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**THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES RELATED TO MENTAL  
HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL  
WELL-BEING OF SCHOOLCHILDREN IN ARMENIA:  
CURRENT CHALLENGES AND  
WAYS TO OVERCOME**

Research report

Yerevan  
YSU PRESS  
2024

UDC 159.922.7(042.3)

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**COMPOSITION DESIGN:** Nare Harutyunyan

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The fundamental issues related to the mental health and psychological well-being of schoolchildren in Armenia: Current challenges and ways to overcome/Anna Ayvazyan, Helen Stepanyan, Lusine Ishkhanyan, Nane Petrosyan, Victoria Ghalumyan, Yerevan: YSU Press, 2024, 48 p.

The research report on fundamental issues related to the mental health and psychological well-being of schoolchildren is a collaborative effort involving adult psychologists, child rights advocates, and the children themselves. The report aims to analyze the current challenges in high schools in Armenia regarding the prevention and management of mental health problems among school children. This report is intended for use by school psychologists, education experts, child rights and child development specialists, teachers, school administrators, parents, and children.

ISBN 978-5-8084-2692-4

<https://doi.org/10.46991/YSUPH/9785808426924>

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## ***Abstract***

The topic of mental health has become relevant worldwide and also has had specific implications in Armenia. It concerns all aspects related to human life, without exception, as well as all ages of a person, considering their characteristics. The attitude towards mental health in Armenia changed dramatically in 2014 when the development and adoption of a strategy based on new ideas and principles were launched. Lamentably, these processes were accompanied by disasters at the global and local levels: the COVID pandemic, war, and security and existential problems. Given the impact of all this on children, the role of schools in maintaining and developing children's mental health has become a priority. There are new amendments in the law for funding allocated in a school's budget for the position of a school psychologist, thus allowing all schools to have one. The present study attempts to look at the described situation, the role of the school, and the functions of a psychologist through the eyes of children as direct beneficiaries.

*Keywords: mental health, psychoeducation, psycho-hygiene, mental well-being, maintenance and development of mental health, school age, school psychologist, functions of a psychologist, discrimination, bullying, children's rights.*



# 1. INTRODUCTION

*“The school is the place where a child spends a significant amount of time. Therefore, it must be safe and play a meaningful role in developing the child’s mental health.”*  
*Interviewed psychologist*

This research is conducted within the framework of the Children’s Leadership Team (CLT) programme, which is one of the initiatives of the Global Campus for Human Rights and is supported by the Global Campus of Human Rights and the Right Livelihood Foundation cooperation. The programme aims to expand opportunities for children’s rights for meaningful participation around the world, making them active agents of change in the matters that concern them. For almost three years now, children from more than 11 countries have been presenting children’s rights issues related to them, and, for the third year, mental health has been highlighted as the most important challenge. This research topic and methods, proposed by the children, were aimed at enabling the children themselves to design, organise, and conduct research on an issue of interest to them, including data collection, processing, and presentation, with their direct participation. Adult and child researchers’ reflections culminated in the identification of three important issues, all of which were related to the mental health of schoolchildren, especially high school students. Without seconding the importance of any issue, the research team focused on the direction presented below, from which the goal and problems were extracted, which, in turn, helped to gain an idea of the current situation around the problem and workable solutions for it.

## 1.1 Unique aspects of the research

The peculiarity and uniqueness of the research is that it is thought out and implemented by schoolchildren. The field, purpose, and key issues of the research were put forward, and the study itself was conducted with the meaningful participation of the child leaders from the CLT. The field of

children's mental health has been recognised as a priority by more than 120 children in Armenia and other countries around the world. Five participants from the Armenian CLT committed to conducting a full study with the advice, guidance, and coordination of senior researchers. All thoughts, concerns, and suggestions expressed by child leaders, their own and those of their peers, were considered and incorporated into the stages of research planning, design, drafting, and summarising. Some excerpts from the research belong entirely to the child authors.

## **1.2 Purpose and objectives of the research**

The purpose of the research was to study the role of the school, including the characteristics and needs of the activity of school psychologists, and to ensure the maintenance and development of children's mental health.

### **Research objectives:**

- Analyse the role of the school in maintaining and developing the mental health of children/adolescents.
- Study the activities, settings, obstacles, challenges, difficulties, and needs of a school psychologist that directly relate to, reflect, and affect a child's mental health.
- Provide a description of skills and abilities of the school psychologist and other school staff representatives, as well as their relationships with each other, in the interests of maintaining and developing a child's mental health.

### 1.3 Relevance of the research

*“If the school is not capable of assessing students’ needs, it can be detrimental and potentially traumatic for the children for the rest of their lives.”*

*Interviewed psychologist*

The relevance of the topic can be assessed from several perspectives. Mental health in a broad sense is becoming a priority at all levels and in all areas of our lives, from kindergarten to university, from education to big business and politics, and covers everything from the mental health of an individual to the mental health of societies and peoples. In 2014, the Republic of Armenia adopted the “Strategy on preserving and improving mental health in the Republic of Armenia”,<sup>1</sup> as well as an action plan for the period until 2019, which was then revised and approved again in 2021. It was a big step that gave the opportunity to address mental health with greater coverage and, by making it a part of it, all the structures related to and influencing the mental health of society. An important focus in this strategy was the development of a new narrative: the fact that mental health is not only a matter of clinical indication but, more broadly, that the state plays a much greater role in maintaining and improving the mental health of its society instead of just treating it reactively. This strategy shows that mental health is important for every individual, and, in fact, it is its development and maintenance that become indicators of a prosperous and dignified society. The strategy also envisages the development of “psychoeducation”, meaning that every member of society should possess basic knowledge about this phenomenon, as well as have personal input in the improvement of individual and societal mental health. This idea can be achieved only with the participation of all interested structures, and the school is one of the most important among them. By educating a large part of society, the school can become the key to a healthy generation, and that generation can become practitioners and advocates of the ideas of developing and maintaining mental health.

**The age of high school students** can be defined as the formation of a mature “SELF”; secondary socialisation becomes a priority; a sense of independence,

one's own beliefs and positions, adulthood, and emancipation grow; importance is placed on finding one's own path and decision-making; and rebellion, the first serious coming-of-age crisis, and the search for answers to eternal questions rise. All this, on the one hand, is characterised by unstable emotional states, insecurity, and, on the other hand, the presence of great opportunities and the expectation to enter a new stage of life. These descriptions are a small group of definitions that make this age a period of heightened sensitivity, precisely from the point of view of mental health and the formation of a new personality. The school becomes a place whose influence on this person in formation is, perhaps in some cases, much more important and significant than the family. It is then the school, along with learned knowledge, that develops the necessary qualities and skills that should help a young person enter a new life and face a new reality with as little stress and trauma as possible, and it is the school that should pay attention to knowledge and skills of psychoeducation, instilling its seeds at this age.

There is another reason for choosing this topic for which we consider important. Beginning in the new academic year 2023, meaning from September 2023, a new school funding mechanism was established according to the decision of the Government of the Republic of Armenia<sup>2</sup> from which a budget for a psychologist was allocated to schools, and, from that date, all schools in Armenia could have a psychologist. However, this positive, progressive, and very timely decision still needs proper quality implementation. The research team tried to identify the problems which may occur after the establishment of the new institution of psychologists and factors that may contribute to its success. These are the justifications that emphasise the importance and significance of this research.

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<sup>2</sup> Decision of the Government of The Republic of Armenia, On establishing the procedure for financing public education institutions with the state budget funds, the principles and methodology for financing programs provided for by the state budget, available at: <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=168828>.



