Transforming School Environments: Exploring the Recommendations of NEP 2020 on Mental Health and School Climate in Indian Secondary Schools

Priya Topno[1], Dr. Parimal Sarkar[2]

[1]Research Scholar, School of Education, Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India
[2]Assistant Professor, School of Education, Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

Mental health is an important part of the entire well-being of an individual, influencing how one thinks, feels, and acts. It serves as the foundation for one's interactions, problem-solving, and decision-making abilities. Good mental health enables a person to face life's obstacles, develop resilience, and live satisfying lives. Poor mental health, on the other hand, can result in crippling disorders such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse, wreaking havoc on individuals and families. Genetics, the environment, trauma, and socioeconomic determinants such as poverty, education, and employment are some of the factors that contribute to mental health problems. The school climate, which is an integral part of education, plays a significant role in the development of students. The school climate consists of the social, emotional and physical environment of a school that influences the student in multifarious ways. This study examines the implications of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on mental health and school climate in Indian secondary schools. It is a review-based study and the secondary sources of data, in the form of published research articles, book chapters, and documents of relevance, have been referred to. The study's findings suggest that emphasis be laid on facilitating mental health within the schools by creating and maintaining a healthy and positive school climate. The findings highlight the critical role of teacher training, student-centred approaches, and community engagement in fostering positive school climates. The study recommends strategies for effective implementation of NEP 2020's mental health provisions, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts between educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals.

KEYWORDS: *Mental health, school climate, NEP 2020, Indian secondary schools, inclusive learning environments*

INTRODUCTION

Health is a fundamental and integral part of life. It is a field of study that has garnered much attention at all ages and more so in the present times from various perspectives and disciplines. Many psychologists all across the world are addressing the concerns of health which has resulted in a new branch of psychology named Health Psychology. The general understanding of health in terms of effective physical condition or functioning of the body is now giving way to a much more comprehensive cognizance of the term and it is often used to refer to a state of physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being of the individual. Mental health stands for the health of the mind and Carter V. Good, in the Dictionary of Education (1959 p. 263) has termed it as ― "the wholesomeness of the mind."

Education, by fostering a balanced development of all the domains of the personality of the individual, enables and equips an individual to adjust to the changing environment. This adjustment of the individual to the changing environment is aided by a healthy school climate. The school climate, which is a significant factor in the educational process, plays a crucial role in achieving the aims of education for both the individual and promoting mental health. A good education institution is one in which every student feels welcomed and cared for, where a safe

and stimulating learning environment exists, where a wide range of learning experiences are offered, and where good physical infrastructure and appropriate resources conducive to learning are available to all students. Attaining these qualities must be the goal of every educational institution (NEP, 2020). Education, mental health and school climate are closely interconnected. A positive school climate can have a rewarding impact on student's mental health and academic performance.

This study examines the implications of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on mental health and school climate in Indian secondary schools. It is a review-based study and the authors have relied on secondary sources in the form of published research articles, book chapters, and documents of relevance. The study's findings suggest that emphasis be laid on facilitating mental health within the schools by creating and maintaining a healthy and positive school climate. The study recommends strategies for effective implementation of NEP 2020's mental health provisions, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts between educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals.

Mental Health

The term "mental health" is used when the concept of health is referred to the well-being of the mind. The WHO (World Health Organisation) defines mental health as – "A state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (2001). Physical and mental health are important as it is a well-known fact that the body can only function well when the condition of the mind is balanced and healthy. This condition allows an individual to be resilient to the stresses one meets and respond to these challenges without compromising one's well-being. This also makes him productive and fruitful for himself and his community. Mental health, therefore, may be understood as a state of emotional and psychological well-being in which an individual can use his or her cognitive and emotional capabilities, function in society, and meet the ordinary demands of everyday life. The trans-domain model of health (Figure 1) constructed on the descriptions of three health domains given by WHO (2015) and Huber, et al (2011), provides a comprehensive conception of health. Based on this description, health can be divided into three categories: physical, mental, and social, each of which can be characterized by a fundamental standard of adaptation and functioning. There are four areas of dynamic integration or synergy across the domains (Patil, 2022). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2019)

