

## From theory to practice: examining legal literacy among pre-service teachers in Kazakhstan

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### ABSTRACT

Pre-service teachers in Kazakhstan are expected to operate within a complex legal framework that governs student rights, inclusion, and teacher accountability, yet legal education in teacher training programs remains critically underdeveloped. This study investigated the current state of legal literacy among pre-service teachers in Kazakhstan, examining knowledge levels, pedagogical approaches, and students' perceptions of relevance. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, data were collected from 189 pre-service teachers via survey and 20 semi-structured interviews across five public universities. Findings revealed severely limited factual legal knowledge, low situational confidence, and strong dissatisfaction with the existing "fundamental law" course. Qualitatively, participants described legal training as exclusively lecture-based and disconnected from classroom realities. Applying Nonaka's knowledge management framework, the study identifies a systemic failure in converting explicit legal knowledge into tacit professional competence. Despite these gaps, students expressed strong motivation for practical legal training (92% rated legal knowledge as essential). The study concludes with recommendations for curriculum reform, including case-based modules, practicum integration, and interdisciplinary collaboration between law and education faculties.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Legal literacy is not a bureaucratic formality, it is a prerequisite for safe, inclusive, and rights-based classrooms. Teachers who cannot identify violations of student rights risk perpetuating exclusion; those unaware of their own legal protections are vulnerable to professional misconduct allegations, unlawful dismissal, or undue interference. International frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UNESCO's Salamanca statement require that teachers actively uphold children's rights in everyday practice, a task that presupposes functional legal knowledge. In Kazakhstan, this mandate is reinforced by the law on the status of the teacher [1] and the law on education [2], yet legal preparation in teacher training programs has not kept pace with these demands.

Educational professionals navigate multifaceted legal environments in which their professional activities encounter various regulations and ethical obligations [3], [4]. Educational legal literacy encompasses more than formal regulatory knowledge because it involves the ability to interpret and apply laws and policies relevant to education. Legal literacy enables educators to make informed legal decisions in

professional settings while protecting the rights of students and teachers [5], [6]. Despite the growing recognition of legal literacy as a part of teacher competence, multiple studies have shown that pre-service teachers often feel unprepared to navigate legal issues in schools [7]–[9]. Research has consistently revealed that teacher education programs tend to provide only limited, fragmented, and highly theoretical legal knowledge that is often detached from the practical realities of educational settings [10], [11]. Consequently, novice teachers worldwide face legal uncertainty, leaving them vulnerable to professional risks, rights violations, and challenges in maintaining safe and inclusive learning environments [12], [13].

This challenge is particularly acute in post-Soviet countries, including Kazakhstan, where educational reforms over the past decade have emphasized human rights, inclusiveness, and the professionalization of the teaching force [14]. However, while policies increasingly demand legal competence from teachers, legal literacy development remains marginal in pre-service teacher education [15]. Existing legal courses, typically labelled ‘fundamental of law’, are often outdated, general, and disconnected from practical educational challenges, leaving pre-service teachers underprepared for legal responsibilities in real school contexts.

The current situation presents a paradox: Kazakhstani teachers are expected to enact progressive measures for child protection and inclusive education but find themselves underprepared by educational systems that fail to supply essential legal knowledge and practical teaching skills. This gap reflects broader international trends. Schimmel and Militello [5] revealed that American educators display limited knowledge of school law, which stems from inadequate legal instruction in teacher training programs and insufficient professional development opportunities. The study showed that most teachers lack proper legal knowledge about student and teacher rights and formal legal education but would change their practices with better legal awareness and show a strong interest in learning legal information relevant to their teaching. The study’s results align with the teaching difficulties found in transitional education systems such as Kazakhstan, where policy reforms often proceed faster than institutional support and capacity-building initiatives [16], [17].

This study investigated the development of legal literacy among future teachers in Kazakhstan. Specifically, this study addressed the following three research questions:

- What is the current legal literacy level among pre-service teachers in Kazakhstan?
- How is legal literacy integrated into teacher education programs?
- What pedagogical methods are used to develop legal literacy, and how effective are they perceived?

