

Pedagogical Competence in Secondary Education: Challenges and Opportunities in France and Greece

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Abstract

Teacher quality is a fundamental determinant of student success, influencing both cognitive and socio-emotional development. Research underscores the long-term impact of teachers on student outcomes and highlights their role in fostering social and emotional skills. Recognizing the critical importance of teacher effectiveness, policymakers worldwide emphasize investments in teacher education, professional development, and well-being (OECD, 2021). This study examines the evolving landscape of teacher education policies, particularly in the context of Europe, with a focus on Greece and France. It explores through interviews and focus groups the shift towards integrating pedagogical theory with practical training, addressing concerns about the disconnection between research-based knowledge and classroom practice. A comparative analysis of Greece and France highlights key policy shifts, including the introduction of pedagogical certification programs and the restructuring of teacher education institutions. The findings reveal that while initial teacher training varies across national contexts, common challenges persist, such as balancing academic autonomy with pedagogical preparedness. In conclusion, the study underscores the necessity of continuous professional development and the refinement of teacher education programs to align with the demands of modern classrooms. Ensuring high-quality teacher training remains essential for equipping educators with the skills required to navigate evolving educational landscapes and meet the diverse needs of students.

Keywords: teacher education, pedagogical competence, students' achievement, school climate

Introduction

Teacher quality is by far the most important factor schools can provide to enhance student learning. A large body of research demonstrates that teachers have a powerful impact on students' outcomes (Aaronson et al., 2007). This impact is long-lasting (Chetty et al., 2011) and extends beyond academic achievement or other cognitive outcomes. There is now robust evidence that teachers can also enhance students' social and emotional skills (Jackson, 2018).

Among the various ways schools can develop students' cognitive and social-emotional skills, teacher quality remains the most significant factor. Research shows that students taught by different teachers often experience significantly different educational

outcomes (OECD, 2022), while achieving greater equity in education remains a central goal for education systems worldwide.

Good teaching requires a well-managed classroom, where teachers communicate, provide effective support, listen to students' needs, respect their ideas, and encourage them while offering constructive feedback through both formative and summative assessments. Effective teachers must also be competent professionals who continuously develop their content knowledge, pedagogical expertise, and motivational competencies, all of which should inform their teaching practices (Guerriero, 2017).

Educational policymakers recognize that supporting and improving teacher well-being should be a crucial priority for education systems. Given the importance of investing in teachers and teaching, education systems can promote teacher participation in professional development through incentives such as covering training costs, adjusting teaching duties, or refining accountability measures, including teacher appraisal and school evaluation (OECD, 2021).

There is a global policy consensus that teacher education must be improved to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Concerns about the quality of initial teacher education, the disconnect between theory and practice, and student achievement have all driven efforts to enhance teacher education across various nations (Trippstad et al., 2017). International assessments and policy reports from organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank contribute to the growing pressure on national governments to reform teacher education.

Over the past few decades, interest in researching cognitive aspects of teachers' professional competence has grown due to the assumption that teacher knowledge significantly influences effective teaching and student learning (Hill & Chin, 2018). Teachers are expected to possess knowledge essential for effective teaching and, more broadly, pedagogical concepts, principles, and techniques that extend beyond specific subjects (Doyle, 2009).

However, since teacher workforce investment often constitutes the largest share of education budgets, it is crucial to identify cost-efficient classroom practices and the policies that best support them (Le Donné et al., 2016). Further research is needed to explore teacher knowledge as a predictor of effective teaching and student attainment.

Literature review

The empirical study of teaching and learning has been going on for centuries, and, especially in recent decades, there is a growing body of scientific literature investigating teaching and the effects of various teaching practices on student learning (Guerriero, 2017).

Teacher education is a complex system in which multiple interacting factors shape future educators. Ell et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of both personal and institutional influences in teacher education, underscoring professors' responsibility for training teachers, serving as authentic and coherent role models for future educators.

