



Promotion of Soft skills in the K-12 Education Curricula: The Case of Virginia State - USA, Portugal and Albania

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Abstract

Rapid demographic, technological, and labor market developments characterize the 21st century. To succeed in this context, students require skills that help them keep up with the fast changes of the times beyond the knowledge of traditional subjects developed in schools. This study seeks to reinforce the relevance of promoting soft skills in K-12 Education Curricula in three different countries, namely in the states of Virginia - USA, Portugal, and Albania. This study is based on the desk research of the curricula of these three countries to describe the strategies and measures taken for the promotion of soft skills in the education system to extract valuable data for the reforming of the education system and, more specifically, for the improvement of the K-12 curriculum in Albania, considering the challenges of the implementation process regarding the key competencies, which represent a system of knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary for development, empowerment, and employment of each individual.

Keywords: Competency-based Curriculum, Soft Skills, K-12 Education, Curriculum Reform, Educational Strategies

1. Introduction

Social, economic, and technological developments today require schools to develop in students the knowledge, skills, values, personal and social attitudes, and those related to the world of work and the free market. In this context, the development of soft skills takes a particular priority in today's society. These interpersonal skills characterize a person's ability to interact with others and complement hard skills. "Soft skills complement academic knowledge and contribute to

the overall development of students, enabling them to navigate the complexities of both personal and professional environments effectively" (Andrews & Higson, 2008). Soft skills are considered interdisciplinary to multiple fields of living in society, as they refer to a higher order of mental complexity associated with a responsible, reflective, and active perspective on life. On the other hand, these skills are multidimensional, integrating communication skills, critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving, awareness, creativity, and emotional intelligence, making them invaluable at both personal and social levels.

A Polish study on the development of competencies by students states that the obstacle faced by the labor market in Poland is the effective alignment of skills with the requirements of businesses and the facilitation of the acquisition of these skills by prospective workers, including students, prior to entering their professional careers (Matuszewska-Kubicz & Warwas, 2023). Soft skills complement hard skills. Furthermore, they are harder to quantify, but they are essential for successfully facing life challenges and adapting to them positively.

In the meantime, it is relevant to recognize that the concept of skills is closely linked to the concept of ethical values. When the orientation to action becomes evident, its intrinsic ethical orientation becomes equally apparent. It is important to remember that once competence is expressed in the real world, a person can be a competent thief as well as a competent mechanic (De Carvalho, 2013).

The school occupies a central place in developing soft skills, and it is here that students learn the rules for living in groups. The school curriculum must contribute to an inclusive and integrated vision of education, which is not limited to the apprehension of cognitive content, as it involves values, behaviors, attitudes, and the inner world (Ndrio, 2019). Such education can find solutions for serious problems that societies face today, making students more aware and sensitive, helping them to better deal with their doubts, emotions, and feelings, to understand the origin and avoid the stereotypes, to live harmoniously in society, to be responsible citizens, to promote creativity.

According to the survey carried out in Albania by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank, employers need and require soft skills on the job, focusing on problem-solving, teamwork, and reliability (WorldBank, 2018). In the recruiting process, organizations rate highly a set of soft skills that affect workers' performance, including skills that have proven critical to long-term labor market success. For this reason, the "Curricular Framework of Pre-university Education (PuE) of the Republic of Albania", drawn up by the Ministry of Education and Sports in 2014, clarifies that:

As society undergoes continual transformation, new needs emerge, and novel relationships develop within both the social and labor markets. Technological innovation, evolving human aspirations, and innovative development strategies also arise, necessitating a comprehensive and adaptive approach to address these multifaceted changes. Given the dynamic nature of societal evolution, addressing emerging needs, evolving relationships, and transformations within the labor market is imperative. Technological innovation, shifting human aspirations, and novel development strategies must be systematically integrated into Public and Urban Economics (PuE). (IZHA, 2014)

In this study, we will analyze the strategies used to treat soft skills in the curricula of three countries: Virginia-USA, Portugal, and Albania, with the aim of making valid recommendations for the Albanian curriculum.

The promotion of soft skills in K-12 education curricula varies across Virginia (USA), Portugal, and Albania, reflecting differences in educational strategies and priorities. In Virginia, the curriculum strongly emphasizes preparing students for the workforce by integrating soft skills like communication, teamwork, and adaptability, which are crucial for success in a rapidly changing labor market. Portugal, through its competency-based education reforms, also focuses on the development of soft skills, ensuring students are equipped with personal and social competencies needed for their holistic development. Albania, on the other hand, is in the process of reforming its curriculum to better align with these global trends, particularly by addressing challenges in implementing key competencies, including problem-solving, creativity, and teamwork. Despite differences in implementation, all three regions recognize the vital role soft skills play in preparing students for both personal and professional success in the 21st century.

