

DOI: 10.55643/ser.1.55.2025.600

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DETERMINING PRIORITY METHODS FOR COMBATING SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN SCHOOLS: CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR SCHOOLCHILDREN

ABSTRACT

It should be noted that the problem of social inequality in schools is becoming particularly relevant today since education is considered a key component of the formation of human capital. In our opinion, ensuring a safe environment in school cannot be effective without taking into account various manifestations of discrimination and bullying, as well as without proper psychological support for students from socially vulnerable categories. As part of this study, we identified six potential methods for combating social inequality (in particular, in-depth programs for the development of empathy and tolerance, the introduction of an "equality code", strengthening psychological services, and others). The results were obtained with the involvement of 40 experts (school principals, experienced teachers, psychologists, social workers and safety specialists) who participated in a two-stage survey using the Delphi method. The second stage of the analysis used the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) method, which allowed for pairwise comparisons of criteria (effectiveness in reducing bullying and discrimination, impact on psycho-emotional state, economic feasibility, institutional support) and alternatives. It should be emphasized that the obtained quantitative data make it possible to assess the relative priority of each method taking into account the agreed expert assessments. The highest integral weights were given to measures to expand psychological support for students, the "equality code" and financial assistance for vulnerable families, which indicates the need to combine both psycho-emotional and material-institutional instruments. It can be argued that such results have significant applied potential since a comprehensive approach to combating social inequality can be integrated into school curricula, regulatory documents and educational development strategies at the state and local levels. In our opinion, further research should focus on developing step-by-step methodological recommendations and monitoring the implementation of the described tools in different types of schools.

Keywords: social inequality, safe environment, school, Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP), Delphi Method, bullying, psychological support

JEL Classification: I21, I24, I28

INTRODUCTION

Lighting is not only the ability to start and gain knowledge, and qualifications but also a way to achieve other life goals, and capital for investment. Gaining knowledge and qualifications in the field of education to a significant extent means social mobility and access to other wealth benefits, as a result of the mastery of rich roles in the extended estate. The removal of former statuses is largely determined by the beginnings, passing through the formal organizations of the Institute of Light. The advantage of education for young people who live in this sphere, the real availability of education for people from different social groups, in fact, sums up the current rise in the culture of marriage, the number and the number of qualified practitioners, which is largely in line with the current trends in sustainable development. In the world of modern development, the role of illumination in the processes of structuring the social space is growing, although it is obviously very clear. So, on the one hand, the world is experiencing increased social

Received: 08/01/2025

Accepted: 23/03/2025

Published: 31/03/2025

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mobility, making marriage less stable. On the other hand, it reinforces social inequality and thereby sounds the possibility of professional and other forms of mobility.

Changes in modern society have fundamentally affected the social sphere of human life. Education is one of the main resources of a new society, the progress of which comes from the development of the knowledge system. The level and quality of education obtained, and the educational achievements of the population largely determine the structural and innovative opportunities for the development of the economy and many other areas important for human well-being. Social position is the most important factor in regulating an individual's activities, behaviour, and activities. Persistence in achieving the goal, the amount of effort made, and the desire to complete the task well depend on it, which largely determines the success of educational activities and contributes to the economic growth of the country. Social inequality in any modern society contains an obligatory component - education. Education has acquired the meaning of a social resource, important not so much as an indicator of a person's education, but as the main channel of social reproduction and social mobility. Recently, in the conditions of globalization, much attention has been paid to foreign communication in the educational process. At different stages of Ukraine's development, the problem of minimizing the negative impacts of an unstable socio-economic environment on children remained relevant. The generally low wage standards in the country led to an increase in the risks of poverty for families with children, which increase critically with the appearance of each subsequent child. The hardships of the transition period and the aggravation of the situation during periods of crisis intensified extreme manifestations of inequality and social exclusion among children. Today, it is possible to justify the existence of groups of children with increased risks of social exclusion, who require special attention, and in some cases, special programs and a revision of society's attitude to the key problems of such groups. A deeper look at the problem of social exclusion of children - through the prism of the socio-economic situation that generates inequality and poverty of children - makes it possible to assess the scale of negative manifestations and possible consequences for the child. A developed system of social protection, which covers various aspects of children's lives and is supposed to prevent extreme negative manifestations of the social environment, does not actually work to its full extent. Social programs do not have the desired effect, as they are designed to mitigate already-caused negative manifestations, rather than prevent them.

