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PEDAGOGICAL LEGITIMACY OF TEACHER SOCIAL INFLUENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

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Summary. The study aims to develop a conceptual framework for assessing the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher social influence in classroom settings. Although teacher social influence constitutes an inherent component of educational practice, current educational and psychological scholarship lacks a coherent framework for distinguishing pedagogically legitimate influence from manipulation, psychological control, and coercion. The article is designed as a theoretical analytical study based on a critical synthesis of contemporary research in education, psychology, philosophy of education, and educational ethics. Relevant theoretical approaches were integrated through conceptual analysis to construct a normative analytical framework for evaluating the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher social influence. The study proposes an original conceptual model consisting of three pathways of teacher social influence, two threshold conditions, and four evaluative criteria of pedagogical legitimacy. The model demonstrates that pedagogical legitimacy depends not on the effectiveness or intensity of teacher influence itself but on the professional justification of a specific educational intervention with regard to its purpose, proportionality, epistemic responsibility, and respect for student dignity, reviewability, and distributive responsibility. The proposed framework contributes to contemporary educational theory by integrating empirical knowledge about teacher social influence with normative principles of pedagogical evaluation. It provides a systematic analytical basis for examining the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher decision making and offers a theoretical foundation for future empirical validation, professional reflection, and teacher education.

Keywords: legitimacy, manipulation, pedagogical guidance, psychological control, school classroom, social influence, teacher authority.

Introduction

Teacher social influence constitutes one of the fundamental conditions of educational practice. Through communication, classroom organisation, assessment, and everyday interactions, teachers influence how students interpret educational situations, accept classroom norms, and shape their own behaviour. However, the mere existence of social influence does not in itself determine its pedagogical legitimacy. The same educational practices may foster students' learning, autonomy, and responsibility, but they may also result in manipulation, psychological control, or disproportionate coercion. Consequently, identifying the criteria by which these forms of influence can be distinguished represents an important challenge for both educational theory and educational practice.

Educational research, psychology, and the philosophy of education provide extensive knowledge regarding teacher authority, social influence, autonomy support, psychological control, student participation, and procedural justice. These perspectives, however, have largely evolved independently and pursue different theoretical objectives. They explain the mechanisms of social influence, the conditions under which it becomes effective, and the consequences of different educational practices, yet they do not offer a coherent framework for systematically evaluating the pedagogical legitimacy of specific teacher interventions. As a result, a significant gap remains in current scholarship, namely the absence of a conceptual framework that integrates the mechanisms of teacher social influence with their normative pedagogical evaluation.

The present study is based on the assumption that pedagogical legitimacy is determined neither by the form of social influence nor by its effectiveness, but by the pedagogical justification of a specific educational intervention in relation to its educational purpose, mode of implementation, and anticipated consequences. For the purposes of this theoretical analysis, teacher social influence is defined as a change in the interpretation of a situation, the reasons underlying students' actions, or the range of available behavioural options that is mediated by the teacher through communication, interpersonal relationships,

or the organisation of the educational environment. This definition should be understood as a working conceptualisation developed specifically for the purposes of the present study.

The aim of this article is to develop a conceptual framework that distinguishes pedagogical guidance, manipulation, psychological control, and coercion from the perspective of the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher social influence. To achieve this objective, the article integrates relevant insights from education, psychology, the philosophy of education, and ethics into a unified interpretative framework intended to support the scholarly analysis of teachers' professional decision making. The article is theoretical and analytical in nature. Its purpose is neither to develop a diagnostic instrument nor to propose an empirically validated model, but rather to offer a systematically justified conceptual framework for examining the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher social influence.

1. Theoretical Background

The educational process is inherently a process of social influence. Through classroom organisation, communication, assessment, the establishment of classroom rules, and everyday interactions, teachers continuously shape students' cognition, motivation, attitudes, value orientations, and social behaviour. Teacher social influence is therefore not a by-product of education but one of its constitutive characteristics. The existence of teacher social influence is not itself a matter of scholarly debate. The fundamental question for contemporary educational theory is under what conditions the exercise of such influence can be regarded as pedagogically legitimate and at what point it exceeds the boundaries of professionally justifiable educational practice. Although education, psychology, social psychology, and the philosophy of education have generated an extensive body of knowledge concerning teacher influence, no unified conceptual framework currently exists for systematically evaluating the pedagogical legitimacy of individual teacher decisions. Educational research primarily examines educational aims, classroom organisation, instructional practices, and teachers' professional responsibility. Psychology explains the mechanisms underlying motivation, self-regulation, social learning, and psychosocial development. Social psychology analyses the processes of social influence, persuasion, and group dynamics, whereas the philosophy of education addresses questions of authority, autonomy, justice, and moral responsibility. These perspectives are complementary, yet they address different theoretical questions. Empirical disciplines explain how teacher social influence operates and what consequences it may produce, whereas normative approaches define the values that should guide educational practice. What remains insufficiently developed is a systematic integration of these perspectives that would enable the pedagogical legitimacy of specific teacher interventions to be evaluated (Chow et al., 2024).

In the present study, pedagogical legitimacy is understood as the quality of the pedagogical justification underlying a specific teacher intervention. Legitimacy is not regarded as an attribute of the teacher, formal authority, or instructional method. Rather, it is always related to a particular decision made within a specific educational context. A pedagogically legitimate intervention must be justifiable with respect to its educational purpose, the proportionality of the means employed, the quality of the information on which the teacher's decision is based, and its foreseeable consequences for both the individual student and the wider school community. Pedagogical legitimacy therefore emerges only through the integration of empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of educational practice with a normative evaluation of its professional and ethical acceptability. This conceptualisation also explains why empirical evidence alone cannot serve as a sufficient criterion of pedagogical legitimacy. Contemporary research on autonomy supportive teaching consistently demonstrates that combining autonomy support with clear instructional structure and meaningful explanations of educational expectations promotes students' intrinsic motivation, school engagement, and psychological well-being (Mammadov & Schroeder, 2023). These findings provide important empirical support for educational practice; however, they do not by themselves determine whether particular teacher decisions are pedagogically legitimate. The same instructional strategy may represent an appropriate means of supporting learning in one educational context; while in another it may unduly restrict student autonomy or rely on mechanisms of psychological control. Empirical effectiveness should therefore be regarded as an essential component of pedagogical evaluation rather than its ultimate criterion (Patzak & Zhang, 2025). A similar pattern can also be observed in research on teacher–student

relationships. Systematic reviews consistently demonstrate that high quality teacher–student relationships promote academic achievement, social adjustment, and students' long term engagement. At the same time, however, they reveal substantial heterogeneity in both the mechanisms examined and the theoretical constructs employed, making it impossible to infer the pedagogical legitimacy of specific teacher interventions directly from the quality of the relationship itself (Emslander et al., 2025).

