School Psychology in Albania

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Context of School Psychology

Albania is located in Southern Europe and is one of more than 10 Balkan nations. Albania is an old Mediterranean country, with a history dating from the 4th century BC. It is bordered by Montenegro in the north, Kosovo in the north-east, the Republic of Macedonia in the east, and Greece in the south. The Adriatic and Ionian Seas lie to the west of Albania and provide beautiful views with mountains, hills, and beaches. Its area is 28,748 square kilometers. It has six main rivers, four natural lakes, four artificial lakes, and mountains. Albania, an emerging democracy was formally named the Republic of Albania. According to a 1989 estimate, 95% of Albania’s population are Albanians (Shqiptare), descendents from the ancient Illyrians, 3% are Greek, and 2% are other (Vlach, Roma [Gypsy], Serb, Macedonian, Bulgarian). Languages that are spoken in the territory of Albania are Albanian (the official language, derived from the Tosk dialect), Greek, Vlach, Romani, and Slavic dialects.

Albania was a closed country for 47 years (1944–1991), due to a dictatorship regime and a communist ideology. But in the 1990s, political and economic changes drastically altered Albanians’ lives. Under communism, most Albanian households shared similar standards, conditions, and lifestyles, but the changes fostered differences among Albanian households. Changes within the political system and the introduction of a market economy caused radical economic reforms. In 2004, the gross domestic product was about US$17.64 billion, US$4,900 per capita (Institute of Statistics, 2004). Albanians are generally impoverished, with a monthly average income per capita of 37 euros. Almost half of the economically active population is still engaged in agriculture, and a fifth still works abroad. The country has a high unemployment rate (15%–30%), there are almost no exports, and it imports many goods from Greece and Italy. Income is obtained mainly from employment in private and agricultural sectors, self-employment, or from unemployment benefits.

Since 1990, migration has had a significant influence on the country’s structure and growth. The movement of people has increased, with a 10% growth rate between 1990 and 2000, with many moving to urban areas. Within its population of 3,563,112 (July 2005), 25.6% are ages 0 to
14 years (476,989 males, 434,298 females), 65.8% are ages 15 to 64 years (1,199,964 males, 1,144,886 females), and 8.6% are 65 years and older (141,559 males, 165,416 females). The Albanian population is young, with an average age of 31 years. The free and uncontrolled movement of people has affected the change of ratio of rural and urban populations. By the end of 2003, the urban population had grown to 44.5%, with 22% of the population living in the capital of Albania, Tirana. The new administrative division of Albania does not allow for the calculation of population growth per district, as this is a continuous process. Today, due to these demographic and political changes, Albania is divided into 12 prefectures, 36 districts, and 374 communes and municipalities (Institute of Statistics, 2005).

Although the Albanian education system relies primarily on its public schools, many private schools have opened, mostly in larger cities. The basic characteristics of current Albanian education are (a) an increase in the number of pupils registered in professional and technical high schools and the profiling of public high schools in two directions (natural and social sciences) after some years of a successful pilot program, (b) an increase of new arrivals to universities in response to the numerous requests from students finishing high school, (c) an improvement in the curriculum and the physical conditions of schools, and (d) the opening of private universities (Albanian Ministry of Education and Science, 2005). The foundation of education in Albania is the National Education Program, whose aim is to meet the educational needs of all Albanians. It encompasses all activities of the system and offers a variety of programs and types of education based on the national tradition. The National Education Program addresses class-based learning, and teachers should follow the strict plan it prescribes. Due to the lack of laboratories and materials, this plan is very theoretical and involves almost no practical work. The National Education Program also includes a system of statistical indices that can provide information on the educational process, direction and management of schools, and the state administration.

Since 1997, following UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) recommendations on the classification of schools and fields of study defined by the International Standard Classification of Education 1997 (UNESCO, 1997) and directions of the Ministry of Education and Science, the education system was divided into the following levels: Level 0: pre-elementary education (with 79,905 students ages 0–6); Level 1: lower level of 9-year education (ages 6–10); Level 2: higher level of 9-year education (ages 10–15; total of 505,141 students at Levels 1 and 2); Level 3: high school education (with 142,402 students ages 15–19); Level 4: Post–high school education but not university (with few students); Level 5: university education (with 40,125 students); and Level 6: post-university education (leading to advanced research qualification).

