboration structure and a teacher cultural community built around meaning, identity, and shared ideals.

Unlike dominant professional learning community models that are generally school-based, accountability-oriented, and instructional in focus, Teacher Academies are structured around voluntarism, out-of-school participation, cultural interaction, and intellectual engagement. This model foregrounds dimensions of teacher learning that remain relatively under-theorized in the international literature, including cultural identity, ethical orientation, belonging, literacy practices, and collective meaning-making. In this regard, Teacher Academies conceptualize teachers as cultural, ethical, and meaning-producing subjects whose professional learning is shaped through intellectual engagement, cultural interaction, and shared meaning-making.

Research Questions and Purpose of the Study

Building on these conceptual discussions, this study aims to frame teacher learning through the Teacher Academies model by foregrounding culture, identity, literacy, ethical participation, and collective meaning-making. In doing so, the study seeks to contribute to the professional learning communities literature by proposing an alternative conceptual framework for understanding teacher communities beyond instructional effectiveness and performance-oriented models. Accordingly, the study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do Teacher Academies challenge dominant professional learning community frameworks?
2. In what ways can Teacher Academies be conceptualized as cultural learning communities?
3. How do culture, identity, literacy, and collective meaning-making reshape understandings of teacher learning within Teacher Academies?

Conceptual Framework and Analytical Approach

This study is designed as a conceptual inquiry rather than an empirical investigation because its primary pur-

pose is to critically reinterpret teacher learning through the Teacher Academies model and to develop an alternative theoretical framework grounded in culture, identity, literacy, and meaning-making. Conceptual inquiry allows for the critical synthesis and reinterpretation of existing theoretical perspectives in order to examine how teacher communities can be understood beyond instructional effectiveness and performance-oriented paradigms. Sociocultural learning theories were particularly important for this study because they conceptualize learning as a socially situated and relational process shaped through participation, interaction, culture, and context. This framework makes it possible to examine teacher learning beyond individual skill acquisition and to focus on identity formation, participation, belonging, and collective meaning-making.

Rather than relying on empirical data collection, the study employs a theory-driven analytical approach grounded in sociocultural learning theories and communities of practice (Hökkä et al., 2017; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, Trayner & de Laat, 2011). The analysis draws on existing literature on professional learning communities, teacher identity, and sociocultural perspectives on learning to identify the limitations of instrumental and performance-oriented models of teacher development (Biesta, 2015; DuFour, 2004; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). Through a critical synthesis of these perspectives, the study positions Teacher Academies as an alternative conceptual model that emphasizes meaning-making, cultural interaction, and identity construction (Haddix, 2015a; Webb et al., 2009). The approach is interpretive and analytical in nature, focusing on conceptual comparison, theoretical positioning, and contextual interpretation rather than measurement or statistical analysis. In light of these views, the study aims to contribute to the literature by expanding the conceptual boundaries of teacher learning and by offering a context-sensitive framework grounded in the Turkish educational context (Biesta et al., 2015; Coburn & Russell, 2008).

Wenger's (1998) communities of practice approach provides an important analytical lens for interpreting Teacher Academies because it conceptualizes learning as participation in shared social and cultural practices. This perspective allows teacher communities to be examined as spaces where professional identities, values, and collective meanings are continuously negotiated and reproduced. The study also draws on literacy perspectives that approach literacy as a socially and culturally situated practice connected to identity, interpretation, participation, and cultural meaning-making (Haddix, 2015; Street, 1995). In this sense, literacy extends beyond reading and writing skills and functions as a medium through which teachers engage with culture, narratives, values, and collective meaning-making processes.

These theoretical perspectives were used as analytical lenses to interpret how Teacher Academies construct teach-

er learning through culture, participation, identity, literacy, and collective meaning-making. Instead of evaluating Teacher Academies through institutional effectiveness or measurable outcomes, the study examines how these communities reshape understandings of teacher learning, professional belonging, and cultural participation.