## **1.4 Study methodology, toolset, sample**

It should be noted that it is quite rare that high school students have conducted research on such a serious issue, of course, with the support and guidance of specialists. Semi-structured interviews were decided from discussions as the research method that will then be analysed qualitatively. A semi-structured interview was conducted with school principals, teachers, and psychologists, as well as a survey with experts in the fields of education and psychology using pre-designed questionnaires (Appendix 1). Those questions were proposed by children aged from 16 to 18 and edited with the help of an adult researcher-psychologist. The questions were compiled/developed in accordance with the research objectives mentioned above. Based on questions developed by children, three separate questionnaires were compiled for school principals and teachers, psychologists, and experts. The questionnaires consisted of two parts: general questions and private questions according to status (principal and teacher, psychologist, and expert). The research sample consisted of high school principals, three from Yerevan and three from the Aragatsotn and Kotayk regions (marzes); one deputy principal of a regional school; 14 psychologists, out of which five were from Yerevan and six from Kotayk, Tavush, Lori, Gegharkunik and Syunik regions (marzes,) with work experience from one to five years; and five experts directly related to education and educational psychology. The total number of participants in the sample was 26 people (Appendix 2). One participant did not want to be mentioned. The results were analysed solely from a qualitative data perspective. Interviews were conducted by the students in the presence of the programme's consultants, and the students participated in an interviewing course in advance, giving them the opportunity to develop the necessary and sufficient skills to conduct an expert interview on the topic. The interviews were conducted both in person and online formats.

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## **2. Research summary**

This research was conducted between December 2023 and February 2024 and consisted of several components: *analysing theoretical material, which included the study of various documents related to mental health; defining a sample for research; developing questionnaires; conducting interviews and qualitative data analysis; and preparing the report.* All stages were conducted by a team that included five representatives of the CLT programme and two experts: a team coordinator/child law expert and an expert psychologist. Before the start of the research data collection process, the programme team addressed an official letter to the MoESCS of Armenia (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports), informing about the initiative. The Ministry forwarded the information to the Republican Psychological and Pedagogical Centre of Armenia, from which a list of schools was obtained to be advisory assistance for conducting a study, as well as from where the research group used to conduct interviews. The data obtained and summarised from interviews was divided

into several conditional groups: a) situation, b) the psychologist at school, c) issues, d) needs. Based on the presented data, recommendations were made, which are presented further in the section “Conclusions and Recommendations”, and these data can also be discussed in the interests of more effective interaction between various industry actors and the development and implementation of actions aimed at achieving results.

**A) Situation** - Armenia has a “Strategy on preserving and improving mental health in the Republic of Armenia” approved by the Government, a “Mental Health Protection and Improvement Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2026” approved by the Ministry of Health, and a National Educational Program approved by the National Assembly and its action plan approved by the Government.<sup>3</sup> Armenia has signed and ratified the United Nations (UN) Conventions on the Rights of Children and on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is part of the Sustainable Development Goals achievement process, and has various other international obligations, among which, it is worth highlighting the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement,<sup>4</sup> signed and ratified with the EU, which covers all spheres of public life.

All these documents and their proper implementation are aimed at ensuring a prosperous life and the future of Armenian society, and, to various degrees, also affect “children” as a class of society and “mental health” as an important area of public life. The problem of mental health affects everyone, including children. The issue of protecting and improving the mental health of children in Armenia is more than acute: COVID, war, compatriots displaced from Artsakh,<sup>5</sup> constant tension at the borders and the threat of new wars, low sense of security, high degree of anxiety, collective trauma all contribute. The simultaneous existence of all these disasters makes the situation in Armenia extremely difficult. In this situation, starting from the early period of the development of a person and their personality, attention to both

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<sup>3</sup> The law on approving the state programme for the development of education in the Republic of Armenia until 2030, 2022, available at: <https://escs.am/am/news/15292>.

<sup>4</sup> The Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, available at: [https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/eu/CEPA\\_ARM\\_1.pdf](https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/eu/CEPA_ARM_1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Self-declared name of Nagorno Karabakh autonomous republic.

the preservation and development of mental health and psychoeducation as important components of general education becomes key, and school becomes one of the important places for their effective implementation. Adolescents are much more vulnerable in this situation. The above-mentioned legal acts and current strategies in force are useful and important from the point of view that they really create ample opportunities for children's mental health issues to remain in the spotlight as the first guarantee of a future prosperous and developing society.

**B) The psychologist at school** - Until September 2023, the position of a psychologist in Armenian schools was not mandatory and was left to the discretion of the school director and possibility of the available financial resources. It should be noted that private schools have had a position of psychologist; moreover, they are not positions filled by just one specialist but by an entire team or service. This psychological service and team of psychologists provide comprehensive services to the students and have policies and guidelines, while the public schools are still in the process of developing these services. These services in private schools are divided into teams by age groups: elementary, middle, and high school, and, accordingly, they have team leaders. These services also enjoy the benefits of participating in various trainings and receiving supervision, which help to constantly develop their professional knowledge, abilities, and skills. Lamentably, the same cannot be said about the situation in public schools and their capabilities. However, in 2023, the Armenian government adopted a new order of financing the education sector, which, starting from the 2023 academic year, established and guaranteed funding for positions of psychologists in public schools. It was a big and positive step in terms of maintaining and developing the mental health of children, as well as in ensuring the process of mental education though insufficient.

**C) Issues** - During the study, several issues were identified that can be divided into the following groups.

Issue 1: Habitual cultural, which includes a prejudiced approach that is still preserved to some extent in certain segments of society, according to which it is shameful to turn to a psychologist and only “sick people” turn to one.

In some cases, this may also be due to the sceptical attitude of the school teaching staff towards the psychologist, which, in turn, may have a negative impact on teamwork, reducing a very important format of cooperation within the school, thus affecting the student.

Issue 2: Legal procedural, which includes a comprehensive regulation of the duties, responsibilities, powers, freedoms, and restrictions of a school psychologist.

Issue 3: The professional activity of a psychologist at school faces several obstacles, as we have already mentioned. Among these issues may be relationships with staff, as well as, being part of the top-down management system at school, implying subordination to a direct supervisor. In fact, this is problematic for a trusting student-psychologist relationship, when a student may not trust the psychologist, thinking that their meeting and the thoughts expressed at the meeting may become available to other people, in particular the school management—such cases have been noted. Trust and confidentiality are the most important factors in psychologists' daily work. To guarantee this trust, psychologists need to cooperate with school management, teachers, staff, and parents. Another issue is the relationship of students with their parents, other family members, or legal representatives, which is necessary when solving various problems. The absence of other specialists at school can also be a problem in terms of the effective work of a psychologist, as well as providing broad support to the child. These specialists mainly include a social worker and a speech therapist. It is often not possible to ensure the “student-school-psychologist-parent” connection with the psychologist's efforts alone, the presence and effective implementation of which will certainly have a positive impact on the mental health of both the student and their environment and community. This connection should lead to cooperation, problem formulation, and joint work on its solutions, where the interests of the child will be kept at the centre of attention.

**D) Needs** - The needs identified during the study can be divided into several groups: **a)** raising the level of educational awareness of society in general about the role of a psychologist, **b)** raising awareness of school management and teaching staff about the role and functions of a psychologist, **c)** presenting



the procedures necessary to maximise the regulation of the activities of school psychologists and developing effective mechanisms for monitoring their implementation, **d)** staffing the school with other specialists related to mental health and improving the professional abilities of each, **e)** training of all school teaching staff on children's rights, combating discrimination and bullying, **f)** strengthening the relationship between parents and the school, **g)** strengthening the connection between the school and the community, especially in the regions. These are the basic needs that can be summarised as great educational and informational needs.

Education for everyone: society, principals, teachers, psychologists, students, and their parents. This education should be conducted in several directions: professional, general awareness-raising and psychoeducation.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The analysis of results and information gained during the research and interviews allow us to draw some conclusions and recommendations for discussion from the perspective of considering their further implementation. Various participants can jointly discuss proposals to find the fastest and most effective solutions, as well as point out the role, responsibility, and extent of participation of each involved structure to make the process of preserving and improving the mental health of schoolchildren even more productive.

#### **3.1 Conclusions**

The conclusions can be viewed with broad scope and coverage, as well as with a narrower and specific focus. These two levels allow us to form a general idea of the depth of the issues and then further deeper and more thorough study.

1. The current reality of Armenia is conditioned by the tragic events of the last four years: the COVID-19 epidemic, the 44-day war unleashed by Azerbaijan against Artsakh and Armenia in 2020, Azerbaijan's attacks on the sovereign

state of Armenia in 2021-23, and ethnic cleansing in Artsakh in September 2023, because of which about 120,000 people fled their homes and were displaced to Armenia. The events that took place radically changed the socio-psychological state of society, a society in a post-traumatic state due to losses, also in a mental state of collective trauma and increased anxiety and tension due to security concerns.

