

National Education Policy 2020 and Student Mental Health and Well-Being: A Conceptual Policy Analysis

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 signifies the first extensive reform of India's educational framework in more than thirty years, and one of its notable shifts from prior policies is a persistent, albeit uneven, focus on the mental health and socio-emotional well-being of students. In contrast to earlier educational frameworks that primarily dealt with health in terms of physical and nutritional aspects, NEP 2020 integrates mental health considerations at various structural levels: the foundational stage, curriculum development, teacher training, assessment reforms, and the equity framework designed for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups. This paper aims to conceptually outline the provisions related to mental health within NEP 2020, juxtaposes them with the documented challenges of adolescent mental health in India, and assesses how closely the Policy's declared goals align with its implementation capabilities. The findings reveal that NEP 2020 marks a significant conceptual progression, especially through its initiatives for school counselors, its clear incorporation of mental health into the curriculum, and its assessment reforms that seek to alleviate the 'coaching culture' linked to student stress. However, ongoing deficiencies in counselor availability, teacher education, and oversight mechanisms hinder the Policy's ability to translate into tangible enhancements in student well-being. The paper concludes with suggestions for improving implementation, particularly emphasizing the necessity for specific mental health indicators within school performance evaluation frameworks.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020; student mental health; socio-emotional learning; school counseling; holistic education; adolescent well-being

1. Introduction

Upon the release of India's National Education Policy 2020, much of the public discourse centered on its more apparent structural modifications: the 5+3+3+4 curricular framework, the multiple-entry-exit system in higher education, and the emphasis on interdisciplinary studies. However, perhaps just as crucial for the everyday experiences of Indian schoolchildren is the Policy's ongoing, if fragmented, involvement with mental health and emotional welfare. NEP 2020 does not feature a singular, unified "mental health chapter"; rather, relevant provisions for student welfare are interwoven throughout sections on early childhood care, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher preparation, assessment reform, and equity for marginalized groups (Ministry of Education, 2020). This dispersed approach can make the

Policy's commitments to mental health easy to overlook, but they remain significant despite their distributed nature.

This is important because the rationale for addressing student mental health as a key educational policy issue, rather than merely a clinical or familial concern, is well-supported. Worldwide, about one in seven adolescents aged 10-19 suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder, which represents a considerable portion of the disease burden within this age group, with depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders being among the primary causes of illness and disability in adolescents. Furthermore, half of all adult mental health issues begin before the age of 18 (World Health Organization, 2025). Poor mental health during childhood and adolescence is also linked to lower educational outcomes, and this relationship exacerbates over time as academic challenges and depressive symptoms mutually reinforce each other (Wickersham et al., 2021). Mental health has come to be recognised, at a population scale, as a basic human capacity that underpins progress toward wider development targets, including those tied to education; without it, those broader goals become much harder to reach (Patel et al., 2018; Lund et al., 2018). Within India, NIMHANS's National Mental Health Survey found that a considerable proportion of the population lives with some degree of mental morbidity, and that the shortfall in treatment access is most severe among younger people and those in poorly resourced areas (Gururaj et al., 2016). Given this context, a national education policy that takes up the question of student mental health, even unevenly, warrants close examination.

That is the task this paper takes on. It traces the provisions within NEP 2020 that bear on mental health across the school-education portions of the Policy, assesses how coherently they hang together conceptually and how well they align with the wider evidence on student well-being, and pinpoints the main gaps separating what the Policy intends from what the Indian school system currently has the capacity to deliver.

2. Mapping NEP 2020's Mental Health-Related Provisions

2.1 Foundational Stage: Health, Nutrition, and Early Attention to Mental Well-Being

NEP 2020 takes up the question of well-being sooner than one might expect: within its section on foundational literacy and numeracy, the Policy states outright that children's nutrition and health, "including mental health," will be supported through nutritious meals and by bringing well-trained social workers, counsellors, and community participation into schools (Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 2.9). Given that this section otherwise centres on cognitive readiness and school preparedness, the inclusion stands out, and it points to an underlying recognition among the Policy's authors that emotional well-being cannot be separated from a child's readiness to learn, even at the very start of schooling, rather than being treated as something that only becomes relevant later, in adolescence.

