

CONTINUOUS TRAINING AND THE REFLECTIVE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN PREVENTING SCHOOL DROPOUT

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Abstract: *School dropout represents one of the most pressing challenges for contemporary education systems, with significant implications for both individual well-being and social cohesion. This study examines the role of continuous professional development in preventing early school dropout, emphasizing the importance of observational and reflective practices in enhancing teaching quality. Through a theoretical-critical analysis and the exploration of innovative educational experiences, the paper investigates training models that position teachers as facilitators of learning. The study highlights the need for educational policies that adopt a systemic approach to teacher training, fostering student engagement and academic success.*

Keywords: *school dropout; continuous training; well-being; educational policy.*

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, early school dropout has become an increasingly central issue in pedagogical debates and in both national and international education policy. Beyond impeding the personal and professional development of students, it constitutes a structural challenge with profound consequences for social cohesion and the economic competitiveness of nations. Schools, tasked with educating new generations and promoting social inclusion, now face complex challenges shaped by rapid cultural, economic, and technological change. These dynamics call for a critical rethinking of teaching practices and instructional strategies. Within this framework, teachers play a pivotal role—not only as transmitters of disciplinary knowledge but also as facilitators of learning environments that engage students actively, sustain motivation, and reduce the risk of early dropout. Prior research highlights the decisive impact of personalized instruction, active methodologies, and meaningful educational relationships on students' retention in the school system (Hattie, 2009; Batini & Bartolucci, 2016). Yet for such approaches to become embedded in daily teaching practice, teachers must have access to continuous professional development that strengthens advanced methodological skills, fosters the capacity to detect early signs of academic disengagement, and cultivates reflective strategies for improving educational practice. Sustained training and the development of a dynamic, self-aware professional identity are thus essential for ensuring educational practices that are effective, equitable, and inclusive.

2. Definition and dimensions of early school leaving

Early school leaving is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond the definitive interruption of formal education. It encompasses a wide range of

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situations in which students, while remaining formally enrolled, experience learning difficulties and irregular attendance, thereby compromising the successful completion of their educational pathway. This, in turn, generates significant consequences both at the individual and societal levels (Colombo, 2010). In the European context, the term Early School Leaving (ESL) is used to indicate the premature termination of schooling without obtaining an upper secondary qualification or a formally recognized vocational credential (European Commission, 2013), underscoring the importance of the issue within international education strategies. Despite progress in recent years, which has seen a decline in dropout rates across several EU countries, data continue to highlight significant challenges, particularly in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. In Italy, the early school leaving rate stands at 12.7%, one of the highest in Europe, with particularly critical levels in the South, where persistent educational deprivation and limited access to cultural and training resources exacerbate the issue (ISTAT, 2023). The causes of early school leaving are closely linked to social and economic factors, including family educational background and income, the quality of local educational opportunities, and the presence of support networks capable of sustaining vulnerable students (Benvenuto, 2016).

2.1 The role of schools and teachers in prevention

The school system is widely recognized in the literature as one of the key actors in preventing early school leaving, due to its potential to serve as an inclusive, motivating, and structured learning environment that supports the success of all students, regardless of their starting conditions (Batini & Bartolucci, 2016). For schools to effectively fulfill this role, they must be reimagined not merely as places for knowledge transmission, but as dynamic and interactive educational contexts. In such contexts, teachers—fully aware of their role as knowledge mediators and promoters of inclusion—should be enabled to develop professional competencies that extend beyond methodological and disciplinary expertise to encompass relational, emotional, and motivational dimensions. This broader skill set is essential for creating learning pathways that are both effective and meaningful (Scales, 2015).

Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of teacher–student relationships, students’ sense of belonging to the school community, and the use of flexible, targeted teaching strategies have a decisive impact on retention, countering disengagement and early dropout (Alivernini, Manganelli & Lucidi, 2017; Schelvis et al., 2014). Within this perspective, active learning methodologies are particularly significant, as they place students’ engagement at the center of the educational process, enabling the construction of personalized learning pathways. Such approaches are better suited to addressing the needs of increasingly diverse school populations, marked not only by differences in skills and learning styles but also by varied socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds (Schelvis et al., 2014; Alivernini et al., 2017).