Trust between teachers and students may facilitate the acceptance of pedagogical guidance, but it may equally increase students' vulnerability to the inappropriate exercise of relational authority. Consequently, the decisive issue is not the existence of a positive teacher–student relationship itself, but the manner in which relational authority is exercised in specific pedagogical decisions. Normative approaches developed within the philosophy of education and educational ethics are subject to similar limitations. Although they provide compelling justifications for the importance of autonomy, dignity, justice, and teachers' professional responsibility, they do not offer a sufficiently developed analytical framework for the systematic evaluation of different forms of teacher social influence. Pedagogical legitimacy therefore lies at the intersection of empirical and normative knowledge. It arises neither automatically from the teacher's institutional authority nor from the empirically demonstrated effectiveness of educational practice. Rather, it requires the integration of these perspectives within a coherent evaluative framework capable of assessing specific teacher decisions in terms of their professional, pedagogical, and ethical justification.

Pedagogical legitimacy also requires a distinction between institutional legitimacy and situational legitimacy. Institutional legitimacy derives from the teacher's professional role and defines the scope of authority to organise the educational process, assess students, and ensure safety within the school environment. While it grants teachers the authority to act, it does not in itself determine whether a particular decision is pedagogically justified. Situational legitimacy, by contrast, concerns the manner in which these professional powers are exercised within a specific educational context. Every teacher decision should therefore be evaluated not only according to whether it falls within the teacher's professional authority, but also according to whether its educational purpose, the means employed, and its anticipated consequences are consistent with the fundamental principles of pedagogical responsibility (Clayton, 2024). Formal authority is thus a necessary condition for exercising the teaching profession, but it cannot be regarded as sufficient justification for every educational intervention (Šimek, 2025).

For this reason, pedagogical legitimacy cannot be reduced to the outcomes of teacher influence. A decision that results in improved classroom discipline or higher academic achievement may nevertheless lack pedagogical legitimacy if it is achieved through disproportionate pressure, informational manipulation, or the misuse of relational authority. Conversely, a decision that supports students' autonomy may not produce the most favourable measurable outcomes in the short term, yet it may be more pedagogically justifiable from a long term educational perspective. Pedagogical legitimacy therefore represents a higher level of evaluation that integrates empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of educational practices with their educational purpose, proportionality, accountability, and the responsibility for their foreseeable consequences. On this basis, different forms of teacher social influence can be distinguished more precisely. Pedagogical guidance refers to the open and professionally justified direction of students towards educational or protective goals. It is characterised by the transparent communication of the reasons underlying educational decisions and by respect for students' capacity to understand their purpose. Transparency alone, however, does not guarantee legitimacy. Even an openly communicated educational requirement may be disproportionate, unjust, or based on insufficiently verified assumptions. Pedagogical guidance therefore becomes legitimate only when its purpose, the means employed, and its anticipated consequences can be professionally justified.

Manipulation represents a qualitatively different mechanism of social influence. Its defining feature is not the influence itself, but the manner in which that influence is achieved. In the present study, manipulation is understood as the arrangement of an educational situation in a way that substantially impedes students' ability to recognise the teacher's actual intentions or the genuine range of available choices. Manipulation is not limited to the provision of false information. It may also involve the selective presentation of truthful information, the omission of relevant circumstances, or the creation of an illusion of free choice where meaningful alternatives have already been eliminated. Consequently, the boundary between

pedagogical guidance and manipulation is determined not by the intensity of social influence, but by whether the conditions necessary for students' informed and autonomous judgement are preserved. Psychological control should be distinguished from manipulation. Unlike manipulation, it does not primarily rely on informational asymmetry but on students' relational dependence on the teacher. It operates through feelings of guilt, shame, conditional acceptance, fear of disappointing the teacher, or concern about losing the teacher's approval. In such situations, students comply not because they recognise the educational legitimacy of the teacher's request, but because they seek to preserve the relationship or avoid negative emotional consequences. Contemporary empirical research consistently demonstrates that psychological control is associated with lower levels of autonomy, diminished intrinsic motivation, and less favourable psychosocial development among students (Mammadov & Schroeder, 2023). These findings describe the consequences of a particular educational style rather than provide a normative evaluation of its legitimacy. Pedagogical legitimacy therefore cannot be inferred solely from the expected psychological effects of teacher behaviour (Patzak & Zhang, 2025).

The distinction between these forms of social influence can be illustrated by a common classroom situation. A teacher requires students to submit a homework assignment. Pedagogical guidance involves explaining the educational purpose of the assignment, establishing a reasonable deadline, and offering support when difficulties arise. Manipulation occurs when the teacher falsely claims that failure to submit the assignment will automatically prevent the student from completing the course, although this is not the case. Psychological control is present when the teacher tells the student that failing to complete the assignment has betrayed the teacher's trust or demonstrated a lack of appreciation for the teacher's support. Although the external requirement remains identical in each case, the mechanism through which compliance is achieved and, consequently, the pedagogical legitimacy of the intervention differ substantially.