2. Methodology

This paper employs a content analysis technique that thoroughly examines the article "Promoting Soft Skills in K-12 Education—An Analysis of Curricula in Virginia, USA; Portugal; and Albania." The analysis entails comparing and contrasting the unique approaches adopted by Virginia, Portugal, and Albania to integrate soft skills into their respective curricula.

Diverse approaches to soft skills development are observed in the three countries, reflecting their distinct cultural, social, and economic contexts. Collaborative learning emerges as a common theme, with Virginia and Portugal

prioritizing project-based learning while Albania emphasizes cooperative learning strategies. The need for teacher training is also highlighted to ensure the effective implementation of soft skills instruction across all three regions.

3. Results of the Study - Content Analysis

3.1 Soft skills literature in the United States

The rise of the importance of soft skills in K-12 education in the United States has been well-documented in various studies. Garcia (2016) defines soft skills as noncognitive skills, "Broadly, these skills encompass those traits that are not directly represented by cognitive skills or by formal conceptual understanding, but instead by socio-emotional or behavioral characteristics that are not fixed traits of the personality, and that are linked to the educational process, either by being nurtured in the school years or by contributing to the development of cognitive skills in those years (or both)"

According to a Brookings Institute report titled "Hard Thinking on Soft Skills" (Whitehurst 2016), if educators in the United States wish to improve soft skills, they should prioritize students who are significantly off-track in critical areas of their social or emotional behaviour or self-management skills; prioritize teachers, coaches, and other adults in the school with whom students spend a lot of time and for whom convergent evidence suggests problems in interpersonal interactions; develop, communicate clearly, and provide learning opportunities and meaningful consequences for observance of rules and expectations for respectful social interactions; and use measures of soft skills that are naturally occurring and useful as feedback at the classroom and individual levels.

3.2 The Case of the State of Virginia and Soft Skills

Virginia has not always been out front in the creation of a universal educational system, let alone soft skills in the elementary, middle, and secondary school years. Due to its history with slavery and racist and discriminatory practices, the state has had a very controversial history. When it comes to efforts to educate all citizens, particularly in soft skills or workforce readiness skills, there have been inequities and injustices against students of color and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

In the United States, most educational historians start with the year 1954 as a turning point in understanding K-12 education policy. In 1954, a unanimous, all-white Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation in schools violated the U.S. Constitution's 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law. The Justices agreed with the NAACP and the plaintiffs that education was needed to get ahead in a modern world and segregated schools denied Black students an equal education that was not only wrong but unconstitutional. The *Brown v. Board* decision said, "In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education" (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954). In this monumental decision, the Supreme Court acknowledged that education and skills were necessary to succeed in the economy of the 20th Century.

Ten years later, Virginia and other Southern states received legislative backing for federal enforcement of school desegregation with the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VI, a crucial clause in the Civil Rights Act, forbade the use of federal funds for initiatives that discriminated against people based on their race, color, or national origin. ESEA assisted school districts across the U.S. in providing for an education that engaged and assisted students from poor communities in getting a proper education (Frankenberg & Taylor, 2015).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) would be signed into law by President George Bush in 2002 and would usher in an era of having public schools in the U.S. focusing on achievement and cognitive abilities. Phrases such as "high-stakes testing" and "teaching to the test" became the norm in Virginia and the other 49 states. NCLB focused education policy in Virginia on gaps in student achievement (as measured by proficiency levels in standardized assessments). It is worth noting that these tests that were developed showed significant gaps based on race, economic disadvantage, language, and other demographic variables (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2008). For years, NCLB forced schools to stop focusing on soft skills.

In 2014, Governor Terry McAuliffe, who was a businessman and had campaigned against the detrimental impact of standardized tests, instructed his administration to create workforce and employable skills. Under his staff's direction, the Virginia Board of Education (VBOE) committed to conducting a comprehensive review and revision of Virginia's Standards of Learning and the regulations governing student achievement and graduation requirements (Commonwealth Learning Partnership, 2020). A Standards of Learning Innovation Committee was created in 2014 by the Virginia General

Assembly, and ultimately recommended changes in K-12 policy that would help students succeed in a changing Virginia economy.

In 2015, the U.S. Congress passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was signed into law by President Barack Obama. Virginia and other states were able to take into account factors such as attendance, unequal exposure to exclusionary discipline, and access to advanced courses because of ESSA, which was a novel approach (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-b). ESSA provided increased flexibility to Virginia to develop and implement goals for school quality and student success that measured more than just proficiency on standardized tests. It allowed states to provide targeted support and interventions on equity and soft skills in learning.