This study contributes new knowledge in three areas: i) it provides the first empirical, mixed-methods evidence of legal literacy deficits among pre-service teachers in Kazakhstan, documenting the size of the knowledge gap ( $M=2.1/6$ ) and its underlying causes; ii) it shows the limited effect of the current ‘fundamental law’ curriculum through both quantitative satisfaction data and qualitative testimony; and iii) it develops context-specific reform recommendations based on student experience and international best practice.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. The importance of legal literacy in teacher education

The importance of legal literacy as a core aspect of teacher professionalism has gained increased recognition in recent years. With growing school regulations and diversity, teachers need instructional skills and the ability to manage challenging legal and ethical situations. Legal literacy helps educators grasp their professional duties and enables them to handle situations with potential legal consequences [3]–[5], [10]. Legal literacy in schools requires teachers to have a theoretical understanding combined with hands-on skills to enforce laws in educational environments.

Legal literacy refers to the ability to read and understand legal documents and to comprehend the official decisions and policies that apply to educational environments [10]. Its scope extends beyond mere textual comprehension. Teachers’ daily work routines are regulated by their understanding of rights applications, along with their obligations and protective procedures. Freudenberg [6] suggested that educators need a practical understanding of laws and the ability to seek legal assistance when needed instead of mastering legal doctrine. The primary objective is to train non-lawyers to correctly identify legal problems, comprehend their basic structure, and conduct themselves responsibly [18], [19].

Teachers operate at the intersection of multiple legal and policy frameworks. Educators work within numerous legal structures, including child protection laws, anti-discrimination acts, labor regulations, and institutional rules. Legal literacy provides educators with essential resources to remain compliant with laws, protect student welfare, and prevent legal liability [20]. The practical application of legal literacy requires teachers to navigate student discipline lawfully while maintaining fairness, understand procedures for reporting abuse or neglect, provide appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities, and protect student data according to confidentiality regulations [21]–[23].

Legal literacy extends beyond defending against legal issues by helping to create ethical school settings that include diverse students and uphold human rights principles. Redfield [24] argues that educators who understand legal principles tend to include democratic principles, such as fairness and due process, in their everyday work. Schimmel and Militello [5] found that legal knowledge shapes educators' professional relationships and decision-making processes, which may significantly affect student learning and overall well-being. The literature stresses the importance of teaching legal literacy as a preventative tool rather than a punitive measure. This education does not aim to help teachers succeed in lawsuits but intends to prevent legal action through teachers making well-informed ethical choices [5]. Teachers lacking legal knowledge tend to make decisions based on false beliefs or institutional traditions, which may cause rights violations or lead to disciplinary action [11]. Despite their clear advantages, teacher education programs tend to overlook legal literacy. According to Carranco [3], teacher trainees have insufficient knowledge of education law, which results in inadequate preparedness to face legal challenges. Real-world school challenges help pre-service teachers understand the value of legal knowledge that they previously did not recognize [13]. The gap between teacher training and actual practice represents a larger problem for the integration of legal literacy into professional teacher development. Teacher education programs should recognize legal literacy as a fundamental component rather than an optional addition. Legal literacy protects individuals and helps them become socially equitable and legally aware. Teachers must begin their careers with basic legal competence because of the growing complexity of their teaching roles, which involve inclusion, diversity, and accountability demands.

## 2.2. Legal literacy in Kazakhstan education systems

Kazakhstan has implemented educational reform legislation focusing on inclusive education, child protection, and human rights. The following key legal instruments define the framework within which teachers are expected to operate: i) Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan 'on education' [2]: establishes the foundational rights and responsibilities of all educational actors and mandates inclusive education provisions; ii) Law 'on the Rights of the Child in the Republic of Kazakhstan' [25]: protects children's rights in educational settings; teachers are legally obligated to report suspected abuse; iii) Law 'on the Status of the Teacher' [1]: defines teacher rights (protection from unlawful interference, right to professional development, right to safe working conditions) and ethical obligations. Despite being the primary legal safeguard for Kazakhstan's teaching workforce, only 41% of participants in this study could describe its function; and iv) Law 'on social and medical-pedagogical correctional support for children with disabilities' [26]: mandates accommodation and inclusion procedures; directly relevant to daily classroom practice.

