

VIEWS OF TEACHER STUDENTS IN GREECE'S DEPARTMENTS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION REGARDING THEIR TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the views of final-year students concerning the teacher education programs offered by Greece's nine Departments of Primary Education. The research involved 507 fourth-year students from the academic year 2020-2021, who completed a structured questionnaire with 19 closed-ended and 8 open-ended questions. The findings reveal that most students express satisfaction with their Department's teacher education program. They acknowledge the significant role of various courses in their pre-service training and feel adequately prepared for classroom teaching. However, they express concerns about managing students with special educational needs and instructing specific subjects. To address these challenges, they propose enhancements to their teacher education programs, primarily focusing on expanding and improving Teaching Practice, incorporating more practical courses at the academic level and placing greater emphasis on training for groups with special educational characteristics. These insights underscore the importance of refining teacher education programs to better equip future educators for the complexities of modern classrooms.

KEYWORDS

teacher education, teacher education programs, departments of primary education, students' views

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education constitutes a prolonged and continuous process of professional development [1,2,3]. It transcends national boundaries and it is universally recognized as a domain of profound reflection, challenges and exploration in all educational systems [4,5,6,7] and as a subject of significant academic inquiry [8,9], since the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of teachers hold a direct positive correlation not only with students' academic performance [10,11,12,13,14,15] but also, to a certain extent, with the overall well-being and progress of states and societies [16,17,18,19].

Teachers, as pivotal figures in the educational process within schools, emerge as a central subject of pedagogical inquiry [20,21,22]. They play a vital role in shaping the quality of education and, consequently, contribute to enhancing the overall quality of life [11,23]. Teachers also serve as principal drivers in the implementation of prevailing educational policies, as the agency of teachers is intricately interwoven with the structures and cultures within which it operates [24,25]. Given the fundamental role of teachers in shaping the future of education, continuous

efforts are necessary to enhance teacher training programs and equip educators with the necessary skills to meet the evolving demands of the profession. The motivation behind this study stems from the growing concerns about the adequacy of teacher education programs in preparing educators for the complex realities of modern classrooms.

The European Union's Education and Training programs underscore initiatives and policies related to teachers and teacher education [26,27,28]. Teacher education stands at the forefront of educational policy discussions not only in Europe but also worldwide and it is recognized as a pivotal element in global efforts to enhance educational systems and to improve teaching and student learning and achievement [8,29,30,31], as it has been widely acknowledged that no educational reform or innovation can occur without the active involvement of teachers [32,33].

The choices made in teacher pre-service training programs are intricately linked to policies and standards governing teacher certification and licensing [34,35,36] and they are closely intertwined with the broader educational system, social, economic, and political contexts, as well as the cultural milieu within which they are implemented [17,37,38]. Consequently, as these conditions continually evolve, it is imperative to adapt teacher education and training programs to align with the evolving landscape [19,29].

The training of Primary Education teachers in the Greek context has evolved over the course of nearly two centuries and can be outlined into three key stages [19]. From the establishment of the Greek state until the conclusion of the 19th century, there were no formalized institutions dedicated to the training of teachers. The first institutions, referred to as Didaskalia, made their debut in the late 19th century and thrived until 1932, when they were succeeded by Pedagogical Academies. The Pedagogical Academies assumed a prominent role in the preparation of Greek teachers until 1984, when this responsibility transitioned to the Pedagogical Departments. These Departments have since retained their central role in the training of Primary Education teachers in Greece, a role they continue to fulfill to this day [39,40]. In the contemporary landscape, Greece is home to nine Pedagogical Departments of Elementary Education, each affiliated with a distinct Greek university. Admission to the Pedagogical Departments is determined by the performance of students in nationwide examinations. Students may exhibit varying degrees of theoretical or practical backgrounds, contingent upon the academic track they pursued during the last three years of high school, namely, the theoretical, practical, or technological direction.

