THE PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE OF SCHOOLING ON STUDENTS IN ARMENIA

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# **Abstract**

The goal of this capstone is to analyze the psychological influence students undergo during their school years. Throughout the school period, students go through a profound self-developing process, since the range of school time includes one’s childhood and teenage years during which a person molds his character. The capstone focuses on the theme of emotional hardships students face during communication with their teachers and classmates. There are introduced certain examples from the observations of famous educational philosophers such as Neill, Freire, hooks, and Owen. The capstone also views the central issues of the current Armenian educational system through the theories of Panopticism, Constructivism, and Behaviorism. Finally, the capstone presents the interviews with three E&C students of the American University of Armenia. The purpose of the interview was to collect data from different sources about their school experiences as former students. The three participants were the graduates of local and foreign schools, that gave me an opportunity to study their reaction to different kinds of challenges, such as abusive treatment from a teacher, other students, and reflection on modern Armenian educational system. This capstone also presents the academical research assisted with observations from my personal narrative viewpoint. That is why I am going to refer to the students as “he”. Similarly, since in Armenia the majority of school teachers are female, I will refer to them as “she” in the capstone.

# **Introduction**

How do students reflect on the experience they get at school? As a part of the former Soviet republic, the principle of Armenian educational system still derives from the Soviet framework. The Armenian educational system implements a hegemonic approach, particularly highlighting the teacher’s professional status over students. Throughout the long-term interrelations with teachers, students get used to working in a way teachers expect from them. Generally, students conduct the learning process through assignments managed only by their supervisors while not having any individual voice in the methodology of their work.

In Armenian schools, the procedure of a class is based on the study of textbooks proposed by the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science and checking students’ knowledge through multiple-choice quizzes. The role of a teacher mostly consists of reading the material from a textbook and then delivering it to the children through her personal interpretation. Hence, a child does not have an opportunity to apply his own judgment to the educational matter. Current educational attitude deprives students of relating their personal experience to the topic discussed in class by limiting their academic role to merely repeating everything they remember from a textbook chapter once called upon by a teacher.

Another way of checking students’ knowledge is to assign them a multiple-choice test on a particular day by forcing them to recall everything they remember from the previous classes.

Overall, such a teaching method restricts students’ creativity by putting their studying potential into the strict bounds of the curriculum. In other words, students will find it much more engaging if they have more freedom to express their own opinions on the content, they are supposed to learn throughout open class discussions.

Reflection on students' knowledge. About 70% of the students in the sample believed that grades on essay exams are more reflective indicators of the students' knowledge of the exam material compared to grades on multiple-choice type exams. The major reason offered is that essay exams provide students the opportunity to accurately and optimally expressing their knowledge and ideas in writing. The remainder of the students believed that multiple-choice exam scores are a more sensitive index of students' knowledge, mainly because the latter normally cover a broader range of topics and sample a greater range of facts, concepts, and principles than typically is the case on essay exams. (Zeidner, 1987, p. 355)

Thus, students’ main challenge is to overcome the pressure teachers put on them by controlling how they should learn the new information. Particularly, this aspect reveals the reason why some students hate going to school and thus, are more inclined to procrastinate and cheat during exams. If a child feels that a teacher puts too much pressure on him to study through regular reprimands, he already feels stressed out and reluctant to put maximum effort in something he will most probably be criticized for. The following are several steps proposed by the article called “Why Don’t Students Like School? Because the Mind Is Not Designed for Thinking” by T. Willingham (2009) regarding the most treatment teachers show towards their students:

1. Praise Effort, Not Ability Students should think of their intelligence as under their control and should know that they can develop their intelligence through hard work. Therefore, you should praise processes, rather than ability (e.g., by following “Good job” with “you must have worked hard” instead of “you’re smart”).‡ In addition to praising effort (when appropriate), you might praise a student for persistence in the face of challenges or for taking responsibility for her work. Avoid insincere praise, however. Dishonest praise is actually destructive. If you tell a student, “Wow, you really worked hard on this project!” when the student knows good and well that she didn’t, you lose credibility. (p. 10-11).

2. Tell Them That Hard Work Pays Off Praising process rather than ability sends the unspoken message that intelligence is under the student’s control. (p. 11).

3. Treat Failure as a Natural Part of Learning If you want to increase your intelligence, you have to challenge yourself. That means taking on tasks that are a bit beyond your reach, and that means you may very well fail, at least the first time around. Fear of failure can, therefore, be a significant obstacle to tackling this sort of challenging work. But failure should not be a big deal. Michael Jordan put it this way: “I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.” Try to create a classroom atmosphere in which failure, while not desirable, is neither embarrassing nor wholly negative. Failure means you’re about to learn something. You’re going to find out that there’s something you didn’t understand or didn’t know how to do. Most important, model this attitude for your students. When you fail—and who doesn’t?—let them see you take a positive, learning attitude. (p. 11).