2.2 Counsellors and Trained Social Workers as a System-Wide Provision

Of all the mental-health-related commitments in NEP 2020, the most tangible and frequently repeated is its call for counsellors and trained social workers to become a standing part of the school system. The Policy states that counsellors or well-trained social workers attached to schools and school complexes will work on an ongoing basis with students and parents to support attendance and learning (Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 3.3). The same commitment resurfaces in the Policy's equity chapter, where counsellors and trained social workers are singled out as especially useful for improving outcomes

among children in low-income urban settings (para. 6.5), and again in its discussion of school culture, where counsellors are listed alongside teachers and administrators as responsible for building a school-wide ethos of inclusion, dignity, and respect (paras. 6.19-6.20). Structurally, the Policy proposes that counsellors be shared across school complexes, together with trained social workers and technical and maintenance staff, as part of its broader argument for consolidating small, isolated schools into complexes that pool resources (para. 7.5). Taken together, these provisions suggest that NEP 2020 does not treat school counselling as a luxury service for well-resourced urban schools, but as infrastructure that should extend, at least in principle, across the system, including into under-resourced and rural contexts.

2.3 Curriculum-Embedded Mental Health and Life Skills Content

NEP 2020 places mental health squarely among the core competencies every student is meant to develop, right alongside physical education, fitness, wellness, and life skills like communication, cooperation, and resilience (Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 4.23). Going further, the Policy commits to including basic training in health, covering preventive health, mental health, and sound nutrition, within the curriculum itself (para. 4.28). This marks a real departure from earlier curricular frameworks, where health education, to the extent it existed, was almost entirely confined to physical health and hygiene. By naming mental health as its own strand of curriculum content, rather than quietly absorbing it into broader "life skills" phrasing, NEP 2020 gives NCERT and state curriculum bodies a textual mandate to build dedicated teaching material around it. That mandate has, to some degree, already moved from paper into practice: the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023, NCERT's vehicle for translating NEP 2020 into classroom reality, sets out specific guidelines for Health and Physical Education, sports, and yoga, and gives curricular space to School Health and Wellness activities tied to the Ayushman Bharat programme (NCERT, 2023). This gives states a concrete point of reference that simply didn't exist when NEP 2020 was first published.

The Policy's equity commitments bring a further, disability-focused layer to this curriculum-and-support structure. NEP 2020 explicitly draws on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, which frames inclusive education as students with and without disabilities learning side by side, with instruction adjusted to accommodate different learning needs (Government of India, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 6.10). Taken together with the Policy's recurring emphasis on counsellors and trained social workers, this points to an intention that emotional and psychosocial support should reach, not skip over, children with disabilities and specific learning disabilities, a group whose mental health needs are all too often overlooked in mainstream classrooms.

2.4 Assessment Reform as an Implicit Mental Health Intervention

Arguably the most far-reaching mental-health-related reform in NEP 2020 isn't described in mental health terms at all: it's the restructuring of the assessment system. The Policy doesn't shy away from naming the damage done by the prevailing culture of high-stakes board exams and entrance tests, acknowledging that this culture crowds out real learning in favour of intensive exam coaching and pushes students into narrow, rigid academic tracks (Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 4.36). To address this, NEP 2020 calls for redesigning board exams around core competencies rather than months of rote drilling, letting students sit exams twice within a year so no single attempt carries all the weight, and

swapping the conventional summative report card for a holistic, 360-degree progress card that captures a student's growth across cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions (paras. 4.34-4.38). These changes are pitched in largely pedagogical terms, but the reasoning behind them tracks closely with a point long made in the student mental health literature: that persistent high-stakes testing pressure is itself a driver of adolescent anxiety and distress, meaning that easing the intensity and frequency of make-or-break evaluation moments functions, in practice, as a population-level mental health intervention, even though it isn't described that way.

