

School-based psychologists in Lebanese schools: An exploratory analysis of their professional profile

Fatima Mansour¹ | Rasha Mashmoushi² | Leyla Akoury Dirani¹

¹Department of Psychiatry, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

²American Center for Psychiatry and Neurology in Dubai, Dubai, UAE

Correspondence

Leyla Akoury Dirani, Department of Psychiatry, American University of Beirut, P. O.Box: 11-0236, Riad El-Solh 1107 2020, Beirut, Lebanon.
Email: la55@aub.edu.lb

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Abstract

The increased interest in school psychology has been accompanied with an expansion of in-house psychological and rehabilitation services worldwide and in Lebanon. This study aims to explore current practices of school-based psychologists in Lebanese schools in an attempt to understand their role and inform the design of national strategies. A mixed methods design was used including a review of existing academic curricula, laws and regulations and published local research studies; interviews with stakeholders, and a survey filled by school-based psychologists. In addition, 7 university curricula, 7 theses, and 3 dissertations were reviewed, 14 stakeholders were interviewed and 49 school-based psychologists filled the survey. Conclusions suggest that there is no consensus about the title of this profession and its scope of practice, and the required knowledge and training to practice. This study highlighted the need to further make strategic decisions and establish this professional profile, in addition to making the needed amendments to the university curricula and the legal framework of the rules and regulations.

KEYWORDS

Lebanon, responsibilities, roles, school-based psychologist, situation analysis

1 | INTRODUCTION

There is an increased interest in school psychology as researchers promote schools as timely settings for providing mental health support to enhance children and adolescents' well-being (Dray et al., 2017). Children in Lebanon have been experiencing a series of political, economic, social, and health crises. The prior puts them at greater risk for developing mental health problems which raises the need for school psychology services. A national household study conducted between February 2018 and November 2018 investigated psychopathology in a sample of 1517 children and of adolescents in Lebanon, and found that, while 33% of the sample displayed at least one psychiatric disorder, only 5% sought professional help (Maalouf, Alrojolah, et al., 2022; Maalouf, Haidar et al., 2022). This highlights the existence of a wide gap between mental health needs and mental health help seeking in children. In a more recent study examining probable disorders in children and adolescents following the Beirut port explosion, the findings reported high rates for anxiety (64%), PTSD (52%), and depression (33%), yet 61.5% did not seek help (Maalouf, Alrojolah, et al., 2022; Maalouf, Haidar et al., 2022).

Mental health support seeking behavior in children and adolescents is influenced by stigma associated with mental health (DeLuca, 2020; Tully et al., 2019). Nevertheless, schools are considered an accessible environment for children and adolescents seeking mental health support as they potentially reduce the barriers associated with help seeking by offering students different types of in house services. Eklund et al. (2017), confirm that young people are more likely to seek school psychological support than visit a community-based mental health clinic. Indeed, school psychologists play a critical role in providing mental health support to children and youth in school settings (Hoffman & Miller, 2020).

1.1 | The profiles and roles of school psychologists across countries

Over time, an extensive literature has been developed on the role and functions of school psychologists. Previous studies show that school psychologists primarily focused on serving students with learning difficulties and on individualized assessments informing specialized interventions (Curtis et al., 1999; Farrell & Kalambouka 2000; Sheridan & Gutkin, 2000). In addition to counseling, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional interventions (Fagan, 2013), the roles of school psychologists developed to include psychoeducational evaluations, research and evaluation, supervision and administration, prevention services, and direct and indirect services (Brown et al., 2016). Furthermore, in a study conducted by Bahr et al. (2017), school psychologists reported spending the greatest amount of time on problem solving consultation, as opposed to diagnostic assessments (Bahr et al., 2017).

Despite the fact that the profession of school psychology has advanced and developed in many countries, there are still variations between countries in terms of professional profiles and the provision of services. Moreover, the terms school psychologist, educational psychologist, and school counselor have been used interchangeably in many countries to refer to the same profession. In the United States and Europe, school psychology has existed since early in the 20th Century, while in Asia it is not regarded yet as a standalone profession and needs further development (Brown et al., 2016).

As per the American Psychological Association (APA), a school psychologist is responsible for providing direct and indirect services including psychoeducational assessment, diagnosis, health prevention, intervention, program development, and evaluation services that are related to child and youth development at the level of school, system, and family (APA, 2020).

In Europe, school psychologists work with students between the ages of 2 and 20 years old (Roe, 2011). They observe students in their daily lives and help them adjust to the school environment, identify possible problem behaviors or learning difficulties, and help design remedial educational programs. They mainly focus on prevention, evaluation and intervention at three different levels: the student, the educational system and the student's environment (Roe, 2011). In addition, school psychologists help students form positive attitudes toward learning,

offer advice on psychological issues, remedial learning, teacher training, and systematic school counselling. They create, implement and evaluate school development plans, and develop learning policies in schools (Roe, 2011).