Along with its socially educating role, the oppressive authority of a teacher prevents students from fulfilling the curriculum up to their creative potential. This issue must be further explored on the psychological and personal level.

The current Armenian schooling system deprives students of applying a creative approach to the studies. This way of teaching makes all the students perceive the same data equally without demonstrating individual critical thinking. The purpose of this capstone is to research the methods that can be included in the Armenian educational system providing students with the opportunity to think creatively and independently. Each student should develop his own standpoint on the subject by developing from both educational and psychological perspectives.

A student’s schedule is subjected to an everyday lifestyle both at school and at home. On average, by having 7 classes every day, he works for nearly 6 hours at school, since usually, the classes start at 8:30 AM until 2:45 PM along with 5-minute breaks after each class. At noon there might be a 25-minute break in some schools. After coming home, a child is expected to prepare his homework for seven subjects including both reading and writing assignments. Considering that classes start at 8:30 AM, a child is supposed to finish his lessons by 11 PM in order to have a proper 8-hour-sleep. Thus, there is literally left no time for extracurricular activities (such as on sports, music or any personal hobby).

# **Literature Review**

Schooling is an integral part of a civil culture, viewed as the first step towards self-discipline for a child, starting from the age of six. Throughout the school period, students get more mature in terms of character development, forming their own worldview especially throughout teenage years.

Today’s schooling system provides students with a curriculum that involves the study of textbooks, writing regular quizzes, and finally grading students for their performance. This pattern derives from the German educational system employed by post-Soviet countries. Armenian Ministry of Education adopted this system in the elementary, middle and high schools by practicing it with students from 6 to 18 years old. (Education System in Armenia). However, this system is a subject of a debate between advocates of banking and problem-posing educational system (Freire, 1970) arguing, which one is more helpful for efficient and productive learning. According to problem-posing perspective offered by a Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire education should be conducted in a more democratic way that contributes to free and equal relationships in class between teachers and students. Specifically, this method focuses on “listening, dialogue and action” mode by emphasizing the importance of verbal communication between teacher and student (Freire, 1970, p. 77).

## **Banking and Problem-Posing Education**

In his research Freire (1970), reveals the methodology of an educational system, which all the students get to pass in their youngest years. Throughout a long period, the hegemonic policy eventually results in a psychological barrier for a student to advance his skills on his own. The preclusion to express his own opinion on a topic and conforming to the ideology imposed by a teacher gradually becomes the paramount problem for a student on a subconscious level while leaving the actual studying process in the second place (Freire, 1970).

Furthermore, Freire indicates the most harmful obstacles to productive learning. His argument involves the implementation of the problem-posing system in modern education, which besides providing students with the necessary skills also stimulates their self-awareness in decision-making. On the contrary, the influence of the banking system has harmful consequences for students’ mental health. While constantly acting under the mandatory guidelines of the teachers, they find their own initiative useless and irrelevant for their studies and as a result, their self-esteem gets lower over time.

Moreover, in his research Freud (1923) discusses the oppressive impact on human psychology, which eventually leads to the negative way a person thinks or acts in the public. Specifically, this relates to the motives of human behavior behind a person’s true desires and feelings. Because of the banking model of education policy, the collision between student’s Id and Superego (Freud, 1923) eventually leads to mental breakdown expressed as self-depreciation (Freire, 1970).

In the article “A Scandal in No.42 School “I hit you this way, so you don’t get ugly” (Simonyan, 2018), the author tells about a case in Taras Shevchenko High School No.42, when a teacher was insulting and beating her students during class for their political views. This case presents a much deeper implication of teachers’ supremacy over students.

The video “Abuse in Armenian School: Teacher Dismissed for Violation of Children's Rights” (Manoogian, 2010) adds up to the article by showing a fragment of a teacher attacking a student in the classroom of Alexander Pushkin Basic School No.8 in 2010. He physically abuses the student by insulting him in a repugnant language in front of his classmates. In spite of firing the teacher due to a secret recording made by one of the students, these are two examples of teachers exceeding their authority as a mentor in two of the most famous central schools of Yerevan.

Thus, the further step of a self-depreciation syndrome is the consequent desire to act as a teacher. Throughout a long-term relationship with the teacher, the student tends to imitate the teacher’s manner of communication with other students. In terms of this theory, the oppressed wants to replicate the manners and style of the oppressor believing that he is also going to do the “right” thing and be a better person in life. The whole pedagogical chain in the banking system is accumulated in a despotic influence on a student’s mental condition since he becomes more uncertain for his own decisions by mainly relying on the opinion of his supervisor.

