

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES IN THE EARLY DETECTION OF STUDENTS' MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

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Abstract. *This article explores the critical role of school psychologists in the early identification of psychological problems among students. It discusses how timely psychological support can influence students' academic and emotional development, with a focus on practical strategies, diagnostic tools, and the collaboration between teachers, parents, and psychological services. Empirical studies and international experiences are used to support the analysis.*

Keywords: *school psychology, early diagnosis, psychological issues, emotional development, school psychologist, mental health, intervention strategies.*

In recent years, there has been growing awareness of the importance of mental and emotional well-being in students' overall development. As academic demands and social pressures increase, many children and adolescents experience psychological challenges that, if left unidentified, can lead to long-term negative outcomes. Schools, being central environments in students' daily lives, play a crucial role not only in education but also in the early recognition of mental health issues. In this context, school psychological services have become an essential component of preventive mental health care, helping to identify and address students' difficulties at an early stage.

In today's educational systems, the psychological well-being of students is as vital as their academic achievement. Research shows that children with undiagnosed emotional or behavioral issues are more likely to struggle academically and socially [1].

School psychologists are not merely support staff but integral members of the educational team, as emphasized by Koller (2000). Their expertise bridges academic learning and emotional development, particularly by helping students overcome psychological barriers that impede success. When school psychologists actively participate in student support teams, they offer insights that teachers or administrators may overlook-such as identifying subtle signs of emotional distress or behavioral disorders. Their role is essential in transforming schools into responsive, student-centered environments where mental health is viewed as foundational to learning. School psychologists, therefore, play a fundamental role not only in identifying these issues but also in developing and implementing effective interventions. According to the National Association of School Psychologists, early identification can prevent long-term negative outcomes and promote resilience [2].

The National Association of School Psychologists (2020) underscores the critical importance of early identification in safeguarding students' mental health. Timely recognition of psychological difficulties allows for preventative support before problems escalate into chronic conditions. In practice, this means school staff must be attentive to subtle behavioral changes-withdrawal, low engagement, or emotional numbness-which may signal deeper issues. Particularly in adolescence, delays in intervention reduce the effectiveness of treatment and often exacerbate academic and social struggles. Thus, early identification is not simply a diagnostic task, but a systemic strategy to ensure that the educational environment promotes wellness, safety, and long-term student development. A well-functioning psychological service within a school must include continuous observation, teacher referrals, student self-reports, and

psychological testing. As Pennebaker (1995) emphasized, open emotional expression is closely linked with mental health [3].

Pennebaker's (1995) research demonstrates the mental and physical health benefits of emotional expression, which is especially critical in school environments. Students who suppress their emotions may develop psychosomatic symptoms, struggle with concentration, or exhibit disruptive behavior. If schools fail to provide safe outlets for emotional expression, students' internal struggles may deepen over time. School psychologists must integrate emotional expression into daily routines-through journaling, creative arts, or one-on-one counseling sessions. When emotional sharing becomes normalized, it fosters self-awareness, reduces inner tension, and enhances emotional literacy, all of which are essential for a healthy learning atmosphere. When a child openly expresses emotions, it not only provides psychological relief but also fosters emotional self-reflection. This is especially important during adolescence-a time when identity is forming, and suppressing emotions can hinder healthy development.

School psychologists play a vital role in helping students recognize, label, and articulate their emotions, which in turn develops emotional intelligence. As a result, students improve their social adaptability, classroom participation, and self-confidence. Thus, Pennebaker's concept serves as a practical roadmap for schools aiming to promote long-term emotional well-being among students. In the school setting, this translates to creating environments where students feel safe to talk, be heard, and be helped. In Uzbekistan, school psychologists often face challenges such as limited resources, high caseloads, and lack of continuous professional development. However, recent educational reforms and increased focus on mental health awareness have brought this field into the spotlight. International experiences, such as in Finland or the U.S., show that integrating mental health programs directly into curriculum leads to better outcomes [4].

The work of Hyvärinen and Kaljonen (2017) illustrates the positive outcomes of embedding mental health programs directly into school curricula. Their research in Finnish schools showed that when emotional well-being is treated as a core educational priority-on par with literacy and math-students demonstrate greater self-regulation, reduced anxiety, and improved academic performance. This integration shifts the school environment from being reactive to proactive. Instead of waiting for problems to escalate, students are equipped with emotional coping skills early on. For countries like Uzbekistan, adopting a similar approach-tailored to cultural norms-can enhance the efficiency of school psychological services and promote a healthier school climate overall. One of the most compelling aspects of the Finnish model described by Hyvärinen and Kaljonen is its systemic integration of mental health into everyday teaching. Rather than isolating psychological services in a separate office, Finnish schools incorporate emotional support into classroom activities, teacher training, and school policy. This whole-school approach ensures that mental health is not a response to crisis but a consistent part of the educational culture. For schools in other countries, especially in post-Soviet contexts, adopting even partial elements of this model-such as teacher-led well-being sessions or curriculum-based emotional learning-can significantly reduce stigma and make support more accessible to students. Creative and proactive approaches are essential. This includes using child-friendly diagnostics like drawings, play-based assessments, and structured interviews. Collaboration among psychologists, parents, and teachers forms the backbone of effective early intervention. Early detection not only helps in solving problems but also in building a support network around the student. A school that identifies a student's anxiety or social withdrawal early

