Journal of Elementary Educational Research and Practice
Vol. 2, No. 1, 2026
Available online at https://ojs.cesmid.org/index.php/jeerp
Email: jeerp@cesmid.ac.id
E-ISSN: 3090-3181

Workload-Mediated Teacher Agency in Curriculum Adaptation: Practice-Based Evidence from Turkish Primary Schools

Ethem Gürhan[1]
[1]Ministry of National Education/Konya, Türkiye

Corresnpondence Author: ethemgurhan@gmail.com

Received: 2026-01-28; **Revised:** 2026-02-09; **Accepted**: 2026-02-13; **Published**: 2026-02-25
How to cite: Gürhan, E. (2026). Workload-Mediated Teacher Agency in Curriculum Adaptation: Practice-Based Evidence from Turkish Primary Schools. *Journal of Elementary Education Research and Practice, 2*(1), 31-45. https://doi.org/10.70376/76bhh023

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Abstract: *This study investigates primary school teachers' curriculum adaptation practices and professional agency under workload-related constraints in Turkish primary education. Existing research has primarily examined teacher agency and curriculum enactment but has insufficiently theorized workload as a structural mediator shaping instructional decision-making. Addressing this gap, the study explores how teachers interpret and adapt curriculum expectations within demanding classroom contexts. A qualitative design was employed involving 12 public primary school teachers in central Türkiye. This study collected interview data using semi-structured protocols and analyzed them using descriptive content analysis with inductive coding. Findings indicate that curriculum adaptation is a routine, practice-based response to structural and instructional pressures. Workload, as manifested through time pressure, administrative demands, and assessment load, mediates the enactment of teacher agency, shaping pacing adjustments, content prioritization, and task redesign. Teachers deliberately orient their adaptation practices toward equity-driven instruction to sustain meaningful learning. The study reconceptualizes teacher agency as contextually bounded and workload-mediated, offering implications for curriculum policy, professional development, and workload-sensitive instructional support.*

Keywords: *Teacher agency; Curriculum adaptation; Workload; Primary education; Instructional practice; Türkiye*

Introduction

Curriculum scholars increasingly conceptualize primary education curriculum implementation as an interpretive process grounded in classroom realities rather than a linear enactment of centrally prescribed policies (Himmah, 2025). While curriculum documents articulate standardized learning expectations, their enactment depends mainly on how teachers interpret, prioritize, and negotiate them across diverse instructional settings. Contemporary curriculum scholarship emphasizes that teachers do not simply deliver curriculum content but actively construct instructional meaning through situated professional judgment (Biesta et al., 2017; Alvunger, 2018; Jenkins, 2020). At the primary school level, this interpretive work becomes particularly pronounced because classroom teachers assume holistic responsibility for multiple subject areas while simultaneously

addressing student diversity, time constraints, and institutional demands. Consequently, curriculum scholarship conceptualizes implementation as a situated professional practice embedded within organizational and pedagogical contexts rather than as a technical enactment of policy.

Within this interpretive perspective, researchers increasingly position teacher agency as a central analytical lens for examining curriculum enactment in practice. Teacher agency refers to teachers' capacity to act purposefully and constructively by mobilizing professional knowledge, experience, and contextual awareness within specific structural conditions (Biesta et al., 2017; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). Rather than functioning as an individual attribute exercised in isolation, agency is relational and contextually embedded, shaped by institutional expectations, accountability structures, and available professional support (Brodie, 2021; Yli-Pietilä et al., 2024). In primary education settings characterized by continuous instructional responsibility, teacher agency plays a decisive role in mediating between curriculum intentions and classroom enactment.

Closely connected to teacher agency is the concept of curriculum adaptation, which encompasses instructional modifications such as adjusting lesson pacing, redesigning learning activities, and prioritizing specific learning outcomes to sustain meaningful instruction. Existing research demonstrates that curriculum adaptation does not necessarily signal weak curriculum fidelity; instead, it often reflects teachers' professional judgment in responding to classroom complexity and student diversity (Alvunger, 2018; Gelmez-Burakgazi, 2020; Özüdoğru & Sakallıoğlu, 2025; Poulton, 2020). From this perspective, fidelity and adaptation operate as interrelated dimensions of curriculum enactment rather than as competing orientations.

Despite this expanding body of scholarship, a critical gap persists in how workload is theorized within the agency–adaptation relationship. Although prior research has widely examined workload in relation to teacher stress, wellbeing, and work–life balance (Chaaban et al., 2021; Tekin & Demirkasımoğlu, 2023; Hulme et al., 2025), it rarely frames workload as a structural condition shaping agency enactment and curriculum adaptation decisions. In many agency-focused studies, workload remains a background variable rather than an analytical component influencing instructional practice (Brodie, 2021; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). As a result, existing scholarship tends to frame teacher agency primarily as a professional capacity, with limited consideration of how workload intensification reshapes its enactment.

