

while the colleagues Etleva Haxhhysemi, Briseida Andoni and Gerti Metani, emphasize the need for a better career orientation, as mean to guarantee professional success. In his paper on the dark social capital as an effective way in getting things done in Albania, Gerti Sqapi tries to explain the dark sides of social capital applied in the context of Albania. The article of Erisela Marko and Kamin Gounaili focuses on interpersonal communication among students, taking case from Eastern Mediterrarean University through the analysis of eye contacts.

In his article “Public or private corruption?”, Dr. Kajsiu focuses on the ideological dimension of anti-corruption discourses in Albania, Colombia and Ecuador. The methodology of the study is the comparative discourse analysis. His paper shows that despite the similar levels and perceptions of corruption, the official discourses of prime-Minister Edi Rama in Albania, that of president, Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia and of president, Rafael Correa in Ecuador are articulated differently due to their distinct ideological positions. Therefore, Rama and Santos from within a neoliberal perspective define corruption mainly as abuse of public office and locate it mainly in the public sector, whereas Correa from within a 21st century socialism stance, defines corruption primarily as a problem of the private sector that captures and distorts the public sector.

In his article on “The Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms According to International Laws and Domestic Laws in North Macedonia “, PhD Candidate, Nail Isufi focuses on comparative aspects. Through this paper, he elaborates the legal overview of the protection of the human rights and freedoms, as well as the international and domestic protection of these rights within state institutions of North Macedonia, for which are adopted various legal acts. Isufi furthermore argues that the international organizations and the states are those who should always ensure the legal protection of the human rights and freedoms, but this is not always applicable and depends on their ability.

In her article on the communication of science, Irena Myzeqari argues that there is an increasing need for more communication from the scientific communities in Albania. Based on a theoretical approach, she brings the latest debates focusing on science communication, trying to open a new path of discussion and research in the higher education system in Albania.

In their article on career guidance and its impact on graduate employability, authors Haxhihyseni, Andoni and Metani inspect the features of an effective career guidance practice, including the emerging necessity for schools to start introducing and encouraging student vocation at an earlier age combined with the essential role of exposure to the working realm. The results of their study show inefficiency in career guidance provided and a need to plan alternative applicable strategies.

Finally, the articles of this issue confirm overall the never-stopping need for reforming education in Albania. Taking a rather internationalized perspective, most authors argue in favor of changes, be it in the educational system, in the institutional practices or in the initiatives and instruments as well as developing more research capacities, in reference to European policies for the Western Balkans and Albania as an aspiring country to join EU.

Curriculum reform in pre-university education in Albania

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Abstract

The study aims to provide a concise overview of the progress of the process of curriculum reform in pre-university education in general, the achievements and problems identified after 1991. After some initial corrections, the pre-university education curriculum changed but they did not follow the same philosophy at different levels of education, which affected the coherence of the changes. In the early 2000s, experts identified the main challenges related to improving the situation in this system. They were:

- a. national curriculum reform; and*
- b. creating a stable and efficient structure for the professional development of teachers working in pre-university education.*

The new curricular framework would indicate the directions in which the country's education system needed to be developed to meet its intended educational policies. But the curricular reform of upper secondary education in 2010 did not follow the same curricular philosophy and approach as the curricular reform of basic education in 2004. Although this reform aimed at aligning with new trends in competency-based curriculum development, it did not managed to realize a curriculum that reflected the development of competencies in all aspects. The basic education curriculum reform in 2013 tried to offer a new curriculum, but despite the efforts made, it failed to develop a competency-based curriculum. The Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education 2014-2020 envisages a broad and competency-based conception of the curriculum. This important development complemented a shortcoming identified in the process of reforming Pre-University Education until 2013. Defining key

competencies, expressed through learning outcomes, as well as defining criteria for assessing outcomes provide the conditions for opportunities to equal education for all students, for accurate assessment of the quality of education offered at national or local level, for fair assessment of the level of student achievement, etc.

Keywords: Curriculum framework, curriculum, key competencies, educational reform, curricular areas, subject standards, pre-university education strategy.

Introduction

The curriculum is the most important element of educational reform, which coherently reflects the goals and objectives of the content of the educational process. The constant changes of social relations, new relations in the labor market, technological innovations, etc., condition the internal developments in the education system of a country, including the pre-university one. In these conditions, the need for curricular changes never disappears and is the core of educational reforms.

The beginning of the 90s of the last century was characterized by a series of gradual but important changes of the pre-university education system which would deepen more and more, completely changing it both in form and content.

