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Policy implementation, trust, and fear of the unknown in Greek schools: Barriers and opportunities for educational reform

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Abstract

Teacher evaluation and accountability have become central to educational reform in Greece since 2012, a system marked by strong centralization and political volatility. This study explores how Greek teachers interpret and respond to policy reforms that are often introduced without sufficient consultation or support, creating conditions of mistrust and fear of change. Drawing on thirteen semi-structured interviews with teachers, headteachers, and regional officials, the study adopts an interpretivist, policy enactment framework to examine how educators construct meaning around evaluation, trust, and professional autonomy. The thematic analysis identified four interrelated themes: top-down control and systemic dependence, mistrust and political influence, fear of the unknown, and professional autonomy as stability. Findings reveal that teachers' resistance is not rooted in opposition to change but in defensive responses to instability and opaque policy communication. Trust emerged as a critical condition for reform engagement, underscoring the need for dialogue and sustained collaboration between policymakers and practitioners. The study contributes to international debates on educational reform by illustrating how emotional and relational factors mediate the success of accountability-driven policies in contexts of high centralization and low institutional trust.

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Data Availability Statement included at the end of the article.

Keywords
policy implementation, educational reform, trust, Greek schools, centralized education, fear of change

Introduction

Since 2010, the education system in Greece has been subject to sustained policy reform driven by acute economic crisis, austerity measures, and external pressures from the European Union and international financial institutions (OECD, 2018; OECD, 2020). These reforms have encompassed structural changes in administrative organization, teacher evaluation and accountability regimes, and efforts to enhance efficiency and performance across schools (OECD, 2018). In practice, however, many policies have been implemented through top-down mandates with limited engagement of teachers and school communities, thus generating skepticism among educators about the true intentions and efficacy of reform agendas. Teachers frequently perceive reform initiatives as primarily politically motivated or as compliance with international obligations rather than as genuine efforts to improve teaching and learning conditions (Grindle, 2018; Sarakinioti and Tsatsaroni, 2015; Traianou, 2023). In this context, trust between teachers, school leaders and education policymakers has emerged as a critical factor: when trust is low and the fear of change is high, reform implementation becomes particularly difficult.

In Greece's centralized education system, the historical legacy of strong state control and limited school autonomy adds further complexity. While earlier work (Kazamias and Roussakis, 2003) emphasized the government's dominance in setting educational priorities, more recent analysis suggests that, despite efforts at decentralization, the system remains highly bureaucratic and top-driven (Fountoulakis, 2025; OECD, 2020). The consequences of the fiscal crisis, including severe budget cuts, teacher redundancies, and increased external oversight, have exacerbated the perception among many teachers that reforms are externally imposed and carry little attention to practitioner voice or local conditions (OECD, 2018). In such a climate, teachers often interpret new policies as signals of accountability demands rather than developmental support, triggering a widespread fear of change: the fear that new approaches will undermine professional autonomy, increase workload, or serve as a pretext for punitive measures. The interrelation of low trust, fear of change, and skepticism toward reform governance thus forms a central problematic in the Greek reform landscape.

Globally, the interplay of trust and teacher agency is increasingly recognized as a key determinant of successful education reform. Research across diverse systems shows that when teachers trust policymakers and feel their voice and expertise matter, adoption of reform is faster, more sustained, and less conflictual (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Ehren and Baxter, 2020; Fullan, 2015; Smith and Benavot, 2019). In contrast, where reforms are perceived as externally driven or lacking legitimacy, teachers may adopt a stance of defensive compliance or outright resistance (Giroux, 2024; Terhart, 2013). This study contends that the Greek case offers broader implications for comparable systems engaged in ambitious reform: restoring trust and addressing teacher fear of change are vital for creating collaborative conditions conducive to reform success.

Against this backdrop, this study examines how trust and fear of change shape the implementation of educational reforms in Greece. Specifically, it investigates how teachers' skepticism toward the Ministry of Education and the apprehension about policy-driven change influence reform adoption and the emergence (or absence) of collaborative reform cultures. By focusing on teachers' lived experiences and narratives of reform over the past decade, the study aims to identify leverage points for rebuilding trust, easing fear of change, and supporting conditions that facilitate

meaningful participation. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial not only for the Greek context but for any education system attempting to implement major reform in a climate of uncertainty and low teacher trust.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on teacher trust, fear of change, and reform implementation in centralized education systems. This is followed by a methodology section outlining the qualitative research design, sample selection, and data analysis. The findings section presents the themes emerging from interviews with Greek teachers and school leaders. The discussion then links these findings back to the literature and draws out implications for policy and practice. Finally, the conclusion offers recommendations for reformers in Greece and internationally, along with suggestions for future research.