Integrating workload into the agency–adaptation discourse offers an important conceptual advancement. Rather than merely constraining teachers' work, workload conditions may redirect and reshape agentic practice. Under conditions of time pressure, administrative demand, and assessment load, teachers may shift from expansive pedagogical innovation toward strategic prioritization and instructional protection. Curriculum adaptation, therefore, can function not only as a pedagogical response but also as a coping mechanism that sustains instructional continuity within structurally demanding environments (Hascher et al., 2021; Mansfield et al., 2016; Savaş & Dolapcı, 2024).

The Turkish primary education context provides a particularly informative setting for examining this relationship. Teachers operate within a highly centralized curriculum system characterized by dense curricular expectations alongside increasing administrative workload (Çelik & Gelmez-Burakgazi, 2024; Tekin & Demirkasımoğlu, 2023). Empirical evidence from Türkiye indicates that workload intensification influences instructional decision-making, professional wellbeing, and adaptive classroom practice (Gelmez-Burakgazi, 2020; Hulme et al., 2025). Such structural

conditions intensify the need for adaptive instructional decision-making, positioning Türkiye as an analytically relevant case for understanding how curriculum enactment unfolds under workload pressure. Insights drawn from this context contribute not only to national scholarship but also to broader comparative discussions on teacher professionalism and curriculum implementation in centralized education systems.

Building on ecological conceptions of teacher agency (Biesta et al., 2017; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020), this study advances the literature by explicitly conceptualizing workload as a structural mediator between teacher agency and curriculum adaptation. In doing so, the study shifts the analytical focus from whether teachers possess agency to how they enact, negotiate, and sustain it within structurally constrained classroom environments.

Accordingly, this study examines primary school teachers' curriculum adaptation practices in Turkish primary schools, focusing on how they enact professional agency under workload-related and classroom-level constraints. The study addresses the following research question: How do primary school teachers in Türkiye describe their curriculum adaptation practices and professional agency in response to workload and classroom-level constraints?

By addressing this question, the study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it sharpens the conceptual relationship between teacher agency and curriculum adaptation by positioning workload as a structural mediator shaping agentic practice. Second, it provides empirically grounded evidence from an underrepresented yet globally relevant educational context. Third, it offers practice-oriented insights to inform professional development, school leadership, and curriculum support mechanisms that strengthen instructional coherence while acknowledging the structural realities of primary education.

Method

1. Research Design and Methodological Flow

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine primary school teachers' curriculum adaptation practices and professional agency in the context of workload-related and classroom-level constraints. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for exploring how individuals interpret their experiences and construct meaning within specific institutional and social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Given the study's focus on teachers' lived classroom experiences, professional judgment, and adaptive decision-making, a qualitative approach enabled an in-depth and context-sensitive examination of curriculum implementation beyond predefined variables or outcome measures (Deschênes & Parent, 2022). The study followed a straightforward, sequential methodological approach to ensure transparency and rigor. First, the researchers established the research focus based on gaps identified in the literature concerning teacher agency, curriculum adaptation, and workload in primary education. Second, they selected a qualitative design grounded in an interpretive perspective to capture teachers' subjective meanings and professional reflections. Third, they recruited participants through voluntary participation from public primary schools and collected data via semi-structured interviews. Fourth, they transcribed interview data verbatim and analyzed them using descriptive content analysis through iterative coding and theme development. Finally, they enhanced trustworthiness by systematically documenting analytical decisions and using representative quotations directly linked to the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2023). This methodological flow ensured coherence between the research

purpose, data collection procedures, analytical approach, and interpretation of findings.

2. Participants and Research Context

The participants consisted of 12 primary school teachers working in public primary schools in Türkiye. All participants were actively teaching at the primary level at the time of data collection and volunteered for the study. The primary inclusion criterion was current engagement in classroom teaching at the primary school level, as the study aimed to capture firsthand instructional experiences related to curriculum adaptation and workload. Regarding gender distribution, 7 participants were female, and 5 were male. Participants' teaching experience ranged from 6 to 22 years, with an average of 14 years. This range allowed the study to reflect perspectives from both mid-career and highly experienced teachers, contributing to a richer understanding of how curriculum adaptation practices develop over time through professional experience. Participants worked in public primary schools across urban and semi-urban settings. The schools served student populations from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and class sizes ranged between 24 and 36 students, reflecting typical classroom conditions in Turkish public primary education. All schools implemented the nationally centralized primary school curriculum prescribed by the Ministry of National Education, which structures instructional content, learning outcomes, and assessment expectations uniformly across regions. In terms of regional context, the researchers conducted the study in central Türkiye, a region characterized by standard public school infrastructure, centralized curriculum implementation, and comparable administrative and instructional workloads across schools. While the study does not seek statistical generalization, the provision of detailed contextual information enables readers to assess the transferability of the findings to similar centralized primary education systems internationally (Creswell & Poth, 2023). To protect confidentiality, the researchers did not collect any identifying personal or institutional information. They assigned participants anonymized codes (e.g., Teacher 1, Teacher 2) throughout data analysis and reporting.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Variable	Description
Number of participants	12 primary school teachers
Gender	7 female, 5 male
Teaching experience	6–22 years (M ≈ 14 years)
School type	Public primary schools
School context	Urban and semi-urban
Class size	24–36 students
Region	Central Türkiye