In light of these considerations, continuous teacher training should not be regarded solely as a matter of professional updating but as a strategic cornerstone for enhancing the overall quality of the education system. Professional development opportunities grounded in critical reflection, peer collaboration, and the experimentation of innovative teaching practices are essential for promoting a school model capable of constant renewal, adaptation

to societal transformations, and the provision of equal learning opportunities for all students (Lamb et al., 2011).

2.2. *Aim of the study*

This study aims to explore the relationship between teachers' continuous professional development and the prevention of early school leaving, with particular attention to the role of reflective and observational practices in strengthening teaching strategies. Pedagogical research has long demonstrated that approaches based on critical reflection and systematic observation of educational practices enhance teachers' ability to interpret learning dynamics, identify early signs of school disengagement, and adopt more effective intervention strategies (Schön, 1983; Brookfield, 1995; Mortari, 2009). Through a theoretical and critical analysis supported by empirical evidence, this contribution examines how in-service training can not only expand teachers' methodological repertoire but also contribute to the construction of a stronger, more self-aware professional identity—one capable of orienting educational practice toward the promotion of student success and the reduction of dropout risks (Timperley et al., 2007; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Beyond individual training practices, particular attention is given to implications for education policy, highlighting the need for a systemic approach to professional development. Such an approach should move beyond isolated initiatives and instead adopt integrated strategies that enhance the role of teachers as facilitators of learning. A training model of this nature should foster the creation of innovative and inclusive school environments in which improvements in teachers' professional competencies translate into a direct impact on instructional quality and the prevention of early school leaving (Darling-Hammond, 2017; OECD, 2019).

3. **The value of continuous professional development for teachers**

The evolution of education systems, deeply shaped by social, economic, and technological transformations, has made continuous professional development an essential component in ensuring teaching quality and promoting student success. In a rapidly changing context that requires schools to constantly revise their role and teaching practices, teacher training can no longer be conceived as an occasional or peripheral activity. Instead, it must be structured as a permanent and systematic process capable of effectively addressing contemporary challenges (Timperley et al., 2007). Whereas in the past the teacher's role was primarily associated with the transmission of disciplinary knowledge through traditional, lecture-based methods rooted in passive learning, it is now evident that such a model is inadequate in the face of growing educational complexity. The diversification of student needs, the introduction of new technologies, and the demand for more personalized and interactive learning call for a radical rethinking of teaching practices, aligning them with the requirements of the knowledge society and lifelong learning (Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1991).

Consequently, teacher professionalism can no longer be restricted to mastery of disciplinary content alone, but must also encompass reflective and adaptive dimensions. These enable teachers to develop strategies that foster student engagement through participatory, co-constructed learning. The literature has consistently shown that the quality of teaching and the methodological approaches employed significantly affect not only student

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motivation but also school retention and the development of positive attitudes toward learning and the institution itself (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Strategies that promote active participation, interactive methodologies, and the creation of positive learning environments are particularly effective in countering early school leaving and encouraging more motivated, informed engagement (Batini & Bartolucci, 2016). For these reasons, investing in teacher training means not only ensuring the constant updating of methodological skills but also advancing an educational approach that is dynamic and reflective, one that enables schools to meet contemporary challenges more effectively. These include fostering inclusion for students with special educational needs, adopting differentiated teaching strategies, and developing transversal skills essential for constructing meaningful, long-lasting learning pathways that accompany students throughout their educational and professional trajectories (Timperley, 2011).

3.1. Moving beyond technical specialization: from knowledge transmission to reflective teaching

In increasingly complex educational settings characterized by cultural, linguistic, and cognitive diversity, it is necessary to adopt an approach that goes beyond the provision of technical tools and emphasizes teachers' capacity for critical reflection on their practices. Such reflection allows educators to adapt their work to the needs of students and the dynamics of the school context (Schön, 1987). Reflective teaching, based on critical analysis and the continuous adaptation of educational action, enables teachers to transcend rigid applications of predefined methods and to position themselves as professionals capable of learning from experience. Through ongoing experimentation and revision, they refine their practice and improve its effectiveness (Brookfield, 1995).