Literature review

The Greek education system remains one of the most centralized in Europe. OECD (2018, p.17) reports that the "Greek education, like all other sectors in the public sphere, is embedded in a large administrative pyramidal structure; schools are units in a larger system." Decision-making on curriculum, staffing, and evaluation lies almost exclusively with the Ministry of Education, leaving schools little flexibility to adapt policies to local needs. While this model promotes consistency and oversight, it limits teacher autonomy and local innovation (Argyropoulou and Hatira, 2014; Ball, 2012). Centralization has thus cultivated a culture of dependency, where educators operate within bureaucratic hierarchies rather than through collaborative professional networks.

Historically, reform in Greece has mirrored the volatility of national politics (Legg, 2021). Policy initiatives are often short-lived, shifting with each administration and reflecting broader partisan agendas rather than long-term educational vision (European Commission, 2021; Fountoulakis, 2025). This cyclical pattern has fostered what many teachers describe as reform fatigue, a sense of exhaustion caused by constant structural changes that rarely improve classroom conditions. Consequently, educators often approach new policies with skepticism, viewing them as politically motivated rather than pedagogically grounded (Traianou, 2023).

A central aspect of these reforms has been the introduction of teacher evaluation and accountability mechanisms. Although evaluation is frequently presented as a tool for improving quality and efficiency, in Greece, it has been perceived as a mechanism of control rather than professional support (Chlapoytaki, 2025). Earlier evaluation attempts in the 1980s and 1990s failed amid union opposition, and post-2013 reforms reignited fears that evaluation could be used punitively. These anxieties are intensified by inconsistent communication, inadequate professional training, and ambiguous performance criteria (OECD, 2021). Evaluation thus symbolizes the broader tension between state accountability and teachers' demand for professional recognition.

Fear of change in this environment is not irrational; it stems from instability and unpredictability. Frequent shifts in leadership and policy direction have cultivated defensive professional cultures (Georgas, 2016; Varsanis, 2022). As Fullan (2015) and Hanushek and Woessmann (2020) argue, when reform lacks coherence and trust, fear becomes a rational coping strategy. In Greece, teachers' apprehension reflects long-term experiences of externally driven reform, marked by political interference and limited consultation (OECD, 2020; Traianou, 2023).

Trust is therefore central to the reform process. International research shows that strong trust between teachers, school leaders, and policymakers leads to higher engagement and successful reform outcomes (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Datnow, 2020; Stojčić, 2021; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000). Where trust is lacking, compliance replaces commitment. In Greece, insufficient

dialogue and limited professional involvement have undermined relational trust, reinforcing teachers' sense of external control (Corhăneanu, 2025; Sarakinioti and Tsatsaroni, 2015).

Debates around school autonomy reflect these tensions. Advocates argue that greater autonomy enhances responsiveness and innovation, while critics warn it can widen inequality among schools with differing resources (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020; Hossain, 2023). For Greece, balancing national coordination and local empowerment remains essential. Excessive autonomy without support could deepen disparities, but persistent centralization perpetuates mistrust and passive compliance (OECD, 2020).

In summary, Greek educational reform operates within a paradox: efforts to modernize through accountability simultaneously reproduce mistrust and fear through control. Teachers' resistance is not opposition to change per se but a response to uncertainty, exclusion, and the erosion of professional trust. Recognizing these dynamics is key to creating reforms that are both credible and sustainable.

Methodology

Research design and rationale

This qualitative study adopts an interpretivist approach to explore how Greek teachers perceive policy reform, evaluation, and their professional roles within a climate of mistrust and uncertainty. The interpretivist framework was chosen to capture the subjective meanings educators assign to reform processes (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to reflect on their experiences and interpretations of educational policies, offering nuanced insights into the emotional and professional dimensions of change.

The study draws upon policy enactment theory (Ball, 2012), which conceptualizes teachers as "policy actors" rather than passive implementers. This lens highlights the complexity of teachers' responses to reform, ranging from compliance to adaptation and resistance, and allows for an exploration of how agency is exercised within restrictive institutional frameworks.

