

INITIAL TRAINING PATHWAYS AND PROFESSIONAL REPRESENTATIONS: THE PROFESSION OF FRENCH LANGUAGE TEACHER AS VIEWED BY STUDENTS OF HIGHER NORMAL SCHOOLS

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Abstract

This article examines the academic pathway of future secondary school French teachers and the evolution of their perceptions of the profession. The study conducted enables us to identify the different conceptions of the teaching profession as well as the various pedagogical and didactic skills acquired during their initial training. From this perspective, we questioned the role of university experience among young students at the École Normale Supérieure in shaping their professional identity and culture. The study, carried out with 15 students at the École Normale Supérieure for secondary education, reveals particular trends as well as diverse conceptions and representations of the teaching profession.

Keywords: university experiences, representations, initial training, profession, future teachers of French as a foreign language (FLE)

Introduction

At the global level, the issue of training young teachers remains a major topic of debate, particularly when it comes to implementing new reforms. Indeed, any new change concerning the training system is presented as a very important lever that makes it possible to address not only educational problems, but also social and economic ones. Global society is evolving and transforming, and it is therefore necessary for teacher training to align with this evolution. For example, on October 5, 2021, UNESCO celebrated World Teachers' Day under the theme "Teachers at the heart of education recovery" and called on all political and educational stakeholders to focus on teachers and the challenges their profession faces, particularly in managing the transformations imposed on teaching and learning by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Novice teachers who have completed university-based preparation programs often express dissatisfaction with the gap between the theoretical knowledge acquired during their studies and the realities of classroom practice, especially those graduated from the École Normale Supérieure (also called EPS, an institution whose only purpose is provide future teacher candidate members with an appropriate educational experience for the preparation of

their profession) in Algeria and their own actual experience in the classroom. This gap has generated ongoing discussion among educators as to what role university experiences significantly contribute to the development of young teachers' identities/cultures while attending EPS. As a result, we have asked: What impact does EPS have on young students' development of their collective identity as well as their professional culture?

1. The dual identity of the ENS student

The ENS student, like any other university student aspiring to become a teacher, must adapt to the new conditions they encounter. They must successfully integrate into university life, assume their new status as a student, and prepare for the teaching profession. Thus, they transition from their status as a pupil to that of a student, and like any transition, this requires a process which, as described by Coulon, involves “discovering and appropriating the taken-for-granted aspects and the hidden routines within higher education practices”(Coulon, 1993, pp. 164-170).

According to (Fellouzis, 2001, pp. 11-12), in the current university context, the student is confronted with new principles of identification, a new pedagogical form, and consequently a new way of being an individual. With regard to students preparing for the teaching profession, and considering the evolution of the teaching body over recent decades (increase in certified staff and diversification of status), the true unity of the teaching profession lies in the academic competencies required by competitive examinations (Fellouzis, 1997, p. 13) .

In this respect, Deauviau (2007) argues that three main types of knowledge must be mobilized in teaching activity during professional training:

- Scholarly knowledge, that is, disciplinary and academic knowledge acquired at university;
- Curricular knowledge; and
- “reflective” knowledge concerning the transmission of knowledge.

However, the latter two types of knowledge are primarily acquired during internships and through actual teaching practice.

2. Initial training of future teachers

In general, initial training is a pathway that should lead to the practice of a profession. In the case of teaching French as a foreign language (FLE), it must equip students with the necessary skills that will enable them to practice the teaching profession once they graduate from university. Forquin (1984) specifies that initial training is an educational pathway, a coherent set of learning experiences undertaken by an individual under the supervision of a formal educational institution over a given period (1984, p. 213).

During initial training, professional development is a central component in preparing future teachers for the demands and complexity of the profession. In this regard, Gervais and Leroux (2011) emphasize that “training in competencies therefore presupposes the acquisition of resources of various kinds and the learning of how to mobilize these resources to act—that is, a gradual internalization of sequences of actions according to what professional situations require” (2011, p. 283). It is therefore not simply a matter of offering practical training, but rather training oriented toward practice, enabling the genuine construction of a professional identity.

