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**The Promise of Pre-Service  
Teachers in Albania**

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## **The Promise of Pre-Service Teachers in Albania**

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### **Abstract**

Preservice education is an important opportunity for young teachers to build knowledge, skills and attitudes. This is true even more so for a society in transition such as Albania, where the philosophy of education from the past should be carefully reevaluated, reinvigorated and integrated. We need to keep in mind that today's students were born have lived in the post-communist era, and they are being trained to teach leaders of tomorrow. Preparation of new teachers is less efficient if only emphasizing a teacher-centered mode. University teachers in Albania are in the process of reinventing their roles as supporters and visionary partners in learning. Action research is a tool which highlights the process of internalizing the pivotal role of the teacher. The 2011 curriculum and instruction class at the University of Tirana is a sampling of student centered research towards promoting introspection and vitality for future reflection.

### **Keywords:**

Walking around Tirana the capital city of Albania offers many obvious signs of progress that has been made since the end of the communist era. Restaurants, fresh fruit vendors and street cafes where locals drink espresso and talk politics abound. A visitor to the now trendy “Blloku” (the “Block”) section of Tirana, an area forbidden to all but communist elites for decades, could not believe that before 1991 people had to wait in line for hours to get a loaf of bread or a few grams of meat because supplies were so low and everything rationed. Boutique shops offering consumer products are plentiful and traffic is congested. Tirana is a walking city and Albanians are known for their hospitality and sense of family honor. Nonetheless, as a short-term foreign resident, I found it disturbing at times to witness the rapidity with which life has changed, particularly for elders who lived through the regime of Enver Hoxha (pronounced Hoja). On the narrow sidewalks young people shuffle tunes on their iPods while elderly people merely shuffle along. The rapid transformation has made everyday life more comfortable, but it seems to have cost intergenerational disconnect and loss of tradition.

Developed nations stepped into technology gradually from the days when computers were as big as a room, to PCs with floppy disks, to chips in handheld devices. Gamers were weaned on “Pong”, videos progressed from VHS to DVD to Blu-ray and beyond. If you think it is hard to adapt to every-changing technology, picture a generation that has transitioned from a state of anomie after communism to the proliferation of smart phones and people thriving on social media. Sometimes referred to as the “European North Korea” just 20-30 years ago, Albania, like its Asian namesake, could not feed its people. For their part, citizens lived in social isolation from the rest of the world. Hoxha led the Communist Partisans against the fascist invaders during World War II. During the war, however, he prepared for his takeover by fighting with the non-Communist Albanian resistance just as often as with the invading Italians and Germans. Remaining in power from 1944 to his death in 1985, this Balkan despot eventually quarreled with every power that aided him (Yugoslavia, the USSR, and China), and became ever more paranoid, afraid to leave Albania for the last 25 years of his life. When other socialist societies made overtures to capitalists, they became an anathema to Hoxha who ultimately cut off ties with all countries; determined to keep Albania the only pure socialist state (Newman 2011).

Since the 1992 end of the communist era Albanian educators have embraced far-reaching efforts to shift from party dictated, structured and controlled education, in which one learned to obey and follow, towards child-centered, critical thinking education in which youngsters learn to think for themselves and to contribute to a democratic society. Implementing modern education for democratic citizenship after decades of rigid communist control is hindered by the realities of economic, social, political and cultural transformation. Nonetheless, reform is a necessary step for Albania to have any opportunity of being considered for entry into the European Union. Three tiers of Albania educators are centered in the cultural center and capital city of Tirana. The first tier of visionary educational leaders is a group of individuals including Milika Dhamo, Nikoleta Mita, Gezim Hadaj, Marenglen Spiro, Sameira Pino and Adem

Tamo, who weathered the transition from communism to the post-communist era. The second tier of intergenerational leadership cascades to current faculty and third tier are the freshly awarded Master's degree recipients from the University of Tirana Faculty of Social Sciences Department of Pedagogy and Psychology who were born around the time the communist era ended. In 2011 these students were introduced to action research and debate in my Curriculum Development course, exploring and reflecting upon hot topics in the Albanian educational system.

