

# An Investigation into the Role of School Social Workers and Psychologists with Children Experiencing Special Educational Needs in Libya

Abdelbasit Gadour

**Abstract**—This study explores the function of schools' psychosocial services within Libyan mainstream schools in relation to children's special educational needs (SEN). This is with the aim to examine the role of school social workers and psychologists in the assessment procedure of children with SEN. A semi-structured interview was used in this study, with 21 professionals working in the schools' psychosocial services, of whom 13 were school social workers (SSWs) and eight were school psychologists (SPs). The results of the interviews with SSWs and SPs provided insights into how SEN children are identified, assessed, and dealt with by school professionals. It appears from the results that what constitutes a problem has not changed significantly, and the link between learning difficulties and behavioural difficulties is also evident from this study. Children with behaviour difficulties are more likely to be referred to school psychosocial services than children with learning difficulties. Yet, it is not clear from the interviews with SSWs and SPs whether children are excluded merely because of their behaviour problems. Instead, they would surely be expelled from the school if they failed academically. Furthermore, the interviews with SSWs and SPs yield a rather unusual source accountable for children's SEN; school-related difficulties were a major factor in which almost all participants attributed children's learning and behaviour problems to teachers' deficiencies, followed by school lack of resources.

**Keywords**—Special education, school, social workers, psychologist.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THERE has been an overlapping understanding of the nature of work carried out by SSWs and SPs, particularly with children experiencing SEN. This leads to difficulties between school professionals working together to address children's SEN. Research in the Libyan literature suggested that teachers, in particular less experienced teachers, are confronted with many problems in controlling pupils' behavioural and emotional difficulties – consequently they seem to work under a considerable amount of pressure compared to more experienced teachers [1], [2]. In fact, teachers insisted on numerous occasions that they were trained as teachers, not as SSWs or psychologists; though they were often critical of the latter for not being 'up to standard'. These views echoed the opinion of the prominent Libyan educator, Al-Shapani (1996) [3], who directed his criticism toward the lack of training provision in Libya for SSWs and SPs and also toward the non-existent cooperation between education, health

and social services departments in Libya. He remained anxious about whether the Libyan educational system is ready to accommodate the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and that of the schools and its consumers. Similarly, the leading Libyan sociologist Attir (1992) [4] saw that the role of family in supporting the child psychologically and socially is weakened, which, he believed, should be considered by the Libyan educators carefully when the needs of children are addressed within mainstream schools. Mohassin (1996) [5] is another major Libyan psychologist who perceived the new century as not being without problems for the family ties and relationships. He predicted that mothers in particular would have to spend more time at work for economic and social reasons, and consequently they would have much less time to educate their children with cultural and social values (for more details see [6]).

There is a consensus among these prominent researchers that children in Libya are being supported less and less, both at home and in school. While they attributed this generally to social change in Libya, they saw the alternative institutions to family, e.g., schools, as not being prepared to address children's SEN. In such a manner, they predicted that Libya would experience in the forthcoming century: social, economic, political and technological development that undoubtedly will influence the current educational philosophy and its principles in one way or another. This was seen, however, by Mohassin [5] as a necessary opportunity for the school to improve its psychosocial services, and consequently prepare pupils and teachers to accept and at the same time deal with the new life pressure. In this sense, these researchers described the present psychosocial services as lacking both the resources and capacity to respond to children's SEN [1], [4], [5]; they stressed the impact of rapid socio-cultural transformation on young offenders and other truancy problems related to family and community which require both education and psychosocial services to work in cooperation in order to respond to the new generation's needs. Thus, it is essential to explore how SSWs and SPs deal with pupils who often enter classrooms not ready or not able to learn.

