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# Assessing Student Perceptions of Professionalization Measures and Coherence after the 2011 French Curriculum Reform

Cindy De Smet and Christine Schmider

## Abstract

This chapter examines the 2011 curriculum reform in France, which aimed to professionalize the teacher training system and establish national frameworks for teacher competencies in primary and secondary schools. Inspired by European guidelines for teacher education, this reform represented a paradigm shift in the French system, integrating pedagogical knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge alongside traditional content knowledge. The result was a closing of the professional orientation gap with other European teacher education systems and a greater vocational coherence.

## Keywords

Coherence • Teacher training • Instructional design • Curriculum reform • French education system

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## 6.1 Introduction

Teacher education in many European countries has been undergoing profound structural and conceptual changes for years. The design and structure of teacher education, the process of acquiring the core competencies necessary for the teaching profession, and the effects of education and training on teachers and learners are topics that are prominent in current debates, both among research specialists and in politics and society. Expectations of the profession and of the professional competencies teachers are supposed to possess are immense. In regard to these expectations and societal demands, the practice of the profession is becoming increasingly complex (Neuber & Lipowsky, 2014, Rothland, 2013). A growing number of academic articles address questions about the prerequisites of future teachers as well as the development, measurement and assessment tools, and effects of professional competencies acquired by teachers (Cochran-Smith et al., 2008, Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Beck, Sembill, Nickolaus & Mulder, 2009). Criticism is often levelled at the fragmented structure of the various phases of teacher training, particularly the division between the study phases and the practical phase of training. There is a certain discontinuity, a fragmentation of knowledge and skills, as well as a curricular content that is not adapted to the requirements of the future profession and that cannot meet the complexity of the profession. One of the criticisms of the existing teacher training systems in Europe is that it is difficult to apply the fragmented knowledge and skills acquired during the years of study. As a result, future teachers have difficulty integrating and adapting their skills to the context of the profession (Blömeke, 2006; Terhart, 2004).

In response to Bologna and Pisa, curricular structures have been reformed in France, as well as in most other European countries, to focus on professionalization and competence orientation. (Le ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2013). The weight of the individual study elements and the relation between theoretical and practical components are also being reconsidered to achieve a more coherent and balanced vocational training (Baumert & Kunter, 2006; König, 2014; Wittorski, 2008).

The chapter's central research questions are twofold: 1) How has the 2011 French curriculum reform affected student perceptions of professionalization measures? 2) How do these results reflect coherence?

To answer these questions, we will first provide a brief overview of the organization of teacher education prior to the 2011 reform. After that, we will extensively discuss the 2011 reform and the role of competency-based education. Consequently, the chapter analyzes data from four cohorts of students enrolled in master education courses at the Insep of Nice (Institut national supérieur du

professorat et de l'éducation) [or National Higher Institute of Teaching and Education] during the 2014–2015, 2016–2017, 2017–2018 and 2018–2019 school years. A survey was conducted to assess how students perceived the professionalization initiatives and actions imposed by the French ministries of education and higher education based on the national competence framework and guidelines.

Finally, the chapter provides an overview of the reform's results and reflects on how students perceive coherence. By examining the impact of the 2011 curriculum reform, this chapter contributes to a greater understanding of the role of coherence in professionalizing teacher training systems.

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## 6.2 What Preceded the 2011 Curriculum Reform?

We need to make a distinction in the evolution of the organization of primary and secondary education. The initial training of primary school teachers remained the responsibility of teacher training colleges until 1989, when significant changes took place. The first of these colleges was established in Strasbourg in 1810. These institutions underwent a rapid series of transformations. Between 1978 and 1986 alone, there were twelve different schemes implemented for the initial training of teachers as well as thirty-eight successive official texts (Le ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2023a). In 1978, a significant change was made to the teacher training program for primary school education with the introduction of a three-year training program at teacher training colleges (Prost, 2013).

The training of secondary school teachers, or “professeurs certifiés”, was historically organized in two distinct systems between universities and the regional pedagogical centers (CPR, or Les Centres Pédagogiques Régionaux). Universities focused on exam preparation, the regional pedagogical centers (CPR), created in 1955, for the training of probationary teachers after passing exams. This one-year training program at the CPR included classes on teaching methodology and disciplinary reinforcement, observation and practice hours with a supervising teacher, and part-time classroom teaching phase (4 to 6 h per week) whose validation was necessary for tenure (Le ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2023a).