Freire provides further elaboration on the sense of one’s dominion over another person. It is the very indicator of the oppressor, referring to the principles of banking educational model, where a teacher’s will is considered more significant than student’s. By putting students into a subservient role, the teacher keeps feeding the information she finds appropriate, neglecting their own preferences toward a subject.

bell hooks (1994) explains ethical and competent strategies relevant for productive education. She states that the strive for creative work evokes a desire for learning. This means that the discipline for productive learning lies through a creative approach, not following the stereotyped framework. That is the main reason that students have to be maximum active during class, by freely sharing their viewpoints on different matters as well as analyzing them from versatile and critical perspectives. While following this procedure the students will improve their communication skills through clear articulation and writing. hooks focuses on the power of discourse between teacher and student that gives an opportunity for both of them to learn from each other, according to “listening, dialogue and action” model. This attitude enhances the mutual respect and honest approach towards studying (hooks, 1994). The essential point of speaking up in class is that a student is given complete freedom in the educational sphere and is not bound by the responsibilities imposed on him by the teacher. Education should be a product of mutual achievement exercised by students and supported by teachers.

Teachers do not have to be dictators in the classroom. She emphasizes the point that teacher-student relationships have to be on the same level to avoid any kind of prejudice towards the teacher’s opinion and make uncomfortable for a student to challenge it. For instance, the teacher does not have the right to impose her rules on student’s way of learning. The process of perceiving the material and then making good use of it belongs only to the student himself. According to hooks, a student strives for “meaningful” knowledge that would be essential for his life experience as well (hooks, 1994).

In typical classrooms in Armenia, common assignment teachers have the student do is learning poems written by famous Armenian writers by heart. Such an obligation might not result in substantial learning, especially for students with weak memory. However, in a problem-posing model, a student might be given an opportunity to make a creative research project that will show his own perception of Armenian poems, rather than just memorizing it and telling by heart.

The basics of problem-posing education promote teaching not just as knowledge from books, but knowledge about how to live in the world. The level of teachers’ professionalism should spread beyond the role of “all-knowing, silent interrogators”, where they merely call upon a student to grade on the information he was told to learn from a textbook. The purpose of teaching is to evoke the sense of self-actualization in students by inspiring them to apply the knowledge they learn in the way they find the most rational and productive for themselves (hooks, 1994).

## **The Atmosphere in a Classroom**

The 19th-century thinker Robert Owen has written about seven approaches of teaching (Wolfe, 2002) regarding the way children should be treated at school from an early age. To sum up, children should not be punished, teachers must address the children's past experiences to help them relate to the class material, as well as answering any questions they have in a kind manner. Children should have their freedom, be introduced to dancing, singing, rhyming in addition to garden production and natural history, as supplementary and physical courses. The aim is to teach students with pleasure, patience and offer a multi-sided education (Wolfe, 2002).

Owen’s motives in these concepts reveal children’s self-awareness within their own educational process. Students must not be forced to learn through artificial incentives, such as different forms of punishment but to be encouraged to go deeper in something they love and strive for self-improvement in that sphere. Students must develop their own self-discipline that will lead them to the constructive, methodological and profound study of the subject. (Wolfe, 2002).

## **Democracy, Equality and Freedom**

The Summerhill School founded by A. S. Neill in 1921 is famous for its democratic approach towards children’s education of different ages. All the classes are voluntary at Summerhill and there is no such thing as compulsory studying. Although most students attend them depending on their age, they choose which course they would be interested to take and engage with self-education during their free time. Neill defines Summerhill’s creed as the child’s aim to live his own life without “forced” guidance of his parents and teachers. “Education should be a preparation for life” (Neill, 1960, p. 26).

Summerhill School operates upon the major principles of democracy, equality and freedom. The democracy of studying is indicated by the fact that each member of the community, regardless of his position or age, has a vote “for” or “against” something he finds important for his own education and lifestyle. This is implemented through special meetings arranged twice a week, called “Special Attention List”. During those meetings students and faculty members collectively discuss the possible reforms that should be made in the school. Throughout the negotiations, the final decision should be implemented according to the majority of votes (Neill, 1996).

Moreover, they also discuss personal issues concerning any individual of the school. Children can attend these meetings when they want to participate but are asked to leave when a certain student is discussed by other members, to maintain the privacy of the student (Neill, 1996). In contrast to it, in Armenian schools, all important decisions regarding the organization of a class are proposed either by a head teacher, while being initially approved by the principal. There is absolutely no room for students’ opinion concerning the way they should be treated and that makes their character more of a subservient type. In case of any problem regarding the behavior of a student, the head teacher conducts a collective discussion in front of all his classmates by openly criticizing the actions of a student she finds inappropriate by inducing his classmates to support her point.

## **The Role of Psychology in Education**

Research done by Freud (1923) explores the concept of human behavior through an individual’s mentality and actions. He highlights the strengths and weaknesses of Id in the formation of psychological perception. Continuous reprimands from a superior (teacher) lead to the suppression of subordinate’s (student) true emotions and feelings under external pressure. This aspect is related to the formation of a student’s behavior at school in front of his classmates and teachers.