## II. PSYCHOLOGY VS. SOCIOLOGY: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Generally, psychology has always been viewed in the Libyan culture as a Western field of study that is viewed with great caution, and as such, it is believed to undermine the Muslim faith and principles. Therefore, it was not possible for this branch of science to grow in a normal way, especially

Dr. A. Gadour is with the Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Bayda', Libya (e-mail: Abderna@yahoo.co.uk).

when most of its theories were considered by the public to be both problematic and deceptive. In addition to this sceptical perception of the field, people still find it difficult to appreciate the difference between psychology and psychiatry, and consequently they are confused over the role of the psychologist and that of the psychiatrist. Not only has this been a grey area for lay people, even educated ones, it has also bewildered even experts in the field [7]. This has made it difficult to view psychology in isolation from the field of psychiatry, and as such, many people have discarded the idea that psychology is mainly concerned with how people perceive things and why they behave the way they do. While this could be perceived as a partial perception of what psychology is exactly about, yet people in general feel anxious when they are referred to psychologists for general assessment. The traditional belief remains that associates psychologists with mental illness and psychological disturbances. Thus, for many parents it is a disgrace and a humiliation to have their children referred to the psychological services (see [5]). However, this conflict appeared to be resolved when psychology became a module that could be taught at the university level. Hence, psychology became more acceptable and has been subsumed into the sociology department. While this may show that the relationship between the field of psychology and sociology is in fact an old and strong one, it has been thought that people's general acceptance of sociology will help them to regard psychology with the same respect. Yet it was not until the late 1970s that psychology became a profession in its own right. In spite of this victory, its members were never fully accepted as professionals and as such were seen as occupying a lower status. It remains a situation that sociologists have exploited by virtue of historical tradition to impose their own social stances and perspectives. Thus, due to these traditional and cultural constraints, psychologists are often employed by the educational and social services departments as either SSWs or counsellors to disguise their identity. While this has made the profession of social work, and sociology in general, flourish and become more acceptable in the eyes of the public, it has left mountains for psychologists to climb. It is also interesting to note from the Western literature on the subject that other developed societies have had to work hard to appreciate the field of educational psychology. According to Lunt (1997) [8], the ambiguity surrounding this field has long been evident in the literature of educational psychology in the United Kingdom. Lunt looked at how this profession has been developed in the UK, starting from Sir Cyril Burt who initiated the practice of educational psychology. The latter was seen as very keen on using psychometric tests with children, but maintained the view that testing should be "the start, never the end" when children are examined [8]. His approach however, has remained an influential one until this day. Yet this field was subject to changes, following the inauguration of compulsory education and the setting up of the welfare systems after the Second World War. Subsequently ideas based on the concept of behaviourism emerged in the 70s and 80s to change the emphasis of the profession, and

consequently stressed the move from direct work with children to include indirect work with adults [8]. Whilst in the 90s, Lunt described the role of educational psychologist as being restricted and concluded that the value of this profession became uncertain in education. This may reflect however, the current views about educational psychologists as being gatekeepers for the local educational authorities, while they are supposed to be ethically and morally committed to serve the needs of their clients. Likewise, this conclusion fits very well with Armstrong and Galloway's (1992) [9] perception of the contradictory role that educational psychologists have to adopt in the assessment process of SEN children. While this may imply that educational psychologists have to adopt various roles to carry out their assessment (see [10]), it seems true that not many parents or children appreciate the purpose of the assessment nor are they aware of the constraints that impinge upon professionals' expertise and skills to do the job that they were initially employed to do. In this respect, it is not difficult to note the dilemma in which professionals i.e., SPs are faced with, regardless of where they are. Hence, there will be always an element of politics where certain views are dictated from top to bottom. This has been the norm in Libya reflecting the centralisation of education and lack of support for children with SEN [1], [6]. In fact, despite the recognition of SEN in the UK educational policies and the resources available to schools, one is not sure whether the educational needs of children are properly addressed within mainstream schools in the UK. Likewise, similar issues have emerged in school psychology in the United States, suggesting that SPs are working under pressure because of the same regulations to determine special education eligibility [11]. Yet it should be noted that many SPs are not satisfied because of the lack of achievement to contribute meaningfully to children's educational and psychological welfare [12]. Thus, the latter maintained the view that SPs are aware of the expectation imposed upon them, reflecting the appreciation of people in such roles of the need to support children with SEN, bearing in mind the environment that shapes children's learning and behaviour.