This paradigm rests on the idea that effective teaching is not dependent solely on mastery of content but also on the ability to identify strategies that engage students and encourage active participation (Mortari, 2009). A central element of this approach is systematic observation, which allows teachers to analyze learning dynamics and student behavior while also serving as a vital tool for identifying effective strategies to meet educational needs, especially in contexts of vulnerability and risk of early school leaving (Mortari, 2009). Observation, understood as an intentional and reflective practice rather than a merely descriptive act, equips teachers to detect students' difficulties and redefine their interventions on the basis of empirical evidence and critical analysis. At the same time, peer collaboration through professional learning communities enhances the progressive improvement of teaching quality. Such communities provide effective contexts for professional growth by enabling teachers to share experiences, collectively analyze pedagogical challenges, and test innovative solutions. They foster professional development that is both conscious and oriented toward methodological innovation (Wenger, 1998).

3.2. The contribution of educational research to updating teaching practices and preventing early school leaving

Improving educational practices requires systematic and structured dialogue between schools and pedagogical research, which offers interpretative models and operational tools for addressing teaching and learning challenges in a scientifically grounded and

methodologically rigorous way. Numerous studies have demonstrated that teachers who engage in training based on empirical evidence have a greater impact on student outcomes compared to those who rely solely on traditional methods without ongoing professional development (Hattie, 2009).

One of the most significant evidence-based approaches in this area is lesson study, a methodology developed in Japan and later adopted internationally. Distinguished by its collaborative and clinical character, lesson study involves groups of teachers jointly designing a lesson with specific learning objectives and innovative strategies. The lesson is then observed in real time, typically by other teachers or researchers, so as to collect detailed data on student behavior, engagement with content, and instructional strategies. What sets lesson study apart is the subsequent cycle of review and critical reflection: the collected data are analyzed collectively to identify strengths, weaknesses, and strategies for improvement. This iterative process leads to the redesign and refinement of lessons based on emerging evidence. Beyond enhancing instructional quality, lesson study fosters a culture of action research in which teachers become co-producers of pedagogical knowledge, systematically testing and validating their practices (Lewis & Hurd, 2011).

Moreover, lesson study serves as a valuable tool for the early identification of risk factors associated with school dropout. Its structure, based on systematic observation and professional dialogue, helps teachers identify behavioral and cognitive indicators of disengagement, such as:

Limited participation in class activities, reflected in passivity, distraction, or refusal to engage;

- Irregular attendance and repeated absences, which may foreshadow progressive disengagement from school;
- Difficulties in relationships with peers and teachers, often linked to socioeconomic disadvantage or low self-efficacy;
- Low levels of motivation and effort, evident in failure to complete assignments or growing disinterest in learning activities.

When these elements are systematically analyzed and discussed collaboratively, teachers are better positioned to identify at-risk students and to design targeted interventions. Lesson study enables educators to test and refine teaching methods aimed at re-engaging demotivated or struggling students, while monitoring their impact over time (Lewis et al., 2006). In parallel, lesson study incorporates formative assessment practices, which not only track student progress but also provide deeper insights into learning dynamics and potential risks of dropout (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Authentic assessment strategies, based on real-world tasks and continuous feedback, help maintain motivation and provide personalized support, thereby reducing the likelihood of failure and disengagement.

3.3. Professional development as a tool for empowerment and identity construction

Continuous professional development is not only an opportunity for teachers to update their skills but also a crucial factor in shaping their professional identity. Training should therefore not be regarded as isolated interventions designed to address technical gaps but as an ongoing process that fosters professional reflection and strengthens teachers' sense of belonging to the school community.

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Teacher professionalism is not static; it evolves through peer collaboration, the experimentation of innovative practices, and sustained engagement with educational research (Wenger, 1998). Participation in structured training networks enhances awareness of one's role, provides opportunities to share strategies with colleagues, and reduces the risk of burnout by fostering stronger emotional and motivational engagement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). In this perspective, schools should not be understood solely as places for student learning but also as environments for teacher growth, where professional development is driven by reflection, experimentation, and the co-construction of shared knowledge. Investing in teacher training therefore means not only strengthening didactic skills but also cultivating a more robust and self-aware professional culture capable of responding effectively to the ongoing transformations of the education system.

