



Reimagining School Education in India: How the National Education Policy 2020 Seeks to Reduce Academic and Social Stress among Students

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Abstract:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant shift in India's educational framework with the intent to transform how children learn and grow in schools. One of its key aspirations is to lessen various forms of stress faced by students. Traditional school systems in India have long been associated with intense academic competition, high-stakes examinations, pressure from parents and society. These stressors contribute to anxiety, reduced motivation, and poor mental health outcomes among learners. NEP 2020 proposes major reforms including holistic curricula, socio-emotional learning, continuous assessment, reduced curriculum load, and counselling services within schools. This paper discusses how these policy elements support the contemporary issues in school education, evaluates early-stage implementations like counselling models, and examines whether NEP's strategic shifts reasonably address student stress. It also proposes areas for strengthened implementation to achieve intended well-being outcomes.

Key Words: NEP 2020, Academic and Social Stress

Introduction:

In recent years, research and media reports have highlighted growing concerns about mental health and stress among school-going children in India and across the world. High academic expectations, intense competition for leading institutions, frequent examinations, and comparisons among peers often burden young learners with psychological stress and anxiety. Studies show that the school climate itself, including teaching methods, peer dynamics, and evaluation patterns, significantly impacts students' stress levels and emotional. Traditional Indian school systems have been criticised for placing disproportionate emphasis on routine learning and final examinations rather than fostering creativity, critical thinking, and personal growth.

Against this backdrop, the Government of India introduced the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) as the first comprehensive overhaul of the educational system in nearly four decades. The policy outlines reforms across foundational literacy, curricula restructuring, teacher development, assessment changes, and student support systems. Amid these reforms, NEP 2020 emphasises not only academic excellence but also the overall well-being of learners. It encourages a holistic approach to education that includes socio-emotional learning, counselling services, and flexible assessment methods aimed at reducing excessive academic pressure.

The policy's renewed focus on well-being and mental health has become especially relevant in the context of rising awareness about student stress, suicides, and emotional health challenges in India. By integrating emotional learning and wellness programmes into the school framework, NEP 2020 acknowledges that learning is not merely cognitive but deeply connected with emotional and psychological factors. It is vital to investigate how NEP 2020 addresses these stressors, examines policy measures aligned with reducing academic and social pressure, and discusses implementation challenges and future directions.

Stress in School Education and NEP 2020 Reforms:

School education has historically been related with performance pressure. The fear of examinations, competitive rankings, comparison with peers, and parental expectations contribute to chronic stress among students. International studies demonstrate how excessive homework, frequent high-stakes testing, and limited focus on mental well-being lead to anxiety and burnout in children. Positive school climates, where students feel connected, supported by teachers, and engaged, have been shown to reduce stress levels and improve emotional health and academic achievement. In India, reports have drawn attention to student suicides and anxiety related to exam performance and academic failures. Emotional challenges among adolescents are increasingly recognised as public health concerns. The 'National Suicide Prevention Strategy (2022)' identified academic pressure as a contributory factor in youth mental health crises, reflecting deep-rooted stressors embedded within school systems. NEP 2020 Reforms aim to targeting stress reduction, few key points have been highlighted below-

- **Holistic Learning and Reduced Curriculum Load:**
NEP 2020 advocates for streamlined and reduced curricular content, ensuring that learning is more application-oriented rather than memorisation-driven. This reform attempts to create space for students to engage in creative thinking, projects, arts, and sports. It aims to allowing for deeper engagement and less stress related to overloaded syllabi.
- **Socio-Emotional Learning and Wellness:**
The policy focuses 'Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)' as an integral part of education. It emphasises on emotional intelligence, resilience, self-management, and coping strategies, all of which help students handle stress and interpersonal challenges. Incorporation of SEL into classroom experiences can help children develop the tools to navigate personal and academic challenges effectively.
- **Continuous Assessment and Flexible Evaluation:**
NEP 2020 advises for a shift from high-stakes examinations to regular, formative assessments. This reduces the anxiety linked with single summative tests by providing ongoing feedback and encouraging learning as a process rather than a performance output.
- **Counselling and Mental Health Support:**
The policy highlights the need for mental health resources, including counselling services within schools. Trained counsellors and wellness programmes can serve as frontline support for students experiencing stress, anxiety, or personal issues. Such services encourage early intervention and mental health discussions in schools.
- **Experiential Learning:**

Recent implementations under NEP 2020 include ‘bag-less days’ in some states where students engage in experiential activities outside traditional classroom settings, such as educational field trips, creative workshops, and clubs. These efforts aim to break the monotony of textbook learning and allow joyful, stress-reducing experiences during the school year.