These changes in state and federal educational policies provided an opportunity to rethink how Virginia approached K-12 curriculum and graduation requirements. The Virginia Board of Education and members of the Virginia General Assembly heard from students, families and educators that K-12 schools should be more than just passing tests. In 2016, the Virginia General Assembly passed bills directing the Virginia Board of Education to develop a profile of learner and graduate based on "5 C's," - critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-c). The Commonwealth Learning Partnership define the 5 C's as:

- critical thinking – students develop critical thinking skills when they have opportunities to explore issues, develop questions and hypotheses, consider evidence and synthesize results,
- creative thinking – students learn how to integrate diverse perspectives.
- collaboration – students learn how to integrate diverse perspectives and rely on fellow learners to achieve a common goal,
- communication – students develop their communication skills and can listen, speak, read and compose information for their benefit as well as those around them,
- citizenship – students will integrate diverse perspectives and rely on fellow learners to achieve a common goal. (Commonwealth Learning Partnership, 2020).

The 5 C's principles informed the creation of the Profile of a Virginia Learner and the Profile of a Virginia Graduate, which was a new set of expectations for student instruction and graduation from K-12 public schools (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-c). The Profile of a Virginia Graduate refers to the Virginia Board of Education's desire for students in K-12 schools to be prepared for job opportunities in a 21st economy and to be successful in work and in life. These "Profiles," as they are known, are the framework for the Virginia Board of Education's graduation requirements in the following areas: content knowledge, workplace skills, career planning, and community and responsibility.

A high school graduate in Virginia today must:

- acquire and apply relevant academic information;
- match employment prospects with knowledge, abilities, and personal interests;
- acquire and exhibit effective workplace abilities, traits, and conduct,
- respect and establish relationships with many communities
- comprehend civic and personal accountability

There are several state-level organization and agencies that assist school districts in Virginia with the implementation of the "Profiles" and with college and workforce readiness skills. For more than 30 years, the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education of the Virginia Department of Education has sponsored studies on workplace preparation skills in Virginia in collaboration with a number of organizations. The Office monitors and oversees the awarding of earning graduation credit and a digital badging and credentialing for career and technical education programs in K-12 public schools in Virginia, which serve more than 670,000 students in grades 6-12 (Virginia Department of Education, n.d.-a).

In addition, Virginia's CTE Resource Center was established by a grant in 1982 to assist the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) in establishing career and technology-based programs in K-12 schools (Virginia Career and Technology Education Resource Center, n.d.). The Resource Center has worked with VDOE on creating curricula resources, materials and reviews for Virginia's Workplace Readiness Skills and its associated programs. The Resource Center also assists VDOE in the design and implementation of competency-based career and technical programs.

3.3 *The Future of Virginia's Economy and Workforce Readiness Skills in Schools*

Virginia is a state that is changing rapidly in terms of its careers, workforce, and demographics. A 2017 report from the Weldon Cooper Center at the University of Virginia found several interrelated trends concerning the changing needs and skill demands of the workplace in Virginia. The report declared that the state's K-12 schools needed to adapt a new more

modern curriculum and pedagogical methods to address the change workforce needs. To address this changing economy in Virginia, the report proposed 22 soft-skills for students in K-12 public schools in Virginia. Some examples of these soft-skills discussed in the report are:

*creativity and innovation,
critical thinking and problem solving,
initiative and self-direction,
interpersonal skills,
conflict resolution,
listening and speaking,
teamwork,
"big picture" thinking,
career and life management,
continuous learning and adaptability,
information literacy,
and, job-specific tools and technologies.*
(Crespin, 2017).

In 2023, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) prepared a report titled, Review of Career Readiness in the Commonwealth of Virginia, which compiled information from interviews with state leaders and stakeholders in government agencies and obtained data from current and former students and reviewed the state's career preparedness data, research, and policy. The research evaluated Virginia's public system and K-12 students' preparedness for the workforce. Three thematic areas emerged in the report for public school systems in Virginia:

*effectiveness: how the career readiness focus engages students,
efficiency: how the career readiness system understands future work and employment opportunities,
and, equitability: how the career readiness system addresses inequalities.*
(Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, December 2023).

To address these themes, the report listed several recommendations that Virginia political and school leaders should consider in making sure students were career ready. These themes focused on updating Virginia's career readiness curriculum, hiring more staff with career readiness expertise, adopting new approaches to career readiness, focusing on skilled trades, removing barriers to labor participation, and engaging students in digital technologies. (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, December 2023).

3.4 Soft skills literature in the United States

The rise of the importance of soft skills in K-12 education in the United States has been well-documented in various studies. Broadly, these skills encompass those traits that are not directly represented by cognitive skills or by formal conceptual understanding, but instead by socio-emotional or behavioral characteristics that are not fixed traits of the personality and that are linked to the educational process, either by being nurtured in the school years or by contributing to the development of cognitive skills in those years (or both)" (p. 6) is how Garcia (2016) defines soft skills, which are no cognitive abilities.