Despite being deeply rooted in national histories and policies, teacher education systems in Europe have been influenced by political cultures, long-standing traditions, and resistance to theoretical and research-driven reforms (Kofod et al., 2012). Since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, the process of harmonizing teacher education policies across Europe has accelerated, contributing to the development of a "European Teacher Education Area" (OECD, 2020).

The integration of theory and practice in pedagogic training is not just a practical issue related to lesson planning, assessment, and classroom management; it is also a political challenge. It requires practical skills supported by scientific knowledge, theories, and research evidence, ensuring a strong connection between pedagogy, subject knowledge, and teaching methodology (Whitty & Furlong, 2017).

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) has catalyzed unprecedented changes in industry and technology, redefining the role of human labor and skills and emphasizing the interconnection of machines and systems to achieve optimal performance and productivity gains while the Fifth Industrial Revolution (IR 5.0) is said to take it a step further by fine-tuning the human-machine connection. IR 5.0 is more collaboration between the two: automated technology's ultra-fast accuracy combines with a human's intelligence and creativity (Humayun, 2021). As a result, the education sector plays a critical role in preparing students for the uncertainties arising, and there is an urgent need to redefine the role of teacher training institutions and consider how sustainability can be maintained amid rapid technological developments (Teo et al., 2021).

Teacher education in Greece and France

In Greece, pedagogical and didactic competence in primary and secondary education was formally recognized as an educational policy issue in 1997. Initial teacher education typically lasts four years, and, as in most OECD countries, prospective teachers receive a tertiary degree upon completion of their training (OECD, 2020).

Research on teacher preparedness primarily focused on Primary Education, especially in Special Education and Intercultural Education. In contrast, studies on Secondary Education have centered on student behavior and teacher-school leadership relationships. A new law established in 2022 allows each higher educational institution to offer a special pedagogical and teaching proficiency program, the successful completion of which grants a Certificate of Pedagogical Proficiency (OECD, 2021).

A recent study by Liakopoulou (2024) examined the perspectives of university professors on the Certificate of Pedagogical and Didactic Competence in Greece. She concluded that while academic autonomy in the certification process is beneficial, a balance must be struck to ensure that future teachers develop a deeper, more holistic understanding of educational realities and adopt innovative pedagogical practices that cater to student needs.

In France, significant reforms in teacher education took place in 2013, when the University Institute for Teachers' Training (Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres – IUFM) was abolished after 23 years and replaced with the Colleges for Secondary School Teachers (Écoles Supérieures du Professorat et de l'Éducation – ESPE). In 2019, the INSPE (Instituts Nationaux Supérieurs du Professorat et de l'Éducation) replaced the ESPE as part of an educational reform aimed at strengthening teacher training.

Initial teacher education in France is university-based and lasts two years, combining theoretical education with practical internships (Cappe et al., 2021). Admission requires three years of prior university study, regardless of discipline. During the first year, students undertake observational and guided practice training internships to familiarize themselves with the professional world of teaching. In the second year, successful students enter the National Education work/study program (alternance-Education

Nationale), where they gain civil servant trainee status and undertake part-time teaching internships while assuming classroom responsibilities (Maamria et al., 2025).

Methods

The researcher collected data using a mixed-method approach, incorporating semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gain in-depth insights and diverse perspectives. The target group consisted of secondary education teachers from various specialties in France and Greece, with an equal gender distribution (ten females and ten males).