3. Presentation of the study conducted among ENS students

The study we conducted with 15 students from the École Normale Supérieure of Sétif in Algeria enabled us to identify the different conceptions that future teachers of French have about the teaching profession. The École Nationale Messaoud ZEGGAR offers both initial and in-service training programs for primary and secondary school teachers, as well as for educational administrators. These programs are organized into departments, each specializing in a particular field. For example, the language department includes French and English classes, where students are trained to teach these disciplines at different educational levels.

We chose to limit our investigation to a single 5th-year class at the École Normale Supérieure, as our objective was not to explain the contextual effects of university teacher training. Rather than focusing on the representativeness of the results, we were more interested in their characteristic dimension. Therefore, we considered that a study conducted within a single class would be entirely appropriate for our research purpose.

We developed a questionnaire consisting of twelve (12) questions centered on themes aligned with our research objectives. This was an original questionnaire specifically designed to meet the needs of our study. To achieve this, we consulted one questionnaire developed by Bourdieu et al. (1964), and another by (Galland, 1995, pp. 221- 247).

3.1. Analysis of the collected data

The analysis of our corpus revealed a very rich range of responses. We arrived at the following results:

3.1.1. Respondents' profiles : Our study population is composed of 5th-year students at the ENS of Sétif—young individuals who aspire to become secondary school teachers. The 15 students surveyed are predominantly female. These initial findings once again confirm that teaching professions are among the leading intellectual fields open to women, and that women are generally more represented in literary disciplines than in scientific ones. Furthermore, the respondents' age distribution shows that our study concerns a young population aged between 21 and 25.

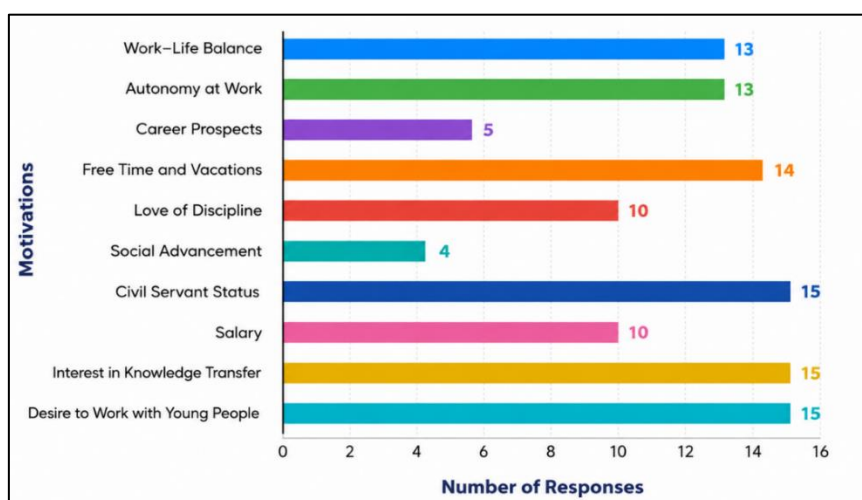


Figure 1. Ranking of motivations for choosing the teaching profession in order of importance.

The issue of motivations for choosing the teaching profession is essential for understanding how young people themselves perceive their future profession. We asked our respondents to rank, in order of importance, the motivations that led them to pursue training for this career. The graph shows that, for our survey population, three major trends emerge.

According to the respondents, the main reasons are an interest in transmitting knowledge, the status of being a civil servant, and the desire to work with children or young people, with an almost unanimous agreement among participants. The respondents then ranked the other motivations as follows: autonomy at work (13 out of 15 responses), free time and holidays (13/15), the possibility of balancing private and professional life (13/15), followed by salary (10/15), career prospects (5/15), and finally social mobility (4/15).

It appears that students are motivated to enter the profession for largely idealistic reasons, particularly regarding their relationships with children and the transmission of knowledge.

Teachers have the opportunity, despite the strict structure of curricula, to independently decide how they organize and carry out their work according to their personal educational projects. This freedom appeals to teachers because it allows them to create a unique pedagogical style. Furthermore, teachers possess a certain degree of authority over student assessment and the daily workload assigned to students (pedagogical freedom). This autonomy is reflected in teachers' ability to create teaching situations that correspond to their particular style, which itself reflects their social trajectory. As noted by Tardif and Levasseur (2010), a teacher may teach the same content as colleagues but in a very different manner.