2. Adolescent vulnerability, in terms of psychology and pedagogy, is now becoming even more acute. Armenia's security concerns, uncontrolled access to information, the rapid spread of negative habits, the socio-economic polarisation of society, and the socio-psychological climate in families are all phenomena that directly affect the psyche and personality development of minors, and this, in turn, has the most direct negative impact on the motivation of schoolchildren towards education.

3. The provision of the position of a psychologist was a big step towards making the school mission's implementation process smoother and more effective. The institutionalisation of the position of a psychologist by ensuring its financial side should lead to changes in culture, thinking, and practice both at the school level and in the community and society. This fact is perceived positively, and it gives hope for positive changes in the socio-psychological state of children, motivation to learn, interpersonal relationships, social skills, mutual assistance, empathy, and the perception of equality.

4. Securing the position of a school psychologist imposes new requirements on school leaders and administrative managers, who must find unique solutions for personnel management in a new way, such as control of personal and confidential information, find alternative and non-conventional approaches in sensitive "student-school-parent-community" situations.

5. For regional schools, the presence of a psychologist is also considered a factor contributing to the psychoeducation of the community and the strengthening of the "school-community" emotional and content-filled connection.

6. Guaranteeing financial resources for the position of a psychologist imposes new requirements for psychological education and qualification and also involves the strengthening of "school-university" and "school-professional structure" ties in terms of promoting mutual professional development.

## 3.2 Recommendations

The recommendations were drawn up considering the opinions of field experts who participated in the interviews, as well as ongoing processes. Recommendations can also be classified according to their recipients, and the possibilities of their implementation can be discussed with them. These recommendations can also be the subject of a separate study for structures that train specialists with qualifications in psychology and pedagogy, as well as for various state and non-state structures interested in this area and issues.

1. State-run and private educational institutions should conduct interrelated strategic communication activities both within the field of education and among the public in order to raise awareness about the position of a psychologist at school. This decision, which has been in effect for less than a year, and its justification should be explained to the public so that psychologists continue to have the support of parents and the public when conducting their activities.
2. Responsible authorities in the field of education, together with colleagues and the university structures that train psychologists, should develop and adopt a document as detailed as possible, regulating the activities of a psychologist at school. This document should contain the clearest and most detailed description of the functions and responsibilities of a psychologist at school, the expansion of opportunities that contribute to the training of specialists in this field, the requirements for specialists, the boundaries of the relationship between a school psychologist and the rest of the school staff and, importantly, the documentation of the daily work of a psychologist, providing them with a clear set of tools for maintaining this documentation.
3. The responsible body, following discussions with the professional community, should determine a mechanism for monitoring the activities of school psychologists. To carry out this monitoring and evaluation, it is necessary to study international experiences and monitor and evaluate the quality of an existing model.
4. It is proposed to conduct informational, educational, and training courses for school principals and teaching staff, informing them about the

scope of the psychologist's activities and the boundaries of professional communication that arise during the daily communication between the psychologist and the principal and teaching staff. Respect for the principle of confidentiality, one of the most important conditions for ensuring the integrity of a psychologist's work, should be a key point in these discussions.

5. National and regional educational structures, together with non-governmental organisations, should conduct communication activities in each enlarged community, informing the population about the presence of a psychologist at school and their role and importance—not only at school but also in society. The issue of psychoeducation should be the cornerstone of that process.

6. A separate issue of information sharing should be the rights of children and the right to non-discrimination, as bullying is a manifestation of discrimination and an action that disrupts the human psyche. These topics should become mandatory for all levels of school staff and be systematic to protect the best interests of the child.

7. School psychologists should have access to additional financial resources to ensure participation in training courses in accordance with their needs, as well as to obtain the necessary supervision in cooperation with specialised institutions.

8. All government and non-governmental stakeholders working in the field of mental health should jointly develop communication campaigns using new narratives that will be based on the interests of our society and modern youth, the characteristics of the educational community, and international experience. Those campaigns should aim to educate school and mental health stakeholders about the changes we are seeking in these fields. This will form a large army of like-minded people who will change perceptions and bring a new culture in relation to children's rights, mental health, psychoeducation, the image of a psychologist, the mission of teachers, the role of schools, and many other prominent issues.

## 4.REPORT

*“There should be an objective to develop, rather than to win.”*

*Interviewed teacher.*

### 4.1 Research process and fundamental data

The interviews were conducted online and in person and had a structured format. During the interview, a questionnaire was used for each sample group, which had general and specific parts with questions designed for that specific group. In the general part of the interview, age characteristics, particularly those of high school students; the role of school in maintaining and developing children's mental health; and the advantages and problems of providing the position of a psychologist in general were discussed. Based on the status of the interview participants (school principal, psychologist, teacher, expert), we also discussed more narrow professional issues related to the principal-psychologist, psychologist-teacher, psychologist-student, and psychologist-parent relationships. Also discussed with psychologists were the criteria for the effectiveness of their activities, the need for support, and the problems they face when performing the functions of a psychologist at school. Each respondent was informed about the confidentiality of the interview and its non-disclosure before the interview. The interviewees gave permission to indicate their names at the end of the research. All permissions were recorded during the video recordings. Below, we present some of the data obtained during collection, based on which the conclusions and recommendations presented earlier at the beginning of the report were made.

### 4.2 General state of mental health in Armenia

In this part, we will touch very briefly on the mental health issues in Armenia. We have divided them into three levels: policy and its changes, legal regulation, and the de-facto situation from the point of view of socio-psychological assessment.



### *Policy level*

- In 2011, the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia, in cooperation with international and local organisations and experts, developed the “2014-2019 Strategy of Maintenance and Improvement of Mental Health in the Republic of Armenia” and the Action Plan for its implementation.<sup>6</sup> Since 2012, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, in cooperation with local professional structures and international experts, has been studying existing gaps in the field of mental health and the needs of people with mental health issues. Due to the participation and advocacy of the Armenian civil society in 2017-2019 and 2020-2022, the Government of Armenia included programs for the provision of alternative mental health services in the medium-term public expenditure programs. The action plan for “2014-2019 Strategy of Maintenance and Improvement of Mental Health in the Republic of Armenia” was revised, and, in 2021 a new action plan for 2021-2024 was approved. The importance of these documents should be assessed from several viewpoints. Mental health, for the first time, went beyond psychiatric institutions; and this strategy introduced a new narrative and terminology, namely “mental health in Armenia”—thanks to which aimed at helping every citizen of Armenia recognise the importance of each being mentally healthy. This new idea broke the stereotype that the problem of mental health concerns only people with mental illnesses. Another important point is that these documents emphasised the concept of “psychoeducation”, and it became key to the well-being of society. Additionally, the strategy was an inclusive document and covered not only healthcare structures but also all possible spheres and structures of various levels that could and should ensure the preservation and development of mental health of every citizen of Armenia within the framework of their activities, and the education system was among them.

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<sup>6</sup> Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2014-2019 Strategy of Maintenance and Improvement of Mental Health in the Republic of Armenia and the action plan for its implementation, available at: <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=90364>.

## *Legal regulation level*

### International regulations

- The rights of persons with disabilities, including persons with mental health issues are enshrined in the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Armenia ratified the convention in 2010, thereby assuming an international obligation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Important provisions on the protection of the rights of persons with mental health issues also include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the UN Convention on the Rights of Children, which were also ratified by Armenia.

Another important document for the protection of human rights is the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which, together with the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, constitutes the European human rights system. In addition to international conventions, the field of mental health is also regulated by other documents (resolutions, declarations).

Based on the criteria fixed by the UN, the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1996 identified 10 basic principles that should be reflected in national legislation:<sup>7</sup>

1. Promotion of mental health and prevention of mental disorders
2. Access to basic mental health care
3. Mental health assessments in accordance with internationally-accepted principles
4. Provision of the least restrictive type of mental health care
5. Self-determination
6. Right to be assisted in the exercise of self-determination
7. Availability of review procedure

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<sup>7</sup> General Assembly resolution 46/119, Principles for the protection of persons with mental illness and the improvement of mental health care, 17 December 1991, document available: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/principles-protection-persons-mental-illness-and-improvement>.