Latino American countries use interchangeably the terms school psychology and educational psychology (Maluf & de Almeida Sargiani, 2018) to designate school psychologists. The primary role of school psychologists revolves around assessments and is grounded in the theoretical research and practice of clinical psychology. In the first decade of the twentieth century, there was a shift towards distinguishing school psychology from clinical psychology; and the role of school psychologists included prevention of learning disabilities, by working with teachers to improve the academic performance of students. However, the development of this field was interrupted by many cultural, socioeconomic, and practical challenges (Maluf & de Almeida Sargiani 2018).

In China, the profession of school psychology differs across regions. For instance, in Hong Kong, professionals in this field are described as educational psychologists who provide direct and indirect services in school. Their main responsibilities are centered around prevention and intervention. They target students, teachers and parents at three levels: individual, group, and system (Ding et al., 2008; Lam, 2007). Moreover, teachers are also assigned as mental health educators and are responsible for providing psychological services such as assessment, interviewing, observation, consultation, counseling, and multi-level interventions (Zhou, 2007).

In Taiwan, school psychologists have a background in school guidance and school counseling (Ding et al., 2008; Fan et al. 2020). Some of them are licensed clinical psychologists who are responsible for mental health services and provide interventions, assessment, and counseling services. Furthermore, in Thailand, school psychologists are trained in educational psychology and provide counseling, placement decisions, and evaluation services (Brown et al., 2016).

In Japan, school psychologists can be classroom teachers, teachers with psychoeducational roles, counselors, or professionals certified in school psychology. Their duties fall under psychoeducational services such as assessment, consultation, intervention, and coordination (Brown et al., 2016).

School psychologists (referred to as school counselors or counseling teachers) in South Korea perform assessment, prevention, intervention, consultation, program development, and training, and research (Brown et al., 2016).

1.2 | The Lebanese context

In the Arab world, and specifically in Lebanon, there is a paucity in published research investigating the tasks and duties of school-based psychologists (We will use the term “school-based psychologists” to designate all professionals delivering psychological services in the schools of Lebanon). According to Ayyash-Abdo et al. (2010), school-based psychologists in Lebanon were mostly referred to as school counselors and their work mainly focused on advising students on problem behaviors and academic difficulties or paths.

The profession of “clinical and educational psychology,” as mentioned by the law, has been regulated in Lebanon in 2017. It is now a requirement for all psychologists to be licensed to practice whether in schools or in clinical settings (Law #8/2017). The minimum requirement for a licensure is a master's degree in educational psychology for school-based psychologists and in clinical psychology for those practicing as clinicians. However, there is no law mandating the presence of a school-based psychologist in the schools of Lebanon.

1.3 | Current study

This in mind, it becomes essential to have a better understanding of the roles of school-based psychologists in Lebanese schools, to explore whether there is a need to have three distinct professional profiles for school-based psychologists: educational psychologist, school psychologist, and school counselor, as the practice is in the United

States, or is it preferable to merge professions. Moreover, it is important to explore if there is a need to modify the academic curricula to suit each profession and secure employment.

In an attempt to contribute to sound decisions and inform national strategies, the aim of this study is to explore the current practices of school-based psychologists in Lebanon and the current state of the university's curricula and local research.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Study design and methods

This study adopts the mixed methods design model whereby qualitative and quantitative data are combined. This choice is determined by the absence of reliable data about roles and functions and a clearly defined national framework. To explore the qualifications and practices of school-based psychologists in the Lebanese schools, we interviewed major stakeholders, reviewed the academic curricula, searched for local documentation and legal documents, and conducted an online LimeSurvey. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the American University of Beirut.

2.2 | Participants

Stakeholders were identified to participate in the interviews. They were chosen based on their professional positions and/or their seniority in the field. As for the survey, the initial study design was aiming at recruiting a representative sample of school-based psychologists employed in Lebanese schools. A convenience sample was obtained rather than a representative sample because schools were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.3 | Procedure

2.3.1 | Desk review of local documentation

University libraries of those offering master degrees in educational/school psychology were searched for theses and dissertations on the topic; the academic curricula of these universities were also investigated.

2.3.2 | Legal documents

A search focused on legal texts regulating this sector. The search included reviewing manuals, the laws, and official reports issued by the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in printed and electronic forms.

2.3.3 | Interviews

An invitation was sent to potential participants via email with the option to participate in a recorded semi structured interview. All participants provided an electronically written consent to participate. These semistructured interviews aimed to provide qualitative data to elicit information about: (1) qualifications of school-based

psychologists, (2) role of school-based psychologist, (3) current needs to enhance the school psychology profession in Lebanon, and (4) local laws and regulations. The interviews comprised 10 questions and lasted on average for 35 min each.

2.3.4 | Survey

A web-based survey was completed by school-based psychologists. An invitation to take part in the survey was disseminated via e-mail to the list of licensed psychologists provided by the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health, as well as to the list of psychologists and counselors working in the public and private schools. It was also disseminated on online platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp. The survey was composed of 46 questions covering personal professional demographics, school demographics, role and tasks of the school-based psychologist, and continuous professional development.