Teacher Academies: Origins, Objectives, and Structural Features

Teacher Academies are voluntary learning communities developed within the Turkish Ministry of National Education that aim to reconceptualize teachers' professional learning in addition to traditional in-service training models. First implemented in Istanbul, this structure has gradually been rolled out in many provinces, becoming an institutional model for teacher communities. Teacher Academies are structured around the principles of continuity, voluntarism, and cultural interaction, rather than limiting teachers' professional development to short-term, output-focused, and mandatory training activities.

These academies are shaped by a vision that does not define teaching solely through teaching techniques and measurable competencies, but rather centers on the cultural, ethical, and intellectual dimensions of teaching. In institutional texts published by the Ministry of National Education regarding Teacher Academies, it is emphasized as a fundamental goal that teachers "step outside their immediate environment to engage with the city, the space, and people," draw nourishment from different cultural spheres, and deepen their perceptions of their professional identities through these interactions. (Yelkenci, Istanbul Academy Journal, Issue 12, 2024). In this context, teachers are envisioned as subjects who keep cultural memory alive and who live and perpetuate values. The structuring of Teacher Academies around the axes of space, people, and culture is presented as the concrete pedagogical counterpart of this discourse.

Teacher Academies include weekly seminars, literature and art-based meetings, and learning activities held in historical and cultural spaces. The academies are essentially structured around five sub-academies: Music, Literature, Biography, Philosophy and Thought, and City and Culture. These sub-academies reflect an approach that addresses teacher learning within a cultural and intellectual whole rather than discipline-based specialization. Each academy aims to bring teachers into direct contact with the cultural fabric of the city they live in. In this context, teachers are introduced to the historical and cultural sites of their city, its living values, prominent intellectuals and "wise" people, local sociology and art practices, music, and narratives. Teacher Academies design these encounters as experiential learning processes that nourish teachers' professional and personal worlds of meaning as well as informative content. Thus, teachers find the opportunity to rethink their teach-

ing practices not through abstract pedagogical principles but through the concrete relationships they establish with the city, culture, and people. These activities aim to involve teachers in collective thinking processes, share their experiences with colleagues, and jointly renegotiate the meanings they attach to the teaching profession. These practices reposition teacher learning away from standardized models of professional development and toward cultural participation, interpretive engagement, and collective meaning-making. In this framework, learning is constructed through teachers' interactions with cultural spaces, narratives, intellectual traditions, and shared social experiences. The emphasis on the city, culture, and lived experience reflects a broader understanding of teacher learning as a process of identity formation, cultural participation, and ethical engagement.

Academies enable teachers to deepen their thinking about teaching and life by offering them a learning space outside of school and free from the pressure of evaluation. The principles of voluntarism and continuity distinguish Teacher Academies from short-term, goal-oriented, and performance-based professional development programs.

The fact that the registration process is based on voluntary participation and is not linked to any measurement or evaluation mechanism encourages teachers to join these communities not because of external expectations, but because of a search for meaning, cultural interest, and a sense of professional belonging. In this sense, voluntarism functions as more than an organizational principle. It reshapes the meaning of participation within teacher communities. Participation is framed through intellectual curiosity, cultural engagement, and professional belonging rather than external accountability mechanisms or institutional obligations. The structure allows Teacher Academies to function as communities organized around shared meaning and cultural participation rather than performance-oriented professional development. This orientation positions Teacher Academies as spaces where teacher learning is constructed through cultural participation and shared meaning rather than through institutional accountability and technical performance.

Current academic studies define Teacher Academies as structures that support teachers' professional motivation, deepen their perspectives on the teaching profession, and strengthen communication, solidarity, and interaction among teachers (Çelik, 2022; Gökçe, 2025). For example, studies conducted on Tokat Teacher Academies reveal that teachers participating in these academies perceive them as environments that contribute to their professional development, enrich their understanding of teaching, and encourage peer learning (Gökçe, 2025). Institutional texts and implementation guidelines also frame Teacher Academies around principles such as voluntarism, continuity, cultural interaction, and strengthening the value-based dimensions of teaching. As emphasized that "teaching requires a holis-

tic professional stance that engages with culture, the city, people, and values, rather than being merely an activity within the classroom" (Yelkenci, 2024), Teacher Academies are designed as cultural learning communities where teachers experience intellectual deepening and reconnect with cultural and moral meanings.