However, the issue of autonomy in the teaching profession remains debatable. Several authors emphasize teachers' limited ability to achieve true autonomy in their work due to institutional constraints. In particular, Van Zanten (2009, p. 86) highlights the differences between schools and the specific practices that teachers are required to implement in the classroom. According to this author, teacher autonomy within the classroom is repeatedly associated with a lack of coordination within educational institutions.

Regarding career prospects, the low ranking can be explained by the fact that these candidates are aware that the education sector offers limited career advancement opportunities. This is due to the closed structures of the national education system, which do not allow for career progression based solely on professional experience, but rather through competitive civil service examinations. Moreover, salary increases remain very limited throughout a teacher's career, and advancement opportunities are scarce. These opportunities mainly involve administrative positions that distance teachers from direct contact with students (for example, positions such as school principal or educational inspector).

3.1.3. Pedagogical Skills and Subject-Matter Knowledge According to Our Respondents

The following graph answers the question related to our respondents' preferences regarding pedagogical skills and subject-matter knowledge.

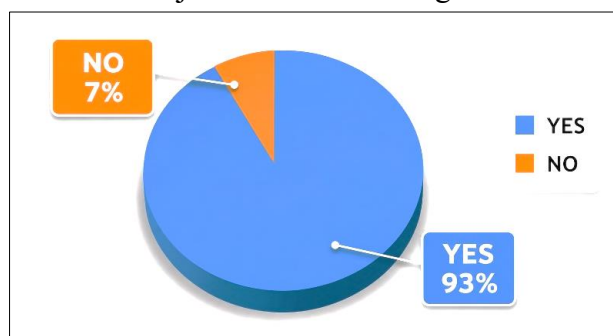


Figure 2. Pedagogical skills and disciplinary knowledge according to future teachers.

The majority of the students, representing 93%, favor pedagogical skills, compared to only 7% who prioritize disciplinary knowledge.

Obviously, the students' attachment to pedagogy can be explained by the specific nature of their training, which includes subjects and modules related to pedagogy and general classroom management, such as "Classroom Tools and Techniques," "Analysis of Professional Practices," and others. Conversely, the responses given for "NO" demonstrate the academic orientation of some students who believe that it is also important to transmit disciplinary knowledge.

3.1.4. The Most Important Competencies According to Our Respondents

We asked these same participants to classify pedagogical competencies according to their order of preference. All students (15/15) chose student motivation as the most important competency, meaning "creating the need to learn." Thirteen out of fifteen students (13/15) ranked classroom management in second position, while twelve out of fifteen (12/15) selected teamwork in third position.