Reforms in Kazakhstan's teacher education and school curriculum have been heavily influenced by OECD studies and participation in PISA, with a focus on functional literacy and international standards becoming key policy themes. However, despite this reform discourse, legal literacy has not been prioritized in pre-service teacher education. Among post-Soviet education systems, Kazakhstan continues to exhibit characteristics of centralized and formalistic legal training from its past. Universities require students to take a mandatory course called 'pravovedenie' ("fundamental of law"), which aims to provide future educators with a basic legal understanding. This course is a general university requirement for all majors and is not specifically designed for pedagogues. Research demonstrates that these mandatory courses remain outdated and abstract, while failing to address the actual legal challenges educators face in schools [27], [28]. The focus remains on constitutional structures and civil law, instead of practical issues, such as teacher liability and school safety.

Legal scholars and instructors from non-education departments often teach these law courses; however, they generally do not have adequate knowledge of school law or proper teaching methods. Legal education fails to incorporate educational practice dynamics, which results in future teachers obtaining a limited grasp of the legal principles relevant to their professional responsibilities [29]. The absence of a pedagogical context leads legal literacy to become an optional theoretical topic instead of an essential element of teacher competence. Pre-service teachers frequently lack the opportunity to implement legal concepts in real-world educational environments. Structured legal discussions and reflection exercises on school-based legal challenges are generally absent from practicum placements. The separation between legal knowledge and professional practice remains evident in this fragmented educational approach.

Educational programs for teachers are criticized because their legal curriculum repeats the same material multiple times. Students fail to acquire critical legal reasoning abilities and training in handling ambiguous or ethically challenging situations that are vital in professional teaching environments. Legal literacy instruction reform in Kazakhstan remains incomplete because changes have only been implemented in small segments. Several institutions have launched elective education law courses or have included legal topics in inclusive education training programmers. These educational changes remain isolated measures that

lack incorporation into the national accreditation criteria and teacher training learning objectives. Legal literacy currently exists as a secondary aspect of teacher preparation rather than a foundational skill.

The existing educational approach creates a major gap between policy and practice, despite Kazakhstan's pledge for inclusive and rights-based education. Teachers face expectations to follow legal guidelines regarding inclusion and student protection; however, they often lack the necessary preparation to meet these requirements. This division raises questions about teacher welfare and legal standards, as well as concerns about student rights and the integrity of the educational system. To address this issue, researchers recommend implementing systemic reforms, including interdisciplinary collaboration between education and law faculties, augmented by simulation and case-based teaching approaches, and integrating legal content into field placements and pedagogical programs [27], [29], which must include specific learning outcomes for legal competence to ensure that legal literacy becomes a fundamental element of professional readiness.

### 3. METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how legal literacy develops in teacher education programs in Kazakhstan. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative data, this study aimed to capture not only the measurable aspects of legal knowledge and perceptions among pre-service teachers but also the contextual and experiential dimensions of their learning. The mixed-methods approach enabled the triangulation of data sources, thereby enhancing the validity and richness of the findings [30].

#### 3.1. Research setting and participants

The study utilized a convergent mixed-methods design [30], which involved collecting and analyzing quantitative (survey) and qualitative (interview) data simultaneously, before combining the results at the interpretation stage. This design was selected because it facilitates the triangulation of findings while maintaining the unique strengths of each data strand. The quantitative strand offers an overview of patterns in terms of scope and magnitude, while the qualitative strand provides a deeper understanding of the patterns and their context. Survey findings were explained and elaborated upon through the use of interview data during the interpretation stage. Table 1 presents a flowchart of the research procedures illustrating the concurrent data collection, independent analysis of each strand, and final merging at the interpretation phase.