8. Automatic periodical review mechanism
9. Qualified decision-maker
10. Respect of the rule of law

Based on the results of research on mental health policies and services, as well as an assessment of mental health reforms developed in several countries, the WHO together with UN brought forward important recommendations for the organisation of mental health services in accordance with the “Guidelines on mental healthcare policies and services”.<sup>8</sup> This would guide states and organizations ‘[...] to support countries to transform mental health systems and services, increase equality and justice in mental health care, and prevent, detect, or remedy human rights violations in mental health care settings.’<sup>9</sup>

## National regulations

- The Constitution of the Republic of Armenia stipulates the constitutional rights of everyone, including people with mental health issues. At the same time, it provides provisions for the rights of persons with mental health issues.

The Law of the Republic of Armenia “On Medical Care and Servicing the Population”<sup>10</sup> regulates the relations related to the organisation and prevention of; legal, economic, and financial issues; as well as the turnover of medical products that ensure the realisation of the constitutional right to human healthcare. Consequently, this law also plays a major role in regulating the field of mental health.

The Law “On Psychiatric Care and Services” of the Republic of Armenia is the main national document regulating the field of mental health (adopted on June 18, 2020). Based on the requirements of the law, several sub-legislative acts regulating the field of mental health were developed and approved.

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<sup>8</sup> UN Human Rights Office of High Commissioner, 09 October 2023, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/10/who-and-un-human-rights-office-launch-new-guidance-improve-laws-addressing>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The Law of the Republic of Armenia, On Medical Care and Servicing the Population, 1996, available at: <https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=144765>.

The field of mental health is also regulated by the Civil, Civil Procedure, Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes; Laws “On Police”, “On Protection of the Population in Emergency Situations”, “On Licensing”, and “On Advocacy” of the Republic of Armenia; and the Armenian Government decision on “Free and preferential medical care and services guaranteed by the state” and other relevant legal acts. The domestic regulation also includes bringing the HD-009-2013 “Classifier of Occupations” of the Republic of Armenia in line with the recently emerging demand for professional functions in the field of mental health, as well as the trends in specialisations and trainings in professional education—directly related to the psychological service at school.

### *Socio-psychological level*

In Armenia, as well as all over the world, the number of people with mental health issues is increasing and the proportion of prevalence of mental concerns is changing, which is caused by the actualization of adverse factors affecting mental health in recent years (population ageing, pandemic, war, uncontrolled flow of information, climate change, etc.). Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider and modernise the ways in which mental health services are provided, ensuring continuity, phasing, diversity, interconnectedness, availability, and quality of services.<sup>11</sup>

What has been happening in Armenia over the past four years has created an unfavourable situation for mental health, and this situation directly affects everyone, from childhood to the older generation. Starting in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the war in Nagorno Karabakh and the consequences of the stress it brought and the traumatic events experienced, have affected the lives of every person in Armenia, leading to various mental health issues in all segments of the population. Various studies and works on psychosocial rehabilitation indicate that the consequences of the war are reflected not only at the level of our compatriots, military personnel, and/or people living in the border settlements of Artsakh but also at the level of our entire population,

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<sup>11</sup> Order of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Armenia, On Approval of the Action Plan for the Protection and Improvement of Mental Health and the List of Measures Arising from the Plan, available at: <https://moh.am/uploads/2940hrh.pdf>.

including diaspora Armenians. In other words, war is a universal catastrophe that does not bypass any stratum of society. Negative and chronic stress factors persist both in incidents that occur and continue at the border, as well as in many other manifestations committed by politicians of the enemy. From the point of view of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), childhood is a risky period, and, therefore, there is still a need to develop a special project of psychological measures to mitigate the negative impact of stressful factors caused by the war on the mental health of the younger generation. The impact of trauma has not abated, and the question of the sufficiency of safety and protection needs in the public consciousness remains uncertain, which creates additional tension at the level of public mental health.

The statistical data presented in the above-mentioned “Action Plan of the Strategy for improving mental health in Armenia” indicates that there has been an increase in the incidence of registered mental health among the population in the Republic of Armenia in recent years.<sup>12</sup>



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<sup>12</sup> WHO, Suicide: one person dies every 40 seconds, 2019, available at: <https://www.who.int/news/item/09-09-2019-suicide-one-person-dies-every-40-seconds>.



Category	1990	2005	2000	2015	2019	2020	2021
Number of people with mental health issues registered			32.717	51.167	57.164		60.222
Increase in morbidity				56%	74%		84%
Number of people with mental disorders under dispensary supervision	1.169	2.042			2.353		2.746
Number of people with mental disorders under dispensary supervision in % compare to 1990		74%			101%		135%
Incidence of mental health issues in the Republic of Armenia among the population aged 15 years and older per 100.000.						2,431.5	2,500.6
the incidence of mental health issues in the Republic of Armenia among the population aged 0-14 years and older per 100.000						58,461	60,222
Number of drug users under dispensary control						13786	14144
Number of people with disabilities because of mental and behavioural disorders						24,223 (out of which 2,725 were children)	

From the viewpoint of mental health, vulnerable groups are children, adolescents, and the elderly, especially when affected by emergencies or military or terrorist acts. Early detection, prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of mental health issues in these groups, ensuring the quality of medical care and services, as well as the inclusion of a person in society will reduce the number of people who find themselves in difficult situations because of mental health issues, and improve the quality of life of the

beneficiaries. Developments regarding mental health issues in the above-mentioned groups are mostly specific (mental retardation, psychological developmental disorders, dementia, PTSD, mental disorders caused by traumatic brain injuries, etc.) and require the provision of differentiated services. Systematic psycho-hygiene and psychological restraint are practically not carried out. Mental health issues in adolescents are detected mainly among male children, who turn 14 and begin being registered in military departments and also at the age of 18, during military medical examinations. Large-scale screening examinations are not conducted among women, children, and the elderly. The impact of all this on the school as an important institution of socialisation cannot remain without consequences. Schools, particularly the senior classes, are a sensitive and vulnerable stratum of society. The preservation and development of their mental health is even more important and vital, also given the fact that it is this generation that, in a few years, will govern, develop, protect, and move Armenia and the Armenian society forward. Only a mentally healthy and resilient generation can achieve success and the ability to resist.

### **4.3 Age/developmental characteristics, school, and mental health of children**

*The adaptation of 6-7 year-old children involves securing a safe environment, teaching them to love learning, and helping them learn about their environment. The role of the teacher is significant, particularly in fostering interpersonal relationships and promoting self-expression.*

The fundamental differences are based on age: elementary, middle school and high school. These differences are important from different perspectives, so the educational process and its methodology should be organised accordingly. These processes are interrelated and one's success and efficiency are conditioned by the good organization of the previous one. Here we have the following chain: preschool (kindergarten) - elementary school - middle school - high school. All these levels are important not only from the point

of view of gaining knowledge but, more importantly, from the perspective of further improving a child's mental health and not creating problems for their psyche.

Topics discussed with all participants were the current age/developmental characteristics of students; the role of the school, especially the psychologist's role taking these age characteristics into account and organizing work accordingly; and the role of the school as a structure in improving and maintaining the child's mental health, as children spend much time there. Principals, teachers, and psychologists have highlighted the following important points from the discussions.

1. For grades 1 to 2, it is very important for a child to learn to adapt to school conditions, considering the characteristics of a first grader, whose activities change from playing to studying. In this age group, the forms of learning through games should be used per best practice and research developmentally.

One of the experts who participated in the interview emphasised that “[i]t is essential to know the characteristics of the child's mental processes, what didactic materials to use, how to occupy the child, give him/her some rest, create a safe environment so that the child wants to return to the school, instil a love for learning, as well as lay the foundations for his desire to study at any age.” The expert highlighted these facts and emphasised, especially for first graders, that school is the first time they come into contact with schooling and that the natural desire to know one's environment depends on the teacher—whether the teacher will shape the attitudes towards schooling, promote the motivation to learn, or have the opposite effect. The importance of the teacher's role in grades 1-2 is invaluable because, as mentioned since “the child has not many choices”, and it is essential what and how the teacher teaches the child. It is important that the academic content meets a child's needs and interests and is tailored to the individuality of their psyche. As mentioned “in today's world, social skills, in particular interpersonal relationships, are becoming more than important, and the formation of these skills becomes an important component of education starting from an early age.”