Below are the characteristics of the participants in the final phase of the research.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics in the final research phase

<i>Country</i>	<i>Participant</i>	<i>Teaching Experience</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Specialty</i>
France	Teacher 1	15 years	36	Male	Greek language
	Teacher 2	25 years	50	Male	Biology
	Teacher 3	26 years	53	Female	Mathematics
	Teacher 4	9 years	32	Male	Physics
	Teacher 5	4 years	30	Female	Literature
	Teacher 6	19 years	45	Male	Chemistry
	Teacher 7	15 years	40	Female	History
	Teacher 8	5 years	29	Male	Physical Education
	Teacher 9	14 years	38	Female	Literature
	Teacher 10	16 years	40	Female	ICT
Greece	Teacher 1	7 years	34	Male	Economy
	Teacher 2	10 years	42	Female	Philosophy
	Teacher 3	7 years	42	Male	Physical Education
	Teacher 4	27 years	59	Male	History
	Teacher 5	25 years	50	Female	Geography
	Teacher 6	18 years	48	Female	French language
	Teacher 7	23 years	51	Male	Civil Education
	Teacher 8	22 years	41	Female	Art
	Teacher 9	16 years	48	Male	Technology
	Teacher 10	3 years	30	Female	Literature

Semi-structured interviews consist of pre-set, open-ended questions, whereas focus groups involve group discussions facilitated by the researcher. Both methods are flexible and non-standardized, prioritizing participants' perspectives (Bryman, 2012). All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the native language of the participants, audio-recorded with their consent, and transcribed verbatim (Denny & Weckesser, 2022).

A pilot study was first conducted through interviews with five teachers from each country. The key themes that emerged from this phase contributed to the development of the research protocol for both the final semi-structured interviews and the focus groups (one focus group of six teachers was formed in each country).

For data analysis, content analysis was applied to examine the qualitative data. Before analyzing the transcripts, a word frequency query was conducted as an initial

exploration, from which some of the first codes for the analysis were derived. To ensure anonymity, participants are referred to as G1 to G10 for Greece and F1 to F10 for France.

Results

In general, this study's descriptive findings revealed that in both countries, teachers recognize the necessity of pedagogical knowledge for new educators entering the classroom. Specifically, all ten Greek and ten French teachers stated that pedagogical training is essential for teachers to effectively fulfill their role.

F1: Pedagogical training in undergraduate studies is essential. Absolutely. I believe it is a critical issue that should be greatly emphasized.

G2: Without pedagogical knowledge, it is truly impossible to teach. And I mean it! Pedagogical training is necessary!

However, Greek teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the pedagogical training they received during their undergraduate education. This dissatisfaction varies depending on years of teaching experience (and thus the year of entry into public education), specialization, and the university attended.

G10: Even though I had taken a course that included practical training in schools at the time, very few students chose it. Nevertheless, I believe that I should have received... greater pedagogical knowledge before entering school, rather than acquiring it on the job.

G5: When I first started teaching, I really faced difficulties. There were no guidelines, no substantial pedagogical knowledge. Overall, our pedagogical training was insufficient, in my opinion.

All French teachers, regardless of years of experience or specialization, expressed satisfaction with the pedagogical training they received during their initial education. They emphasized that obtaining pedagogical qualifications follows a standardized framework, is a prerequisite for entering the profession, and is considered a crucial asset for the effective execution of their teaching duties.

F3: So far, I consider my pedagogical training quite satisfactory... I must say I feel prepared to manage the classroom from all aspects.

F5: In L3, we specialize. I pursued an education and skills specialization closely aligned with teaching, and my master's degree was specifically designed to become a teacher. Our training is highly immersive, and at least in the classroom, we know what we are doing. Besides theoretical training, I also completed practical training in schools during my final year. I felt completely ready in my first year of employment.

F8: My studies and practical training truly helped me. Because science—our specialization—is one thing, and teaching is another. My initial education and training, yes, I feel it prepared me for the teaching profession.

Regarding professional development, teachers acknowledged its necessity for updating their knowledge in response to societal changes and evolving pedagogical and

teaching methods. However, they reported that the incentives provided for training are insufficient. Specifically, 9 out of 10 Greek teachers and 4 out of 10 French teachers highlighted inadequate training incentives.