3. Data Collection

The study collected data through semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions. This approach enabled consistency across participants while allowing flexibility to probe emerging issues and clarify responses as needed (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The interview questions focused on teachers' experiences with curriculum implementation, perceived workload, classroom-level constraints, and the instructional strategies they use to adapt curricular content in everyday teaching practice. The interviews foregrounded professional experiences and instructional decision-making processes rather than evaluative judgments or sensitive personal

information. This focus ensured that the data reflected teachers' routine classroom realities while remaining within the scope of non-invasive educational research.

The researcher conducted interviews in Turkish, audio-recorded them with informed consent, and transcribed them verbatim before analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 35–50 minutes and followed a protocol comprising six open-ended guiding questions that addressed curriculum adaptation practices, workload perceptions, classroom constraints, and instructional decision-making.

4. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using descriptive content analysis, an approach well-suited for identifying recurring patterns and thematic structures in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The analysis commenced with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the data and to capture participants' overall perspectives. The analytical process involved identifying and inductively coding meaningful units related to curriculum adaptation, teacher agency, and workload. The researchers then compared codes systematically and clustered them into higher-order conceptual categories, which they refined into overarching themes and sub-themes representing recurrent patterns across participants' accounts.

The analytical procedure involved an iterative process of coding, comparison, and refinement through which themes emerged inductively from the data. The researchers implemented three analytical stages: initial open coding, conceptual categorization, and thematic abstraction. They incorporated representative quotations to substantiate thematic interpretations while safeguarding anonymity. Manual analysis facilitated intensive data immersion and analytical rigor.

5. Trustworthiness and Rigor

The researchers employed several strategies to enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the study in accordance with established qualitative research criteria. They ensured methodological transparency by documenting data collection and analysis procedures in detail, enabling systematic tracing of the analytical process. They strengthened credibility by using verbatim participant quotations, which provided a transparent and traceable link between teachers' statements and the study's interpretations. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study emphasizes analytic transferability by offering rich descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and instructional conditions. This level of contextual detail enables readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings characterized by centralized curricula and workload-related constraints (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Dependability was supported by systematically recording analytical decisions and coding procedures, ensuring consistency throughout the research process. Confirmability was enhanced by grounding interpretations directly in participants' accounts and by maintaining a clear distinction between empirical data and analytical interpretation.

6. Ethical Considerations

The research team complied with institutional and international ethical standards for educational research. They secured informed consent from all participants before data collection, ensured voluntary participation and anonymity, and informed participants of their right to withdraw at any time.

Result and Discussion

1. Result

The qualitative analysis yielded four interrelated themes, each comprising distinct sub-themes that reflect primary school teachers' curriculum adaptation practices, professional agency, and workload-related instructional decision-making. The themes and sub-themes were derived through an inductive coding process and are presented in alignment with the analytical structure outlined in the Method section. Together, these findings illustrate how curriculum implementation is enacted in everyday classroom practice under structural and instructional constraints. The findings are organized around four overarching themes derived through an inductive analytical process, as summarized in Tables 2–4.

Table 2. Themes, Sub-Themes, and Coding Structure

Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Codes
Curriculum Adaptation as Instructional Practice	Adjusting lesson pacing	Time compression; flexible sequencing; skipping non-essential activities
	Content prioritization	Core learning outcomes; exam-oriented focus; essential knowledge
	Task redesign	Simplification; alternative activities; contextualized tasks
Workload as Structural Constraint	Time pressure	Limited instructional time; overcrowded schedules; pacing stress
	Administrative demands	Documentation load; reporting obligations; non-teaching duties
	Assessment load	Continuous evaluation; grading pressure; exam preparation
Teacher Agency in Practice	Experiential decision-making	Professional judgment; experience-based choices; situational reasoning
	Instructional autonomy	Classroom discretion; adaptive control; pedagogical flexibility
	Reflective practice	Ongoing adjustment; self-evaluation; responsive teaching
Equity-Oriented Curriculum Adaptation	Differentiation	Level adjustment; varied instruction; learner responsiveness
	Inclusive adjustment	Supporting diverse learners; accessibility; participation
	Equity-driven prioritization	Focusing on disadvantaged students; fairness-oriented choices

Table 2 presents the thematic structure derived from the inductive coding process, which shows four main themes together with their associated subthemes and their designated codes. The configuration shows that teachers implement curriculum modifications based on three factors which include established educational requirements and their own professional expertise and their teaching priorities. Thematic mapping demonstrates that equity-oriented considerations function as essential elements which inform instructional decision-making processes. The structured coding system allows researchers to analyze how different themes appear throughout the participant group, which they show in Table 3.