The university education includes 11 public universities: Ten are universities and one is the High School of Nurses in Tirana and its branches in district universities. Fields of study and training are divided in 9 broad areas, 25 limited fields, and 80 detailed ones. High school and university education are mainly organized to offer full-time education and less so for part-time education. Since 2004, two private universities have opened: the University of New York with 245 students and the Law University with 160 students (Albanian Ministry of Education and Science, 2005).

Before September 2004, compulsory education was based on an 8-year education system (Levels 1 and 2). After a decision made by the Ministry of Education and Science, this system has been extended to a 9-year system of compulsory education. According to the Institute of Statistics (2004), a total of 776,627 students in Levels 0 through 3 were enrolled in public and private schools (not including special education), including students who repeated the academic year because they failed in the previous one. During the 2003–2004 school year, in
Levels 0 through 3, there were a total of 701,998 students and 35,884 teachers in 3,773 public schools and 25,450 students and 2,010 teachers in 225 private schools.

Ninety-five percent of students graduate from Levels 1 and 2, and 90% graduate from Level 3. The average age of students graduating from Level 3 is 18. Sixty-six percent of students graduate from Level 5. Although statistics about the average class size nationally are not available because of the continuing and uncontrolled migration, the capital of Albania, Tirana, has classes that range from 40 to 50 students at Level 3 and from 30 to 40 students at Levels 1 and 2. Other Albanian cities and rural areas have an estimated 20 to 30 students per class. Studies by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Science (2005) compared the ratio of students to teachers during the academic year 2003–2004 (21.4:1, Level 0; 18.8:1 Levels 1 and 2; 19.3:1 Level 3) to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development guidelines (15.5:1, Level 0; 16.3:1, Levels 1 and 2; 13.9:1, Level 3). The variation in class size results from the shortage of schools and the concentration of population in the urban areas.

The field of special education has two national institutions, six special schools, and four daily centers of special education. These 12 institutions offer 77 classes with 10 to 12 students per class and 184 teachers. Eight hundred students attend these institutions, and 36% of the students are female. Special education students constitute 0.12% of the students in Albania (Levels 1–3). The number of children with special needs is much higher, but the infrastructure and the mentality of parents hinder delivery of special education. Some parents prefer not to send children with moderate retardation to special schools, because they do not want to admit that their child is “sick,” or they are not aware of how their children can benefit. At the same time, children with retardation are not welcomed in the public schools, because of the lack of qualified teachers to help them.

### Origin, History, and Current Status of School Psychology

In 1996, a department of psychology was created at Tirana University with 42 students. At that time, the professors who taught at the University had no diploma/degree in psychology. They had diplomas as teachers and had attended universities abroad to acquire an introduction to general psychology and its specializations. In 1999, school psychology began as a division of the Psychology Department. After 3 years of general education in psychology, students choose whether to pursue school psychology or clinical psychology. In 2000, students graduated as school or clinical psychologists, according to the direction they chose. Ten selected school psychology; 32 selected clinical psychology. The term school psychologist is used in Albania. The first 10 school psychologists graduated in 2000. Since then, 63 school psychologists, 6 males and 57 females, have graduated.

Since 2004, school psychologists have worked in public schools with different programs funded by different organizations. They also work in centers and for associations, which implement different programs related to categories of people in need. None work in private practice or in schools in rural areas. The majority of school psychologists work in Tirana. A few work in other cities in other professions.

In September 2004, the Ministry of Education and Science decided to expand the psychological service to Levels 0, 1, 2, and 3 of the education system for 2 years (2004–2006). The aim was to increase the number of professionals who could offer psychological services to schools. In Tirana, 20 psychologists (school and clinical psychologists) work in Levels 1, 2, and 3, 5 work in the 40 public kindergartens, and 5 in the 29 nurseries (Level 0). The salaries of psychologists who work in different levels of education are different. The average annual salary of school psychologists in Albania is estimated to be between 1,600 and 2,000 euros annually, depending on the levels of education in which
Salaries of school psychologists and teachers are comparable.