The pre-university education system underwent a cycle of reform changes, at the system level and in teaching practice, going through 3 main phases:

- The phase of correction of the interior of education (until 1995).
- The phase of preparations for change, based on law no. 7952, dated 21.06.1995, "On the Pre-University Education System (1995-2010).
- Phase of further reform, based on law 69/2012, dated 21.06.2012 "On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania" (2012 onwards).¹

In the first phase, these changes consisted of some emergency improvements, mainly of the content and revision of the curriculum load, introduction of a new subject, etc. They were the first steps in the long road of the reform process regarding the reconceptualization of content and the transition to curricular planning. For subjects, especially those of a social nature, including history, de-ideologisation and de-politicization were the first steps on the long path of the reform process related to content reconceptualization, and the main studies initially focused on reviewing the learning load of students in the 8th grade

¹ "Reform of the Pre-University Education System". Preliminary Report (2014), p.5.

high school and then in setting new national objectives of education in Albania, reforming subject curricula, drafting subject standards, etc.

Efforts to determine the main directions of compulsory education reform were initially accompanied by the diagnosis of elements of school content, the assessment of student achievement in various subjects on the basis of tests performed and the problems encountered in the teacher qualification process, school infrastructure etc.

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Experts began to analyze existing plans and programs at this level by determining the main directions of change in this regard. At the end of this process they concluded that:

*"The existing curriculum was outdated and did not respond to the overall changes, especially the social and economic ones that were happening rapidly in Albanian society. As a result, there was a lack of harmonization between education cycles, curricular areas and special curricula, many necessary elements of curriculum design were missing, in many areas scientific and methodological reforms were needed, there were overloads which hindered the formation of technical and practical skills of students with towards everyday life, the binding and centralizing character of the current curriculum, etc."*²

Based on international experience, the experts suggested that the curriculum of compulsory education in the future should provide:

✓ *Equipping students with general culture.*

In this regard there were shortcomings in the lower cycle of 8-year education, while in the upper cycle scientific knowledge was not given gradually;

✓ *Equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge.*

This required first increasing the volume of drawing, music and physical education classes in the primary cycle and a reconceptualization of them enabling subject integration for the first two;

✓ *Students' initial orientation for life.*

The current curricula did not provide for any subject-oriented subjects for students. The lack of subjects or even extra classes for students with special needs did not encourage the latter to develop their maximum tendencies or interests;

✓ *Development of special tendencies of students.*

✓ *Optimal weekly and annual load.*

² Mato, E. (2002) "Curricular framework to help improve the national curriculum". Pedagogical Journal (1), p.7

The current plan was characterized by an overload of learning in and out of the classroom³

Among the main weaknesses that characterized the subject programs in this period were:

- a) In most cases their elements such as learning goals, goals for students, basis teaching, etc., were either superficial or vague;
- b) The standardization of subject contents in accordance with the levels of education left much to be desired. It was seen by the authors as the only and absolute standard, regardless of the potential, opportunities and age characteristics of the students;
- c) Setting the final subject goals was treated superficially while in some programs was absent.

In this way the concrete objectives could not be measurable and standardized according to age;

- d) The learning methodology was not foreseen despite the academic independence of teachers;
- e) The methodology of student assessment was not reflected⁴

At the end of their analysis, the experts suggested that:

- ✓ *The main direction of change had to be oriented towards reconceptualizing existing plans and programs;*
- ✓ *To plan and approve a clear model of curricular programming of all 8-year school activities.*

Only in this way opportunities were created for:

- coordination of knowledge and teaching skills for all classes;
- use of appropriate learning strategies to ensure continuity;
- defining and selecting learning objectives according to the criterion of continuity;
- fair distribution of content objectives during the school years in accordance with the psychological maturity of children.

They were convinced of the indisputable advantages of curricula over subject syllabuses and suggested that 8-year education contain three types of curricula:

³ Nishku A., Daci J. (1998) "Analysis of compulsory education syllabuses and programs and the basic directions of their reform in the future." Pedagogical Journal (2), pp.8-11

⁴ Idem, pp.11-13

formal curriculum, applied curriculum and extra curriculum which would represent a single macro and microlevel system.⁵

Research Methodology

The study is based on the review and analysis of an important part of the documentation related to the process of reforming Pre-University Education, carried out by specialized national institutions and on the International Consultancy Report on the evaluation of the Basic Education Curriculum.