In these respects, Teacher Academies are distinctly different from programs focused on developing pedagogical knowledge and skills, they offer a holistic approach that conceptualizes teacher learning as a cultural and social practice. However, in the existing literature, they are largely treated as professional development initiatives. This approach highlights the need for more in-depth theoretical studies on how Teacher Academies function as teacher communities, particularly in terms of their cultural and discursive dimensions, and how they can be positioned within the international literature.

Teacher Identity

In many contexts, teacher professional development is approached through utilitarian and instrumental approaches. It is often addressed within frameworks focused on imparting technical skills and short-term outcomes. In these approaches, professional learning gains value primarily through its capacity to produce measurable outcomes; improving teaching practices, curriculum alignment, and increasing student achievement are highlighted as key objectives (DuFour, 2004; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008). Even when teacher collaboration is emphasized, this collaboration is often framed as a mechanism that serves to optimize efficiency, consistency, and performance (Prenger et al., 2021; Stoll et al., 2006). Within this framework, teachers are positioned as technical actors whose learning gains meaning only to the extent that it produces pedagogical benefits; their positions as meaning-producing, cultural, and ethical subjects are largely neglected.

This instrumental orientation defines teacher learning mostly in alignment with school-based accountability structures and reform agendas. It treats the cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions of teaching as secondary or contextual elements (Barth et al., 2023; Biesta et al., 2019; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2012). However, sociocultural learning theories emphasize that professional learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge and skills, it is a holistic formation that also includes processes of identity, belonging, and meaning construction (Haddix, 2015a; Hökkä, et al., 2017; Trayner & de Laat, 2011; Wenger, 1998; Wenger). Therefore, teacher learning goes beyond the goal of "more effective teaching" and is intertwined with questions about who the teacher is, what they value, and for what purpose they practice their profession.

The Academies significantly develop this instrumental understanding of professional development, offering

a qualitatively different conceptualization of the teaching community. Rather than organizing professional learning around predefined competencies, standards, or accountability indicators, Teacher Academies aim to enrich teachers' ways of thinking about teaching and their professional stance through cultural interactions with the city, the space, and different people (Yelkenci, 2024).

In instrumental professional development models, culture, national values, identity development, and ethics are often treated as contextual or peripheral considerations; although considered important for teacher motivation and well-being, they are regarded as secondary to instructional improvement (Day & Gu, 2010; Kelchtermans, 2009). In contrast, Teacher Academies position culture and identity development as foundational principles of professional learning. Learning practices structured around literature, art, history, and shared intellectual inquiry are not treated as tools for developing classroom techniques; rather, they are considered as the very objectives that shape how teachers understand their roles, responsibilities, and professional identities. Continuous participation in such culturally oriented practices enables teachers to experience professional learning not merely as skill acquisition, but as a process of ethical thinking and cultural positioning.

This approach also aligns with broader critiques of technocratic conceptions of education that seek to reduce teaching to a set of competencies divorced from values and meaning (Biesta, et al., 2015; Giroux, 2011; Haddix, 2015b). Furthermore, it aligns with critical pedagogical approaches that view education as an ethical relationship, community-based hope, and an area of mutual responsibility (hooks, 2003). Within this framework, teacher learning is understood as a process of developing a teacher identity situated within cultural traditions, national and moral allegiances, as well as becoming a “more effective” teacher.

Teacher Academies go beyond the performance, output, and accountability-centered approaches that dominate the professional learning communities literature, offering a unique teacher community model that places teacher communities at the center of cultural and moral meaning production.