The teacher education programs offered by the Pedagogical Departments of Primary Education in Greece, have undergone regular deliberation and discussion. As teacher education is intricately linked to societal realities and developments, individual countries possess the flexibility to customize teacher education programs according to their specific needs and traditions [29,41]. The choices made within these teacher education programs are crucial in shaping the initial training of prospective teachers, as they aim to cultivate a specific type of professionals equipped with both the requisite knowledge in their field and a comprehensive understanding of how to engage with scientific knowledge [42,43]. Moreover, the teacher education programs are linked to teaching readiness, an optimal level of professional competence development. This aspect holds paramount importance for the future careers of teachers, equipping them with the capability to effectively undertake their job responsibilities and to deal with the professional difficulties [44,45].

In accordance with the pertinent legislation in Greece, and more specifically, guided by the provisions outlined in Article 16 of the Constitution emphasizing the principles of academic freedom in research and teaching and the full self-governance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as well as the legal recognition accorded by Law 1268/82, which formally established Pedagogical Departments as Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), Pedagogical Departments

within the country possess the authority to collaboratively formulate their own teacher education programs. This process involves extensive deliberation, taking into account their respective capabilities, the demands of Greek society, and the contemporary living conditions. Consequently, the teacher education programs of Greece's nine Pedagogical Departments may vary to different extents, both in terms of the number and diversity of courses offered during the academic year [46,47].

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that despite the initial perception of a lack of connection between these teacher education programs, they share common foundations [48], which are echoed in both Greek and international academic literature [19,33,49]. Thus, if we comparatively examine the courses offered in the teacher education programs of the nine Pedagogical Departments in Greece, it emerges that despite variations among Departments, these teacher education programs can, according to Shulman's theory [50,51], be divided into three major fields: 1) content knowledge, 2) pedagogical knowledge and 3) teaching practice.

Content knowledge encompasses courses related to the subjects that teachers are expected to teach and aims to adequately prepare prospective educators for their specific professional roles. Content knowledge is deemed one of the fundamental and critical categories of knowledge for a teacher [52], as research consistently demonstrates that teachers' strong content knowledge correlates with enhanced student performance [15]. In Greece's Departments of Primary Education, prospective teachers undergo comprehensive training to equip them with the competence to teach all subjects across all six grades of primary school.

Pedagogical knowledge delves into general principles and strategies for classroom management and the broader organization of the educational process [51,53,54]. This category includes courses aimed at equipping teachers with pedagogical and didactic skills to effectively fulfill their pedagogical role [17,55]. Moreover, a variety of elective courses offered within each Department plays a pivotal role in shaping the unique identity of each Department, enriching their educational offerings with distinct dimensions.

Teaching practice encompasses the practical experience that prospective teachers acquire during their initial training, with the objective of preparing them for their professional roles. It constitutes an integral part of initial teacher education [56], in Greek and other European academic institutions. This initial exposure to teaching within the context of their future work contributes significantly to the formation of professional identities among aspiring teachers [57,58,59,60].

The interconnection of the aforementioned educational fields displays noteworthy variation among different countries. Some countries adopt the one-phase or concurrent model, wherein all three fundamental fields are concurrently presented within a singular phase, seamlessly incorporating teaching practice into the teacher education program [17,61]. Conversely, others lean towards the two-phase or consecutive model, which mandates that students first acquire content knowledge before engaging in pedagogical knowledge and teaching practice during a subsequent phase [19,61,62]. Within the Greek context, the Pedagogical Departments of Primary Education adhere to the one-phase model. They impart to prospective educators a holistic educational experience encompassing three essential fields: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and teaching practice [17,63].

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on teacher education programs by providing an in-depth analysis of students' views on Greece's teacher education programs, highlighting their strengths and areas requiring reform. Through our research, we aim to contribute to the broader

dialogue on teacher education and support policymakers, educators, and academic institutions in better preparing future teachers for the complexities of modern classrooms.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature related to the students' views on teacher education programs. Section 3 outlines the methodology adopted for data collection and analysis. Section 4 presents the research findings and their implications, while Section 5 discusses the challenges identified and potential solutions. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding remarks and suggestions for future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The formulation of teacher education programs within the Departments of Primary Education emerges as a complex, multifaceted, and time-consuming process, which necessitates careful consideration of the views of all stakeholders within the academic community. However, a review of the relevant literature reveals that student views, a crucial aspect of this process, have received limited attention in scholarly investigations.

