The role of prototype memories in social studies teachers' instructional decision-making processes: An ethnomethodological analysis

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ABSTRACT

Instructional decisions are the judgments teachers make throughout the instructional process about what, how, why, and when to teach. Examining the various dimensions of how teachers structure these decisions can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the teaching–learning process. This study aimed to explore how social studies teachers' prototype memories influence their instructional decision-making processes. The research was conducted using an ethnomethodological design grounded in qualitative research methods. The study group consisted of nine social studies teachers working in the province of Nevşehir, selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers and analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers employ prototype memories to guide lesson flow, facilitate classroom management, foster emotional connections with students, and concretize abstract concepts. Teachers perceived these memories as tools for guiding professional identity development and instructional decision-making. However, the study also highlights that prototype memories do not yield uniform effects across all situations. Teachers emphasized considerations such as relevance to the subject, ethical and cultural appropriateness, and timing when utilizing prototype memories in the classroom. Based on these results, teacher education programs should provide learning environments where teacher candidates can share their experiences and develop teaching strategies. Furthermore, the influence of prototype memories on instructional decision-making across disciplines and with larger sample sizes should be investigated in future research.

KEYWORDS: Teacher education; Teaching strategy; Qualitative research; Thematic analysis

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1. Introduction

People's immediate experiences may be influenced by past events. Personal and social experiences play a crucial role in forming individual preferences (Schubert et al., 2019). People often make improvised decisions based on past experiences (Holland, 1999). Such spontaneous decisions can influence many aspects of life, including the educational system. Through this improvisational relationship, teachers may assume responsibility for their instructional decisions despite environmental pressures and constraints such as centralized examinations or parental expectations. Rather than focusing solely on knowledge transmission and exam-oriented instruction, teachers may choose to share their experiences with students using a constructivist approach (Dewey, 2007;

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McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Parrott et al., 2000). Although teachers' classroom decisions are often examined through the lenses of curriculum, student characteristics, or teaching methods, their individual experiences play a significant role in shaping instructional decision-making processes. Among these experiences, certain memories that occupy a special place in the lives of teachers, carry strong emotional weight, are frequently recalled, and guide their behavior, are closely associated with instructional decisions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Instructional decisions encompass judgments about what, how, why, and when to teach during the educational process. These decisions emerge during the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of instruction (Sancar & Deryakulu, 2020). A range of factors can influence these decisions, including teachers' knowledge, skills, values, experiences, and personal characteristics (Freeman, 1989; Smagorinsky et al., 2003; Spillane, 2002; Stein et al., 1999), as well as their cultural backgrounds (Lim, 2004; Parrott et al., 2000; Rousseau & Tate, 2003) and unique personal memories (Frost, 2009). Schultz (2003) describes such memories as "prototype memories," emphasizing their impact on decision-making. Prototype memories are distinctive recollections shaped by critical turning points, life-changing events, or deeply influential experiences that play a key role in identity construction processes (Schultz, 2003).

This study's theoretical framework adopts the concept of "prototype memories," which draws on Schultz's (2003) notion of the "prototypical scene." In our study, however, the term "prototype memories" was preferred over "prototypical scene," as it better reflects the cultural and linguistic context of Türkiye. While "scene" suggests a visual or immediate experience, "memory" conveys a deeper sense of emotional meaning etched into the minds of individuals. Thus, "memory" more accurately captures teachers' narratives and how they inform instructional decision-making. In Turkish, the word "memory" is translated in a way that more appropriately conveys individual significance-imbued experiences. According to the Turkish Language Association (TLA, 2024), "anı" (memory) refers to the mental traces of past events. A linguist's opinion was consulted to ensure accuracy in conceptual translation and terminology, and the expression "prototype memory" was determined to be more suitable for the theoretical framework of this study. While other scholars (e.g., Chase, 2005; Florio-Ruane, 2001) have emphasized the role of particular stories within narratives, Schultz's (2003, p. 173) description of these stories as "prototypes" underscores how they function as models that shape storytellers' perspectives by "bringing together networks of meaning into concise content." Prototype memories, as narrative elements, can serve as powerful pedagogical tools to help students effectively grasp complex topics (Schultz, 2003).

From this perspective, prototype memories, which are deeply rooted in teachers' past experiences, can directly influence what content is taught, how lessons unfold, how teachers respond to classroom dynamics, and how they engage with students. The literature includes several studies on instructional decision-making (e.g., Coşkun et al., 2020; Frost, 2009; Jenkins, 2018; Kirman Bilgin & Akbulut, 2023; Köylü & Gündüz, 2019; Sancar & Deryakulu, 2020). For example, Coşkun et al. (2020) demonstrated that instructional decisions encompass not only pedagogical but also ethical dimensions. Sancar and Deryakulu (2020) argued that every instructional decision made by teacher candidates in the classroom can be considered a fundamental teaching skill (Shavelson, 1973). Jenkins (2018) found that teachers' professional development positively influences instructional decision-making. Similarly, Köylü and Gündüz (2019) identified a significant relationship between teachers' participation in decision-making processes and their organizational commitment. Collectively, these studies highlight instructional decision-making as a critical teaching skill that directly impacts teaching, learning, and professional engagement.