According to a Brookings Institute research titled "Hard Thinking on Soft Skills" (Whitehurst 2016), American educators should concentrate on the following if they wish to improve soft skills: emphasize behavior rather than characteristics and dispositions, cultivate, communicate effectively, and offer opportunities for learning and significant consequences for following rules and expectations for polite social interactions,

3.5 The Case of Portugal: The Promotion of Soft Skills in Education System

The education system faces different challenges caused by the exponential growth of information and the global problems the world is facing today, such as climate change, violation, unequal opportunities, humanitarian crises, among others (NSCE, 2017). In that sense, the investment in developing soft skills, transversal to the different key competencies for Lifelong Learning, translated into values and skills, is crucial. These skills enable the students to understand the world, seek solutions that contribute to sustainable and inclusive development, and respond to the complex challenges of the 21st century.

Portugal is committed to following the Europe 2020 Strategy and the new strategic agenda (2019-2024) to set up a European Education Area (EEA) by 2025. This means investing in the population's education and skills, including issues related to inclusion, innovation, sustainability, and European values reflected in education and training.

The government has made investments to advance the European component of education, emphasizing training, international collaboration, and higher education, in an effort to raise the skill levels of Portuguese citizens. Education and training are recognized in Portugal as the cornerstones of the Portuguese people's future. In order to address the issues that society is currently facing with regard to sustainability, interculturality, equality, identity, participation in democratic life, innovation, and creativity, among other things, the Portuguese government is concentrating on raising the standard of education (NSCE, 2017).

Portugal focuses its policies on five strategic areas, reflecting its commitment to implementing the European Education Area 2025 (Euridyce, 2021).

1. Improving and ensuring equal rights and success of everyone in education and training.
2. Reinforcing lifelong learning and mobility for all.
3. Improving the skills and boosting the motivation of education staff.
4. Strengthening European higher education.
5. Supporting the ecological and digital transition in education.

All these strategic areas are focused on promoting soft skills translated into cross-curricular competencies that include principles and values transversal to different curricular components and levels of education. In the Portuguese education system, the cross-curricular competencies are stipulated in the Student's Profile by the End of Compulsory Schooling, which is a reference for development of curricula and for the work to be carried out in each school, in line with the skills development of the century XXI (DR Diário da República, 2017). These competencies, principles, and values are approached in the Citizenship and Development component that is based on a holistic perspective of the individual, recognizing the promotion of democratic citizenship, the promotion of the inclusion and educational success of all children and young people, from preschool to upper secondary education, developing respect for differences, healthy, peaceful and democratic relationships, interaction and closeness between students and other members of the educational community (Euridyce, 2021).

The cross-curricular competencies are also promoted through the intercultural perspective of education that is part of Citizenship Education. It represents a transversal and compulsory dimension in all the curricula of the Portuguese educational system since 2001. The Citizenship Education recognizes diversity as an opportunity and source of learning for all, respecting the multicultural nature of today's societies, while developing the capacity to communicate and encourage social interaction, which creates identity and a common sense of belonging to humanity (Euridyce, 2021).

The national curriculum includes "Citizenship and Development" as one of its components. Its objective is to offer the best possible learning environment that influences a person's civic position by taking into account interpersonal, social, and intercultural aspects. It employs three complementing methods:

- independent subjects in upper primary and lower secondary education;
- transdisciplinarity in lower primary education;
- a cross-cutting curriculum element that is taught with input from all topics and upper secondary education teaching components (NSCE, 2017).

The three groups into which the various Citizenship Education topics are divided have the following traits: 2) at least in two elementary education levels (lower to upper primary or lower secondary education); 3) applied optionally to any school year; 3) required for all educational levels. As previously stated, all of these areas must concentrate on the development of the values, principles, and areas of expertise listed in the student's profile by the end of compulsory schooling (NSCE, 2017).

3.6 National Strategy for Citizenship Education

Regarding the Citizenship and Development curriculum component, the Portuguese government launched in September 2017, the National Strategy for Citizenship Education (ENEC), which consolidates the new curricular component of citizenship and development at all levels of education and compulsory schooling, proposing that students learn through plural and responsible participation in building citizenship and more inclusive societies within the framework of democracy, respect for diversity and the human rights protection. The ENEC resulted from the Working Group on Education for Citizenship (GTEC), which was appointed by a joint decree of the Secretary of States for Citizenship and Equality and Education. The ENEC's goal is to contribute to a solid construction of the humanistic training of students so

that they assume their citizenship, respecting the basic democratic values and human rights, both at an individual and social level. The emphasis on citizenship education seeks to guarantee "a set of rights and duties that must be conveyed in the education of Portuguese children and young people so that in the future they will be adults with a civic conduct that favors the equality in interpersonal relationships, integration of difference, respect for Human Rights and the valorization of values and concepts of national citizenship" (NSCE, 2017).