On a global scale, several studies have concentrated on the views of undergraduate students regarding the teacher education programs offered by their respective Departments [57,64,65,66,67,68,69]. These studies indicate that the majority of students express satisfaction with their Department's teacher education program, highlighting several positive attributes related to curriculum content, teaching practice, teaching and learning methods, and certain organizational aspects. However, they also identify various shortcomings, including concerns about the structure of the teacher education program, the lack of cohesion among specific courses, the disconnection between theoretical knowledge and practical application, the duration and organization of teaching practice, the insufficient alignment between university instruction and school realities, the disparity between the teacher education program's courses and the actual needs of pre-service teachers during their teaching practice, and the subpar quality of feedback provided by some teacher educators. In light of the aforementioned, it is evident that despite variations in the organization and content of teacher education programs, certain constants prevail, primarily concerning students' expectations and demands from their teacher education programs [57,64,65,67,68,69].

In the context of Greek studies, the majority of pertinent research centers on students' views concerning a particular aspect of the teacher education program, namely, the Teaching Practice [56,70,71,72,73,74,75,76,77,78,79,80,81,82]. These surveys generally indicate that most students in Greece's Departments of Primary Education recognize the significance of Teaching Practice and express overall satisfaction with its implementation. However, they often assert that the theoretical courses offered by the university have limited relevance and utility in their Teaching Practice, failing to address the specific requirements of the school environment and classroom teaching. Additionally, students' suggestions for improving the Teaching Practice focus primarily on extending its duration and enhancing its organization. Simultaneously, they advocate for courses during their academic studies that possess a greater practical orientation and a more substantial connection to the realities of school environments. Comparable findings pertaining to Teaching Practice have been reported in corresponding international surveys [83,84,85,86,87,88,89,90,91].

The literature thus reveals a consistent theme: although teacher education programs are generally viewed favorably by students, they are frequently critiqued for their lack of relevance to the practical needs of the teaching profession. The primary weakness across the global context appears to be the insufficient integration of theory with practice, particularly in areas such as the

coherence of study programs, the teaching methods, and the organization of Teaching Practice. At the same time, there is an overwhelming consensus that improvements are necessary to better prepare students for the challenges of teaching.

In summary, while there exists a substantial body of literature addressing various facets of teacher education programs, the views of students, particularly in the Greek context, remain relatively underexplored. The emphasis on Teaching Practice as a critical component of teacher education is consistent across studies, but there is a clear need for reforms to address the disconnect between academic instruction and the realities of the classroom. The literature collectively underscores the importance of aligning teacher education programs with the practical demands of teaching, suggesting that such an alignment is essential to improving the overall quality of teacher preparation. This is a recurring theme across both national and international contexts, indicating that the issues identified are not isolated but rather part of a broader, global challenge in teacher education.

3. METHODOLOGY

This publication will focus on a part of our broader research, examining the views of final-year students enrolled in Greece's nine Departments of Primary Education concerning the teacher education programs offered by their respective Departments. In our study, "views" refer to the collective opinions, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that teacher students hold regarding their teacher education programs. These views reflect the students' personal experiences, evaluations, and judgments about the effectiveness, relevance and overall quality of the education they receive in their respective Departments.

To gather the views of the students, a structured written questionnaire consisting of 27 questions was developed explicitly for this research. The questionnaire included 19 closed-ended questions using a Likert scale (Very much, Much, Moderately, Slightly, Not at all) and 8 open-ended questions. Despite each Department's distinct teacher education program, a uniform questionnaire was administered to students across all Departments. The development of this questionnaire was based on the shared foundational pillars present in the teacher education programs of all Departments. These pillars encompass: 1) content knowledge, 2) pedagogical knowledge, and 3) teaching practice, as articulated by Shulman [50,51].

