



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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ATEE Spring Conference 2024

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Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29th – June 1st, 2024
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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Analyzing poor academic performance of Albanian pupils in PISA

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse poor academic performance of Albanian Pupils in PISA over the last two decades in light of the reforms and legislative changes in the Albanian School System. The main conclusion is that educational reforms in Albania have been frequent, unstudied and in response to the immediate needs of the moment, without a clear vision. They have influenced, directly or indirectly, the quality and number of those who choose to become teachers as well as in the quality of learning in pre-university education. The Ministry of Education and Sports lacks any document, strategy or study that analyses the factors that have negatively affected the academic achievements of pupils in PISA, as an instrument that indicates the quality of education that children receive in Albania.

Keywords: PISA; teachers; performance; schools; pupil's performance.

1. Introduction

PISA has become the principal source of data on the performance and quality of education systems, as measured by student achievement outcomes, for the OECD indicators reports (Froese-Germain, 2010). According to the OECD, one of the key features of PISA is progress monitoring, while one of the indicators on the quality of politics is the oversight of student progress. Using students' assessment results to inform decision making must be part of educational strategy to increase student achievement (Murnane *et al*, 2007).

Albania took part in the very first administration of PISA in 2000, and also of PISA 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018, 2022 (OECD, 2024). In total, during the period of 2009-2022, Albania has been part of this external evaluation six times (Fig. 1). According to the obtained data, in 2022 year, 6 129 students from 274 schools completed the assessment in mathematics, reading or science, thus representing about 28 400 of 15-year-old students (21,58 % of the total population of 15-year-olds); average results of 2022 were lower compared to those of 2018 in mathematics, reading and science (OECD, Albania, fact sheets). In the span of 22 years, Albanian students' score in maths have taken steps backwards - the results were down by 13 points, while in science the scores are exactly the same. If there is any room for consolation, after 22 years the reading results are only 8 points higher.

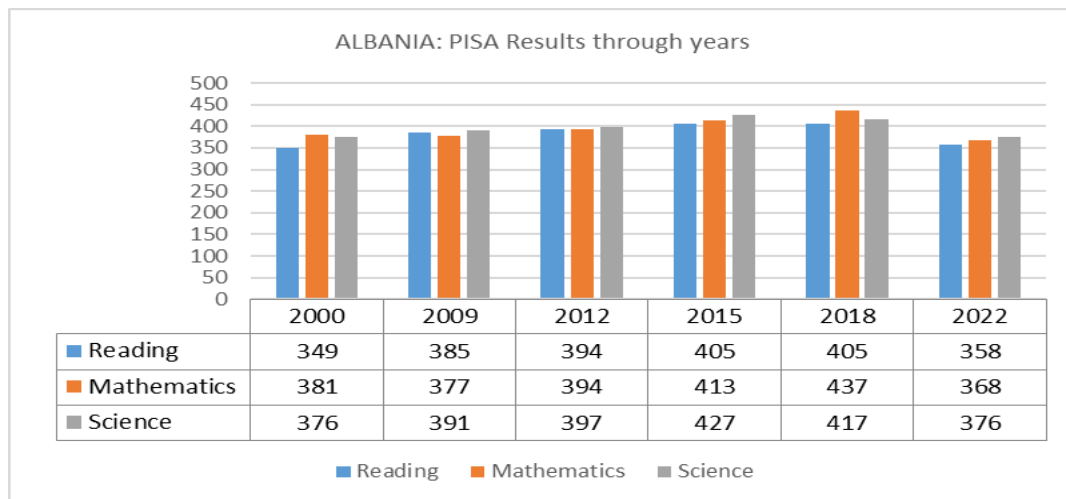


Figure 1: Albania: PISA results through years.

The data reveals a persistent trend of low achievement among Albanian students. Also, different documents, produced by or under surveillance of Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES), state the same situation: in PISA 2012 Albanian pupils scored lower than pupils from any European and Asian country (Wort *et al*, 2019); The International Program on Students' Evaluation that comprises one of the most prestigious international studies on the measurement of students' academic performance demonstrated that the results were rather low (MoES, 2008).

2. Methodology

The paper employs a mixed-methods approach. The qualitative method utilizes document review to analyse the structure of basic education, external evaluation systems to assess teacher and principal performance, and financial models of intervention. The quantitative method investigates the average grade (AG) of upper secondary school of a sample of 36 students & candidate students in Bachelor for preschool teaching at X University, which compares the number of candidates with the number of actual students' attendees for two consecutive years. This method is used to analyse the quality of students that have chosen to study teaching in an institution of higher education named as X, for ethical reason.

The study ensures that the information collected and used does not contain any identifiable personal data, for ethical reasons.

Research questions

What are some of the educational reforms introduced during the period 2000-2022?

What role do those educational reforms play in the quality of learning in Albania?