Table 3. Prevalence of Themes Across Participants (n = 12)

Theme	Number of Participants (f)	Prevalence

Curriculum adaptation as instructional practice	12	High
Workload as structural constraint	11	High
Teacher agency in practice	10	Moderate–High
Equity-oriented curriculum adaptation	8	Moderate

Thematic presentation of Table 3 shows how different themes were studied through their existence in multiple participants which resulted in determining their analytical importance. Teachers demonstrated two main instructional practices because they used curriculum adaptation as their primary teaching method while workload functioned as their main limitation which affected their daily teaching activities. Teacher agency in practice appeared frequently in the study although teachers used it to discuss their workload and adaptation needs instead of treating it as a separate topic. Teachers showed dedication to inclusive teaching methods through their equity-based adaptation which proved important for analysis. Table 4 presents all analytical steps which occurred from the first coding stage until researchers reached their final thematic conclusions to show how researchers developed these thematic patterns starting from original data.

Table 4. Analytical Progression from Codes to Themes

Analysis Stage	Description
Initial coding	Identification of meaningful units related to workload, agency, and adaptation
Code grouping	Clustering similar codes based on conceptual similarity
Category formation	Development of higher-order conceptual categories
Theme abstraction	Integration of categories into overarching themes
Interpretive synthesis	Linking themes to the analytical model (Figure 1)

a. Curriculum Adaptation as Instructional Practice

This theme captures how teachers modify curriculum content and instructional processes to sustain meaningful teaching under real classroom conditions. Teachers described curriculum adaptation as a routine and necessary aspect of instructional practice rather than an exceptional response to specific challenges.

Teachers frequently reported adjusting lesson pace to accommodate differences in students' learning readiness and classroom dynamics. Slowing down or extending instructional time was described as a common strategy to ensure comprehension and participation. *"I have to slow down because students are at very different levels. Otherwise, some of them cannot follow the lesson."* (Teacher 4).

Participants indicated that not all curriculum objectives could be addressed with equal depth due to time limitations. As a result, teachers engaged in selective emphasis, prioritizing core learning outcomes over supplementary content. *"Sometimes I focus on the most important parts of the curriculum. There is simply not enough time to cover everything in detail."* (Teacher 9)

Teachers also described redesigning instructional tasks to better align with students' abilities and classroom realities. This included simplifying activities, modifying instructions, or using alternative examples. *"I change the activities so that students can understand better. The original tasks are not always suitable for my class."* (Teacher 2)

Taken together, these findings position curriculum adaptation as a routine and professionally grounded instructional practice rather than an incidental response to classroom challenges. Teachers' adjustments to lesson pacing, content prioritization, and task design demonstrate how curricular expectations are actively reinterpreted

within situated classroom realities shaped by time constraints, student diversity, and instructional feasibility. Adaptation thus operates as a pragmatic mechanism through which teachers sustain instructional continuity while safeguarding learning quality under structural limitations. In this sense, curriculum adaptation does not signal diminished curriculum fidelity; instead, it reflects teachers' agentic capacity to translate prescribed curricular intentions into context-responsive pedagogical action that maintains meaningful learning engagement in everyday classroom practice.

b. Workload as a Structural Constraint

This theme reflects how workload conditions shape teachers' instructional decisions and curriculum adaptation practices. Teachers consistently emphasized workload as a factor that limits instructional flexibility and planning capacity.

Time pressure emerged as a central aspect of workload. Participants noted that dense schedules and limited instructional time influenced both lesson pacing and curriculum coverage. *"There are days when time pressure determines how much of the curriculum I can realistically teach."* (Teacher 7)

Teachers reported that administrative responsibilities reduced the time available for lesson preparation and individualized instruction. These demands were described as competing directly with instructional priorities. *"Administrative tasks take time away from planning lessons and thinking about students' needs."* (Teacher 11)

Assessment-related tasks were also identified as contributing to workload intensity. Teachers noted that preparing, administering, and documenting assessments affected their instructional focus. *"Assessment work adds to the workload and limits how much time I can spend on teaching itself."* (Teacher 5)

Collectively, these findings underscore workload as a structural condition that substantively shapes teachers' instructional decision-making and curriculum enactment. Time pressure, administrative demands, and assessment responsibilities emerged not merely as background factors but as organizing forces that delimit planning capacity, instructional flexibility, and pedagogical depth. Within such conditions, teachers do not passively absorb structural pressures; rather, they strategically recalibrate instructional priorities to sustain feasible and meaningful learning processes. Workload thus functions as a mediating structure that redirects professional judgment toward pragmatic instructional protection, reinforcing the view that curriculum enactment unfolds within materially and institutionally bounded working environments.

c. Teacher Agency in Classroom Practice

Despite workload-related constraints, teachers demonstrated professional agency through experiential judgment and reflective decision-making. This theme highlights how teachers actively navigate instructional challenges rather than passively following curriculum prescriptions.