Until the Education Orientation Law of July 10, 1989 (Loi d'orientation sur l'éducation, 1989, n° 89–486), primary school teachers and secondary school teachers in middle and high schools were trained using two completely separate systems. As a result, two distinct professional bodies existed with different statuses, career paths, remunerations, and retirement ages (Poucet & Prost, 2016).

The Education Orientation Law of July 10, 1989 brought an end to this situation by establishing the new position of “professeurs des écoles” (for primary school teachers), aligning their position with that of the secondary school teachers. The law also included an implication for teacher education at the university level, as the old teacher training colleges and regional pedagogical centers (CPR) were replaced by University Institutes of Teacher Education (IUFM, or Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres).

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### **6.3 The Centralized Reform of the Teacher Education in France**

Compared to other countries, France was characterized by different educational particularities. Firstly, the country had a unique centralized public education system (Dobbins, 2014). Secondly, it is one of the only countries to condition the employment of teachers on the success of a national competition in addition to their university diploma (Le ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2023a, 2023b). And thirdly, the French pupils remain grouped together in secondary school until the age of 15. Only then did a differentiation begin.

Not surprisingly, teacher training in France has undergone an even more fundamental change in recent years than in most countries (Tardif & Petropoulos, 2012, Perrault, 2013). Until the reform in 2011, the Teacher Education system was traditionally characterized by a very low level of professionalization. A purely subject-focused first study phase (bachelor) without practical experience was followed by a second phase in which Pedagogical Content (PC), by which we understand knowledge and competences related to educational science, and Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK), defined as didactics of the discipline by Shulman (1987), were taught in an isolated way from the previous subject study (Bouvier & Obin, 1998). The focus on the subject-specific CAPES Concours (Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle à l'Enseignement Secondaire) [or Certificate of Professional Aptitude for Secondary Education Teaching], a centralized selection examination for all teacher candidates with a complete bachelor's degree in one subject, meant that teacher education students who obtained the CAPES gained access to the teacher profession and obtained civil servant status without ever having followed didactic or educational science related courses. In other words, only after students had completed a subject-related degree, prepared for the Concours after three years, passed the exam, and become a teacher with civil servant status did they meet pupils for the first time while having to teach with the full responsibility for the class (Jolion, 2011).

Following the Bologna reform and under the influence of European guidelines on educational standards, teacher training in France became professionalized with greater consideration of practical experience and subject didactics as well as a focus on competence orientation. In the academic year 2011–2012, a new framework of a consecutive study structure consisting of a polyvalent Bachelor's degree and a profession-oriented Master of Education as well as a competence framework for teacher education were enacted on a national level and implemented in all French Regional Education Authorities or "Académies" (Loi d'orientation et de programmation pour la refondation de l'école de la République, 2013, JORF n° 015). These 30 "Académies" are the decentralized services of the Ministry of National Education in France (Le ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2023c). Institutionally, this law fundamentally changed French teacher education. At the core of this new teacher training program was the idea of a coherent professionalization that focused on competence orientation.

### **6.3.1 Competence Orientation as a Key to Professionalization**

As in most European countries, the educational reform that changed the French system aimed for 'competence-based' education. In educational science, competence has been understood as a construct and a performance disposition (Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Weinert, 2001) and increasingly defined and modelled in a context- and disciplinary specific manner through empirical research focusing mostly on cognitive aspects (Bobillon, Schmider & Zaki, 2017). Defined by Weinert as "the cognitive abilities and skills available in or learnable by individuals to solve specific problems, as well as the associated motivational, volitional, and social readiness and skills to use the problem solutions successfully and responsibly in variable situations" (Weinert, 2001, p. 27), the concept of competence in teacher education has evolved in the last few years. More recent subject-specific and transdisciplinary approaches in educational science have attempted to integrate non-cognitive elements into the construct of competence. A good example is the COAKTIV study which was one of the first empirical studies in the German-speaking world in which central facets of teacher competence were studied with regard to their relevance for classroom activities. For this study, the researchers took not only professional knowledge but also beliefs, motivational aspects, and self-regulatory abilities of teachers into account (Brunner et al., 2006). On the same level, König's interdisciplinary model of "professional competence is based on both aspects of professional knowledge and motivational factors, with the

professional knowledge being mostly subject-specifically defined whereas the other factors are largely interdisciplinary” (König, 2014, p. 23). The challenge for curricular developers directed by a competence approach is therefore to create a coherent chain of effects between the three elements: 1) teacher training, 2) teaching competence, 3) and student performance (Blömeke, 2003, Brunner et al., 2006; Terhart, 2012; König, 2014). Coherent teacher training creates competent teachers who improve student competences and performances. This means that being a good teacher is not innate, but rather the result of acquiring competences during a teacher training program and ultimately transmitting them to learners through competent teaching behaviour (Hattie, 2003).

