What Educational Policies Underlie the Process Establishing a Longer Common Core Curriculum in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and in Albania?

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Abstact: This article analyses the educational policies underlying the reforms to the core curriculum in the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB, Belgium) and in Albania. The global neoliberal context in which these reforms take place, marked in particular by their successive participations in the PISA surveys and by the OECD and UNESCO intergovernmental recommendations for change, raises the question of the impact of these suggestions in the reform process. To answer this question, we conducted a thematic content analysis of the parliamentary minutes preceding the vote on the draft decree on volumes 1st and 2nd of the core curriculum in the context of the Pact for Excellence in Education in FWB and Law 69 of 2012 in Albania, using the Nvivo software. We used an a priori analysis grid created on basis of the work provided by Mons, (2004a,2007b). The results show that both countries are making changes in line with the recommendations by, redesigning a longer common core in response to the challenges of the 21st century on the one hand, and opting for a decentralised form of governance aimed at increasing actors' responsibilities, on the other. Through these structural changes, both countries are aligning themselves with the global agenda of objectives while however retaining their own decision-making space. The latter results in divergent policies that redraw the contours of their education systems accordingly to their specific features.

Keywords: equity; common core skills; PISA; global education; international policy; thematic analysis; governance.

1. Introduction

At the break of this century, education is to be understood within a context of global economy and competition marked by the advent of international comparisons. With the launch of the PISA assessment programme in 2000 by the OECD , a new era of reform called into question the functioning of the welfare state (Mons, 2004). The media coverage and publication of the PISA results, in addition to the encouragement to follow the good practices of well-placed countries, has provoked reflection on what needs to be done to improve performance and reduce inequalities (Meyer & Bénavot, 2013). This urge for change is being translated into reforms of education systems in several countries. The importance of investing in human capital, in its capacities, knowledge and skills, so that it can respond rapidly to changes in the world of work, has therefore emerged.

It is in this context that the OECD recognised the Lifelong Learning for All objective in 1996 (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017). Several international institutions assert the will to establish education as a human right and a major force for sustainable development and peace. Consequently, states have an ambitious agenda to achieve by 2030 to ensure inclusive and fair quality education for all and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2015).

The international recommendations aimed at skills to be achieved, contribute among other things, to the emergence of a form of globalisation of educational policies that «transforms national and regional educational spaces, policies and outcomes to align with a global agenda of goals» (Robertson & Dale, 2017 p. 890).

As a result, education policies are no longer exclusively part of state affairs, even though each country has taken a stand according to the change it wished to implement (Wahlströom & Sundberg, 2018). In this context of neoliberal policies, a reflection on the aims of compulsory education is emerging in several countries, which naturally focuses on the core curriculum, representing a turning point in education.

The study reported in this article focuses on two European countries with dissimilar profiles: Albania and Belgium. Other than being almost identical in size, these countries share two characteristics in terms of education: they have participated in the PISA surveys and they have each undertaken a reform of their proper education system in a context of global education.

The reform of the Albanian educational system, strongly recommended by international bodies, resulted in the adoption of the law governing the functioning of the pre-university education system in 2012, revised in 2015 and in 2017. Hereby, important structural changes are made to the compulsory education most specifically to the core curriculum. The core curriculum has been extended by a year in order to improve equality but also performance, which is among the lowest in PISA results (OECD, 2016).

In the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB), a systemic reform has been underway since 2015. The Pact for Excellence in Education aims to improve the quality and equality of learning by extending and revising the existing common core curriculum. In May 2019, the Walloon parliament voted the legal basis for the new common core. It is intended to be a ground-breaking act and is in line with

the renewal of school policies aimed at improving equity and efficiency since the «Missions» decree (FWB, 2019).

In this article, our aim is to understand the issues and characteristics of these renewed common cores and what they are tending towards in terms of content: standardisation or diversification. We will also try to understand the general trend towards which these two education systems are tending in terms of educational policies and to what extent they adhere to the global suggestions of neo-liberal international policy. To this end, we analyse, by means of a thematic content analysis, the parliamentary debates around these educational reforms.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. *Global and neoliberal education policies under the international agenda*

With the advent of the PISA international comparative assessment programme, the OECD has established itself as a *policy maker* within the sphere of education policy (Grek, 2009). The media coverage of the results and the outcoming recommendations encourage the lowest-ranked countries to follow the good practices of the countries at the top of the list (Fairclough, 2000 cited by Grek, 2009). For some countries, this shockwave (Cattonnar & al., 2009; Crahay, 2004) has given rise to a profusion of research aimed at improving the system (Maroy, 0204; Demeuse & Baye, 2005; Deboutemont & Plumelle, 2002; Monseur & Crahay, 2008; Mangez & Hilgers, 2012). Many European countries are implementing measures following their participation in the PISA programme. With decentralizing policies, content differentiation, free choice of school and the development of assessment, a paradigm shift is happening that challenges the management of education by the welfare state (Mons, 2004a, 2007b).

The PISA programmes have empowered OECD leading to its establishment as a *policy maker* for education throughout the world. Yet, the late institution was initially aimed to enhance international economic collaboration (Grek, 2009). The author calls this the *PISA effect* and views these programmes as a powerful indirect and influential part of the new political technology that governs the European educational space by numbers (Grek, 2009).

Ever since 1996, the OECD set the goals of lifelong learning (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017), recognising the importance of investing in people's skills, knowledge, and abilities so that they can respond quickly to changes in the world of work. Programmes defining competences have since emerged from several international institutions. In 2005, the OECD defined and selected competences, as did the European Commission in 2007, with the «European framework of eight competences for lifelong learning». At the same time, other international bodies such as the European Bank, UNICEF, the European Union, UNESCO, the World Bank, etc. followed the trend.

The will to establish education as a human right, a major force for sustainable development and peace, has led to the creation of an international agenda of goals set for 2030 (UNESCO, 2015). This provides states with a roadmap aiming to ensure

inclusive, equitable and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 20152015).