Teachers emphasized that professional experience played a key role in curriculum-related decisions. Over time, they developed practical knowledge that informed how and when to adapt instruction. *"Experience helps me decide what to emphasize and what I can skip when necessary."* (Teacher 3)

Participants described exercising instructional autonomy in selecting methods, materials, and strategies that suited their classrooms, even within a centralized

curriculum framework. *"The curriculum is there, but how I teach it depends on my classroom."* (Teacher 8)

Teachers also reported reflecting on the effectiveness of their instructional choices and adjusting practices accordingly. Reflection was described as an ongoing process embedded in daily teaching. *"I think about what worked and what did not, and I adjust my lessons the next day."* (Teacher 1)

Overall, these findings illuminate teacher agency as an enacted and contextually negotiated professional practice rather than an abstract individual capacity. Teachers exercised agency through experiential judgment, instructional autonomy, and ongoing reflective adjustment as they navigated the complexities of curriculum implementation under structural constraints. Agency, in this sense, operated as a relational and situationally embedded capacity shaped by institutional expectations, classroom dynamics, and professional experience. Rather than being diminished by workload pressures, teachers' agentic practice was recalibrated toward strategic decision-making that balanced curricular demands with instructional feasibility. This positioning reinforces the view that teacher agency becomes most visible in the everyday micro-practices through which teachers sustain pedagogical coherence within constrained instructional environments.

d. Balancing Curriculum Expectations and Student Needs

This theme captures the tension teachers experience between fulfilling curriculum requirements and addressing students' diverse learning needs. Teachers described curriculum adaptation as a means of promoting inclusion and equity.

Teachers employed differentiation strategies to address varying learning levels within the same classroom. These strategies included flexible grouping, alternative explanations, and adjusted tasks. *"I try to explain the same topic in different ways so that all students can understand."* (Teacher 6)

Participants emphasized adapting instruction to ensure that no students were excluded due to rigid curriculum expectations. *"If I follow the curriculum exactly as written, some students are left behind."* (Teacher 10). Teachers framed many adaptation decisions in terms of fairness and equity, prioritizing meaningful learning over strict curriculum completion. *"My goal is not just to finish the curriculum but to make sure students actually learn."* (Teacher 12)

these findings position equity-oriented curriculum adaptation as a central pedagogical orientation underpinning teachers' instructional decision-making. Teachers' differentiation strategies, inclusive instructional adjustments, and fairness-driven prioritization reflect a sustained commitment to ensuring meaningful participation for diverse learners. Rather than functioning as peripheral considerations, equity concerns actively guided how teachers interpreted curricular expectations and allocated instructional attention. However, these inclusive practices remained structurally mediated, as workload intensity and institutional demands shaped the extent to which individualized support could be enacted. Equity-oriented adaptation therefore emerges as both an ethical professional commitment and a contextually bounded instructional practice through which teachers seek to balance curriculum coverage with socially responsive pedagogy.

Overall, the results indicate that curriculum adaptation in primary education is shaped by a dynamic interaction between workload conditions, classroom complexity, and teacher agency. Teachers actively negotiate curriculum expectations

through adaptive instructional practices grounded in professional experience and reflective judgment. The thematic structure presented here provides a transparent and traceable account of how these practices emerge from teachers' everyday classroom experiences.

2. Discussion

a. Teacher Agency Revisited: From Capacity to Contextually Bounded Practice

Consistent with ecological and relational conceptualizations, the findings confirm that teacher agency is not an individual attribute exercised independently of context but a professional practice shaped by institutional, relational, and material conditions (Kirby & McLaughlin, 2016; Biesta et al., 2017; Imants & Van der Wal, 2020). Teachers' instructional decisions were grounded in experiential knowledge, situational awareness, and responsiveness to classroom dynamics, reinforcing scholarship that positions agency as enacted within practice rather than possessed as an individual trait (Brodie, 2021; Jenkins, 2020). Within primary education contexts characterized by continuous instructional responsibility, agency becomes embedded in routine pedagogical judgment rather than episodic professional action.

