

Lower Secondary Education System in Albania, Challenges and Innovations

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Abstract

Education and its vigorous reformative process has been generating interest among researchers over the last years in Albania becoming one of the most widespread topics of discussion. The reforms that the Lower Secondary Education System has undergone over the last decade have been intensive, quick and sometimes even chaotic highly influenced by other social developments. Due to the implementation of a new restructured school curriculum in the Albanian compulsory educational system, the managing process in this level of education has become a major challenge for the educators. The addition of another year (9th grade) to the previous educational Albanian system has increased the difficulty of classroom management of the 9th grade students. This study aims to analyze the current educational reality in Albania created after this structural and content reform made in the Lower Secondary Education System, changing it from 8th grade system to 9th grade system, pointing out the advantages and difficulties encountered by the teachers, as well as the adaptation of the pupils versus this new reality. The study is realized through four phases: firstly, the compilation of a general outline of the paper; secondly, the preparation of questionnaires for teachers and pupils; thirdly, the gathering of data and observations in the Lower Secondary Education classes; fourthly, the elaboration of the gathered information drawing certain conclusions and suggestions regarding this issue. The treatment of this topic served not only for the recognition of this transformation that the Albanian educational system underwent, but also for the recognition of the new challenges that teachers faced up with while trying to reach an efficient classroom management.

Keywords: education, system, challenges, compulsory, curricula.

Introduction

The Albanian educational system, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Sport, has been facing challenges and changes as a result of the adaptation and harmonization of the Albanian education with the European one. Following the instructions and criteria established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) in overcoming school barriers among countries, Albania has also been determined to improve its system. During the last years, experiences have shown that the social changes have

encouraged the necessity for reforms in the field of education not leaving aside even the technological innovations of information and communication with the insertion of internet in our schools (Journal of Management Education. 1996). As pointed out by Scott Cowen (1996) it is to be emphasized that it is the future which imposes us the changes to be made in the field of education, in accordance with the requirements of the society.

In 1995, the Albanian parliament approved one of the most important drafts concerning Lower Secondary Education System in Albania. It determined the general principles of education, structures, curricula,

etc. establishing in this way essential basis of improvement in this direction. (British Council, Albania. Studim Paraprak 2003/2004)

Since 1995 the educational system has been in continuous modification aiming to meet the standards of other European countries as well as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which was electronically introduced in 1996. In this transitional reality, the changes firstly began in the primary school system, subsequently following the other levels of education. Thus the Lower Secondary Education System which used to consist of 8 years, due to the actual reforms undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Sport in the context of the national strategies of the Albanian education, as well as reforms adapted by the specialists of education, was changed into a system consisting of 9 years, constituting in this way a new reality unknown for the educators. The implementation of a new structure (5 years + 4 years) aimed to approach Albanian educational system with that of the Balkan countries and EU countries (Ministry of Education and Sport. *Strategjia Kombëtare e Arsimit* 2004-2015).

The first difficulties, challenges were evident in the management of the 9th grades by the teachers, who were facing a new system accompanied by problems never encountered during the previous years. "The impossibility of classroom management" (Fullan M. 2001) has already turned into the daily expression of every teacher, within the teaching environment, considering it as one of the drawbacks of this broad educational reform. Based on the conversations and interviews with different teachers, it is given the impression that there exists a "division" between them concerning the views and thoughts they share regarding the management of the 9th grade.

Many educators have shown their criticism versus these "curricular and structural innovations" (Educational Policy. 1996) viewing them as less effective in comparison with the previous traditionally established school structures. The situation is further influenced by social and economic factors, particularly emphasizing the "educational diversity factor" (Cummings, Carol, p.4) as an essential one in the management of the classroom.

Problems of the Research

Due to the application of this new 9-year-school-program, the Lower Secondary Education context changed not only in its structural organization but also in its content. Concerning its structural organization, it is to be mentioned that there was added another year to the existing system, whereas concerning its content the previous curriculum was enriched with new subjects. The new structured curriculum was based on the development of a model oriented by the demand for sufficient knowledge and skills required by the work market and society needs (Ministry of Education and Sport. *Strategjia Kombëtare e Arsimit* 2004-2015).

The reformation of the educational system, as an evolving process was accompanied by a series of problems pointed out by educators among which it is to be mentioned: the pedagogic concerns and impact on the side of the teachers caused by these modifications made to the actual school system consisting of 9 years; the difficulty of adaptation with this system for educators and pupils; discipline concerns; pupils' motivation issue; the abandonment of lessons by pupils; the management of this age group which corresponds with the beginning of teenage years etc.

