



## Study on the Functional Features of the School as Community Center and its Expected Impact on Local Communities in Albania

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### Abstract

*In this paper, the main aspects related to the tasks and functioning of the School as Community Center (SCC) and their impact on the life of local communities are addressed. The reform for the establishment and operation of the SCC has been conceived by referring to the best international practices, standards and requirements provided for in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. SCC are institutions of pre-university education that serve to meet the needs of society for the education of the generation through the realization of the process of collaboration and cooperation of students-teachers-parents-community. Based on National Strategy of preuniversity education system SCC in Albania operate in accordance with the defined standards: (i) Ensuring a quality education for every student, (ii) Ensuring the social, emotional and health well-being of students, (iii) Community engagement and development, (iv) Decision-making common, (v) Respect for diversity. SCC as inclusive educational institutions influence the coexistence and good governance of the affairs and interests of local communities.*

**Keywords:** School, community center, features, impact, local community, Albania

### 1. Introduction

As part of efforts to reform the pre-university education system, the Ministry of Education and Sports, in 2013, took the initiative to establish and put into operation the School as Community Center (SCC). This initiative was included as one of the strategic priorities and objectives in the Pre-University Education Strategy 2014-2020.

Policies and programs for the transformation of schools into Community Centers are driven by the needs of society to create and give the opportunity to all its members, regardless of age, educational level, status and economic interests, to be active in social life, to contribute and benefit from cooperation with other members of society. Meanwhile, it is important to emphasize that the SCC is an important and effective way and instrument through which society achieves, not only to develop the education and training of citizens under the conditions of the democratic system, but also to realize democracy in the education system. (John Dewey, 1916).

The main mission of the school is the education of the new generation to prepare for facing the challenges of life. Education and teaching, with aims the creation and developments of performances to the young generation, in accordance with the demands that arise from the needs for psycho-social and professional behavior of the citizens, in

accordance with the current stage and perspective of the economic-social and democratic development of the country, are among the basic duties of the school. Meanwhile, in a democratic society, the school cannot and should not perform these tasks as a single institution, unaffected and independent of the social-cultural environment in which it develops its activity. The current trends in the development of the pre-university education system show the need for intervention in this system. Among these interventions, the process of transforming the traditional school into a school-community center is gaining more and more ground. In the academic school year 2021-2022, in Albania, in the pre-university education system, there were 200 schools transformed into SCC. Meanwhile, in the National Education Strategy 2021-2026, strengthening the network of Community Center Schools is one of the main objectives that are intended to be realized.

## 2. Brief Review on Literature

The operation of the school as a community center is an idea for the realization of which efforts are early. The school as a community center is considered an effective possibility not only for the successful realization of their basic tasks and objectives as an institution that teaching and should prepares citizens of the new generation, but also as a support for social processes that encourage and support the capacities building and development of the culture of cooperation in communities. Hanifan (1916) based on the analysis of the results achieved in the Rural School Community Center - West Virginia, has emphasized that the organization of the school as a community center creates the opportunity to unite people, to accumulate social capital and therefore "...improvements in community may begin. The more the people do for themselves the larger will community social capital become, and the greater will be the dividends upon the social investment". According to Earl Hutchinson (1948) "The true community school is one that becomes a center of community (or neighborhood) living. Its contributes all its resources to the improvement of the community, and in turn, of the state, nation, and world, and it serves both young and old".

Genn, J. M. (1971) in the treatment of issues related to the most effective model according to which the community school should be implemented and functioned, a special place is devoted to problems related to the meaning of the term *community* and its use in the function of finding that the best choice for the Community School model. Researchs on this argument aims to identify and evaluate the effects that the school as a community center has on the feeling and behavior of students as part of a school community. (Karen, 2000)

According to Bala, N. (2016) "The school as community center, a friendly school for all is an approach (a promotional and developmental movement) to turn the school into the place where the partnership school-familycommunity is built and where it is cooperated to develop the full potential of each student"

Kashahu and Satka (2022) point out that the School-Community Center (SCC) is a model based on the American practice of education. The main purpose of SCC is "to improve the educational experience and minimize inequalities in education". Meanwhile, these authors emphasize that "... SCC differ greatly from each other both within the same state, but also between states. The model that is applied for their construction and functioning is chosen depending on the goals and the social-cultural and political-economic contexts of each country of society".