Sampling and participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in experience, professional status, and school context. The final sample included 13 educators: 7 teachers, 2 headteachers, and 4 regional education officers. Participants represented secondary education settings and worked across various regions of Greece. This choice reflects a cross-section of viewpoints within the system and captures differences in the enactment of national reform at local levels (Table 1).

Interviews were conducted between March and May 2022. Each lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was carried out via secure online conferencing platforms, due to ongoing institutional restrictions at the time. Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, and written consent was obtained. All identifying information was anonymized, and pseudonyms are used throughout.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee. The study followed BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines for educational research, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary

Table 1. Details of interviewees.

Pseudonym	Subject taught	Position	Region	Service Years
John	Physics	Headteacher	Attica	30
Helen	Mathematics	Permanent teacher	Attica	19
Mary	Literature	Headteacher	Central Macedonia	23
Emma	Mathematics	Permanent teacher	South Aegean	15
Charlotte	Mathematics	Educational coordinator	Attica	40
Olivia	Mathematics	Educational coordinator	Western Macedonia	30
Amelia	Special education	Supply teacher	Central Macedonia	8
Robert	Mathematics	Educational coordinator	Attica	36
George	School nurse	Permanent teacher	Attica	9
Kate	Mathematics	Permanent teacher	Attica	20
Nick	Mathematics	Regional director	Attica	35
Rosie	I.C.T	Permanent teacher	Attica	12
Sarah	Physical education	Permanent teacher	South Aegean	20

participation. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Data collection and thematic axes

The semi-structured interview schedule was designed around four thematic axes derived from the literature and policy context.

(1) Top-down control and governance, exploring perceptions of centralization and limited autonomy.
(2) Mistrust and political influence, investigating how teachers interpret the motives behind reforms.
(3) Fear of change and evaluation, examining emotional and professional reactions to accountability policies.
(4) Professional autonomy and collaboration, understanding how teachers navigate reform through trust and agency.

These axes guided both the interview prompts and subsequent coding. Open-ended questions encouraged reflection on teachers' lived experiences and their sense of professional identity under reform pressures.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, allowing both deductive and inductive coding. Deductive codes stemmed from the thematic axes, while inductive codes emerged from teachers' narratives. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure immersion, and preliminary codes were refined through iterative analysis.

Themes were generated collaboratively with a second researcher to strengthen inter-coder reliability. Divergences in coding were discussed and resolved, and the coding framework was validated through peer debriefing. The process enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985),

ensuring both credibility and dependability. Recognizing the researcher's professional background in education, reflexive journaling was employed to monitor assumptions and positionality throughout the research process. This reflexive practice aimed to minimize interpretive bias and maintain transparency, in line with qualitative research rigor (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Results

Thematic analysis produced four interrelated themes: (1) Policy implementation as a top-down process, (2) Mistrust, political dynamics, and the "implementation dip," (3) Fear of the unknown and resistance to change, and (4) Cultural emphasis on stability and professional autonomy. The excerpts below use the original participant pseudonyms and roles exactly as in the submitted manuscript.

Theme 1: Policy implementation as a top-down process

Participants emphasized the hierarchical, centrally directed nature of policy implementation and the limited room for local discretion. This theme captures codes such as *"policy as imposition," "implementer identity,"* and *"leadership as mediator."*

> Nick, a regional director: "the Ministry of Education has authority over the schools."
>
> Mary, a headteacher: schools are primarily "implementers of national policies."
>
> Rosie, a teacher: "If the headteacher is not good, or not able, that's where the problems start."

Several participants underlined the chain-like flow of decisions: policy originates centrally, is transmitted through Regional Directorates, and is executed at school level. While some participants recognized the potential merits of central coordination (for equity or standardization), most described a practical effect of limited autonomy and professional disempowerment. Headteachers and coordinators were seen as key mediators, tasked with balancing ministerial directives and staff welfare, and where leadership failed, the capacity to translate policy into meaningful practice collapsed.

These accounts point to a structural barrier: centralization produces a professional role for many teachers that is closer to implementation than to policy co-creation. The data suggest that top-down implementation shapes daily practice not only through formal regulations but through routinized expectations of compliance, producing what teachers described as "implementer" identities rather than professional partners in change.