At the same time, this study extends existing agency literature by highlighting the bounded nature of professional action. Teachers consistently framed their decision-making within structural constraints, particularly time pressure and administrative demands, echoing research that shows agency often operates alongside perceived limitations and professional tensions (Yli-Pietilä et al., 2024). Rather than diminishing agency, these structural boundaries redirected professional judgment toward strategic instructional choices, positioning agency as a negotiated, contextually mediated practice enacted within institutional limits.

b. Curriculum Adaptation as an Agentic and Context-Sensitive Practice

Curriculum adaptation emerged as a routine and necessary dimension of classroom instruction. Teachers' adjustments to lesson pacing, content prioritization, and task design illustrate how they actively reinterpret curricular expectations within situated classroom realities. These findings reinforce prior research demonstrating that adaptation reflects professional responsiveness to student diversity and instructional feasibility rather than weak curriculum fidelity (Alvunger, 2018; Gelmez-Burakgazi, 2020). From this perspective, adaptation constitutes a pedagogically intentional practice grounded in contextual judgment.

Furthermore, the findings align with studies conducted in centralized curriculum systems showing that teachers continuously negotiate between policy expectations and classroom practicality (Çelik & Gelmez-Burakgazi, 2024; Özüdoğru & Sakallıoğlu, 2025; Kılıç & Peker Ünal, 2025; Gürhan, 2025). Curriculum enactment, therefore, operates as a negotiated process rather than a linear implementation of prescribed content. Adaptation, in this sense, represents the observable manifestation of teacher agency, translating professional interpretation into responsive instructional action that sustains meaningful learning under real classroom conditions.

c. Theorizing Workload as a Structural Mediator

This study makes a central contribution by conceptualizing workload as a structural mediator that shapes how teachers enact agency in curriculum practice. While previous research has examined workload primarily in relation to stress, wellbeing, and work–life balance (Royer & Moreau, 2016; Chaaban et al., 2021; Tekin & Demirkasımoğlu, 2023), the findings demonstrate that workload also plays a formative role in instructional decision-making. Time pressure, administrative

responsibilities, and assessment demands influenced how teachers prioritized content, structured lessons, and adapted instructional tasks.

International scholarship supports this interpretation, demonstrating that workload intensification reshapes teachers' professional focus and instructional sustainability (Hulme et al., 2025). Rather than functioning solely as a constraining force, workload redirected agentic capacity toward instructional protection and strategic prioritization. Curriculum adaptation, therefore, operated not only as a pedagogical modification but also as a coping mechanism enabling teachers to maintain instructional continuity within structurally demanding institutional environments.

d. Agency, Wellbeing, and Professional Resilience

The mediation of agency by workload conditions also intersects with teachers' professional wellbeing and resilience. The findings suggest that adaptive instructional decision-making allowed teachers to preserve professional coherence despite structural pressures. This finding aligns with resilience scholarship, which emphasizes that sustained decision-making capacity supports teachers' motivational endurance and occupational sustainability (Hascher et al., 2021; Mansfield et al., 2016). In this sense, agency operates as a protective professional resource.

Conversely, literature indicates that when workload intensification coincides with restricted opportunities for agentic action, professional motivation and enthusiasm may decline (Savaş & Dolapcı, 2024). The present findings nuance this perspective by demonstrating that bounded agency can mitigate such risks by enabling teachers to exercise selective professional control. Adaptive curriculum enactment thus contributes not only to instructional continuity but also to professional resilience within demanding educational environments.

e. Equity and Inclusion under Structural Constraint

The findings further underscore the relationship between curriculum adaptation and equity-oriented pedagogy. Teachers frequently framed adaptive decisions as necessary to address diverse learning needs and ensure inclusive classroom participation. This finding aligns with research on differentiated instruction, demonstrating that teachers modify instructional practices in response to student diversity and accessibility considerations (Ugur-Erdogmus & Albayrak, 2024; Yuen et al., 2022). Adaptation, therefore, functions as a mechanism for promoting equitable learning opportunities.

However, the study also reveals that inclusive instructional practices are structurally mediated. Workload intensity and institutional expectations shaped teachers' capacity to differentiate learning tasks and provide individualized support. This finding resonates with inclusive education research, which indicates that the enactment of equitable pedagogy depends not only on teacher commitment but also on organizational and structural support (Aktan, 2020). Equity-oriented adaptation thus emerges as both a professional intention and a structurally conditioned instructional practice.

The findings have important implications for professional development and educational leadership. Research indicates that structured professional development can enhance teachers' agentic capacity and positively influence classroom practices (Morina et al., 2025; Pinzón et al., 2024). However, such initiatives are most effective when aligned with teachers' actual working conditions. Measuring and supporting teacher agency through professional learning contexts, as suggested by recent scale development studies, may offer a systematic way to strengthen adaptive capacity (Erdem et al., 2025; Gürhan, 2025). From a leadership perspective, recognizing teachers as bounded agents operating under structural constraints calls for

leadership practices that mitigate unnecessary workload and legitimize adaptive decision-making. Rather than emphasizing compliance alone, school leaders and policymakers should create organizational conditions that enable reflective practice and curriculum flexibility.

f. Integrative Conceptual Model

Taken together, the findings support an integrated analytical interpretation in which teacher agency, curriculum adaptation, and workload operate as dynamically interconnected dimensions of curriculum enactment. As illustrated in the proposed conceptual model, agency represents teachers' relational capacity for professional judgment; adaptation constitutes the instructional manifestation of that capacity; and workload functions as a structural mediator that shapes how agency is enacted in practice.