In the study related to the effectiveness of community school, Heers, et al. (2016) concluded that extracurricular activities that take place in community schools affect reduced dropout and risky behavior of pupils as well as improved their academic performance.

Bordia, D. (2022) argued that "Schools play an important role in the development of the community we live in. They can adopt different strategies to foster the development of the community we live in. With the right education, students can be encouraged to contribute to their local communities and help develop them"

According to most part of researcher one of important component that school as community center should developed is School-community partnerships. Sepanik and Thaddeus Brown (2021) point out that "School-community partnerships are a popular evidence-based tool for bringing additional resources and services into schools" According to them: "Through partnerships, additional opportunities are created for the school to be supported at the level of the program, staff and policies, which affect the transformation of the school and the creation of healthy learning environments where all students experience the conditions they need to learn and grow to their greatest potential". Given the identified impact of school-community partnerships, the building partnerships has been highlighted as a key school focus for school improvement. Teo et al (2021) highlights the importance of school-community partnerships as one of nine key domains for school improvement. Based on a bibliographic analysis of the publications related to this issue, they confirm that, "... a growing recognition of the importance of school-community partnerships in promoting improved student outcomes, engagement and wellbeing, post schooling trajectories, and the development of cultural and social capital".

The process of transforming the school into a school-community center should be realized as a multifactorial process. According to Blank et al (2003) at least four important dimensions must be included in this transformation

process, which are the capillary pillars on which the pre-university education system is supported and functions.: (i) *Pupils learning*. (ii) *School effectiveness*; (iii) *Family engagement*; and (iv) *Community vitality*.

Bingler, et al. (2003) referring to the Department of Education's National Symposium on School Design in October 1998 and the fact that learning is a lifelong process, design is always evolving, and resources are limited, they define six simple principles on which SCC should be built and function: (1) enhance teaching and learning and accommodate the needs of all learners; (2) serve as a center of the community; (3) result from a planning and design process that involves all community interests; (4) provide for health, safety, and security; (5) make effective use of available resources; and (6) be flexible and adaptable.

The school as a community center turned out to be an effective institution which had a significant impact on dealing with the problems generated by the Covid-19 pandemic in the pre-university education system. This fact is communicated by different foreign and Albanian researchers (Hatzichristou, et al, 2021; Buxton et al. 2023, Kume and Sallaku, 2022).

### 3. SCC - Albanian Experiences

In the Albanian public policies and programs that deal with issues of the implementation of SCC, the operation of these schools is understood and expected to be realized as a promotional and development movement, which has as its objective the transformation of the school from a closed institution focused only on teaching and learning, in an institution where the interaction, collaboration and creation should be the main important characteristics. Moreover, this approach aims to transform the school into an institution where the school-family-community partnership is built. The cooperation between different actors like pupils, teachers, parents and local community for the development of the full potential of each pupils and for the improvement of the quality of life of the entire community around the school should be the important objective of this schools (IDM, 2019). Based on this point of view for SCC in Albania, in Albanian Strategy of Education the following are accepted as standards that must be achieved: (i) Ensuring a quality education for every student, (ii) Ensuring the social, emotional and health well-being of students, (iii) Commitment and community development; (iv) Shared decision-making, (v) Respect for diversity.

In the Albanian documents that deal with SCC issues, the field of action and the instruments that should be used are detailed, with the objective of meeting the above standards. Their conception is made in accordance with the functional features of SCC, which can be summarized as follows:

- SCC is realized and functions as an institution that aims at the qualitative development of the school and the training of children and young people as citizens ready and able to contribute to their communities.
- SCC develops the necessary capacities for the realization of the joint work of students - teachers - parents - community, not being limited only within the school hours.
- SCC functions as an open educational institution and at the service of all other members of the community.
- SCC develops capacities needed to perform functions that serve the needs of students, families and the community;
- SCC functions as an institution in the realization of which parents also contribute as co-educators and for joint decision-making.
- SCC ensures social cohesion.