Theme 2: Mistrust, political dynamics, and the "implementation dip"

Mistrust was a consistent, pervasive theme. Participants linked mistrust to political instrumentalization of policy, repeated cycles of short-lived reforms, and skepticism about the aims and longevity of new initiatives. The codes include *"political manipulation," "union-government tension,"* and *"abandoned reforms."*

> Nick, a regional director: "laws could have been voted but only to convince society that we are interested in evaluating and raising the quality of education… but I do not believe it."
>
> Emma, a teacher: "it is always a no from the side of the union which the government uses to turn society against the teachers."

Robert, an educational coordinator: "there is always a suspicion that the union never saw and did not help things to happen."

Amelia, a supply teacher: "I do not believe that the teachers' unions in this country were ever really interested in the teachers themselves."

Helen, a headteacher: union leaders "aspire to a political career."

Participants described an "implementation dip," that is an initial wave of high expectations followed by disillusionment when reforms were diluted, abandoned, or rebranded after political turnover. Teachers narrated a history of reforms that begin with rhetorical optimism but fail to establish lasting practice change, fostering rational skepticism about subsequent initiatives. Unions, for some participants, were located ambiguously; as protectors of teachers' interests by some, and as politicized actors that sometimes inflame resistance by others. This complex union, state dynamic deepens teachers' mistrust of the motives behind evaluation and accountability policies.

The interviews show that mistrust in Greece operates at multiple levels; distrust of the Ministry's intentions, distrust of the consistency of policy across governments, and distrust of intermediary actors (including unions and some local leaders) when these actors are perceived as politicized. Together, these forms of mistrust undermine early implementation momentum and contribute to cycles of surface compliance rather than genuine engagement.

Theme 3: Fear of the unknown and resistance to change

The third theme captures how uncertainty and past negative experiences shape teachers' emotional responses to reform. Fear was not expressed as a rejection of change itself but as apprehension toward its unpredictable consequences. Participants recalled previous evaluation systems that were perceived as punitive and destabilizing, generating enduring anxiety and defensive behavior.

Robert, an educational coordinator: "Teachers are terrified when they hear about evaluation, because they think that they will be dismissed."

Helen, a teacher: "In our country, everything changes constantly, and it's exhausting. We can't keep up, and that creates fear — not because we don't want to improve, but because we never know what to expect next."

Mary, a headteacher: "The older teachers have lived through different systems that were harsh. For them, fear is connected to memories, not to what is happening now."

Participants described fear as both emotional and rational, a protective mechanism rooted in instability and opaque communication. Teachers' experiences reflect what the literature identifies as "implementation anxiety" in systems where reform cycles are short and often politically motivated (Fullan, 2015; OECD, 2020).

Emma, a teacher: "We are asked to change everything overnight, but we are never told clearly how. The uncertainty is what makes people resist."

The codes "fear of the unknown," "change fatigue," and "protective resistance" summarize these recurring patterns. Participants did not reject evaluation or improvement but expressed frustration at being uninformed, unprepared, or unsupported. The lack of transparent information and professional development opportunities intensified uncertainty and mistrust.

This theme underscores that resistance, often interpreted as conservatism, can in fact be understood as *defensive adaptation*, a strategy to preserve professional stability in a volatile policy context. The findings therefore support the argument that fear is structurally produced by reform inconsistency and insufficient dialogue rather than individual reluctance to change.

Theme 4: Cultural emphasis on stability and professional autonomy

The final theme highlights teachers' strong attachment to stability, collegial relationships, and professional autonomy. Participants framed these values as both a coping mechanism and a foundation for trust within schools. Many viewed collegial collaboration as the only reliable buffer against constant systemic disruption.

> Amelia, a supply teacher: "What we need is stability, not only in policy but in how schools are treated. If we had that, we would have the space to develop."
>
> Robert, an educational coordinator: "When people trust each other in the school, then they can try new things. Without trust, even the best reform will fail."
>
> Mary, a headteacher: "Teachers want to do their job well. But they also want to feel respected and trusted. If there's no trust, no reform will succeed."

The codes "trust and collegiality," "autonomy as professional pride," and "stability as safety" capture the interdependence of these ideas. Teachers viewed professional autonomy not as independence from reform but as the ability to exercise discretion in implementing it meaningfully.

> Nick, a regional director: "The problem is not evaluation itself; it's that it comes as an order. If teachers were trusted to take part in shaping it, they would accept it."

Participants' emphasis on relational trust resonates with international literature linking collegial collaboration and distributed leadership to reform success (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Stojčić, 2021; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000). Within schools, informal peer networks and supportive headteachers appeared to mitigate some of the system-level mistrust.

