

EUROPEAN POLICY ON TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: OBJECTIVES, CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

Petros Trantas¹, Dionysis Kouloumpis¹, & Katerina Kasimati²

¹Department of Education, University of the Aegean (Greece)

²Department of Education, University of Limassol (Cyprus)

Abstract

Teacher professional development (TPD) constitutes a central pillar of European education policy under the Education and Training 2021–2030 (ET 2030) framework, where teacher learning is positioned as a driver of equity, quality, digital transformation and system resilience. This study explores how European objectives are interpreted and operationalised within national TPD agendas in Greece, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands and England. A comparative qualitative content analysis of European and national policy documents is conducted through a training transfer perspective across five analytical dimensions: governance arrangements, teacher agency, mechanisms for classroom transfer, evaluation and incentive structures, and wellbeing and digital support. Findings indicate convergence at the level of strategic discourse, as all systems prioritise continuous professional learning, inclusion and digital competence. However, significant divergence emerges in implementation logics and professional infrastructures, producing uneven degrees of systemic coherence and sustained training transfer into classroom practice. The study advances an integrative analytical lens for examining European–national alignment in TPD and outlines implications for strengthening mentoring capacity, incentive design and policy coherence.

Keywords: *Teacher professional development, European education policy, policy convergence, training transfer, knowledge sharing.*

1. Introduction

Teacher professional development is a foundational component of the European strategy for education and training. The need to strengthen teachers' professional skills, autonomy and resilience in the face of social and technological change has led the European Union to develop increasingly coherent policies for continuous professional development (European Commission, 2022). The strategic framework "Education and Training 2021–2030" (ET 2030) suggests that strengthening the teaching profession and cultivating collaborative knowledge networks are core priorities, closely linked to quality, inclusion and the sustainability of education systems (Council of the EU, 2021).

This paper examines how these European priorities are embedded within different national teacher professional development models. It pays particular attention to the relationship between theories of training transfer (Pineda, 2012) and organisational conditions that support knowledge sharing within schools. The study illuminates how professional development policies take on distinct features within each national context while reflecting shared European values such as lifelong learning, quality and collaboration (OECD, 2022; Kyriakides & Creemers, 2014).

1.1. Case selection rationale

The selection of Greece, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands and England is based on a combination of theoretical, geographical and institutional criteria to provide a representative picture of diverse approaches to teacher professional development in Europe. These cases span a geographic arc from Southern to Northern Europe and include systems ranging from more centralised governance (Greece) to more decentralised systems with established professional learning cultures and strong institutional maturity (Sweden, the Netherlands).

Spain offers an intermediate configuration, combining regional autonomy with a national framework and drawing on EU policy approaches that allow flexibility aligned to national specificities while encouraging innovation and good practice. England represents an Anglo-Saxon model characterised by strong accountability and evaluation logics (Bubb & Earley, 2009). Although outside the EU since 2020

(Brexit), it remains of high comparative interest because it maintains broadly similar objectives, illustrating how shared contemporary challenges can shape convergent policy aims even under different governance conditions.

The five systems also reflect a wide range of TPD modalities: from more top-down approaches to collaborative professional networks and school-embedded professional learning communities. The heterogeneity of these models enables comparison across different levels of institutional capacity, decentralisation and mechanisms that support sustainable training transfer and knowledge sharing (Admiraal et al., 2017; Timperley, 2011).

2. Theoretical models of teacher professional development

Teacher professional development is widely understood as a continuous process through which teachers expand their professional knowledge, skills and pedagogical practices (Evans, 2008). Research on educational change emphasises that professional learning becomes more effective when it is embedded within collaborative school environments that support reflection, feedback and professional agency (Fullan, 2020; Kyriakides & Creemers, 2014). In this perspective, schools function as learning organisations where teachers act as agents of innovation and improvement.

Timperley (2008) emphasises that professional learning has meaningful impact when it is connected to student learning and supported by continuous feedback. Contemporary approaches therefore highlight professional learning that is experiential, data-informed and practice-oriented (Trantas, 2022), framing professional development as a form of organisational learning that integrates inquiry, reflection and collaboration (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

2.1. European policies and the ET 2030 strategic framework

Recognising the decisive role of teachers, the European Union has developed a coherent policy framework for their professional development. ET 2030 sets five strategic priorities, with a strong focus on strengthening the teaching profession and linking professional learning to lifelong learning (Council of the EU, 2021). Priority 3 emphasises support for initial teacher education and continuing professional development, teacher wellbeing and working conditions. It also promotes networking, mobility and the European Teacher Academies through Erasmus+, reinforcing knowledge sharing and European cohesion.