The proposal of GTEC represented a reference document to be implemented in the 2017-2018 school year in public and private schools. One of the recommendations of this proposal was the reinforcing of Citizenship Education from preschool education to the end of compulsory education. In the component of the Citizenship and Development curriculum, the teacher's mission is to prepare students for life including their democratic, participatory, and humanistic dimensions. This component considers the challenges of a growing social and cultural diversity, namely the promotion of tolerance, non-discrimination, and solution for overcoming violent radicalism. The humanist training of teachers is seen to be fundamental for the development of Citizenship and Development, as it facilitates the interconnection between the subjects, learning, and the promotion of cross-curricular competencies addressed in this curriculum component (NSCE, 2017). The following factors were taken into consideration when defining the Teacher's Profile: • The capacity to recognize and honor cultural diversity, as well as the development of critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving skills;

- Improve educational opportunities in collaboration with the community;
- Have organizational experience and understand how to work in a team;
- Participated in Citizenship Education training workshops;
- Have practical knowledge of project process;
- Have proficiency with technology tools;
- Having the capacity to build and preserve relationships of empathy with kids;
- Having the drive to complete the assignment without external pressure;

Acknowledged as the qualified instructor to oversee the Citizenship Education course during the proposal's development, GTEC met and listened to the main stakeholders in promoting Citizenship Education in the school environment, particularly students, teachers, and representatives of civil society, to reinforce work principles and practices with schools. The main issues considered in GTEC's proposal were related to the following areas (National Strategy for Citizenship Education (NSCE, 2017).

Methods for achieving these objectives in the classroom; • Citizenship Education and its approach to each educational level; • Students' certification in the Citizenship and Development discipline upon completion of mandatory education;

Training and involvement of teachers;

Content to be posted on the Citizenship Education Platform

The Citizenship Education is approached in two levels:

At class level. During preschool until lower primary education, the teacher has the responsibility to choose the areas and to decide what kind of skills will be promoted during the school year, in accordance with the Strategy for Citizenship Education. "Citizenship and Development" is taught as a separate subject and is promoted as an autonomous subject in upper primary and lower secondary education. "Citizenship and Education" has provided and enhanced an interdisciplinary approach whenever there is possible to create bridges with other subjects. In the primary and secondary education, as well as in the vocational courses, the components of "Citizenship and Development" are promoted considering the contributions of the different subjects and teaching components. Regarding the assessment criteria of the Citizenship and Development subject, it is based on the student's participation in the activities carried out in school or in community. It is highly advised that the methods and instruments utilized for assessment, especially diagnostic and formative assessment, take into account and promote the regulation of learning and its contextualization in accordance with the school's Strategy for Citizenship Education objectives, rather than merely evaluating the theory (NSCE, 2017).

At the school level. It is foreseen that citizenship, values, and principles must be promoted in daily practices, contributing to fostering an open and free atmosphere for active participation and discussion that affects the whole community of the school. The methodologies and practices adopted by schools must consider promoting citizenship experiences and adjusting to the different levels of education and teaching. The Strategy for Citizenship Education adopted by the schools includes attitudes, values, rules, practices, principles, and procedures. The successful implementation is related to the opportunities that each school creates for the students to take part in the decision making directly related with them. The projects developed under Citizenship and Development are stimulated to be carried out in partnership with the community and can be shared to other schools from the networking perspective. Each school has the autonomy to monitor and assess its Strategy for Citizenship Education, which must be based on the methodology and

indicators applicable to their culture and governance in relationship with the community and linked to a self-assessment process. The GTEC recommendation for their external assessment is to produce knowledge to foster research studies and projects that can be seen as good practices for the whole education system.

The Strategy for Citizenship Education is coordinated by a National Team for Citizenship Education composed of representatives of government members in Education, Citizenship, and Equality and is implemented under the School Strategy for Citizenship Education (EECE), which should constitute one of the guidelines for the entire Educational Project.

The report, which the national coordinating team must deliver each year, should identify the training needs and priorities in the training actions offered by the School Association Training Centre (CFAE) and other credited entities.

For the development of the Strategy for Citizenship Education, schools are encouraged to build partnerships with other entities outside of schools, including research centers, institutions of higher education, youth organizations, NGOs, local governments, voluntary groups, social media, private companies, among others. The partnership with municipalities is essential for promoting and generating local and regional synergies, which contribute to the development of participatory and citizenship experiences (NSCE, 2017).