Experts and interviewees highlighted another problem for this age group. Children who did not attend kindergartens need more attention because their skills and experience are lower compared to those who attended. It should be noted that the teachers need to create an environment and atmosphere for integration to reduce the potential risk of their self-isolation. Being part of a social environment, feeling like an equal member of a group, and receiving equal attention become a guarantee that a child will not be discriminated against in the future, become “invisible”, or have their mental health compromised.

2. Middle school is the age of adolescence. In adolescence (ages 10-15), a child shows rebellious behaviour. The teacher, realising that this is not a “rebellion” but an age feature, also changes their own attitude and behaviour; although, not all teachers succeed in doing so. There are cases when a teacher consciously or unconsciously creates in a child a dependency on grades or attitudes, since those become examples for a child at that sensitive age, an age when value systems, attitudes towards people and human relationships, as well as social abilities and skills start forming. That is exactly why considering age/developmental characteristics is utterly important—it should help ensure that a teacher does not attempt to add conflict with teenagers or create additional tension for their mental state.

3. Perhaps, the most controversial age of nowadays is the high school age. Several important manifestations and circumstances define the high school age, and the interviewees emphasised the peculiarities of the high school age in terms of further development and maintenance of individual mental health. The problems of this age are caused by the desire for self-affirmation, emancipation, diversity of interests, various behavioural compensations, desires to fit into formal and informal groups, as well as very pronounced manifestations typical of the age crisis. All these wants can be aggravated and cause extra stress if we consider that high school classes often join students from other different schools, who very often have not known each other before. In the regions, this idea is furthered as there may be students from entirely different villages and cities. This circumstance becomes a rather acute problem in terms of conflicts in interpersonal relationships and their

negative impact. The interviewees also noted several other clearly visual important circumstances here: family, cultural differences, community influence, social status, and, in particular for boys, the possible influence of the criminal subculture in terms of manifesting themselves in a new environment and demonstrating their strength and importance. In high school, experts talked about conflicts and the importance of overcoming them, noting that where there are people of the same age with different backgrounds, they are not immune from conflicts, especially when they are children who are still learning to communicate with each other and be together, whose social skills are still in the stage of formation. The psychologist noted, “It is important not so much to prevent conflict, but to teach how to communicate with each other, respect the opinion and point of view of another person. If an adult sees a problem arise, the teacher can give right direction and advice that will be instructive for life. And to notice the problem, the teacher must further expand their attention, understand what is happening, paying attention to the most subtle points, including the intonation of the voice.”

#### **4.4 The role of school in children’s mental health: problems, challenges, needs**

*“If there is no mental well-being at school, and when children do not see it, they also do not see the meaning in school and do not want to attend.”*

*Interviewed psychologist*

The respondents believe that the school, whether in the past or now, is a place where a person spends quite a lot of time, in particular, during the years of their formation and a place where they should have a feeling of security and available resources for healthy development. Education is where reforms do not happen too quickly: “...various methods have been introduced to conduct the educational process, such as project learning, research work. However, the most important thing is not the tool but pedagogy and its relation to the mental health of a person.” Mental health is formed from an early age, and the family



plays an important role in this matter, and the school and educational institutions also are considered part of this active stage in the cognitive development and formation of a worldview of a child. However, according to the experts who took part, schools still pay insufficient attention to the mental health and self-awareness of the children. In this case, a teacher's attitude towards the student is a key issue, since, in addition to providing knowledge, the teacher has a great influence on the maintenance and development of the child's mental health. Pedagogical knowledge is important. For example, when a teacher understands the age characteristics of children, they can assess what capabilities a child has and recognise the mental inner world of a student. This is an integral part of pedagogy. As it was mentioned by the psychologist: "Many teachers do all this intuitively, other teachers use other skills based on their training. However, it should be noted that there are teachers who see pedagogy as only the transfer of knowledge. A modern child, however, does not want to receive education in this way because they can get knowledge from other alternative sources, and, if the relationship with the teacher is bad, the child can simply refuse school education".

Here a serious and ambiguous question arises about the mission of a modern school: is a school a place that gives knowledge, or is it a structure with much broader responsibilities? Experts agree that schools today should also be a structure that provides education based on values and does more than instruction. According to the expert: "The school cannot be generic. The school should be balancing, revealing, and guiding." It is difficult for the current school to meet all these needs because, in fact, schools still see their missions as providing information. This idea can have a serious impact on student motivation. Children do not see why they should go to school if a school does not do more, and it is becoming more and more difficult for parents to explain to children the mission and importance of schools. Children do not see why they should go to school, and it is becoming more and more difficult for parents to explain to children the mission and importance of them. Children's motivation or, rather its decrease, further is becoming a serious problem, which was also pointed out by the respondents: "As a result of a decrease in motivation, for example, phones result in degradation, which leads to a decrease and weakening of memory, attention, and concentration, and this

also affects the cognitive sphere, pushing learning into the background. It also contributes to a decrease in mental development.”

When speaking about these circumstances, it becomes clear that the role of a teacher in school needs to significantly change in terms of new knowledge, skills, and abilities, and the role of a psychologist becomes fundamental. An important function for the teachers to fulfil is to identify children’s problems at the right time, such as low grades, traces of violence, poor health, poor hygiene, mood swings, interpersonal problems, isolation, restraint, quarrels with peers, and, in Armenian reality, if the school fails to see, identify, and address the problem, then it can stay inside the child— having an obvious negative effect on the child’s mental health. Schools should have all the necessary resources to accomplish this, and a trained teacher with the necessary set of tools should be able to assess such situations and intervene together with their colleagues, prioritising the important issue of not harming the child’s mental health. The idea that children are greatly influenced by which teacher they interact with and what influence the teacher has on them is not debatable. Experts have noted the difference between public and private schools; however, the paper doesn’t discuss this issue, since it was not part of the objectives of the study; the differences were considered from the perspective of organising the activities of a psychologist.

#### **4.5 The experience of other countries in the field of school psychologist services**

Our research with psychologists and representatives of psychological services (school doctors, teacher’s assistants, special pedagogues, logopedists, etc) from different schools has shown that there are different models of psychological services at school. Here we present models that envisage the mandatory presence of a psychologist at school, as well as models that provide psychological services outside of school by psychological organisations. This model assumes the various functions of a psychologist: preventive, corrective, training, and others.

It is known that **Finland** has one of the most effective educational systems in the world, with many countries trying to implement the model it has developed

to improve the quality of their education as well. Even though it is one of the best education systems in the world, the socio-emotional well-being of students in Finland is of concern. Most students do not want to continue their education after the 9th grade, and a number of studies indicate a low level of well-being,<sup>13</sup> especially among boys' families. Taking all this into account, psychologists in Finnish schools are working on improving the well-being of students and trying to maintain their good studies and good psychological, social, and physical health. School health services are central to Finland, and all professionals working at the school do their best to promote the well-being of students. For a long time in Finland, as well as all over the world, attempts were made to clarify the roles and responsibilities of a psychologist. The Finnish policy makers are trying to develop educational programs that will allow them to train school psychology scientific practitioners. In addition to direct work, i.e. various forms of professional intervention, assessment, counselling, etc., there is also a need to organise indirect work, such as various activities, preventive work in multidisciplinary groups, community service, etc. In addition to training the psychologists, it is also important to prepare the environment in which they work, that is, the school. Teachers should also understand that in addition to teaching certain knowledge and skills, they must also support the well-being of students during their work, that is, the importance of cooperation between professionals (teacher and psychologist) comes forward. Thus, the Finnish education system is one of the first in terms of academic achievements, about socio-emotional well-being; everything is being done to introduce an effective psychological support system, which involves cooperation with teachers and other specialists working at school and includes both direct and indirect work.<sup>14</sup> The peculiarity of the Finnish model is that the service has a specific purpose, is aimed at a specific need, that is, there is a problem and work is organised with the aim of solving it directly. Moreover, in this model it is also important that there is a tendency to universal introduction of psychological knowledge. The provision of psychological services in **Hong Kong** is in a better position. Research shows that here school psychologists spend 46% of

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<sup>13</sup> Ahtola Annarilla, Niemi Pekka, Does it work in Finland? School psychological services within a successful system of basic education, *School Psychology International* 2014, Vol. 35(2) 136–151.