The recommendations of these international institutions therefore have a direct impact designing the national education policies. In doing so, they contribute in creating a global education policy space (Lingard & Grek, 2007; Grek, Lawn, Lingard, Ozga, Rinne, Segerholm, & Simola 2009). As a result, these recommendations have led to global neo-liberal education policies. The neo liberal feature is reflected when implementing policies such as decentralizing policies, management by results policies (Lessard & Carpentier, 2015) as well as a new assessment paradigm proceeding through standardised international testing for instance. As a result, evaluation appears to be a tool used to develop a new educational system. By using evaluation for transparency, making practices and results visible, evaluation acts as a lever for change through its feedback, which is supposed to fuel efforts to improve these same results. This is claimed to be a new evaluative and regulatory function of the public management (Lessard & Carpentier, 2015). These so-called neo-liberal education policies converge towards the questioning of the welfare state, implying a rational intervention of the latter in making education more efficient and rational. A new model is therefore being shaped around decentralized policies, free choice of school and content renewal, challenging deeply the monopolistic management of the educational function by the state (Mons 2004a, 2007b). According to Robertson and Dale, this neoliberal globalisation «transforms national and regional educational spaces, policies and outcomes to align with a global agenda of goals» (2017, p. 890). Alexiadou (2016) corroborates this by further criticising the neoliberal context from which international suggestions originate and which consists in perceiving education in terms of problems and solutions to provide.

2.2. *Two unique educational spaces*

In this global context, two education systems, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation and Albania, with entirely divergent socio-politico-historical profiles, are carrying out an in-depth overhaul of education and more specifically of the common core.

2.3. *The Wallonia-Brussels Federation*

Belgium is a federal country of about 11 million and a half inhabitants on a surface of 30. 528 km². Its population is mostly middle aged (50-59) with an unemployment rate of 5.6% on average (Statbel, 2023). The Belgian state has known six state reforms so that have shaped its federal patterns mainly aiming to settle the tensions between the two main communities the Flemish and the French speaking. Since the third reform in 1988-1989, the three communities (the Flemish Community, the FWB and the German-speaking Community) have been given the prerogative of education. The FWB is responsible for education in French-speaking Belgium which represents about 4300000 inhabitants.

According to van Hecht (1985), the common core appeared in the educational scene with the introduction of renewed education in 1971, with the common degree. However, it was not until the «

Mission» decree in 1997 that the common core was specified, and which was later reformed by the Pact for Excellence in 2017. In the «Mission» decree, the community defines the school's missions by defining a pedagogical continuum between nursery kindergarten school and the first eight years of compulsory education (Art. 13, § 1st, §3).

Ever since the first PISA tests, the FWB has been at the bottom of the list, among the most inequitable European countries, strongly marked by a logic of social segregation (Hirtt, 2017). The education system is in fact organised according to a quasi-market system resulting in socially and socio-economically segregation. Moreover, the important use of early school orientation and year repetition are *segregating structures* (Danhier et al., 2017) that maintain social inequalities and the polarisation of schools (Vandenberghe, 1998; Demeuse & Baye, 2012; Monseur & Crahay, 2008). Furthermore, socio-economic level continues to have a strong impact on student performance (Quittre & Crépin, 2017).

In view of these findings, the Pact for Excellence in Education, was launched in 2015 to reform education in various levels and steps. This time the change is brought through a process of massive participation and negotiation with the actors. The resulting «Opinion number 3 of the central group» made public in March 2017 states that the common core reviewal is set to be the very first of the five strategic focuses aimed by the Pact. It states: «Teaching the knowledge and skills of 21st century society and fostering the pleasure of learning, through a strengthened pre-school education, a polytechnic and multidisciplinary common core and a reviewed and redefined learning framework» (FWB, 2017, p.11).

This new polytechnic and multidisciplinary core curriculum for compulsory education was officialised in 2019 by means of the vote of the first two volumes of the CODEX.

2.4. *The Albanian educational space*

The Republic of Albania or *Republika e Shqiperise*, with a surface area much similar to the surface of Belgium, is located in South-Eastern Europe in the eastern part of the Balkan peninsula. With a population of less than 30,000, 31% of which is concentrated in the capital Tirana, its population is mainly young: 21.7% between 15 and 29 years old and characterised by a high unemployment rate of 12.3% in 2018, as well as a high emigration rate (Instat, 2019). The official language of the country is Albanian, a language of Indo-European origin.

The Albanian educational system has been shaped by occupations, moments of sovereignty and imposed policies. (Nathanaili, 2011).

After the Second World War, the establishment of the communist regime in Albania was accompanied by a reform of the education system, establishing the basis for a unitary and egalitarian education. In 1946, education was made compulsory from the ages of 7 to 14. For the first time, a distinction was made between different levels (pre-school, general, vocational, and adult). Later, in 1963, the content of the curricula was revised, reinforcing the democratic and socialist ideological character of the Marxist-Leninist orientation. The attendance of vocational education also evolved. (Nathanaili, 2011).

In 1991, the communist regime was overthrown marking the beginning of modernising reforms towards a democratic society and a liberal economy. According to Nathanaili, (2011), the reforms following the fall of the Berlin Wall have been characterised by radical reversals of the former communist countries. A step-by-step reform process aims at a thorough overhaul of the education system. These reforms aim at a democratic, more efficient and more egalitarian education (Nathanalili, 2011; ACRS, 2017). According to the report of the task force for the reform of the pre-university system MAS, the various reforms that have taken place in Albania can be analysed in three stages (MAS, 2014).

Initially, until 1995, the main objective was to «cleanse» the education system and curricula of the communist legacy and its ideological influence (MAS, 2014).

In a second phase, until 2010, the objective was to establish a legal framework needed for implementing reforms, including the gathering of information on contemporary education systems and curricula, in collaboration with the World Bank, main partner in the development of national education strategies aimed at improving quality. Nevertheless, performance, effectiveness and efficiency indicators remained low (MAS, 2014).

In a third phase, currently underway, the aim is to offer democratic education in accordance with the principles of equal opportunities, while respecting individual differences. The main objective: more equality and more equity (MAS, 2014).

A few basic laws and principles form the legal framework of the Albanian education system. Firstly, the article 57 of the 1998 Constitution guarantees the right to education for all, free of charge compulsory education, as well as the autonomy and academic freedom of higher education institutions.

Secondly, the law of 21st of June 1995 shapes education in Albania by distinguishing the different levels of public education. The first level is the non-compulsory pre-school from 3 to 6, followed by the basic education *arsimi bazë* from 6 to 15, which is compulsory for 9 years. At the end of the *arsimi bazë*, orientation towards vocational trainings can take place. This part of the continuum of the Albanian education system can therefore be considered as *common core* for two reasons: firstly, it combines the age when students are oriented/ guided towards vocational or non-vocational schools and the end of common compulsory education.

After the compulsory education, ordinary and special secondary education (*arsimi i mesëm*) begins.

In addition to the middle school, there is also *gjimnaz*, which aims to provide students with a general education and to deepen their basic skills.

Gjimnaz corresponds to the general transitional secondary education in FW-B, and middle education to secondary vocational education.