2.5 Socio-Emotional Learning and Teacher Orientation

Beyond their subject-teaching duties, NEP 2020 asks teachers to treat socio-emotional learning as a core part of every student's holistic development (Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 5.14). Brief as this provision is, it matters because it places responsibility for socio-emotional support with the classroom teacher rather than leaving it entirely to a specialist counsellor, an approach that lines up with international evidence showing teacher-led, classroom-based socio-emotional learning programmes can produce real reductions in depression, anxiety, and behavioural problems among adolescents, especially when the programmes are well-structured, involve families, and are implemented faithfully (Oswald et al., 2024). This finding echoes one of the largest bodies of evidence on school-based SEL to date: a meta-analysis spanning 213 universal, school-delivered programmes and more than 270,000 students, which found consistent gains in social-emotional skills, behaviour, and academic performance among participants compared with control groups, and which showed classroom teachers were fully capable of delivering these programmes themselves, without needing specialist staff (Durlak et al., 2011). Whether India's teacher education system is currently prepared to meet this expectation is a separate matter, taken up in Section 4.

2.6 Health and Well-Being Clubs

Among its provisions for nurturing student interests and talents, NEP 2020 includes Health and Well-being Clubs and Yoga Clubs in the same category as Science Circles, Music and Dance Circles, and Debate Circles, recommending them as co-curricular structures at the school, school-complex, and district level (Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 4.44). It's a modest provision, but it hands schools an explicit, sanctioned space to address well-being outside the formal curriculum, through peer-led and activity-based formats that the mental health literature generally considers more approachable and less stigmatising for adolescents than purely clinical or classroom-bound approaches.

2.7 Post-NEP State and Central Implementation Examples

Two programs initiated around the same timeframe as NEP 2020, although not explicitly included in the Policy document, illustrate how its commitments related to mental health have begun to manifest in reality. On a national scale, the Ministry of Education's Manodarpan initiative, introduced in July 2020, established a toll-free tele-counseling helpline, a registry of trained counselors, and organized advisory resources for students, educators, and families. Originally focused on providing psychosocial support during the COVID-19 crisis, its impact has continued well beyond that period (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). The implementation framework for NEP 2020, known as SARTHAQ, which was published in 2021, connects the Policy's suggestions, including its counseling and well-being components, to specific tasks, accountable agencies, and deadlines, thereby giving states a more robust

accountability framework than the Policy text alone provides (Ministry of Education, 2021). At the state level, Delhi's Happiness Curriculum, a daily classroom-based program for socio-emotional learning launched in 2018 and later assessed through a randomized study led by the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, serves as an early, India-based example demonstrating that well-being education can be integrated into the standard school day on a large scale. Independent evaluations have indicated enhancements in students' relationships and reflective thinking (J-PAL, 2023; Press Trust of India, 2020). While none of these three initiatives were intended as formal assessments of NEP 2020, collectively they indicate that the Policy's fundamental commitment to student well-being has made a significant, albeit still inconsistent, impact on Indian classrooms.

3. Alignment with the Evidence Base

It is also important to place the mental health-related elements of NEP 2020 in the context of the World Health Organization's Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2030, which encourages member countries to enhance governance surrounding mental health, provide integrated care through communities and educational institutions, engage in promotion and prevention initiatives, and improve information systems for monitoring outcomes (World Health Organization, 2021). The aspects of NEP 2020 concerning counselling, curriculum, and assessment fit quite well within this global framework's promotion-and-prevention objective; however, as discussed in Section 4, the Policy significantly lacks in the areas of information systems and monitoring.