Have low PISA results influenced the policies of Albanian stakeholders?

2.1 Qualitative method

Structural reforms of basic education

On national level, one of the most important political reforms, upon the transition from communism to the post-communism, was free movement which led to massive migration of rural population to urban centers. This migration made schools overcrowded, particularly in Tirana, where gymnasiums faced severe space limitations, sometimes accommodating more than 52 students/class. According to the MoES (2008), general secondary education continues to experience infrastructure-related problems such as overcrowded classrooms in urban areas with significant demographic impact. To address the overcrowded conditions in upper secondary schools, the pre-university education system was restructured (Table 1).

Period	Structure Reforms, years - based, of pre-university system
until 2012 year Law No 7952, date 21 June 1995	Primary education lasts for 4 years (grades I-IV); lower secondary education lasts for 4 years (grades V-VIII); upper secondary education, typically lasts for 4 years (in the case of part-time education or evening education, the duration is extended to 5 years).
2012-2015 Law No. 69/2012	Primary education lasts for 6 years (grades I-VI); lower secondary education lasts for 3 years (grades VII-IX); upper secondary education, typically lasts for 3 years (gymnasium) including grades X-XII.
2015 – until now Law No. 69/2012	Primary education lasts for 5 years (grades I-V); lower secondary education lasts for 4 years (grades VI-IX); upper secondary education, typically lasts for 3 years (gymnasium) including grades X-XII.

Table 1: Pre-university education and structure reforms.

Reform on admission of students in higher education

The process of student admission to public and private HEIs is centralized and overseen by the Council of Ministers. Each year, the Council of Ministers decides on the minimum AG required for admission to universities. This AG is calculated as the simple average of annual final grades in all subjects over the course of upper secondary education and Grades from the State Matura exams. In addition to the general AG criterion, some HEI may require students who apply to certain programs (such as medicine or architecture) to take an entrance examination. For the study programs bachelor in teaching, all Albanian HEIs apply only the AG criterion for admission. This is primarily due to the declining number of young people who chose to become teachers.

During 2018-2021, there were 2 decisions made by the Council of Ministers regarding the minimum AG required for admission to teacher bachelor programs. For the 2018-2019, the minimum AG required for admission to a teacher's study program was set at 7 out of 10; for the 2020-2021, this minimum AG was increased to 7.5. However, the latter decision comes with a caveat emptor: individuals can be accepted into the bachelor's program with a minimum AG of 6.5. It's important to note that this exception applies only if the individual does not opt for a Master's program that leads to teacher's graduation (Table 2).

Period	Reform of admission at university teaching study programs based on AG
<i>Academic year: 2018 -2019</i> Decision of Ministerial Council, No. 216, 20.4.2018 for accepting students in HEI	Point 3. For candidates who apply to be admitted to study programs in the field of teaching, for the academic year 2018-2019, the AG calculated, according to this decision, should be 7.
<i>Academic year: 2020 -2021</i> Decision of Ministerial Council, No. 436, 3.6. 2020, for accepting students in HEI	Article 1, point c: In the bachelor's study programs that give access to the second cycle "Master's" programs in the field of teaching, the AG of upper secondary school must be 7.5. Rule no. 3: For those who intend to become teachers, the admission AG in these branches will continue to be 7.5, but for other students who intend to continue studies for another profession such as translator, psychologist, social worker, Cicero, historian, geographer, etc., this acceptance AG must be at least 6.5. Those who will apply to these study programs will be provided by the Educational Services Center with a special matriculation number, which does not allow them to follow the second cycle master's programs in the field of teaching.
<i>Note:</i> This decision, indirectly, does not impact individuals choosing to pursue teaching in preschool, as per the law, which mandates that teaching in preschool requires studies only at the Bachelor's level.	

Table 2: Upper High Education AG required for admission to Bachelor study programs in teaching.

Professional development policy for teachers and principals in service

According to the Law No. 69/2012 (LAW), teachers and principals must be trained at least 3 days/year; trainings must be organised according to the "demand-offer" system, based on the demands of educational institutions and offers from training agencies that can be public or private, and accredited by the MoES. State responsibility to provide professional development for teachers in service is represented by local educational offices. Durrës is one of the main urban centres in Albania and has 53 basic schools, out of which 21 are located in city and 31 others in the villages (Durrësi, Local Educational Offices, 2023). Organization of the Local Office of Durrës that is up to the level of Regional Educational Directorate and covers a wide geographical area has only 9 employees (Order No. 234, Date 19.4.2019). Individual responsibility for professional development, based on the "demand-offer" system has a price in labour market: 1 credit=10 to 20 euros. Almost all HEIs provide such courses, which are designed in compliance with the human resources and economic benefits of the HEIs, not of the needs of an individual teacher or of a school as a whole. But, actually, there is an increased emphasis on school leaders. Based on the LAW, operates the Center for School Leadership (CSL). Since October 2018, CSL functions as an independent structure in terms of administration, information, and training programs management. Until 2018, a person without a master's degree in education from a HEI found it very difficult to be employed as a school principal, especially in upper secondary education level. Since 2018, everyone (in-service, both principals and teachers) is invited to apply for a training: One of the main tasks of CSL is to develop, lead and monitor the process of initial training for in-service principals/ vice- principals and aspiring principals.