In summary, this law transforms the structure of basic education according to the 6-3-3 model, abolishing the previous 9-3 structure. The article 22 of the law defines 6 years of primary education from 6 to 12, followed by lower secondary education from 12 to 15 and finally upper secondary education from 15, age at which the compulsory education ends. This law extends compulsory education by a year.

This was followed by a series of revisions and legal changes, including Law 56, which stepped backwards to the 5-4-3 model (MASH, 2015, art 21).

2.5. *Reforming the core curriculum to combine efficiency and equality*

2.5.1. *Characteristics of successful and more egalitarian systems according to Mons (2004)*

Some countries are almost always ranked at the top level when assessed at international surveys. They share a range of characteristics such as including low repetition rates, no early orientation to vocational training, high differentiation in classes and a long core curriculum (Mons, 2007).

Mons (2004a, 2007b) provides a theoretical framework for understanding why the two educational spaces have chosen to reform their respective common cores. Mons focuses on three policies that concern the differentiation and diversification of educational training offer with the aim of improving performance. Those policies are decentralizing policies, the free school choice policies and the renewal of differentiated content and structures policies. She highlights a series of mechanisms that impact both equity and performance. First and foremost, she shows that there is a correlation between equity and decentralizing educational competences. Secondly, she raises the issue of school career differentiation opposing differentiated school career on one hand, and common core on the other. In some education systems, the common core is combined with an important rate of repetition (FWB), while others combine automatic promotion with differentiated support for pupils (Mons, 2007). Depending on the country, the mechanisms for managing school flows and careers form coherent models for managing heterogeneity, which can lead to very different results (Mons, 2007). Thus, countries with features such as a long common core, automatic promotion, low repetition rate and differentiation of learning supports, combine performance and equity.

2.5.2. *Purpose of the reforms in FWB and Albania*

There is a consensus in French-speaking Belgium that efforts are needed in order to improve the efficiency and the equity of the education system, i.e. to increase the level of achievement (competences) and to reduce the gaps in levels between social groups. The PISA assessments have contributed to raising collective awareness (Grootaers, 2014). The orientation towards technical and vocational education in the third year is being therefore questioned. It is the result of a relegation process based on failure and repetition and not on a positive choice made by the pupil himself (Grootaerts, 2014; *anonymized reference to author 2 et al.*, 2014). The need for a longer core curriculum in line with international requirements for greater equity is backed by research. It would offer students the opportunity to develop their orientation so that it becomes a positive choice they make (Lafontaine et al., 2018; Kerckhof, 2017).

InAlbania,acertainnumberofobservationshavebeenmadefollowingitsparticipation in the PISA 2000, 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018 surveys. Despite improvement in all three subjects over the years, Albania's average scores are below the OECD average.

Other aspects of education need to be reviewed. In this respect, several investment and development agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO and the OECD have submitted suggestions to Albania. The country has carried out its policy within a portfolio of reforms to accomplish in order to achieve the goals set by the United Nations for sustainable development by 2030 (OECD, 2016; UNESCO, 2017). A particular emphasis is laid on   education policies to be addressed primarily. It is hence considered essential for Albania to focus on improving basic education, starting from pre-school education, in order to break the cycle of exclusion present at an early stage of schooling (OECD, 2003; UNICEF, 2017). These reports highlight the need to reduce inequalities and to decentralise the education system by offering more autonomy to schools. Moreover, it suggests the use of rigorous assessment and increasing investment, which is among the lowest in the OECD. Improvements need to be made in terms of equity, vulnerability, discrimination, social inequalities, urban-rural disparity, discrimination of minorities (especially Roma) as well as for people with reduced abilities (OECD, 2003; UNESCO, 2017).

Improving the quality and equity of education by introducing a revised and extended core curriculum therefore seems to be a priority for both countries.

3. Research questions and hypotheses

3.1. *Research questions and hypotheses*

The research questions are divided into two parts: the first part deals with the new extended core curriculum and the second part with the subject of the reforms and debates they arose.

About the core curriculum:

1. What do these new common cores represent in each of the education systems? To what extent are they alike?
2. What issues, impediments and values lie behind the revision of the core curriculum?
3. What is the trend in terms of content? Is there an attempt to unify and structure content to determine a precise level of achievement at the end of the core curriculum?
4. To what extent do the core curriculum amendments reflect the international suggestions for competences to be achieved by 2030?

The following assumptions stem from these questions about the core curriculum:

1. The process of implementing a longer common core curriculum in both countries is accompanied by a clarification of the knowledge and skills to be acquired at the end of it.

2. These knowledge and skill goals are similar for both countries.
3. The revision of the core curriculum and the clarification of terminal competences are accompanied by a change in the evaluative and regulatory function.

Questions arising from the object of ongoing reforms and debates:

1. What are the mechanisms implemented for the reform of the common core in the two educational areas? Are they similar or different?
2. What are the main features of the debates in each country?
3. What is the institutional framework towards which both systems are heading?
4. Are there any country specific features that explain the choice of the implemented education policies? If so, which ones?

The following assumptions have arisen from these questions on reforms:

1. The objects of the reforms as well as the debates are similar in both educational territories.
2. Reforms are underpinned by neo-liberal *international policy* recommendations with the aim of achieving global competencies by 2030.
3. Both educational territories converge in terms of educational policies and frameworks.

4. Method

4.1. *Presentation of the corpus*

The corpus which this study is based upon consists of several documents.

For Albania, the analysed corpus includes the plenary discussions on Law 69 (2012) prior to its vote in the Albanian Parliament. These political debates shed light on the reform and restructuring of the common core provided by the law. The number of pages analysed is 344. This law was amended by law no. 56 of 28 May 2015 . This amendment was debated. The content of the plenary debates 2012 were thoroughly analysed for this study.

Regarding the FWB analysed documents include the discussions in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation parliament prior to the vote on the draft decree on books 1st and 2nd of basic and secondary education. These debates concern the implementation of the new common core curriculum. They therefore make it possible to appreciate the characteristics of the desired change. For the sake of conformity and equivalence, the corpus analysed includes the minutes of the project (pp. 53-86), the explanatory memorandum (pp. 10-22) and the commentary on the articles defining the structural changes brought about by the common core (pp. 23-24). The rest of the document constitutes the legal part itself. It is separate from the rest of the corpus analysed

which focuses on the parliamentary discussions. These documents are available in French.