2.3.5 | Data analysis

A matrix was developed to extract the major themes of the local documentation collected. The interviews were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) (Smith & Shinebourne 2012). The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (IBM SPSS 24) was utilized to run descriptive analyses on quantitative data extracted from LimeSurvey.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Local documentation

Schools in Lebanon are divided into two categories: public and private. Public schools are managed and fully supported by the Ministry of Education and High Education (MEHE). They implement a unified curriculum and have the same managerial structure and personnel recruitment process. Private schools are fully or partially subsidized by tuition fees that the parents pay. Some are affiliated with local religious institutions representing the religious communities of Lebanon and some are secular. Of the private schools, some groups are semiprivate schools where pupils' tuitions fees are subsidized by donations. Private schools have full autonomy in the choice of their management, personnel recruitment, choice of school materials and curricula, providing that the basic Lebanese curriculum be preserved (Zakharia, 2009).

The establishment of missionary schools molded the educational system in Lebanon around a bilingual system. Schools are divided into French and Anglo-Saxon influences (Womack, 2012). Private and public schools rely on English or French as medium language of instruction in addition to Arabic, which is the national language (Bacha, 2019). Moreover, some schools are trilingual where French, English and Arabic operate as three main languages (Shaaban, 1997). Some other schools incorporate Armenian or German as a primary language of instruction.

Shehab (2017) indicates that there is no structured training program in Lebanon preparing school-based psychologists to handle cases of students with mental and learning disorders. This statement has also been made earlier by Ayyash and Abdo (Ayyash-Abdo et al. 2010). Results from the conducted desk review on university curricula indicated that school psychology is taught at a Master level in seven universities in Lebanon. Six are private and one is public. The degree is registered in an Education or Psychology department. Refer to Table 1 for the desk review on university curricula.

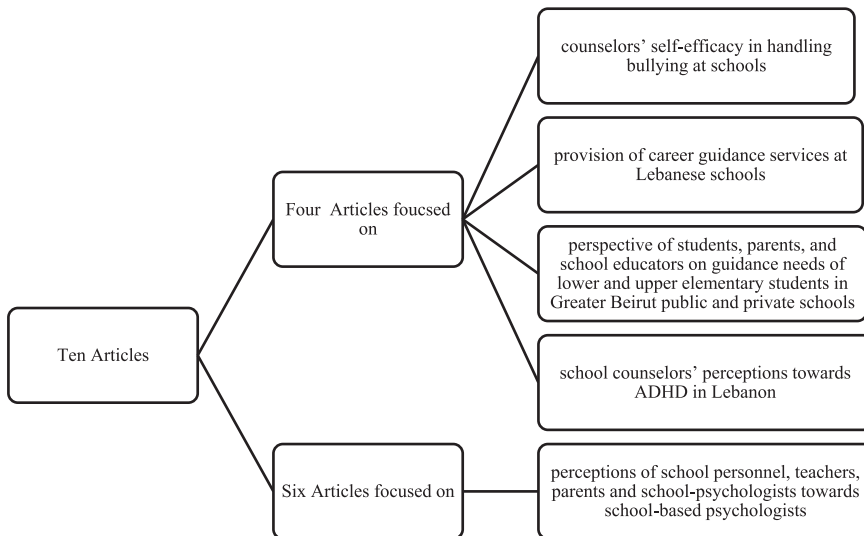
TABLE 1 Desk Review on University Curricula.

Department: Education/psychology		
Degree level: Master		
Title of program	Educational psychology (2 universities)	Tests and measurements School guidance
	Counseling and psychology (1 university)	
	Developmental and school psychology (1 university)	

Number of credits by program: ranged from 27 to 40 credits.

Curricula: vary in the depth and breadth of the taught courses as well as in the training duration and content.

- All programs teach research method and assessment of students' cognitive and/or learning abilities
- There is a vast variety among curricula covering basic knowledge in psychology, learning theories, counseling, management of students' behavior, career development, and so forth.

**FIGURE 1** Available research and dissertations related to school psychology in Lebanon.

As part of our local documentation research, we reviewed available research and dissertations related to school psychology in Lebanon. The term used to designate a school-based psychologist in these studies was “counselor.” The search yielded ten articles (theses and dissertations) from the libraries of two private universities in Lebanon Refer to Figure 1 for the available research and dissertations related to school psychology in Lebanon.

Perceptions towards school-based psychologists was the most common theme in the research performed by students. The sample articles investigated perceptions regarding the role of school-based psychologists in different contexts in school settings: perceptions and misperceptions about role implementation, working with students with special needs and those with high-risk behaviors, the necessity of teaching experience in the preparation of school psychologists to be competent in delivering their roles, the need for school psychologist in Lebanon's schools since 1994.