<sup>14</sup> Ahtola Annarilla, Niemi Pekka, Does it work in Finland? School psychological services within a successful system of basic education, *School Psychology International* 2014, Vol. 35(2), 136–151.

their time on intervention, 27% on assessment, 16% on administration and 6% on research work. It was also found that 40% of the time is devoted to children with special needs or disabilities, 22% to teachers, 13% to administration, 12% to parents and 8% to general education recipients.<sup>15</sup> In **England**, psychological services are provided by local education authorities (LEA), along with other specialists and services, and the presence of a psychological service is also mandatory. It should be noted that there is also a distribution issue here, that is, the number of psychologists is quite small compared to the number of students. Educational psychologists provide services to all schools that are part of the LEA, as well as to children referred by various authorities, for example, children referred by a family doctor or social worker (referred after obtaining the mandatory parental consent), in addition to this, parents can also refer their children to a psychological service.<sup>16</sup> The work of the psychological service can be divided into two large groups: the first group is the provision of individual services (for example, to children, families), and the second group is the provision of consulting services, primarily to schools. The first group includes assessment and intervention work with children with personal or educational requirements. The second group includes professional development projects. Psychological services spend about 40% of their time on such projects and publish information about their activities in the newspaper every year—giving some transparency to the public. Each psychologist is provided with an equal number of schools in which they will provide psychological services. This service delivery model is quite effective, but efforts are put into further developing it to overcome potential difficulties in the future.<sup>17</sup> The **English model** stands out for its cultural specificity. There are no psychologists working at a specific school, but rather there are organisations that provide services to schools. The effectiveness of this model is largely conditioned by what society knows about the science of psychology, what ideas it has about psychologists, and how embedded is the culture of using psychological services, in other words, the level of public awareness.

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<sup>15</sup> Ding Yi, Lung-Yi, Kuo and Don C. Van Dyke, School Psychology in China (PRC), Hong Kong and Taiwan, A Cross-Regional Perspective, School Psychology International, Vol. 29(5), 2008

<sup>16</sup> Lindsay Geoff, Educational psychology in England and Wales, Journal of School Psychology. Vol 23, 1985.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

In **Australia**, the Australian Psychological Society<sup>18</sup> has also developed a comprehensive model of school psychological services. To be considered a school psychologist in Australia, there are several requirements to fulfil: you must receive an appropriate education, have the necessary skills, which are also approved by the union, as well as be a member of the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA), which is the national council for the registration of psychologists. Actually, we should mention here that UK and US also required certification for psychologists working at schools. School psychologists in Australia also perform three types of work: direct, indirect, and school-wide services.<sup>19</sup> Direct work involves working directly with students, who are the most vulnerable part of the school community, which is the majority of their workload. Direct work involves psychological and behavioural assessment, which can be carried out using various tests, observation (in the case of behaviour assessment), consultations with parents/teachers, and other methods. The assessment of education, which concerns student achievements, is also included in the direct work. Finally, psychological treatment and counselling aimed at maintaining mental health, eliminating several developmental, behavioural, and psychological issues are also included in the direct work. Indirect work includes working with teachers, parents, guardians, and stakeholders to meet the needs and demands of the students. These can be consultations with teachers about the tactics they use, on classroom management issues, mental health awareness for parents/teachers, consultations with parents/guardians about the needs of their children, etc. The third group in types of work is the services provided to the entire school. Psychologists act as members of the school team, but they also work at the system level. They can develop educational programs and activities that will contribute to student achievement, learning, and teaching. They also, as team members, take care of the well-being of the system and the school.

We also refer to the **Norwegian** model of educational psychological services.

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<sup>18</sup> APS professional practice, The framework for effective delivery of school psychology services: a practice guide for psychologists and school leaders, available at: <https://psychology.org.au/APS/media/Resource-Finder/Framework-delivery-school-psych-services-practice-guide.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> McInerney M Dennis, Educational Psychology – Theory, Research, and Teaching: A 25-year retrospective, University of Western Sydney, Australia Published online, 19 Jan 2007.

The **Norwegian** Education Act states that each community must provide educational psychological services, while the community is free to decide how large the service should be and how the work should be organised. Moreover, there is also no national guidance that would address the educational requirements of educational psychological service providers. The service may include special pedagogues, psychologists, and social workers. It is also worth noting that if the school refers a child to the service for help, the parents must give their consent, and the parents themselves can contact the service directly. Sections 5-6 of the Norwegian Education Act define the methodological guidelines for the work of the Service. Thus, the service provides professional assessment where necessary. The service also helps schools improve their skills and organisational development to make the school adaptation of students with special educational needs more effective. This means that the service works with both individuals and organisations. The service usually focused on individual work to identify special needs, as well as providing consultation to teachers and parents as needed. However, it should be noted that there is a tendency to make changes to the educational psychological service system. In addition to working individually with beneficiaries and compiling reports based on it, there is also a need to introduce an approach to preventive work and systemic intervention, this means moving from individual work to systematic work.<sup>20</sup> These changes are primarily due to an increase in the number of requests for psychological help, as well as the fact that research shows that a systematic and preventive approach can be a more effective form of providing psychological services rather than working with concerned individuals.

Finally, to turn to the **American model** of psychological services provided at school, which, one might say, often serves as a prototype for models in other countries. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), in turn, has developed the NASP Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services.<sup>21</sup> The latter is applied in combination with NASP

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<sup>20</sup> Moen Torill, Rismark Marit, Samuelsen Anne Sofie, Sølvyberg M. Astrid, The Norwegian Educational Psychological Service: A systematic review of research from the period 2000–2015.

<sup>21</sup> National Association of School Psychologists, Guidelines for the provision of School Psychological Services, available at: <https://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/nasp-practice-model>.



Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists, Standards for the Credentialing of School Psychologists and Principles for Professional Ethics<sup>22</sup> to provide a unified set of national principles. These principles determine the organisation of professional education and activities of school psychologists, as well as ethical behaviour. The NASP documents are designed to define modern school psychology to support school psychologist services for children, parents, and schools, and provide a foundation for the further development of school psychology. It should be noted that the model serves as a guide for the organisation and provision of school psychological services at the federal, state, and local levels. It guides school psychologists, students, school psychology faculty, school psychological service administrators and beneficiaries of school psychological services. The model also determines what services can rightfully be expected from school psychologists, which contributes to development and certainty in this field. The model of providing comprehensive and integrated school psychological services refers to the provision of those services within the framework of educational programmes and educational institutions. It should also be noted that, in addition to public and private schools, school psychologists also work in several other institutions, such as juvenile justice institutions, colleges and universities, hospitals, and psychiatric hospitals and also engage in individual practice. The American model clearly formulates the job description of a psychologist, helps to understand what expectations there should be from a school psychologist and, at the same time, puts forward conditions and requirements to ensure that those expectations are met.

Looking at the psychological model introduced into the Armenian school system, from the perspective of the already existing and experience-rich models of the countries listed above, it is obvious that the experience and knowledge accumulated over the years, the funds allocated to education, and created social norms have formed traditions that leave their mark on the formation and development of the education system and psychological services in it. Nevertheless, maintaining and developing the mental health of

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<sup>22</sup> National Association of School Psychologists, Principles for Professional Ethics, available at: <https://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/professional-ethics>.

schoolchildren is crucial in developed countries, as it directly links to motivation for education and requires effective relationships between students, schools, parents, and society to support both mental well-being and academic achievements.