4.2. *Thematic analysis*

With the aim of answering the research questions, we implemented a thematic content analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2003). Our analysis consists in combining inductive and deductive approaches in a reflective approach (Derobertmasure & Demeuse, 2012) using a common grid established *a priori* and enriched as the coding progressed. We used the NVivo12® software, which belongs to the CAQDAS family. The use of the software requires the division of the corpus into coding units. In the context of thematic analysis this division is made by semantic units (Derobertmasure & Demeuse, 2012). It requires the use of an *a priori* theoretical framework. Here we used Mons' typology (2004a, 2007b).

With regards to analysing the corpus, an analysis grid consisting of main subjects and sub-subjects was created based on the work of Mons (2004a, 2007b). This document can be found in the appendix referenced as appendix number one. As a result of a mixed approach, the initial grid was supplemented by other concepts added as the corpus was analysed in line with the idea developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) that the theme captures something important, related to the research question, to which correspond one or more responses in the corpus. The importance of a theme is considered in relation to the research questions as suggested by Braun & Clarke (2006). Examples of the modifications made to the analysis grid can be found in the appendices.

The grid consists of ten main non-hierarchical themes: the object of the reforms, the object of the debates, the institutional framework targeted, the mechanisms implemented, the reasons that led to the changes, the characteristics of heterogeneity management, the characteristics of the common core, the deployed values, and concepts during the reforms, what freedom is about (for each country) and finally, evaluation.

Mons (2004a, 2007b) chose to analyse educational policies in relation to the freedom of choice, decentralizing policies and renewal of content and differentiated structures (insofar as the latter aim to modify the educational pathways as well as the regulatory model of institutions). These three policies can be found on the grid under the themes of management of heterogeneity, targeted institutional framework and freedom of choice.

The common core represents a whole separate theme, in line with the research questions.

As the corpus was read and re-read, the nodes (themes) and/or sub-nodes encoded in the software evolved (Correa & Molina, 2011). The added themes shed light on the different characteristics related to the reforms undertaken.

These themes concern: the subject (what the changes are about), the reasons that justify the moment of action, the mechanisms practically implemented, the core values that determine educational goals (Durkheim, 1922; Demeuse & Sotewey, 2013) and that also led to debates.

Finally, one last element relates to the evaluation policies. Given that the changes to the Common Core (CC) are part of the evaluation of these competences, for which the mastery is essential, as stipulated in the draft decree books 1st and 2nd of the CC «[...] what can no longer be ignored [...]» (FW-B, 2019, p.16), it seems important to consider the modalities foreseen in the evaluation of these competences. In other words, it is essential to make it clear who assesses, when and how.

5. Results

5.1. *Results of the analysis for the French corpus (FWB)*

The global view of the most encoded themes makes it possible to distinguish the themes occupying a major place in the discussions (figure 1). The second graph inserted in this figure allows us to zoom in on the 20 most encoded themes.

Thus, the topics that are at the bottom of the graph concern: the articulation and coherence of the approach, the position towards this extended core curriculum, the issue of knowledge and skills to be redefined within the framework of this core curriculum, the organisation and the coherence of the 1st and 2nd volumes, which are supposed to mark out the implementation of the core curriculum. For the sake of clarity, it should be noted that the political parties expressed themselves unequally during the discussions. However, political positions are not the subject of study in this work.

The hierarchical classification of the encoded themes reveals their hierarchical order during encoding.

Figure 1. Thematic analysis of parliamentary minutes preceding the vote on CODEX 2019 books 1ˢᵗ & 2ⁿᵈ
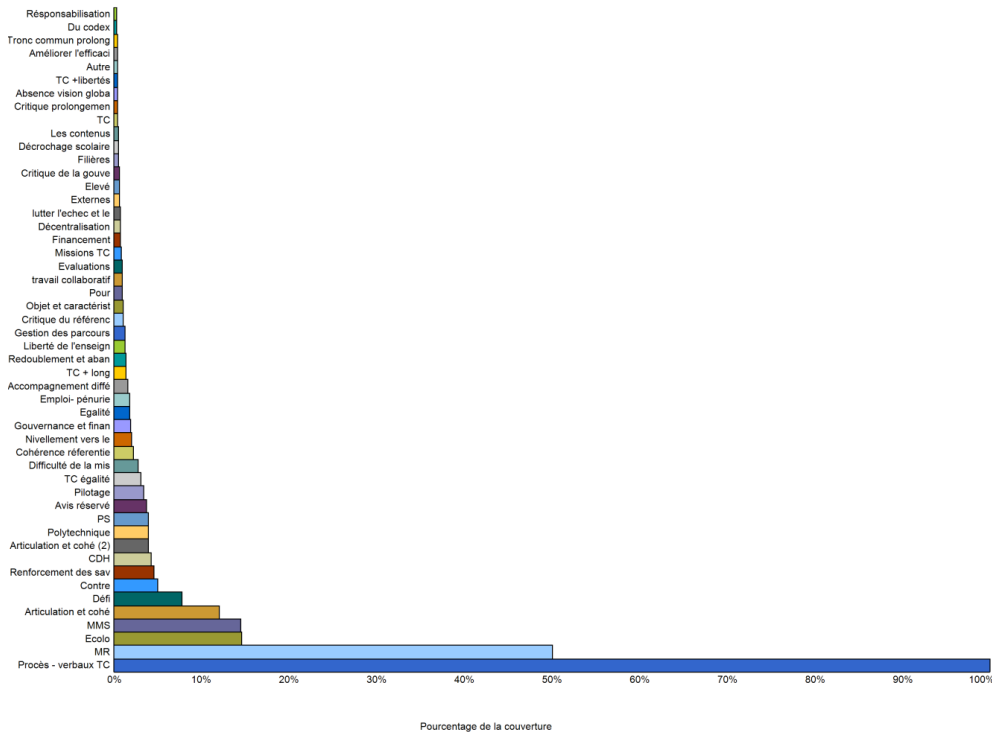
At the very heart of the debates, we find the positions to a longer common core. The parliamentarians expressed their positions: the position *against* represented (4.95%) of the area encoded, the position *for* (0.96%) while approximately 4% (3.94%) of the area encoded was neutral. The fear of a downward levelling of such an endeavour is explicitly discussed as a 1.98% of the encoded area. The new CT is also said to be very similar to the current one such as defined by the «Missions» decree dating from 1997. Criticisms and concern were also expressed regarding the redesigned teaching function putting forward the need to review it in order to respond better to the new challenges brought by the new core curriculum design. Issues such as personalised support and differentiation in teaching, workload, were identified as possible dropouts causes while the country is currently short of teachers. Debates also centred on the articulation and coherence of the Codex. Considered as the *keystone of* the CC or *official contract*, its objective is to ensure vertical and horizontal coherence while specifying what should be taught.