Coercion constitutes a separate category of teacher social influence. It encompasses various forms of restricting students' behaviour that cannot be evaluated uniformly. A distinction should be made between ordinary institutional sanctions, organisational restrictions on choice, protective measures, and immediate physical interventions. Sanctions or restrictions may be pedagogically legitimate when they pursue a publicly justifiable educational or protective purpose, are proportionate to the situation, and allow for subsequent reflection and review. By contrast, humiliating punishments, demonstrative abuses of authority, or physical interventions exceeding what is necessary to ensure safety cannot be pedagogically justified. Coercion should therefore not be regarded as a routine educational strategy but as an exceptional measure applicable only when the intended educational or protective objective cannot reasonably be achieved through less restrictive means.

Pedagogical legitimacy also presupposes the teacher's epistemic responsibility. Every educational decision is based on an interpretation of students' behaviour, motivation, and educational needs. Teachers must therefore distinguish between established facts, professionally supported assumptions, and provisional interpretations that require further verification. The more serious the potential consequences of an educational intervention, the greater the demands placed on the quality of the available information, its verifiability, and the teacher's willingness to revise initial judgements in light of new evidence. Epistemic responsibility is not an independent criterion of pedagogical legitimacy; rather, it constitutes a prerequisite for the appropriate application of all other evaluative criteria. Disregarding the student's perspective, reaching premature conclusions, or relying on stereotypical assumptions may undermine the legitimacy of a teacher's decision even when its declared purpose is fully consistent with the educational aims of the school (Fricker, 2007).

The preceding analysis demonstrates that pedagogical legitimacy cannot be inferred from any single characteristic or isolated feature of teacher behaviour. It is not guaranteed by formal authority, good intentions, positive teacher–student relationships, or the empirically demonstrated effectiveness of an educational practice. Rather, pedagogical legitimacy results from the integrated evaluation of educational purpose, the proportionality of the means employed, the quality of the informational basis of the decision, respect for students' dignity, and responsibility for the foreseeable consequences of educational intervention. Existing educational, psychological, and philosophical approaches provide valuable partial insights but have not yet integrated them into a unified analytical framework capable of systematically evaluating

specific forms of teacher social influence. Addressing this theoretical gap constitutes the principal objective of the present study. The following chapter therefore introduces a conceptual model of the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher social influence based on three pathways of social influence, two threshold conditions, and four interrelated criteria of pedagogical legitimacy.

2. Metodology

2.1. Research Design

The present article was designed as a conceptual study employing theoretical analysis to develop a framework for assessing the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher social influence. The study did not seek to test empirical hypotheses, estimate causal relationships, or quantify the effects of educational interventions. Its purpose was to clarify central constructs, examine their analytical relationships, identify unresolved conceptual tensions, and organise relevant interdisciplinary knowledge into a coherent framework for evaluating pedagogical decisions. Conceptual research is appropriate for this purpose because it contributes to theory development by making assumptions explicit, specifying constructs, and proposing theoretically defensible relationships among concepts that have previously been examined within separate disciplinary traditions (Borsboom et al., 2021; Lourie & McPhail, 2024).

The resulting framework is therefore presented as a theoretically reasoned conceptual structure rather than as an empirically validated theory or a prescriptive model of teacher behaviour. For the purposes of this study, pedagogical legitimacy is understood as the professional justifiability of a specific exercise of teacher influence, assessed in relation to its educational or protective purpose, the epistemic quality of the decision, respect for student dignity, the proportionality of the means employed, and its reasonably foreseeable consequences. This definition provided the principal analytical orientation throughout the study. The research was based on the assumption that descriptive and normative analyses can be analytically distinguished without being artificially separated. Consequently, empirical evidence concerning the mechanisms and consequences of teacher social influence was analysed together with normative arguments concerning the professional justification of pedagogical decisions.

The study adopted an explicitly interdisciplinary perspective. Pedagogical, psychological, social psychological, philosophical, and ethical perspectives were treated as complementary rather than competing sources of explanation. Educational research contributed concepts related to teaching, classroom organisation, professional judgement, and educational aims. Psychology and social psychology informed the analysis of social influence, autonomy support, psychological control, motivation, and relational dependence. Philosophy of education and educational ethics provided normative concepts concerning authority, dignity, justice, responsibility, and legitimate educational constraint. This interdisciplinary position reflects the assumption that pedagogical legitimacy cannot be explained adequately through either empirical evidence or normative reasoning alone.

2.2. Literature Selection and Conceptual Analysis

The literature was selected purposively and iteratively according to its direct conceptual relevance to the research objective. Priority was given to peer-reviewed publications published from 2020 onwards, supplemented by earlier foundational works where they remained indispensable for defining central concepts or reconstructing the development of influential theoretical arguments. The literature corpus included empirical studies, systematic reviews, conceptual articles, philosophical analyses, institutional reports, and foundational theoretical works. The selection focused on four interconnected domains: mechanisms of teacher social influence, professional judgement and educational decision-making, psychological consequences of autonomy-supportive and controlling teaching practices, and normative limits of teacher authority. Sources were included when they fulfilled at least one analytical function. They had to define or differentiate a central construct, explain a mechanism of teacher influence, provide evidence concerning the consequences of pedagogical practice, formulate a normative argument regarding teacher action, or clarify the professional justification of educational decisions.

The literature selection was concept-driven rather than exhaustive. Accordingly, the present study should not be interpreted as a systematic review and does not claim comprehensive coverage of all relevant publications. The selected concepts likewise do not represent an exhaustive account

of pedagogical legitimacy. They were retained because they repeatedly emerged across the analysed literature as necessary for explaining the mechanisms, minimum conditions, and evaluative dimensions of legitimate teacher influence.

The development of the conceptual framework can be reconstructed as an iterative analytical process consisting of four interconnected stages. First, concepts associated with teacher social influence and its pedagogical, psychological, and ethical limits were identified. Second, their definitions, assumptions, explanatory functions, and normative implications were systematically compared. Third, conceptual overlaps, tensions, and omissions were analysed in order to distinguish mechanisms of influence from evaluative criteria and minimum conditions of pedagogical acceptability. Finally, the resulting conceptual structure was progressively refined through repeated comparison of alternative classifications until a coherent analytical framework emerged (Borsboom et al., 2021).