In recent times, in the west, adherents of the two traditions (Psychology & Sociology) seem to find common ground to develop an integrated and eclectic approach, which would enable comprehensive assessments of SEN children to be made in favour of keeping the referred children within the margins of mainstream schools. It is becoming necessary for educational psychologists in particular to expand the range of services and work in coordination with other school professionals who deliver health and social services [13]. This late shift comes as a result of moving away from the traditional trends of standardised testing toward a more problem-solving approach based on broadly defined consultation. In contrast, psychologists in Libya are still working in isolation and rely heavily on direct assessment by using psychometric tests e.g., WISC-R. Indeed, in the light of the socio-political changes that have taken place in Libya since the uprising in 2011 and the effect of the war on the wellbeing of children, there is a growing need for more

psychosocial services to respond to the needs of children. SSWs like psychologists are expected by teachers to engage in multiple activities, in spite of the fact that a great number of the former feel segregated and less valued by the latter and hence they seem to work in a strange environment. Yet interestingly teachers consider SSWs as the key source to the assessment process of SEN children [7] - they are expected to consult with teachers, administrators, and provide children and their parents with direct and indirect services. Yet, in the absence of specificity in the Libyan local educational authorities (LEAs) regulations on how the assessment of pupils with SEN should be conducted, schools appeared to develop their own policies [1], [10].

### III. METHOD OF STUDY

21 professionals in the field of child welfare working in the schools' psychosocial services took part in this study, of whom 13 were SSWs and eight were SPs. A semi-structured interview was used in this study to elicit information from these professionals regarding their role and involvement with SEN. The following pages will present the information gathered in relation to SSWs and SPs perceptions of children's SEN and the contributing factors as well as identifying their role as experts involved in the assessment process of SEN.

The results of the interviews showed that there are various factors, which seemed to influence the perceptions of the SSWs and SPs toward the assessment of pupils with SEN. Variables such as experience and qualifications appeared significant contributors in shaping the attitudes and opinions of these professionals. The results indicated that SPs occupy a relatively new position compared with SSWs. While this may reflect the reality in which the post of SPs is a new one, meaning that they have much less experience of dealing with children with SEN, it assumes on the other hand, that SSWs had the opportunity to know teachers and pupils much better than the former. Regardless, all SPs felt privileged that they were able to go to university and become recognised as psychology graduates, though they were very concerned that they were not adequately prepared to handle pupils' SEN more effectively. In this respect they described their role in the school psychosocial service as that of more or less "filling the gap", while on the other hand serving mainly the interest of the school. In relation to this perception one SP metaphorically depicted her duty in the school as that of "keeping the principal's chair warm", reflecting the hopeless situation that she was in. While this appeared to be a common response from almost all the participants in the interviews, SPs in particular were almost certain that both schools and LEAs almost deliberately failed to provide them with the opportunity to convey the meaning and function of psychology in the best way. In fact, they held the LEAs responsible for not training them as qualified SPs. While they said this frustrated them and put them under unnecessary pressure, none of them seemed to be satisfied with their achievements, or felt valued by the school personnel. In contrast, SSWs appeared to acknowledge somewhat satisfaction with their work experience; they revealed that they had learnt a great deal from their

predecessors. The results of this study suggested that the current numbers of psychologists who are available at schools are insufficient to meet the increasing demands for assessment of SEN children. Taking into account that the large percentage (20.93%) of the pupils in mainstream schools in Libya have SEN (see [2]), further expansion of the role of the SP is essential to address the educational needs of children. This development should not only take care of the increase in quantity but rather concentrate on making psychologists suitably trained and recognised by other professionals and non-professionals alike.

The results of the interviews showed that the majority of the respondents felt that their image was deliberately distorted by teachers. While they described the role of the school psychosocial service as being virtually ignored by some teachers, they found other teachers on numerous occasions actually misrepresented them. In relation to these misconceptions, one SSW felt "... sad when the teachers use us as a sort of threat or sanction to pupils, where many young people feel traumatised before coming to us."