The coherence and the organisation of the reform is also an issue. The reform is qualified as hasty. On top of that, the carried-out policy is considered a halfway-measure policy, or even a contradictory policy especially when it comes to maintaining the CEB . «It is too early. The time of the legislature was probably not the most favourable to consider a reform, what's more on the common core [...]».

The characteristics of the new common core were discussed in terms of the precise level of knowledge, with the need to strengthen core knowledge. «[...] the school subjects of the common core were determined so as to enhance core knowledge, know-how and skills, as well as to highlight school subjects, contents or abilities that are little practised, even though they contribute to the development and fulfilment of future citizens [...]». Furthermore, «[...]the reform of the core curriculum goes along with the will to stop prescribing a particular pedagogy - the pedagogy of skills [...]».

Moreover, its polytechnic character is considered insufficient, its newness is questioned: the logics of «making something new out of something old» is therefore criticized.

The reforms are about the common core and the new form of governance through the implementation of a new steering project. «[...]The present Code paves the way for a new common core. This vast project constitutes one of the two main pillars of the reform of the Pact for Excellence in Education, the second being the reform of governance and, peculiarly, the implementation of steering plans and contracts of objectives organised by two decrees of 13th of September 2018(2). [...]».

When it comes to the values the right to make a free choice appears fundamental. This is opposed to the necessity of establishing a safeguard and common guidelines in order to regulate the so called quasi-market school system. The latter is ruled by the logics of absolute freedom which continue to generate a dual school system and a state of educational inequality. Parliamentarians blame the code for restricting this freedom through the desire to legislate and thus to define the work and its results.

Among the schemes, the implementation of a longer CC brings along some issues. Besides the partial support of the actors for its extension, other concerns were expressed, including class heterogeneity management, the risk of school dropouts for pupils who already had a project, levelling down, etc.

The new institutional framework towards which the FW-B is moving is a form of balance between the virtues of centralizing policies (through the steering of evaluations and objectives) and those of decentralizing decisions and policies through the empowerment and increased autonomy of the actors. This framework is accompanied by a new evaluation paradigm which considers external evaluation as a permanent regulation. This new paradigm walks along with the concern for more equity and results comparison by means of the certificate of acquisition of knowledge, know-how and competences targeted by the CC.

An analysis of the Explanatory memorandum (Figure 2) reveals the importance of freedom of education in topic ranking. As the Council of State criticised this aspect, it therefore appears in the explanatory memorandum as a reply to the critics been made. The subjects of the reforms include the steering project, the core curriculum, the structural changes as well as the trajectory changes resulting from the extension of the CC. There is talk of strengthening the autonomy of schools: «[...] the strengthening of the autonomy of managements in terms of the organisation of the school, and that of educational teams in terms of the choice of means and pedagogical methods to be implemented in order to meet the objectives set for the school [...]». This confirms a strive for balance between decentralizing and

centralizing. There is also talk of a new digital strategy to be achieved in order to provide pupils with digital skills in line with the needs of 21st century society.

Figure 2. Thematic analysis of the explanatory memorandum and commentary of the draft CODEX Decree 1st | 2nd

Exposé des motifs des livres 1 et 2 du CODEX - Encodage
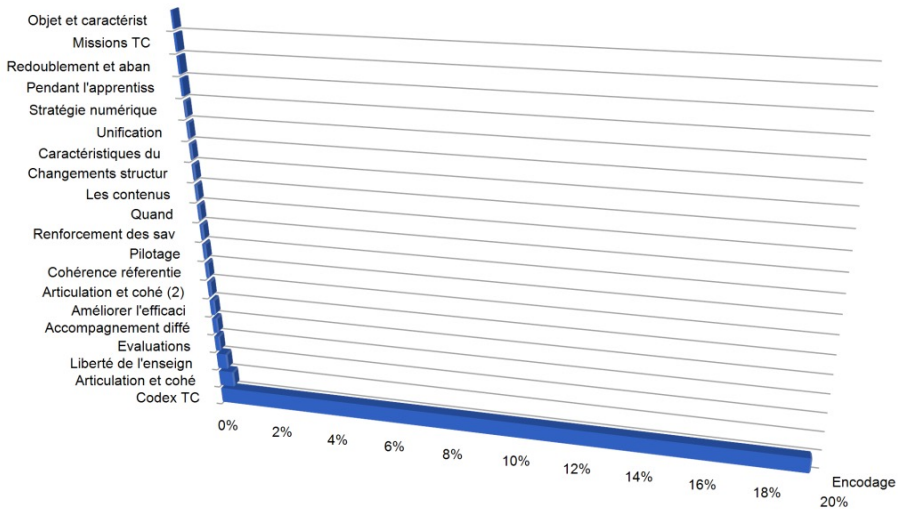
5.2. *Results of the analysis for the Albanian corpus*

The thematic analysis of the Albanian corpus shows a regular decreasing curve (Figure 3). It shows a peak of 4.95% for the theme related to decentralizing. The other themes that were debated were secularism, the text choice (single or plural) the governance, the school board, the characteristics of the teaching function and that of the headmasters, all of which show a strong political tendency in the debate.

The debates are characterized by the participation of many non-parliamentary groups such as the SOROS foundation, publishers unions, associations for the defence and the right of children, representatives of public schools, representatives of religious schools, etc.

The depoliticization of education is the main focus of the debate. It concerns the cleansing of the processes of teachers and headmasters' appointment in an attempt to curb political intervention that is here considered harmful to education. The use of teachers for political (campaign) purposes was for instance criticised.

This reform is in line with the demands for modernisation in the context of the country's integration into the EU. It is characterised by several key issues to be addressed as a matter of priority: a review of governance with more autonomy and support for school headmasters; restructuring and development of the curriculum,

which is considered obsolete and produces little quality, through the integration of the competency-based approach; and cleaning up the system from the influence of the ruling parties, which is detrimental to the quality of education (UNESCO, 2017).

The need to «cleanse» education from political intervention raises the issue of funding giving school managements and boards more autonomy. Albania is adapting the basic skills approach to lifelong learning and intends to take advantage of the international expertise validated by UNESCO, the OECD, etc., which requires the revision of the curriculum and the inclusion of assessment by skills. The curriculum is presented as being close to the British schools. In this framework, the inclusion of all students in pre-university education, so that everyone can acquire basic skills, seems to be of prime importance. However, the implementation of this approach seems, at this stage, incomplete, as indicated by a representative of the SOROS Foundation «[...] projektligj seti i kompetencave themelore eshte nje çudi shqiptare [...referencen e pare qe vjen nga UECD- ja, produkti i projektit DESEIKO, ku ka nje set me nente kompetenca dhe po them qe giysma e tyre nuk figurojne [...]». (The set of basic competences in this bill is an Albanian curiosity. The first reference, which comes from the OECD, mentions nine competences, of which I can say that half are not included in the draft law).