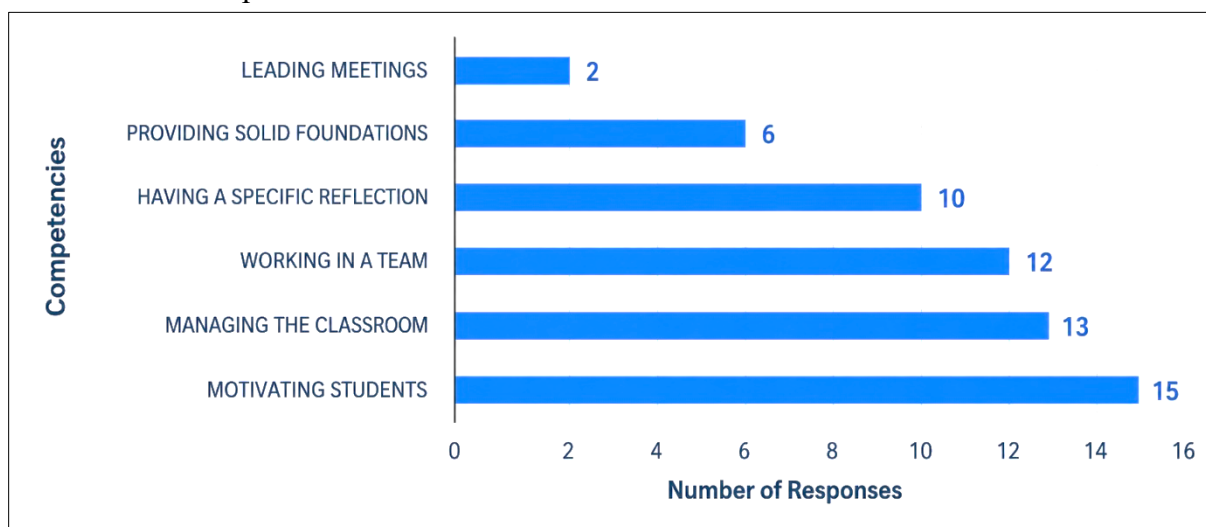


Figure 3. The Most Important Competencies According to Students

The competencies required to motivate students would still be considered ideal for managing the classroom today, given that students now have many more extracurricular interests. Nowadays, teachers must capture learners' attention, since students are at the center of current educational systems.

The students interviewed seem to hold rather idealistic representations and do not have a clear image of reality. This is why they conform to current teacher-training models and, more generally, to the guidelines of the educational institution, which places "the student at the center."

Then comes, in second place, classroom management. It is already well known that teachers face many difficulties due to the heterogeneity of students' levels. They are unable to effectively integrate and articulate all levels. This is also one of the most important competencies in the eyes of our respondents, alongside teamwork. Regarding the latter choice, it is mainly necessary to focus on the fact that the initial situation of students who will be in the classroom, without experience, will undoubtedly determine the need for exchanges with other colleagues. This is confirmed by (Obin, 2005, p. 102):

“Paradoxically, it is perhaps this individualism, and thus the weaker feeling of belonging to the same professional body, that allows newcomers to approach teamwork in a more pragmatic way, with less bias than experienced teachers, and to express more openly demands for solidarity in close interaction.”

The other competencies — “having a specific reflection on school failure and on personal and cultural differences,” “having solid theoretical foundations in social psychology of development,” “leading information meetings,” and “discussions with parents” — were not highly ranked by our respondents.

3.1.5. Main Sources of Information on the Evolution of the Teaching Profession

Regarding the main sources of information on the pedagogical evolution of the teaching profession, social media constitute the primary source cited by the 15 students surveyed. They are followed by school textbooks (10 out of 15 respondents). Scientific publications and seminars/conferences rank jointly in third place (6 out of 15 respondents each). Finally, the press (1 out of 15), official documents and bulletins (1 out of 15), and pedagogical websites occupy the last positions.

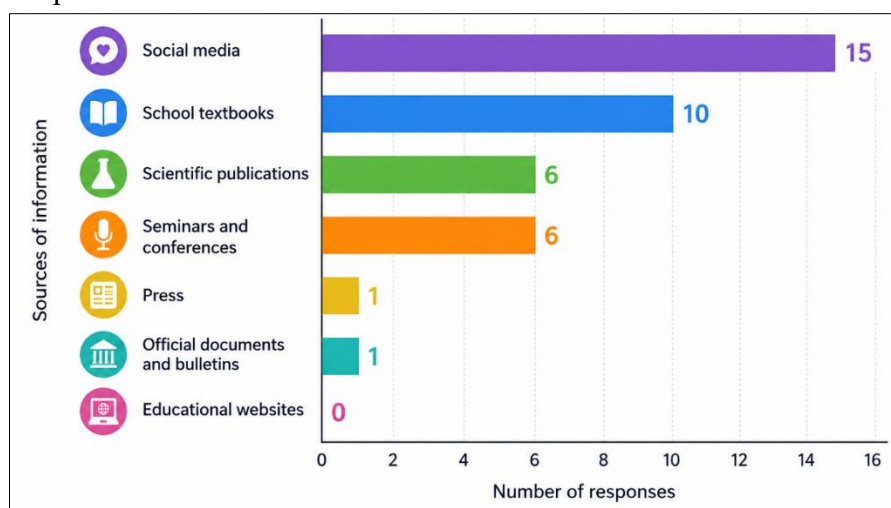


Figure 4. The Main Sources of Information on the Evolution of the Teaching Profession According to Our Respondents

It is interesting to highlight the current perception of the teaching profession from the perspective of future teachers. In particular, it is important to examine the image that prospective teachers have developed regarding the evolution of the profession in recent years. Their reliance on social media as a source of pedagogical news can be explained by the speed with which these platforms deliver information, both in terms of quantity and accessibility. As for school textbooks, it is likely that these students consult them regularly, especially since they have already received training in the module “Study of Curricula, Textbooks, and Assessment” during their third year of study.