Another social worker, who perceived her role as being intentionally underutilised by the class teachers, said: "How many times we have seen children kicked out of their classes without any attempt to ask us what can be done with this case or that ..., and frequently, the cynical justification for this is..., that they know we can't do anything else to solve the problem!" Likewise, even though all the participants held these reasons responsible for the poor level of communication between them and teachers, they were concerned to see their roles changed from crisis prevention to crisis intervention. In line with this, one SSW did not feel excluded from the assessment process of SEN children, but rather hated to see herself as being the last resource of intervention to sort pupils out, after all types of sanctions failed to make pupils conform with the school rules and regulation. What emerged clearly from almost all SPs' views is that they emphasise general involvement with teachers in order to promote preventive measures and become more involved in advisory work, while they reported teachers stress the needs for psychologists to carry out individual assessment. Although this seems to support the work of Topping (1978) [14] and Wright and Payne (1979) [15], it is not clear from this study whether teachers appreciate the individual work with children.

Like SPs, SSWs were ready to attribute their problems with teachers to the lack of having clear guidelines and framework from the LEAs for schools and professionals to consider, prior to making any decision concerning pupils' SEN. In fact, almost all participants referred to their school rules as not clear, nor are teachers' expectations of them as professionals realistic. In line with this, SPs claimed that they have more trouble with teachers than with pupils, and consequently they regard the assessment process of SEN children as often failing due to the lack of cooperation between these parties.

### IV. SEN: AS PERCEIVED BY SSWs AND SPs

It was extremely hard for both social workers and psychologists to talk about pupils' SEN in isolation from their

own personal experiences with teachers. In fact, the issue of pupils' SEN often aroused passionate responses among SSWs and SPs. The majority of SSWs and SPs appeared to define SEN in relation to teachers' lack of cooperation with them reflecting teachers' tendency to refer SEN children to head teachers directly in order to frighten them. Similarly, they described head teachers' intervention with SEN children's often harsh and not thoughtful of their expertise either. In relation to this, most SSWs like psychologists do not consider themselves as of the resources that are supposed to be available to support children in schools. In fact, they reported incidents in which pupils pleading to save them from trouble (corporal punishment) by either teachers or head teachers in mainstream schools. This appears to put them off, they said, and create tension between them as specialists and the school in general. They said it was unlikely that teachers would seek their help to identify the pupils' SEN and plan ways to meet these needs; instead, they would refer pupils to the psychosocial service merely to remove them from their classrooms. While this appears to echo Western researchers' perceptions of the role of educational psychologists as "gatekeeper of provision" (see [16]), participants in this study did not seem to define pupils' SEN in terms of available provision. In a parallel apprehensive spirit, both social workers and psychologists were unhappy to see SEN pupils torn apart emotionally and treated rather ignorantly by teachers and head teachers; besides, they referred to the poor relationship among school professionals in general as not without effect on pupils' learning and behaviour. They went on to say teachers are not willing to accept them as experts, nor are they ready to take responsibility for identifying and dealing with pupils' learning and behaviour difficulties.

The results also suggested that there is a lack of consensus among participants concerning the meaning of SEN as both SSWs and SPs represented different paradigms. In fact, the division in perceptions among SSWs and SPs remained apparent, in that the former was concerned to define children's acts as they occur at school or home in social terms, the latter attempted to characterise children's SEN in relation to inner qualities which were influenced by external factors i.e., school and home. While this account reflects the backgrounds that underpin participants' expertise and knowledge, it supports the dominant views in the literature [16]. Yet SSWs like psychologists stressed the importance of the effect of social construction of SEN and its subjectivity. They recalled incidents where pupils were difficult at school but not at all with their parents and vice versa. This sounds familiar from the literature on SEN children (see for example, [17], [18]), implying that what can be perceived as a problem at school can be seen as normal at home. In a similar way, almost all participants in this study appeared to explain pupils' SEN in relation to their learning difficulties as opposed to behavioural problems; equally, they identified the actual reasons behind the referral as trivial and often unjustifiable i.e., having casual attitudes to study, homework or coming late to school. In fact, they described the reasons underlying the referrals as arbitrary reflecting teachers' failure to address pupils' educational

needs within classrooms. In saying that, they highlighted teachers' over reaction to certain behaviour, which they appeared to take personally; a point that can be supported by Solity (1992) [19] and Galloway, Armstrong and Tomlinson (1994) [16].