The key problem of the modern education system in Ukraine is to maintain its quality and efficiency of functioning. Against the background of growing requirements for professional training, compliance of the educational process with the innovative requirements of modernity, and insufficient funding of the educational sphere, there is a decline in the prestige of education and a deterioration in its quality. It should be noted that the issue of combating social inequality in the school environment is attracting increasing attention from researchers and practitioners in the field of education. In our opinion, the importance of this problem is due not only to the need to protect the rights and freedoms of schoolchildren but also to the desire to create a safe and psychologically comfortable environment for all participants in the educational process. We believe that social inequality can manifest itself in discriminatory practices, limited access to additional educational services, financial inequality, as well as in the lack of proper psychological support for students from vulnerable categories. It should be noted that the lack of effective mechanisms for combating inequality in schools can lead to increased bullying and marginalization of certain groups of students. It can be argued that this not only negatively affects the emotional state of the younger generation, but also inhibits the formation of civic and social competencies. It should be emphasized that effective counteraction to social inequality must include both organizational and regulatory measures, as well as targeted work with teachers, students and their parents. This study pays special attention to methods aimed at creating a safe environment in schools. In our opinion, creating an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect and the absence of discrimination is the key to creating a healthy educational climate. We believe that the successful integration of such methods requires a comprehensive approach: from the development of "equality codes" to the introduction of additional financial benefits for students from low-income families. It should be noted that within the framework of this work, a summary of the expert assessment of six possible methods (alternatives) of combating social inequality in schools will be presented, as well as the identification of the most priority measures. It can be argued that the results obtained can become a useful guide for the administrations of educational institutions and public organizations that deal with issues of safety and equality in the field of education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We believe that one of the most relevant in this context is the work of Satrianto and Juniardi (2023), which considers inclusive growth and inclusive human development, taking into account environmental aspects. It should be emphasized that such an expanded vision of inclusivity can also be transferred to the school sphere since the creation of a safe educational space also requires taking into account various socio-ecological factors. It can be argued that among the factors that influence the effective functioning of the school and the implementation of initiatives to overcome inequality,

the quality of teacher training and their professional capacity occupy a key place. Allen et al. (2016) analyzed the impact of different paths of teacher training on the long-term costs and benefits for the education system. Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor (2010) also reached similar conclusions, emphasizing the importance of teacher qualifications for improving student learning outcomes.

It should be noted that institutional changes in the school system can play a crucial role in reducing inequality. Andrews et al. (2017) and Eyles, Hupkau and Machin (2016) have analyzed how various school reforms (including the introduction of academies and a changed management system) affect student educational outcomes. According to their data, the successful implementation of reforms contributes to improving the quality of the educational process, which, in our opinion, is one of the steps towards overcoming social inequality. It should be noted that in the context of social inequality in schools, an economic factor plays a significant role - students' access to funding and resources. Drayton and van der Erve (2022) showed the impact of minimum requirements for student loans on their subsequent participation in higher education, which, in our opinion, has direct parallels with the availability of educational opportunities for students who find themselves in difficult economic circumstances. Similarly, Cattani et al. (2024) have examined early childhood as a key phase where inequality can be created or significantly reduced. We believe that the psychological dimension of safety and well-being also needs careful consideration. Beaglehole, Bell, Frampton and Moor (2017) examined the impact of natural disasters (the Canterbury earthquakes) on adolescents' successful school graduation. It is worth emphasizing that, despite the different contexts, the findings regarding the need for more intensive psychological support and the organization of safe environments are universal.

For their part, Burgess, Wilson and Worth (2013) have shown that transparency of information about school performance and their accountability to the public has a significant impact on student progress. In our view, the availability of information and transparent rules contribute to the development of a culture of trust, reduce the risk of discrimination and encourage educational institutions to distribute resources more equitably.

It should be noted that the influence of teachers on students' learning outcomes and future social trajectories has been repeatedly confirmed in the works of Chetty, Friedman, and Rockoff (2014) and Chetty et al. (2011). It should be emphasized that higher levels of teaching, a focus on the individual needs of students, and targeted support for students in difficult life circumstances are factors that reduce inequality in educational achievement and in the subsequent economic prospects of graduates. It can be argued that reducing inequality is associated not only with the quality of teaching but also with optimal learning conditions, in particular the number of students in the class. Cho, Glewwe, and Whitler (2012) analyzed whether reducing class size can contribute to improving students' test scores. The results suggest that in some situations, smaller classes may be more effective in equalizing opportunities, especially for socially vulnerable groups.