In this sense, related to the importance of cooperation between the public and the private sector, the ENEC has established various protocols with private entities distinguished in Portuguese society, which are considered best practices in promoting citizenship education through the development of cross-curricular competencies. An example of cooperation is the Luso-Illyrian Foundation for Human Development (LIDH Foundation, of Portuguese and Albanian founders), which has developed different educational materials related to Values and Citizenship Education in close relationship with the Portuguese Ministry of Education and has provided training to thousands of teachers in national levels and different areas, and since 2009 signed collaboration protocols for the implementation of several educational policies and, more recently, the ENEC. This foundation was developed and launched in 2016 at the Values University, a transdisciplinary and informal/non-formal learning space that uses the original concept of University, meaning "the whole, total, the universe, the world," as a learning, research, and training site for the 21st-century skills making available to the public more than 60 pedagogical and interactive, digital and analog, activities that aim:

1. The development of cross-curricular competencies, exploring human values as common human characteristics;
2. Understanding mind functioning, conflict origin, recognition of stereotypes, and the development of self-reflection, attention, concentration, interest, self-knowledge, creativity, and critical thinking.
3. The contribution to increase the respect for nature that represents the perfect form where universal values can be identified, where the source of inspiration and creativity can be found, knowing that it is through the relationships we establish with nature that we can be able to perceive who we are, where we came from and where we want to go.

3.7 *Soft skills in Albania curriculum*

The history of the Albanian education system is relatively new. It dates back to 1887 when the first Albanian-language school in Korça was established. Until 1944, despite the efforts made by the different governments of the time, the number of schools in Albania was low, and illiteracy was prevalent. In Albania, as in other fields, post-war reforms were also implemented in the education system. The first step in the reform of education was the creation of courses against illiteracy, which were widespread in every corner of Albania from 1945 to 1949 (Ekspozita Muzeale). From 1945 to 1990, the Albanian education system promoted communist ideologies, incorporating political subjects, the History of the Communist Party, and Marxism into every aspect of study. The school organized its activities according to a principle known as "the revolutionary triangle," which consisted of learning, productive work, and physical and military education. All programs and texts were designed around this principle, leading to long-term negative effects on the Albanian education system. The approach during the communist era aimed to prepare a generation in line with the regime's vision of the "Creation of the New Man" (Ekspozita Muzeale). In this context, the emphasis was on memorizing knowledge and excelling in what were considered "core" subjects, such as math, which was believed to determine future success. To this day, critical thinking, problem-solving, and other soft skills that schools should instill in students are not mentioned in any curriculum document.

After the 1990s, the education system began to change, starting with the removal of communist ideologies present in most school subjects. The philosophy of working in schools started to change, and the educational system underwent successive reforms aimed at curricular changes to adapt the school to a new democratic context. "Currently, efforts are

being made for the Pre-University Education System to provide democratic education, taking into account the requirements of the basic principles of equality of opportunities for quality education and respect for individual differences. The proposed reform is part of the completion of this major objective, the details of whose components are provided in this report" (MAS, 2014). Reforms in education during these years aimed at promoting democratic citizenship and developing the necessary skills and competencies, with the aim of the sustainable economic development of Albania, having as a priority the change of their role from the accurate reproduction of subjects to the promotion of growth and the development of critical thinking and digital competencies for participation in the society and economy of Albania.

These reforms in education, aimed at replacing the tradition of rote learning with learning for democratic citizenship and critical thinking, were also supported by non-profit education organizations through major and fruitful projects. A fruitful project called CTRW (Critical Thinking during Reading and Writing) today, we can fairly say that Critical Thinking is widely spread in the Albanian school reality and is largely supported by most Albanian educators, enabling changes in mindset regarding the learning process and the goals he should have in student development (Jashari, 2012).

The education reform in 2014 also brought about changes in the curricula of the pre-university education with the implementation of the curriculum with basic competencies, "The curricular reform being carried out in Albania aims to equip students with several competencies that include such high-level skills as critical thinking, extracting and analyzing information from diverse sources, and using multiple learning strategies, including problem-solving, analysis, and presentation. The new curriculum's key competencies align with key lifelong learning competencies across the European Union. Adopting this approach in the framework of the national curriculum in Albania is seen as an important step in the modernization of the curriculum" (UNESCO, 2017).

The curricula's actual framework emphasizes the relevance of key competencies in the pre-university education system for each individual's development.

The Albanian curriculum reform takes into account:

- needs, current developments, and goals of the educational system announced in various educational policy documents;
- the tradition of the education system, which is the basis for the continuation of the reform;
- the necessity of improving training and education standards;
- the requirement that everyone have equitable access to high-quality training and education;
- the necessity of opening the educational system to the outside world

The ways and means people access information and services are changing continuously. As such, people of all ages need to be equipped with basic competencies that help them adapt to an ever-changing digital world by acquiring knowledge and technical skills and a deep understanding of opportunities, challenges, and ethical, legal, and social matters that accompany new economic, social, and technological developments. These changes require mastering the competencies that enable individuals to manage changes and new situations and to thrive in the ever-changing digital landscape.