The review showed discrepancies between perceptions of students, teachers, parents, principals, and counselors about the implementation of the role of school-based psychologists in schools (Hamzeh, 2008). Even more, in Khansa's study perceptions about the role of school-based psychologists varied among teachers (Khansa, 2015). In El Zein's study

(2014), parents, school directors and teachers acknowledged the importance of the role of school-based psychologists. They also agreed that there are some barriers facing school-based psychologists such as the lack of support from students, parents, teachers, and MEHE, which impacts the implementation and the efficacy of the role.

In summary, these studies highlighted the below roles (Bsata-Juma, 1994; Dayya, 2014; El Zein, 2014; Hamzeh, 2008):

- Counseling and guidance
- Consultations
- Student assessment
- Individual student planning
- Program coordination
- Prevention and intervention
- System support

3.2 | Legal documents

There are two generic laws. The mandatory Licensing of educational and clinical psychologists (Law #8/2017) and the mandatory registration to the Lebanese Order of Psychologists (Law 254). We could not find any laws or legal documents that regulate the profession of school psychologists in schools. The profession has not been yet institutionalized and there are no reports that state the standards of the role of school-based psychologists in terms of qualifications and responsibilities in schools.

3.3 | The interviews

Fourteen stakeholders participated in an online in-depth interview. The interviewees work in different sectors and their years of experience ranged from 5 to 21 years. Refer to Table 2 for information about the stakeholders who participated in online in-depth interviews. In line with the concept of "information power" proposed by Malterud et al. for qualitative studies (2016), 14 interviewees were enough to reach saturation of each question.

Four themes emerged from the data analysis capturing the opinions and experience of the interviewees in the field:

- Definitions of roles and responsibilities of school-based psychologists
- Qualifications and training of school-based psychologists
- Current needs to further regulate the profession
- Recommendations to improve the profession and practice.

3.3.1 | Definitions of roles and responsibilities of school-based psychologists

As per participants, in Lebanon, the most common term used for a school-based psychologist is School Counselor and the second in row is School Psychologist. The majority of participants reported that school psychologists, educational psychologists, and school counselors can be appointed as school-based psychologists within Lebanese schools, despite the nuances in the role and the specificity of each title. They admitted that school psychologists and school counselors are not performing their role in accordance to the international description of these roles and

TABLE 2 Stakeholders who participated in online In-depth interviews.

Stakeholders	N
A representative of the Director of the Office of Guidance and Counseling (DOPS)	1
President of the Center of Educational Research and Development (CRDP)	1
A senior consultant working with MEHE and UNESCO	1
Senior educational psychologists working in schools and private practice	5
University professors and chairpersons or program coordinators of six universities offering a master's degree in educational/school psychology	6

TABLE 3 Core functions of school-based psychologists.

Functions	Educational psychologists (N)	University professors (N)
IQ testing	1	1
Observing academic and behavioral problems in children and monitoring progress	1	2
Emotional, cognitive, and educational screening and assessment	3	2
Diagnostic assessment	0	3
Referring students to outside professional	2	3
Prevention	0	2
Individualized education plan (IEP)/planning for students with special needs	1	1
Counseling	2	1
Psychotherapy	1	1

responsibilities (International School Psychology Association, 2012; ISCA, 2019) but they adopt the school's policy and needs. Refer to Table 3 for the core functions of school-based psychologists.

The participants agreed that school psychologists, school counselors and educational psychologists generally have similar roles when working in school settings, as they help students with learning difficulties, emotional, and behavioral problems. They agreed that educational psychologists have a broader profile.

There were different opinions regarding diagnostic assessment. Two educational psychologists, who expressed being influenced by the American school of thought, mentioned that diagnostic assessment requires intensive training and should be the main function of school-based psychologists. Participants who said to be influenced by the French school of thought indicated that school-based psychologists should not provide diagnostic assessments but only screening and referrals. In addition, only one university professor mentioned therapy being a role of a school-based psychologist. Another university professor explained that school-based psychologists do not do therapy, not because they are not qualified but because they are already involved in different responsibilities.

Participants reported that in addition to their roles working with students, school-based psychologists collaborate with parents, teachers, and administration. One educational psychologist indicated that,

“A school-based psychologist is the liaison between students, service providers, school, and parents.”

Based on the responses of participants, there is no standard way for referrals' procedures to outside school professionals. When a need arises, the student is often referred to a clinical psychologist or a child psychiatrist. One educational psychologist indicated that,

“School-based psychologists should not make decisions for referral, as ideally, a multidisciplinary team encompassing a speech therapist, special educator, psychomotor therapist, is responsible for making this decision.”

In public schools, as per the representative of the Director of the Office of Guidance and Counseling (DOPS), UNICEF and NGOs handle inclusion cases and these cases are referred to the Ministry of Social Affairs, which in turn will work on providing some social support but little specialized interventions are provided.