can implement strategies that foster confidence, communication, and classroom engagement. As Lazarus(1991) argued, the emotional-cognitive relationship is at the core of personal development [5].

Lazarus's cognitive-motivational-relational theory of emotion emphasizes that emotions arise from how individuals evaluate and relate to their environment. In schools, this insight is crucial-students do not merely react to academic content, but to how safe, valued, and supported they feel within the learning environment. If a student interprets a classroom as threatening or dismissive, even minor academic challenges can trigger overwhelming emotions, leading to disengagement or behavioral issues. Therefore, school psychologists must help educators cultivate psychologically safe classrooms, where emotional responses are acknowledged and managed constructively. This transforms schools into spaces that support both academic growth and emotional development. Applying Lazarus's theory in school settings requires a shift from purely academic assessment to a more holistic approach that includes emotional evaluation. For example, a student who reacts aggressively to criticism may not be displaying poor discipline but rather a maladaptive emotional appraisal—perhaps rooted in trauma, anxiety, or low self-esteem. School psychologists can use this framework to decode the emotional meaning behind behavior and intervene accordingly. By helping students reframe their interpretations of stressors, psychologists empower them to regulate emotions, build resilience, and make healthier choices. This reinforces the idea that learning and emotional adaptation must go hand in hand. Modern psychological diagnostics rely heavily on standardized tools such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) and the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL), which can assist in identifying risk factors early. These tools help in quantifying behavioral patterns and comparing them to normative data, thus supporting early decision-making [6].

Goodman's development of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) has revolutionized early psychological screening in educational settings. Unlike general observations, the SDQ offers a structured, evidence-based tool that helps school psychologists identify emotional, behavioral, and peer-related difficulties through standardized metrics. Its user-friendly design makes it accessible to both educators and parents, promoting collaborative assessment. The SDQ also enables early intervention by providing a profile of a student's strengths as well as challenges-shifting the focus from labeling deficits to understanding whole-child development. This aligns well with inclusive education models that prioritize proactive support over punitive measures. The SDQ's versatility lies in its adaptability across cultures, age groups, and educational systems. Its multiple informant format-gathering input from teachers, parents, and the child-ensures a more comprehensive psychological portrait. This triangulation helps minimize bias and allows school psychologists to detect hidden or context-specific difficulties that might otherwise go unnoticed. Moreover, the SDQ supports longitudinal tracking, making it useful not only for early screening but also for monitoring the effectiveness of interventions over time. Such data-driven insights empower schools to move from reactive to preventive models of mental health care. In addition to its diagnostic capabilities, the SDQ also fosters communication among stakeholders. When results are shared transparently, they create a common language between educators, psychologists, and families-enabling a coordinated response to student needs. This collaborative approach is especially beneficial in inclusive or multi-tiered support systems, where interventions must be both timely and personalized. By using SDQ data as a foundation, schools can design individual support plans, track behavioral changes, and adjust strategies proactively. The tool's balance between quantitative scoring and

qualitative interpretation ensures that psychological screening remains both data-informed and human-centered. A school psychologist must possess the ability to distinguish between situational reactions and more deeply rooted psychological disorders. For instance, the temporary anxiety caused by a family move may not require the same intervention as symptoms indicating long-term social phobia. Professional development is also a cornerstone of effective psychological support. Psychologists must continually update their knowledge and skills through workshops, peer consultations, and engagement with current research [7].

Moreover, culturally sensitive approaches should be adopted to accommodate the diverse backgrounds of students. In order to strengthen early identification systems, it is essential for policymakers and education leaders to allocate funding and institutional support for psychological services. Building a robust psychological infrastructure ensures that early signals of distress do not go unnoticed.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Early identification of students' psychological problems is not just a preventive action, but an investment in their long-term development. School psychologists must be equipped not only with diagnostic tools but with empathy, communication skills, and continuous training. The integration of mental health support into everyday school culture can significantly improve learning outcomes and overall school climate. It is recommended that educational institutions strengthen cooperation among staff, implement regular screenings, and prioritize mental well-being in policy planning.

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