Despite this extensive body of research, only one study has examined the relationship between prototype memories and instructional decision-making. Frost (2009) explored how prototype memories influenced mathematics teachers' decisions, finding that decision-making was shaped not only by technical knowledge or external constraints but also by powerful personal recollections. Importantly, Frost's (2009) work issued a call to more closely investigate these internal resources. Responding to this call, the present study investigates the role of prototype memories embedded in the experiences of social studies teachers. Furthermore, our research answers Sancar and Deryakulu's (2020) appeal to examine the diverse ways in which teachers construct their instructional decisions, thereby extending the existing literature on prototype memories and decision-making. Given the central importance of instructional decision-making in teacher education (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Parsons et al., 2018), this study's findings are expected to provide meaningful contributions for teacher educators, practitioners, and policymakers.

In particular, this study reveals how the narrative-based and socially oriented nature of social studies education—which emphasizes values, lived experiences, and the interpretation of current events—shaped the instructional decisions of teachers through their personal histories. Social studies, by its very nature, serves as a bridge between the past and the present, aiming to foster the sense of identity, belonging, and citizenship of students (National Council for the Social Studies, 2023). Therefore, the prototype memories of teachers, which are rooted in their own life experiences, function not only as personal recollections but also as pedagogical resources that influence what and how they teach (Reed, 2019). When teachers share narratives drawn from these memories (whether related to historical events, social issues, or moral dilemmas) they enable students to engage with content cognitively and affectively, fostering deeper and more meaningful learning experiences. From this perspective, the study identifies a reciprocal relationship between the narrative structure of social studies and personal memory-based experiences of teachers (Reed, 2019). Prototype memories allow teachers to reinterpret their past experiences and integrate them into present instructional contexts (Frost, 2009). The socially and temporally dynamic nature of social studies gives these memories renewed pedagogical meaning. Accordingly, this research demonstrates that social studies teachers ground their instructional decisions not only in pedagogical knowledge but also in their personal narratives intertwined with collective memory and social context.

As the first study to explore prototype memories within the field of social studies education, this study highlights the cultural, emotional, and experiential dimensions of instructional decision-making and opens new directions for understanding teachers' narrative-based pedagogical approaches. Conducted within an ethnomethodological framework, this study contributes uniquely to Turkish educational research by foregrounding the meaning-making aspect of teaching social studies. Furthermore, the findings align with Article 668 of the 12th Development Plan issued by the Presidency of Strategy and Budget of Türkiye (2024), which emphasizes enhancing the teaching profession's quality. In this regard, this study aims to uncover how prototype memories shape instructional decisions of social studies teachers and how these memories function within narrative-driven teaching, values education, and the cultivation of social awareness. The following research question was addressed: What is the role of prototype memories in the instructional decisions of social studies teachers?

2. Method

This section provides information on the research method, design, data collection, and analysis.

2.1. Design

The study employed an ethnomethodological design and a qualitative research approach. Ethnomethodology examines the methods individuals use in their daily lives to construct social order and meaning. In contrast to traditional sociological theories, it posits that social order is continuously produced through individual interactions rather than externally imposed (Garfinkel, 2014, p. 79). The central focus of ethnomethodology is to explore how individuals create, structure, and assign meaning to social reality in everyday contexts (Coulon, 2015). Within this design, the researcher adopts the role of an analyst seeking to understand participants' meaning-making processes from within their lived experiences (Garfinkel, 2014). Ethnomethodology provides a valuable framework for analyzing teachers' classroom decision-making processes and their communication with students (Sancar & Deryakulu, 2020). It also reveals how participants' cultural backgrounds (social reality) are reflected in their daily interactions within educational settings (Garfinkel, 2014).

2.2. Participants and Procedure

A convenience sampling technique was employed to ensure efficient and cost-effective qualitative data collection (Merriam, 2009). This method offers advantages such as rapid access to participants and reduced costs, as it enables researchers to work with readily available individuals (Patton, 2002). The study group comprised nine social studies teachers working in the Nevşehir province who were accessible to the researcher. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Table 1 ***Demographic characteristics of the participants***

Feature	Categories	n
Experience	6–10 years	2
	11–15 years	2
	15 years and above	5
Gender	Male	5
	Female	4
Undergraduate Graduation	Social Studies	5
	History	2
	Geography	2

Table 1 shows that five participants were male and four were female. Their professional experience ranged from 8 to 28 years. Regarding their undergraduate education, two participants held degrees in history, two in geography, and five in social studies.