3.3.2 | Qualifications, competencies, and training of school-based psychologists

All of the fourteen participants mentioned the following elements to consider when it comes to qualifications and competencies of a school-based psychologist:

- holding a graduate or postgraduate degree in any psychology or education degree even if titles differ by universities
- undertaking a proper training
- obtaining a licensure.

All participants pointed at a major problem in the practice of school-based psychologists in Lebanon, which is the lack of proper training particularly in screening and assessing students with difficulties. One educational psychologist further explained that,

“School-based psychologists should undergo extensive training in screening strategies, evaluation techniques, and assessment batteries and procedures.”

Participants acknowledged the essential duty of university programs in building the basis of a good professional identity. One university professor indicated that,

“The problem in Lebanon is that the coursework provided by universities does not match the schools' demand.”

One educational psychologist further explained that,

“Universities vary in terms of depth and breadth of coursework.”

He added,

“Universities in Lebanon do not have an end goal; hence the confusion in terms of what they offer and how much they should actually offer.”

Accordingly, he suggested setting Lebanese statewide requirements for the role of a school-based psychologist then formulating the curricula.

Lastly, most participants indicated that professionals with different backgrounds could all perform similar tasks and responsibilities with a key requirement, which is sufficient academic background, proper training, and field experience.

Finally, the participants highlighted key personality traits that should be available in school-based psychologists such as: open-mindedness, good observational skills, and interpersonal-communication skills. One educational psychologist added:

"In simpler terms, school psychology is a school friendly approach to clinical psychology."

3.3.3 | Current need to further regulate the profession

All participants were aware of the existence of the Licensing law #8/2017. However, they admitted that this came as an orphan initiative and has not been accompanied with laws, rules and regulations embedded in the Educational System. They noticed the absence of standards relating to school psychology, and no obligation to hire school-based psychologists in schools. Furthermore, the representative of the Director of the Office of Guidance and Counseling (DOPS) indicated that,

"The job does not exist in MEHE organizational chart which means that public schools cannot hire school-based psychologists."

A senior consultant working with MEHE and UNESCO indicated that,

"Several initiatives aiming at introducing this job and enforcing its implementation as a stable and mandatory employment in the public schools were aborted while revising the School System Framework both in 1995 and in 2008."

He continued:

"To face the impossibility of hiring school-based psychologists, in the 90s, the Office of Guidance and Counselling of the MEHE trained high school teachers to become 'school counsellors' in addition to other professionals who have basic background in psychology, sociology, and education. Some of the individuals who were assigned to this role are still in these positions in addition to newcomers, hired on a contractual base as psychosocial support professionals."

The Director of the Office of Guidance and Counseling adds that,

"Training of these persons follows a tiered model approach. Three tiers are identified: prevention, intervention, and follow-up."

Participants reported a general scarcity of school-based psychologists in Lebanon. The educational psychologists agreed that while almost half of the top notched private schools have a school-based psychologist per cycle, this professional is absent from modest private schools and public schools.

3.3.4 | Recommendations to improve the profession and practice

On recommendations suggested to better describe the professionals working in Lebanese schools, one educational psychologist proposed using the term “school-based practitioner” to stand for the three different terms currently used: educational psychologists, school psychologist, and school counselor. All stakeholders agreed, as stated by an educational psychologist:

“The role of psychologists in schools across Lebanon should be clarified and unified.”

In the absence of a standard approach, participants recommended unifying schools' approaches where they apply the multi-tier system of support to monitor the progress of the child, screen for emotional, behavioral, and/or learning difficulties and disorders, implement assessments, and provide adequate support. When students suffer from complex difficulties, participants agree that they need to be referred to an educational psychologist to complete a formal assessment. Finally, participants recommended to increase the number of school-based psychologists in schools with a minimum of one full-time school-based psychologist for each cycle, particularly in schools with a big students population.

3.4 | The survey

3.4.1 | Participants

A total of 140 school-based psychologists accessed the survey. Ninety-one dropped out, and 49 participants completed the survey. Participants were 85.7% ($n = 42$) females and 14.3% ($n = 7$) males. The vast majority of participants 81.6% ($n = 40$) work in public schools, 16.3% ($n = 8$) work in private schools, and 2.0% ($n = 1$) work in non-profit private schools. Participants hold various BA degrees including Psychology (40.8%, $n = 20$), Sociology (26.5%, $n = 13$), Education and other (32.6%, $n = 16$). Fifty-seven percent of the participants ($n = 28$) hold a masters or a doctorate degree in educational psychology (12.2%, $n = 6$), psychology (18.4%, $n = 9$) (of which 6.1% ($n = 3$) in clinical psychology), education (14.3%, $n = 7$), sociology (8.16%, $n = 4$), and other (4.1%, $n = 2$).

Around two thirds (63.3%, $n = 31$) reported being proficient in English and French (of which only one reported being proficient in Spanish too), 34.7% ($n = 17$) in English only, and 2.0% ($n = 1$) in French only.

