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SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH:

A Policy Brief



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Executive Summary

This document is intended for policy makers, the government, mental health and education organizations and institutions in Kosovo. The recommendations provided are aimed at strengthening Kosovo's education system for the improvement and promotion of the mental health of children and adolescents in schools.

Mental Health: A Definition

Mental health can be defined as a state of wellbeing in which each individual realizes their potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and are able to contribute to their community.

Children's Mental Health

Children's mental health is a significant public health problem worldwide. Magnified by the pandemic, the needs for appropriate mental health interventions and services for this category continue to be extremely intense. In the absence of programs and services required to address these needs, the latter have the potential to go into crisis stages and continue to be deprived of proper treatment. It is reported that one in five children experience some form of mental health condition within a year, but only 20% of them receive the necessary treatment. Many of those who try to get the help they need, face multiple challenges as a result of limited access to quality mental health care services.

With the pandemic leading to school closures, physical distancing, safeguards and lockdowns, the figures obtained indicate increased levels of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and other co-occurring disorders in children. The policies and practices designed as a response to this situation, must be tailored to the experiences of children and young people in general, as well as guided by a structural intervention approach. These practices should start from the premises where children spend the most time, such as schools.

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of them receive the necessary treatment.



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Mental Health in Education

Educational premises are among the principal facilities with the highest potential to promote optimal mental health in cases where they provide the right space and opportunities for children and adolescents who interact with these environments. Moreover, good mental health appears to be associated with better educational and behavioral outcomes. The data obtained from consultations carried out with adolescents in different countries around the world, show that they see school as an important source of self-esteem, socialization, emotional security, space to distance themselves from unhealthy home environments, and as an environment in which they can feed their need to know the world better. However, some of the adolescents who took part in these consultations also reported their perception and recognition of the school as an environment in which they can experience violence, abuse, and high academic pressure, also reporting various unpleasant experiences in these settings as a result of gender differences.

The integration of mental health in sector-wide policies, and especially in education policies, is shown to be a positive contributing factor in children's mental health during their development. Despite the need and proven effect, only a small number of children and adolescents receive the necessary services in school settings.

Mental Health in Education: Extent of Problem in Kosovo's Context

In contrast to other countries in the region and around the world that prioritize the mental health care of pupils in schools, Kosovo still has significant deficiencies in regulating the system for providing the necessary psychological services in these settings. In addition to the absence of school-based psychological services, the lack of data on the state of mental health of pupils in schools at the country level, is another fundamental problem which strongly penalizes the process of drafting evidence-based policies and interventions.

On the other hand, from the few existing data in our possession, the results show the disturbing presence of psychological violence in Kosovo's schools and clearly prove the need for research and interventions in this direction (Kosovar Youth Council, 2022). Since teachers are the first point of contact for pupils, they are hypothetically the safest source for addressing mental health issues. However, the necessary and indispensable relationships between teachers and pupils in Kosovo are at a much lower level compared to other countries around the world. More specifically, it is reported that the time a teacher can spend with a pupil for a lesson is approximately one minute, which is insufficient to ensure the necessary interaction in these settings.

While in different countries in the region and around the world, a large number of school psychologists are involved in the key processes of regulating the psycho-social and educational climate in schools, and especially within classrooms, Kosovo has an extremely low number of engaged school psychologists and a legal infrastructure which offers limited opportunities for the advancement of this profession and transmission of the contribution expected from and intended by these professionals.



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Legal Basis for Psychological Services in Kosovo's Pre-University Education System

In cases where schools have less than

1000
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The profession of school psychologist is regulated according to Administrative Instruction No. 34/2014 on Functioning of Pedagogical-Psychological Services in Schools. This Administrative Instruction has its legal basis in Law No. 04/L-032 on Pre-University Education in the Republic of Kosovo. As such, it speaks of psychological and pedagogical services as an advisory unit within professional non-teaching staff. Despite the fact that these two profiles have different responsibilities and tasks, confusion of roles is reported in practice.

Whereas, based on Administrative Instruction No. 26/2013, all schools in Kosovo that have over 1,000 pupils must have school psychologists, whose duties, also regulated by Administrative Instruction, are superficially defined. As a result, the form of engagement and duties of school psychologists are determined by the schools in which they are engaged and are therefore different in different schools around the country.

In cases where schools have less than 1,000 pupils, psychologists or pedagogues are instructed to meet the necessary quota in two or three other schools. This distribution is considered to have a high capacity to undermine the necessary commitment and provision adequate services in schools.

In addition to their engagement in conducting sessions with pupils, designing and implementing various activities, collaborating with pedagogues, teachers, parents and other important stakeholders, research, assessments and other interventions, school psychologists are also engaged in administrative work in their respective schools.

In addition to these legal limitations, Kosovo also lacks a legal basis that regulates the licensing of school psychologists and the definition and observance of the professional standards of school psychologists. Similarly, current practices do not include any professional supervision of the work of school psychologists. To address these important issues, the School Mental Health Symposium follows civil society efforts to better address the challenges and opportunities for improving school mental health.

“School in the Mind” - School Mental Health Symposium

On October 10, on World Mental Health Day, the Psycho-Social and Medical Research Center (QHPSM) and the Kosovo Education Center (KEC) organized the First School Mental Health Symposium. This symposium addressed the topic of psychological wellbeing of pupils in Kosovo schools by conducting three different discussion panels with representatives of relevant profiles and institutions in the country. Discussions and follow-up activities have sought to provide a detailed perspective of the barriers, challenges, opportunities and programs providing mental health services in Kosovo schools.