3.1.6. Characteristics of the Good and the Bad Teacher According to Our Respondents

Many researchers have studied the teacher’s effect on student learning. A good teacher is generally considered to be one who supports all learners according to their abilities by optimizing and creating opportunities for learning.

When asked to cite three adjectives characterizing a good teacher, future teachers produced a long list of qualities they expect in a “true” teacher.

Competent/objective, understanding — active, competent, aware

Competent – patient — motivated, interested, responsible

Cultured, strict, punctual.

The model teacher is one who is fully attentive to the learning situation by establishing a positive relationship with students. This is a professional who is able to anticipate unpredictable situations with wisdom, and it is precisely on this basis that professional competence is evaluated. According to Fellouzis (1997, p. 100), in his study on the academic characteristics of a teacher, mastery of one's discipline is not always spontaneously considered essential. Generally, young teachers prioritize relational and emotional qualities far more than intellectual ones, such as patience, a certain form of authority, and a willingness to listen.

This is also observed among our respondents, for whom a good teacher must be understanding, patient, and interested—someone kind to students, always prepared and attentive, responsive to their needs, sympathetic and caring, constantly available, humanistic, and altruistic.

Another important characteristic highlighted by our respondents is “**competence.**” Indeed, a good teacher must be competent in his or her subject matter; however, he or she is not merely a simple executor of disciplinary instruction. The teacher is also someone who knows how to capture students' attention by motivating them. He or she is responsible, active, and punctual.

Another characteristic of a good teacher is being fair, described as “objective.” It is interesting to note that a fair teacher's attitude is reflected in genuine respect for students' personalities, which reveals the deep interest of young teachers in the learner as a person.

Other characteristics mentioned include awareness and authority, which are also valued by the respondents. These refer to setting classroom rules, maintaining overall order in the classroom, and ensuring fairness.

However, when asked to cite adjectives characterizing a bad teacher, the respondents referred to a teacher who is:

- authoritarian / unable to manage the classroom
- abusive, lazy, vulgar
- idle, passive, contemptuous
- unmotivated, disinterested, irresponsible

Our respondents primarily judge the “authoritarian” teacher as one who abuses his or her power, is violent (verbally or physically), vulgar, does not respect students' needs, creates stressful situations, and treats learners poorly.

Such a teacher is also perceived as contemptuous, passive, and lazy. A teacher who does not provide students with opportunities to participate in class is seen as contributing to learners' fatigue and disengagement.

Overall, these results indicate a clear break with the traditional model of the authoritarian, lecture-based teacher, which is being replaced by a more understanding, fair, and kind teacher—one who is passionate about both his or her subject and students. Our findings show that young students are fully aware that the role of the modern teacher is to serve the learner, who is placed at the “center of attention.”

3.1.7. Theoretical and Didactic Knowledge in Teacher Training

To the question posed to students: “As future teachers, do you consider that the theoretical and didactic knowledge provided by your university training is sufficient to prepare you for the teaching profession?”, 87% of responses were **YES**, while only 13% were **NO**.

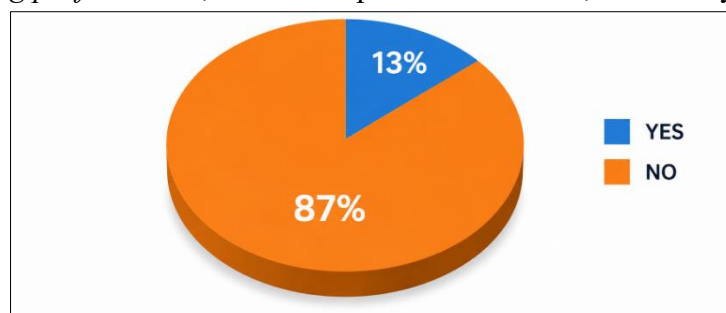


Figure 5. Validity of Theoretical and Didactic Knowledge During Training at the ENS.