Conceptual development was considered sufficiently mature when additional sources no longer generated analytically distinct categories but only refined the meaning, boundaries, or relationships among existing concepts. Rather than representing formal theoretical saturation, this point indicated that the conceptual structure had achieved sufficient analytical stability for presentation while remaining open to future refinement. The proposed framework was internally examined against four author-developed requirements derived from broader methodological expectations concerning conceptual transparency and theoretical coherence. Each component had to fulfil a distinct analytical function, remain logically consistent with the other components, contribute directly to the evaluation of pedagogical legitimacy, and provide sufficient explanatory coverage across contrasting forms of teacher social influence. These requirements served as an internal examination of theoretical coherence rather than as evidence of empirical validity (Lourie & McPhail, 2024; Luft et al., 2022).

Because the same author developed both the framework and the criteria used to examine its coherence, the internal evaluation necessarily contains an element of circularity. It can identify logical inconsistencies, conceptual redundancy, and analytical gaps, but it cannot independently establish the validity or superiority of the proposed framework. Consequently, the internal examination should be interpreted as an assessment of conceptual coherence rather than as formal validation. Boundary situations were employed as analytical thought experiments to examine the robustness of the emerging framework. These situations were derived from recurring dilemmas identified across the analysed pedagogical, psychological, and ethical literature, including tensions between student autonomy and classroom safety, individual support and distributive fairness, relational trust and psychological dependence, and educational effectiveness and proportionality. Their purpose was not to provide empirical evidence but to examine whether the framework could distinguish conceptually different forms of teacher influence without reducing professional judgement to a mechanical decision procedure.

2.3. Construction of the Conceptual Framework

The analytical procedure demonstrated that neither empirical research nor normative educational theory alone provides sufficient grounds for evaluating the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher social influence. Although the analysed literature offers extensive evidence concerning mechanisms of influence, teacher authority, autonomy support, psychological control, professional judgement, and educational ethics, no integrated conceptual framework was identified that systematically combines these perspectives into a coherent model of pedagogical legitimacy. The proposed framework therefore represents an original conceptual synthesis rather than a summary of existing theories (Jaakkola, 2020).

The framework was constructed as a normative-analytical model intended to support professional reflection rather than prescribe correct pedagogical decisions. Its purpose is not to replace teacher judgement or to establish universal decision rules but to provide a structured analytical framework through which pedagogical decisions can be systematically justified and critically examined. The model assumes that the legitimacy of teacher influence depends not on the instructional method itself but on the relationship between the educational purposes of the intervention, the mechanism of influence employed, the quality of professional reasoning, the proportionality of the chosen means, and their reasonably foreseeable consequences.

The framework consists of three analytically distinct yet interconnected components. The first identifies the principal pathways through which teachers influence students. The second establishes the minimum epistemic and ethical conditions that every pedagogical decision must satisfy before its legitimacy can be evaluated. The third introduces evaluative criteria for comparing pedagogically acceptable alternatives. These components are not intended to function as independent categories but as complementary dimensions of a unified analytical framework. The model has an iterative structure. Professional judgement begins with interpretation of the pedagogical situation and identification of the dominant mechanism of teacher influence. This is followed by examination of the threshold conditions and subsequent evaluation through the proposed criteria of pedagogical legitimacy. New information, changing educational circumstances or unforeseen consequences may require revision of earlier judgements and reconsideration of previous decisions. Pedagogical legitimacy is therefore understood as a dynamic process of professional reasoning rather than a fixed attribute of teaching practice.

3. Results

3.1. *Three Pathways of Teacher Social Influence*

The first analytical component of the proposed conceptual framework comprises three pathways of teacher social influence. These pathways are distinguished according to the immediate object of the teacher's influence: the meaning of the educational situation, the basis on which students accept an educational requirement, and the range of behavioural options available to students. This classification represents the author's synthesis of contemporary educational and psychological scholarship and is intended as an analytical framework for identifying the mechanism of teacher social influence rather than as a classification of instructional methods or teaching styles. The three pathways are not evaluative categories and do not, in themselves, determine the pedagogical legitimacy of an educational intervention. Manipulation, psychological control, and coercion may occur within any of these pathways but are not intrinsically linked to any one of them.

Normative signalling influences the meaning of an educational situation by assigning significance to students' behaviour through its relation to rules, expectations, or shared educational goals. By explaining expectations, evaluating behaviour, and directing students' attention, teachers create an interpretative framework through which students assess the appropriateness of their own behaviour and that of others. The effects of this pathway may include a genuine understanding of educational norms, but they may also involve conformity to perceived classroom expectations. Research examining teachers' responses to student behaviour and disciplinary practices provides indirect support for the assumption that the communication of norms influences students' psychosocial functioning and social integration (Karasová & Nehyba, 2023).

Normative signalling is pedagogically legitimate when it provides an accurate representation of the educational situation and transparently explains the rationale underlying educational norms. It becomes manipulative when teachers create a false impression of consensus or deliberately withhold information that is essential for students' informed judgement. Relational conditionality refers to a pathway in which students perceive an educational requirement as legitimate because of the significance of their relationship with the teacher and the expectation that the teacher will act consistently, professionally, and fairly. Repeated experiences of such conduct may contribute to the development of teachers' perceived trustworthiness, thereby facilitating students' acceptance of educational expectations. Contemporary systematic reviews confirm a positive association between the quality of teacher–student relationships and both educational and psychosocial outcomes, although they do not demonstrate a direct causal mechanism explaining students' acceptance of specific teacher requests (Emslander et al., 2025).

