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Dilina BESHIRI, PhD 

University “Aleksandër Moisu” Durrës, Albania
dilinabeshiri@uamd.edu.al

Klodiana LEKA, PhD 

University “Aleksandër Moisu” Durrës, Albania
klodianaleka@uamd.edu.al

Shqipe HAXHIHYSENI, PhD 

University “Aleksandër Moisu” Durrës, Albania
shqipehaxhihyseni@uamd.edu.al

IMPLEMENTING KEY COMPETENCES IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION WITHIN THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK: TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS IN ALBANIA

ABSTRACT: *In the context of educational reforms in recent years, key competences have been placed at the center of the curriculum, requiring teachers to build a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach. Therefore, this study aims to explore teachers’ attitudes towards key competences and to analyze how they include and implement them during the teaching process. The study also examines the challenges that teachers face when planning and assessing key competences in combination with those of the subject. Aligned with European Union priorities (2018), key competences, which include critical thinking, digital skills, collaboration, and creativity, constitute an important aspect of educational reforms in recent years. The study is based on qualitative analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with 53 teachers in the pre-university system of the Durres region. The selection was based on an equal representation of age, teaching experience and relevant fields of study. A thematic analysis was used to reflect the relationship between themes and factors that influence the development of key competences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were recorded, and the transcripts were analyzed independently by two researchers. The findings show that most teachers try to integrate key competences into the teaching process, although challenges related to the lack of adequate resources and training continue to be present. While teachers emphasize the importance of developing these competences, the results show that these often take a back seat due to the prioritization of subject objectives.*

KEYWORDS: Key competences; teaching process; subject objectives; teacher training; pre-university education.

1. Introduction

The literature on key competences has expanded significantly in recent years, particularly following their inclusion in the educational policies of many countries. According to the European Commission for Education and Training (2018), key competences represent a set of fundamental skills that all individuals need to develop in order to meet the challenges of modern life, including critical thinking, creativity, collaboration,

and digital literacy. These competences are considered essential for building a sustainable and successful society in an ever-changing world. Furthermore, OECD reports (2020) highlight that equipping students with these competences has become a central priority for education systems worldwide.

According to Eurydice (2019), the inclusion of key competences in school curricula requires a comprehensive approach, covering all knowledge areas and subjects. A prominent problem is that teachers often face difficulties in integrating these competences with subject outcomes. In a large study, Johnson et al. (2019) showed that teachers often focus more on achieving specific subject objectives, while key competences take a back seat due to a lack of time and pressure to fulfill the curriculum. Furthermore, Mosley and Paterson (2020) found that teachers often feel uncertain about how to assess key competences, requiring guidance and support materials that are not always available at the local or national level. The OECD's PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) project has greatly influenced the design of curricula and methods for assessing key competences in many countries. According to OECD (2020), PISA tests focus not only on academic knowledge, but also on interdisciplinary skills, including critical thinking, problem-solving, and civic competences. This change has prompted many education systems to reassess and more deeply incorporate key competences into their teaching planning.

Another approach that has gained ground for the development of key competences is the use of projects and group work. According to Davis et al. (2021), these methods are effective for developing collaborative skills, conflict management, and critical thinking. These activities provide opportunities for interdisciplinary learning, where students can collaborate to solve complex problems that require the use of several competences simultaneously. Hattie (2020) highlights the importance of these methods, emphasizing that group work and projects are among the most effective methodologies for developing key competences and increasing student motivation for learning. However, Kaur and Singh (2019) emphasize that the use of projects and collaborative activities requires careful planning and sufficient time, which is often lacking in teachers' busy schedules.

In addition, Ball and Forrester (2022) discuss the importance of digital competences, noting that the development of these skills is essential to prepare students for the job market in an increasingly digital world. They suggest that educators should include information and communication technologies in every area of the curriculum to ensure that students develop full technological competence. However, Vander Ark (2020) warns that the development of digital competences must be balanced and closely linked to educational goals, not to focus solely on the use of technology, but on the development of critical skills that go beyond it.

In Albania, key competences have received increased attention in recent years, especially after the adoption of the new national curriculum in 2014, which aims to include key competences at all levels of education. Key competences, according to the New National Curriculum (IZHA, 2014), include skills such as critical thinking,

civic skills, digital skills, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The inclusion of these skills aims to prepare students for the challenges of a society that is increasingly complex and intertwined with technology and globalization (Puka, 2011).

According to a study conducted by the Institute for the Development of Education (IZHA, 2017), the inclusion of key competences in primary and lower secondary education has encountered several challenges. One of the main challenges highlighted by this report is the lack of resources and practical guides for teachers, who often feel unprepared to integrate these competences into their teaching planning. Rama and Gjikhuri (2019) confirm that teachers often focus more on subject objectives, viewing key competences as add-ons that are more difficult to achieve due to tight schedules and pressures to fulfill the curriculum.