Voluntary Teacher Networks

This perspective challenges dominant professional learning community frameworks by positioning teacher participation through voluntarism, cultural engagement, and collective meaning-making rather than institutional accountability. One of the distinguishing features of teacher communities is that they are positioned outside of school-based accountability structures. The dominant literature on teacher communities assumes that meaningful collaboration largely takes place within the school and is shaped by institutional expectations, evaluation systems, and re-

form agendas (DuFour, 2004; Stoll et al., 2006). While these contexts enable interaction among teachers, they often constrain this interaction with predetermined goals, performance indicators, and accountability pressures (Ball, 2016; Fullan & Hargreaves 2012). Ultimately, this type of collaboration can be shaped more toward conformity, alignment, and standardization than toward discovery and critical inquiry. This creates a structural tension that limits the potential of teacher communities. While school-based professional learning communities often encourage teachers to focus on the question of “how can we teach more effectively?”, they can lead to more pressing, profound, and long-term questions such as “why do we teach?” and “what does teaching mean?” being pushed into the background (Biesta, et al. 2015; Kelchtermans, 2009). In these environments, where accountability regimes are dominant, teacher learning is equated with pedagogical efficiency; therefore, limited space is given to teachers' search for professional identity, values, and purpose. Voluntarism can reshape the relational dimensions of teacher learning in different ways. Teachers join these communities not out of institutional obligation or external expectations, but through intellectual interaction, cultural bonding, and the search for professional meaning. Therefore, commitment to the community is built through shared goals, common experiences, and collective meaning-making (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al. 2011). Such voluntary and out-of-school learning spaces open up space for forms of communication and solidarity that are difficult to sustain in performance-oriented contexts. Teachers can share their beliefs, values, and hesitations about teaching without having to defend or legitimize their professional roles, enabling deeper and more transformative learning processes (Haddix, 2015b; Hökkä et al., 2017).

Here, being “outside of school” does not mean that teachers are disconnected from their professional lives. On the contrary, Teacher Academies function as supportive and empowering spaces where teachers can redefine their professional identities within broader cultural and ethical horizons. These spaces allow teachers to step outside their daily teaching priorities and engage in long-term intellectual inquiries into what teaching means, what values it is performed around, and what kind of social responsibilities it carries (Biesta, et al 2015; Giroux, 2011). As well as mechanisms for school improvement, The Academies position teacher communities as autonomous and cultural learning spaces where the cultural, ethical, and intellectual dimensions of teaching are renegotiated.

Teacher Academies and Literacy

From this perspective, Teacher Academies may be understood as cultural learning communities where literacy practices shape participation, interpretation, identity, and collective meaning-making. Teacher Academies invite

teacher communities to rethink the concept of collaboration itself. In the literature on professional learning communities, collaboration is mostly defined through instrumental practices such as collaborative planning, data-driven decision-making, or instructional coordination (DuFour, 2004; Stoll et al., 2006). In the context of Teacher Academies, teachers read together, discuss texts, engage with literature, philosophy, and art; they participate in cultural events and conduct dialogues based on interpretation, reflection, and ethical inquiry. These practices enable literacy to be approached within a broad framework that is not limited to technical reading and writing skills in the narrow sense, but encompasses the forms of relationship established with texts, ideas, and cultural narratives. The tradition of new literacies approaches literacy as a practice shaped within social, cultural, and ideological contexts and emphasizes its relationship with meaning production (Street, 1995; 2003). Literacy is experienced as a social and cultural activity that shapes how teachers understand the world and their professional roles, rather than as an individual competency (Haddix, 2015a; 2015b).

Haddix (2015b) emphasizes that teachers' literacy practices are shaped within community-based interactions and that teacher identity is reproduced through these practices. From this perspective, the teacher community becomes a space where literacy is lived, negotiated, and reimaged. Identity and equity-based approaches to literacy reveal that literacy is directly related to how individuals make sense of themselves, their communities, and the world (Muhammad & Mosley, 2021). By conceptualizing Teacher Academies as teacher communities focused on cultural and identity development, these approaches offer a reframing that goes beyond instrumental models of professional learning.