Relational conditionality should therefore be understood as a conceptual reconstruction rather than an empirically established causal pathway. It is pedagogically legitimate when the teacher–student relationship promotes trust while preserving students' ability to express disagreement without fear. It develops into psychological control when teachers make acceptance, support, or approval conditional upon compliance and rely on feelings of guilt, shame, or fear of rejection to secure students' cooperation. Choice architecture influences students' behavioural options through the organisation of available alternatives, their

accessibility, their foreseeable consequences, and the relative costs associated with different decisions. This concept should not be confused with the broader notion of instructional structure, which also encompasses guidance, feedback, and competence support. Research on the relationship between instructional structure and autonomy support provides an indirect theoretical foundation for this conceptual construct by demonstrating that clearly defined expectations are compatible with student autonomy, provided that opportunities for choice remain genuine and transparent (Patzak & Zhang, 2025). Choice architecture is pedagogically legitimate when it openly presents available alternatives together with their foreseeable consequences. It becomes manipulative when it merely creates the appearance of choice or deliberately conceals alternatives that are essential for informed decision making. It becomes coercive when it explicitly restricts students' behavioural options through threats or sanctions. Even in such cases, however, the pedagogical legitimacy of coercion must always be evaluated with reference to its educational purpose, necessity, and proportionality.

In authentic educational situations, these pathways rarely operate in isolation. Rather, they typically interact and overlap. The analytically dominant pathway should therefore be identified on the basis of the mechanism through which teacher influence is primarily exercised, the organisation of the educational situation, and the interpretation that students can reasonably be expected to construct, rather than solely on the teacher's declared intentions. Identifying the dominant pathway constitutes the first stage of the analytical process but does not, in itself, determine the pedagogical legitimacy of the intervention. That judgement results from the subsequent evaluation of the intervention against the two threshold conditions and the four evaluative criteria that form the core of the proposed conceptual framework.

3.2. Threshold Conditions of Pedagogical Legitimacy

Identifying the analytically dominant pathway of teacher social influence constitutes the first step of the proposed conceptual framework. In itself, however, it does not allow a judgement to be made regarding the pedagogical legitimacy of a particular educational decision. Regardless of whether teachers rely primarily on normative signalling, relational conditionality, or choice architecture, each of these pathways may be employed in either a pedagogically legitimate or an illegitimate manner. For this reason, the proposed framework introduces two threshold conditions between the identification of the mechanism of social influence and the evaluation of pedagogical legitimacy. Their function is to establish the minimum epistemic and ethical acceptability of educational decision making. They do not constitute additional evaluative criteria or an alternative procedure for assessing pedagogical legitimacy. Rather, they represent indispensable preconditions whose serious violation precludes any educational decision from being regarded as pedagogically legitimate, irrespective of the educational or protective purpose it seeks to achieve (Standley, 2025).

Both threshold conditions are normative analytical constructs. They are not empirically derived variables or descriptions of everyday educational practice; rather, they express the minimum requirements that must be satisfied before any further evaluation of an educational decision can take place. Their purpose is neither to predict teachers' behaviour nor to provide an algorithm for correct decision making. Instead, they function as conceptual boundaries separating decisions that are already indefensible because of deficiencies in their epistemic foundation or in the treatment of students from those that may subsequently be evaluated through the four evaluative criteria of the proposed framework. Consequently, the threshold conditions do not assess the quality of educational decisions but establish their minimum level of acceptability.

The need for two threshold conditions reflects the fact that educational decision making may fail in two qualitatively different ways. The first concerns failure of the epistemic process, whereby teachers form professional judgements on the basis of incomplete, distorted, or professionally unjustifiable information. The second concerns failure in the manner of educational action, whereby students cease to be respected as persons possessing their own perspectives, dignity, and moral worth. These dimensions represent distinct aspects of pedagogical legitimacy and cannot be reduced to a single overarching criterion or compensated for by one another. An educationally desirable objective cannot justify a decision grounded in epistemically irresponsible judgement, nor can it justify educational practices that deny students' dignity. Likewise, respectful communication alone cannot legitimise decisions based on stereotypes, unverified assumptions, or the deliberate disregard of relevant evidence (Maxwell, 2025).

The first threshold condition is teachers' epistemic responsibility, which is understood as the professional obligation to develop educational judgements through an appropriately reliable process of inquiry and reasoning. This does not require infallibility or complete knowledge of every educational situation, since teachers necessarily make decisions under conditions of time pressure, limited information, and contextual uncertainty. Epistemic responsibility therefore concerns primarily the manner in which available evidence is used. It requires teachers to distinguish between observed facts, their interpretations, and provisional conclusions, to critically evaluate the reliability of available information, and to remain willing to revise initial judgements when warranted by new evidence. It also entails actively seeking information capable of challenging initial interpretations and reflecting on whether decision making may be influenced by stereotypical expectations, selective perception, or one sided professional experience (Wyatt Smith et al., 2024).

Error in itself does not constitute a violation of epistemic responsibility, provided that teachers have acted on the basis of the best evidence reasonably available and remain prepared to reconsider their decisions in light of subsequently emerging relevant information. A threshold failure occurs when teachers abandon the verification of essential information, knowingly rely on false claims, disregard relevant evidence, or refuse to reconsider their judgements despite the existence of facts that reasonably challenge their original interpretations. Epistemic responsibility also requires reflection on potential epistemic biases in the evaluation of students' accounts. Responsible educational judgement therefore depends not only on the careful use of available information but also on critical consideration of information that may be absent or systematically overlooked. An essential component of this condition is protection against epistemic injustice, whereby students' testimony is accorded diminished credibility not because of its content but because of stereotypes, prior reputation, or social status (Omodan, 2023).

3.3. Four Evaluative Criteria of Pedagogical Legitimacy

Satisfying both threshold conditions constitutes a necessary prerequisite for pedagogical legitimacy; however, it is not sufficient to determine whether a particular educational decision is pedagogically justifiable. In educational practice, several alternative courses of action may equally satisfy the requirements of epistemic responsibility and respect for student dignity, while differing substantially with regard to their educational purpose, the means employed the quality of professional justification, or the distribution of their foreseeable consequences. For this reason, the proposed conceptual framework complements the two threshold conditions with four interrelated evaluative criteria. Each criterion addresses a distinct dimension of educational decision making. Publicly justifiable educational purpose evaluates the legitimacy of the intended objective, proportionality assesses the legitimacy of the means employed, reviewability concerns the quality of professional judgement, and distributive responsibility examines the fairness with which the foreseeable consequences of educational decisions are distributed. These criteria are inherently gradual rather than dichotomous, allowing different pedagogically acceptable alternatives to be compared once the threshold conditions have been satisfied. The proposed framework is neither a descriptive theory of teacher decision making nor an algorithm prescribing correct educational practice. Rather, it provides a normative analytical framework designed to facilitate transparent evaluation of the quality of educational decision making across diverse pedagogical contexts (Standley, 2025).