Thus, in our opinion, the entire spectrum of research indicates the multifaceted nature of the problem of overcoming social inequality in the school environment: from the quality of teacher training, changes in the system of management of educational institutions, the scale of state (or private) financial support for students to the creation of a safe psychological climate in schools. It should be emphasized that it is precisely the comprehensive consideration of these factors that can make it possible to get closer to the goal of minimizing social inequality and creating a safe environment for all schoolchildren.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The study aims to identify priority methods for combating social inequality in the context of forming a security environment, based on expert assessments and applying formal quantitative methods for processing these assessments.

METHODS

It should be noted that several interrelated methods were used in the research process, which allowed combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. We believe that the most important among them is the Delphi Method, thanks to which it was possible to involve 40 experts of various specializations (school leaders, teachers with many years of experience, psychologists, social workers and specialists in safety in educational environments). In our opinion, it was precisely such a multidisciplinary composition of the expert group that ensured a diversity of views and maximum objectivity of the conclusions.

It should be emphasized that the implementation of the Delphi Method took place in two main stages. During the first round, experts filled out questionnaires with a list of potential criteria and methods for combating social inequality in

schools. It should be noted that the result of this stage was the agreement of the main concepts and the formation of the final list of criteria. In the second stage, respondents made pairwise comparisons both between the criteria and between each of the six alternatives, assessing their relative importance on a special scale.

In our opinion, the application of the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) method allowed us to increase the accuracy and consistency of expert assessments. It can be argued that the AHP algorithm involves building a hierarchical structure, where the research goal is formed at the top level - combating social inequality and creating a safe educational environment, key criteria are located below (such as the effectiveness of reducing bullying, the impact on the psycho-emotional state of students, economic feasibility, etc.), and even lower - specific methods of counteraction (alternatives).

It should be emphasized that each expert formed matrices of pairwise comparisons for the criteria and for each alternative, evaluating them in the context of a certain criterion. After collecting all the matrices, standard aggregation and weight calculation procedures were applied, including calculating the consistency index (CI) and consistency ratio (CR). In our opinion, this made it possible to identify the least controversial assessments and discard those where the degree of disagreement between the experts' opinions was too great.

RESULTS

Social inequality in the school environment can manifest itself in different ways: in the form of bullying (including cyber-bullying), discrimination on the basis of national, economic or any other grounds, inequality of access to educational and extracurricular opportunities, etc. The formation of a safe environment for schoolchildren simultaneously covers:

1. Emotional and psychological safety (availability of effective psychological services, trust in teachers, reduction of anxiety, etc.).
2. Physical safety (absence of physical violence, proper security, fire and other safety measures).
3. Social protection from discrimination (ensuring equality regardless of social status, gender, ethnicity, health status, etc.).

To obtain objective quantitative assessments, the Delphi method expert procedure was used, which involves an anonymous and multi-step survey of a group of experts with subsequent coordination of their opinions.

Composition of the expert group (40 people):

- 10 directors (deputy directors) of schools of various types (urban, rural, specialized);
- 10 practical psychologists working in schools;
- 10 teachers with over 15 years of experience;
- 5 social workers with experience working with adolescents;
- 5 security specialists (representatives of public organizations, consultants on educational security issues).

We identified the following criteria to start with:

1. Effectiveness in reducing bullying and discrimination (C1).
2. Impact on the psycho-emotional state of students (C2).
3. Practical feasibility and economic feasibility (C3).
4. Institutional support (C4).

Next, we consider specific methods of combating social inequality:

1. In-depth programs to develop empathy and tolerance (A1).
2. Regular training in conflict mediation and communications (A2).
3. Strengthening the work of psychological services and hotlines (A3).
4. Introduction of a mentoring and peer-to-peer system (A4).
5. Development of financial and other types of benefits (scholarships, grants) for vulnerable groups (A5).
6. Establishing an "equality code" and mechanisms for punishing discrimination (A6).

Experts compare every two objects (criteria or alternatives) on a scale from 1 to 9 (Table 1).

Table 1. Rating scale.