This innovation in the system was mainly perceived as a metamorphosis which did not embrace the school common curricular standards and expectations that it used to in the past. Furthermore, the entire innovative program was accompanied by the difficulty of the teachers in managing the pupils who were one year older than the others. It was frustrating and challenging for educators to adapt approaches aiming to reduce or avoid inappropriateness of these pupils' misbehaviours (Lewis, R. 2009) Therefore teachers and pupils were unprepared pedagogically and technically versus this situation, sometimes even doubting the success of the implementation of this new program.

Focus of the Research

The last two decades have been characterized as a period of intensive changing involvement in education by both specialists and educators. Their joint goal has been focused on increasing school quality and achieving structural and curricular school organization in accordance with the standards

introduced by the Common European Framework of Reference. (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) The observations of this paper can provide a basis of comparison, reflection and future suggestions over the success of this newly applied program.

For the realization of this research we were focused on the problem of the 9th grade management process in Albanian schools. The reform started to be implemented in 2009, but specialists had been working on this issue years ago. The previous existing curriculum of the 1st grade up to the 8th grade had already been improved. Furthermore, there had also been composed the new curriculum of the 9th grade, which constituted the innovation of the educational system. This reform was further encouraged by the fact that in our Albanian society, the average number of school years was lower in comparison with that of the other Balkan and European countries.

This undoubtedly motivated educators and specialists to pursue the idea of elaborating a more detailed and more structured knowledge curriculum for the pupils of the 9th grade. Responsibility and hard work of the participating actors would provide grounds for the achievement of this applied process. The secret of this success and development would be knowing how to face and deal with these powerful forces of change. (Fullan, M. 2002)

The new reality very soon became a new model to be pursued in this educational reformation process whose success would depend on all participating actors, that is educators, specialists, and pupils too. Consulting contemporary writings, conducting interviews with educators, making researches on this issue, analyzing real observed situations, and the difficulties encountered by teachers were essential encouraging reasons for developing this study paper, considering also the lack of previous researches in this field since it is a relatively new experience. The study is based on observations and interviews conducted in various schools in Elbasan, Albania.

Methodology of Research

During the last two decades we seem to have become used to the presence of continuous change in education that we have hardly stopped to reflect and think about what

the meaning and impact of innovation really is. The simplicity of change from the technical and theoretical point of view, is further complicated from the circumstances and conditions of schools, as well as the pedagogic qualification of the teachers.

In order to perceive a better understanding of the situation, the methodology employed in this study was based on observations and contemporary literature related to this issue. Besides the interviews, a questionnaire of ten questions was compiled and delivered to thirty educators of the 9th grade urban and rural schools in Elbasan.

The questionnaire included questions of different types, closed and open ones. They provided enough room to the teachers to answer according to their personal experiences, avoiding thus the provision of similar standard replies. Even in closed questions, the ones requiring a Yes/No answer, teachers were welcomed to provide their additional comments in a written form, in the same papers. The gathered data and information have been elaborated and displayed in the following charts, the results of which will be further analyzed.

Findings and Discussions

Referring to the chart concerning effective classroom management, it resulted that out of thirty educators being asked, 70% define classroom organization as an organization and lesson planning not leaving aside the discipline being established in the classroom environment. Meanwhile 30% of the teachers besides the above mentioned elements included in their definitions about effective classroom management: strategies and materials being used by the teachers during the teaching process.



Figure 1. Effective Classroom Management

However, as it can already be viewed from the above chart, in none of the questionnaires were the elements of time and space included in their definitions, as two essential components (*Instituti i Studimeve Pedagogjike*, 2003) in achieving a successful classroom management.

As it can be seen in the following diagram, another crucial point on which educators expressed various opinions was whether the new 9th grade system constitutes an improvement or not. The lack of belief among this group of teachers on whether the initiated school reforms would guarantee quality in education and a good management process is plainly reflected in the diagram.