The beginnings of changes in conception and content and the new curricular framework of pre- university education

In the early 2000s, a period related to the second phase of the reform of the pre-university education system, experts identified the main challenges facing them in terms of improving the situation in this system. They were:

- c. national curriculum reform; and
- d. creating a stable and efficient structure for the professional development of teachers working in pre-university education⁶

The new curricular framework would direct and manage the functioning of curricula in public and non-public education, in accordance with the current needs of Albanian society, as well as new developments in education in democratic countries. It would indicate the directions in which the country's education system should develop in order to meet the educational policies it aimed for⁷

The draft of the new curricular framework envisaged the step-by-step realization of some important objectives starting from the adoption of the guiding principles and philosophies on

which it would be based, the planning of continuity, coherence and curricular progression, the adoption of national goals and general objectives and those expected for each cycle of pre-university education, setting objectives and subject content, drafting standards of student achievement, etc. ⁸ On this basis,

⁵ idem pp.16-18

⁶ Mato, E. (2002) "Curricular framework to help improve the national curriculum". Pedagogical Journal (1), pp.3-4

⁷ Idem, p.4

⁸ Idem, p.8

the curricula of different subject areas would be drafted⁹

The draft curricular framework envisages 7 main areas of learning as well as an eighth area called “activities and optional subjects”. These curricular areas were:

1. languages and communication;
2. mathematics;
3. natural sciences;
4. social sciences;
5. art;
6. technology;
7. physical education and sports.

The areas summarized the knowledge, habits, attitudes and competencies that needed to be developed in the students. When designing specific programs, the links between learning areas should be taken into account, as well as the inclusion of cross-curricular issues and topics.¹⁰

At the end of the second phase of the pre-university education reform, (2010) the current basic education curriculum (Grades 1-9) underwent a detailed analysis by an international consultancy. In addition to the achievements, the Final Report also identified a number of issues, both conceptually and procedurally.¹¹

A Conceptually, the main problems identified were:

- The curriculum for basic education lacks a clear and coherent vision as well as such a philosophy, as there is no clearly expressed Curriculum Framework that would regulate the curriculum system in general.
- The Basic Education Curriculum is one of the overloaded in Europe.
- Curricula and programs built on it, are very overloaded focusing on information and theoretical and academic knowledge, instead of procedural knowledge and cognitive learning skills, etc.
- The objectives and content of the programs are poorly adapted to the age of the students and their real capacities to meet the requirements of the curriculum and do not have a deep vertical and horizontal connection; and thus lacks consistency and real cross-curricular integration of subjects (and topics within the subject).

⁹ Mato, E., Nishku, A., Papajani, A., Dautaj, A., Lulja E., Koci, E., Hamza, M., Gjokutaj, M., Spahiu, Y. (2004) “The new curricular framework for pre-university education (Draft)” *Pedagogical Journal*, p.7

¹⁰ Idem, pp.10-11

¹¹ Crisan A. (2010) Report of the international consultancy for the evaluation of the Basic Education Curriculum; pp.6-8

- The curriculum does not meet the real needs and interests of students on the one hand, and those of parents and the school on the other.
- Most textbooks are overloaded, textbooks are highly “scientific”, with a typical academic language and a number of pedagogical solutions (ie, “apparatus”) are very difficult for students to understand.
- Curriculum implementation was not properly “nurtured”:
 - (a) special training for teachers on the implementation of the new curriculum was insufficient;
 - (b) lacks a school-based professional development system or the support of “mentors” in curriculum implementation.
- A clear and consistent system of Quality Assurance, Monitoring and Evaluation of the system is lacking. In this way, students’ achievements in relation to the expected learning outcomes are modest, as shown by the national exams at the end of grade 9 or the final results of PISA 2007.

From the procedural point of view, the main problems identified were:

- Lack to some extent of a conceptual and procedural leadership, strong and stable; (Total Quality Management) which would provide mechanisms and procedures to be respected by all.
- The Institute for Educational Development did not and still does not have a package with an Operational Procedural Manual (“Vade Mecum”) for the authors of the curriculum and for the whole process of curriculum development and implementation;
- The curriculum for basic education was developed mainly “in pieces” and not as a system where all parts should be connected to others.
- Experts and working groups acted during the process mainly as independent units without any serious and formalized cooperation or affiliation.
- There is no mechanism to ensure cross-curricular reading of the attached curriculum products, and thus to present a unified image; The curriculum seems more like a “summary” of subject programs rather than a system
- There is a lack of total involvement of teachers as the main actors in the process

At the end of the report were given the relevant recommendations for improving the situation divided into two processes related to operational aspects and policies within the curricular system for Basic Education according to a well-defined timeline:

- Process 1 (2010/2012):
 - It would consist of a rapid “revision” of the current Curriculum for basic education, undertaken with the aim of improving the current provisions until a new Curriculum for this level is gradually developed and implemented;
 - The revised curriculum can be implemented from 2012 with grades 1 to 6; It is recommended in the Report that the review process focus on grades 1 to 6, in order to prepare the parallel process below.
 - Its implementation should continue with fewer classes in attendance, until a new Curriculum covers all classes
- Process 2 (2011 onwards): with a development phase (2012-2014) aimed at developing a brand new curriculum for basic education in Albania (grades 1 to 6 and 7 to 9, according to the Draft Law on Education Parauniversitar); an implementation phase starting from the school year 2014/2015 (grades 1/7); 2015/2016 (class 2/8); 2015/2016 (class 3/9); 2016/2017 (class 4); 2017/2018 (class 5); 2018/2019 (class 6) ¹²

Further reformation of the Curriculum in the Pre-University Education System

The curriculum and the whole teaching process underwent an extensive review and evaluation process in order to further improve it. In 2012 the structure of pre-university education changes again according to the scheme (6 + 3 + 3)¹³

According to a preliminary report drafted by the working group for the reform of pre-university education, it was stated that: “The current curriculum of pre-university education has undergone fragmented changes, according to levels of education, which have affected the coherence of changes. Thus, the curricular reform of upper secondary education in 2010 did not follow the same curricular philosophy and approach as the curricular reform of basic education in 2004. Although this reform aimed at aligning with new trends in competency-based curriculum development, failed to realize a curriculum that reflected the development of competencies in all aspects. While the Basic Education Curriculum Reform in 2013 tried to offer a new curriculum, but despite the efforts made, it failed to develop a competency-based curriculum.”¹⁴

The Strategy for the Development of Pre-University Education for the period 2014-2020 envisages a broad and competency-based conception of the curriculum. ¹⁵This was an important development which complemented a shortcoming identified in the process of reforming Pre-University Education

¹² idem

¹³ Law 69/2012 “On pre-university education”, (article 72, 4).

¹⁴ Reform of the Pre-University Education System (Preliminary Report) (2014), pp.10-11

¹⁵ Evaluation of the pre-university education strategy 2014-2020. Final Report (2019)

until 2013. Defining key competencies, expressed through learning outcomes, as well as defining criteria for assessing outcomes provide conditions for equal opportunities for education for all students, for accurate assessment of the quality of education offered at national or local level, for fair assessment of the level of student achievement, etc. Key competencies for lifelong learning would already be reflected in the competency-based teaching process as well as student-centered teaching. The competency-based curriculum shifts the focus from learner-centered learning of subject content to learner-centered learning situations. As a result, this teaching offers different learning situations through which the student is formed in the social, cultural, intellectual and civic aspect. The key competencies set out in the curriculum framework are 7:

1. Communication and expression competence;
2. Thinking competence;
3. Learning to learn competence;
4. Competence for life, entrepreneurship and environment;
5. Personal competence;
6. Civic competence.
7. Digital competence¹⁶

Key competencies are closely linked to areas of learning. The latter form the basis of the organization of the teaching-educational process in the school, for each educational level and the respective levels of the curriculum. The following areas were identified as learning areas:

1. Languages and communication
2. Mathematics
3. Natural sciences
4. Society and the environment
5. Art
6. Physical education, sports and health
7. Technology and ICT

Each area has its own learning outcomes pertaining to the development of key competencies. Areas of learning include one or more subjects or modules. Courses and modules are based on the learning outcomes defined for each area. Some subject areas may be part of several curricular levels. In the areas of learning, learning objectives are set which enable the achievement of key competencies.¹⁷

¹⁶ Curriculum Framework of Pre-University Education of the Republic of Albania (2014)

¹⁷ Idem

In the school year 2019-2020, the implementation of the competency curriculum started in all grades I-IX, including the preparatory class, while starting from the school year 2017-2020, the implementation of the competency-based curriculum in all grades of high secondary education has continued.¹⁸

According to an analysis of the internal evaluation of the implemented curriculum, conducted by the Agency for Quality Assurance of pre-university education for the school years 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, results that:

- Implementation of competency-based curricula in institutions of pre-university education has brought significant positive changes in the understanding of curricular philosophy and the implementation of pedagogical practices related to curriculum planning, teaching / learning methodologies and student assessment.
- Teachers and school leaders have created successful experiences, in a wayspecial in terms of the use of learning methods, techniques and strategies that promote students' interest, inclusion, interaction and research.
- Ongoing training by curriculum specialists and other actors, with a focus on special use of techniques and strategies that promote critical and creative thinking, problem solving, etc., as well as publications that the Agency for Quality Assurance of Pre-University Education has prepared to help implement the curriculum, have supported the work of teachers in the use of techniques that develop skills of high levels of thinking.
- Curriculum implementation is associated with challenges that address support in a way continued further professional development of teachers in such areas as: student assessment, meeting the needs of students with special needs, use of ICT, etc. Improving communication between actors and the role of school leaders in implementing competency-based curricula are aspects that need to be further improved and supported.¹⁹

However, in the Final Report of the evaluation of the Pre-University Education Strategy 2014-2020, in addition to the achievements, there are also problems for which the relevant suggestions for their improvement were given.