The main feature of this reform is the structural change of education levels to a 6-3-3 system which brings along many challenges. The gathering of school subjects under one main subject within the framework of a competency-based approach requires, among other things, an overhaul of teacher training and a different vision of evaluation, including the possibility of ranking schools according to an external evaluation.

In this attempt to provide a more egalitarian and inclusive education with equal opportunities for quality content learning throughout life and for all students (UNESCO, 2017), the issue of school texts has been discussed at length. The decision for a limited policy of text choices *altertext* . was finally made leaving that choice to the discretion of the most experienced teacher, parents and school managers. The issue of multi-text inevitably raises the question of choice, as opposed to the historically imposed single text, but also that of the free market. Publishing houses offer different texts, sometimes translated, not always free of errors.

The school board represents in this reform the ultimate unit of the decentralizing process. It appears in the debates in conjunction with the depoliticization of the school institution and its actors. Moreover, there is seemingly an inconsistency between the talks and the walks.

Figure 3. Thematic analysis of parliamentary minutes prior to the vote on the 2012 law

PV 2012 - Encodage

Pourcentage de la couverture
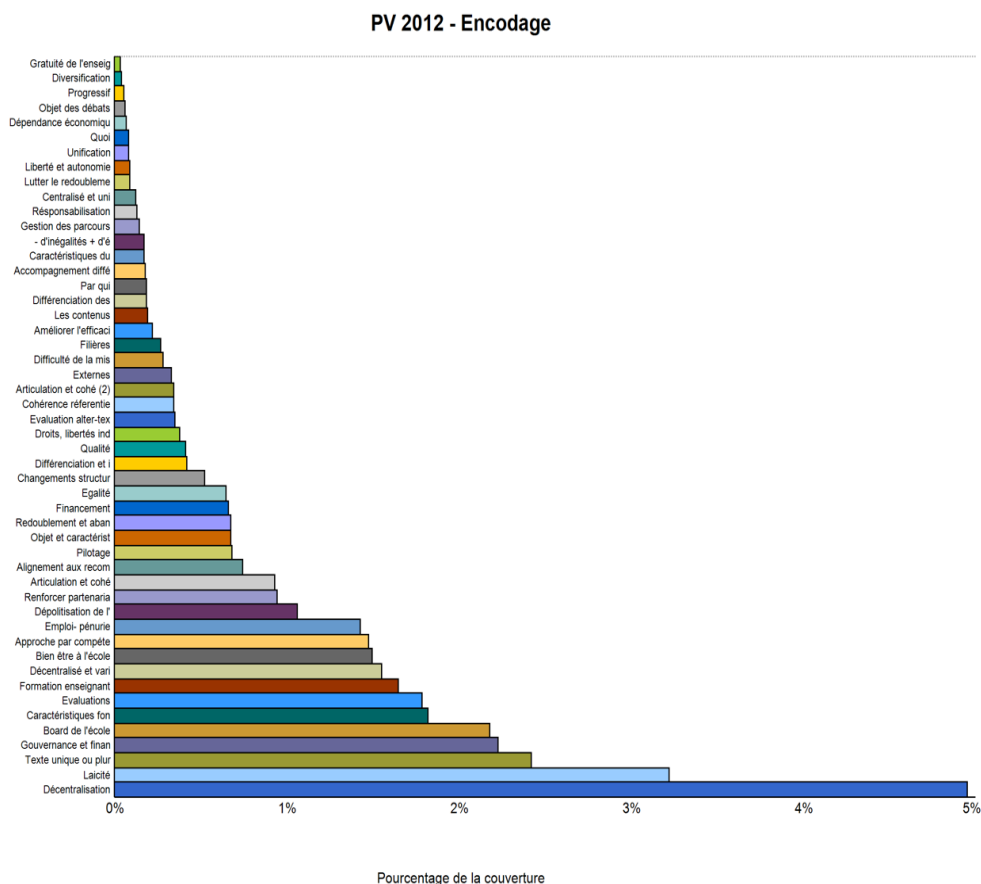
6. Discussion of the results

The extension of the common core for both countries is one of the major measures undertaken during reforms in the education systems with the aim to improve equity and performance, in accordance with the diagnosis made by international assessments, including the PISA studies (Grootaers, 2014; Jacobs & Danhier, 2017; UNESCO, 2017). This extension raises the question of the basic skills for a lifelong learning for all (OECD, 2005; EU, 2007). The extension of the common core is also inspired by the more productive European systems, where the common core is organised up to the age of 15 or even 16 (FWB, 2019). This characteristic, shared by both countries, appears to be central. It consists in drawing inspiration from practices and policies that have proved their value, i.e. *Evidence-based policy* (Lessard & Carpentier, 2015).

Extending the CC goes together with clarifying knowledge and content to be mastered by all, which confirms the first hypothesis: the process of implementing a longer common core curriculum in both countries is accompanied by a clarification

of the knowledge and skills to be acquired at the end of it. In FWB, the vote of the first two volumes implementing the CC reflects the will to establish greater horizontal and vertical coherence (Delvaux, 2005). This endeavour specifies no longer how to teach but what emphasising the basic knowledge expected at the end of the CC. The French-speaking Belgium is rebalancing knowledge after the much-criticised implementation of the vague and ambiguous competency-based approach, which has led to multiple readings and practices as well as an impoverishment of knowledge (Hirtt, 2005a, 2009b; Crahay, 2006; Legendre, 2008; Beckers & Voos, 2008).

Albania, for its part, is making a significant change by opting for a competency-based approach after a long period of objective-based teaching. This change is accompanied by a revision of curricula and a restructuring of subjects and basic knowledge.

When addressing both academic under-achievement and repeating issues, making progress is being made on the path of a well-shaped school orientation which corroborates many researcher claims (Delvaux, 2005; Mons, 2004a, 2007b; *anonymized reference to Author 2 et al.*, 2010; *anonymized reference to Author 2 et al*, 2014).

The answer to hypothesis two: the knowledge and aims in terms of competences are similar for both countries, is balanced. Although there is a certain convergence in the two systems insofar as the specification of knowledge is in line with the knowledge and skills of *lifelong learning skills* (OECD, 2005; EU, 2007; UNESCO, 2017), it cannot be asserted that the knowledge specified for the two common cores is identical. In addition, both systems specifically «adapt» knowledge and core skills according to their own specific features, although they are aligned to the global the international agenda.