The questionnaire was administered to the students via the internet. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot distribution was conducted among students, allowing for refinements to the questionnaire based on feedback received. It is worth noting that the results of the pilot study were consistent, and no significant issues or ambiguities emerged.

The data collected were subsequently processed using the statistical software SPSS (version 26). The open-ended questions were subjected to content analysis, with the unit of analysis being the meaning of each sentence. Initially, a preliminary reading of the responses was conducted to identify the central themes that emerged. Following this, the responses were coded by creating thematic categories that were derived inductively from the data. Each sentence was analyzed individually and the concepts it contained were categorized accordingly. The data were then interpreted in line with the thematic categories that emerged, supported by examples from the original material to validate the conclusions.

The specific research questions guiding this investigation include:

1. *Views on Teacher Education Program:* How do students evaluate the overall quality and effectiveness of their Department's teacher education program?

2. *Views on Teacher Education Program Courses:* Which courses within the teacher education program do students believe have played a substantial role in shaping their educational experience and professional development?
3. *Views on Teaching Readiness:* How do students assess their readiness to teach, both generally and in terms of specific content knowledge areas such as History, Mathematics, and Language, across various grade levels or classes?
4. *Suggestions for Improving the Teacher Education Program:* What suggestions do students offer for improving the Department's teacher education program to better prepare them for their future teaching careers?

The research sample comprises 507 fourth-year students from the academic year 2020–2021, all of whom have completed their Teaching Practice, thereby gaining a comprehensive understanding of their Department's teacher education program.

The demographic data of the 507 students from the Departments of Primary Education across the nine Departments were examined in terms of gender, age, the city where they study, the academic track they followed in the final years of high school, their entrance exam scores for higher education and whether the Pedagogical Departments were their first choice on their university application. Regarding the academic track that students followed during their final years of high school, it is important to note that in Greece, high school students can choose one out of three academic tracks: Theoretical, Scientific and Technological. In the Theoretical track, students study subjects such as Ancient Greek, Latin, History and Modern Greek Language. In the Scientific track, students study subjects like Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, Biology, and Modern Greek Language. Finally, in the Technological track, students take courses such as Economics, Mathematics, Computer Science and Modern Greek Language.

4. RESULTS

In this section, we will present the results of our study based on the responses from students across all nine Departments. The analysis will focus on the views of the overall sample, without examining variations in responses between different Departments. It is important to note that no statistically significant differences were observed based on gender, age, or the academic track of the participants.

4.1. Views on Teacher Education Program

Pertaining to the data obtained from the analysis of the questionnaires for our first research question, which concerns students' views on the overall teacher education program of their Department, a significant majority of students across all nine Departments express a high level of satisfaction with their respective Department's teacher education program. Specifically, only 1% report not being satisfied at all, while 4% indicate slight satisfaction, 29% report moderate satisfaction, a substantial 52% express much satisfaction, and 14% state very high satisfaction. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that a substantial proportion of students feel that their specific teacher education programs have effectively prepared them for their future careers as teachers. A mere 2% claim that their preparation is nonexistent, while 9% report slight preparation, 33% acknowledge moderate preparation, a substantial 44% state significant preparation, and 12% indicate that they are very well-prepared. Moreover, students believe that their studies at the Department have been immensely beneficial in enhancing their expertise in the areas of content

knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and teaching practice relevant to their future profession, as evidenced in Table 1.

Table 1. How much the studies at the Department helped in the preparation in the three fields of the Teacher Education Program.