During my semester as a Fulbright Scholar at Marin Barleti University (UMB) and the University of Tirana (UT), Curriculum Development students visited schools to conduct action research and on a number of themes, including parental involvement in student's education and violence in high schools. One question curriculum and instruction graduate students asked was, "If student's prior knowledge can help or hinder learning, are parents similarly influenced?" (Moffett & Fleisher 2013). Albanian parents themselves, having experienced totally controlled education from the state during the dictatorship as they were growing up, are reluctant to participate in education. Even parenting their own children in such a transformed society is a major challenge to them.<sup>1</sup>

Located in southwestern region of the Balkan Peninsula, Albania has a predominantly mountainous interior but a flat coastline along the Adriatic Sea. Albania shares a border with Greece along the south/southeast, Macedonia to the east, Kosovo to the northeast, and Montenegro to the northwest. Albania remains a society in transition; its people have their eyes fixed on western culture, but their feet remain rooted in Albanian tradition. Albanians remember that Woodrow Wilson protected Albanian independence in 1919, which forms the basis of today's friendly relations between the US and Albania. A pro-U.S. sentiment is widespread among the population while the nation's diplomacy focuses on bilateral cooperation and enhancing security, peace, and stability in the region. 2011 marked the 20th anniversary of Albania--USA diplomatic relations (IIE 2008-2009).

Until a generation before school education grew in a culture of taboos, social shame and exclusion. Their educational memory and experience showed that in school institutions the teacher is the central scientific and pedagogical figure. In a 2001 report on monitoring and evaluating education in Albania, a teacher was the person who "carries out proper methods and uses tools in order to realize the basic program, relying on his own skills and professional preparation, securing a harmonious education, preserving the pupil's personality and avoiding any influence that can cause problems with his social, political and religious beliefs." The pattern of verbal interactions for secondary schools in Albania is dominated by teachers talk while student-initiated talk is about 1% of the total lesson time. The Albanian educational experience reflects a hodge—podge of influence ranging from

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<sup>1</sup>UT and UMB students discussed special education for handicapped students, autism, skipping school, wearing religious clothing, the tense relationships among teachers, parents and students, the treatment of Roma students, violence in schools, school facility issues, teacher-training, disengaged students, drug use, risky activities, the sociological function of religion, concepts of empathy, and the family as social institution.

the old monarchy, the fascist administration and the communist and post-communist governments. De facto political and issues of civic identity versus ethnic identity are involved in the design of Albania's curriculum. Professor Marenglen Spiro writing about reforming Albanian programs of study and curriculum declared, "Being for a long time under the total isolation of the country, the Albanian Higher Education System did not have the possibility to follow the developing rhythm of European Higher Education (Sinani & Gjokutaj 2001) .