The majority of participants reported having no licensure (69.4%, $n = 34$). Only 30.6% percent ($n = 15$) reported having a licensure: 26.5% ($n = 13$) in educational psychology and 4.1% ($n = 2$) in clinical psychology. Years of experience mostly ranged between 1 and 5 years (63.3%, $n = 31$). Additionally, 26.5% ($n = 13$) have 6–10 years of experience, and 10.2% ($n = 5$) have more than 10 years of experience. Of the 49 participants, 81.6% ($n = 40$) work in more than one school, of which 30.6% ($n = 15$) specified the number of visits for each school. Twenty percent reported visiting each school once per month and 10% ($n = 5$) visit the school 1–3 times per week. Fourteen percent ($n = 7$) reported having multiple roles in a school.

More than half of the participants (57.1%, $n = 28$) reported taking part in continuous educational activities (workshops, conferences, and in-service training, research and publications, and supervision or mentorship) monthly (26.5%, $n = 13$), 1–3 times/year (26.5%, $n = 13$), and 4.1% ($n = 2$) did not specify the number of times. Find demographic information of school-based psychologists in Table 4.

3.4.2 | Roles and responsibilities of school-based psychologists

Eighty one percent ($n = 40$) of participants reported providing counseling services for students in need. Forty-one percent ($n = 20$) of the participants reported that they screen for emotional, behavioral, and social needs using rating

TABLE 4 Demographics of school-based psychologists.

Characteristics	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
	Private schools	Public schools	Non-profit private schools	
Total: 100% (49)	16.3% (8)	81.6% (40)	2.0% (1)	100% (49)
Gender	F = 16.3% (8)	F = 69.4% (34)	F = 0.0% (0)	85.7% (42)
	M = 0.0% (0)	M = 12.2% (6)	M = 2.0% (1)	14.3% (7)
Highest degree held				
BA	4.1% (2)	38.8% (19)	0.0% (0)	42.9% (21)
MA and PhD	12.2% (6)	42.9% (21)	2.0% (1)	57.1% (28)
Language of proficiency				
English and French	8.2% (4)	53.1% (26)	2.0% (1)	63.3% (31)
English	6.1% (3)	28.6% (14)	0.0% (0)	34.7% (17)
French	2.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	2.0% (1)
Licensure				
Educational psychology	4.1% (2)	22.4% (11)	0.0% (0)	26.5% (13)
Clinical psychology	2.0% (1)	2.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	4.1% (2)
No licensure	10.2% (5)	57.1% (28)	2.0% (1)	69.4% (34)
Years of experience				
1–5	6.1% (3)	57.1% (28)	0.0% (0)	63.3% (31)
6–10	10.2% (5)	16.3% (8)	0.0% (0)	26.5% (13)
More than 10	0.0% (0)	8.2% (4)	2.1% (1)	10.2% (5)
Participants who work in more than one school	2.1% (1)	77.5% (38)	2.1% (1)	81.6% (40)
Participants who work in one school	14.3% (7)	4.1% (2)	0.0% (0)	18.4% (9)
Attend continuous educational activities	12.2% (6)	42.9% (21)	2.0% (1)	57.1% (28)
Monthly	6.1% (3)	20.4% (10)	0.0% (0)	26.5% (13)
1–3 times/year	4.1% (2)	20.4% (10)	2.0% (1)	26.5% (13)
Did not specify	2.0% (1)	2.0% (1)	0.0% (0)	4.1% (2)
Do not attend continuous educational activities	4.1% (2)	38.8% (19)	0.0% (0)	42.9% (21)

scales/questionnaires. Fifty-nine percent of the participants ($n = 29$) reported using standardized assessment tools to assess students. Of these participants, 55.1% ($n = 27$) reported using standardized tools to assess social, emotional, behavioral difficulties, 36.7% ($n = 18$) reported using them to assess learning and attention difficulties, 18.4% ($n = 9$) reported using them to assess language and motor difficulties, and 4.1% ($n = 2$) reported using these tools to assess other difficulties (unspecified).

Forty-three percent of participants ($n = 21$) reported taking decisions to refer students to outside school professionals. In addition, 32.6% ($n = 16$) reported completing behavioral observations. When completing behavioral observations, participants reported using mostly narrative observation (61.2%, $n = 30$), followed by time-sampling

observations (34.6%, $n = 17$), structured observations (30.6%, $n = 15$), and other undetermined observation methods (8.2%, $n = 4$).

Moreover, participants were presented with a list of tasks and were asked to rate the time consumption of these tasks from 1 to 5 (5 being the most time consuming task). The results are reported based on the majority of participants responding to each task. Five tasks were rated by most of the participants as the most time consuming: (1) offering counseling sessions for students (71.4%, $n = 35$) (2) offering counseling sessions for groups (67.3%, $n = 33$) (3) screening and assessing emotional and behavioral needs (53.1%, $n = 26$) (4) screening and assessing social needs (46.9%, $n = 23$) (5) referring and communicating with outside school professional (28.6%, $n = 14$). Refer to Table 5 for the roles and responsibilities performed by school-based psychologists.