These competences are as follows, in line with the objectives of pre-university education:

- Communication and Expression Competence;
- Thinking Competence;
- The ability to learn new things;
- Environmental, entrepreneurial, and life skills;
- Individual proficiency;
- Civic proficiency.
- Proficiency in digital skills (IZHA, 2014).

All of these are related to the concept of competencies for lifelong learning, which enables the preparation of individuals to be successful in personal, social, and professional life. All the key competencies included in the 2014 curriculum framework are related to the development of soft skills.

The development of competencies in the school environment is directly related to the eight main pillars of the "Education and Training 2010" report of the European Council, according to which it is determined that educational systems must be oriented towards the needs of the labor market, for individuals with sustainable knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes (Official Journal of the European Union, 2004). The labor market requirements and soft skills development have also been reflected in the Albanian school curricula. In 2013, the educational reform brought a significant change in the curricular approach, from a system aiming to fulfill objectives to a competency-based approach. This change is also reflected in the most important document for pre-university education, which is the Curriculum Framework. It describes the main orientations and guidelines for the educational system. It gives the general goals of pre-

university education, among which is the achievement of key competencies that all students will acquire after completing upper secondary education. The curricular framework states that the education process will enable students to master the key competencies necessary for life and work. The achievement of these competencies by the student makes it possible to develop soft skills in them.

The learning outcomes for each key competency aim not only to provide information but also to strengthen the interaction, creativity, use of ICT, development of critical thinking, problem-solving, analysis of facts and situations, abstract thinking, and decision-making after evaluating possibilities, connecting these decisions with consequences. Also added to the results list are the management of situations, information, and risk, cooperation with others, taking the initiative, and organizational skills (curricular framework). As can be seen, these results are nothing but soft skills, which make it possible to prepare young people for the labor market and the developing society (IZHA, 2014).

3.8 *The challenges of implementation of the curriculum based on competencies*

Although implementing the competency-based curriculum marks an important step in the Albanian education system, its implementation presents challenges that still need to be overcome. For more than ten years, the competency-based curriculum has been implemented in pre-university education, seeking to bring changes in conceptualizing teaching and its goals. Now, teachers, in addition to working to achieve subject competencies, also work to achieve key competencies, which are closely related to the development of soft skills. However, being a new approach, this curriculum has had difficulties in implementation related to various factors:

The curriculum documents provided by the Agency for Quality Assurance of Pre-University Education and the interviews with pre-university education (K12) teachers show that the documents, which would direct/guide the institutions in measuring and evaluating key competencies, were prepared relatively late.

Only in 2020 did the Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education publish a school quality assessment material stating that the achievement of key competencies should be a priority for the school. This document defines the criteria for evaluating the work done: "The principal leads the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the school's priorities, in the function of the development of basic competencies, which all students must achieve" (ASCAP, 2020a).

According to the provided instructions, teachers must ensure equal educational opportunities for all students, realizing constructive, contextual, interactive, and self-regulated teaching and learning in teaching or life situations and contexts. Students' achievements and progress in mastering key competencies meet the expectations set in the core curriculum. The school must provide safe, appropriate, and inviting learning environments for all students to master the basic competencies.

In 2024, the School's Internal Evaluation Methodology was published, in which one of the criteria is: Teachers provide individualized teaching, adapting the needs of all students to the curriculum for the construction and development of key competencies (ASCAP, 2020b).

The key competencies are mentioned as the main pillars on which educational reform is built. Their primary importance is also emphasized in the Annex to the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework". Key competencies are essential in a knowledgeable society. They guarantee more flexibility in the labor market, allowing the individual to adapt more quickly to constant changes in an increasingly interconnected world. They are also a significant factor in innovation, productivity, and competitiveness, contributing to workers' motivation and satisfaction and the quality of work ". However, the way of measuring them is vague, difficult, and incoherent. In fact, in the orientation program of the state Matura for high school and for language high school (foreign languages) for the subjects: "Albanian language" and "Core literature" for the school year 2023 - 2024", the basic competencies and their assessment are not mentioned, but only subject competencies (ASCAP, 2020c). While in the subject programs, where detailed instructions are given for teaching, the key competencies that the students must achieve are given simply by an example, as follows:

The teacher creates a situation where the students must convince their parents why they should continue their higher studies in another city or abroad. Students must argue why they should live away from their families, e.g., they learn to live independently, manage their income, and care for themselves (ASCAP, 2003).

However, even in the Teacher's Manual, the development of key competencies by students during the teaching-learning process is not a separate process; however, the teacher should consider the connection of key competencies with the competencies of the subjects. To realize this connection in practice, the teacher must select learning situations, activities, methods, and tools suitable for the learning process. When the students develop the competencies of the subject, he is simultaneously developing the key competencies (MASR, 2018). As can be seen from the Ministry of

Education's instruction, the development of key competencies is yet to be given with examples of concrete activities to help teachers develop and promote new and key competencies.