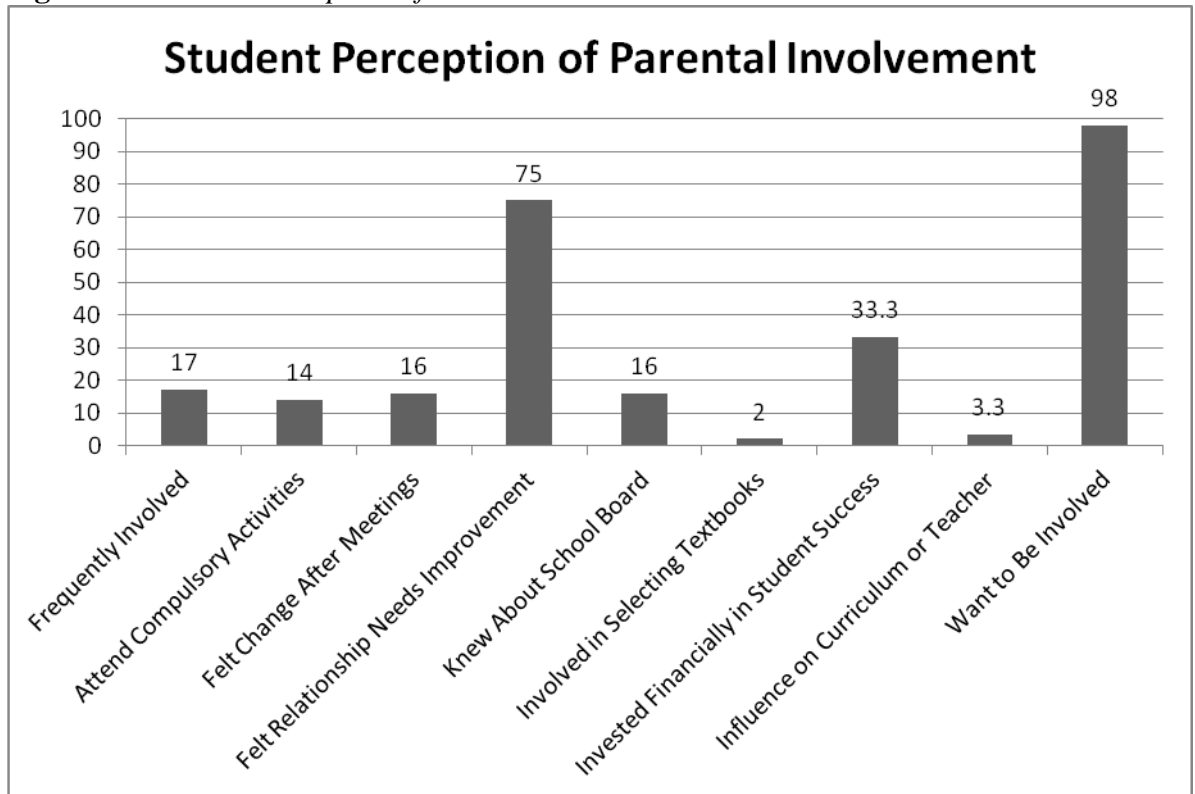
Not surprisingly, MA teacher candidate students initially did not express themselves readily in class, did not read in advance of class, and, expected a traditional lecture format. After prompting, guidance and feedback from me and co-teacher Professor Gerda Sula, students embraced debating, and becoming interested in research, practice, design and policy by conducting action research. They developed understanding and empathy in a class climate whereby students unaccustomed to group work adapted and became more vocal and proficient at public speaking. Professor Milika Dhamo, who with other leaders of democratic education weathered the transition from communist dictatorship (1945-1985) through the chaos of the post-communist era, writes that indoctrination was the only teaching strategy. 'Proletarian democracy' ideology permeated the Albanian educational system; inundated with propaganda voiced in slogans exhorting "correct attitudes".

University of Tirana students distributed informal surveys in the small town of Burel to 24 girls and 6 boys in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and also asked their homeroom teacher, "How much are you in contact with parents?" She responded that although School Boards had been established for about 15 years and the school has created opportunities, parents do not show up even when there are issues. Parental role was described as limited if not non-existent; they were not involved in pedagogy. She stated that in five years as homeroom teacher for the same students, she had yet to meet parents of at least 5 students. Parents are interested, but depending on their socio-economic status they have too many problems making a living. Even when teachers inform parents of meetings, the quality of the relationship is lacking. The homeroom teacher revealed that teachers probably do not share enough with parents and that students do not discuss school with their parents, especially those who have more problems (Kola, Loci, Peshu & Xheladini 2011).