	<i>Field of Content Knowledge</i> %	<i>Field of Pedagogical Knowledge</i> %	<i>Field of Teaching Practice</i> %
Very much	14	30	21
Much	41	45	45
Moderately	28	18	25
Slightly	14	5	7
Not at all	3	2	2
Total	100	100	100

4.2. Views on Teacher Education Program Courses

Regarding our second research question, which concerns students' views on the specific courses within their Department's teacher education program, the consensus among students from all nine Departments is that certain courses have made significant contributions to their preparation as future teachers. Specifically, courses like "Psychology" (48.1%), "Special Education" (41.4%), "New Technologies" (36.7%), and the "Didactics" of Language (44.8%), Natural Sciences (42.8%), Mathematics (41.8%), History (36.9%), and Literature (34.1%) have played pivotal roles in enhancing their teacher training. Conversely, courses such as "History of Education" (37.3%), "Sociology of Education" (35.1%), "Education Policy" (35.1%), "Educational Research Methodology" (31.8%), and "Environmental Education" (28.2%) have contributed moderately to their teacher preparation. Students also express a desire for additional courses, including "Didactics of Geography," "Didactics of Religious Studies," and further courses in "Environmental Education" and "Psychology," to be incorporated to better equip them for their professional roles.

4.3. Views on Teaching Readiness

In terms of our third research question, which concerns students' views on their readiness to teach in the classroom, a majority of students across all nine Departments exhibit a high degree of preparedness. Specifically, 74% feel much or very much prepared, while only 13% report slight or no readiness. When examining their readiness to teach specific subjects in the early grades of Primary School (1st to 3rd grade), students feel more prepared for Language (45.8%) and Environmental Studies (43.8%), but less prepared for Music (26.4%) and Visual Arts (30.4%). In the later grades of Primary School (4th to 6th grade), students feel more prepared to teach Environmental Studies (46%) and Language (42.4%), but less prepared for Music (25%), Mathematics (26.8%), Visual Arts (29.6%), and Physics (32.9%). Regarding pedagogical and didactic handling of situations, students express greater readiness to handle situations involving gifted and talented students (40.4%) and school bullying (38.9%), but less readiness to manage students with special educational needs (17.4%) and bilingual students (29.6%).

4.4. Suggestions for Improving the Teacher Education Program

With regard to our fourth research question, which concerns students' suggestions for improving their Department's teacher education program, the majority of students across all nine

Departments advocate for greater emphasis on Didactics and ask for courses with a greater practical orientation. They also endorse the inclusion of more teaching practice. Additionally, there is a call for a stronger focus on training for groups with special educational characteristics, such as disabled students, immigrants and minorities.

For instance, certain student responses exemplify these suggestions:

- Courses with a greater practical orientation: "We would benefit from more practical lessons and fewer theoretical ones" (Code 91). "Reducing the emphasis on theory and introducing case studies, group discussions, and assignments would be more beneficial than rote memorization" (Code 256).
- More teaching practice: "Our profession is highly practical, and thus, we need as much hands-on experience as possible" (Code 256). "Extending the duration of teaching practice is essential, as it constitutes a fundamental element of our entire teacher education program" (Code 438).
- Greater emphasis on how to teach groups with special educational characteristics: "Courses on teaching minority groups (Roma, immigrants, refugees) and children with special educational needs (disabled, etc.) should be incorporated" (Code 45). "More courses addressing the needs of refugees and children with disabilities are essential" (Code 317). "Intercultural education courses should be expanded to reflect the diverse sociocultural backgrounds of today's students" (Code 383).

5. DISCUSSION

In light of the findings obtained from this study, regarding our first research question, it becomes evident that students enrolled in Greece's nine Departments of Primary Education exhibit a high level of satisfaction with their respective Department's teacher education programs. Furthermore, they firmly believe that these teacher education programs significantly aided their education in the field of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and teaching practice of their future profession. However, concerning content knowledge, a notable portion (45%) of respondents expressed a lower degree of preparedness compared to the other two fields. This finding appears to have a strong correlation with the teacher education programs offered by the Pedagogical Departments of Primary Education, which adhere to the one-phase model, where all three major fields, encompassing content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and teaching practice, are concurrently presented within a single phase [17,63]. Additionally, prospective teachers undergo training to instruct all subjects throughout all six grades of primary school. Nevertheless, this comprehensive training approach may, in some cases, hinder the development of in-depth expertise in specific subject areas.