Another important aspect that has been mentioned in the literature is the importance of preparing teachers for the development and assessment of key competences. Çipi (2020) emphasizes that teacher education programs in Albania still need improvements to face the new challenges of integrating key competences into teaching practice. Teachers often do not have enough practical training to effectively incorporate these skills into their daily teaching.

On the other hand, several pilot initiatives have shown some positive results. The “School as a Community Center” project (UNICEF Albania, 2018) emphasizes that the inclusion of project-based activities and the development of civic competences has brought great benefits to students, especially in increasing their involvement in school and extracurricular activities. These activities have helped to increase student engagement and have promoted collaborative and critical competences.

Bajrami (2021) highlights that digital competences are one of the biggest challenges for schools in Albania. While some schools are equipped with basic technology, teachers and students often do not have equal access to the technology needed to develop digital skills. The report highlights that training and further professional development for teachers in the use of technology is an area that requires more investment and priority from the part of education policies.

2. Methodology

Research questions

1. What are teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward the role of key competences in the teaching-and learning process?
2. How do teachers incorporate key competences in lesson planning and classroom implementation?
3. Which methods and activities do teachers use to develop key competences in their students?
4. How do teachers assess pupils’ progress in key competences, and what challenges do they encounter in doing so?

5. Is there a perceived need for a practical guide to developing key competences, and, if so, how should it be structured?

Research design and population

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive design, aiming to explore teachers' in-depth perspectives on the integration of key competences in the teaching and learning process. This design was appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the need to capture participants' lived experiences in a naturalistic setting (Sandelowski, 2000). The design emphasized flexibility and openness, allowing themes to emerge from teachers' narratives rather than being pre-imposed.

The population of the study included teachers from various educational levels (elementary, lower secondary, and upper secondary) within the pre-university education system in Durrës County, Albania. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 53 participants, ensuring diversity in terms of teaching experience, school type (urban and rural), and subject area. The sample was considered adequate to achieve data saturation, where no new themes were emerging (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Participants were selected based on their willingness to reflect critically on their professional practices and their involvement in curriculum planning and implementation. All participants had at least three years of teaching experience, providing a mature and grounded perspective on the integration of key competences in educational practice.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allow an open yet focused conversation, enabling teachers to describe how they embed and enact key competences in the curriculum (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interview prompts centred on:

- lesson-planning and forecasting of key-competency outcomes,
- teaching methods and classroom activities,
- assessment practices, and
- challenges and resource needs.

Each research question above was explicitly mapped to at least one interview block to ensure alignment between inquiry and data.

3. Data analysis

The data analysis followed a latent qualitative content analysis approach as outlined by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). The process began with a phase of immersion, during which all interview transcripts were read in full to obtain a holistic understanding of the content and to identify elements relevant to the

research questions. This initial reading provided a foundation for recognizing the overarching patterns and perspectives conveyed by the participants.

Subsequently, the transcripts were re-read multiple times to deepen familiarity with the data. The next step involved identifying meaning units by carefully examining each transcript line by line. These meaning units, segments of text expressing central ideas, were marked and extracted systematically. Following this, the meaning units were contextually condensed, preserving their essential meaning in a more concise form.

After condensation, units sharing similar meanings were grouped into sub-themes, which were then abstracted into overarching themes that directly addressed the five research questions of the study. This analytic procedure ensured traceability from the original interview text to the final thematic interpretations, while upholding methodological rigor throughout the process (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). (*See Table 1 for an illustrative coding trail.*)

Teaching and integrating key competences

The data collected shows that a significant proportion of teachers (54%) try to organically combine subject content with key competences. This reflects a modern approach to the teaching process, in line with the new curricular framework that sees the student as an active subject of learning, and the teacher as a leader in the development of life skills.

“When I give students group projects, I notice that they not only share tasks, but also learn to listen to each other, argue and make decisions together. This is the essence of key competences.” (Albanian language teacher, 9-year school)

Around 25% of teachers consider the development of key competences as the primary goal of the lesson, seeing this as a way to prepare students for life and social challenges. This category shows a high awareness of the development of interdisciplinary skills such as critical thinking, self-management, and interaction with others. However, a significant percentage (21%) continues to maintain the traditional focus on subject competences, treating key competences more as an addition than as an integral part of the content. This shows that although there is progress, the deep integration of competences into all teaching practice remains a challenge.

Planning and predicting key competences

In the planning analysis, a clear duality emerged: teachers declare the inclusion of key competences

in their lesson plans, but in practice, this often happens formally, to fulfill administrative obligations.