2.3. Data Collection Tool

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers. Semi-structured interviews are a widely used technique in qualitative research because they combine pre-prepared questions with the flexibility to elicit new, context-specific questions based on participants' narratives (Merriam, 2009). This flexibility, which is particularly valuable in ethnomethodological studies, facilitates the collection of personal and narrative data and enables participants to articulate their own experiences (Garfinkel, 2014). The opinions of two experts in qualitative research methods

and social studies were sought to ensure the validity and reliability of the semi-structured interview form. Based on their feedback, the questions were reviewed and revised accordingly. Some questions were removed from the questionnaire; some were simplified to improve understandability. Furthermore, a pilot study was conducted with three teachers to test the clarity of the questions, after which the interview form was finalized (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

2.4. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted individually with teachers in their natural settings (schools) and lasted approximately 30 minutes (Garfinkel, 2014; Merriam, 2009). The researchers collected data through audio recording. Data collection was concluded after the ninth interview, as no new themes emerged, responses became repetitive, and existing categories reached saturation (Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 1995).

2.5. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis enables researchers to generate meaningful themes from qualitative data and systematically interpret their content (Liamputtong, 2009). Thematic analysis is a fundamental qualitative technique that can be applied flexibly across different epistemological approaches and research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, data were analyzed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis model. In the first phase, interview transcripts were produced, allowing the researcher to carefully review and interpret all statements and develop a general understanding. In the second phase, the participants' responses were examined, and statements with similar content were grouped into codes. Important points were identified and organized into themes in the third phase based on semantic similarities. During the fourth phase, the emerging themes were re-examined against the data, and elements lacking semantic coherence were either eliminated or revised. In the fifth phase, sub-themes were created where appropriate, and themes were subsequently renamed to better reflect their meanings and clearly delineate their scope. In the final phase, a table was prepared to clearly present the themes, with explanations for each theme and illustrative quotations from participants' statements. Direct quotations were incorporated throughout the analysis to enhance reliability and maintain data fidelity. Such quotations not only supported the development of themes but also strengthened the construction of meaning. As Merriam (2009) noted, the use of direct statements by participants is a key factor in increasing descriptive validity and credibility in qualitative research. Similarly, Patton (2002) and Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013) highlighted that incorporating direct quotations enriches both the depth and rigor of qualitative studies.

2.6. Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

Before starting data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were informed about the research purpose, procedures, and confidentiality principles, and written consent was obtained. Video recordings were used to support the contextual interpretation of teachers' emotions and thoughts in line with the ethnomethodological approach (Garfinkel, 2014). However, as five teachers did not consent to video recording, data from these participants were collected through audio recordings or written notes in accordance with ethical principles. All interviews were conducted confidentially, with teachers assigned codes (e.g., T1, T2, and T3), and no identifying information was disclosed.

To enhance reliability, researcher triangulation was employed. In scientific research, triangulation refers to approaching a phenomenon from multiple perspectives to increase accuracy (Neuman,

1991). Researcher triangulation specifically involves the participation of more than one researcher in the data collection or analysis processes (Bhandari, 2023). In this study, diversity was ensured by collecting data from different schools. The research team first analyzed the data independently and then consolidated their findings for a holistic evaluation. In addition, an academician specializing in qualitative research reviewed the coding and theme development process, and consensus was reached to strengthen the consistency of interpretations.