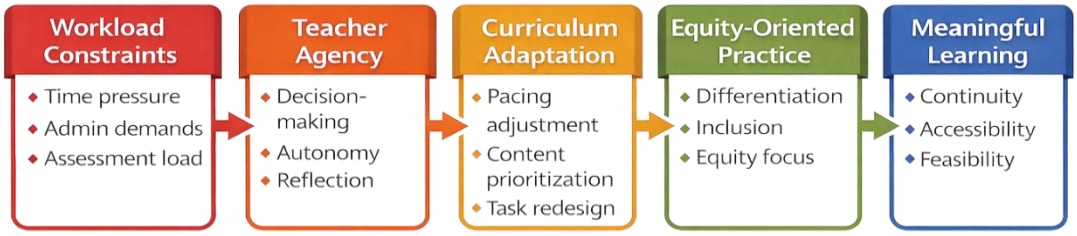


Figure 1. Integrative Framework of Teachers' Curriculum Adaptation Practices

This integrated framing advances existing agency scholarship by repositioning curriculum implementation as an agentically enacted yet structurally bounded process. Understanding curriculum enactment through this lens underscores that the sustainability of meaningful instruction depends not only on curricular design but also on the structural conditions that enable teachers to exercise professional judgment within the realities of their professional work.

Conclusion

This study examined how primary school teachers in Türkiye enact curriculum adaptation and professional agency under workload-related and classroom-level constraints. The findings demonstrate that curriculum implementation in primary education is not a linear process of policy delivery but a dynamic, structurally conditioned practice shaped by the interaction among teacher agency, workload, and classroom complexity. Teachers actively reinterpret curricular expectations through adaptive instructional strategies such as pacing adjustments, content prioritization, and task redesign, enabling them to sustain meaningful learning within demanding institutional environments. In this sense, curriculum adaptation emerges as the practical manifestation of teacher agency enacted in everyday classroom decision-making.

The study's principal theoretical contribution lies in conceptualizing workload as a structural mediator that reshapes how teacher agency is enacted rather than merely constraining professional action. In this framing, structural load conditions redirect agency into strategic prioritization, instructional protection, and equity-oriented decision-making. This integrated perspective advances existing agency frameworks by foregrounding the structural realities within which curriculum enactment occurs. The findings further highlight important implications for policy and educational leadership, emphasizing the need to align curriculum expectations with teachers'

working conditions, reduce unnecessary administrative burdens, and support adaptive professional judgment. Strengthening curriculum implementation, therefore, depends not only on curricular design but also on the institutional capacity to sustain teachers' agentic practice within the realities of primary education. Future research may extend this analytical model through comparative cross-national studies and mixed-method designs to further examine how varying structural workload conditions shape the enactment of teacher agency and curriculum adaptation across educational systems.

Acknowledgements
The author would like to thank the primary school teachers who voluntarily participated in this study and generously shared their professional experiences. Their contributions made this research possible.

References

Aktan, O. (2020). Determination of educational needs of teachers regarding the education of inclusive students with learning disability. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research, 7*(1), 149-164. https://doi.org/10.33200/ijcer.638362

Alvunger, D. (2018). Teachers' curriculum agency in teaching a standards-based curriculum. *The Curriculum Journal, 29*(4), 479–498. https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2018.1486721

Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2017). Talking about education: Exploring the significance of teachers' talk for teacher agency. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 49*(1), 38–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2016.1205143

Brodie, K. (2021). Teacher agency in professional learning communities. *Professional Development in Education, 47*(4), 560–573. https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2019.1689523

Chaaban, Y., Arar, K., Sawalhi, R., Alhouti, I., & Zohri, A. (2021). Exploring teachers' professional agency within shifting educational contexts: A comparative study of Lebanon, Qatar, Kuwait, and Morocco. *Teaching and Teacher Education.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103451

Civriz, E., & Gelmez Burakgazi, S. (2021). Ortaöğretim İngilizce Dersi Öğretim Programına Yönelik Durum Çalışması: Öğretmenin Programa Bağlılığı ve Öğrenci Beklentileri. *Ankara University Journal of Faculty of Educational Sciences (JFES), 54*(2), 559-597. https://doi.org/10.30964/auebfd.694502

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2023). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Çelik, F. M. A., & Gelmez-Burakgazi, S. (2024). Opening up classroom doors: English teachers' curriculum fidelity and adaptations. *Hayef: Journal of Education, 21(*2), 192–200. https://doi.org/10.5152/hayef.2024.23072