Table 1. Research procedure flowchart

| Quantitative strand                                            | Qualitative strand                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Survey (N=189)                                                 | Semi-structured interviews (N=20)       |
| 5 sections, 33 items                                           | Purposive sampling                      |
| Pilot tested (n=15)                                            | 30-45 min, Kazakh/Russian               |
| Descriptive stats, t-tests, Pearson r (Jamovi)                 | Braun and Clarke [31] thematic analysis |
| Phase 2: merging & integration                                 |                                         |
| Triangulation: qualitative data explains quantitative patterns |                                         |
| Findings organized by three RQs                                |                                         |

The study was conducted at five public universities across Kazakhstan, each with an established faculty of education offering accredited bachelor's degree programs in teacher training. These institutions were selected to reflect geographical diversity and to represent different institutional types within the national education system. Participants were eligible if they were: i) enrolled in a Bachelor of Education program at one of five selected public universities; ii) in their third or fourth year of study, having completed the mandatory 'fundamental law' course and at least one practicum placement; and iii) willing to provide written informed consent. Students in their first or second year were excluded because they would not yet have experienced the legal education component under investigation.

A total of 189 pre-service teachers participated in the quantitative phase, as seen in Table 2. A purposive sampling method was used during the quantitative stage. Links to an online survey were sent directly to the university email accounts of eligible pre-service teachers in their 3rd and 4th years. For the qualitative stage, a nested sampling technique was applied: respondents were given the opportunity to volunteer for a follow-up interview at the conclusion of the online survey. From these volunteers, 20 individuals were deliberately chosen to ensure a range of perspectives.

Table 2. Demographic distribution of survey participants (N=189)

| Year of study | Male | Female | Total | Total (%) |
|---------------|------|--------|-------|-----------|
| 3rd year      | 33   | 55     | 88    | 46.6      |
| 4th year      | 43   | 58     | 101   | 53.4      |
| Total         | 76   | 113    | 189   | 100       |

### 3.2. Data collection

The survey instrument consisted of 33 items grouped into five sections. Prior to full deployment, the survey was piloted with 15 pre-service teachers who were not included in the final sample:

- Section A: demographic information (year of study, gender, university, and practicum completion status).
- Section B: 6-item multiple-choice legal knowledge test covering key Kazakhstani education laws, legal sources, and teacher liability scenarios.
- Section C: 8-item situational legal awareness scale (4-point Likert: strongly disagree to strongly agree). Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.78$  (acceptable internal consistency).
- Section D: 10-item attitude scale measuring perceived importance of and motivation for legal literacy. Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.82$  (good internal consistency).
- Section E: 8-item evaluation scale for the 'fundamental law' course (5-point Likert). Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.81$  (good internal consistency).

Instrument validity was established through expert review prior to piloting: a panel of three experts reviewed the instrument, one specialist in educational law, one teacher educator with experience in legal literacy research, and one methodologist with expertise in survey design. Items were revised based on expert feedback before piloting. The semi-structured interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on students' experiences of legal education, the challenges faced during practicum in relation to legal matters, and their views on how legal literacy could be better developed. Interviews were conducted in person or via Zoom, depending on the participants' location and availability. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was conducted in Kazakh or Russian, according to the participants' preferences. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using Jamovi software. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and frequencies) were used to summarize demographic characteristics and responses across the five sections. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach outlined by Braun and Clarke [31]. The initial codes were developed inductively and grouped into broader themes through iterative comparison and refinement. Thematic findings were then triangulated with quantitative data to identify convergence and divergence in students' knowledge and experiences. In this convergent design, a side-by-side comparison method was employed during the interpretation stage to integrate both quantitative and qualitative data. Specifically, the statistical descriptive results from the survey, such as knowledge scores and situational awareness, were aligned with the key themes identified from the interview transcripts. This technical process enabled the qualitative narratives to directly elucidate the subtleties underlying the low confidence scores observed in the quantitative data.