In the article “How Schools Are Killing Creativity” the author (Dalile, 2012) claims her views concerning the pattern of modern education. This corresponds to Neill’s idea regarding students’ active participation in the development of their educational process. Moreover, similar to Freire’s research, Dalile analyzes the ways the school makes an oppressive influence on a student through such aspects as hegemonic policy and classmates’ bullying.

The most destructive weapon of the modern educational model is the excessive value of the “grading system”. A student is graded according to his performance on a quiz, by leaving out the part the actual information he drew personally for himself, not for the particular assignment. Thus, according to Freire’s concept of the banking educational system, a student is forced to forget about his own desires and conform to the requested capacity. At the same time, in order to avoid any kind of jealousy and conflict with classmates, it is important not to get too isolated from them while acting in an anti-social way. By overlaying those different kinds of problems in result one gets completely destructive consequences for his independent and individual initiative out of fear to be either misunderstood or even worse be publicly humiliated for the opinion that is disregarded by other members of the community.

The current educational system in Armenia meets certain challenges from the concepts provided by the above-mentioned authors. Their ideas concerning school education play a vital role in the student’s future formation as a multi-sided person. I am planning to use particularly Neill’s, Freire’s, hook’s and Wolfe’s research as a background for my own study and reflect my observations in this capstone project. By drawing conclusions from all sources it appeared to me that the most essential factor to focus on is the social condition of a child within the distinct educational system. The current challenge of paramount importance is to convert schools to a much more democratic society, where each student will have a voice in his own studies and strive for individual, purposeful actions.

The research conducted by psychologists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky deal with theories related to children’s cognitive development. According to Piaget, a person develops through four stages of mental development since his birth and throughout the whole life. Particularly, his theory highlights the procedure of how a person gains knowledge as a child – Sensorimotor stage: birth to 2 years, Preoperational stage: ages 2 to 7, Concrete operational stage: ages 7 to 11 and Formal operational stage: ages 12 and up. (Marcin, 2018)

Piaget states, that a child starts forming his way of thinking by making observations and drawing consistent conclusions from the personal experiments. Thus, the person learns much more about the world during infancy than he does in the mature period. As infants interact with the world around them, they continually apply new theoretical and practical knowledge, built upon their instinctive nature and adapt previously held ideas to accommodate new information. According to Piaget, a child mainly perceives general knowledge through independent and personal experiments (Marcin, 2018). Piaget’s contribution to a child’s development is distinguished by his intention to study the way a child perceives the principles of number, quantity, justice and so on. Since this kind of knowledge is formed through a child’s self-awareness, it requires critical thinking and problem-solving skills, that cannot be taught, but rather discovered by a child himself.

Vygotsky’s accomplishments in the sphere of cognitive development are related to the sociocultural approach. His social development theory is also based on the perspective of a child’s perception of knowledge. However, his observations present the theory on the more advanced level with the participation of a more knowledgeable person (MKO) which at a certain point serves as a guide for a child’s social development. Particularly, MKOs role is to help a child to grasp certain from the point when a child is not capable to comprehend it on his own. The stage between child’s development on his own and continuing with the assistance of MKO is called Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Initially, a child develops his character according to the nurture he received in the family. Thus, a child’s behavior at school is a reflection of the environment, where he was nurtured by his family. For instance, if a child keeps disturbing the classes or uses abusive language towards his classmates, that is the kind of behavior he imitates from his family members. At school, however, the quality of his knowledge is perceived through social communication with both his classmates and teachers. Hence, whatever a child learns at school is the result of his direct communication with his peers and superiors in the classroom, the people he pays attention most of all during the daytime. (Kozulin, Gindis, 2003, p. 39).

Vygotsky’s concept of ZPD involves the level of skills a child can acquire individually compared to the case when he is assisted by a parent or teacher. In other words, MKO is a person whose behavior serves as a role model for a child standing out for his advanced skills. In a classroom, it is the teacher, who is playing the role of MKO referring to someone who already has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the student. Thus, from this early, age by looking at the older people (a school teacher and family members) a child starts imitating their actions by forming his own character.

Vygotsky considers interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies. One of the options of conducting Vygotsky’s principles in a classroom is arranging group work, where children can elaborate through exchanging ideas and sharing opinions on different topics through ZPD.

## **Classroom Activities**

A contemporary educational application of Vygotsky's theories is "reciprocal teaching," used to improve students' ability to learn from the text. In this method, teachers and students collaborate in learning and practicing four key skills: summarizing, questioning, clarifying, and predicting. (Palinscar, Brown, 1984).

Vygotsky's theories also fit into the current interest in collaborative learning, suggesting that group members should have different levels of abilities, so more advanced peers can help less advanced members operate within their ZPD. The actual process of the collaboration is called scaffolding. Scaffolding is a key feature of effective teaching, where the adult continually adjusts the level of his or her help in response to the learner's level of performance. (McLeod, 2019).

Basically, Vygotsky’s concept is applied to classroom activity through teacher’s class management fostering students’ collective and independent approach that will help them to get familiarized with the subject through interrelated communicative experience. While performing the learning process, children strive for collective decisions by discussing and making theirs as a group rather than individually, which differs from Piaget’s perspective.