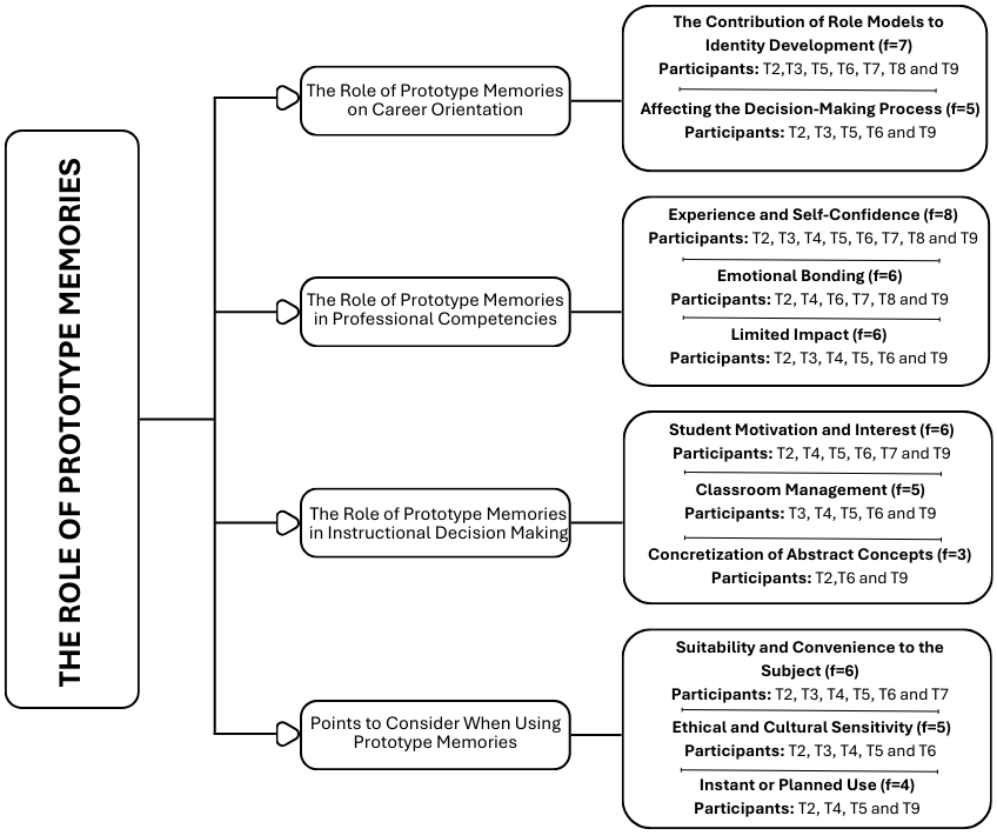
3. Findings

Following the data analysis, the participants' opinions were grouped into four main themes. The research findings are presented below, organized by the following themes. Table 2 presents an overview of the themes, sub-themes, and frequencies identified in the study.

Table 2 ***Overview of themes, sub-themes, and frequencies***

Theme	Sub-theme	f	Participants
Role of Prototype Memories in Career Orientation	Role Models' Contribution to Identity Development	7	T3, T7
	Influencing the Career Decision-Making Process	5	T5, T6
Role of Prototype Memories in Professional Competencies	Experience and Self-Confidence	8	T2, T8, T9
	Establishing Emotional Connections	6	T6
	Limited Impact	6	T3, T6
Role of Prototype Memories in Instructional Decision-Making	Student Motivation and Interest	6	T2
	Classroom Management	5	T3
	Concretizing Intangible Concepts	3	T6
Points to Consider When Using Prototype Memories	Adaptability and Suitability of the Subject	6	T4, T8
	Ethical and Cultural Sensitivity	5	T4, T6
	Instant or Planned Use	4	T2, T5

Figure 1 *Role of prototype memories in instructional decision-making processes*



3.1. The Role of Prototype Memories in Career Orientation

The findings indicate that teachers' orientation toward the profession is not arbitrary but closely tied to prototype memories from their past and the formative influence of these experiences. The role models encountered during participants' early interest in teaching left lasting impressions on their professional trajectories. Moreover, prototype memories acquired during their own learning experiences significantly contributed to the development and shaping of their teaching perspectives. The data reveal that such memories play a decisive role in both the formation of teachers' identities (f = 7) and their professional decision-making processes (f = 5).

3.1.1. Role Models' Contribution to Identity Development

Many participants stated that the prototype memories they encountered during their teacher education served as role models, shaping their current teaching roles. Participant T3 reflected as follows:

> "My primary school teacher had a profound impact on me. The demeanor of my philosophy teacher, his command of the lessons, and his communication with students left a strong impression on me. I sometimes adopt a different stance because of him. My primary school teacher's ability to engage with students' inner worlds and to treat boys and girls equally, fairly deeply influenced me. I attended primary school in Diyarbakır. From my teacher, I learned how to dance, how not to smack my lips, and how to properly eat. These lessons left a lasting impression on me." (T3)

Similarly, participant T7 highlighted the influence of professors during university:

> "During my university years, I was very impressed by some professors' classroom practices. My professor's effective use of body language, particularly in the introductory course, left a positive impression on me. This experience encouraged me to use body language more effectively in my professional life. His skillful use of body language not only motivated us but also enhanced our engagement as students." (T7)

As these narratives suggest, prototype memories and the teacher figures that participants regarded as role models played a strong role in shaping their teaching identities.