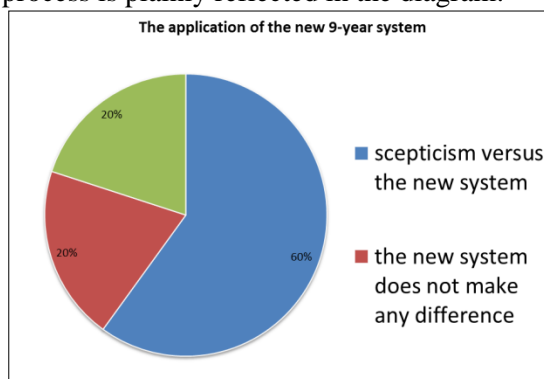


Figure. 2 The application of the new 9-year system

The dominance of the blue colour shows that 60% of the teachers being asked seem to be skeptic and they think that the new system does not constitute an improvement. Furthermore, they think that maintaining pupils one more year in the 9th grade system does not make them cleverer or more intellectually prepared. 20% of them believe that the new system does not make any difference to the old one which consisted of 8 school years. Meanwhile the last 20% of the educators claim and accept that the new applied system is an improvement, which should have initiated earlier in time, if we want to achieve the integration of the educational system comparing it with other European countries. They even think that maintaining pupils one more year in Lower Secondary Education System helps them reach a higher maturity which means that they will be more grown-up when deciding whether to

attend further education or not, avoiding in this way aimless roams of this age, after having finished the 9th grade.

It is interesting to note that another issue coming out from the completion of the questionnaires was the reason why many teachers tend to show their disapproval versus the implementation of these reforms. It is also to be emphasized that the teachers who had a long experience in teaching (approximately 50% of the teachers being asked) resulted to disapprove the new compulsory system because of the application of traditional classroom management methods in their teaching process. Moreover, 10% of the teachers with a teaching experience of nearly 20 years in education claimed that there is no real difference between the two systems. Meanwhile, 40% of those being asked, having few years of experience in education showed their approval of the new changes made in the Albanian educational system by the Ministry of Education.

Quality, lack of good management and discipline were three other elements upon which educators reflected their disapproving opinions regarding the application of the 9th grade school system. The majority of the teachers shared the same opinion expressing that the 9th grade system is more problematic in its management concerning discipline and undesirable, disruptive behaviors of the pupils during the teaching process.

They also highly suggest motivating strategies that they use during the lesson in order to reduce these repetitive disruptive attitudes manifested by students. Some of the most common motivating strategies applied by the teachers are:

- The use of appraisals
- The creation of a positive climate in the classroom

Concerning this issue 60% of the educators being asked think that the use of appraisals during the lesson not only creates a positive environment in the classroom but the use of such strategy also encourages learning, reducing to a considerable extend the undesirable attitudes of the pupils who behave irresponsibly, disturbing their classmates too.

On the other side 40% of the teachers asked about this issue think that the use of such expressions does not reduce the disruptive behaviors of the pupils and it does not guarantee a successful classroom

management, so they use them very rarely. This percentage of educators share the opinion that appraisals (such as great, bravo, excellent, etc.) encourage only the good pupils not only those who do not actively participate during the lesson.

The questionnaire contained another question related to the preparatory training sessions of the school staff. It appeared that when asked about the training sessions and the professional qualifications (Skelton,A. 2005) preceding the implementation of the new system by the Ministry, and the necessary teaching capacities of the schools, a high number of answers resulted to be negative. The majority of the teachers being asked (80%) expressed that they were not prepared or trained to deal with the new system, more particularly the 9th grade.

In most cases the use of the same strategies and the same teaching methods by the teachers makes pupils feel less motivated, bored by the lesson, more distracted and as a result they are more likely to show undesirable irresponsible behaviors, which negatively effect the lesson, causing its abandonment by the pupils, or disturbance of the classmates.

The same phenomenon was also encountered by the secondary school teachers, who when being transferred into the 9th grade schools found themselves unqualified to face up with this new reality of the education reformation.

On the other side 20% of the teachers show their disapproval of the above opinions, claiming that all the educators are able to manage the 9th grade pupils. They express that the current educational system has not undergone any radical changes concerning the curriculum, pupils' behaviors or the teaching methodology used with this category of pupils.

However, it is to be emphasized that most disturbing problems negatively effect and damage the management of the teaching process. Furthermore, this new system was not preceded by informative sessions for both the teachers and pupils. The application of the altertext (alternative course books) seemed to further complicate the situation too.