4. Developing teachers as learning facilitators

In contemporary education, teachers can effectively act as facilitators of learning only when professional development provides them with tools that enhance both instructional competence and pedagogical sensitivity. Such sensitivity enables the early identification and prevention of risk factors that may lead to school dropout. Educational research has therefore highlighted the need for training approaches that promote critical observation of the educational context, reflective practice, and the capacity to design inclusive and motivating learning environments (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Among the most effective strategies in this regard, observational and reflective practices serve as essential instruments for understanding students' learning processes and detecting early signs of disengagement. Another key dimension involves mentoring and peer collaboration, which not only support teachers' professional growth but also foster networks that facilitate the exchange of experiences and strategies for addressing educational challenges (Wenger, 1998). Systematic engagement with experienced colleagues or peers working in similar contexts helps develop more effective pedagogical solutions and strengthens an approach centred on the personalization of learning pathways.

Similarly, the use of educational narratives has proven particularly valuable in promoting teachers' self-awareness and encouraging critical and constructive reflection on their professional experiences (Day, 2004). Reflecting on one's own practice through narrative tools enables teachers to construct deeper meanings around the challenges of teaching, thereby reinforcing their sense of self-efficacy and their ability to manage school-related risk factors proactively.

4.1. Preventing school dropout: mentoring, peer collaboration and educational narratives.

In today's educational landscape—marked by increasing complexity and the diversification of students' needs—school dropout remains a significant challenge. To address this issue effectively, it is essential to implement professional development strategies that foster teachers' growth, with a particular focus on mentoring, peer collaboration, and the use of educational narratives.

Mentoring constitutes a supportive relationship between an experienced teacher and a novice or developing educator, aimed at strengthening methodological competences and enhancing teachers' sense of self-efficacy (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez & Tomlinson, 2009).

This process facilitates teachers' integration into the school community and helps reduce professional isolation, thereby improving motivation and professional identity (Kwan & Lopez-Real, 2005). Well-structured mentoring programmes have been shown to enhance teachers' ability to respond effectively to educational challenges and are particularly valuable in the Italian context for preventing school dropout (Mortari, 2009).

Alongside mentoring, peer collaboration represents another key avenue for professional growth. Through action-research groups, communities of practice, and co-design workshops, teachers can share good practices, collectively address professional challenges, and develop new pedagogical perspectives (Wenger, 1998). This collaborative approach promotes methodological innovation and the continuous improvement of teaching strategies, proving effective in combating school dropout through the adoption of active and inclusive pedagogies (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Peer exchange not only enhances the quality of teaching but also fosters a stronger sense of belonging to the educational community—an essential factor in maintaining the motivation and engagement of students at risk of dropping out (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Finally, the use of educational narratives is fundamental, as it provides teachers with opportunities for critical reflection on their professional experiences and contributes to the construction of a more self-aware professional identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Reflective journals, teaching stories, and professional autobiographies enable educators to analyse their trajectories, reframe encountered difficulties, and assign deeper meaning to their pedagogical choices (Kelchtermans, 2009). Moreover, educational narratives foster a culture of sharing and continuous improvement within professional communities, thereby promoting more effective, student-centred teaching approaches (Goodson, 2013). The act of narrating teaching experiences not only strengthens teachers' professional awareness but also supports the early recognition and management of students' difficulties, helping to create more inclusive learning environments conducive to the success of all learners (Bruner, 2002).

5. Implications for educational policies

The phenomenon of early school leaving represents a complex issue that requires an integrated and multidimensional approach, one capable of moving beyond the mere training of teaching staff and embracing a broader perspective. In this regard, a key determinant in preventing school dropout is the implementation of personalized guidance and tutoring pathways which, starting from the early stages of schooling, can facilitate the self-assessment of individual competencies and the identification of educational trajectories aligned with students' personal aptitudes (Lo Presti & Tafuri, 2020). The activation of such measures, supported by continuous assistance strategies, constitutes a fundamental action for reducing the risk of early school leaving and promoting educational success.