In 2003, using the International School Psychology Survey (Jimerson & International School Psychology Association Research Committee, 2002), Boce and Bashi (Musabelliu) gathered information regarding the roles, responsibilities, and activities of school psychologists in Albania (Jimerson et al., 2004). Using the phone list of the Albanian Association of School Psychologists, Boce and Bashi (Musabelliu) contacted every school psychologist living in Albania (N = 11) at the time. Most of the respondents (9) were living in the capital area. All distributed questionnaires were completed and returned. The results of this survey revealed that all school psychologists were female, between ages 23 and 25, held a bachelor’s degree in school psychology and were at least bilingual (Albanian, English, French, and Italian were the most common languages). The ratio of school psychologists to students in the schools where school psychologists were employed was 1 to 580 on average (ranging from 1:200 to 1:1,500). All 11 were members of the national school psychology association. External challenges jeopardizing service delivery in Albania most often referred to were the low status of school psychology, the lack of money to properly fund services, and the lack of public support for education. Since the changes 2004, the ratio of school psychologists to students is 1:2,500 students in Levels 1 and 2; 1:1,200 students in Level 3; 1:1,200 students in Level 0 (kindergarten); and 1:300 students in Level 0 (nurseries).

Opportunities for professional development are few. Although some organizations offer training, not all school psychologists are able to attend, and the majority of courses on offer have no connection to school psychology. In 2000, the first postgraduate school psychology program was launched. This program lasts three semesters (12 months), and students who complete the program receive master’s degrees in counseling. Although the Ministry of Education and Science currently offers employment opportunities for school psychologists, there are no guarantees that this will continue (because it is experimental for 2 years), and the job satisfaction is not high because of the very low salary and poor work environment. The majority of schools have no counseling office at all, and one psychologist is responsible for two or three schools, depending on the number of students they have.

**Infrastructure of School Psychology**

There are no professional organizations to offer support to school psychologists, except for the Albanian Association of School Psychologists, which has no funding for its projects. In addition, no standards exist for credentialing and licensing school and other psychologists in Albania. With the employment of psychologists in schools, Ministry of Education and Science specialists, with the help of other professionals, compiled some regulations to direct the work of school psychologists in the education system, but no psychologists are involved with this process. In 1995, the Ministry of Education and Science proposed the law “For the Pre-university Education System,” which normative provisions about special education were included. This law was enacted by the Council of Ministers that same year.

Since 2004, the employment of school psychologists has been restricted to very few schools, for brief periods, through different nongovernmental organizations’ programs or centers. Various foreign organizations have specific programs that attempt to improve students’ academic lives or help them to cope with establishing new relationships with other students from different areas of Albania. School psychologists or social workers are employed by these organizations to fulfill their projects. Psychologists, sociologists, teachers with courses in psychology, and any other professional related to the field of psychology, are eligible to offer psychological services in schools.
There are no professional journals for school psychologists. The problems of school psychologists or the problems of education are discussed in periodicals, such as Nentori, a publication of the Institute of Pedagogic Research, which deals with education issues, and Arsini Sot, a publication of the Tirana Regional Department of Education.

**Preparation of School Psychologists**

Only one school psychology program within the psychology department at the University of Tirana prepares school psychologists. The average number of school psychologists admitted into and graduating from the program annually is 12. To become a school psychologist, one must have concluded 3 years of general education in psychology and complete a year-long program in school psychology. The program requires the following courses: psychology of environment (one semester, 4 months); organizational psychology (one semester); test theory (one semester); psychological evaluation (annual, 8 months); scientific research (annual, 8 months); psychology of people with special needs (one semester); speaking disorders (one semester); school psychology (one semester); psychotherapy, cognitive-behavioral approach (two semesters); and practice (annual, 8 months).