Overall, this theme reveals that teachers' preference for stability and autonomy is not a rejection of accountability but an appeal for predictability and partnership. Stability functions as a precondition for trust; without it, even well-designed reforms are perceived as threats rather than opportunities.

Across all four themes, teachers' narratives reveal a system caught between control and collaboration. Centralization and political volatility foster cycles of mistrust and defensive professionalism, yet within this environment, educators construct spaces of mutual trust and adaptive agency. Teachers' "fear of the unknown" and emphasis on stability illustrate the emotional undercurrents of reform, showing that change, to be effective, must build on relational trust and sustained dialogue.

Discussion

The findings of this study reaffirm the paradox identified in the literature. While educational reform in Greece aspires to modernize teaching through accountability and evaluation, its implementation

continues to reproduce mistrust and emotional resistance (Fountoulakis, 2025; Traianou, 2023). Teachers' responses to reform are deeply rooted in the structural and cultural features of the Greek education system, particularly centralization, politicization, and the absence of professional dialogue.

Reform as a cycle of control and mistrust

The persistence of top-down policymaking reflects a historical pattern where the Ministry of Education functions as both regulator and reformer. Teachers interpret this dual role as contradictory, that is a system that demands professional autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing compliance (Argyropoulou and Hatira, 2014; OECD, 2020). The data show that teachers do not resist reform per se, but rather the form it takes which is externally imposed, politically unstable, and detached from classroom realities.

This dynamic confirms Ball's (2012) concept of "policy enactment," where teachers are not passive recipients but active negotiators of policy intent. Participants' accounts demonstrate that educators constantly reinterpret reforms within the constraints of institutional dependence, developing coping mechanisms such as selective implementation or collective adaptation. These acts of micro-level agency reveal a professional community capable of critical engagement, though constrained by systemic mistrust.

Fear of change and the emotional politics of reform

Fear emerged as both an outcome and a strategy; an emotional response that shapes teachers' engagement with change. As Fullan (2015) notes, emotion is central to reform dynamics: sustained change requires psychological safety and professional trust. In Greece, fear of change functions as a rational defense against policy instability and perceived punitive intentions (Chlapoytaki, 2025).

Teachers' narratives show that emotional responses are not merely individual but institutional, embedded in the collective memory of previous reforms. The anxiety surrounding evaluation, for example, is inherited from past experiences where assessment was linked to surveillance rather than professional growth. This historical continuity reinforces a cycle of apprehension and disengagement, impeding reform's transformative potential.

Trust as a foundation for reform

Across all interviews, trust appeared as the missing infrastructure of reform. Teachers consistently emphasized that trust, both in leadership and in the Ministry, is essential for professional motivation and reform legitimacy. This finding echoes the work of Bryk and Schneider (2002), who identified relational trust as the key resource for school improvement.

In contexts where trust is low, reform efforts become transactional rather than developmental. Teachers comply with directives to maintain institutional stability, but deeper engagement and innovation remain limited (Datnow, 2020; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000). The evidence from this study suggests that building trust requires more than communication; it demands consistency, transparency, and genuine participation in decision-making. When teachers are involved as equal partners in reform design, they move from compliance to commitment, a shift essential for sustainable change (Corhăneanu, 2025; Stojčić, 2021).

Professional agency and school autonomy

Although participants operated within a rigid system, instances of agency were evident. Teachers exercised what Ball (2012) describes as *"enacted professionalism,"* a capacity to adapt, reinterpret, and occasionally subvert policy. Peer collaboration and school-based initiatives emerged as informal forms of autonomy, allowing teachers to reclaim some control over their professional space.

However, these practices highlight the delicate balance between autonomy and accountability. International evidence suggests that excessive autonomy without structural support can exacerbate inequalities (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2020; Hossain, 2023). In the Greek context, where resource disparities persist, a hybrid model may be more appropriate, one that combines central coordination with local adaptability. This approach aligns with the OECD's (2020) recommendation that effective decentralization must be accompanied by strong professional learning systems and equitable resourcing.

Reframing teachers as policy actors

A key contribution of this study lies in reframing Greek teachers not as passive victims of reform, but as policy actors who interpret, mediate, and reshape policy in context. Participants demonstrated awareness of their positionality within the system, acknowledging both their limitations and their influence at the school level. This finding supports Datnow's (2020) argument that teacher agency is relational, contingent on organizational trust and leadership culture.