A professionalization that sees itself as competence-oriented and also ‘coherent’ must therefore take into account very different dimensions and differentiate between them, among others, a temporal one (i.e. the coherence of the study program or the professional biographical process of the individual and between the different training phases), a structural one (i.e. the coordination of the individual elements in the curriculum), a conceptual one (the fitting of module structures, competence goals, and teaching–learning formats), but also an individually ‘reflected’ one (i.e. the interaction between the acquired competencies on one side and the individual dispositions as well as the understanding of the profession’s roles and practices on the other) (Bobillon, Schmider & Zaki, 2017). The competence approaches of Pachler and Field (2001) or König (2014) for which such an integrative consideration of professional knowledge, professional understanding, and motivational factors are essential, can provide the theoretical blueprint and structural models for a coherent vocational competence orientation. The importance of an integrative approach for a sustainable theory–practice relation in teacher education programs should also be stressed if we want to avoid the fragmentation of the contents and different phases of the teacher training. Far too often, they are perceived as not coherently linked (Hammerness, 2006). Recent studies have underlined that the feeling of a coherent competence orientation and professionalisation depends largely on socio-cultural traditions or circumstances, on the education policy of each country, and on the training programs (Canrinus et al., 2015).

What does this mean for the reform of the French teacher education system and its pedagogical and curricular choices? Does the reform reflect the current research situation and the scientific standard in educational research? Does it take into account the necessity of a coherent competence orientation?

Our presentation of the French reform and the analysis of the student data we are assessing aims to answer these questions. The structure and the curricular

program of the French Master of Education considered a variety of the forementioned aspects. In a very French top-down movement, the ministry replaced the in 1990 created IUFMs with University Schools of Education, named “ESPE” (Ecole Supérieure du Professorat et de l’Enseignement) [or Higher School of Teaching and Education], which have since been responsible for the initial and in-service training of teachers in the Master MEEF (Métiers de l’enseignement, de l’éducation et de la formation) [or Professions in Teaching, Education, and Training] degree programs (Cornu, 2015; Le ministère de l’éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2023d). As mentioned earlier in this article, today these institutions are called Inspé. These new training centres were conceived as university faculties with the intention of enabling all future teachers to acquire interdisciplinary, profession-related competences, these are taught through transversal, interdisciplinary modules according to the educational standards set by the ministry within the framework of the so-called “culture commune” or the shared professional teaching culture. Teacher training for primary school, as well as lower and upper secondary school, consisted of the newly conceived Master MEEF degree program. This degree prepared students for the state exam while training future teachers in a more profession-oriented manner in addition to the subject-specific qualification. From then on, students not only studied at the university in the first Master’s year, taking Content Knowledge (CK, or the body of knowledge such as facts, theories and principles), Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and Pedagogical Knowledge (PK, or practices and strategies of teaching) courses and passing the state selection examination, the Concours, they also spent half their time of the second Master’s year teaching at a school (Le ministère de l’éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2015).

### **6.3.2 Coherence Through Exchange Between Theory and Practice**

The reform assigned a pioneering role to the new ESPE Schools. They were meant to provide a closer interlinking of the theoretical components (CK, PCK, and PK) and practical school training. Practice-related aspects of the training program (internships, project work, student sponsorships, etc.) are supposed to reactivate disciplinary course contents, didactics of the discipline and competences acquired in the educational science courses, and clearly link them with each other or emphasize their interrelation. The newly created inter-institutional teaching teams, or the “équipes pédagogiques mixtes”, are at the core of this exchange between theory and practice. In addition to the responsible persons



for the various subjects at the university and the teacher education professors, they also include secondary school teachers, school counselors, and mentors who together convey the training content and a coherent profession-oriented teaching–learning practice (Desjardins, Altet, Étienne, Paquay & Perrenoud, 2012).