### 3.4. Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles code of ethics for researchers in education of Kazakhstan. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that non-participation would not affect their academic standing. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team. All participant data were anonymized prior to analysis; participants are identified in this report only by student number (e.g., 'Student 7').

## 4. RESULTS

The study results, derived from mixed-methods data, including survey responses from 189 pre-service teachers and interviews with 20 participants, are presented in this section. The findings were organized into three key thematic categories aligned with the research questions: the participants' legal knowledge and understanding of concepts, their self-assurance in applying legal principles and solving problems, and their views on the relevance of legal education to their professional field.

#### 4.1. Legal knowledge and conceptual understanding

Section B's survey results, consisting of six multiple-choice questions, demonstrate that students possess minimal factual understanding of education law and school-specific legal frameworks. The survey results indicate insufficient factual legal knowledge among the participants. Most survey participants answered less than half of the questions correctly in the six-item multiple-choice section, where the average score was 2.1 with a standard deviation of 1.2. Specifically, while 68% of respondents correctly identified the law on education as the main legal framework, only 41% understood the function of the law on the status of teachers. Furthermore, a mere 37% could pinpoint valid online legal sources, such as Adilet.zan.kz, and only 25% correctly identified the legal parameters of teacher liability in a case of student injury. One fourth-year student shared:

*"I understand that laws exist, but I lack knowledge of their content and their impact on my daily activities. I recognize legal document titles but fail to understand their true significance."*  
(Student 13)

Another student noted:

*"The curriculum did not teach us methods for understanding legal texts. Our students lack information about updated legal documents along with methods to verify their current validity."*  
(Student 2)

The collected observations indicate that students do not possess the necessary skills to understand and utilize legal texts effectively. The lack of practical knowledge originates from the theoretical nature of the "fundamental law" course content, which does not directly relate to school settings, and from the insufficient inclusion of legal topics in teaching or practical training modules.

The interviews showed that numerous students had an incorrect understanding of fundamental legal concepts, including due process, liability, and legal responsibility. Multiple students believed that legal accountability fell solely to school principals, while others were worried about personal repercussions from reporting abuse. The lack of structured, case-based training leads to the underdevelopment and distortion of legal literacy among students.

#### 4.2. Confidence in legal application and problem solving

Section C of the questionnaire assessed situational legal awareness through eight scenario-based statements that participants evaluated using a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 represented strongly disagree and 4 indicated strongly agree. The average score was 16.06 out of a total of 32 points, and the median score was 16.0. The findings show that people have moderate knowledge about legal matters but feel uncertain about implementing them properly. Furthermore, t-tests indicated no significant correlation between students who had completed their practicum and higher situational awareness scores ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating that current practicum experiences do not effectively build legal confidence. Statements receiving the lowest average ratings included in Table 3.

Table 3. Self-reported legal literacy

| Scenario statement                                                              | Mean (out of 4) | Standard deviation |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| "I know how to report suspected abuse or violence involving students."          | 1.96            | 1.05               |
| "I can identify when a student's rights are violated due to exclusion or bias." | 2.04            | 1.01               |
| "I know the legal procedure for dealing with students with disabilities."       | 1.99            | 0.99               |
| "I know which institutions to contact if my rights as a teacher are violated."  | 2.10            | 1.03               |

This uncertainty was reinforced in the interviews. A third-year student admitted:

*"Legal situations are complicated. Our educational curriculum covers rights and responsibilities but fails to demonstrate their application in real-world situations."* (Student 7)

During their practicum, students grappled with typical issues, including managing complaints from parents, dealing with unauthorized student filming, and deciding whether to teach students who display behavioral problems. Students recognized the ethical issues in these matters but did not understand how to report such situations or protect themselves. Certain individuals choose silence as a way to prevent confrontation during specific situations.

The split between ethical goals and procedural understanding revealed that legal reasoning development failed in both classroom lessons and practical training. Structured legal reflection during the practicum is missing, which impedes students from applying theoretical knowledge to real-world situations. Preparation programs should incorporate supervised simulations, structured debriefings, and legal response protocols, according to students' requests. Participants showed enthusiasm for incorporating mock hearings and team-based legal scenario studies into educational seminars.