Reframing Teacher Academies as teacher communities has important implications for how literacy is conceptualized in teacher education and professional learning research. Contemporary studies in the field of literacy approach literacy is not a neutral set of skills. It is a socially and culturally situated practice. In contrast, in the literature on teacher learning, literacy is often reframed within an instrumental framework and discussed in terms of strategy use, curriculum alignment, or assessment practices. This raises a critical question: Where and how do teachers relate to literacy as a cultural practice for themselves? Teacher Academies offer an alternative answer to this question. In these communities, literacy is experienced as a form of reading, recognition, and interpretation of a lived practice through which teachers relate to texts, ideas, spaces, histories, and cultural narratives. Reading, discussion, and interpretation become central forms of participation within the community rather than peripheral or secondary activities.

Teacher Academies reveal literacy as a form of cultural participation that shapes how teachers make sense of their

professional lives and social worlds. Teachers' collective engagement with literature, philosophy, history, and art reveals dimensions of literacy that extend beyond classroom practices, reaching into the areas of identity construction, ethical inquiry, and social responsibility. These practices position teachers as transdisciplinary cultural readers and interpretive subjects who contribute to broader educational visions (Haddix, 2015a; 2015b).

This perspective also questions the implicit distinction between literacy acquisition and teacher identity. While much of the literacy literature focuses on students' literacy identities, teachers' own literacy practices are often assumed to be or remain in the background. Teacher Academies challenge this assumption by placing teachers at the center as active literacy actors. These relationships established through texts and discourses shape teachers' perceptions of purpose, belonging, and responsibility. Literacy becomes a way of relating to the world beyond pedagogy.

Implications for Teacher Learning and Professional Development

The conceptualization of Teacher Academies as cultural learning communities carries important implications for teacher learning and professional development policies. Dominant professional development models are often structured around instructional competencies, measurable outcomes, curriculum alignment, and institutional accountability (DuFour, 2004; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Within these approaches, teacher learning is generally evaluated through its contribution to teaching performance and student achievement. However, the Teacher Academies model suggests that teacher learning also involves cultural participation, identity formation, ethical reflection, and collective meaning-making processes. This perspective points to the need for broader professional learning frameworks that recognize teachers as cultural and intellectual subjects rather than primarily technical practitioners.

The study also highlights the importance of voluntary and out-of-school learning spaces in teacher education. School-based professional learning communities often operate within institutional expectations, performance pressures, and accountability systems. In contrast, Teacher Academies create spaces where teachers participate through intellectual curiosity, cultural engagement, and professional belonging. Such environments may support more sustainable and meaningful forms of professional learning by allowing teachers to reflect on the ethical, cultural, and social dimensions of teaching beyond immediate instructional concerns.

Another important implication concerns the relationship between teacher learning and literacy. The findings of this conceptual inquiry suggest that literacy should be understood as a cultural and interpretive practice that shapes

how teachers engage with texts, ideas, values, histories, and social realities. From this perspective, teacher learning communities may function as spaces where literacy practices contribute to identity construction, ethical inquiry, and collective cultural participation. This understanding expands current discussions in teacher education by positioning literacy as part of teachers' broader professional and cultural formation.

Finally, the study suggests that professional learning communities may be reconsidered within broader cultural and contextual frameworks. Comparative research increasingly demonstrates that teacher communities operate differently across national and institutional contexts (Coburn & Russell, 2008). To sum up, Teacher Academies provide an example of how teacher learning communities may be shaped through local cultural traditions, collective memory, and shared social meanings. This perspective may contribute to future discussions on culturally grounded and context-sensitive approaches to teacher professional learning.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its arguments and contributions. First, the study was designed as a conceptual inquiry and therefore does not include empirical data collected from teachers participating in Teacher Academies. The analysis is based on theoretical interpretation, institutional documents, policy discourse, and existing literature related to professional learning communities, teacher identity, socio-cultural learning, and literacy studies. While this approach makes it possible to critically reinterpret teacher learning from a broader conceptual perspective, it does not provide direct evidence regarding how teachers experience these communities in practice.