3.1.2. Influencing the Career Decision-Making Process

The findings indicate that prototype memories played an influential role in participants' career decision-making. Participant T5 emphasized the importance of these memories in shaping her career path:

> "My teacher, Tufan Gündüz, was the biggest reason I chose this department and teaching as a profession. His teaching style was very different. He made me love history, and my dream of following in his footsteps came true." (T5)

Similarly, T6 described the lasting influence of a middle school teacher as follows:

> "...There was something I paid particular attention to after I started teaching. I had a favorite teacher in middle school, and I took her as a role model without even realizing it. If N*A* is alive, she may live long. Sometimes, when I am teaching, I feel as though she is the one teaching. I absorbed her deeply. She was a very sweet teacher. She would chat with our families and sit at our table. These were beautiful experiences. She touched my heart and left a mark on my soul. I feel as if I am in her shoes." (T6)

These accounts clearly demonstrate that prototype memories significantly influenced teachers' career choices. In particular, role models were frequently cited as pivotal in participants' decisions to pursue teaching.

3.2. Role of Prototype Memories in Professional Competencies

Another key finding of the study is that teachers' prototype memories from past experiences shape their professional competencies. Participants reported that such memories not only enhanced their self-confidence in the teaching process but also supported more effective communication with students. At the same time, some participants noted that these memories were not always decisive and that their influence could be limited. Among the themes identified in participants' prototype memories, experience and self-confidence (f = 8) were the most frequently emphasized elements, followed by emotional connection (f = 6) and limited spheres of influence (f = 6).

3.2.1. Experience and Self-Confidence

Teachers reported that prototype memories gave them courage during instructional decision-making and served as references. Participant T2 explained:

> "Past events contain experience... Based on these experiences, we can produce solutions to similar situations." (T2)

Similarly, T9 emphasized the connection between prototype memories and teaching experience:

> "I think what we call a prototype memory is something that comes with experience in teaching. I agree with this sentiment... As you can see from the examples I've given, experience will show you how to continue on your journey." (T9)

Participant T8 also reflected on how extensive teaching practice contributed to building self-confidence:

> "...Our professors, especially in recent years, made us teach too many lessons. At first, it seemed very boring and difficult, but I think these lessons helped me gain self-confidence." (T8)

Taken together, these narratives illustrate that prototype memories are not merely recollections of the past but serve as critical foundations for developing professional competence. They provide teachers with strategies to address challenges and reinforce their self-confidence, which, in turn, is reflected in their decision-making.

3.2.2. Establishing Emotional Connections

Another sub-theme that emerged from the data analysis is emotional connection. This theme illustrates how teachers use prototype memories to build emotional bridges with their students. Sharing such memories not only allows students to see their teachers as more than lecturers but also helps them focus and fully engage in the learning process. Participant T6 emphasized this point:

> "...A lesson can be taught without memories, but when you include them, you create a different connection with the student. The student does not see you as just a lecturer. They get to know you and realize that you have a life. This creates a close and trusting relationship between the student and me. We connect with students not only technically but also emotionally..." (T6)

Based on these findings, the memories teachers share in their classrooms contribute significantly to building trust and fostering stronger teacher–student relationships.

3.2.3. Limited Impact

The findings also indicate that teachers' prototype memories are not always effective and do not have the same influence on every teacher. Participant T3 reflected as follows:

> "...It is partially effective; it does not have the same effect on everyone. We cannot share every memory, nor can we bring it up without reason. It should be shared at an appropriate time. Negative experiences should not be discussed, and some memories are not suitable to share with students..." (T3)

Similarly, participant T6 remarked:

> "...Is it essential? No, of course not. A lesson can certainly be taught without memories. However, when we add our memories to the lesson, we connect with the students a little more. It can create an emotional impact..." (T6)

These accounts indicate that prototype memories do not always yield the same level of influence. Therefore, their impact may be limited in classroom contexts. The findings highlight the importance of teachers being selective when sharing prototype memories and carefully considering factors such as relevance and students' levels of interest.

3.3. The Role of Prototype Memories in Instructional Decision-Making

Another key finding of the study is that participants' past experiences, which left a lasting impression, significantly influenced their instructional decisions. Teachers reported drawing most frequently on prototype memories to enhance student motivation and engagement (f = 6), support classroom management (f = 5), and concretize abstract concepts (f = 3). These results underscore teachers' tendency to rely on past experiences as valuable resources for guiding their instructional practices.

3.3.1. Student Motivation and Interest

The most salient finding regarding the role of prototype memories in instructional decision-making concerns students' motivation and engagement. The data show that teachers deliberately use

prototype memories to capture students' attention and enhance their motivation. Participant T2 explained:

> "When the child's attention is distracted, if you tell a story, they all listen with great attention... The pencils stop, the conversation stops... their attention is on you." (T2)

This account illustrates that prototype memories are effective at sustaining students' attention and fostering engagement in the classroom.

3.3.2. Classroom Management

Classroom management was another sub-theme that emerged from the data analysis. Teachers reported that recalling how they had previously addressed challenges enabled them to act more consciously in similar situations. Participant T3 recounted advice received from an experienced colleague early in her teaching career, which she considered a prototype memory:

> "I was struggling to control the class. An experienced colleague said, 'Give one student a task in the class and just supervise them.' That was one way to manage the class." (T3)

This finding illustrates that teachers use prototype memories as guiding tools, using past experiences to inform their instructional strategies, particularly in directing lessons and maintaining classroom order.