Overall, the provisions of NEP 2020 align favorably with what research—both in India and globally—indicates actually supports student mental health. Its initiative to reduce rote learning and high-stakes testing directly addresses one of the well-established sources of stress for Indian adolescents. The focus on integrating counselling within schools reflects a broader international perspective that suggests school-based delivery, rather than models reliant on families seeking clinical care elsewhere, provides a genuinely effective approach to bridging the significant treatment gap for adolescent mental health issues identified by India's National Mental Health Survey (Gururaj et al., 2016). Furthermore, recognizing socio-emotional learning as an essential part of the curriculum, rather than an optional add-on, aligns with evidence that school-based SEL programs are among the interventions with the most robust record for enhancing adolescent mental health in various settings, including low- and middle-income countries (Oswald et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, it is equally crucial to acknowledge what NEP 2020 omits. The Policy does not establish a minimum ratio of counsellors to students, does not allocate a specific budget for mental health infrastructure, and does not define outcome indicators—whether a reduction in reported anxiety, incidents of bullying, or school-related distress—against which its implementation could later be evaluated. In this regard, the mental health components of the Policy appear more as aspirations than practical commitments, and the extent to which they ultimately make a difference will largely depend on how earnestly state governments and organizations like the SCERTs transform them into funded, monitored programs.

4. Implementation Realities and Gaps

Anyone assessing NEP 2020's mental health provisions as they actually play out, rather than as they read on paper, should keep a few implementation problems in mind. For one, India simply doesn't have enough trained school counsellors to match what the Policy envisions; most government schools, and rural and semi-urban ones especially, still have no dedicated counselling staff whatsoever, leaning instead on whatever individual teachers are willing to take on informally. For another, the Policy's assumption that classroom teachers will handle socio-emotional learning takes for granted a level of pre-service and in-service training that most current B.Ed. and D.El.Ed. programmes simply don't offer in any structured, competency-driven way, even though NEP 2020 itself calls for an overhauled teacher education framework by 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020, paras. 5.22-5.23). Additionally, although SARTHAQ, the implementation roadmap accompanying NEP 2020, refers to the role of counsellors quite extensively, turning that textual emphasis into actual sanctioned positions, recruitment efforts, and salary allocations, within state education budgets that are already stretched thin, has happened unevenly from one state to the next. Finally, there's no routine, standardised data collection on student mental health and well-being to match what already exists for learning outcomes through the National Achievement Survey, which makes it genuinely hard to say, with any empirical confidence, whether NEP 2020's mental-health-related provisions are delivering measurable benefit five years into rollout.

5. Recommendations

Building on all of this, three directions stand out as worth pursuing to strengthen how NEP 2020's mental health provisions play out in practice. First, State and UT governments, along with the proposed National Assessment Centre, PARAKH, might consider working basic, age-appropriate well-being indicators into the periodic school assessment and monitoring structure the Policy already envisions, so student well-being gets tracked with something close to the rigour applied to learning outcomes. Second, teacher education institutions currently shifting toward the 4-year integrated B.Ed. structure that NEP 2020 mandates have a real opening, since these programmes are largely being rebuilt from the ground up, to make structured, evidence-based socio-emotional learning and mental health literacy training a core requirement rather than an elective, instead of trying to bolt it on afterward. Third, given how well-documented the effectiveness of school-based counselling is, and how often the Policy itself returns to the idea of shared counsellors across school complexes, treating counsellor recruitment as a priority within the broader push to consolidate schools into complexes, rather than as a lower-order reform to get to later, would let the Policy's most concrete mental-health-related promise actually materialise sooner.

6. Conclusion

NEP 2020 marks a genuine, if somewhat scattered, step forward in how Indian education policy thinks about student mental health, moving well past the narrowly physical understanding of student health found in earlier policy documents. Its commitments to embedded school counselling, mental health content built into the curriculum, teacher-led socio-emotional learning, and, perhaps most significantly, its overhaul of the high-stakes assessment culture, together line up with a substantial body of evidence on what actually supports adolescent well-being. Even so, the gap between what's promised on paper and what plays out in real classrooms remains sizeable, shaped by counsellor shortages, uneven teacher readiness, and the lack of any dedicated monitoring system. Whether NEP 2020 genuinely improves the mental health and well-being of India's schoolchildren will depend less on how well the Policy is

worded, which is genuinely promising, and more on how sustained, well-funded, and carefully measured the effort is that state governments and institutions put into implementing it over the years still remaining in its rollout.

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