TABLE 5 Roles and responsibilities performed by school-based psychologists.

Characteristics	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
	Private schools	Public schools	Nonprofit private schools	
Provide counseling support for students	10.2% (5)	71.4% (35)	0.0% (0)	81.6% (40)
Screen emotional, behavioral, and social needs through rating scales/questionnaires	12.2% (6)	26.5% (13)	2.0% (1)	40.8% (20)
Assess students using standardized assessment tools	8.2% (4)	49.0% (24)	2.0% (1)	59.2% (29)
Assess social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties	8.2% (4)	46.9% (23)	0.0% (0)	55.1% (27)
Assess learning and attention difficulties	8.2% (4)	26.5% (13)	2.0% (1)	36.7% (18)
Assess language and motor difficulties	2.0% (1)	14.3% (7)	2.0% (1)	18.4% (9)
Other	0.00% (0)	4.1% (2)	0.0% (0)	4.1% (2)
Take decisions for referral to outside school professional	8.2% (4)	34.7% (17)	0.0% (0)	42.9% (21)
Complete behavioral observations	4.1% (2)	26.5% (13)	2.0% (1)	32.6% (16)
Behavioral observations				
Narrative observations	12.2% (6)	49% (24)	0.0% (0)	61.2% (30)
Time-sampling observation	10.2% (5)	24.5% (12)	0.0% (0)	34.7% (17)
Structured observations	8.2% (4)	20.4% (10)	2.0% (1)	30.6% (15)
Other	0.0% (0)	8.2% (4)	0.0% (0)	8.2% (4)
Most time consuming tasks				
Offering counselling sessions for students	10.2% (5)	59.2% (29)	2.0% (1)	71.4% (35)
Offering counselling sessions for groups	10.2% (5)	57.1% (28)	0.0% (0)	67.3% (33)
Screening/assessing emotional and behavioral needs	10.2% (5)	42.9% (21)	0.0% (0)	53.1% (26)
Screening and assessing social needs	8.2% (4)	38.8% (19)	0.0% (0)	46.9% (23)
Referring and communicating with outside school professional	6.1% (3)	22.4% (11)	0.0% (0)	28.6% (14)

Since most questions permitted multiple responses, some of the total percentages of the above results overstepped 100%.

TABLE 6 School demographics.

Characteristics Sector	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)
	Private school	Public school	Non-profit private school	
Governorate				
Beirut	8.2% (4)	2.0% (1)	2.0% (1)	12.2% (6)
Mount Lebanon	6.1% (3)	18.4% (9)	0.0% (0)	24.5% (12)
North	0.0% (0)	20.4% (10)	0.0% (0)	20.4% (10)
Baalbeck and Beqaa	2.04% (1)	26.5% (13)	0.0% (0)	28.6% (14)
South and Nabatieh	0.0% (0)	14.3% (7)	0.0% (0)	14.3% (7)
Grade level				
Grades (1–12)	14.3% (7)	38.8% (19)	0.0% (0)	53.1% (26)
Grades (1–9)	0.0% (0)	36.7% (18)	0.0% (0)	36.7% (18)
Grades (1–5) or (6–9) or (10–12) or (6–12)	2.0% (1)	6.1% (3)	2.0% (1)	10.2% (5)
Main language of instruction in school				
English and French	10.2% (5)	69.4% (34)	0.0% (0)	79.6% (39)
English	4.1% (2)	4.1% (2)	2.0% (1)	10.2% (5)
French	2.0% (1)	4.1% (2)	0.0% (0)	6.1% (3)
No answer	0.0% (0)	4.1% (2)	0.0% (0)	4.1% (2)

3.4.3 | School demographics

Participants reported working in different governorates (12.2%, $n = 6$ in Beirut, 24.5%, $n = 12$ in Mount Lebanon, 20.4%, $n = 10$ in North Lebanon, 28.6%, $n = 14$ in Baalbeck and Beqaa, and 14.3%, $n = 7$ in South and Nabatieh). About half of the schools (53.1%, $n = 26$) comprise grades 1 to 12, 36.7% ($n = 18$) comprise grades 1–9, and 10.2% ($n = 5$) comprise grades 1–5, or grades 6–9 or 10–12 or 6–12. Most schools (79.6%, $n = 39$) use two languages of instruction (English and French) in addition to Arabic, which is the main language in Lebanon. Find school demographics in Table 6.

Based on the reported numbers, the ratio of school-based psychologists to the total number of students in school is one school-based psychologist to 525 students. The ratio was obtained by calculating the average number of students enrolled in school (as reported by participants) and the average number of school-based psychologists in school (as reported by participants).