Some of the main findings were:

1. Unsatisfactory levels of funding are one of the main issues that negatively affect the outcome of the education sector in Albania. The level of budget available compared to Gross Domestic Product remains below the target

¹⁸ Achievement report. ASCAP. September 2017 - December 2020 pp.9-10

¹⁹ Idem pp.18-19

level and Albania remains one of the countries with the lowest investment in education in the region.

2. School leaders are seen as weak bridges within the system. The need lies in consolidating and improving the education management system with a particular focus on strengthening the systems, to include the establishment of monitoring services and professional support.
3. Major achievements have been made, especially in the area of access to schools. The Government continues with the same commitment demonstrated so far in addressing issues related to quality and justice issues in the Pre-University Education Development Strategy, and as a national priority.
4. Albania has increased investments in support of inclusion, as a key policy issue in meeting national goals. However, the data show that there are still groups excluded from education.
5. Improving the quality aspects of education is a matter of concern.
6. It is very important to pay attention to the latest regional studies, regarding what works in the implementation of the new competency-based curriculum. Trends suggest that true competency-based education can only work in alternative settings, in schools that are given the flexibility to meet the needs of non-traditional students, with methods that overcome the limitations and lack of flexibility of traditional education as we know it.
7. Teachers need more support for the implementation of the new curriculum. Curriculum success has been limited due to lack of resources at the school level, especially ICT.
8. Significant progress has been made in selecting and providing textbooks.
9. The use and utilization of ICT is at low levels. Although the necessity of ICT is recognized in progressive education in Albania, the difficulty found is related to its effectiveness within the new curriculum model.
10. There is a limitation regarding the duration and time of organizing the training that is currently offered to teachers, in the framework of the implementation of the major reform. The three days set aside for curriculum training are too few to see from the perspective of the diversity and complexity of changes in education.
11. Teachers need to be better prepared, supported and provided with resources, which would also lead to changes in the budget and resource allocation for schools.
12. Practice-based teaching is the least efficient link in the system. Effective implementation will contribute to improving the quality of enhancing the learning outcomes of all students.

13. In the next phase of implementation, it would be important to develop a Competency Framework for Teachers. Developing a Teacher Competency Framework will be important to support future developments and build on the platform of professional standards already developed for teachers.²⁰

In the Draft National Education Strategy for the years 2021-2026,²¹ the Ministry of Education outlines its vision for a comprehensive education system based on the principles of equality and lifelong learning, which enables the quality formation of all individuals, contributing in their personal well-being, as well as in strengthening democracy and the country's integration into the European Union. According to her, "inclusion and equality are necessary preconditions to ensure the quality formation of all individuals and to narrow the gap of educational achievement between different social groups."

In pre-university education the strategy will also include:

- Teachers;
- Mastery of lifelong learning competencies;
- Digitalization of education;
- Quality management and assurance.

Conclusion

The pre-university education system is based on the positive tradition of education, operates in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Albania and the relevant legislation in force, and is implemented in relation to the common values of modern education systems, which have

at their core is competency-based learning which prepares young people to face the challenges of knowledge society.

The Albanian education system has entered a series of contemporary educational reforms after 2000. Some of the positive elements of this reform, despite the weaknesses and criticisms, were the integration of the curriculum, the conception of the curriculum in the areas of lifelong learning, critical thinking, structuring of basic education 1 - 9, Alternative textbooks, etc., but in essence the curriculum of this period could not overcome the emphasis on imparting knowledge rather than on building knowledge and competencies.

At the strategic and long-term level, the standards create the possibility of providing quality in the education system, monitoring and evaluating the content, as well as create the reference system for gradual changes in education.

²⁰ Evaluation of the pre-university education strategy 2014-2020. Final Report (2019)

²¹ Draft National Education Strategy for the years 2021-2026, p.67

Organized in this way, the standards help educational institutions to assess the objectives in the areas of learning, ensuring the proper direction of the organization of the teaching and learning process.

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