While confidence and knowledge were low, section D of the survey revealed a stark contrast in student attitudes. Participants demonstrated a highly positive attitude toward the importance of legal literacy, with a mean score of 32.4 out of 40 ( $SD=3.5$ ). The vast majority (92%) agreed or strongly agreed that "legal knowledge is essential for a successful teaching career", and 88% expressed a desire for "more practical legal training" within their university program. This data, combined with interview responses, confirms that the deficit in legal literacy is not due to student apathy, but rather structural gaps in the provision of relevant knowledge.

#### 4.3. Perceptions of legal education and professional relevance

The evaluation results from section E showed substantial unhappiness with the "fundamental law" course because it represents the primary formal legal content in teacher training programs. Participants completed a rating task in which they evaluated eight statements using a 5-point Likert scale with an overall maximum attainable score of 40. The average rating was 17.23 with a standard deviation of 3.21, while the median score was 17, indicating a result the desired positive standard.

Most students disagreed with the claim that the course helped them understand legal procedures in schools and did not find the course content relevant to their teaching practice or interactive and engaging teaching methods. Although the course had several limitations, the students experienced enhanced competence in meeting legal requirements after completing the course. A statistical analysis showed a strong positive correlation between low satisfaction with the course and low self-reported confidence in legal application ( $r=0.65$ ,  $p<.001$ ). A senior fourth-year student provided this description of the course:

*"It was just lectures-theory and definitions. The class failed to establish any link between its content and real-world school experiences. During the entire course we never discussed contracts or funding and inspection of the secondary school system."* (Student 19)

Another student added:

*"During high school we completed two years of legal studies. The university course replicated the same content but presented it in less interesting terminology."* (Student 17)

Survey data demonstrated that over 60% of students adamantly denied that the course improved their ability to manage legal matters within school environments. Participants evaluated both the content and teaching methods used in the program. The course lacked legal case analysis, failed to provide real-school examples and authentic documents, and did not include assignments focused on policy interpretation; furthermore, it did not invite guest speakers from the legal profession.

Students advocated shifting away from theoretical legal teachings toward practice-based education methods through simulations and case studies of school law, as well as exposure to actual ministerial orders and teacher regulations. One student suggested:

*"How about we conduct an analysis of an actual teacher contract? Or read a school inspection report? Analyzing actual teacher contracts would offer students a thousand times more practical benefit than repeating their memorization of the Constitution."* (Student 11)

Students stated that legal education should extend beyond one module. They recommended integrating legal literacy into various curriculum aspects, such as classroom management and school governance, together with ethics. Several individuals recommended developing context-relevant learning by exploring Kazakhstani education court legal case studies and official inspection reports.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results of this research highlight a significant and widespread shortcoming in the cultivation of legal literacy within Kazakhstan's pre-service teacher education framework. Although aspiring teachers are anticipated to function in highly regulated educational settings that prioritize student rights, child protection,

and inclusive practices, their legal training is severely lacking, disjointed, and not aligned with professional practice. To comprehend the reasons behind this deficiency, rather than merely acknowledging its existence, it is essential to engage analytically with the theoretical framework that supports this study and to critically compare it with insights from international research.

Analyzing the study's data through the lens of Nonaka's [32] socialization, externalization, combination, internalization (SECI) model of knowledge creation highlights a failure at certain identifiable stages in the knowledge transfer process. The university system effectively conveys explicit knowledge such as definitions, constitutional principles, and broad legal categories via the compulsory 'fundamental law' course. However, it completely falls short in transforming this explicit information into the tacit knowledge necessary for professional practice. This includes the context-specific judgment that allows a teacher to recognize when a student's rights are being infringed, to identify the appropriate legal channel for reporting suspected abuse, or to grasp the legal ramifications of excluding a student with a disability. According to Nonaka's framework, this transformation primarily takes place during the internalization stage, where explicit knowledge is internalized through experience and becomes actionable. The lack of case-based learning, legal simulations, structured practicum debriefings, and school-specific legal modules means that internalization does not occur. Similarly, the socialization stage, where tacit knowledge is transferred from experienced practitioners to novices through communities of practice is also missing. There are no legal mentoring structures in practicum placements, and practicing teachers seldom explicitly demonstrate legal reasoning. Consequently, the data reveal students who can identify laws but cannot apply them, who recognize legal titles but cannot articulate their significance.