## 4.6 Challenges faced by a school psychologist

*“There are no accepted ethical norms, and any previous norms had only a figurative meaning. There are no exact codes of conduct for school psychologists.”*  
*Interviewed field expert*

Welcoming once again the initiative of the Armenian government to allocate funds for the position of a school psychologist, the challenges and problems that existed and have just arisen because of this change must also be addressed. Those issues should be discussed openly to find solutions and possibly prevent their deepening. This presentation, like the rest of the research, is based on information obtained from the interviews completed and data analysed. Psychologists and principals who participated in the interviews noted that there are stereotypes that interfere with the more effective work of a psychologist at school, such as “only special education needs children need a psychologist”, “a psychologist fills in for absent teachers”, “consulting a psychologist means being “mentally ill”, “if the child goes to a psychologist, he/she will talk/reveal about family problems”, “the psychologist enters ‘someone else’s house’”, “teachers are also psychologists, and why do we need an individual psychologist and what they can do that the teachers can’t?”. These stereotypes create obstacles for the psychologist, and they do not create an atmosphere and environment that will contribute to the psychologist’s activities. This situation becomes even more complicated when we see that psychologists need clear functions and procedures to carry out their activities. The absence of those and the combination of stereotypes often lead to a situation where the well-being of the entire school is left to a psychologist and not placed on the shoulders of school staff. In that regard,

the school culture, the role of the teacher, and how much they can maintain a healthy culture and create a safe environment for children are very important. The role of the psychologist is becoming more and more experimental, and this role demands the highest expertise and observance of knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as the necessary tools and, most importantly, professional ethics. A school psychologist should have developed tools and special questionnaires to get to know students and parents. The most subtle and delicate part of the relationship between a psychologist and a student is confidentiality and trust. To ensure mutual trust, the most important is to maintain confidentiality between the psychologist and the student. Unfortunately, there are cases when this is not respected, which can have irreversible consequences for the student's mental health. Psychologists warn the child before the conversation that anything that may be dangerous to his life or health, or the health of another person should be reported to the parents, there are also cases when the child himself expresses a desire to warn his parents. There are cases when parents may be aggressive towards a child, including, regarding the child's referral to a psychologist, the psychologist should talk to the parent in these cases or contact the appropriate authorities. The solutions and regulations of such issues and situations should be very clearly spelled out in the relevant documents. However, there are situations that go beyond the scope of legislative regulation. Such is the creation of a safe and reliable environment at school so that children are not ashamed to consult a psychologist. The law cannot solve all this, as this is already within the competence of the school—the school should regulate this.

Another issue is the ideas and attitudes of teachers to their own work, to students, and to a psychologist. Nowadays teachers should approach students in a new way, creating equal, positive relationships and beginning to get to know children in a new way. They must be non-discriminatory, show an inclusive approach, get rid of stereotypes, and show flexibility in order to be able to change their approaches from class to class, as well as be aware that their role is not only in teaching a subject but also in forming a system of values.

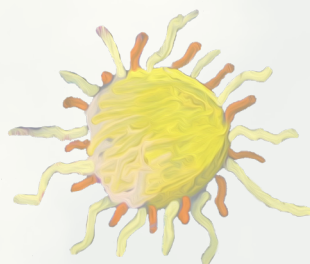
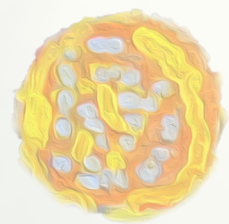
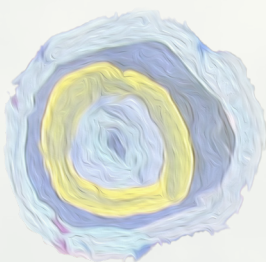
The perception of a psychologist is an important factor in the success of their work. The teaching staff should not perceive them as someone who comes

to school to solve urgent problems. One example of this is the following observation of a psychologist, "When there is a problem during the lesson and the teachers immediately send the child to see the psychologist or the class teacher, the child gets the impression that the teacher is trying to dismiss him." It is important to be open and honest with children. Considering the best interests of the child should be a key point. As we have already noted, the function of a psychologist has an expert component, which is also shown by the experience of other countries. The effective implementation of this component is due to the cooperation of everyone within the school. From a psychologist's observation, "There are three questions of trauma-sensitive learning, the child asks: am I safe, am I accepted and loved, can I learn? When a child has a problem, even one trusted adult can make a difference." And this difference-maker should not only be the psychologist (though often is in reality) but the teaching staff itself.

According to another expert, "The teacher believes that with his role comes a certain amount of power. They see their role in teaching the subject and in other circumstances they tend to blame and place the responsibility on the child. And if the child is not learning, the teacher does not recognise that this can possibly be because of his teaching methods." A psychologist, assessing the situation, can conclude that this is due to the method of teaching, which is not always accepted by the teacher. This situation becomes a problem of internal communication where the child is most vulnerable because of the peculiarities of their newly emerging psyche, especially if suddenly they are accused secretly or openly.

One possible way out of these situations is to have a school based on sufficient competence to develop and adopt ethical standards for the activities of a psychologist, which will be communicated to the teachers. The school does not have a clearly defined concept or regulations related to the work of a psychologist. Definitions are important for establishing a trusting relationship with parents. Awareness-raising activities for parents will also contribute to general psychoeducation. Through the joint efforts of teachers, a psychologist, and parents, it is possible to maintain and develop a child's mental health. Such effective cooperation will have a direct positive impact on the mental well-being of not only one child but also the entire community as a whole

and will increase trust and right of demand towards the school. As a result, people will also have a greater sense of responsibility towards the school. Bullying and discrimination are among some of the serious problems for a psychologist. A few important observations on this issue. According to a psychologist, “In cases of bullying, the focus is often only on the victim, but the bully should also be given attention and help.” Most interviewed psychologists believe that in cases of bullying, it is necessary to act according to clear rules and have a procedure. Work with both targeted children and bullies and engage teachers and parents. Anti-discrimination education is also one of the effective ways to combat bullying. Speaking of bullying, we should note that the causes of this vicious phenomenon are very often stereotypical approaches, such as insensitivity to diversity. In addition, these attacks may be unconscious, moreover, in their opinion, even well-intentioned words. The fight against this phenomenon should have a serious strategy, and the educational component should take a significant place. Many interviewed psychologists also saw the involvement of several different professionals in fighting bullying cases and educating the parties as an effective way of fighting. Comprehensive approaches by a psychologist, teacher, social educator, social worker, and parent can be a highly effective way to combat and mitigate the consequences.