At the same time, strengthening collaboration among schools, families, and the local community represents another cornerstone in combating early school leaving. An Italian policy document (2000) emphasizes that the creation of integrated educational networks, engaging social services, cultural associations, and local institutions, may provide meaningful support for students in vulnerable situations, thereby contributing to the construction of an inclusive and motivating school environment. Such synergy among the various actors within

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the educational process makes it possible to intervene promptly and in a targeted manner, reducing the negative effects of social inequalities on school performance.

Another crucial aspect concerns the adoption of innovative teaching methodologies that enhance student engagement and foster their active participation in the learning process. The integration of digital tools, the organization of laboratory-based activities, and the implementation of extracurricular pathways can positively influence student motivation, promoting the development of transversal competencies essential for their educational journey (Mancini & Gabrielli, 2009). Instructional innovation therefore not only improves teaching effectiveness, but also represents a key factor in preventing early school leaving.

Finally, the promotion of school well-being emerges as a decisive factor in building an educational environment conducive to learning. The establishment of positive relationships between students and teachers, active listening, and respect for individual differences prove to be effective strategies for strengthening students' sense of belonging to the school community and preventing situations of discomfort that could lead to dropping out (Lo Presti & Tafuri, 2020). From this perspective, the stipulation of a "learning contract" among schools, students, and families may serve as a useful tool for clearly outlining the rights and responsibilities of each actor involved, thereby fostering a solid and shared educational alliance.

5.1. The need for structured and regular training programmes

Although initial teacher education represents an essential step in developing solid professional competencies, it is not sufficient to ensure long-term teaching effectiveness. The constant evolution of teaching methodologies and educational needs requires the adoption of a model of continuous, structured, and systematic professional development capable of supporting teachers in updating their pedagogical practices and adapting to changes within the school context (OECD, 2019). International studies confirm that the most effective education systems are those that invest in continuous professional development programmes, as these not only improve teaching quality but also directly influence student learning outcomes and well-being, thereby contributing to the reduction of early school leaving (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

To be truly effective, such programmes must be conceived as processes integrated into teachers' career pathways, articulated through a multidimensional approach that includes experiential training, participatory observation, mentoring, and the establishment of communities of practice (Timperley et al., 2007). Moreover, it is essential that these pathways be accompanied by monitoring and impact assessment strategies, ensuring continuous improvement and the implementation of corrective measures when necessary, with particular attention to students at risk of dropping out of school (Guskey, 2002).

5.2. Valorising teachers who actively contribute to the growth of their professional community

Alongside the need to guarantee regular professional development opportunities, educational policies must include mechanisms for valorising the role of teachers, recognising the contributions of those who actively engage in the growth of their professional community and in efforts to combat early school leaving. The literature highlights that teachers involved

in collaborative networks, action-research projects, and interdisciplinary working groups develop greater awareness of their professional role and significantly enhance their competencies, with positive effects on the entire school environment and on the capacity to respond to the educational needs of the most vulnerable students (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Recognition of such forms of participation may occur through incentives for teachers involved in peer-to-peer training, access to educational leadership pathways to foster teaching innovation, and the integration of acquired formative experiences within career progression mechanisms, thereby contributing to the creation of inclusive and motivating educational contexts (Avalos, 2011). Furthermore, the development of professional communities of practice promotes cooperation among teachers, encourages the exchange of best practices, and supports the construction of shared pedagogical knowledge—elements essential for preventing school marginalization (Wenger, 1998).

5.3. Reating school environments that foster reflection and continuous improvement

For teacher-training and professional valorisation strategies to generate a lasting impact on the school system and contribute to reducing early school leaving, it is necessary to promote the creation of educational environments oriented toward reflection, experimentation, and continuous improvement (Fullan, 2011). Research shows that schools adopting an approach grounded in organisational learning and innovation are better equipped to improve their teaching practices and respond effectively to emerging educational challenges, thereby mitigating the risk factors associated with dropping out (Stoll & Earl, 2003). From this perspective, it is essential to establish dedicated spaces and times for pedagogical discussion and the sharing of experiences among colleagues, to encourage school leadership that is open to change and supportive of the experimentation of new methodologies without fear of punitive evaluations (Spillane, 2006), and to strengthen collaborations with universities and research centres to ensure access to up-to-date scientific resources and evidence-based teaching methodologies (Cordingley et al., 2015).