The underlying issue of this structural failure is rooted in the way the curriculum is designed and how institutions are organized. The 'fundamental law' course serves as a general legal introduction for all university students rather than a specialized training program for future educators. Typically, it is delivered by lawyers who are not well-versed in school law or teaching methods, and its content emphasizes constitutional structures and civil law instead of practical responsibilities for teachers, such as mandatory abuse reporting, procedures for accommodating disabilities, student privacy rights, and the parameters of teacher liability. Matsiuk [33] notes that this pattern is typical of post-Soviet education systems, highlighting a trend towards formalistic, context-free legal instruction that mirrors Soviet-era methods. This study is the first to quantitatively confirm this pattern in Kazakhstan, building on Matsiuk's comparative analysis by providing empirical evidence of its impact on student competence.

The results align with global research on the legal literacy of pre-service teachers. Research by Kutsyruba *et al.* [8] highlighted legal ambiguities faced by Canadian pre-service teachers during their practicum, a trend echoed in this study, where 60% of students indicated that the 'fundamental law' course did not enhance their capability to handle legal issues in schools. Similarly, Wagner [9] discovered that United States (US) pre-service teachers were inadequately prepared legally upon completing their programs, attributing this to a lack of legal content in their training curricula. Perry-Hazan and Tal-Weibel [11] noted that Israeli teachers work from a 'disempowered professional status' partly due to the absence of legal literacy in professional development, a situation mirrored in Kazakhstan, where the law 'on the status of the teacher' is largely unfamiliar to most pre-service teachers in this study, with only 41% able to explain its purpose. Treacy [34] identified a disconnect in Ireland between the legal knowledge required by professional conduct codes and what is taught in initial teacher education, a gap that also characterizes the situation in Kazakhstan. Schimmel and Militello [5] found that US teachers would alter their practices if provided with relevant legal information, showing a strong willingness to do so. This is strongly supported here, where 92% of Kazakhstani pre-service teachers agreed on the importance of legal knowledge, and 88% expressed a desire for more practical legal training.

A notable difference from certain European settings is observed in the motivational characteristics of learners. While some research has noted student indifference towards legal content in teacher training, this study reveals a contrasting sentiment frustration rather than apathy. The strong positive correlation between dissatisfaction with the course and low self-reported confidence ( $r=0.65$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) suggests that students are aware of the shortcomings in their preparation and are actively seeking improved resources. Interview data further illuminate this perspective: students did not find the course inherently irrelevant, but rather irrelevant in its current format. Young *et al.* [13] contend that the lack of relevance-based teaching methods, rather than student disengagement is the main barrier to developing legal literacy in teacher education.

The quantitative results concerning the situational awareness items with the lowest scores have significant professional and ethical implications. According to Ozkaya and Colak [10], teachers often struggle to apply legal concepts in practice because abstract legal knowledge does not easily translate without structured experiential learning, a component that is systematically lacking in Kazakhstani teacher training. Körkkö *et al.* [12] indicate that professional legal uncertainty is also a recognized factor contributing to early-career teacher burnout and attrition, adding a dimension of teacher wellbeing to the existing concern for student protection.

The interview data also highlight how the teaching style in legal education conveys a detrimental underlying message. When legal instruction is presented as detached lectures that echo high school material in “*less interesting terminology*” (Student 17), it communicates to students that legal knowledge is merely bureaucratic background rather than an essential professional tool. Previous research [35], [36] on simulation-based legal learning shows that this situation can be changed: activities like case analyses, moot court simulations, and structured legal role plays not only enhance factual knowledge but also foster the internalization stage of Nonaka’s framework, allowing students to develop implicit legal skills through guided practice. The strong student demand for these methods, consistently reflected in both survey and interview data in this study, indicates a high openness to such reforms.