mental health is "A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." Mental health is the "ability to adapt and self-manage (Huber, et-al, 2011). With the increasing demand to cope with the complexities of life in the present times it has become imperative to cater to mental health as much as physical health to lead an effective and purposeful life.
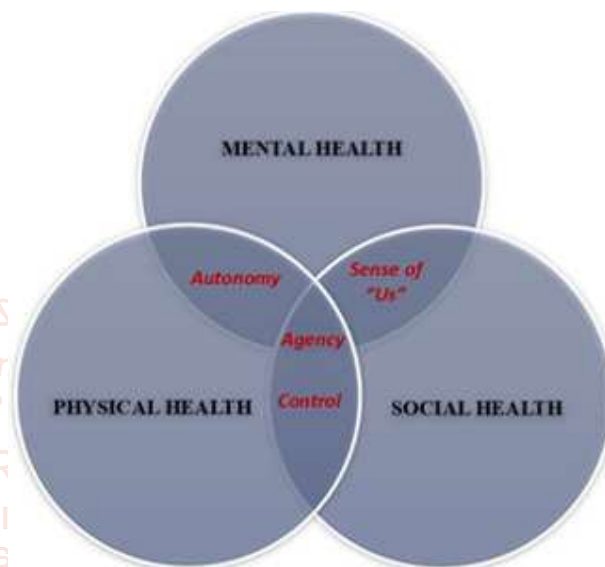

Figure 1- Trans-domain Model of Health

Adapted from the three spheres of health as described by WHO (2015) and Huber, et- al (2011)

School Climate

Formal education is a purposeful activity, it aims at achieving stipulated goals and objectives which include the personal development of its beneficiaries as well as the progress of its stakeholders. The school or the educational institution plays a crucial role in the regulation of the formal system of education. It is not merely a center for disseminating information and knowledge but a medium for the holistic progress of both the individual and the society. It is this pivotal role that an educational institution plays in a student's life that holds any school/institution accountable for the experiences that it provides to its attendees. The experiences of the students within the school/institution are directly related to the type of climate of the school/institution. In other words, the effectiveness of the school/institution is measured by its climate. The term school climate describes the quality of school life as it relates to rules and values, human interactions and relationships, and organizational and administrative procedures and structures. The school climate determines the tone for all instruction and learning that takes place there and predicts how well pupils will be able to learn and

grow. School climate is the heart and soul of a school. It is about the essence of a school that leads a child, teacher, administrator, and staff member to love the school and look forward to being there each school day. School Climate is about that quality of a school which helps each individual feel personal worth, dignity and importance, while simultaneously helping create a sense of belonging to something beyond ourselves. The National School Climate Council (2007) defines school climate as "norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe" (p.4). School climate is a product of the interpersonal relationships among students, families, teachers, support staff, and administrators. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) conducted a survey on "Mental Health and Well-being of School Students" (2023) which focussed on various mental health and emotional well-being parameters like understanding of self, emotions experienced and strategies for coping. The survey on the whole projects the importance of healthy, supportive and balanced school climate for the propagation mental health and emotional well-being among school students. A positive school climate is fostered through a shared vision of respect and encouragement across the educational system. The school climate comprising of various dimensions (Figure 2) and their interconnectedness is consequential for mental health.

Figure 2- Dimension of School Climate

Mental Health and School Climate According to NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India emphasizes the holistic development of students, including their mental health and well-being. It recognizes the importance of a positive school climate in nurturing students' mental health. Research suggests that a positive school climate can improve mental health outcomes, including reduced stress and anxiety (Wang et al., 2020). Some of the essential recommendations of NEP 2020 for promoting mental health by ensuring a positive school climate are stated below:

1. *Emphasis on Holistic Development:* NEP 2020 advocates for the holistic development of students, which includes not just academic learning but also emotional and psychological well-being. The policy highlights the need for a supportive school environment that promotes overall health. NEP 2020 underscores the importance of a nurturing school environment for the holistic development of students (Ministry of Education, 2020).

2. *Focus on Mental Health Awareness:* The policy suggests integrating mental health awareness into the school curriculum and training teachers to identify and support students facing psychological issues. This approach aims to destigmatize mental health issues and create an environment where students feel comfortable seeking help. NEP 2020 recommends integrating mental health awareness in education to foster a supportive learning environment (Ministry of Education, 2020).

3. *School Counselling Services:* NEP 2020 highlights the need for trained counsellors and psychologists in schools to support students' mental health needs. It emphasises the importance of creating a safe space where students can discuss their issues openly and receive appropriate guidance. The policy advocates for the presence of trained counsellors in schools to provide mental health support (Ministry of Education, 2020).

4. *Creating a Healthy School Climate:* A positive school climate, as per NEP 2020, involves promoting inclusivity, equity, and respect among students and staff. The policy encourages schools to foster an environment where every student feels valued and safe, which is crucial for mental well-being. NEP 2020 emphasizes creating an inclusive and equitable school climate to enhance student well-being (Ministry of Education, 2020).

5. *Encouraging Life Skills Education:* The policy also advocates for life skills education, which includes social-emotional learning. This helps students develop resilience, empathy, and emotional intelligence, contributing to better mental health and a positive school atmosphere. NEP 2020 supports the inclusion of life skills education to promote emotional and psychological well-being (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Figure 3- Mental Health and School Climate

Strategies for a Positive School Climate to Promote Mental Health

Creating a positive school climate can significantly impact students' mental health. Here are some strategies to facilitate mental health through school climate. These strategies, when implemented effectively, can significantly enhance the mental health and overall well-being of students within the school setting.