Deschênes, M., & Parent, S. (2022). Methodology to Study Teacher Agency: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *European Journal of Educational Research, 11*(4), 2459-2474. https://doi.org/10.12973/eu-jer.11.4.2459

Erdem, C., Tunç Toptaş, H., Kuzu, H. A., & Varol, B. (2025). The scale of teacher agency in professional development: The validity and reliability study. *International Journal of Turkish Education Sciences, 13*(1), 345-378. https://doi.org/10.46778/goputeb.1589783

Gelmez-Burakgazi, S. (2020). Curriculum adaptation and fidelity: A qualitative study on elementary teachers' classroom practices. *Issues in Educational Research, 30*(3), 920–942. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.465246677972448

Gürhan, E. (2025). Primary School Curriculum Reform in Türkiye: Analyzing Recent Innovations in National Education Policies. *Al-Adzka: Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Guru Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, *15*(1), 143–155. https://doi.org/10.18592/aladzkapgmi.v15i1.16298

Hascher, T., Beltman, S., & Mansfield, C. (2021). Teacher wellbeing and resilience: Towards an integrative model. *Educational Research, 63*(4), 416–439. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2021.1980416

Himmah, F. (2025). Teacher Perceptions of Independent Curriculum Implementation in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah: A Phenomenological Study at MI Podorejo Tulungagung. *Journal of Elementary Education Research and Practice*, *1*(3), 111–120. https://doi.org/10.70376/rwa3qm46

Hulme, M., Beauchamp, G., Wood, J., & Bignell, C. (2025). Workload intensification and wellbeing among primary school teachers in Scotland. *Education 3*-13, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2448509

Imants, J., & Van der Wal, M. M. (2020). A model of teacher agency in professional development and school reform. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *52*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1604809

Jenkins, G. (2020). Teacher agency: The effects of active and passive responses to curriculum change. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 46*, 167–181. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-019-00334-2

Kılıç, B., & Peker Ünal, D. (2025). Adaptation of curriculum by classroom teachers: A case study of mathematics curriculum. (Open Access PDF). https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/4246819

Kirby, P., & Mclaughlin, C. (2016). Teacher agency: an ecological approach. By Mark Priestley, Gert Biesta and Sarah Robinson. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 64*(4), 557–559. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2016.1241042

Mansfield, C. F., Beltman, S., Broadley, T., & Weatherby-Fell, N. (2016). Building resilience in teacher education: An evidenced informed framework. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 54*, 77–87. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2015.11.016

Morina, F., Fuetterer, T., Huebner, N., Zitzmann, S., & Fischer, C. (2025). Effects of online teacher professional development on teacher-, classroom-, and student-level outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Computers & Education*, *228*, 105247. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2025.105247

Özüdoğru, F., & Sakallıoğlu, G. (2025). Teachers' Curriculum Fidelity: Analyzing How Teachers Implement and Adapt the Curriculum. *International Journal of Educational Studies and Policy*, *7*(1), 61-84. https://doi.org/10.63612/ijesp.1776104

Pinzón, A., Gómez, P., & González, M. J. (2024). Effects of a professional development programme on teachers' classroom practices in Colombia. *Oxford Review of Education*, *50*(5), 607–625. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2023.2265296

Poulton, P. (2020). Teacher agency in curriculum reform: The role of assessment in enabling and constraining primary teachers' agency. *Curriculum Perspectives, 40*(2). https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-020-00100-w

Royer, N., & Moreau, C. (2016). A survey of Canadian early childhood teachers' psychological wellbeing at work. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 44*, 135–146. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-015-0696-3

Savaş, G., & Dolapcı, E. (2024). Factors influencing teacher enthusiasm: A qualitative study in Turkish context. *Participatory Educational Research*, *11*(6), 172-188. https://doi.org/10.17275/per.24.85.11.6

Tekin, S., & Demirkasımoğlu, N. (2023). An analysis of the relationship between teachers' workload and work-life balance. *International Journal of Turkish*

*Education Sciences, 2023(*21), 893-937. https://doi.org/10.46778/goputeb.1209332

Ugur-Erdogmus, F., & Albayrak, D. (2024). A phenomenological analysis of primary school teachers' lived distance education experience during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. *Education 3-13*, *52*(5), 703–717. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2124879

Yli-Pietilä, R., Soini, T., Pietarinen, J., & Pyhältö, K. (2024). Primary school teachers' sense of professional agency and inadequacy in teacher–student interaction. *Teacher Development*, *28*(2), 278–296. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2023.2295414

Yuen, S.-Y., Leung, C. C. Y., & Wan, S. W.-Y. (2022). Teachers' perceptions and practices of differentiated instruction: Cross-cultural validation of the differentiated instruction questionnaire in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 115. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2022.102044