“Our plans include key competences, but in practice it is much more difficult to implement them, especially when materials are lacking or time is limited.” (Mathematics teacher, high school)

Many teachers state that the lack of guidance resources and specific training hinders them from understanding how competences can be implemented in real teaching situations. This results in plans that contain general goals, without clear support for practical strategies.

“We have very theoretical instructions, but we need concrete examples, planning models that work in the classroom.” (Elementary school teacher)

Didactic activities in function of key competences

Didactic activities aimed at developing key competences range from integrated projects, group work, and simulations to the use of technology and problem situations. Teachers see these as effective ways to help students develop skills applicable in real-world contexts.

“Projects are the best way to get students to collaborate, use information, and reflect on solutions. In one case, students developed an ecological plan for their neighborhood.” (Geography teacher, 9-year school)

The inclusion of technology in teaching has often been mentioned as an important tool for developing digital competence. However, its effective use is conditioned by the school infrastructure.

“When technology is absent, it is useless to talk about developing digital skills. One laptop for the classroom is not enough.” (Information technology teacher)

Activities that stimulate interaction, critical thinking, and problem solving are key to developing civic and personal competences. Teachers who experiment with these forms report greater student engagement and increased autonomy in their learning.

Assessment of key competences and the need for support

One of the most controversial points was the assessment of key competences. Although many teachers

use alternative forms of assessment, such as self-assessment, observation, and project assessment, the lack of clear standards and instruments causes uncertainty.

“The assessment of competences is often done intuitively. We do not have any instrument that clearly guides us on how to measure them.” (History teacher, 9-year school)

The data show that most teachers assess students for key competences through projects and continuous assessment, but they express the need for a manual to better structure the assessment process. The demand for a common assessment framework and well-structured instruments was dominant. Teachers want rubrics, practical guidelines, and concrete models to carry out authentic and fair assessment.

“I feel I can do more to develop students’ competences, but the lack of materials makes the work much more difficult.” (Biology teacher, 9-year school)

Training was also highlighted as a necessity to move from theoretical knowledge to practical application.

“We need practice-oriented training, not just theoretical presentations. I want to see how a colleague in the classroom does it, not just hear about it.” (Physics teacher, high school)

4. Discussion of results

The interview data show that the majority of teachers (54%) try to combine subject competences with key competences in teaching. Many of them (25%) focus mainly on key competences, while another part (21%) is more focused on subject competences. Teachers identified projects and group work as the most effective ways to develop key competences.

Regarding planning, teachers express that while they try to include outcomes for key competences in their plans, they often encounter difficulties in accomplishing them during the teaching process. They also identify the need for clearer and more practical guidelines that would help them in better implementing the curriculum.

One of the main challenges that emerged was the lack of coherence between lesson planning and the practical implementation of key competences. Although most teachers include key competences in their lesson plans, their implementation during lessons is not always consistent. This is consistent with the findings of existing literature, which show that one of the main obstacles to the integration of key competences is a strong

focus on subject content and the lack of a systematic approach that supports the development of these skills (Johnson et al., 2019; OECD, 2020).

An important factor that was highlighted is the lack of practical guides and structured materials that would help teachers in developing and assessing key competences. This deficiency directly affects the effectiveness of teachers in incorporating these competences into their lessons. Teachers are looking for clearer guidelines and practical manuals that can be used as ongoing references when planning and implementing lessons. This is in line with previous research results, which highlighted that a large number of teachers feel unsure about the appropriate ways to integrate key competences into the curriculum and need more structured support (Davis et al., 2021).

One aspect that has been reviewed very carefully is the importance of developing digital skills as an integral part of key competences. Teachers expressed a strong interest in improving students' digital skills, but it was highlighted that there is a lack of sufficient and up-to-date equipment in many schools. Furthermore, teacher training in the effective use of technology in the teaching process is still considered insufficient. This finding is consistent with the findings of previous studies, which have argued that digital skills are critical for preparing students for an increasingly technology-dependent world, but that schools and teachers often lack the resources and training needed to develop these skills (European Commission, 2018).

Another key point that emerged from the data analysis is the need for greater formalization of the assessment of key competences. Many teachers point out that these competences are often assessed informally or remain closely linked to the assessment of specific subjects. However, there is a lack of clear guidelines and standardized procedures for measuring key competences independently. This problem has also been identified in the international literature, which suggests that clearer and more structured tools for assessing these competences should be developed so that they can be better integrated into school reports and records (OECD, 2020).