Empowering teachers as policy actors requires a cultural shift in how reform is conceived. Policymakers must recognize teachers not merely as implementers but as co-constructors of educational change. This reframing has practical implications for professional development, leadership, and participatory governance models.

Toward a culture of collaborative reform

Ultimately, the findings underscore that successful reform depends less on structural innovation than on cultural transformation. Sustainable change in Greece requires moving from a compliance-based culture to one grounded in trust, dialogue, and shared responsibility. This transition entails institutionalizing consultation processes, fostering school networks, and embedding teacher voice in policy formulation.

As the European Commission (2021) and OECD (2021) have emphasized, education systems that integrate collaboration into reform cycles achieve greater teacher engagement and long-term stability. Greece's challenge, therefore, is not the absence of reform but the absence of relational trust, the connective tissue that transforms reform from policy into practice.

Conclusion

This study has explored how Greek teachers perceive and respond to educational reform within a system characterized by centralization, political interference, and historical mistrust. The findings reveal a persistent paradox. While reforms aim to modernize education and enhance accountability, their implementation often reinforces the very conditions, control, instability, and fear of change, that hinder meaningful change.

Teachers' narratives illustrate how reform is experienced not as a process of empowerment but as one of imposition. The dominance of top-down policymaking and the absence of sustained

consultation have produced a climate of caution rather than commitment. Teachers' fear of change, often interpreted as resistance, emerges instead as a rational response to systemic volatility and unclear intentions.

Despite these constraints, the study also highlights the capacity of educators to exercise professional agency. Through collaboration and local adaptation, teachers construct spaces of autonomy within an otherwise rigid system. This adaptive professionalism demonstrates that reform is not enacted uniformly but interpreted through the lens of teachers' lived experiences, beliefs, and institutional realities.

In essence, the study suggests that the success of reform in Greece depends less on the technical design of policies than on the cultivation of trust. Without relational trust between policymakers and practitioners, reform remains superficial, limited to compliance rather than transformation. Establishing this trust requires continuity, dialogue, and the recognition of teachers as active partners rather than recipients of change.

Limitations

As with all qualitative research, the findings of this study are context-specific and not generalizable to all teachers in Greece. The sample, while diverse in experience and region, remains relatively small and limited to educators willing to discuss sensitive issues related to policy and evaluation. Additionally, data were collected during a period of policy transition, which may have shaped participants' perspectives on reform and trust.

Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout, but the researcher's professional familiarity with Greek education could have influenced interpretations. Nevertheless, triangulation of data sources, peer debriefing, and transparency in analytical procedures enhanced the study's credibility and dependability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Implications for policy and practice

The findings underscore the need for Greek educational policy to move beyond episodic, top-down interventions toward a sustained culture of collaboration and trust. Meaningful reform requires the institutionalization of teacher participation in policymaking processes, ensuring that educators are not only implementers but co-constructors of change. Evaluation mechanisms must be reframed as developmental rather than punitive, linked to professional learning, mentoring, and constructive feedback. Achieving stability is equally crucial; continuity of policy across administrations can help rebuild confidence and reduce reform fatigue. At the same time, gradual and well-supported decentralization is necessary to empower schools while maintaining equity and national cohesion. Such an approach must be accompanied by professional development and resource redistribution to prevent disparities between schools of different socioeconomic profiles. Finally, leadership training should prioritize relational trust, transparency, and collaborative problem-solving, positioning school leaders as mediators between national policy and local practice. Only through these interlinked strategies can policymakers rebuild trust and transform fear into engagement, enabling reforms that are both credible and sustainable.

Implications for future research

Future studies could expand this inquiry by comparing teacher perceptions across different regions and education levels, or by including perspectives from policymakers and parents to develop a more

holistic understanding of reform dynamics. Mixed-method designs combining qualitative interviews with quantitative survey data could further illuminate how trust, fear, and agency interact across contexts. Additionally, longitudinal research could examine how teachers' trust evolves as reforms mature, providing valuable insight into the long-term effects of policy continuity and professional dialogue.

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Ethical considerations

This study involving human participants was reviewed and approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee. This study adhered to the ethical standards of research as presented on the ethical guidelines for educational research of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Any potential risks to participants were minimized, and the study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines and regulations set by the ethics committee.

Consent to participate

Informed consent to participate was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Consent was obtained in writing and participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, and potential risks involved in the study. They were assured of the confidentiality of their data and given the option to withdraw at any time without consequence.

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Declaration of conflicting interests

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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