The confrontation between Vygotsky’s and Piaget’s theories involves the difference between both psychologists' views on child's development stage for a child. According to Piaget, a child gets more skillful by adapting to new experiences, while in Vygotsky’s opinion the element of social interaction is essential for a child’s growth. Another difference is that Piaget did not pay much attention to the cultural background of a child, considering his theories universal for everyone, while Vygotsky specified that, the efficiency of his theory differs from the environment where a child is raised. Thus, Vygotsky’s attitude is more relevant to contemporary Armenian school children.

# **Statement of Central Research Questions**

The capstone will be divided into two aspects related to the impact a child is exposed to at school — education and psychology.

## **Question-related to the educational perception**

Should the democratic educational system substitute the current one in terms of giving students the voice in the priorities of their curriculum by reflecting on their experience at school through respectful pedagogy?

## **Question-related to the psychological perception**

How do the relationships between teacher and student influence the process of study and does studying in a community foster or restrict student’s social potential?

# **Methodology**

There are three types of theories I am going to apply to the identification and resolution of the challenges students face at school — Panopticism, Constructivism, and Behaviorism.

Foucault’s Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison book introduces an essential element utilized in the context of controlling people’s behavior by subconsciously suppressing their inner desires — Panopticism. The book explains the psychology of a prisoner constantly feeling the presence of the superior and expecting immediate punishment for the slightest delinquency. Thus, people are becoming more isolated from their own mentality and behavior, while obeying to the rules and systematic surveillance of other people in order not to be punished. (Foucault, 1977, p. 97)

Constructivist theory is related to the person’s propensity to interpret things subjectively due to the opinion he forms after receiving all the basic information on a certain topic. This is achieved by linking new experience to the previously learned knowledge (Kozulin and Gindis, 2003, p. 67). In the context of the schooling system, the teacher is the one conducting the class with the background of textbook chapters. Since in Armenian schools the teacher is given much higher authority than a student, her perspective is initially predominating over students. Thus, the teacher’s principles presented in the classroom are putting students in the framework of understanding the material from her perspective rather than fostering students to form and most importantly express their opinion from their own viewpoints.

This aspect is followed by another theory related to the motivation of a person’s behavior — behaviorism. This is a worldview that assumes the learner is essentially passive. “The primary hypothesis of behaviorist learning theory is that learning is influenced solely by physical variables such as environmental or material reinforcement” (Reimann, 2018). Behaviorism is often used by teachers who reward or punish student’s behavior. If the consequent reaction on student’s activity is punishment, it decreases the probability that the same kind of behavior will happen again. For instance, it can often be observed in a classroom when a student asks his teacher a question on a course topic, the teacher might rudely interrupt him referring to it as a “stupid question” and making fun of him in front of a whole class followed by classmates’ echoic laughter. In fact, this way the student is supposed to conform to the teacher’s expectations, consequently by omitting his own creative and critical thinking.

Basically, positive reinforcement indicates the application of a stimulus; negative indicates the withholding of a stimulus. For example, if a teacher sees a group of students bullying another one and does not take certain measures to isolate them from the victim, it is an example of positive reinforcement towards bullying, when a teacher simply ignores the negative behavior of a student, thus not preventing him from such behavior in the future. Therefore depends on the kind of learner’s behavior.

# **Research Findings and Analysis**

The political reforms implemented at the beginning of the 20th century on om Soviet Union, the governmental level directly affected the practice cultivated in the sphere of education.

Armenian educational system has already been functioning separately from 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Starting from the elementary school (1-3, 7-9 years old) students learn five subjects — math, Armenian, English, Russian and physical education. After it, a child goes to middle school (grades 4-9, 10-14 years old). Middle school enlarges the scope of subjects by deepening the knowledge in each one, while dividing them into several ones — algebra and geometry, Armenian Language and Armenian Literature, Russian Language and Russian Literature, English, Physics, Chemistry, Geography, Biology (botany, geology, anatomy), History of Armenia, World History, Armenian Church History, Social Sciences, Primary Military Training and Physical education. Thus, students already have seventeen courses. The next stage is Senior Secondary (Academic) school (grades 9-10, 15-16 years old). After each schools level (Elementary, Basic and Senior Secondary) students should pass the final exams which approve their advancement to the higher level of education (Scholaro, 2008). In Armenia, high schools are separated from all the other schools. Student can either go to particular high schools or specific colleges based on their own career choices.

The procedure for a school class is quite distinct. For example, during such subjects as math, Armenian Language, Russian Language, and English students are assigned written homework after each class, supposed to be done in their copybooks. During the next class, a teacher usually checks the copy books for the quality of the homework. During the oral subjects, however, a student randomly called out by a teacher approaches the blackboard in the center of the class and retells the textbook chapter. Although the class procedure might look rather informative and disciplinary, in fact, it leaves little room for creativity and does not stimulate a student’s personal attitude on the topic he learns from the textbook.