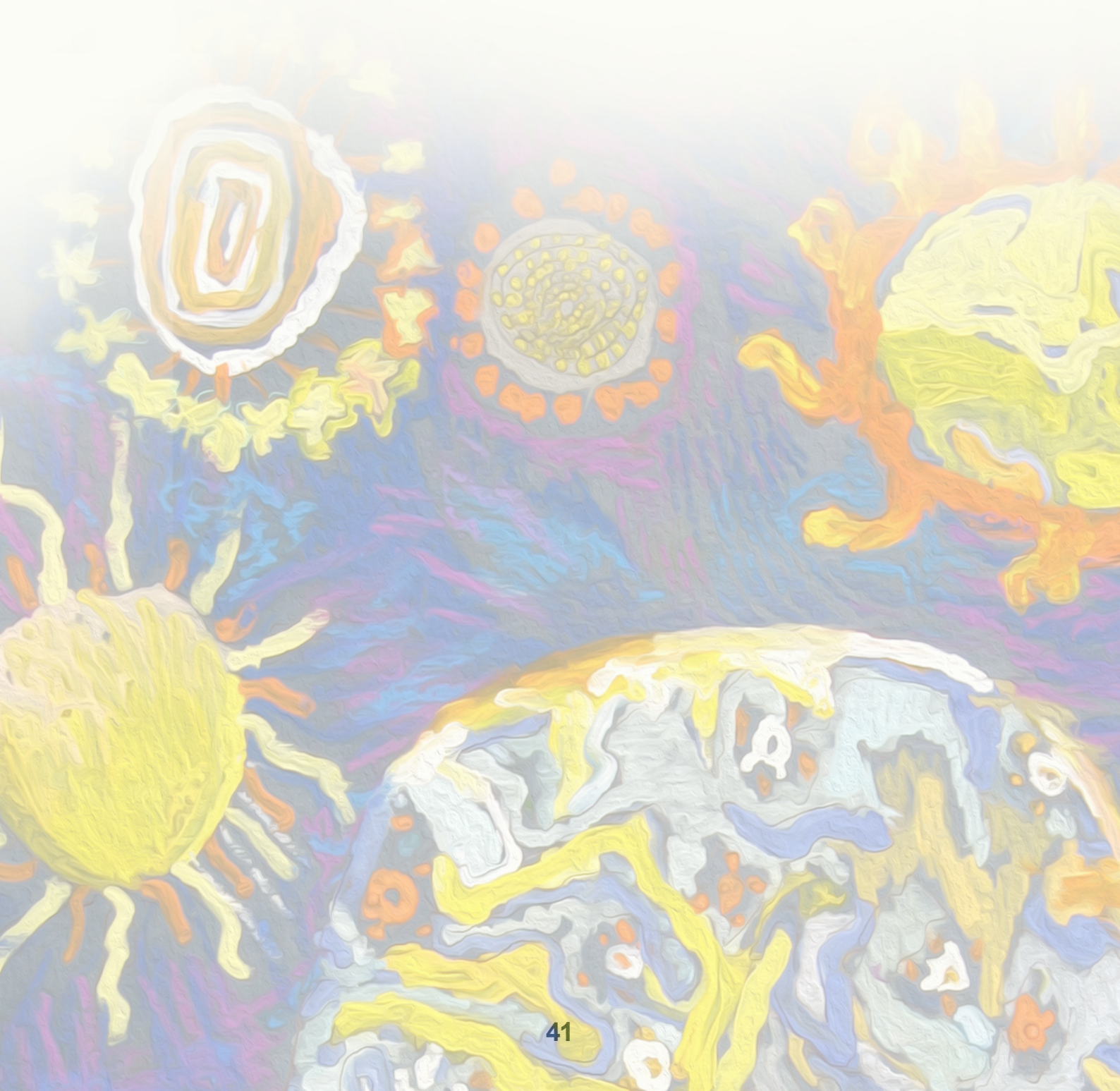
## 5. SUMMARY

Summing up this research report, the research team considers it necessary to focus on several points once again.

The role of the school psychologists institute in addressing children's mental health issues, which has been attempted to address in this research, is very sensitive, extensive, and multi-layered. Dealing with mental being has many different sides and participants. The direct beneficiaries of better administration of mental health issues are schoolchildren, teachers, parents, the community, society, and the state. The challenges facing our society and the state have a direct negative impact on the mental health of the Armenian society. Children and adolescents are doubly vulnerable in this situation because they need much more help and intervention given their age-related characteristics. The role of the school in administering, promoting and ensuring mental well-being is becoming fundamental. Trained school management and teaching staff, psychologists, social educators, social workers with a high level of professional skills in many cases become a more important link than even the family. A school is a place where a young person should be taught psycho-hygiene and self-monitoring. From this perspective, the financial guarantees of the position of a psychologist in Armenian schools are encouraging. However, there is still a need to provide them with both legal, regulatory, and professional tools. In this situation, being guided by custom and inner feeling will not lead to the result we are striving for. Improving and preserving children's mental health is not only a matter of intervention of a psychologist and other specialists. Many related problems, such as bullying, neglect, low levels of mutual assistance and empathy, should be predicted and prevented, and not just reacted to. Thus, raising the level of education and awareness on those issues is urgent. School principals, teachers, psychologists, social educators, and social workers should educate students, parents, and community representatives about anti-discrimination, bullying, diversity, different people, and phenomena, and speak to the society in a language they understand: all this, to promote the improvement and development of mental health.



This study was children's, those who were co-researchers, small contribution to the study of ideas on children's mental health, psychoeducation, psychohygiene, how they talk about them with their peers in their own language and look at their own mental health from the perspective of the principle of law. The research provided answers to several questions, but raised even more questions that should be studied by various specialists, individually or jointly, and all this should be aimed at developing, maintaining the mental health of children, ensuring mental well-being in any and in all situations.



## 6. ABBREVIATIONS

CLT: Child Leadership Team

CEPA– Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement

EU – European Union

LEA – Local education authority

NASP –National Association of School Psychologists

PTSD – Post-traumatic stress disorder

RA MoESCS – Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia

SEN –Those with special educational needs

UN – United Nations

USA – United States of America

WHO – World Health Organisation

YSU – Yerevan State University

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# THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES OF MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING OF SCHOOLCHILDREN AT SCHOOL: CURRENT CHALLENGES AND WAYS TO OVERCOME

### A questionnaire designed for conducting an interview

*Dear respondent,*

*Our research aims to find out what supportive effects school and the school environment can have on a child's development and improvement of their mental health. The results of our interview will be subjected to qualitative analysis and will have a generalised presentation. We will adhere to the principle of confidentiality and will not provide personal data of interviewees.*

*Thank you in advance for agreeing to participate in the interview.*

### A set of key questions to be asked to all participants

1. What role do you think modern school plays in strengthening and maintaining the mental health of its students?
2. Which you would highlight as important and common problems in children, at different ages, that are of fundamental importance in terms of their mental health and development. Rank 5 in the order of importance.
  - A school should promote the formation and development of several skills in its students, and one of those skills is communication skills. To what extent does school contribute to the development of that skill today and how?
  - Given the serious age period, how does the school contribute to the personal growth and development and manifestation of the personality of its students?
  - How does school contribute to the development of endurance in children, the formation of stress tolerance, considering both external and internal

problems such as war, COVID, problems typical of adolescence.

- To what extent does the school attach importance to age-related characteristics, such as the stage of psychosexual development? What is the associated behaviour and its impact on children's mental health?
- How effective is the school, in your assessment, as an environment that provides mutual assistance and social harmony for children? Does the school promote ideas of understanding, tolerance, helping and supporting each other among its students.

3. To what extent do the above-mentioned problems become the focus of the school's attention and how does their solution contribute to ensuring educational progress?

4. What support methods, tools and resources does the school provide to children when they face a problematic situation, such as bullying, discrimination, neglect, conflict with peers or teachers, social vulnerability etc.

5. What are some important actions that need to be taken immediately to maintain the mental health, mental and physical well-being of children at the necessary level?

6. What knowledge does a modern schoolteacher need in terms of improving the mental health of children at school?

7. What are the bases of organizing the psychologist's work at school? Are there written and approved ethical standards and rules? Who and how does one become a school psychologist? What kind of education and professional training is required to become a psychologist at school?

8. What is the task of a psychologist at school?

9. What are the boundaries of professional contacts with the teaching staff and administration? How does they identify children with various problems? How is the confidentiality of their work guaranteed?



10. What problems arise at school or may arise when a child consults a psychologist at school?
11. What professional difficulties have you encountered while working at school? What needs to be changed to improve the effectiveness of the psychologist's work?
12. Who supports and gives importance to the work of psychologist in your point of view? How does that manifest itself?
13. What is the school's mission today: to provide knowledge, to educate a citizen, or both, or perhaps other missions as well?
14. How do you assess the psychological readiness of the teaching staff to communicate with the modern generation? Does today's teaching staff have the socio-psychological tools to effectively build their relationships with the new generation and develop the necessary skills?
15. What should be the role of the newly introduced compulsory institution of school psychologist?
16. How to ensure the availability of high-quality psychological work at school in these conditions?
17. To what extent is our society demanding and committed to school and its problems, the quality of education, and respect for children's rights?

## ANNEX 2

The research team thanks the interviewees for openly and honestly sharing their experiences, thoughts, and recommendations.

1.	Oksana Nersisyan	School psychologist
2.	Susanna Grigoryan	School psychologist
3.	Ani Harutyunyan	RPPC, Kapan, psychologist
4.	Solange Tamamyanyan	School psychologist
5.	Nina Movsisyan	School psychologist
6.	Mariam Grigoryan	School psychologist
7.	Anush Grigoryan	School psychologist
8.	Ani Harutyunyan	School psychologist
9.	Inna Khachian	School psychologist
10.	Aspram Amirjanian	School psychologist
11.	Nune Ambardanova	School psychologist
12.	Tatev Mnatsakanyan	School psychologist
13.	Vardui Ghazaryan	School psychologist
14.	Mane Tarverdyan	School psychologist
15.	Nvard Barseghyan	School principal
16.	Armenuhi Sargsyan	School principal
17.	Narine Avetisyan	School principal
18.	Karmile Arakelyan	School principal
19.	Marina Sukiasyan	School principal
20.	Tatevik Yesayan	School principal
21.	Maria Khanisyan	School deputy principal
22.	Zina Ghukasyan	Education expert
23.	Haykui Adamyan	Education expert
24.	Narine Khachatryan	Education expert
25.	Ruzanna Tsaturyan	Education expert

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Research report

Cover design N. Harutyunyan  
Computer design N. Harutyunyan  
Tech. editor N. Harutyunyan

Submitted for publication 31.10.2024  
Size 60x80 1/16. Publisher: 3,125 press

YSU Press  
Yerevan, 0025, Al. Manoogian 1  
[www.publishing.am](http://www.publishing.am)