The results of this study highlight that teacher training is a key factor for the successful implementation and assessment of key competences. Teachers need continuous and specialized training, which should be more practical and focused on the application of these competences in the real classroom context. Participants also highlighted the importance of sharing experiences and best practices among colleagues to develop a more coherent and harmonised approach to teaching and assessing key competences. In summary, the results of this study show that although teachers are aware of the importance of key competences, they face numerous challenges in their implementation and assessment. To overcome these challenges, it is necessary to provide further support through practical guides, specialised training, and improved digital infrastructure in schools. Formalising the process of assessing key competences will also help to ensure a more structured and sustainable approach to their development.

5. Limitations and comparative relevance

This study presents certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small (53 teachers) and limited to one geographic region, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the research provides rich insights but does not allow for statistical generalization. Future studies could therefore expand the sample to include teachers from different regions and apply mixed-methods designs to strengthen the empirical validity. Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable comparative insights within the European Union educational framework, as it reflects how the integration of key competences, aligned with the European Reference Framework for Key Competences (European Commission, 2018) is being interpreted and implemented in the Albanian pre-university context. The findings highlight both convergence with broader EU priorities on competence-based education and the specific challenges of adapting these principles within national educational systems.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of qualitative data shows that, although teachers consider key competences important, there is a great need for additional support for their development and assessment. Teachers often face difficulties in how these competences can be integrated into everyday teaching and require clearer and more practical guidance. A practical manual that provides structured instructions and concrete examples would be a valuable resource to help teachers implement these competences more effectively, providing them with tools and strategies that they can use in the classroom. Such a manual would not only help standardize methods for developing key competences but would also contribute to better preparing students for future challenges. Given the importance of digital skills as an integral part of key competences, schools must provide up-to-date and sufficient technological equipment. This equipment is essential for the development of students' digital skills, preparing them for an increasingly technology-dependent world. Furthermore, training teachers in the effective use of technology in the teaching process is essential. This training should include strategies for integrating technology in order to develop digital skills, making the teaching process more advanced and more relevant to today's needs.

Another important aspect is the formalization of the assessment of key competences in lesson planning. Teachers need clear guidance on how to measure these competences, ensuring that their assessment is included in lesson reports and grade records. Continuous assessment, carried out through projects, essays, and group work, can be an effective method for measuring the development of key competences. This would help

create a more comprehensive and structured approach to assessing the skills that students develop in the classroom.

Finally, teachers should have access to regular and specialized training on the development and assessment of key competences. This training should not only focus on the theory of competences, but also on their practical application in the classroom. Teaching methodologies, such as project work, group collaboration, and problem solving, are important ways to integrate these competences naturally into the learning process and to prepare students for the real challenges they will face in the future.

7. Recommendations

There is a clear need for practical materials and manuals that teachers can use during the teaching process to more effectively integrate key competences across all subjects. Clear and structured guides that provide practical examples and strategies for integrating key competences would help reduce the confusion and fatigue associated with existing documentation and resources.

Teachers should benefit from specialized and regular training on the development and assessment of key competences. This training should focus not only on the theory of key competences, but also on their practical application in the classroom, through different teaching methodologies, such as project work, group collaboration, and problem solving.

Given the importance of digital skills as part of the key competences, schools must provide sufficient and up-to-date technological equipment. This should be accompanied by specific training on the effective use of technology in the teaching process.

The assessment of key competences should be more formalised in teaching planning. Teachers should have clear instructions on how to measure these competences and include their assessment in teaching reports and grade records. This can be done through continuous assessment, projects, essays, and group work.

The Ministry of Education should examine whether the current curriculum and lessons offer sufficient space for the integration of key competences. If necessary, new elements can be included or the lesson structure adapted to allow for a more sustainable development of these competences.

To help new teachers at the start of their careers, it is necessary to create support mechanisms, such as experienced mentors, who can share best practices for integrating key competences in the classroom.

Collaboration between teachers, parents, and the school community is essential for the successful development of key competences. Parents should be informed and encouraged to support the development of these skills outside of school.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Illustrative coding trail

<i>Excerpt from Interview transcript</i>	<i>Meaning Unit</i>	<i>Condensed Meaning Unit</i>	<i>Sub-theme</i>	<i>Theme</i>
We aim for students to develop critical thinking through projects and group discussions.	Focusing on the development of critical thinking through active methods	Development of critical thinking through projects and discussions	Methods for developing key competences	Inclusion of key competences in teaching
The planning includes subject-specific competences, but we are increasingly trying to integrate key competences as well.	Integration of key competences in planning	Planning for the integration of key competences	Competency-oriented planning	Inclusion of key competences in planning
It is difficult to assess civic competences through traditional tests, so we use alternative assessments.	Challenges in assessing competences and the use of alternative methods	Use of alternative assessments for competences	Challenges in assessment	Assessment of key competences
It would be helpful to have a concrete manual on how to develop these competences.	Need for a practical guide on competences	Need for a practical manual	Need for support	Need for a practical guide