Panel One: The State and the Mind

With the primary purpose of addressing the issue of existing legislation on mental health and barriers in the provision of relevant psycho-social services, this panel's guest speakers were Prof. Asst. Dr. Fitim Uka, MP in the Assembly of Kosovo, and Mr. Vebi Mujku, Head of the Center for Social Work (CSW) in Prishtina. In addition to emphasizing the failure to implement the mental health law in Kosovo, this panel also addressed the high level of demand by the society for receiving psycho-social services in cases of need. Both of these issues, of an extremely important and concerning nature, have led to the stagnation of both areas in terms of addressing citizen mental health with the appropriate capacities. Likewise, the lack of progress, deficiencies and recommendations in relation to the Administrative Instruction on school psychologists, were also covered by the discussion. Some of the main recommendations of this panel were, legal regulation of mental health services, integration of mental health into other important policies, increasing the capacities of services and monitoring and improving the performance of these services.



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The panelists addressed the present levels of stigma related to mental health among most social groups, considering stigma as a risk factor in addressing and fulfilling the needs for optimal psychological wellbeing.

Panel Two: Education and the Mind

The “Education and the Mind” panel sought to discuss in greater detail the topic of psychological wellbeing from the perspective of schools, academia and multi-disciplinary teams in Kosovo. Moreover, the panel discussed Kosovo’s potential to address mental health problems in schools and how much we are preparing teachers, psychologists and support teams that can meet the needs of the community. This panel’s guest speakers were: Prof. Dr. Aliriza Arënliu from the Department of Psychology, Prof. Asst. Dr. Blerta Perolli Shehu from the Faculty of Education; Lirie Lokaj from GIZ, Valdet Plakolli, school psychologist, and Miran Xhelili, speech therapist. The panelists addressed the present levels of stigma related to mental health among most social groups, considering stigma as a risk factor in addressing and fulfilling the needs for optimal psychological wellbeing. The panelists praised the preparation of school psychologists, indicating a well-realized profile meeting the requirements that would have to be specified in the relevant Administrative Instruction. The addition of subjects from the field of psychology to the academic programs of the Faculty of Education, was presented as one of the reforms already undertaken within the University of Prishtina. Some of the recommendations derived from this panel included, increasing school-based services, advancing the profile of psychologists, pedagogues and speech therapists in relation to school psychological services, raising awareness through public education interventions, and creating other prevention and intervention programs.

Panel Three: Community and the Mind

The “Community and the Mind” panel sought to serve as a space for presenting various community-based programs, projects, services and initiatives in the field of School Mental Health and wellbeing in general. This panel’s guest speakers were: Selvi Izeti-Çarkaxhiu (KRCT), Egzon Gashi (Teach for Kosova), Ardiana Lahu (TOKA), Ditjon Fetahu (KYC), Saranda Rexha (Stress Free Corner) and Veronë Perçuku (QHPSM). This panel discussed the issues of the importance of equality in education, lack of institutional support for civil society initiatives, marked lack of research and data on the state of mental health in the country, importance of trauma-informed intervention approaches, violation of the rights of people with mental health problems in mental health institutions, lack of physical, emotional and psychological safety of pupils in schools and homes, as well as the layered psychosocial challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic.



This panel discussed the issues of the importance of equality in education, lack of institutional support for civil society initiatives, etc.

Recommendations

Recommendations to Policy-Making Institutions

- Amend Administrative Instruction No. 26/2013 on the engagement of school psychologists in relation to the number of pupils in schools, by reducing the engagement criterion to 1 psychologist for 600 pupils and providing for alternatives to service delivery in smaller schools, where the number of pupils does not reach 600.
- Review the duties and responsibilities of school psychologists in a separate Administrative Instruction from the current Administrative Instruction No. 34/2014 on the role of psychologists and pedagogues in schools.
- Regulate by law the process of professional supervision of school psychologists and, consequently, supervisory and support groups for school psychologists should be created.
- Regulate by law the licensing process of school psychologists, clearly defining the modalities of the first licensing and those for relicensing.
- Develop strategies and programs for the prevention of suicide among children and young people, that include awareness-building, intervention, necessary training, and relevant support services.
- Increase institutional support in the realization of research at the national level on the state of School Mental Health by cooperating with academic and research institutions.

Recommendations to the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, and Kosovo Schools

- Incorporate the promotion of mental health in school curricula as an integrated approach in current subjects.
- Integrate trauma-informed approaches into the processes of teaching and interaction with pupils in schools, through training of school staff and preparation of teaching staff.
- Train school staff in providing appropriate psycho-emotional support to pupils in schools, through training in providing psychological first aid and mental health first aid.

- Increase the level of involvement of pupils, parents and care-givers in the design of school settings, in order to provide a comfortable, motivating and safe environment.

Recommendations to Mental Health Institutions

- Review and specify the profiles of community-based mental health services, by improving the legal infrastructure and advancing the communication and referral processes between the relevant institutions.
- Create a system of professional advancement of school psychologists, for the administration of tests for assessment, identification and intervention in schools.
- Increase the accessibility and quality of school-based and community-based mental health services for children and adolescents in need of psychological help and support, by increasing the number of children's mental health programs and centers, as well as non-teaching staff in schools.

Conclusions

School Mental Health is a complex issue that requires interventions at different levels and from various perspectives in order to be properly addressed. Despite this complexity, the goalpost is to ensure and provide services to all pupils in schools in order to support their health and psychosocial wellbeing. In parallel to increasing the number of school psychological services, it is indispensable to improve the effectiveness of existing ones. Mental health should receive the necessary attention and its integration into sector-wide policies should be a priority for policy makers and other relevant stakeholders.

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