Rating scale	Meaning
1	equally important
3	moderate advantage of one over the other
5	strong advantage
7	very strong advantage
9	extremely important advantage
2,4,6,8	intermediate values

For a matrix of size $n \times n$, the eigenvector w (priority vector) is calculated as the normalized eigenvector corresponding to the largest eigenvalue $\lambda_{\max}$. The consistency index CI (1) is determined:

$$CI = (\lambda_{\max} - n) / (n - 1) \quad (1)$$

The consistency ratio CR is calculated as CI/RI , where RI is the average random value of CI for the matrix $n \times n$. Its approximate standard values are as follows: if n is 6 (as in our case), then the value is 1.24.

In the first round of the survey, experts were offered a wide list of possible criteria (over 10 items), but based on the results of the Delphi method, four of the most significant remained:

- **C1:** Effectiveness in reducing bullying and discrimination (how quickly and by what percentage the number of cases of bullying and discrimination in school decreases).
- **C2:** Impact on the psycho-emotional state of students (level of psychological comfort, reduction of anxiety, depressive states).
- **C3:** Practical feasibility and economic feasibility (financial costs of implementing the method, availability of resources, required number of personnel).
- **C4:** Institutional support (support from the administration, government structures, and public organizations; availability of a regulatory framework).

Furthermore, six main alternatives (A1–A6) were identified, i.e. specific methods of combating social inequality.

Next, we will form a generalized matrix of pairwise comparisons of criteria C (Table 2).

Table 2. Matrix of pairwise comparisons of criteria C.

C	C1	C2	C3	C4
C1	1	2	3	2
C2	1/2	1	2	2
C3	1/3	1/2	1	1/2
C4	1/2	1/2	2	1

Let's explain some numbers: $C1 \text{ vs } C2 = 2$ means that experts on average rated the effectiveness in reducing bullying (C1) as more important than the impact on the psycho-emotional state (C2), 2 times on the Saati scale. $C1 \text{ vs } C3 = 3$ indicates a strong advantage (3 times) of C1 over C3.

Next, we calculate the eigenvalues and eigenvectors. These are the weights estimated by experts:

- $w_{C1} = 0.45$ – Effectiveness in reducing bullying and discrimination is the most important criterion (45%).
- $w_{C2} = 0.27$ – the second most important criterion (27%).
- $w_{C4} = 0.18$ – institutional support (18%).
- $w_{C3} = 0.10$ – practical feasibility and economic feasibility (10%).

Therefore, for a matrix of size $n=4$, we will have a value of CI 0.036. That is, $CR = 0.041$. The resulting $CR \approx 4.1\%$. This is less than 10%, so the consistency of expert estimates is high.

For each criterion (C1–C4), experts evaluated 6 alternatives (A1–A6) in a 6×6 format. As a visual example, we present C1, and we do the same for the others (Table 3).

Table 3. Matrix of pairwise comparisons of alternatives for C1.

C1	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6
A1	1	1/2	1/3	2	1/2	1
A2	2	1	1/2	3	1	2
A3	3	2	1	3	2	3
A4	1/2	1/3	1/3	1	1/3	1/2
A5	2	1	1/2	3	1	2
A6	1	1/2	1/4	2	1/2	1

Therefore, after calculations for C1, the following weights of priority vectors are obtained: 0.11;0.16;0.28; 0.07;0.16; 0.11. Similarly, we make pairwise comparisons and determine the weights for A1–A6 for C2, C3, C4. We obtain 4 vectors presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Aggregated weight of alternatives by criteria.

Alternatives	W _{C1}	W _{C2}	W _{C3}	W _{C4}
In-depth programs to develop empathy and tolerance (A1)	0.11	0.2	0.12	0.15
Regular training in conflict mediation and communications (A2)	0.16	0.18	0.15	0.12
Strengthening the work of psychological services and hotlines (A3)	0.28	0.25	0.09	0.2
Introduction of a mentoring and peer-to-peer system (A4)	0.07	0.15	0.16	0.13
Development of financial and other types of benefits (scholarships, grants) for vulnerable groups (A5)	0.16	0.1	0.28	0.13
Establishing an "equality code" and mechanisms for punishing discrimination (A6)	0.11	0.12	0.2	0.27

Now we calculate the integral priority of each alternative (A1–A6). As an illustrative example for A1, it will be like this:

$$WA1 = 0,45 \times 0,11 + 0,27 \times 0,20 + 0,10 \times 0,12 + 0,18 \times 0,15 = 0.1425$$

We do the same for all other alternatives. As a result, we will get the following values presented in Figure 1.