3.3.3. Concretizing Intangible Concepts

According to the findings, teachers employ prototype memories to make abstract concepts more accessible to students and adapt instruction to their level of understanding. Participant T6 explained:

> "While explaining the subject of democracy, I gave them an example and told them a story I had experienced so that they could understand the difference between the two. I said that the form of government is actually a republic, but the way of life is democracy." (T6)

T6 further elaborated with a classroom example:

> "Just yesterday, I was teaching a 7th-grade class on democracy. I began with a story from my own life. The students really enjoyed it. I started by saying, 'My little boy.' They all listened intently. When I told them that he was 21, they laughed heartily. They asked, 'Is your little boy 21?' I recalled a memory from when my son was in kindergarten. For a performance, the children were supposed to bring cakes and juice. My son wanted a moloch cake and peach juice. By the time I arrived after my class, the cakes had already been distributed. Despite being a child with a strong appetite, he had not eaten anything and was waiting sadly. I asked him why, because this was unusual for him. He explained that the teacher had not asked for his preference and simply handed out other treats. I exaggerated the story to capture the students' attention, but the point was clear: individual preferences matter and should be respected in a democratic environment." (T6)

T6 concluded: "Children get bored in class. Imagine making them sit at a desk for 40 minutes. The more we connect them to real life, the more engaged they become, and the lesson leaves a lasting impression."

These findings demonstrate that prototype memories are particularly effective in making abstract concepts more concrete and relatable. Teachers transform difficult-to-grasp ideas into meaningful narratives that facilitate comprehension and enhance learning by drawing on their own lived experiences.

3.4. Points to Consider When Using Prototype Memories

The findings indicate that when incorporating prototype memories into classroom instruction, teachers must attend to specific criteria. These considerations reflect the importance of prototype memories and the manner in which they are conveyed. The data show that teachers placed particular emphasis on relevance to the subject (f = 6), ethical and cultural sensitivity (f = 5), and whether the use of memories was planned or spontaneous (f = 4).

3.4.1. Adaptability and Suitability of the Subject

The most critical consideration in using prototype memories is their relevance and suitability to the subject matter. The participants emphasized that not every memory is appropriate for the classroom context and that sharing such experiences requires careful judgment. Participant T4 noted:

> "...If a prototype memory that has no connection with the subject or the event in the lesson is chosen and told, it will result in nothing but a waste of time. If a memory relevant to the topic comes to the teacher's mind and is used at that moment, it will be more effective for the student." (T4)

Similarly, participant T8 explained:

> "...It can be effective if you tell students about things they have experienced. In general, everything can serve as an example. It's not only a memory you've personally experienced; it's even an example from daily life. It is even more important to draw students' attention to something they might have heard or seen. It is effective in education and enriches the subject you are discussing." (T8)

This finding illustrates that teachers not only draw on their experiences but also develop pedagogical sensitivity to determine when and how to convey them.

3.4.2. Ethical and Cultural Sensitivity

The findings indicate that participants demonstrated ethical and cultural sensitivity when sharing their prototype memories. Participant T4 remarked:

> "Using prototype memories would be a good approach. It would be more effective if they were told without mentioning the name of the school or the workplace." (T4)

Similarly, T6 emphasized the importance of appropriateness:

> "...Of course, as I just said, that link needs to be adjusted very carefully. You should not get too personal, use inappropriate language, or tell offensive stories. Everything should be completely suitable for the level and age of the students." (T6)

These perspectives reveal that sharing prototype memories in the classroom requires a clear ethical framework and cultural sensitivity. Teachers stressed the importance of ensuring that the content of their memories was age-appropriate and respectful of privacy.

3.4.3. Instant or Planned Use

In this sub-theme, participants reported that their use of prototype memories most often occurred spontaneously during instruction, although previously prepared memories were also employed in some cases. Participant T2 explained:

> "Let me give you an example from myself. Most of them are spontaneous because the class was very messy that day, and you need to tell this memory. Sometimes, while teaching a particular topic, I decide to share a memory with the class." (T2)

Similarly, T5 emphasized the role of context in determining when to use memories:

> "...I determine the topics according to the events and the subject of the course. The subjects and events we experience are the primary determining factors. It would be very beneficial if we could learn from both positive and negative experiences in real life." (T5)