The drafting of policies, programs and projects for SCC in Albania has been done once again having as the main reference the principles, requirements and standards defined in Convention on the Rights of Children. Their main objective is the realization of the comprehensive approach that connects all aspects of the reform in education, the basic principle of which is to put the pupils at the center of attention in all the activities that are organized and implemented in the school.

In the process of learning and education the pupils face a complex of issues and problems of different natures. For their solution, having in every case the interest of children and young people as a priority, it is required that teachers, parents and other actors cooperate and build a partnership as functional as possible. Thus, more spaces and opportunities are created for the conception and realization of projects that serve to enable students, parents and teachers to contribute to their communities.

Referring to the international experience, SCC in Albania are developed as institutions which, in the first place, have as their main purpose the development of functions in the service of the functional and effective realization of the pupilist-teacher-parents-community partnership. To achieve this goal, SCC engages in the identification of issues and problems that condition this partnership. The main goal and expectation of SCC in Albania is to create opportunities for families, the community, pupils and teachers to work together. Their realization is expected to be the result of work and achievements for:

- (i) (drafting and implementing a sustainable and comprehensive Strategy and Action Plan for children, young people and families;
- (ii) the development of capacities for carried out of formal and informal activities that serve the learning process;
- (iii) building and implementation of a friendly environment that offers and integrates services, which enable the family and the community for better life and effective school.

#### **4. SCC – Reform Dimension in the Albanian Pre-University Education System**

SCC is an important dimension of the reform in the pre-university education system in Albania. Their implementation is supported by Law no. 69/2012 "On the pre-university education system in the Republic of Albania". A set of by-laws that was compiled for implementation of this law, the National strategy of pre-university education 2013-2020, 2021-2026, as well as other documents that support the principle of the operation of an open school where the cooperation between pupils-teachers-parents and community should be an important dimension are the legal framework related to implementation and development of the SCC. SCC is the institution at the center of which is the pupils.

The impact that SCC is expected to achieve is related to the fact, that such a school, more and better than any other educational institution, is able to provide:

- inclusiveness without gender and other types of differences;
- better achievements of children and young people;
- guarantee for stronger health;
- active participation in pupils decision-making, involvement and wide contribution of the family;
- openness to the community and local structures;
- protection for children and young people.

SCC creates conditions for local communities, students and their parents as well as other members of the community to be contributors and beneficiaries in the development of the process of education, coexistence and good governance of community interests and affairs.

SCC achieves these goals through:

- academic development of children and young people;
- citizens engagement and their contribution to solving community problems;
- supporting the family, in particular to strengthen its role in the learning and education process of children;
- increasing and improving social services with a focus on the safety and health of children and young people;
- increasing capacity and quality in community services.

Referring to the situations and problems currently faced by the Albanian society, the need for the implementation and deepening of the reforms, which have the SCC as its focus, has been defined by the Albanian government as one of the strategic priorities in the development of pre-university education. Such a priority was based on the assessment of the needs of children and young people have for a successful education process. Having as their important objective the strengthening of the collaboration between pupils, teachers, parents and community, aiming the realization of common objectives and goals that they have, SCC is valued among the effective and most promising solutions to respond successfully the challenges of our society faced in the process of democratic development. Such schools are the institutions of the future in the Albanian system of pre-university education.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The reform for the establishment and operation of the SCC, conceived based on international experience, standards and requirements provided for in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is developed as part of strategic priorities in the framework of the implementation of the National Education Strategy in Albania.

SCC in Albania are conceived as institutions of pre-university education that serve to meet the needs of society for the education of the new generation through its development as a process of cooperation and cooperation of students-teachers-parents-community.

Policies and programs for the implementation and development of SCC aim to create conditions for the development of their functional capacities in accordance with the defined standards: (i) Ensuring a quality education for every student; (ii) Ensuring the social, emotional and health well-being of students; (iii) Community engagement and development; (iv) Shared decision-making, (v) Respect for diversity.

The development of SCC as an inclusive educational institution affects the coexistence and good governance of the affairs and interests of local communities. SCC are future institutions in the pre-university education system in Albania.

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