All in all, the factors responsible for children's SEN identified in this study are not dissimilar to those already found in the literature (e.g. [20]-[26]), though most of the participants involved in this study referred children's SEN to factors within the school. The results also suggested there is a link between children's learning and behaviour difficulties in that SSWs like SPs attributed pupils' behaviour problems to their learning disabilities. They saw the negative impact of years of academic failure was detrimental to the self-esteem of pupils. Equally, they highlighted the lack of resources within the school, which made the classroom an unbearable environment for both pupils and teachers. In relation to this, they pointed out the current scarcity of not having appropriate teaching aids i.e., textbooks and blackboard. They also felt that the extent of SEN may go far beyond teachers' training and expertise and hence cause them personal frustration. It is essential from this study to realise that there are greater attitudinal barriers than resource barriers causing pupils' learning and behaviour difficulties. Negative attitudes were often associated with the newly experienced teachers; a greater number of the referrals made to the school psychosocial services are done by young teachers compared with the experienced teachers. In like manner, SSWs like SPs found novice teachers as easily irritated and often in conflict with pupils compared with experienced teachers. This could be referred to newly qualified teachers' lack of preparation to respond to children's personal and social education compared with experienced teachers who seem to have better discipline strategies because of long years of teaching. The question remains whether children's SEN can be solely attributed to the teachers' lack of experience or alternatively to the system of education which fails to provide teachers with the necessary skills to properly address children's SEN.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of this study provided an overall view of the function of school psychosocial services. It allowed insights into how SEN pupils are identified, assessed and dealt with by school professionals in mainstream schools in Libya. It also appears that what constitutes a problem has not changed significantly and the link between learning difficulties and behavioural difficulties is also evident. Pupils with casual attitudes to learning and refusal to do certain tasks including homework are still being referred to school psychosocial services. Yet the results of this study yield rather unusual source accountable for pupils' SEN; school-related difficulties were a major factor in which most of the participants attributed pupils' SEN to deficiencies within schools and teachers. Thus, the results indicated that the school and its teachers should be the focus of change rather than the pupils, even though pupils with behaviour difficulties are more likely to be referred to school psychosocial services

than pupils with learning difficulties. However it is not clear from the interviews with SSWs and SPs whether pupils are excluded merely because of their behaviour problems; instead they would surely be expelled from the school if they failed certain academic tasks including homework. While this may suggest that mainstream schools in Libya have different rules and regulations in which pupils are referred or excluded, there will always be different factors influencing the school's decision regardless of the type of problem. Yet it is evident from this study that the 'removal button' of the problem pupil lies exclusively in the hands of teachers and head teachers, while social workers and psychologists gave the impression that they have no hope of playing any major role in influencing the process of decision making, nor are they able to change teachers' views with regard to SEN pupils. This was often believed to be due to the absence of clear guidelines to how to address the educational needs of pupils, instead of making them scapegoats for a school's failure and less qualified teachers. In like manner, social workers and psychologists acknowledged their own shortcomings and the needs for improvement in order to become effective and able to establish good relationships with teachers and head teachers. They seem to function in the absence of any framework and appear to lack the potential to act as trained professionals. In fact, the role of SPs and social workers is still in a state of identity crisis in which they overlap and are only vaguely understood. Although a great many of the above views fall in line with the dominant perceptions highlighted by Western researchers in the field (e.g. [20]-[26]), further studies are needed to examine the role of SSWs and SPs more closely.

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**A. Gadour** is a Libyan and a member of academic staff at the Department of Educational Psychology, Faculty of Education, Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Bayda', Libya. Bachelors of Education (BSc), University of Tripoli, Libya, 1990. Master of Education (MEd), University of Newcastle, United Kingdom, 1995. Post-Master Certificate in Professional Studies in Educational Psychology, University of Newcastle, United Kingdom, 1996. PhD in Educational Psychology, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom, 2003. He considers himself as an academic and an educator concerned with the well-being of children. His interest and expertise in the area of child and educational psychology has led him to carry out research both in Libya and the United Kingdom. This research has encompassed studies on pupils'/students' learning and behaviour, the assessment of teachers, school psychologists and social workers. He was also the former Cultural Attaché for Libya located London, United Kingdom between the years of 2011-2017. Dr. Gadour. Member of the British Psychological Society (BPS). Member of Editorial Committee, *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies*. Member of the Scientists and Experts at the Council of Derna, Libya.