These accounts demonstrate that prototype memories are used either spontaneously, emerging naturally in the lesson's flow, or as pre-conceived narratives prepared in advance. In both cases, teachers draw on personal experiences as pedagogical tools to concretize abstract content, capture students' attention, and deepen meaning in the classroom.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the role of prototype memories in the instructional decision-making processes of social studies teachers. The first main result revealed that prototype memories play a significant role in shaping teachers' orientation toward the profession and their understanding of teaching. Role model teachers were found to be particularly influential in shaping individuals' interest in teaching, a finding consistent with Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, which emphasizes observational learning. Similarly, Lortie (1975) argued that teachers' prospective encounters during their educational journeys strongly shape their career orientation. Beijaard et al. (2004) also highlighted that past experiences, role models, and professional interactions nurture the formation of teacher identity. According to Bruner (1990) and McAdams et al. (1997), narratives and life stories provide insight into how individuals make sense of themselves and their lives. This narrative approach has become increasingly common within teacher education research (Casey, 1993). The stories teachers live and tell serve as a lens through which they interpret both their personal and professional selves and the content and context of their work, including instructional innovations.

The prototype memories of teachers are informed not only by individual experiences but also by teacher education programs, professional development activities, and collaborative collegial settings (Smagorinsky et al., 2003; Stein et al., 1999). In the context of Türkiye, studies suggest that social ties exert a stronger influence than individual preferences on career choice (Koçakoğlu & Yalçın, 2020), and a collectivist culture amplifies the impact of role models (Hofstede, 2001; Kağıtçıbaşı, 2017). This underscores the significance of prototype memories as a source of motivation in the career decision-making processes of social studies teachers.

Another important result is that prototype memories contribute to the development of professional experience and self-confidence among teachers. Berliner (1994) emphasized the complex knowledge structures of expert teachers, while Ertmer and Stepich (1999) noted that knowledge-based experiences fundamentally nourish instructional decisions. Parsons et al. (2018) similarly argued that teachers' pedagogical competence is grounded in prior experiences and structured knowledge bases. Research further suggests that expert teachers rely on this accumulated knowledge to inform decisions across a range of learning and teaching situations, whereas novice teachers often draw upon limited and superficial information (Demiraslan Çevik, 2013). Consistent with these results, Eisner (1988) contended that teacher education should move beyond conventional and technocratic approaches to embrace the affective dimensions of teaching, including intuition, creativity, and compassion. The narrative inquiry tradition (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Elbaz, 1991) also underscores the critical role of teachers' personal experiences and intuitive wisdom in shaping instructional decisions.

A further result is that prototype memories directly influence instructional decision-making. Teachers used such memories to concretize abstract concepts, enhance student motivation, and support classroom management. This indicates that teachers rely not only on technical knowledge but also

on narratives and stories from their own experiences. Frost (2009) highlighted that teachers' stories are a vital tool for explaining instructional decisions and clarifying course content. Similarly, Bolkan et al. (2019) argued that narratives enhance student learning by engaging them through metaphors and imagery, rather than relying solely on analytical reasoning. This dual-processing approach activates both rational and experiential systems, making the learning of complex and abstract concepts more effective. Furthermore, research suggests that cultural backgrounds also influence instructional decisions, as teachers adapt their stories and narratives with sensitivity to students' cultural contexts (Lim, 2004; Parrott et al., 2000; Rousseau & Tate, 2003). Within this framework, Ryan and Deci (2000) noted that teachers can foster student success by safeguarding basic psychological needs, such as autonomy and competence, through the narratives they share. Balli (2010) demonstrated that the episodic, memory-based experiences of prospective teachers were directly reflected in their classroom management practices. Collectively, these results confirm that instructional decision-making relies not only on theoretical knowledge but also on the internal resources of past experience.

The study also showed that the use of prototype memories requires careful consideration of relevance, ethical and cultural sensitivity, and timing. Existing literature on traditional narratives and storytelling provides limited guidance on what stories are appropriate to tell, to whom, and under what circumstances. This gap highlights the importance of teachers' ability to evaluate timing, topical relevance, and audience characteristics when sharing prototype memories. Teachers must carefully select stories not only in terms of content but also in terms of context and timing (Şimşek, 2004). Such attentiveness enhances narratives' pedagogical value while safeguarding ethical and cultural considerations. In particular, timing plays a crucial role in instructional decision-making. The significance of the temporal dimension of discourse in the development of knowledge and understanding has been well documented (Alexander, 2000; Crook, 1999; Cobb, 1999; Erickson, 1996; Lemke, 2001; Nystrand et al., 2003; Roth, 2001). Teachers can integrate prototype memories either spontaneously in response to immediate situations or deliberately through advanced planning. Both approaches require attention to timing and content relevance to maximize instructional effectiveness (Roth, 2001).