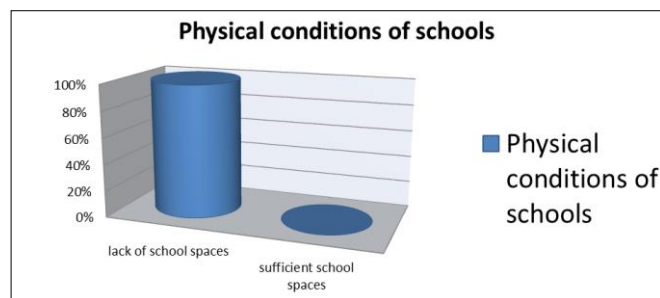


Figure 3. Physical conditions of schools

As it can be easily noticed from the above chart, another essential issue pointed out by the teachers through the questionnaire is the lack of necessary physical spaces in our schools. It resulted that all the educators share the same opinion regarding this topic. They claim that the addition of another school year has brought a higher number of pupils in the same spaces. Schools' directories have been obliged to increase the number of pupils in each class in order to create spaces for the 9th grade pupils.

Moreover, even the foreign languages' laboratories, or labs of other subjects that schools used to have were changed into classes not functioning as laboratories any more. Therefore this lack of spaces as a result of the addition of another school year, and the increased number of pupils per class has created managing difficulties for the teachers especially with the 9th grade pupils.

The lack of other recent professional studies over this issue leads to the impossibility of drawing general final conclusions and suggestions regarding this topic. The major difficulties that this school reformation is causing to the Albanian educational system, seem to result in slow gradual changes of improvement. Regarding the analysis and result of the data gathered, it is to be emphasized that part of the reason of this lack of desirable improvement it is also the factors which have affected classroom management in the 9th grade system during the teaching process.

This recent analysis of the reformation process has shown that these factors have influenced not only classroom management but their effect is also noticed on the quality of the teaching process. The results of this case study expressed in percentages (%) raise a set of concerns regarding the appropriateness of

the new implemented educational system.

Some of the most worrying concerns encountered by teachers due to the application of these reformation initiatives are:

- Disciplinary problems with the 9th grade concerning their disruptive behaviors
- Lack of motivation and concentration by the pupils
- Lack of teaching capacities in schools and lack of physical spaces
- Lack of informative sessions and preparatory professional ones for the teachers
- Simultaneous implementation of the reformatory system and the use of altertext (alternative course books) etc.

These intensive educational reforms aiming to reach European standards of education, often lead to a delay and doubt in the improvements they are supposed to provide, sometimes even causing chaotic situations for all participating actors. Educators' reactions have shown that in many cases these changes even affect negatively in the achievement of a well managed classroom environment, causing disturbance during the teaching process.

However, it is to be emphasized that the new implemented system constitutes a new one for the Albanian education. Therefore more studies and professional researches are required to be conducted in this field and for this group of pupils concerning the problems of the 9th grade in order to reach useful conclusions, and find effective strategies which would help and facilitate the work of educators in achieving a well managed classroom as well as increase the quality of education reflected in the pupils' school results.

Conclusions

This current research on the reform implementation in Albanian schools has undoubtedly encouraged specialists and educators to further pursue the idea of educational integration. The study describes only one segment of a more detailed and elaborated research which can be regarded and treated from different perspectives, whose target institutions would be the Albanian 9th grade schools. The standard established by the Ministry of Education regarding the objectives aimed to be reached, and the reforms made in the field of education can be realized by

achieving a successfully managed classroom by the teachers. These would consequently lead to the increasing quality inside the managing process of education.

The new 9th grade constitutes an innovation in the field of education in Albania. This reform taken to improve Lower Secondary Education system, part of the national strategy of Albanian education, must be viewed and considered as a very positive development. One of the most easily distinguished advantages is the increase of pupils attending secondary school. Referring to the statistics of the Ministry of Ministry of Education and Sport, it can be said that in 2008, 18% of the pupils were not motivated to continue further studies. Meanwhile in 2011, with the application of the new system only 10% did not continue further studies in the secondary schools in Albania (Ministry of Education and Sport, Strategjia Kombetare e Arsimit, 2004-2015).

It appears that the application of the new system compared to the previous years' problems, increased school obligatory attendance with one more year, pupils are more mature, they are also nearer the legal age required by the labour market. This innovative system needs to be considered as a positive and higher quality system in the field of education, and not as a challenge versus pupils, teachers or institutions. The achievement of success concerning the implementation of this innovative system was based on the finding of a coherent educational managing philosophy, which aimed to guarantee the increase of quality of Albanian education even for the future generations.

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