The adoption of a systemic and integrated approach that combines continuous professional development, the valorisation of the teaching profession, and innovative school environments represents the key to improving teaching quality, promoting student success, and effectively countering the phenomenon of early school leaving.

6. Conclusions

In light of the reflections developed throughout this work, it clearly emerges that preventing early school leaving and improving the quality of teaching are closely linked to systematic investment in teachers' continuous professional development. Such development must not be conceived as an occasional or merely formal activity, but as an indispensable component of teaching professionalism and as a central pillar of educational policy. Schools, as institutions responsible for constructing inclusive and meaningful learning pathways, require teachers who are adequately trained and capable of responding effectively to contemporary educational challenges. This demands targeted professional development policies that foster methodological updating, critical reflection on teaching practices, peer collaboration, and the recognition of the teacher's role as a facilitator of learning (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

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A holistic and systemic approach to teacher education must overcome the fragmentation of interventions and promote continuous professional development that is integrated into the professional career, valorising teachers as conscious and proactive actors within the educational process. The analysis presented has highlighted three essential aspects for understanding the role of continuous professional development in preventing early school leaving. First, teacher professional development cannot be limited to initial training but must be understood as an ongoing process founded on learning strategies grounded in observation, reflection, and educational research (Timperley et al., 2007). Second, reflective teaching, mentoring, and peer collaboration have proven to be essential tools for improving teaching quality, enabling teachers to develop greater professional awareness and to adopt effective methodologies to prevent school discomfort and dropout (Schön, 1983; Wenger, 1998; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Finally, the effectiveness of teacher development also depends on the ability of schools and policymakers to create favourable conditions for its implementation, through the promotion of structured professional development programmes, the recognition of continuous training within career progression, and the creation of school environments that encourage reflection and continuous improvement (OECD, 2019).

For teacher education to truly contribute to reducing early school leaving, it must be reconceptualised within a lifelong learning perspective, whereby professional development is no longer perceived as a mere bureaucratic requirement but as an opportunity for continuous growth, closely connected to the real needs of schools and students (European Commission, 2013). It is therefore crucial to promote innovative training models that support experiential learning through methodologies enabling teachers to experiment with new educational practices and to reflect critically on their work, as well as research-based approaches and instructional experimentation that ensure constant methodological updating grounded in scientific evidence and validated empirical data (Cordingley et al., 2015). Strengthening professional learning communities through participatory models such as mentoring, co-design of curricula, and action research represents another key element for fostering teachers' sense of self-efficacy and reinforcing their connection with the school community (Guskey, 2002; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018).

A cultural shift is necessary for continuous professional development to have a meaningful impact on teaching quality and the prevention of early school leaving. Too often, professional development is perceived by teachers as a top-down obligation rather than an opportunity for growth, partly due to a school culture that privileges the transmission of content over the construction of knowledge (Fullan, 2011). To overcome this issue, schools must become learning environments for all, where teachers are given the opportunity to develop new competencies through authentic training experiences oriented toward experimentation, to engage with colleagues in collaborative learning contexts, and to test innovative methodologies without fear of punitive evaluation (Stoll & Earl, 2003). This implies, on the one hand, investment in educational leadership so that school leaders become promoters of a culture of collaboration and instructional innovation, and, on the other hand, the creation of favourable organisational conditions that allow teachers to devote time and energy to their professional development without perceiving it as an additional burden beyond daily teaching responsibilities (Spillane, 2006).

Only through an integrated approach involving schools, training institutions, and policymakers will it be possible to build an education system capable of effectively responding to present and future challenges, valorising teachers not only as disciplinary experts but as learning professionals able to guide students in their developmental pathways and contribute actively to the improvement of both schools and society.

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