## **Communication in Class**

Communication is a vital part of active participation in studying. Since the Armenian educational system does not operate through a digital platform yet, classes are conducted through textbooks and paper-written assignments. Moreover, in local institutions, the students have neither a flexible schedule nor office to have a one-on-one conversation with a teacher. Usually, any kind of personal discussion is limited within the 45-minute class time during which a student obviously cannot speak with the teacher privately. Although, current Armenian educational has derived from the pattern of the Soviet model, nowadays in the century of Information Technologies, exploiting a digital framework in the course of a school study might be of great use for students. Firstly, it will facilitate access to the curriculum subjects for students. Secondly, it will be easier to preserve the limits of privacy by sending their grades directly to their accounts and thus avoiding the undesirable feelings of envy, arrogance and rivalry, the feelings that are familiar to any child.

## **Communication with Teachers**

Sometimes it happens that a student does not recall the exact data he read from the textbook and while retelling his explanations might seem inaccurate for the teacher. In this case, the teacher's normal reaction would be to politely correct the student and then to decide how to grade him. Instead, the “typical” teacher’s reaction is judging the student’s mental abilities through abusive language or even sometimes beatings.

In spite of the absurdity of the teacher’s tone, some students find such an approach quite witty and amusing. Then their sonorous laughter across the class usually resembles an audience listening to the actor’s jokes in a comedy show. Although, instead of an actor there stands a confused student, who is ready to sacrifice everything for a chance to avoid everybody’s attention as quickly as possible.

He becomes the victim of the bullies, which are not only his classmates. Teachers also bully and sometimes even more than the other students. Bullying is a persistent theme that comes up in the aforementioned situations.

But when the bully is the grown-up in charge, how should a child respond? With a bully teacher, fighting back, walking out of the class, or ignoring the teacher are hardly viable solutions and ones that will most likely get kids in even more trouble. Even telling another teacher or the principal gets tricky. At the very least, the child knows by telling a teacher, another adult at the school, or even their own parents, that the problem isn’t likely to be solved overnight. So what’s a kid — or a parent — to do? (Kelmon, 2018).

It might be relatively easy to deal with a bully who is disturbing a class and picking on the students, but what measures can be taken if the person publicly bullying his student is actually a teacher?

The major part of my research is supported by students’ testimonies. This data involves personal stories of three English & Communications students of the American Universities of Armenia, Diana Nersisyan, Arman Vardanyan, and Shushanik Tadevosyan. Particularly, the questionnaire involved abstract question about their communication with teachers and other students, their vision of a regular class, the system of education and what subject they loved most of all. While being too broad and the same for all of them, each of them individually told about the kind of hardships they underwent as middle and high school students regarding difficult communications in the class.

Here are the following fragments from the interviews regarding students’ personal episodes of how they were treated by classmates and teachers.

# **Interview No.1 with Diana**

“**VH:** What is your most vivid impression from school? Both positive and negative.

**DN:** Actually, there was one incident. During the Physical Education class, we went in Monument Park, and I was running very slowly and I was left out of the group, after some time I got lost actually, I could not find any of my classmates or the teachers. Then I called one of my classmates, who was more or less tolerable, and she told me that they had gone to school an hour ago, so they had left me there, all alone. I was very afraid, actually, I panicked. I went to school, as we had a quiz to write and when I entered the classroom, the quiz had already started. Teacher of History started to shout at me, scream at me, saying that why I was late. And when I started to explain that the group and the teacher of Physical Education had left me all alone, she said that it was my fault and my classmates started to laugh at me. Also, they had put the box full of grass under my table, so they thought I would like to eat it., because you know, my name “Diana” is pronounced in Armenian like ձի, which means horse. They were mocking me saying that I am a horse and I should eat grass. It was pretty offensive, horrible. They did not care that the left me there and that it was not my fault. But the most important thing was the quiz and the right answers and the fact that I was late. Actually, I did not manage to write it because I could not concentrate and I got an F for that.”

Diana’s story reveals the kind of treatment she experienced from the Physical Education teacher. Such kind of irresponsible behavior from the teacher urged her to find her way back to school alone. Moreover, the teacher whose class was after that blamed Diana for being late and gave her F for the quiz along with insulting pranks from the classmates. No one in the class, especially the teacher, actually considered that the Physical Education teacher was responsible for the safety of each child he got out of school for an exam, not to mention Diana’s classmates ignoring her absence. How could a teacher leave a child in the park without noticing her absence until the very next class? The next teacher, however, seems to care even less for Diana’s safety, since the easiest solution for this issue is to put the whole blame on the student for being late and “encouraging” other students to mock her in the class (an example of “positive reinforcement” related to behaviorism).