Students must pass all exams in these courses. There is no credentialing system. The performance of students is determined by their marks. After earning a bachelor’s degree, a student may enter the master’s program for counseling in psychology at the University of Tirana. This program takes three semesters (12 months) to complete and requires the following courses: developmental psychology (one semester, 4 months); psychological evaluation (one semester); gestalt psychotherapy (one semester); social psychology (one semester); therapeutic groups (two semesters); cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy (one semester); ethics of counseling (one semester); scientific research (one semester).

In general, these programs provide school psychologists with (a) theoretical knowledge of psychology related to development, learning, cognition, personality, human biology, social aspects, and evaluation; (b) a focus on children and youth related to the psychological services in schools and communities and relationships between teachers and students; (c) interpersonal skills related to listening and communication and attitudes toward clients; and (d) knowledge of statistical and basic research methods.

**Roles, Functions, and Responsibilities of School Psychologists**

The major roles assumed by school psychologists depend upon the professional environment in which they work. Common roles include counseling, consultation, and intervention. Consultations with teachers and parents address developmental problems of children and help monitor their progress in school. The common goal of intervention is to minimize students’ learning difficulties, improve their temperaments, help solve family and community problems related to the child, and engage children in community programs to increase collaboration (establishing and maintaining relationships) between peers from different cultures and educational backgrounds. Through migration, many people with differing cultural backgrounds have come to Tirana from other cities and villages. This poses a significant problem in Albania because this movement has highlighted individual differences between children.

Psychologists who work in Level 0 perform these duties: (a) assess physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development of children; (b) develop program services or education programs for individual children; and (c) train education staff about psychological services. In 2004,
the Ministry of Education and Science enacted a bylaw in which the duties of psychologists who work in Levels 1 through 3 are described. The most common duties are (a) counsel members of education staff and parents about students’ needs and collaborate with different services in communities; (b) provide individual psychological counseling to students, (c) provide group counseling to two or more students to solve different problems; (d) assess each child’s behavior and progress in school; and (e) develop specific and general programs related to education in school and children’s behavior.

The information from the 2003 survey revealed that school psychologists in Albania reported that, on average, approximately 50% of their time was spent counseling students, 20% consulting with teachers and staff, 15% conducting staff training and in-service programs, 12% consulting with parents and families, 10% in administrative responsibilities, 9% providing direct services, 8% completing psychoeducational evaluations, and 6% providing primary prevention programs (Jimerson et al., 2004). School psychologists in Albania ranked psychoeducational evaluations as the ideal role and counseling students as the second most ideal, with administrative responsibilities ranked last.

Current Issues Impacting School Psychology

School psychology is still young in Albania; thus, it suffers from the problems and challenges of a new field. One is professional development: School psychologists acquire their specialization in only 1 year plus the master’s program in counseling. Thus, their professional development is minimal, especially in practical experience, including the use of tests to measure achievement and intelligence. The field of school psychology has yet to develop tests, and thus school psychologists have no tests to use in their work. Knowledge of tests and their use comes from the Internet or from a limited number of psychology texts. This is a great barrier to the psychologists who work in the education system because they cannot perform the duties they should.

Some internal challenges also jeopardize service delivery in Albania. Along with the fact that more able professionals are leaving the field, the profession lacks leadership, research and evaluation, professional standards governing professional services, and adequate supervision (Jimerson et al., 2004). Almost all issues important to school psychology need to be researched. School psychologists have little practical experience conducting research and receive no funds from the University or other foundations to support research. Some do not understand the need for research in this field. Most urgently, research should focus on the need for school psychologists and their roles and functions, as well as on how school psychologists can best meet the needs of public schools. Research on students’ satisfaction with schools, including teaching, peer and student and teacher relationships, is also needed. Professional development and the inclusion of school psychologists within the educational system infrastructure were noted as important areas for future emphasis in the 2003 International School Psychology Survey (Jimerson et al., 2004).

The Albanian Association of School Psychologists, the only organization attempting to address professional issues and problems of school psychologists, is collaborating with the International School Psychology Association Research Committee to compare the status of school psychology in Albania to that of other countries. It is also working with other associations to promote psychologists and psychology and to have psychologists licensed by the government of Albania.

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