The first evaluative criterion is publicly justifiable educational purpose. An educational decision is pedagogically legitimate only when it pursues an objective that is consistent with the educational and protective mission of the school and can be professionally justified. What is required is not universal agreement or the existence of a single correct educational solution. Educational practice accommodates a plurality of legitimate approaches that may lead to different decisions. Public justifiability therefore refers to the ability to articulate reasons that can be communicated within the professional community, subjected to critical scrutiny, and justified independently of personal preferences or the teacher's formal authority. Such purposes must also respect students' rights and legitimate interests while remaining consistent with professionally recognised educational or protective goals. Decisions motivated primarily by convenience, the demonstration of power, or the preservation of personal authority fail to satisfy this criterion, even when they produce desirable short term outcomes. Conversely, an educational intervention may remain pedagogically legitimate despite disagreement among some stakeholders, provided that its purpose withstands professional educational justification (UNESCO, 2023).

The second evaluative criterion is proportionality. Pedagogical legitimacy depends not only on the legitimacy of the intended objective but also on the appropriateness of the means through which it is pursued. Proportionality expresses the relationship between the seriousness of the educational situation, the intensity of the social influence employed, the availability of less restrictive alternatives, and the foreseeable consequences of the intervention. Assessing proportionality therefore requires consideration of three interconnected questions. First, are the selected means suitable for achieving the intended educational objective? Second, are they necessary, or could a comparable outcome reasonably have been achieved through an equally effective but less restrictive intervention? Third, are the anticipated educational benefits proportionate to the restrictions imposed on student autonomy, the potential risks involved, and the broader social costs generated by the decision?

Educational decisions are invariably made under conditions of uncertainty and incomplete information. Consequently, proportionality should be assessed not retrospectively on the basis of actual outcomes but prospectively in relation to the information reasonably available to the teacher at the time the decision was made. The subsequent identification of a preferable alternative does not, in itself, imply that the original decision was pedagogically disproportionate. Nevertheless, teachers remain responsible for calibrating the intensity of educational intervention in accordance with the most reliable evidence available, considering relevant differences among students, and acknowledging the inherent uncertainty surrounding future consequences. Educational effectiveness alone therefore cannot establish pedagogical legitimacy when the same legitimate objective could reasonably have been achieved through a less restrictive intervention (OECD, 2021).

The third evaluative criterion is reviewability. Unlike epistemic responsibility, which establishes the minimum acceptable quality of the reasoning process preceding educational decisions, reviewability concerns the possibility of reconstructing and professionally evaluating the teacher's judgement retrospectively. Its focus is therefore not the correctness of the outcome but the transparency of the decision making process itself. Teachers should be able to explain the information on which their decisions were based, how they interpreted the educational situation, which alternative courses of action they considered, and why they ultimately selected a particular intervention. Reviewability thus creates the conditions necessary for professional reflection, critical dialogue, and, where appropriate, the revision of previous decisions (Kristjánsson, 2024).

This criterion does not require the formal documentation of every pedagogical action or the extensive administrative recording of routine teaching. Educational decision making frequently occurs under severe time constraints and relies not only on explicit knowledge but also on professional experience and intuitive judgement. Intuitive decision making therefore does not, in itself, undermine pedagogical legitimacy. What is essential is whether teachers are subsequently able to identify the principal reasons underlying their decisions, relate them to the available evidence, and critically reconsider their judgements when confronted with new information. By contrast, decisions become non reviewable when their justification is reduced to a mere appeal to teacher authority or when any form of professional reflection is rejected. Reviewability also presupposes a willingness to acknowledge the possibility of error. The fact that a chosen course of action later proves less appropriate does not, in itself, imply that the original decision lacked pedagogical legitimacy, provided that it was based on reasonably reliable information and professionally justified judgement at the time it was made (Becher, 2025).

The fourth evaluative criterion is distributive responsibility. Educational decisions rarely affect only the individual student to whom they are directly addressed. They also influence other members of the classroom community, the quality of the classroom climate, perceptions of fairness, and the future norms governing social interaction. Teachers are therefore responsible not only for the immediate consequences of their decisions but also for those foreseeable consequences that, given their professional expertise, experience, available information, and institutional context, could reasonably have been anticipated and influenced. Conversely, teachers cannot be held responsible for outcomes that were objectively unforeseeable in light of the available knowledge or that resulted primarily from structural limitations of the educational system (Hosseini et al., 2024).

Distributive responsibility does not require identical treatment or identical educational outcomes for all students. Different pedagogical approaches may be entirely legitimate when they respond to relevant differences between students and pursue legitimate educational or protective objectives. The critical requirement is that such differentiation should not be based on prejudice, systematically disadvantage particular students, or generate disproportionate adverse consequences for other members of the classroom community. For example, removing a student from a lesson may legitimately protect the educational process, while simultaneously increasing the risk of long term social isolation or stigmatisation. Distributive responsibility therefore requires teachers to evaluate not only the immediate effectiveness of educational interventions but also their broader consequences for the educational environment (UNESCO, 2023).

The four evaluative criteria constitute an integrated analytical framework. Each captures a distinct dimension of pedagogical legitimacy, and none can be reduced to the others. Although the criteria are gradual in nature and enable comparison between different pedagogically acceptable alternatives, they do not function as a compensatory scoring system or as a fixed hierarchy of values. In practice, tensions between individual criteria are often unavoidable. The proposed framework does not provide a universal rule for resolving such conflicts. Its purpose is not to replace teachers' professional judgement but to make value conflicts explicit and to facilitate their transparent professional justification. Transparency of reasoning therefore does not guarantee the correctness of educational decisions; rather, it constitutes a prerequisite for their professional defensibility (Biesta, 2024).