External evaluation systems to assess teachers and principal's performance

External evaluation is used in school systems to gain insight on how to succeed. External evaluation in teaching profession takes only the form of inspections conducted by educational inspectors. MoES, General Directorate of Pre-University Education has published a checklist of what to inspect in the course of inspections. This checklist has 102 criteria for teachers and the answers for each of them should be either yes or no; when the object of inspection is the school principal, this check list has 47 criteria (General Directorate of Pre-University Education).

2.2 Quantitative method

The quality of students-in-entrance

Another characteristic of Admission Management Process in Albanian HEIs, is that it is structured in some rounds. In the first 2 rounds, each candidate can choose up to 10 study programs from the overall list of HEIs which lists both, private and public institutions. Usually, the most desired study programs are medicine, nursing, economics and law. In the first round, the system selects candidates with the highest AG. Teaching is kept as a back-up option by most of the candidates, in case they do not manage to get a place in other study programs. In developing a basis for the above argument, the starting point was a sample of first and second year students that are attending a program study in "Bachelor in preschool teaching" in X University. The AG of upper secondary school for the first year students was 7.68, and for those in the second year of the same study program was 7.4. In total, the number of students were respectively 9 and 7. Also, data were collected for candidate students that applied in the first and second rounds. Those data contained the same features: the AG of upper secondary school, and the number of applicants. Fig.2 shows the AG of upper secondary school candidate students applying for a bachelor's program in preschool teaching at a university over two consecutive academic years, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024; it also displays the AG of upper secondary teacher-students who actually enrolled in the preschool teaching program.

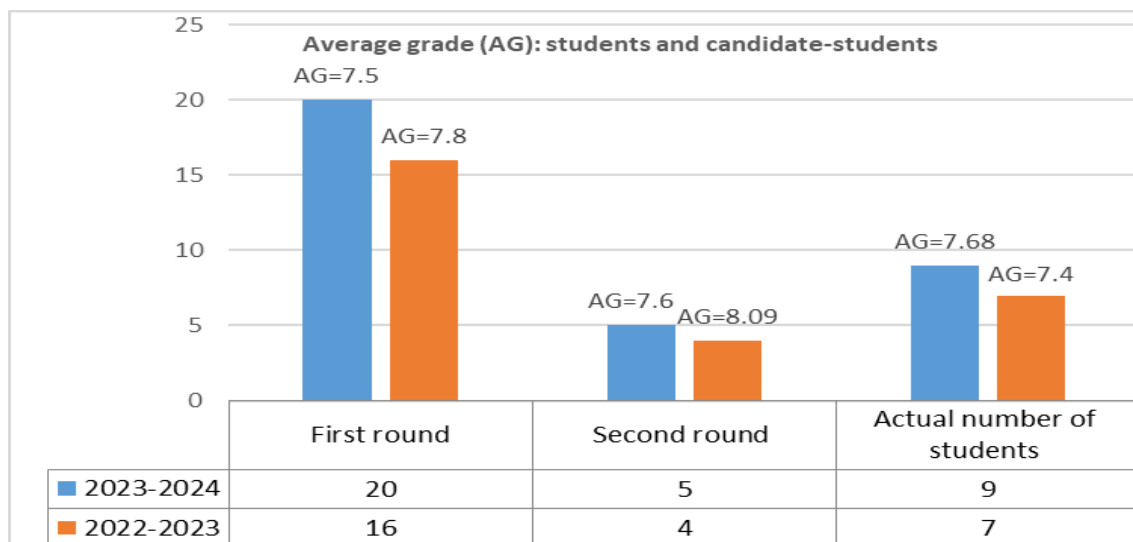


Figure 2: AG of upper secondary school of candidate students and of teacher-students over two consecutive years.