ET 2030 builds on earlier initiatives such as ET 2020 and incorporates the green and digital transitions. Professional development is directly connected to policies for teaching quality, inclusion and equity. The European Commission (2022) highlights that investment in teachers is among the most effective strategies for resilient education systems. Teachers are increasingly positioned as “agents of change” who contribute to social cohesion and the development of 21st-century skills. EU policy thus operates less as an imposition of uniform standards and more as a convergence framework and a platform for mutual learning among Member States (European Commission, 2022).

2.2. Training transfer and knowledge sharing

The effectiveness of professional development depends not only on program design but on whether learning is transferred to classroom and school practice. Training transfer refers to the extent to which teachers apply in practice what they learned in professional development activities (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). International research (Pineda, 2012) suggests that transfer is influenced by (a) the classroom and school environment, (b) teacher characteristics and (c) program features. A collaborative culture, supportive leadership and institutional autonomy substantially strengthen the sustainability of professional learning outcomes.

Adult learning perspectives aim at the transformation of experience, making teacher learning particularly sensitive to implementation conditions. Professional development is more likely to generate sustainable change when it is constructivist and supports teachers in actively making meaning from experience (Kasimati, 2019). In this sense, training transfer functions as the link between micro-level learning and macro-level policy. Sustainability depends on whether new knowledge becomes embedded in school practices and whether continuous learning and reflective cultures are supported (Fullan, 2020; Timperley, 2008; Pineda, 2012). In this perspective, the concept of training transfer provides an analytical bridge between professional development policies and classroom practice, highlighting the conditions under which teacher learning translates into changes in instructional practices (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Hutchins, 2007).

3. Methodological approach

Content analysis is well suited for analysing policy and institutional texts, as it enables investigation of underlying values, priorities and implementation logics (Krippendorff, 2013; Mayring, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018). The approach is grounded in three assumptions: (a) policy and institutional texts convey meanings that shape professional development structures and cultures; (b) cross-country comparison can reveal different ways of embedding European priorities; and (c) policy interpretation can illuminate mechanisms that enable or constrain classroom transfer (Fullan, 2020; Timperley, 2008).

The research process followed four stages:

1. Initial scoping and corpus construction (European and national policy texts, strategic documents, guidelines and secondary research).
2. Coding and categorisation: initial categories were theory-driven and then refined inductively from the material (Kyriakides & Creemers, 2014; Pineda, 2012).
3. Comparative interpretation to identify patterns of convergence and divergence across cases.
4. Conceptual synthesis linking themes to models of professional learning and policy transfer.

The research questions are:

- (a) How do national TPD policies reflect ET 2030 strategic priorities?
- (b) Which institutional and organisational mechanisms promote or hinder training transfer into practice?

(c) Which models of professional learning (transformative, collaborative, reflective) are embedded in national policies?

- (d) What convergences and divergences shape the European ‘policy architecture’ of TPD?

Coding organises data into concepts and subcategories (Mayring, 2014). The main analytic dimensions were: (a) governance and decentralisation; (b) pedagogical orientation and theory–practice connection; (c) training transfer mechanisms; (d) evaluation and accountability; and (e) wellbeing and digital transformation. Validity was ensured through source triangulation (institutional texts, research studies and policy reports) and iterative checks of coding coherence (peer debriefing). Reliability was supported through an analyst log and consistency checks using worked examples. However, this study has certain limitations: Data availability across countries is uneven, and policy frameworks are continuously evolving, which may influence the interpretation of institutional arrangements and implementation practices.

4. Content analysis

Greece has historically followed a centralised model of teacher professional development, with a strong regulatory role for the Ministry of Education and the Institute of Educational Policy. Professional development initiatives are typically centrally designed and funded through national or European programmes (e.g., ESF, Erasmus+). Thematic emphases often include ICT, evaluation, differentiated instruction and inclusion (Karavas et al., 2018). Despite institutional organisation, initiatives often lack continuity and strong mechanisms for sustained transfer into classroom practice. Structures such as regional planning centres and school-improvement teams constitute positive steps toward collaborative learning, yet their impact is constrained by limited protected time, weak reflective cultures and insufficient school-level support. Training transfer remains limited due to policy discontinuities, fragmented designs and limited mentoring and peer-learning infrastructures.