The assessment of pedagogical legitimacy is likewise inherently iterative. New information, changes in the educational situation, students' responses, or gradually emerging consequences may require the revision of earlier judgements. Pedagogical legitimacy should therefore be understood not as a final verdict but as a continuously re-examined quality of professional educational decision making (Becher, 2025).

Within the proposed framework, the student's perspective does not constitute a fifth evaluative criterion. Instead, it represents an important source of information informing the application of all four criteria. Students' subjective experiences do not automatically determine the legitimacy of educational interventions; however, neither can they be dismissed as merely subjective reactions. They may reveal disproportionate burdens, hidden forms of stigmatisation, ambiguity concerning the intended educational purpose, or consequences that teachers did not anticipate when making their decisions. Taking students' perspectives into account also constitutes one mechanism through which the inherent power asymmetry of the educational relationship may be partially balanced while enhancing the transparency of professional educational decision making (Maxwell, 2025).

The four evaluative criteria proposed here should not be understood as an algorithm for correct educational decision making but as a structured framework for its professional evaluation. Their analytical value can ultimately be established only through their application to complex boundary cases in which legitimate educational purposes, available means, and foreseeable consequences come into tension with one another.

4. Discussion

Although contemporary educational and psychological research has substantially advanced our understanding of the processes through which teachers influence students' learning, motivation, social relationships, and psychosocial development, the question of the pedagogical legitimacy of such influence remains only partially conceptualised. As demonstrated in the Results section, the proposed conceptual framework addresses this gap by integrating three analytically distinct dimensions of pedagogical legitimacy: pathways of teacher social influence, threshold conditions of pedagogical legitimacy, and evaluative criteria for assessing educational decisions. Rather than replacing existing theories of teacher social influence or professional decision making, the framework provides an analytical structure that integrates empirical evidence concerning the operation of teacher social influence with its pedagogical and ethical evaluation. In this respect, the proposed framework shifts attention from the effectiveness of educational action towards its pedagogical legitimacy. We argue that this integration represents an important contribution to the contemporary discourse on teachers' professional decision making because it moves beyond the prevailing separation between empirical evaluations of educational effectiveness and the pedagogical and ethical justification of educational interventions (Kristjánsson, 2024).

We further contend that the proposed framework extends contemporary theories of teachers' professional decision making without seeking to replace them. Current research on professional judgement convincingly demonstrates that sound educational decisions emerge neither from the mechanical application of empirical evidence nor from intuitive reliance on professional experience alone, but from the continuous interpretation of educational situations, the critical evaluation of available information, and careful reflection on the potential consequences of alternative courses of action (Becher, 2025). These approaches primarily explain how teachers make decisions rather than according to which criteria the pedagogical legitimacy of those decisions should subsequently be evaluated. Likewise, educational ethics emphasises professional responsibility, autonomy, justice, and respect for student dignity, yet leaves unresolved the question of how these values should be balanced in educational situations characterised by competing legitimate interests and considerable uncertainty (Becher, 2025). Neither the existence of sound professional judgement nor adherence to general ethical principles is therefore sufficient to guarantee the pedagogical legitimacy of a particular educational intervention. Teachers may arrive at professionally well-reasoned decisions while nevertheless selecting interventions that remain problematic with respect to proportionality, distributive responsibility, or their long-term educational consequences. Rather than proposing an alternative theory of professional decision making or educational ethics, the present framework provides a common analytical structure within which professional judgement, empirical evidence, and normative principles can be understood as interconnected dimensions of educational decision making. We argue that distinguishing between the quality of the decision-making process and the pedagogical legitimacy of its outcome constitutes one of the original contributions of the proposed framework, as it explains why two professionally justified decisions may differ substantially in their pedagogical legitimacy despite being based on equally rigorous professional judgement.

The proposed framework also offers a critical perspective on the widespread tendency to equate pedagogical quality with the empirically demonstrated effectiveness of educational interventions. Contemporary approaches to evidence-informed educational decision making have made an important contribution by reducing reliance on intuition and tradition while strengthening expectations that educational practice should be grounded in robust research evidence (OECD, 2024). Empirical evidence, however, typically answers the question of which educational approaches are effective under particular conditions, rather than whether their application in a specific educational context is pedagogically legitimate. As demonstrated by the conceptual model presented in this study, pedagogical legitimacy additionally depends on the mechanism through which teacher influence is exercised, the fulfilment of threshold conditions, and the balanced evaluation of the four proposed criteria. The same instructional strategy may therefore produce comparable educational outcomes while differing substantially in the extent to which it respects student autonomy, employs proportionate means, or distributes its consequences fairly among participants in the educational process. Educational effectiveness therefore represents an important, but not sufficient, condition of pedagogical legitimacy. This conclusion is also consistent with philosophical perspectives on education, according to which the quality of educational decision making cannot be reduced to measurable learning outcomes because education inevitably encompasses normative, relational, and ethical dimensions extending beyond empirically observable effects (Biesta, 2024).

This distinction is particularly evident in the evaluation of activating teaching methods. Contemporary educational research consistently demonstrates their potential to promote active learning, student engagement, and independent thinking. At the same time, increasing attention has been drawn to the fact that the mere adoption of activating methods does not automatically result in higher quality or more pedagogically legitimate teaching. As Šimek (2023) argues, the educational value of activating teaching methods depends not on their formal inclusion within instruction but on the manner in which they are pedagogically implemented, the teacher's professional competence, and their alignment with educational objectives. The same instructional activity may foster independent thinking and student responsibility while, under different circumstances, generating subtle forms of social pressure, conformity, or manipulative influence when implemented without adequate pedagogical reflection. Pedagogical legitimacy is therefore not an inherent property of a particular instructional method but of the way in which that method is employed within a specific educational context. The conceptual framework proposed in this study

makes this distinction explicit by demonstrating that pedagogical legitimacy emerges from the interaction between educational purpose, mechanism of influence, epistemic responsibility, respect for student dignity, proportionality, reviewability, and distributive responsibility rather than from instructional effectiveness alone. It is precisely at this point that the framework offers its principal added value by distinguishing empirically effective educational practices from those that are simultaneously professionally justified, proportionate, and ethically defensible without assuming that these categories necessarily coincide.