We are convinced that students do not deny the quality of the university education they received; however, the quantitative data do not support the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge acquired during their training. We assume that students do not consider themselves adequately prepared in pedagogy and didactics. Therefore, it is this issue of preparedness for the teaching profession that appears to be of greater concern to our study population.

3.1.8. Sufficient Training for Building a Professional Identity

As part of our survey, only 27% of the students believe that university training does not help them develop a *professional* identity. Conversely, 73% of the students consider the training they received at the ENS to be sufficient for this purpose.

These findings suggest that a clear majority of students perceive their university education as playing a significant role in shaping their professional identity as future teachers. The results indicate that the training provided by the ENS contributes positively to students’ understanding of their professional role, values, and responsibilities within the educational field. However, the fact that more than a quarter of the respondents remain unconvinced highlights the need for further efforts to strengthen professional identity development throughout the training process.

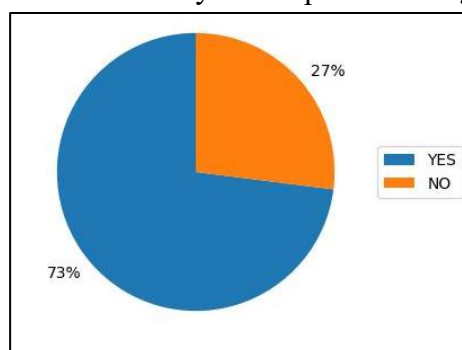


Figure 6. Role of training in the construction of a professional identity

Students who deny that training is sufficient for the construction of a professional identity put forward three main reasons: “We lack practice and professional experience,” “The language,” and “Interaction with students (putting theory into practice).” It goes without saying that future teachers realize that this is a form of training that is very far removed from the professional field. This observation is well known among teachers who enter the profession for the first time. They become aware of this gap from their very first contact with students. Such academic training is therefore not sufficient to become a teacher.

On the other hand, this observation contradicts the results obtained for this question, since 73% of respondents confirm that university training helps them build a professional identity. This, in our view, can be explained by the quality of the teaching provided by ENS instructors. By examining the syllabi offered to students since their first year, we have come to the conclusion that the students surveyed value the university training provided, as it is largely based on knowledge of pedagogy and didactics.

Students who expressed a favorable opinion of their training put forward the following arguments: “Because we study at ENS, which aims to train professional teachers,” “One must always work on oneself,” “Modules that help train us,” and “It provides all the necessary information/data in a professional field.”

3.1.9. The meaning of the teaching profession for young students

The following table shows what the teaching profession represents for our respondents. The overwhelming majority of students chose “new skills and new working methods,” “a professional activity based on a rationally organized form of learning,” “a profession with a certain prestige due to its intellectual nature,” and finally “a very high level of social recognition,” with (14/15) responses.

The students also emphasize the importance of pedagogical expertise, with 13/15 responding positively compared to 2/15 responding “no.”

Table 1. What the teaching profession means for student teachers

Opinions	Yes	No	DK (Don't)
Lifelong learning	10	5	
Strong mastery of behavior, thanks to an ethical code	11	4	
Work relatively free from routine social constraints, allowing	10	5	
Use of general laws of learning psychology to solve	10	4	1
More career prospects	10	5	
A profession with a certain prestige due to its intellectual	15	0	
Very high level of social recognition	14	0	1
Acceptance and sharing of common values and norms	/	/	
Higher remuneration	4	9	2
Greater pedagogical expertise	13	2	
Greater autonomy and individual responsibility	15	0	
Enhancement of teachers' status	7	6	
New skills and new working methods	15	0	
A professional activity based on rationally organized	15	0	

Other consistent trends also emerge. (10/15) for “Lifelong learning,” (11/15) for “Strong self-regulation and professional conduct, thanks to an ethical code internalized during professional socialization,” (10/15) for “Work free from ordinary social pressures, allowing innovation and risk-taking,” and finally (10/15) for the “Use of general laws of learning

psychology” to solve the individual problems each child encounters during the acquisition of knowledge.