The idea of a coherent teacher training program, in which theory and practice are not seen as independent domains but rather form two closely interlinked and fundamentally interrelated areas, is also supported by the systematic co-supervision of the students' teaching internship, their induction service which leads to their permanent teacher position and their master thesis. In the mixed tutoring, "the tutorat mixte", students are supervised during their teaching practice by a school mentor (tuteur établissement) and a specialized subject teacher from within the university (tuteur ESPE/Université) who together complete the school visits, evaluate the teaching, and supervise the master thesis. This arrangement allows the subject teachers a direct insight into everyday school life and—in the sense of feedback—valuable information for the design of their own courses and their coherent integration into the students' school practice (Michaud, 2016).

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## **6.4 Assessing Student Satisfaction and Perception Following the Curriculum Reform**

### **6.4.1 Methods and Metrics for Evaluating Educational Change**

To evaluate the initial feedback and reactions of those primarily affected by the reform and its practice-oriented professionalization, namely the teacher education students, l'ESPE de l'Académie de Nice commissioned a survey in 2014. The survey aimed to measure the satisfaction with and perception of the 2011 reform. Students in the first year (Master 1) and second year (Master 2) of their master's program were asked to give their opinion on the study organization and its contents. The focus of the survey, which differentiated between first- and second-year students, was primarily on five indicators:

1. General satisfaction with the education program and core courses.
2. Relationship between and satisfaction with the disciplinary courses and the courses related to didactics.
3. Participation by school practitioners.
4. Internship evaluation and internship supervision.

5. State exam preparation: professional orientation (Master 1), tutoring, practical components and master thesis (Master 2).

### 6.4.2 Measuring Coherence

From the questionnaire, we selected questions that solicit a degree of coherence. First, we will discuss the overall course satisfaction, consequently we'll compare the satisfaction of the subject courses with the satisfaction of the courses related to didactics; observe the evolution of two cohorts from Master 1 to Master 2 and track their appreciation of disciplinary courses and didactic courses; and finally we will discuss the extent to which the courses were perceived as being useful during the internship, as well as the quality of supervision provided during that period.

### 6.4.3 Survey Versions and Participants

In total, we were able to rely on 4 surveys, namely for the academic years 2014–2015 (Boissicat, 2015) and 2016–2017, 2017–2018, and 2018–2019 (Calistri, 2017, 2018, 2019).

As shown in Table 1, a total of 518 students participated in these surveys, of whom 61% identified as female. This is a normal gender distribution for the secondary education context in France, where 58.4% of all teachers are female (Le ministère de l'éducation nationale et de la jeunesse, 2019). The distribution of students between Master 1 and Master 2 programs was roughly equal, with 244 students in Master 1 and 274 students in Master 2.

For the interpretation of the data, it is important to understand the difference between Master 1 (M1) and Master 2 (M2) students.

In France, the master's degree is a national diploma awarded by universities, commonly referred to as 'bac + 5'. It is accessible after obtaining a bachelor's degree, also known as 'bac + 3'. However, in the case of teacher studies, they consist of a two-year program. For the students involved in this research, the M1 students focus on the disciplinary-oriented state exam concours which is taken at the end of their year, whereas M2 students spend half of their time at the university and half at a school in their own class, teaching as fully responsible teachers.

**Tab. 1** Table of participants

		Students	Female	Male	Other
2015	M1	92	65	25	1
2017	M1	59	33	26	
2018	M1	46	26	19	1
2019	M1	47	23	23	1
	<b>244</b>				
2015	M2	107	67	40	1
2017	M2	95	53	42	
2018	M2	34	18	16	
2019	M2	38	32	6	
	<b>274</b>	<b>518</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>4</b>

## 6.5 Results

A whole series of aspects stand out in the evaluation of the respective indicators of coherence.