F4: We should have an element of individual choice, as it is a great way to engage people in the process and encourage participation in professional development. This should not be about competition but rather about discovering new approaches. We need initiatives that enhance our teaching practices, and I believe these should be tailored to the needs of each school.

Teachers identified their extensive non-teaching responsibilities as a major obstacle to effective teaching, as these demands limit their time for professional development. Specifically, 9 out of 10 Greek and 7 out of 10 French teachers stated that they had no time for training activities.

F3: My day feels twice as long with all the paperwork we have to handle, and by the end of it, training seems like a waste of time.

F5: We need to free up time at our school because when we are together as colleagues, when we notice something that isn't working, we must discuss, but finding the time is really difficult.

Regarding their preferred training methods, teachers emphasized that due to rapid societal changes, the professional development system should focus on new challenges through specialized programs that blend theory with practice. Specifically, 9 out of 10 teachers from both Greece and France expressed a preference for on-site training in real classroom conditions, allowing them to integrate theory into their actual teaching situations while they consider that their training will be meaningful and effective if it considers the local conditions which undeniably shape school specificities and consequently different professional needs.

F1: Well, training is absolutely needed, and learning should be lifelong. But this training should be linked to society and its changing conditions.

G5: The best training, the one that truly works for me, includes theoretical lessons that you must immediately apply in a school setting.

F3: It should also have a practical component at school. To see whether a theory applies in a classroom, and which theory fits which class, because not all theories work for every group of students.

Concerning the problems they face, teachers underlined as an important issue the “devaluation of the teacher’s work and role”. More specifically, 9 out of 10 Greek and French teachers mentioned in their responses that their role is not appreciated by society. They also placed great emphasis on the role of students’ families, how they perceive school and teachers, and the lack of educational stimuli for young people. Indicatively, they stated:

F6: Especially when you work in a big school and interact with many parents... The problems stem from the lack of education in society in general. And... in the fact that in recent years, teachers have been devalued.

F4: *I feel that for my students, interaction with the teacher seems meaningless to them. We are not respected by society anymore, I feel, although everyone expects too much from us.*

G5: *I don't want to be entirely pessimistic... but the general attitude from students is a complete lack of interest. A devaluation of the educational process and the teacher. I am very sorry to say so... but it is the truth.*

F1: *Some families are pressing us for grades, evaluations, and comments. A lot of pressure. A lot of pressure. That is a challenge.*

All participants agreed that schools must focus on the fact that future citizens need to be ready to understand diversity and cooperate by taking on multi-level roles within and outside national borders.

Conclusion

Based on the distinct mean responses of the participants, the results suggest that teachers place significant emphasis on the new social reality that has emerged. This evolving landscape demands flexibility and adaptability, both in pedagogical approaches and in the formulation of teaching objectives.

The debate around teachers' knowledge and its role in the teaching profession continues, where teacher educators can play a key role in building the profession's knowledge base. Despite acknowledging the important role of teacher educators in improving learning outcomes, national policies to promote the development of the profession are lacking. More importantly, professionalizing teacher educators is likely to have a positive impact on the profession (Guerriero, 2017).

The importance of pedagogical competence was rated as the most crucial factor for teachers, as they are responsible for educating the new generation. Given the constantly changing modern work environment, students require new action strategies, enhanced abilities to analyze complex problems, take initiatives, manage risks, adapt continuously, and make rational decisions.

Meanwhile, teachers highlighted the significance of professional development through practical training and on-site activities in response to societal changes. They emphasized that continuous learning, in combination with evolving pedagogical and teaching methods, enables them to serve as facilitators within the educational community.

To summarize, teacher training programs, particularly those focused on pedagogical knowledge, play a crucial role in enhancing teaching quality, strengthening teachers' ability to manage classroom needs, and improving student achievement. Going forward, a dynamic study of teachers' concerns, intervention strategies, and problem-solving approaches is essential. The goal should always be to promote student engagement while ensuring both professional satisfaction and career development for teachers, given the strong interaction observed between these factors.

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