# **Interview No.2 with Arman**

“**AV:** Yes, in the US it’s very di… They respect your privacy, they respect your personality, of where you come from, especially if you are an exchange student, like I was, as a foreigner, they would give you like more space and more respect. And it was… And it was, really, really motivating and I think that if the Armenian teachers, they… If they wouldn’t just go to, you know, some sort of Armenian State University, graduate and then go to school to, you know, teach, if they would have some training, you know, so their eyes would be opened, their understanding would be extended than you don’t hit a kid, you don’t, you know, be harsh on them, but you try to understand every kid psychologically, you try to encourage them, motivate them, not like one of my English teacher, who told me that I would never be able to speak English, that I would never be able to study at AUA, that I would never make it to the US, while (unclear), I have studying in the American University of Armenia, graduating soon, I’m gonna make my third visit to US, and here I am speaking English. So… Yeah, I am saying they were very very VERY demotivating, you know, there is no other word I can ever describe it… If they see you... If they see you better than them or something they would like, you know, silence you. If I corrected my English teacher for, you know, misspelling or (unclear), she would make a big hole, you know… A deal out of it, to prove that, you know, I was wrong or something.”

Arman’s reflection is profound and valuable in terms of compare/contrast analysis between Armenian and United States schools’ communities. He tells about his oppressive experience from his English teacher who kept discouraging him to pursue English by constant insults and abusive language. In comparison to such oppressive behavior, the United States’ teachers’ attitude is much more motivating, friendly and inspiring for the students.

# **Interview No.3 with Shushanik**

“**VH:** And also the earlier experiences… Were there cases that a teacher was too oppressive towards students, like… Or she like… Yeah.

**ST:** Okay, what’s happened in the… Maybe third class… Or second.

**VH:** Yeah.

**ST:** My teacher… Hit me with…

**VH:** Ruler?

**ST:** Yes, ruler. And not only me.

**VH:** Yeah.

**ST:** I was sitting in the third or fourth desk…

**VH:** Yeah.

**ST:** And she hit all the students from the first to the (laughs) to my place. I… To be honest that was a shock for me.

**VH:** Yeah.

**ST:** Because I didn’t expect it and in my family hitting is not a… I mean solution to something (pen hits the table). I rather… Talk to my parents, talk to someone who understands the problem. But it was really shocking for me that she could hit me or someone else. I… I wasn’t in a… In a… How can I say this?

**VH:** You can say in Armenian if you want, that’s fine.

**ST:** Էդ իմ համար շոկ եր, որովհետև, ես ոչ միայն․․․ Չեի սպասում, այսինքն ես չեմ հասկացել ինչի եմ ես էդ ստացել, այլ իմ համար շոկ էր, որ առհասարակ դասատուն կամ ինչ-որ մեկը ինձ կարա խփի։

**VH:** Hm.

**ST:** Ավելի շատ ոնց-որ ես էր ինձ վիրավորել, որ...

**VH:** The fact.

**ST:** The fact!

**VH:** And what was the reason, do you remember?

**ST:** Reason, I can’t… Maybe talking. I don’t know.”

In some schools, teachers still resort to hitting a student for misbehavior. As Shushanik tells, a teacher just approached and hit her with a ruler for chatting during a class. Overall, this might be considered as an extreme punishing measure imposed by a teacher and that is the reason why it happens relatively rare compared to the cases when teacher abuses the student verbally and mocks in front of the rest of the class.

# **Teaching Strategies**

In a public Armenian school classroom, there are anywhere from 30 to 40 students. The younger the students are, the more difficult it is for a teacher to maintain a stable and working atmosphere in a classroom. However, in private schools, which nowadays are much less in Armenia, the number of students might be less than 20 in a class. Since I have studied in both types of schools, it has become clear to me, that in private schools, a student may go through a much more stressful experience of the banking model of education (Freire, 1970). Overall, there is one distinct flaw in the Armenian educational system. In the process of learning, the teaching strategies do not foster creative and critical thinking. For instance, the process of an oral class involves reading a textbook chapter and then retelling exactly the same content. By considering the limits of the classroom discussions without applying personal interpretation throughout the whole academic year, such pedagogy is limited by the “technical” aspect of the subject. Thus, the educational process fails to encourage a student to demonstrate a genuine interest in the subject if he is unable to express his personal ideas on the subject. By referring to such oral subjects as Geography, Biology, Physics, Chemistry, World History, Armenian History, Armenian Church History, and Social Science, a student’s personal opinion must be considered of paramount importance. This educational approach will help a student to become more curious and discover his true passion for his/further study. Classes must be conducted through open discussions by considering relevant questions and relating personal experience to the topic.