### 6.5.1 General Satisfaction

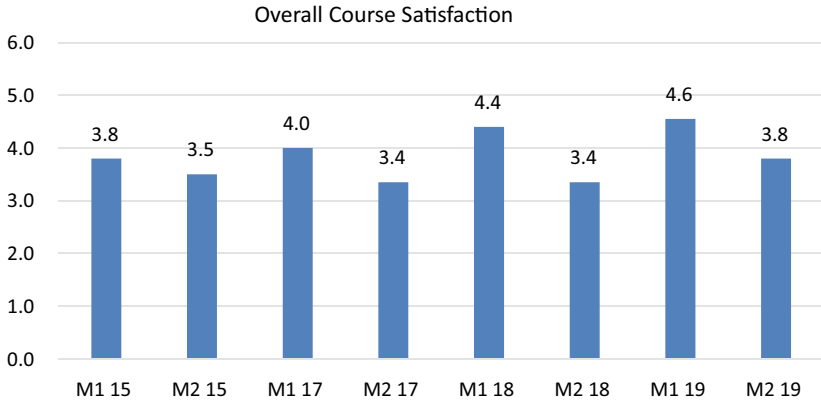
In Fig. 1, we present the overall satisfaction with the courses. We observe two main conclusions: First, course satisfaction rises over time for M1 (Master 1) students, while the M2 (Master 2) satisfaction remains more or less stable. Second, the satisfaction of M2 students is lower than that of M1 students.

A possible explanation for the difference in general satisfaction between M1 and M2 students could be the confrontation with the reality of teaching and the associated practical shock that begins for M2 students.

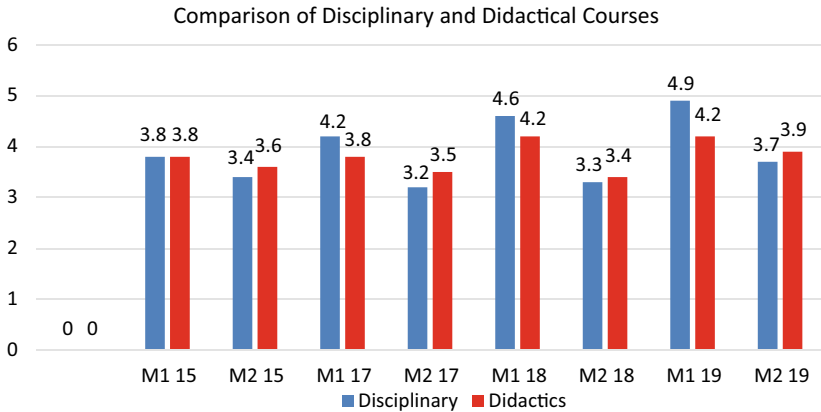
### 6.5.2 Relationship Between Subject Science and Didactics

Figure 2 shows the satisfaction of our student teachers with their disciplinary and didactical courses.

We can conclude that M1 students value both disciplinary and didactic courses more highly than M2 Students. The trend in Fig. 2 follows the general satisfaction



**Fig. 1** Overall course satisfaction



**Fig. 2** Comparison of disciplinary and didactical courses

depicted in Fig. 1, where disciplinary course satisfaction rises over time for M1 students, however this is less explicit for their didactic courses. M2 satisfaction remains stable for both disciplinary and didactic courses.

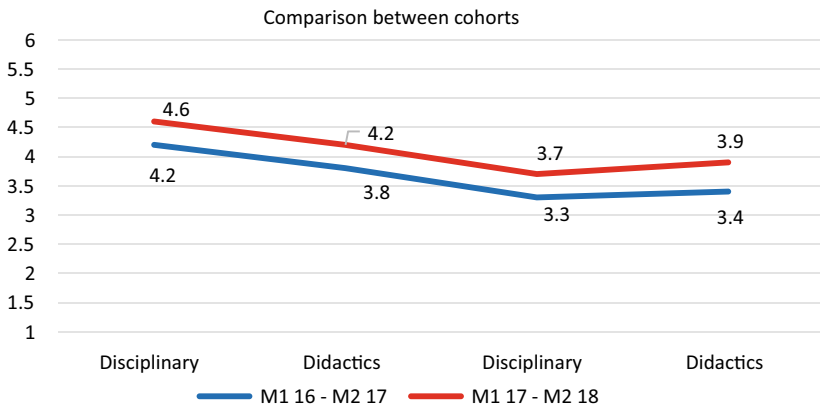
A possible explanation could be the amount of time devoted in the course program to disciplinary and didactic courses for M2 students. The legislative authority decided to allocate less time to disciplinary courses during Master 2 in

favor of the practical aspects of the job (Jolion, 2011). As a result, students' priorities shift after passing the disciplinary-oriented state exam concours (in Master 1) in favor of training that can be labeled as "practice-relevant". Nonetheless, this data indicates that both types of courses are necessary, but disciplinary courses remain vital even when student teachers assume the role of the teacher in their own classroom during their internship.