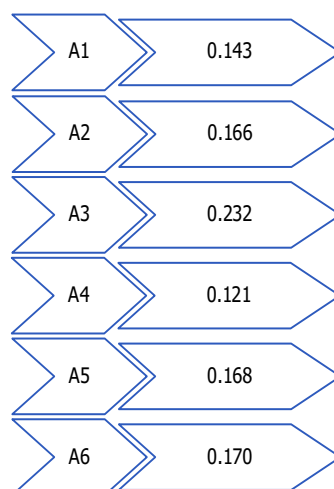


Figure 1. Final weights of alternatives.

From Figure 1, we see that the highest integral weight was given to alternative A3: Strengthening the work of psychological services (0.232). This is followed by A6: "Equality Code" (0.170) and A5: Financial benefits (0.168), A2: Mediation training (0.166). A1 and A4 received relatively lower weights. The high score of A3 is largely due to the large contribution of criterion C1 (fighting bullying). Experts believe that powerful psychological assistance can most quickly identify and eliminate manifestations of social inequality.

The leader in the final weighted assessment was strategy A3: Strengthening the work of psychological services, which provides for a number of measures (Figure 2).

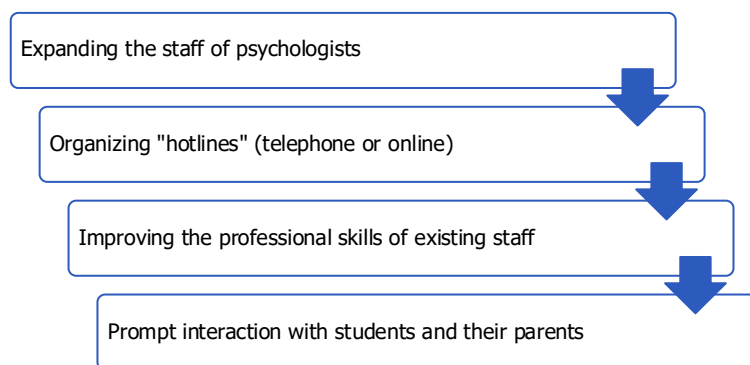


Figure 2. Directions for achieving A3.

Strengthening the work of psychological services ranks first among the proposed measures precisely because, according to experts, it directly and promptly affects the main factors of social inequality in schools: low levels of psychological safety, hidden or overt manifestations of discrimination and bullying, as well as insufficient response to the individual needs of students. It should be noted that the effectiveness of psychological support determines whether schoolchildren, especially those from vulnerable categories, will be able to receive consultations, advice and the necessary assistance so as not to end up "overboard" in the educational process. In our opinion, it is precisely by expanding the staff of psychologists, introducing regular trainings and seminars for staff, as well as introducing "hotlines" (phone and online) that it is possible to minimize the consequences of any discriminatory manifestations and ensure closer integration of students from different social strata.

DISCUSSION

It should be noted that the issue of school funding and equity in access to resources is one of the most important aspects of creating a safe and equitable environment for students. In our opinion, previous studies (Gibbons and McNally, 2013; Gibbons, McNally and Viarengo, 2018) demonstrate that additional funds aimed at improving learning conditions can have a significant positive impact on student achievement, but this impact often depends on how effectively schools are able to manage available resources. We believe that one of the significant factors that can modify learning outcomes is the structure of student groups and the distribution of students according to different characteristics (Hoxby and Weingarth, 2005). It should be noted that unsuccessful administration of internal school transfers or distribution according to "prestige" can only increase social inequality, negatively affecting the creation of a safe atmosphere in an educational institution. It can be argued that the effects of increased school funding are clearly reflected in students' economic prospects. Jackson, Johnson, and Persico (2016) found that targeted reforms in funding can significantly improve both students' educational and economic outcomes in the future. We believe that these findings are particularly important for low-income groups of students who need greater support and protection.

It should be emphasized that the allocation of funds to schools and the optimization of the learning environment are closely related to the problem of optimal class sizes. Krueger (1999) has shown that reducing the number of students in a class can have a positive effect on their academic achievement, especially in the early grades. We believe that in the context of overcoming social inequality, it is important to consider that reducing class sizes helps students from vulnerable families receive more personalized support.