In terms of our second research question, which concerns the impact of specific courses within the teacher education programs, students across the nine Departments of Primary Education widely recognize Didactics, as well as courses like Psychology, Special Education, and New Technologies, as critical to their educational journey. In contrast, more theoretically-oriented courses like History of Education, Sociology of Education, and Education Policy appear to have a less profound influence. This highlights the importance of appreciating the value of theory, an aspect which students often underestimate [92,93,94,95]. Furthermore, according to our findings, it seems that the students may not have developed the ability to fully comprehend the educational environment in which teaching takes place. There appears to be a lack of awareness that the act of teaching is a socially and politically negotiated process [96], as their focus seems to be

primarily on the cognitive aspects and didactic elements of education, without delving into the sociological dynamics of the school.

As for our third research question, which focuses on their teaching readiness, most students across the nine Departments of Primary Education express a high level of readiness to teach in the classroom, particularly when it comes to subjects like Language and Environmental Studies. However, they anticipate challenges in teaching subjects such as Music, Art, Mathematics, and Physics, especially in the higher elementary grades. Moreover, they report feeling inadequately equipped to manage students with special educational needs and bilingual students. Previous research has also suggested that teachers may not receive effective training in areas like multicultural awareness and addressing the diverse learning needs of students [97,98,99]. Additionally, Mathematics and Physics present notable challenges, given that many students originate from a theoretical background, leading to doubts about their ability to effectively teach these subjects, particularly in the more demanding upper grades of elementary school.

In response to our fourth research question, the majority of students across Greece's nine Departments of Primary Education advocate for improvements to the existing teacher education programs, that primarily focus on refining teaching practice, placing a greater emphasis on courses with a practical orientation, and addressing the training needs of student groups with special educational characteristics. The existing literature has consistently highlighted the disconnect between theory and practice, as well as the insufficiency of preparation to face the daily challenges of the teaching profession [9,59,92]. The perception that teacher education programs are predominantly theoretical and detached from the real-world demands of schools has also been well-documented [29,100,101,102]. Moreover, in line with findings from other studies [73,75,76,79,81,83,84,86,87,89,91,95], it is clear that students place considerable importance on teaching practice and courses with a pronounced practical focus, such as Didactics, as they serve to bridge the gap between theory and practice, directly relating to classroom teaching and the realities of the school environment.

Considering these findings, it is evident that our results align with previous research, as mentioned earlier, highlighting the necessity for improvements in the teacher education programs within Greece's Departments of Primary Education. Based on the findings presented, we can assert that students within Greece's nine Departments of Primary Education place a distinct emphasis on the practical aspects of their studies. This orientation can be closely linked to contemporary trends and the global emphasis on developing practical skills that better align with the evolving demands of the labor market [103,104]. Simultaneously, our results underscore the gap between theory and practice [59,92,105,106]. This gap is further compounded by students often undervaluing the significance of theoretical knowledge [92,93]. Instead, they tend to prioritize courses with a more pronounced practical orientation, such as those focused on Didactics, which better align with the school environment and the demands of teaching.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the data for this study were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period that brought unprecedented disruptions to education. The shift to online learning and the limitations on in-person teaching practice may have influenced students' views of their preparedness and the effectiveness of teacher education programs. While this article does not delve into an extensive analysis of the pandemic's impact, this topic will be explored in greater depth in future research.

6. CONCLUSION

The present research was carried out among a sample of final-year students from the nine Departments of Primary Education in Greece. What sets our findings apart is the exploration of variables that had not been previously investigated, making our study particularly valuable. Our research adeptly navigates unexplored terrain, by elucidating the views of students concerning the teacher education programs offered by the Pedagogical Departments, and providing us with new hypotheses for further exploration.

However, it is also important to acknowledge some limitations in our study. First of all, we cannot draw direct and conclusive conclusions about the teacher education programs in Greece's Departments of Primary Education based solely on our findings. To do so, we would require qualitative data from various methods of data collection, such as focus groups and interviews. Additionally, we would need to delve into additional factors related to students, such as their expectations. Finally, due to the extraordinary circumstances resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, where coursework and teaching practice were conducted online, a follow-up study is imperative to mitigate the impact of contemporary factors, such as the repercussions of the pandemic.

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