3. Conclusions

3.1 Reforms in Albanian education system have been frequent, unstudied and in response to the immediate needs, without a clear vision, or a connection of a problem with another. There is not an element in any of the reforms that can be found in another, as a sign of a continuous long term policy. During 2012-2015, the structure of basic education levels changed twice. Despite the extremely high attendance rate, these changes were not grounded in studies and design processes to assess their impact before implementation. Instead, the primary objective of policymakers was simply to alleviate overcrowding in the existing gymnasiums. Furthermore, these changes found teachers, who were qualified and certified to teach at certain grades of basic education, completely unprepared, which influenced directly and indirectly the quality of teaching. The second reform examines the decisions regarding admission criteria in higher education for study programs Bachelor in teaching. Between 2018 and 2021, two notable decisions were made. Initially, the

minimum upper secondary education AG required for admission to a teaching program was set at 7.5, thus exceeding the threshold for other study programs while aiming to maintain student quality. Later, the requirement was adjusted to the minimum AG of 6.5 for admission to a teaching program. However, this change came with the stipulation that these students would not be eligible for a Master in Teaching - they cannot become teachers at pre-university education level. The ongoing changes in admission policies for teaching programs in higher education have exacerbated an existing negative trend - young people are increasingly disinterested in becoming teachers - and also contribute to the uncertainty among prospective students contemplating a career in teaching. While the decisions attempt to balance academic standards with access to education programs for students with varying levels of academic achievement, they do not necessarily improve the system. Data analysis on the number of candidate students compared to the enrolled students for both academic years reveals a higher application rate in the initial phase. These figures underline the challenges and uncertainties surrounding the decision-making process for aspiring teaching professionals. Also, the number of students attending the program is always lower than in the application process because at the end candidate students prefer other study programs. This reform has directly influenced the number of individuals choosing to become teachers. On the other hand, at first glance, there is a perception that the quality of those entering the teaching profession - measured by the AG at admission to the study program Bachelor in teaching - is improving. However, in reality, these grades do not always reflect the same level of competencies for all the system. Usually, students who choose to become teachers often come from schools whose quality varies significantly, depending on their geographic location.

3.2. State responsibility to provide professional development for teachers in service is represented by local educational offices, but the number of the employed is very low compared to the number of the schools under responsibility. In this regard, to fulfil the legal requirement for annual training, teachers often view the market as a means to meet this obligation, treating it as a task rather than an intentional effort toward professional development. The MoES has not issued any document indicating the need for teacher professional development based on student outcomes in specific schools or, more broadly, on PISA results. Additionally, in Albania teaching salaries are determined solely by years of experience. Professional growth or student achievements do not influence salary increases, rendering the mandated credits and legal requirements largely formal. This approach may hinder genuine professional development and improvement in student performance.

3.3 CSL aims to certify current and prospective school principals. While it may not necessarily be a political move to reward party supporters, it does raise concerns that all individuals employed within the system may soon receive principal certification, as promised principal. The Albanian education system focuses on the professional development of principals from a top-down approach. However, the PISA results call this approach into question, suggesting that a more nuanced strategy may be needed to effectively address the complexities of school leadership. From the other side, the absence of robust external evaluation systems to assess teacher and principal performance does not allow to collect data on the needs and wants of students, teachers and schools.

3.4 The variance of results in mathematics is weakly associated with the socio-economic status of Albanian students, as measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS): 4.5 %, rank 76/79. (OECD: PISA 2022), but I need to question this statement, simply because the best schools in Albania are located in the center of urban areas where communities are wealthier and better educated. Also, the best teachers are employed in those schools.

The economic development is centred round the urban areas of Tirana & Durrës: in 2021, around 63% of Albania's population lived in urban areas. In rural areas, people have very few economic opportunities. There is lack of education and training opportunities (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2023). In a Public Report of MoES (2021) on the achievement of students in State Matura for the year 2021, the first best four schools on national level (out of 38

listed) were located in the urban area of Tirana. Furthermore, in Albania is in use the *school performance card*, which mean that in the end of the scholastic year, schools are ranked based on 14 indicators (MoES, 2023, School Performance). One of them is “Percentage of graduates who meet AG criterion, to pursue studies in HEIs”. In Tirana, out of 35 public upper secondary schools listed, 4 with the lowest values for this indicator are located in rural area of Tirana, such as Zall Herr, Shengjergj etc., while the best ones are located in the city center. So the explanations are two: 1. The Albanian national standards for schools’ evaluation are not correct or at least are not at the level of those of PISA. 2. In the Albanian education system, cheating during an exam – whether at the classroom, national, or even international level – is not an uncommon occurrence, especially in smaller towns where everyone knows each other. Turning a blind eye when a student cheats during class is something that doesn’t penalise the teacher, particularly when it comes to an international exam, which is both a matter of prestige and a reflection of the leadership of the education system, given my understanding of how the system works from the inside. The same thing happens with schools whose students are selected to participate in the PISA assessment: ‘S. Frashëri’ Gymnasium of Tirana is one of the best schools in the country, yet it is selected to take part in the PISA test almost every time Albania is scheduled to participate.

According to MoES, since 2008 the PISA demonstrated that the results of Albanian pupils are rather low, while compared to the load indicators for the OECD countries, the learning load of Albanian students is currently very high. 16 years after this statement, the results continue to be low.

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