It should be noted that factors related to the organization of the educational process (e.g., the length of the school year) may also play a role. Pischke (2007) has shown that reducing school days can have a detrimental effect on students' academic performance and subsequent earnings. It can be argued that such findings highlight the importance of carefully

managing the schedule and length of the school year to avoid reinforcing inequalities through absenteeism or lack of time to absorb the material. Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005) emphasize that the quality of the teaching staff and the conditions in which teachers work are directly correlated with student outcomes. In our opinion, comprehensive policies aimed at improving teacher qualifications and reducing “staff turnover” can significantly contribute to equalizing the chances of students from different social backgrounds.

It should be emphasized that the financial gap between public and private schools is no less important (Sibieta, 2021). We believe that the difference in funding often leads to an increase in educational inequality at a higher level. If students with disabilities cannot count on public support to the same extent as their peers in private schools, this threatens the formation of a safe and equitable environment in general.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the final integral assessment, the method of strengthening the work of psychological services turned out to be the highest priority, and the “Equality Code” and the provision of financial support to students from vulnerable groups turned out to be quite effective and promising. The high positions of A6: “Equality Code” and A5: Financial benefits allow us to conclude that experts consider the institutional and normative approach and material assistance to be important components of a comprehensive counteraction to social inequality. The results obtained may be useful for school administrations, education management bodies and public organizations working in the field of safety and equality in the educational environment. It is precisely this type of research that provides an understanding of how to optimize resources and implement comprehensive measures aimed at the equality and safety of all participants in the educational process. Based on the data presented, in our opinion, the following is recommended:

1. First of all, strengthen psychological services, and make them accessible and professionally trained.
2. Develop and implement an “Equality Code” at the level of each school, and ensure its support (C4).
3. In parallel, introduce financial and other types of support for students who are in difficult social conditions.
4. Not forget about educational programs on mediation and tolerance, which form a long-term understanding of equality and empathy among children and adolescents.

Let us list a number of limitations of the study: the subjectivity of assessments: although we checked for consistency, it still reflects the views of a specific group of experts; general nature of the criteria: in each country or region there may be specific factors of social inequality; the set of alternatives (A1–A6) may expand or narrow according to the specific conditions of the school or community.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

FUNDING

The Author received no funding for this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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ВИЗНАЧЕННЯ ПРІОРИТЕТНИХ МЕТОДІВ ПРОТИДІЇ СОЦІАЛЬНІЙ НЕРІВНОСТІ В ШКОЛАХ: ФОРМУВАННЯ БЕЗПЕКОВОГО СЕРЕДОВИЩА ДЛЯ ШКОЛЯРІВ

Слід зазначити, що проблема соціальної нерівності в школах сьогодні набуває особливої актуальності, оскільки освіту розглядають як ключову складову формування людського капіталу. На нашу думку, забезпечення безпечового середовища в школі не може бути ефективним без урахування різних проявів дискримінації та булінгу, а також без належної психологічної підтримки учнів із соціально вразливих категорій. У рамках цього дослідження ми визначили шість потенційних методів протидії соціальній нерівності (зокрема поглиблені програми з розвитку емпатії й толерантності, запровадження «кодексу рівності», посилення психологічних служб та інші). Результати було отримано із залученням 40 експертів (директорів шкіл, учителів із великим стажем, психологів, соціальних працівників і фахівців із питань безпеки), які брали участь у двоетапному опитуванні за Методом Дельфі. На другому етапі аналізу застосовано метод аналізу ієрархій (АНП), що дозволив провести парні порівняння критеріїв (ефективність у зменшенні булінгу й дискримінації, вплив на психоемоційний стан, економічна доцільність, інституційна підтримка) та альтернатив. Слід підкреслити, що отримані кількісні дані дають змогу оцінити відносну пріоритетність кожного

методу з урахуванням узгоджених експертних оцінок. Найвищі інтегральні ваги отримали заходи з розширення психологічної підтримки учнів, «кодекс рівності» й фінансова допомога для вразливих сімей, що свідчить про необхідність поєднання й психоемоційних, і матеріально-інституційних інструментів. Можна стверджувати, що такі результати мають значний прикладний потенціал, оскільки комплексний підхід до протидії соціальній нерівності може бути інтегрований у шкільні програми, нормативні документи й стратегії розвитку освіти на державному й локальному рівнях. На нашу думку, подальші дослідження мають зосередитися на розробці покрокових методичних рекомендацій і моніторингу впровадження описаних інструментів у різних типах шкіл.

Ключові слова: соціальна нерівність, безпекове середовище, школа, метод аналізу ієрархій (АНР), метод Дельфі, булінг, психологічна підтримка

JEL Класифікація: I21, I24, I28