Alongside clarifying knowledge, emphasis is put on differentiated management of pupils according to their characteristics, but each country in their own way. In FWB, there is talk of inclusive education, differentiation and accompanying pupils who have difficulties during their learning. In Albania, there is talk of differentiation for the most gifted pupils, in order to promote excellence.

The third hypothesis on the common core is accepted. The revision of the common core and the clarification of terminal competences are accompanied by a change in the regulatory and the evaluative function. Indeed, through the introduction of external certifying evaluations at the end of the CC or *matura*, evaluation becomes what Lessard & Carpentier (2015) identify as an inner part of public management, both a tool for transparency revealing practices and a lever for regulation in order to retroactively improve results.

Alongside policies to extend compulsory schooling and thus the core curriculum, a second mechanism promotes the deployment of a new framework for school governance and management that is supposed to improve equity and performance. Mons (2004a, 2007b) had already identified an important correlation between equity and the implementation of decentralised governance policies. The steering project in FW-B aims to strengthen the accountability of the actors for results by implementing a contract of objectives per school. «[...] Such a logic of accountability implies more autonomy for the actors within the framework of their responsibilities, but also a

stronger collective dynamic around precise objectives and reinforced steering [...]»
(FWB, 2017, p.112)

The decentralizing process taking place in Albania has some specific features.
It establishes and defines the role of *school board members* in a *school-based
management* approach (Lessard & Carpentier, 2015). Moreover, economically-
sounding terms filter through the educational discourse in both countries such as:
management, *skills* and *civil servant*. Again, the notion of contract with the obligations
and duties of each *board* member confirms a logic of results, or even an obligation
to achieve results, as Lessard & Carpentier (2015) point out.

As for the characteristics of the reforms undertaken in the two countries, the
first hypothesis postulating the similarity of the debates in the two countries is
rejected. Indeed, the debates are significantly different on both sides. What is mainly
debated in French-speaking Belgium, is the revision of the common core curriculum.
Extended by one year, it is to be seen as a device implemented to improve
equality and quality. Mons (2004a, 2007b) has shown that some of the top-ranking
countries in PISA surveys, both in terms of performance and equity, combine certain
characteristics, including a longer core curriculum, delayed orientation and low
repetition rates. However, the extension of the core curriculum is not unanimously
supported. Lafontaine (2019) or Hirtt (2019) support this idea for more equality.
Others, streaming from a very liberal conception, freely express the fear of a levelling
down, the increase in the risk of dropping out by keeping the pupil in a general
option, etc. Yet early guidance produces inequalities (Franquet, Friant & Demeuse,
2010; Ferrara & Friant, 2014).

Another aspect of the parliamentary debates concerns the questioning of the
new, polytechnic, and polyvalent character of the common core despite the shared
consensus on the necessity to take action.

In Albania, the debate is mostly about depoliticising education by cleaning up
past practices (Nathanaili, 2011; MAS, 2014) as well as the choice of textbooks
approved by the Ministry of Education. This unique and compulsory choice of the
past is being redefined after a totally liberal policy that resulted in a lack of quality.
Among the practices to be abolished are those that consisted in using the school,
the teachers and the headmasters for political and electoral purposes. Another
custom to be abolished is the matching of political affiliation with employment. The
clarification of the procedure for the entry and exit of regional directors of education,
school headmasters and teachers is part of this so-called depoliticization process.

The second hypothesis: the reforms are underpinned by the neo-liberal
recommendations of international policy with the aim of achieving global competences
by 2030, is confirmed. Indeed, both FWB and Albania, make clear reference to the
recommendations of international and intergovernmental bodies such as the OECD,
UNESCO and the European Commission. These references underpin the recognition
of the diagnosis made [...] the quality of our education is still insufficient [...] (FWB,
2015, p.1) as well as in the taken actions: (the revision of the TC, the revision of
governance, the teaching function etc.). Moreover, these policy recommendations
are part of the objectives that appear in the official texts in both countries (FWB,
2019; MAS, 2012).

In Albania, the reform process is characterised by a visible and direct involvement of international bodies both in the working groups and in the texts. They set out the structural changes to be made by Albania as part of the country's application to join the European Union. These objectives are part of the goals to be achieved by 2030 (UNESCO, 2015; UNICEF, 2017). However, these reforms are viewed as hasty. They require a deep change in several aspects and generate a multitude of small cascading reforms affecting teachers, management, the competency-based approach, etc. The Albanian society does not seem to be ready and does not have the means to ensure its success either. The revision of the 2012 law in 2015 is a step backwards in the structuring of education and the policy of the *altertext*.

It can be argued that there is a shift towards a new form of educational management, one that decentralises the power of the «welfare state» (Mons, 2007) with direct influence from multinational development bodies. In this context, the role played by these international bodies, in particular the OECD following the PISA tests, goes beyond that of mere suggestion. Indeed, these suggestions underpin the improvement policies in the reforms carried out in Albania and FWB, confirming the role of these bodies as policy-makers.

As to hypothesis three, we see it appropriate to provide a balanced answer. Hypothesis three postulated that both educational territories converge in terms of educational policies and frameworks. Indeed, both educational areas converge in terms of improvement policies.

However, they subsequently differ in terms of objectives and structures put in place.

First of all, they do not start from the same level. Albania scores way below the OECD average in all skills. Secondly, they do not address the same issues. In FWB, segregation (Jacobs & Danhier, 2017) and the logic of a quasi-school market as addressed by Vandenberghe (1998), are consensually presented as areas that require improvement. In Albania, inequality of performance and opportunity between urban and non-urban areas is a priority.

Thirdly, the characteristics of the undertaken reforms are determined by their social- historical experience and the values that each society wish to transmit to the future generations (Demeuse & Soetewey, 2013). Thus, in the French-speaking Belgium, the question of legitimisation and the acceptance of reforms by actors (Dupriez, 2015; Lessard & Carpentier, 2015) has conditioned the communication upon the momentous moments of the reform alongside with involving of the actors via the implementation of the participatory process of the Pact.

As to the liberal feature which has shaped the history of education so far it kept conditioning the subject of the debates as well as the choices made.

In Albania, on the other hand, the reform undertaken is marked by efforts to modernise a system that has functioned for half a century under the overwhelming control of the state and political power, whose core values are those of freedom and free market.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the analysis make it possible to highlight the common and specific features of each education system in implementing change. Both systems present hence two converging elements in terms of educational policies: the setup of a longer common core for more equality and the revision of the governance, calling into question the monopolistic management of education by central public authorities.