4 | DISCUSSION

The goal of the study was to gather exploratory data on school-based psychologists to guide future inquiry rather than generalizing findings. Information reported by school-based psychologists gave us an overview of their characteristics, roles and responsibilities. The findings of the review of the local literature shed light on the current practices. The interviewed stakeholders shared their understanding of the profession, the current challenges, and recommended measures to be taken by government and schools to move the field forward. Both qualitative and

quantitative data collected converge in the description of the current roles of the school-based psychologists in Lebanese schools.

Our findings suggest that in Lebanon, the most common term used for school-based psychologist is School Counselor and the second in row is School Psychologist. This corresponds to what is used in Europe and Latino-America. The term Educational Psychologist is not frequently used and may be more commonly used to describe academicians, researchers, strategic planners, and experts in assessments. Like many countries in Asia, the profession in Lebanon is still developing. However, despite continuous efforts to improve the field, the progress is disrupted by the multiple crises shaking the country. As observed in some countries in Asia such as China where teachers are assigned as school-based psychologists or in Taiwan where some have background in school guidance or clinical psychology, not all school-based psychologists in Lebanon hold degrees in school psychology or in any psychology field. Twenty-one out of 49 school-based psychologists who filled the survey have a BA degree in different domains. This goes against the law #8/2017 where a minimum of a master's degree in psychology is required to practice.

The academic curricula are not aligned among universities nor the training objectives and contents, which produces discrepancy between alumni themselves and the field demands. Therefore, what is observed is more of an adjustment to the roles and responsibilities of the professional according to each school's needs and perspectives. This lack of clarity may explain the low number of licensed school-based psychologists. In fact, the latest list published by the Ministry of Public Health mentions that there are 829 licensed psychologists in Lebanon out of which 126 are educational psychologists (Ministry of Public Health, 2021).

The survey indicates that participants are aware of the role of school-based psychologists but the majority of them (63.3%, $n = 31$) are juniors in the field (1–5 years), are not well qualified and do not have the resources (staff, action, and strategy) to provide the services. Based on our findings, the roles and functions of school-based psychologists stretch from screening and assessment related tasks, to counseling, referral decisions, and behavioral observations which looks more like the practice described in Asian countries. Counseling and assessment are the most time consuming tasks which may limit them from performing other tasks. In fact, Bell and McKenzie (2013) suggested that the demand for assessment services might limit the development of other practices.

Furthermore, the majority of participants reported using standardized assessment tools and rating scales/questionnaires despite that only few of them held a license in educational psychology, which reflects the unpreparedness of individuals providing this service and absence of a code of practice.

The vast majority of the participants work in more than one school (81.63%). This hinders their availability to answer the psychological needs of the students at all times, as well as being fully and efficiently immersed in the school team. This situation creates barriers to the integration of school-based psychologists in the school (Meyers & Swerdlik, 2003; Suldo et al., 2010).

As for the ratio of school-based psychologists to students, our numbers are consistent with the recommendation made by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), which is one school psychologist to 500 students (NASP, 2021). However, this finding may not reflect reality when comparing it with the number of schools served by one school-based psychologist associated with the time dedicated per school. During informal interviewing, we knew that, in public schools, a school-based psychologist is assigned to an average of 7 schools at a ratio of 1:3500 which is highly exhausting and exceeds the number set by NASP.

The survey's results are to be interpreted with care. The participants were mostly from public schools ($n = 40$) as compared to private ($n = 8$) and non-profit private school ($n = 1$). They have diverse academic backgrounds and degrees. As mentioned above, we could not secure a stratified random sample since the schools were only providing online teaching for the duration of the study because of the COVID 19 pandemic. Moreover, the economic crisis reduced their support services. Therefore, we resorted to convenient sampling. Thus, our sample is not strictly representative of all school-based psychologists across Lebanese Governorates.

4.1 | Implications and future directions

Based on the study results, we observe that there is a large agreement among stakeholders and practitioners about the role of a school-based psychologist in enhancing the mental wellbeing and learning skills of vulnerable students, preventing the exacerbation of psychological difficulties by supporting teachers, parents, and administration and providing them with awareness information. The disagreement is focused on the ability or not to conduct assessment, provide diagnosis, and develop treatment plans. As such, three main concerns will need to be addressed: (1) Is there a need for school-based psychologists in Lebanese schools to carry out diagnostic assessments or not? (2) Is there a need to have two layers in this profession: a practitioner providing in-house services and an expert who provides diagnostic assessments and contribute to strategic planning? (3) Do these two layers warrant two distinct professionals or one professional with an advanced level of knowledge and skills? When an agreement is reached on these matters, then it will ease developing the job description with clear definitions of roles and duties of school-based psychologists, unifying the universities' curricula, clarifying the qualification(s)/ professional training requirements to be qualified as a school-based psychologist in Lebanon, and clarifying the professional development requirements to renew professional license. Finally, lobbying to develop more regulations mainly, allowing the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to hire school-based psychologists in the public schools will strongly contribute to the recognition of this profession as a pillar in students' education.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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