It appears that students do not attach particular importance to the “Enhancement of teachers’ status” (6/15) and to “Higher remuneration” (9/15).

It is striking to note, based on the results obtained, that some of our respondents demonstrate a certain professional awareness, particularly in understanding the concept of professionalization as lifelong learning. Their choice to emphasize skills, working methods, and a professional activity ensuring organized learning also indicates students’ awareness of the new expectations set by educational authorities regarding teaching that is centered on learners’ needs and adapted to societal changes.

Some respondents link the professionalization of teaching to the status of teachers as professionals. This is why they stress the need to improve teachers’ status and to enhance the value of their profession, which is often poorly perceived by society. Other responses confirm students’ tendency toward autonomy and individual responsibility, away from the constraints of the profession.

4. Results and Discussion

Our survey conducted among student teachers at the ENS of Sétif allowed us to identify different conceptions and representations of the teaching profession. For most of them, the training received at the university proves to be insufficient, given that it offers content more closely related to the discipline than to pedagogy and professional know-how. It goes without saying that, for some, practical classroom experience appears to be the primary source of professional learning.

Moreover, when asked about their preferences between pedagogical and didactic skills, most favor pedagogy over academic learning. This shows that they are aware that their skills are not permanent, since the teaching profession is directly exposed to societal changes. Students evolve and change every year, and each generation differs from the previous one; therefore, training must adapt to these transformations. It should be noted that teaching is a constantly evolving profession, which explains students’ need for complex techniques and classroom practices to manage it effectively.

Furthermore, it seems to us that the real drawback of the training lies in the fact that it does not focus on how to identify the root causes of the problems that future teachers may encounter. Teachers do not always have the possibility to clearly see the real causes of issues that escape their control. The training provided focuses more on learning and applying techniques aimed at solving problems once in the field. Students appear to unanimously value practice-based training. This means they expect to build and experience their professional training in real situations, through action, in order to become increasingly aware of the difficulties and challenges of teaching.

We also found that the students in our survey are particularly open to teamwork. They are aware that the teaching profession requires a strong commitment to immediate action and good relationships with others. These students already know that they will need proper guidance at the beginning of their careers.

In addition, when asked about their motivations for choosing the profession, the responses confirmed that young teachers are mainly driven by three factors: the transmission of

knowledge, a love for the subject, and interaction with students. However, the fact that the majority of candidates cite the transmission of knowledge as their primary motivation reveals a certain vocation for the profession, that is, a choice driven by a deep and genuine desire.

When asked about the construction of a professional identity through university training, these students are aware that it cannot be built without a professional environment. Indeed, the notion of professional identity links the individual to the classroom context. For it to be constructed, a teacher's identity must be connected to the social and institutional environment in which it is embedded; in other words, it must be validated by certain social and institutional norms and values.

The survey enabled us to better understand the various representations that ENS students have of the profession. Their awareness of the need for guidance at the beginning of their careers, as well as the need for practice and working methods, confirms what researchers assert today: teaching is a profession like any other. The characteristics of this new professional identity include the rationalization and technicization of knowledge, while vocation becomes something of a myth. In other words, new teachers are "learning professionals" (Guibert et al., 2008, p. 108).

4. Conclusion

The analysis we conducted of both the quantitative and qualitative results allows us to answer our initial research question. However, even though students appear more pragmatic in the face of the profession's difficulties, the reality shock experienced by beginning teachers remains unavoidable. This may be interpreted as the result of insufficient professional preparation during the university training of future teachers.

Indeed, our respondents believe that the disciplinary knowledge they received was sufficient, but that it did not correspond to the real needs of the teaching profession. There was no connection between theory and practice. This gap between theory and practice is also the reason why our respondents believe that university training did not help them build a professional identity.

Finally, we would have liked to collect responses from our study population regarding their impressions upon entering the classroom for the first time. The study conducted is limited to the level of conceptions and representations of the teaching profession, based on students who will probably be in the field at the beginning of next year. In order to better understand their adaptation to the field and their ability to teach in the face of the specific challenges of language classes, this research will be continued to deepen the analysis and to monitor their development within the profession.

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