# **Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

This capstone project examines various significant and relevant themes. It stresses the importance of education, the proper behavior of teachers and students, and the overall atmosphere in Armenian schools. By introducing such a profound and detailed analysis on the psychological influence of schools and education in Armenia, I wanted to highlight the importance of teacher-student relationships. Children should never be traumatized or bullied inside classrooms, and this issue should be thoroughly discussed over and over again. Future scholars and researchers can expand upon this research by focusing on distinctive ways to develop the education system in Armenia. They can conduct surveys during different stages of school, for instance in the 4th, 6th, 9th and 12th grades to understand which factors left strong impact on child’s psychology. Besides urban schools these surveys might be also arranged in rural regions comparing the studying atmosphere in both environments. Researchers have a unique opportunity to explore and investigate the school system specifically in Armenia, teacher’s attitudes towards children and vice versa by inviting students to certain individual sessions with a private psychologist who will ask them about their feelings towards the studies. They can analyze the relationships of the children with their teachers and classmates, how long they are doing their homework, what kind of extracurricular activities they attend, what are their main interests and what they intend to focus on in the future. By doing so, a much more clear and objective representation of the current situation regarding education in Armenia can be viewed. It is very important to not ignore these concerns and do more elaborate research regarding psychological state of students who suffer from bullying, and the impact of schools in general.

# **Conclusion**

Hence, a student should at least be encouraged to learn through his own initiated methodology. The more personal investment will bring to personal gain. The creative approach makes students personally engaged in the course of their studies.

Overall, this capstone explores a number of issues in the Armenian educational system that has a negative psychological impact on students. Mainly, the research is focused on the interrelation of psychological and educational aspects of the school experience. The main emphasis is laid on the importance of communication in the classroom with both teachers and students. While striving to be a democratic society, Armenian mentality still involves certain prejudice in the perception of a teacher’s image through the student’s eyes. The value of collective thinking rather than democratic, conservative policy and discouragement of creative thinking restrict freedom of speech and actions. Thus, all these obstacles affecting the educational and psychological level cumulatively prevent the student from unfolding his true potential in the sphere of his general education and future career since a very young age.

By considering that all three students came from different backgrounds and schools, those three fragments highlight one issue ― during their school years in Armenia all three students faced serious psychological oppression. By considering my own observations regarding Armenian school teachers and instructors at the American University of Armenia, the contrast between cultural and ethical manners is evident. Teachers in the American community are much more supportive and ready to help students with any kind of issues related to academical needs. This might be a question of American mentality vs. former Soviet, however, by judging from the interviewees’ feedback, a twelve-year study at Armenian school was a quite depressive experience for them.

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# **Appendices**

**Questions for Interviewees**

1. How many schools have you attended?

1. Did it affect your relationships with classmates? How did you get along with your classmates at school? What kind of memories do you have related to your school experience?
2. Were you bullied in class or was it friendly?
3. How did you get along with your teachers at school? (Were there some cases when a teacher was too oppressive towards students?)
4. What is your most vivid impression from school. Positive and negative?
5. What subject did you like most of all? (How were you interested in the course?
6. Did you like the process of a school class (anything)?

# **Sample of a Consent Form**

**CONSENT FORM**

Consent to participate in a Capstone project research study in the E&C program at the American University of Armenia (AUA). This is to state that I agree to participate in an interview conducted by Valeri Hakobyan (tel.: 099 201473, email: valery\_hakobyan@edu.aua.am) under the supervision of Dr. Hourig Attarian as Capstone director at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: [hourig.attarian@aua.am](mailto:hourig.attarian@aua.am)).

**PURPOSE:** I have been informed that the purpose of the project is to explore how schools may exercise oppressive strategies in teaching and learning environments as well as their influence on students in Armenia. The capstone will identify main social and educational issues by further suggestions on how it can be resolved particularly in students’ favor.

**PROCEDURES:** I understand that the interview will be conducted in an appropriate place for me, and recorded on audio. As a participant, I will be asked to express my opinion from the perspective of a former student by referring to my personal experience at school. I have been informed that interviews will take approximately 1 hour, however, the participants are free to stop at any time, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the project at any given point. I understand that if I wish to extend the interview for more than one hour, I will be provided that opportunity.

**RISKS AND BENEFITS:** I understand that this interview involves the sharing of my

personal life experiences, which will be treated with the utmost care and consideration. I have been informed that I am free to stop, take a break or discontinue at any time. With my permission, my story will be shared.

**CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION:** As a participant, I will have access to all the recorded and transcribed data for verification purposes. Throughout the project, if and when the material produced is in Armenian, I will have the opportunity to review and verify the English translations.

\_\_ I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

\_\_ I understand that the data from this project may be published in print or digital format for academic purposes.

In terms of the **identification and reproduction** of my interview **(please choose one)**:

\_\_ I agree to **disclose my identity**. I understand that my identity may be revealed in any academic publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

**OR**

\_\_ I understand that my participation in this study is **confidential** (i.e., the student-researcher and the Capstone director will know, but will not disclose my identity).

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

INTERVIEWEE:

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

STUDENT RESEARCHER:

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a participant in Valeri Hakobyan’s Capstone Project, please contact Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: [hourig.attarian@aua.am](mailto:hourig.attarian@aua.am)).

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