The *Parental Involvement* graph shows that 98% of students reported that parents want to be involved in their education and 66.7% students reported their parents are financially invested in their education. Yet it is clear that their actual involvement is minimal, judging from the other data on the graph. Students who participated in the survey reported that their parents were seldom involved in curriculum or textbook decisions, most had not known of a school board and believed more should be done to improve teacher/parent relationships. Survey participants perceived that parents lack authority in the school board, especially regarding textbook selection. Rarely are parents involved in "compulsory activities" (meetings with teachers, school events), parent-- teacher conferences are 16% effective with 3.3% influence over curriculum. The chart indicates that parents want to be

involved but lack an opportunity to participate in the educational framework.

**Figure 1.** *Students Perception of Parental Involvement*



The Albanian Ministry of Education (MOE) mandated collaboration among pupils, teacher, staff, parents, and social partners demands a complete reformation of education for optimal integration in life, emancipation and progress of the country. University of Tirana students suggested that parent involvement would improve quality for all students and bring about more harmony in the parent-teacher relationships. Further, they concluded that even relatively uneducated parents' involvement will give children and their parents needed support and help from state, public, and private institution (Albania MOE 2000/Part 1 p. 4).

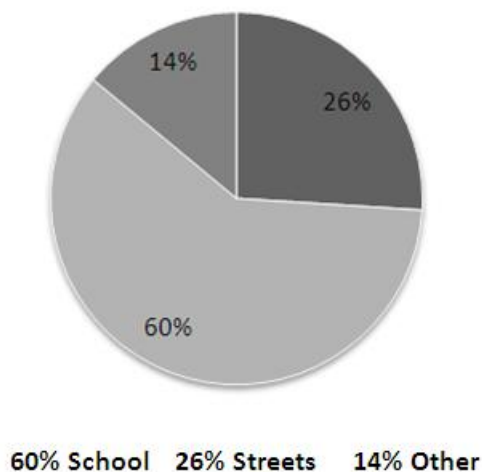
Violence in Albanian high schools is often reported in the media. MA pre-service teachers conducted action research in the northeast Albania area of Rreshen, a very poor isolated community with a high unemployment rate. Their informal survey defined 4 types of violence; physical, emotional, sexual, and social. Tenth and twelfth grade respondents said they understood violence as 82% physical, 12% physical and psychological and 6% non-specified fighting. They believed that bullying violated their rights and all students reported at least once being insulted, being hit, or having someone making fun of their home experience. Mostly, these acts occur in high school but also are felt in the lower grades. Some students were "observer victims". Based on the results of the survey, high school students feel unsafe, feel threatened, feel alone, and feel that they might be the next victim (Whitehead 2000 p.6)

Students reported that violence in the home, video games, movies, television and sheer boredom were underlying factors of increased violence. UT MA students interviewed 15 tenth graders and 22 twelfth graders reporting it was challenging to discuss this sensitive issue in focus groups because the kids did not wish be identified by name or by handwriting. Even with the promise of anonymity, survey respondents voiced fear. “Bullying and harassment may go unreported by students out of fear of making a bad situation worse. Educators may even harbor their own misconceptions, making intervention and prevention less likely and even more challenging” (Jandali 2010 p. 32-35).

All the respondents have witnessed violence; 70% reported violence occurs frequently, and they would rarely intervene and only sometimes report the violent encounter to a friend, parent or teacher. 60% of students experienced domestic violence and 96% reported being threatened by a peer. 82% reported most violence was physical. When asked what they did when witnessing an act of violence, 79% said they left the area, of those who remained, 80% just watched and rarely intervened. 85% said they would report violence, but 15% said they would not dare.

**Figure 2.** *Locations of Violence*

### Locations of Violence



Student researchers recommended in the short term that police and social workers be placed in schools with high percentages of violence, believing that schools need more social workers than psychologists because issues are beyond psychology. “Social workers should play the role of mediator to advocate for kids. Solutions need to come out of community efforts which start with improved communication. High school students should give respect to get respect, their opinions should be heard not put down” (Biba, Cela, Lena, & Thomasi 2011).