A. *Promoting a Sense of Belonging:* A positive school climate fosters a sense of belonging among students, which is crucial for mental well-being. Schools can achieve this by encouraging inclusive practices, respecting diversity, and ensuring all students feel valued and supported. Research indicates that a strong sense of belonging at school is associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression among students (Osterman, 2000).

B. *Implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Programs:* Social-emotional learning programs help students develop essential skills like emotional regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills. These programs contribute to a supportive school environment and improve students' overall mental health. SEL programs have been shown to improve students' mental health outcomes and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

C. *Providing Access to Mental Health Resources:* Schools should ensure that students have access to mental health resources, such as counsellors, psychologists, and support groups. Regular workshops and seminars on mental health awareness can also help destigmatize mental health issues. Access to mental health resources in schools has been linked to improved student well-being and academic outcomes (Weist et al., 2000).

D. *Encouraging Positive Relationships:* Building positive relationships among students, teachers, and staff creates a supportive and nurturing school environment. Teachers can model positive behavior and conflict resolution, which students can emulate. Positive student-teacher relationships are associated with better psychological adjustment and academic success (Roorda et al., 2011).

E. *Creating Safe and Inclusive Environments:* A safe and inclusive school environment is crucial for protecting students' mental health. This includes implementing anti-bullying policies, promoting respect for diversity, and ensuring that students feel safe and accepted. Safe and inclusive school environments are linked to reduced incidents of bullying and improved mental health among students (Espelage et al., 2013).

Figure 4- Strategies to Promote Mental Health through School Climate

Conclusion

The interplay between education, mental health, and school climate is a vital consideration in modern educational settings. As research increasingly highlights the significance of mental well-being on academic performance, it has become evident that a supportive school environment is crucial for students' overall success. A positive school climate, characterised by feelings of safety, belonging, and connection, lays the groundwork for optimal learning and mental wellness. Conversely, a negative school climate can exacerbate mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, leading to decreased academic engagement and motivation.

To foster a supportive school environment, educators can implement social-emotional learning programs, provide accessible mental health resources, and promote inclusivity and diversity. By doing so, schools can empower students to develop essential life skills, build resilience, and cultivate positive relationships. Moreover, addressing bullying and conflict effectively is critical in maintaining a healthy school climate. This involves implementing evidence-based prevention programs, encouraging empathy and understanding, and providing support for victims. To sum up, the synergy between education, mental health, and school climate is undeniable. By prioritizing students' mental well-being and creating a supportive school environment, educators can unlock students' full potential, leading to improved academic outcomes, increased motivation, and enhanced overall well-being.

References

[1] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development, 82(1), 405-432. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

[2] Espelage, D. L., Hong, J. S., & Henkel, R. R. (2013). Bullying and cyberbullying: What educators and parents should know. Journal of Educational Psychology, 105(3), 237-250. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030793

[3] Huber, M., Knottnerus, J. A., Green, L. W., van der Horst, H. E., Jadad, A. R., Kromhout, D., ... & Smid, H. (2011). How should we define health? BMJ, 343, d4163. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.d4163

[4] Ministry of Education. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. Government of India. https://niepid.nic.in/pdfs/NEP2020_EN.pdf

[5] National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2023). Mental health and well-being of school students: A report on survey findings. NCERT.

[6] National School Climate Council. (2007). The school climate challenge: Narrowing the gap between school climate and student achievement. National School Climate Council. http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/documents/School-Climate-Challenge-Report-2017.pdf

[7] Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. Review of Educational Research, 70(3), 323-367. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070003323

[8] Patil, S. (2022). Understanding the trans-domain model of health: Bridging the gap in health perception. International Journal of Health Studies, 8(1), 15-22. https://doi.org/10.22138/ijhs.2022.1572

[9] Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., Spilt, J. L., & Otten, R. (2011). The influence of a positive

student–teacher relationship on students' engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. Review of Educational Research, 81(4), 493-529. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311421793

[10] Wang, M. T., Brinkworth, M., & Eccles, J. S. (2020). Moderating role of teacher-student relationships on the association between school climate and students' mental health. Social Science & Medicine, 246, 112689. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2019.112689

[11] Weist, M. D., Sabo, K. A., & Hready, I. (2000). School mental health services: A comprehensive approach. Psychiatric Services, 51(11), 1421-1425. https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.51.11.1421

[12] World Health Organization. (2001). Mental health: New understanding, new hope. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/whr/2001/en/

[13] World Health Organization. (2015). Thrive: A manual for mental health promotion. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/mental-health/thrive-manual.pdf

[14] World Health Organization. (2019). Mental health: Strengthening our response. World Health Organization. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response