Another limitation concerns the contextual nature of the Teacher Academies model. The study focuses primarily on the Turkish educational context and examines Teacher Academies within specific cultural, institutional, and policy conditions. Therefore, the conceptual arguments developed in this study may not fully reflect how similar teacher communities function in different national or institutional settings. Comparative studies conducted across different educational systems may contribute to a broader understanding of how culturally grounded teacher communities operate in diverse contexts.

Future research may strengthen and expand this framework through quantitative, qualitative, ethnographic, and comparative studies focusing on teachers' lived experiences within Teacher Academies. Studies examining how teachers construct professional identity, belonging, ethical orientation, literacy practices, and collective meaning-making through participation in these communities may provide important contributions to the literature. Longitudinal

studies may also help explain how sustained participation in voluntary and culturally oriented teacher communities shapes teachers' professional learning over time.

In addition, future studies may explore the relationship between Teacher Academies and broader educational questions such as teacher agency, cultural memory, civic responsibility, and democratic participation. Research examining how literacy, culture, and identity intersect within teacher learning communities may further contribute to expanding the conceptual boundaries of professional learning community research.

CONCLUSION

This article is designed within a conceptual and theoretical framework. Rather than presenting empirical findings, it aims to open up an analytical space for rethinking teacher communities and professional learning beyond utilitarianism. The study argues that prevailing models of teacher professional learning remain largely constrained by instrumental logics that prioritize measurable outcomes, technical expertise, and performance-oriented collaboration. Although recent research increasingly highlights the relational and emotional dimensions of teacher communities, these dimensions are often addressed at a secondary level, in addition to instructional development and accountability goals. Drawing on the example of Teacher Academies emerging in the Turkish context, this article proposes an alternative approach that conceptualizes the teacher community as a space oriented toward knowledge production, intellectual life, and ethical formation. This approach highlights the constructive role of people, space, and cultural contact in teacher learning.

Framing Teacher Academies as meaning, identity, and value-based teacher communities has the potential to contribute to the field at three levels. First, it expands approaches that address professional learning solely within the framework of technical education and pedagogical competencies, placing culture and identity development at the center as foundational elements of the teacher community. Second, it expands the spatial, institutional, and mandatory boundaries of research on teacher communities, analytically making visible voluntary, out-of-school, and cultural learning spaces. Third, it repositions literacy as a lived cultural practice where teachers negotiate their identity, belonging, and professional meaning.

In this context, Teacher Academies should be considered a cultural extension of professional learning communities, as well as a unique form of teacher community with a distinct historical and intellectual field of study on teacher learning, positioned outside the school-based logic of performance. The framework invites researchers in the fields of literacy and teacher education to develop teacher com-

munities and the established concepts and studies related to them.

The new approach, teaching gains meaning as a relationship with culture, values, and lived experience that requires continuity, rather than as a technical field of expertise. Therefore, the areas that nourish teacher learning should be considered not only as spaces where teaching skills are developed, but also as intellectual and experiential spaces where teachers deepen their cultural and moral worlds and reposition themselves. In this respect, Teacher Academies can be evaluated as a conceptual framework that allows for a context-sensitive rethinking of teacher learning, teacher communities, and literacy, rather than as a standard model of practice to be replicated one-to-one in the international literature. This framework offers a space for thinking that different teacher communities can interpret and adapt according to their own cultural, historical, and institutional conditions. It incorporates dimensions such as meaning production, continuity, and professional orientation into discussions of professional learning.

Ultimately, this study argues that teacher learning cannot be reduced to the acquisition of technical skills, instructional efficiency, or institutional accountability alone. Teacher Academies demonstrate that teacher communities may also function as cultural and intellectual spaces where literacy, identity, ethics, participation, and collective meaning-making shape professional learning. In this sense, the study calls for a broader rethinking of teacher learning as a socially situated, culturally grounded, and deeply human process.

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