Spain is a characteristic example of decentralised educational governance. The seventeen autonomous communities design professional development programmes through structures such as Centros de Profesorado and teacher networks (Bolívar Botía & Bolívar-Ramos, 2014). Professional learning is closely linked to school improvement and commonly incorporates communities of practice and collective cycles of reflection. Teachers participate as active members of learning communities that co-design programmes, document practices and share them across networks. This collaborative architecture strengthens professional autonomy and supports sustainability of change, aligning strongly with the ET 2030 emphasis on professional empowerment, mobility and mutual learning.

Sweden represents an example of a more holistic professional development policy. The model prioritises continuous, school-embedded learning, reflective practice and the use of data to improve teaching (Persson, 2014). Collaboration with universities supports the theory–practice connection, and schools typically enjoy substantial autonomy. Training transfer is reinforced through established mentoring, coaching and plan–do–review cycles. Policy also connects continuous professional learning with teacher wellbeing and job satisfaction, closely matching ET 2030 priorities for quality, equity and wellbeing.

The Netherlands applies a networked and participatory model of professional development in which schools, universities and innovation centres collaborate in joint programmes (Admiraal et al., 2017).

Professional learning is linked to action research, collective reflective practice and the use of technology for continuous feedback. Teachers play an active role in co-designing programmes, while transfer to practice is supported through peer observation, microteaching and digital learning communities. Alignment with ET 2030 is particularly strong regarding innovation, digital transition and school autonomy, illustrating how professional learning becomes more effective when embedded in school organisation and sustained feedback routines.

In England, teacher professional development is strongly institutionalised and shaped by quality frameworks, performance indicators and accountability policies (Bubb & Earley, 2009). Professional learning is organised across school-based, inter-school and university-linked routes, including established mentoring and leadership programmes. While links to evaluation and career progression can secure continuity and institutional commitment, they may also narrow space for creative, reflective learning. England shows a mature CPD infrastructure aligned with priorities for quality and lifelong learning; however, strong accountability pressures can constrain innovation and—particularly in the post-Brexit context—create tensions with broader European agendas emphasising collaborative capacity building and wellbeing.

5. Comparative synthesis

The analysis highlights distinct TPD policy profiles. Greece represents a centralised and changeable model in which implementation depends heavily on central decisions and time-bounded programmes. Spain and the Netherlands illustrate decentralised and collaborative systems where professional learning is more organic. Sweden appears as the most coherent approach, integrating theory, practice and feedback into a unified framework. England combines institutional consistency with strong evaluation logics, sometimes at the expense of teacher wellbeing. Overall, training transfer tends to be stronger when: (a) professional learning is embedded within school culture and routines; (b) teachers actively participate in the design and direction of learning; (c) stable mechanisms for mentoring, coaching and collaborative feedback are available; (d) evaluation systems prioritise learning and improvement rather than compliance (Timperley, 2008; Pineda, 2012).

Alignment with ET 2030 is strongest on lifelong learning, inclusion, wellbeing and innovation in systems that invest in collaborative infrastructures, school autonomy and inquiry-based improvement. Persistent challenges concern decentralisation, quality assurance and sustaining professional learning impacts over time.

6. Conclusions and implications

This comparative study sheds light on how national teacher professional development policies connect—or fail to connect—with the strategic priorities of ET 2030. A key conclusion is that different national models reflect different assumptions about the teacher's role and the nature of professional learning. Where professional development is organised around collaborative structures, communities of practice, action research and systematic reflection (Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands), it aligns more closely with adult-learning and transformative perspectives. Teachers are positioned as active agents who learn through critical engagement with experience, rather than passive recipients of directive (Panaoum, 2014).

By contrast, in Greece—and in some aspects of England—professional development is more frequently episodic, technical and externally driven. Limited protected time, fragmented programs and weaker institutionalised mentoring and peer-learning structures restrict sustained transfer into practice. These patterns support the central argument that effective TPD must be understood as organisational learning: school functions as learning communities that encourage inquiry, collaboration and continuous improvement (Fullan, 2020; Kyriakides & Creemers, 2014).

For policy design—particularly in contexts such as Greece—the findings point to the need for a shift from fragmented provision toward coherent professional learning ecosystems. Indicative directions include: (a) institutionalising school-based communities of practice with protected collaboration time; (b) recognising and credentialing school-embedded learning on par with external training; (c) strengthening school–university partnerships for research-informed professional learning; (d) advancing gradual decentralisation and local capacity for programme design; and (e) integrating teacher wellbeing and psychosocial resilience as core components of professional learning policy.

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