Opting for a longer core curriculum, the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FW-B) and Albania are taking action to reduce inequalities and improve performance in line with international recommendations. Numerous intergovernmental bodies and research agree on the fact that there is an important correlation between long core curriculum and equity (Mons, 2004a, 2007b; Demeuse & Baye, 2005; OECD, 2015; Lafontaine & al., 2017; Hirtt, 2018, etc.). However, the question of the ability of such a measure to combat inequalities on its own arises. Hirtt (2018) reminds us of the need to address the quasi-school market issue for more equality. Demeuse (2018) insists on the need to act on the principle of separation of schools to fight inequalities. Indeed, wanting an equal society is not granting it. The motto 'equal but separated' reminds of the urge for schools to remain open beyond explicit intentions.

The two education systems converge to some extent in terms of the objectives to be achieved in redesigning of their respective core curricula in response to the challenges of the 21st century as defined by intergovernmental bodies. These bodies therefore directly have an impact on the conception of national education policies by creating a global space of neoliberal education policies as supported by research (Lingard & Grek, 2007; Grek, Lawn, Lingard, Ozga, Rinne, Segerholm, & Simola 2009). Hence, the globalisation of educational policies as observed, transforms regional and/or national education spaces as well as their policies, to the extent that they are aligned with a global agenda of objectives (Robertson & Dale, 2017).

Nonetheless, these changes do take place according to the specific socio-economic characteristics of each country in line with the claims of Wahlström and Sundberg. (2018). For a fact, FW-B rehabilitates knowledge after a vague application of the long-criticised competence approach (Hirtt, 2005; Hirtt, 2015; Beckers & Voos, 2008) meanwhile Albania, on the other hand, is embracing the competency-based approach and approaching the management school in order to modernise its education system. The reform it is undertaking is part of the changes to achieve within the project of joining the European Union. In this perspective, Albania needs to clean up its education system from the habits of the past.

In both education systems, the endeavour of school governance revision goes together with the aim to decentralise competences and the will to strengthen the accountability of the actors (Mons, 2004a, 2007b). The steering project, on the one hand, and the redefinition of the school board, on the other, support this argument.

Furthermore, the new paradigm in evaluation legalizing external assessment, provides the government with a steering role. The latter determines the expectations and certifies them. Consequently, both education systems adopt a management approach underpinned by the logic of results (Grek, 2009; Lessard & Carpentier, 2015) in a context of international economy and competition. The advent of PISA

assessments contributes to the establishment of a neo-liberal decision space aimed at aligning with a global agenda of goals (Alexiadou, 2016; Robertson & Dale, 2017).

The research carried out in this work could be enriched at several levels. First, the analysis could be extended to the minutes of law 56/2015 as well as to all laws. Secondly, it should be complemented with a double encoding in order to limit the biases related to the single researcher.

Subsequently, from a broader perspective, it would be interesting to consider the competences of the new common core namely how they are translated in the new curricula and to extend this study to several countries. The aim would be to determine whether a form of global and common core of competences would emerge for the European citizen of the 21st century society.

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9. Appendices

Appendix 1. *Education policy analysis grid based on Mons (2004a, 2007b)*

Object	Structural changes Changes in educational trajectories Single core curriculum for all Teacher training Decentralizing policies from the system Controlling the system
Reasons	Alignment with economic-political recommendations Accession to the EU Economic dependence (landlords) Training future citizens in 21st^e century skills Improving efficiency Improving quality
Debates	Common core Single or multiple text School Board Characteristics related to the teacher's function
Devices	Which ones? Extension of the Common Core (CC) Restructuring of the existing CC Strengthening technical and vocational education Other
CC Features	The beginning and the end Features of the CC in FWB Features of CC in Albania
Heterogeneity management	The contents Unification Diversification
	School career management Unification Differentiation
	Grouping students By level By age Individualised support
	Repetition High Medium Low
	Branches When?

Values and concepts mobilised	Efficiency Equality Individual freedom and singularity Quality Opposite values
Free choice What is the choice about?	What? The institutions Textbooks The teachers By whom? Ministry/public authority Teacher Parent School board Why? In the name of freedom Control over the taught content Partnership Other
Targeted institutional framework	Centralized and united Decentralised and varied Progressive Wild Financing By whom? The State Private bodies Principle Per registered head
Policy assessment	How? By whom? When?

Appendix 2. *Examples of nodes and sub-nodes added following the encoding of the parliamentary discussions of the draft decree of books 1st & 2nd implementing CC*

Nodes = themes	Sub-nodes	Examples

Features of the FW-B core	CC and equality Knowledge building Polytechnic CC missions Combating failure and repetition Skills Informed choice	«The subjects figuring in the timetables of the core curriculum have been determined with a view to reinforcing basic knowledge, know-how and skills on the one hand, and to highlighting subjects, content or skills that have been little worked on on the other hand [...]».
Subjects of debate	CC **For** **Against** **Reserved opinion** **Articulation and coherence of the codex** **Articulation and coherence of the approach** **Levelling down** Characteristics of the teaching function **Collaborative work** Accountability Employment shortage	«[...] Madam Minister, as our group has said, repeated and proclaimed, we are deeply displeased with this draft decree, particularly the introduction of the common core curriculum! [...] « I have very serious doubts about the purpose of the reforms and debates [...]» [...] the implementation of the core curriculum, described as multidisciplinary and polytechnic. In this respect I have very serious doubts about the purpose of the reforms and the debates [...]» «[...] I would point to collaborative work as another element that illustrates your mistrust of the actors on the ground [...]». «It is impossible to grasp the coherent, systematic and complete nature of the codification operation envisaged. Your Code is not one, since it does not bring any coherence to a text which, moreover, is imprecise and illegible [...]».

Appendix 3. *Examples of nodes and sub-nodes added as a result of encoding the parliamentary discussions leading up to the vote on the 2012 law*

Nodes = themes	Sub-nodes	Examples
Characteristics of the Albanian core curriculum	Talent differentiation Competency-based approach Differentiation and inclusion	"[...] Projektligji i kushton vemendje te posaçme nxenesve qe kane prirje si ne shkencat shoqerore, ashtu dhe ne ato natyrore [...]" «[...] Jane 7 kompetenca te pasqyruara ne nje nen te ri [...]»

Values	Secularism Depoliticisation of education Rights, individual freedoms and singularity Free education	«[...] Ne sistemin arsimor parauniversitar respektohen, mbrohen dhe zhvillohen te drejtat e lirite e njeriut ne pergjithesi dhe te drejtat e femijeve [...]»