3.9 *The Conception and Development of Key Competencies by Teachers*

The daily lesson planner is the first step teachers take to determine the teaching goals and learning outcomes that will lead to achieving the competencies foreseen by the subject programs. In their work to achieve the curriculum goals, teachers heavily rely on the curriculum framework and subject programs to achieve subject and key competencies. However, there is currently no manual for developing competencies which includes guides for the achievement and evaluation of key competencies and models of lessons and activities. This is due to the general nature of the instructions provided by the Agency for Quality Insurance of Pre-University Education.

Despite all the ongoing support that ASCAP has provided with in-person training and support materials for teachers, the need for improvements persists. A key challenge lies in clearly defining learning outcomes related to knowledge, skills, and attitudes that contribute to the development of subject-specific and key competencies and effectively communicating these outcomes to students (ASCAP, 2021).

Concerning the training made in the framework of the professional development of teachers, it should be said that on the official online training page (<https://trajnime.arsimi.rash.al/>), there are no trainings that have as a theme the promotion and development of key competencies throughout the curriculum. However, more priority is given to inclusivity, ethics, and communication issues. Little importance is given to what happens during the lesson and the learning outcomes that must be achieved at the end of it, especially for key competencies.

3.10 *Results in the implementation of the curriculum based on competencies*

Implementing the competencies-based curriculum proved to be a significant challenge for reforming the Albanian education system. This ongoing reform reflects international policies and represents a European effort to establish a system that would reduce the gap between educational institutions and the labor market. Sustainable knowledge and soft skills (acquired through key competencies) were expected to be the most important human capital assets to emerge from this reform. However, while the expectations of the reform were high, the reality was different. Although the implementation of the reform aimed to improve the education system's situation, measurements through international programs proved the opposite.

Just 16% of Albanian pupils achieved at least a baseline level of creative thinking competency (Level 3), which is much lower than the OECD average of 78%. These pupils can at least come up with suitable ideas for expressive and problem-solving activities that range from simple to moderately complicated. They also start to show that they can come up with unique ideas or solutions in task contexts that they are familiar with (OECD, 2024).

In addition, competency in thinking, communication, and expression, the ability to learn how to learn, civic, personal, and entrepreneurial skills, as well as digital skills, are cornerstones of the educational system and a point of reference for a person who will serve the society of the future.

4. Conclusions

In the three countries under review, the inclusion of soft skills in school curricula has been a policy undertaken in recent years, reflecting the needs of society and the labor market for noncognitive skills.

- In the State of Virginia, the idea and way of organization have been well thought out, with clear goals for schools and colleges, the proper organization for sponsoring research, and curriculum and achievement evaluations. The report provided an assessment of the career readiness of K-12 students and the public system in Virginia. The thematic areas emerged in the report for the public school system in Virginia focused on updating Virginia's career readiness curriculum, hiring more staff with career readiness expertise, adopting new approaches to career readiness, focusing on skilled trades, removing barriers to labor participation, and engaging students in digital technologies. The examples of Virginia Schools show that the students can reflect on their learning and can use soft skills to take ownership of their current learning and future success
- In Portugal, strategies focused on promoting soft skills are translated into cross-curricular competencies that include principles and values transversal to different curricular components and levels of education. In the Portuguese education system, the cross-curricular competencies stipulated in the Student's Profile by the End

of Compulsory Schooling have also been developed various protocols by ENEC with private entities distinguished in the Portuguese society and considered as best practices in the promotion of Citizenship education through the development of the cross-curricular competences. The report, which the national coordinating team must deliver each year, should identify the training needs and priorities in the training actions that each School Association Training Centre (CFAE) and other credited entities can offer.

- In Albania, despite the recognized importance of soft skills, the education system still has significant gaps and needs help in effectively teaching and assessing these skills. These challenges include teacher training and professional development, insufficient curriculum guidelines, and inadequate assessment tools. There is an urgent need to develop and implement national policies and frameworks that explicitly define soft skills and provide comprehensive curriculum integration guidelines. Such policies should align with international best practices and be tailored to the specific needs of the Albanian education system.

5. Recommendations for the Albanian Education System

Drawing from the literature review and analysis of educational curricula in Virginia-USA, Portugal, and Albania, several key conclusions have been made about promoting soft skills in Albania's K-12 curriculum. The national curriculum should be updated to focus on soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and critical thinking. These skills should be taught in all subjects, and students should work on projects that require them to use these skills. Teachers need regular training to stay up to date with the best ways to teach soft skills. Schools should also have ways to monitor and improve how well soft skills are being taught. Creating a school environment that supports and encourages soft skills through various activities and programs is crucial.

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