Finally, the increasing diversity of today's classrooms—characterized by students from varied ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds—further underscores the need for ethical and cultural sensitivity in instructional practices (Serdyukov, 2017). In Türkiye, internal and external migration, social transformations, and urbanization have contributed to the growing demographic diversity in schools (Bölükbaşı, 2024). Such diversity necessitates that teachers consider students' cultural characteristics, values, and sensitivities when incorporating prototype memories into instruction. Similarly, Gay (2015) argued that traditional classroom management strategies are insufficient in diverse learning environments and that teachers must adopt more inclusive and culturally responsive approaches. In summary, the effective use of prototype memories requires teachers to consider classroom demographics, cultural diversity, ethical sensitivities, and timing. Attention to these elements contributes to creating an inclusive and equitable learning environment while simultaneously fostering students' sense of value and encouraging their active participation in the learning process.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

Based on the results of this study, several recommendations can be made to inform teacher education practices and guide future research. When teachers interpret situations encountered during instruction, awareness of prototype memories from their past experiences may enable them

to make more informed decisions. Therefore, teacher education programs should encourage candidates to recognize and reflect on their meaningful past experiences. Reflective practices should be incorporated to foster learning and draw pedagogical conclusions from such experiences. During teaching practice courses, candidates should be provided with opportunities to analyze their own learning stories. By systematically evaluating teachers' responses to past challenges, they may be better equipped to make informed decisions in similar situations in the future. To support this, structured learning environments should be designed to critically analyze teacher candidates' experiences. Such processes create a cyclical learning pattern that enhances teachers' professional competence.

This study was limited to social studies teachers in the Nevşehir province. Future research involving teachers from different geographical regions could shed light on how cultural and institutional differences shape prototype memories. In addition, the experiences of teachers across different educational levels, such as primary and secondary schools, should be examined comparatively. The role of prototype memories in instructional decision-making may also vary across subject areas. Therefore, future studies should compare the experiences of teachers working in fields such as science, mathematics, Turkish, and foreign languages. Such research could reveal how interdisciplinary pedagogical cultures influence instructional decision-making.

This study collected data exclusively through semi-structured interviews. Future studies should integrate additional qualitative techniques, such as classroom observations, teacher diaries, and analysis of teaching materials, to provide deeper insights into how and in what contexts teachers use prototype memories. These methods would allow the observation of teachers' behaviors in natural settings rather than being limited to self-reported narratives. Finally, longitudinal research is needed to investigate how novice teachers structure their experiences over time and which prototype memories guide their instructional decisions at different stages of their careers. Such research would provide a more systematic understanding of the place and significance of prototype memories across teachers' professional lifespan.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the role of prototype memories in social studies teachers' instructional decision-making processes. The research was conducted using an ethnomethodological design within a qualitative framework. The study group consisted of nine social studies teachers working in Nevşehir Province, selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview form developed by the researchers and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results revealed that teachers employed prototype memories to guide lesson flow, support classroom management, establish emotional connections with students, and make abstract concepts more tangible. Teachers also viewed these memories as a resource for professional identity development and instructional decision-making strategies. However, the results further indicated that prototype memories do not have the same impact across all situations, highlighting the need for careful consideration when applying them in practice.

Based on these results, teacher education programs should provide learning environments in which teacher candidates can share their experiences and develop teaching strategies grounded in those experiences. Future research should examine the effects of prototype memories on instructional decision-making in different subject areas and across larger, more diverse samples. In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of research on instructional decision-making by highlighting the role of prototype memories in social studies education. This study underscores the

importance of narratives and lived experiences in professional practice by demonstrating how teachers draw on their past experiences to manage classrooms, motivate students, foster emotional connections, and clarify abstract concepts. At the same time, the identified limitations—particularly the small sample size and focus on a single region—point to the need for further research across diverse contexts, subject areas, and educational levels. Taken together, the results emphasize that teacher education programs should integrate reflective practices that enable candidates to critically examine their personal experiences, thereby strengthening their professional identity and decision-making skills. This research offers both theoretical insights and practical implications for creating more responsive, culturally sensitive, and experience-based approaches to teacher preparation and professional development.

7. Declarations

7.1. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests, institutional affiliations, or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

7.2. Funding

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7.3. Author Contributions (CRediT)

Muhammed Talha Özalp: Conceptualization; Methodology; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing-review & editing.

Gülşah Nazlı Oğuz: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing-original draft; Writing-review & editing.

Eda Dinçer: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing-original draft; Writing-review & editing.

Emine Büşra Kaya: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing-original draft; Writing-review & editing.

All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

7.4. Data Availability Statement

Data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

7.5. Ethics Approval

Ethics Committee: Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee Approval Number: 2025.06.197 Approval Date: 23.05.2025 Informed Consent: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was ensured.

7.6. Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

AI-assisted tools were used for language editing. No AI tools were used to generate empirical data or analytical results.

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