Despite these theoretical contributions, several limitations of the proposed conceptual framework should also be acknowledged. First, the model should not be understood as a normative scheme capable of determining the correct educational decision in every situation. As discussed in the Methodology section, the framework represents a conceptual construction developed through interdisciplinary synthesis rather than an empirically validated decision-making model. Educational practice is characterised by complexity, time pressure, incomplete information, and conflicts between legitimate values that cannot be reduced to a set of universally applicable rules. Teachers therefore make decisions under conditions of unavoidable epistemic uncertainty, where it is impossible to anticipate all potential consequences of educational interventions with complete confidence. The proposed framework neither eliminates nor attempts to eliminate this uncertainty. Its purpose is not to replace teachers' professional judgement but to strengthen the quality of its professional justification and to provide a transparent analytical structure through which educational decisions can be critically examined. In this respect, the framework is consistent with contemporary conceptions of professional responsibility, which associate high-quality teaching not with infallibility but with teachers' willingness to reflect upon their decisions, justify them openly, and critically evaluate their possible consequences (Kristjánsson, 2024).

A further limitation arises from the deliberate decision not to establish a fixed hierarchy among the four evaluative criteria proposed in the Results section. We regard this not as a weakness of the framework but as a consequence of the nature of educational reality itself. In particular educational situations, legitimate educational purposes may come into conflict, and their relative importance may vary according to students' developmental characteristics, the educational context, institutional conditions, or the social climate of the classroom. Attempting to establish a universal ranking of evaluative criteria would therefore oversimplify educational practice and might ultimately diminish teachers' capacity to respond sensitively to the unique circumstances of individual situations. The proposed framework accordingly assumes that pedagogical legitimacy does not result from the mechanical fulfilment of predefined conditions but from the professionally justified balancing of values whose relative significance inevitably varies across educational contexts. Such an understanding is consistent with contemporary conceptions of teaching as a reflective profession in which the quality of decision making depends primarily upon the capacity to engage responsibly with uncertainty rather than to eliminate it entirely (Biesta, 2024).

The proposed framework should also be interpreted in light of its conceptual character. Although its individual components are grounded in contemporary scholarship from education, psychology, philosophy of education, and educational ethics, their integration represents an original theoretical synthesis rather than an empirically verified explanatory model. Consequently, the framework should not be regarded as a definitive taxonomy of pedagogical legitimacy but as an analytically justified proposal intended to stimulate further theoretical refinement and empirical investigation. Its primary value lies in making explicit distinctions that have frequently remained implicit in previous literature, particularly the distinction between mechanisms of teacher influence, minimum conditions of pedagogical acceptability, and evaluative criteria through which alternative pedagogical decisions may be professionally assessed. In doing so, the framework provides a common conceptual language that may facilitate dialogue across educational research, educational ethics, and professional teacher education.

Future research should therefore focus not only on evaluating individual components of the framework but also on examining its practical applicability across authentic educational settings. Particular attention should be devoted to determining whether teachers are able to distinguish the proposed analytical dimensions during real decision-making processes and whether the framework contributes to more transparent professional reasoning. Promising directions include expert validation through the Delphi method, analyses of authentic educational case studies, qualitative investigations of teachers' professional

argumentation, and the development of diagnostic instruments supporting systematic reflection on pedagogical legitimacy during initial teacher education, induction programmes, mentoring, and continuing professional development. Comparative studies across different educational systems and cultural contexts may further clarify the extent to which the proposed threshold conditions and evaluative criteria remain stable or require contextual modification. Ultimately, the theoretical and practical value of the framework will depend on its successful integration with future empirical research capable of examining both its analytical usefulness and its contribution to educational practice.

Limitations of the Study

The present study proposes a conceptually derived framework rather than an empirically validated model of pedagogical legitimacy. Although grounded in contemporary educational research, psychology, philosophy of education, and educational ethics, the framework represents one theoretically justified conceptualisation rather than a definitive taxonomy of pedagogical legitimacy. Its analytical components therefore require further theoretical refinement and empirical validation.

Furthermore, the framework is intended to support transparent professional reasoning rather than prescribe universally correct pedagogical decisions. Future research should examine its applicability across diverse educational contexts through expert validation, educational case studies, qualitative analyses of teachers' professional reasoning, and the development of instruments capable of operationalising its principal analytical components.

5. Conclusion

The present study addressed a persistent conceptual gap in contemporary educational research by developing an integrated framework for evaluating the pedagogical legitimacy of teacher social influence. Rather than proposing another theory of teacher influence or professional decision making, the study brought together insights from educational research, psychology, philosophy of education, and educational ethics into a coherent analytical framework for examining the professional justification of pedagogical decisions. The principal contribution of the proposed framework lies in distinguishing three complementary dimensions of pedagogical legitimacy: pathways of teacher social influence, threshold conditions of pedagogical acceptability, and evaluative criteria for assessing pedagogical decisions. This distinction demonstrates that pedagogical legitimacy cannot be inferred solely from the effectiveness of educational interventions but emerges from the relationship between educational purposes, mechanisms of influence, epistemic responsibility, respect for student dignity, and the professional evaluation of pedagogical consequences. The framework should be understood as a heuristic analytical model intended to support transparent and critically justified professional reasoning rather than prescribe universally correct educational decisions. Although further theoretical refinement and empirical validation remain necessary, the proposed framework provides a common conceptual language for analysing teacher social influence and offers a foundation for future research on pedagogical legitimacy, teacher education, and reflective professional practice.

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