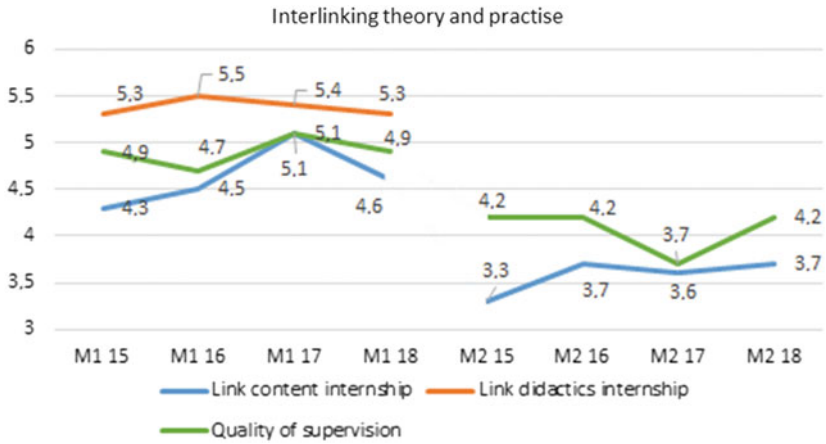
### 6.5.3 Cohort Evaluation

The following delves further into this subject and examines the evolution of two cohorts from Master 1 to Master 2 in order to demonstrate how their satisfaction of disciplinary courses and didactic courses changed over time. For instance, the M1 students of 2016 progressed to become the M2 Students of 2017.

Figure 3 shows that all the observations of Fig. 2 remain consistent. Although the data is not of a multitudinous nature, we note that the gap between disciplinary and didactics courses narrows for the 2017–2018 cohort.



**Fig. 3** Comparison between cohorts



**Fig. 4** Interlinking theory and practise

### 6.5.4 Interlinking Theory—Practice

Figure 4 shows to what extent the internships allowed M1 students to discover the approach of analyzing practice and to implement it, the extent to which the courses taught at the Inspé were useful during the internship, as well as the quality of supervision provided during that period. It is important to note that this figure connects the data points for interpretation, and does not imply the presence of multitudinal data as it involves different groups.

The red line in Fig. 4 shows that M1 students have a stable vision on how the internship helped them to understand didactics and to implement it. Commenting on this, we can say that during the first internship in M1, student activity is mainly limited to observation. Therefore, their evaluation is not yet based on actual teaching.

The blue line in Fig. 4 also shows a decline in the satisfaction of usefulness with the courses taught in M1 compared to M2 (link content internship). This observation follows the previous one.

Lastly, the green line in Fig. 4 shows us that M2 students are less satisfied with quality of the supervision. This can probably be explained by the evaluation criteria being much broader in M2 than in M1. As a result, the personal impact of this evaluation is greater in M2.

## 6.6 Discussion

At the beginning of this article, we posed the following two research questions: 1) to what extent has the 2011 French curriculum reform influenced students' perceptions of professionalization measures and 2) what insights can be drawn from these findings regarding the coherence of the results.

To address the first research question, we once again refer to Fig. 1, which illustrates that satisfaction with disciplinary courses increased over time for M1 students, while the trend was less pronounced for their didactic courses. Additionally, satisfaction among M2 students remained stable for both types of courses. These findings are further supported by Fig. 3, which indicates that the gap between disciplinary and didactic courses narrowed for the 2017–2018 cohort. While it is uncertain whether the 2011 curriculum is solely responsible for this upward trend over time, teacher educators may have already integrated the reform, leading to increased course satisfaction and consequently influencing students' perceptions.

Regarding the coherence of the results, we can conclude that any modern teacher education system is built upon professionalization and the coherent integration of theory and practice. As such, future teachers evaluate their training based on these two components. While their feelings about the training may be subjective and their understanding of the teaching profession fragmented due to limited experience, their perception is crucial for the development of their professional awareness.

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## 6.7 Conclusion

Our findings highlight the need for curriculum developers, teacher educators, researchers, and political stakeholders involved in educational policy to take students' perceptions into account. The most well-designed educational training program is futile if students fail to recognize its value and purpose.

Unfortunately, we do not have data from all of the academic years since the reform. It would be interesting to compare the evolution of trends. Additionally, it should be noted that the observed trends are not statistically significant as the data is not normally distributed, and that we do not have information on whether the data is representative.

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