Albanian nationalism exemplifies a type of honor—shame society, which differs from a conscience—guilt society found in the United States. The public school system in the United States was used in a way that would



“Americanize” the people. Albania is using the educational system in a way that will “democratize” the people because Albania really wants to integrate into the European Union. Problems emerge in this scenario because Albania is a traditional society which has experienced a lot of diametrically opposed changes in a relatively short time. Looking at parental involvement in education might suggest the effectiveness of democratization. Examining violence suggests that the traditional notions of honor—shame are bulwarks of the national character, wherein it is uncommon for young men to be disciplined at home.

Albania wants to accelerate integration into the European and World Community and in downtown Tirana a large building is dedicated to Albania’s integration into the European Union. National pride and identity hinge on acceptance by nations whose economic and political systems they seek to emulate. Albanian’s desire that their training and qualifications be accepted by other European countries to promote a long-term political and professional aspiration for job mobility. However, it is somewhat ironic that reforms to improve teacher training might in the short term lead to a possible exodus of teachers” (Karapici & Thereska 1993 p.6 ).

The post-communist “brain drain” was something witnessed in the People’s Republic of China from and 1979 through the Tian An Men protests of 1989 and beyond. The ‘brain drain’ only abated after China began to enjoy economic prosperity under the banner of “commodity socialism”. Professor Gezim Hadaj explained aspects of Albanian history which reinforced the notion that Albania and China followed patterns of upheaval and exodus. Institutions within both countries failed to provide “most favored opportunities” so people left. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China 1966-76 students were primarily admitted to university (such as they were) because they fulfilled the political criteria rather than based on academic merit. In that setting, a university diploma guaranteed a job (referred to as an ‘iron rice bowl’) because the graduate’s new job placement was part of the centralized plan. Although the Albanian emphasis on democracy education for EU integration is not parallel, it puts one in mind of the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution when top-down “grass-roots” movements’ enflamed a “Four Modernizations” campaign to catch up to the rest of the world in health, advanced technologies, science and mathematics.

In Albania, classrooms provide a poor psychological and social environment to stimulate student initiation, participation or risk taking. Pre-service teachers, born as the communist era ended who know the realities of economic, social, political and cultural transformation, want strategies to deal with violence and other challenging issues. Teacher education is the driving force for change in education as a whole. Teachers at all levels have been quick to recognize their own particular need for continuous professional development. Universities and schools work to meet these needs for organization of teacher preparation which reinforce the sense of unity of the teaching profession and a holistic approach to the development of education. The process is arduous and when you add integration into the European Union and adoption of the Bologna Declaration it becomes urgent. It is a tall order to expect “swift and unpredicted transformation to

be successful in an environment with social, economic, technological, psychological dimensions” (Gobbo, et al 2010 p.5).

In Albania educational strategies for democratic development in the context of a national policy for human resources offer ladders of opportunity to all political forces, institutions, intellectuals and citizens. Educational leaders hope to harness the democratic enthusiasm of young people to educate them in the ideals of political and social responsibility so that Albania will avoid the pitfalls that so often beset nations liberated from dictators.

Albania’s junior faculty whose world view of intercultural societies that rely on multilateral communication, ideas and social interaction are the classroom teachers of today. Far-reaching efforts to raise the level of education for democratic citizenship play a role in their decision to become teachers. The Albanian MOE suggests thoughtful experience and early reflective practice to identify and understand problems in education even though the potential of present day Albanian families differs a lot according to the city, village, educational level, tradition and other reasons. Gardinier’s dissertation (2012) about localization of democratic citizen education in Albania describes implications of “hybrid localization and enactment” when policies are conceptualized by efforts to adopt internationally recognized standards, yet are impacted when global practices are interpreted and adapted to fit the local political context, as well as individual teacher’s style, experience, and knowledge base (Gobbo, et al 2010).

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