### 5.1. Implications

At the policy level, it is essential to integrate legal literacy as a distinct and measurable component within national teacher competency standards and accreditation frameworks. Additional resources, such as annotated guides to school-related legislation accessible through platforms like Adilet.zan.kz, would further facilitate the practical application of explicit legal knowledge in everyday professional settings. The results have significant implications on three fronts. Regarding the curriculum, the immediate priority is to replace the generic ‘fundamental law’ course with a tailored legal literacy module, collaboratively developed by the education and law faculties. This module should be rooted in Kazakhstani school law and taught using case-based methods, such as analyzing teacher contracts, simulating abuse reporting procedures, and engaging in role-based discussions on student rights scenarios. Additionally, legal content should be integrated into existing pedagogical modules, including those on inclusive education, classroom management, and practicum preparation, rather than being isolated in a single course. This method of integration directly addresses the Internalization deficit by providing structured opportunities for explicit legal knowledge to transform into implicit professional competence through guided experience.

### 5.2. Theoretical contribution

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of how professional competence is developed by adapting Nonaka’s SECI model of knowledge creation to the less explored area of legal literacy in teacher education. Traditionally, legal literacy has been viewed in the literature as merely the acquisition of explicit facts. However, this study refines that view by highlighting a systemic failure at the internalization and socialization stages. We specifically question the belief that formal, lecture-based legal education alone is adequate for preparing professionals. By aligning the gaps in quantitative legal knowledge and situational uncertainty with Nonaka’s stages, the study reveals that explicit legal knowledge cannot be transformed into tacit, practical professional competence without context-specific educational methods, such as case-based simulations and guided practicum reflections. This fusion of knowledge management theory with legal education offers a comprehensive theoretical explanation for the discrepancy between educational policy requirements and actual teacher readiness, providing a fresh conceptual framework for developing teacher training programs.

### 5.3. Limitations

There are several limitations to consider. Firstly, although the sample of 189 students from five universities offers geographical diversity, it does not fully represent the national population, as institutions in rural or smaller regional areas were excluded. Secondly, the study’s reliance on self-reported measures for confidence and attitudes introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, meaning students might have inaccurately reported their confidence in legal knowledge compared to their actual competence. Thirdly, the legal knowledge test comprised only six items, limiting the accuracy of knowledge-level assessments; a more extensive tool would be necessary to thoroughly explore the legal knowledge landscape. Fourthly, the qualitative component, though intentionally selected, included only 20 participants; while thematic saturation was achieved, minority experiences might not be fully captured. Lastly, the cross-sectional design prevents any causal conclusions about the impact of the curriculum on the development of legal literacy over time.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study offers the first empirical, mixed-methods evidence highlighting a notable gap in legal literacy among pre-service teachers in Kazakhstan. The results indicate that the current legal training in teacher education programs at the five universities examined is consistently lacking. In addressing the specific research goals, the study uncovers alarmingly low levels of practical legal knowledge. Firstly, participants showed a limited factual grasp of education law and expressed low confidence in applying legal

principles, especially in matters related to student safety and teacher protection. Secondly, concerning curriculum integration, the research found that legal literacy is poorly incorporated into teacher education; it is usually limited to a single, generic ‘fundamental law’ course, which students view as irrelevant to everyday educational practice, with no legal content included in practicum modules. Thirdly, the predominantly theoretical, lecture-based teaching methods currently used are seen by students as ineffective, failing to develop practical legal skills or situational preparedness. Future investigations should utilize longitudinal approaches to monitor the progression of legal literacy from initial training stages through to the early phases of professional practice. Furthermore, upcoming research should aim to create and assess specific, case-based interventions for legal literacy, while also conducting comparative analyses of legal education systems in other Central Asian regions.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [AA], upon reasonable request.

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