Practical Implementations and Challenges:

- **Counselling Hub Models:**

Boards like CBSE have launched hub and spoke counselling networks to provide structured support across schools. These networks bring trained resources to otherwise under-resourced schools, promoting psycho-social support and educator training in student well-being. Additionally, mandatory placement of mental health counsellors as per affiliation norms signals a proactive shift to embedding support structures within the education system.

- **Teacher Training and Awareness:**

For effective stress reduction, teachers must be equipped with psychological first aid skills and awareness of student mental health issues. Teacher preparedness remains a challenge in many districts where resources and training budgets are limited.

- **Parental and Societal Perceptions:**

Community attitudes toward success and performance can weaken well-being initiatives. Parents often prioritise high academic scores, inadvertently reinforcing performance anxiety. Change at the societal level requires sustained awareness campaigns.

- **Resource Constraints:**

Many rural and underfunded schools lack adequate staff and infrastructure to implement SEL and counselling services effectively. Bridging this gap requires policy commitments backed by financial support, training, and monitoring.

Associating Policy to Student Outcomes:

Evidence suggests that reducing academic pressure enhances students’ engagement, emotional resilience, and long-term learning outcomes. Countries that have introduced reforms aimed at reducing homework load and promoting physical activity report improvements in student well-being and reduced stress levels. Other countries like China has decided to regulate homework time and ensure daily physical activity responds to similar stress concerns seen globally, reinforcing the necessity for such reforms in educational systems. In India, integrating SEL, counselling hubs, and flexible assessment methods can produce environments where students perceive school as a supportive place rather than a competitive battleground for marks. Peer support strategies and safe peer networks also help in stress reduction by creating shared support systems among students themselves.

Discussion:

NEP 2020’s fundamental shift towards holistic education represents a progressive response to mounting stressors in school environments. By reconfiguring curricula, embedding emotional and social learning, and supporting students through counselling services, the policy addresses not only academic outcomes but also emotional well-being. These reforms recognise that stress is multi-dimensional, extending beyond examinations to encompass parental expectations, societal pressures, comparison among peers, and lack of emotional coping mechanisms. Kurien and

Chandramana (2020) describe NEP 2020 as a timely and far-reaching reform, especially noting its impact on higher education through curriculum redesign and structural transformation. Singh (2021) and Ruchi Rani (2022) also regard the policy as a major national initiative that promotes holistic education, flexibility in learning pathways, multilingual instruction, reformed assessment systems, and the use of technology. At the same time, they caution that successful implementation depends on addressing concerns such as limited resources, the digital divide, teacher readiness, and equitable access. Manurkar (2023) reviews existing scholarship and points out the need for stronger empirical evidence to understand both the benefits and limitations of the policy. Empirical investigations by Jain et al. (2023) and Kulal et al. (2024), using mixed and comparative approaches, report generally favourable perceptions among stakeholders regarding the long-term promise of NEP 2020, while acknowledging practical challenges. Translating policy into practice involves navigating structural and cultural challenges. While policy frameworks emphasise wellness, the pace of implementation varies widely across states and school boards. Schools with adequate resources are better positioned to integrate counselling, SEL programmes, and experiential learning, whereas under-resourced settings struggle to keep pace. Teacher preparedness is also pivotal; without adequate training in child psychology and wellness facilitation, well-intended reforms may remain superficial.

A notable strength of NEP 2020 is its inclusive view of assessment. Moving away from final summative examinations to more continuous, formative evaluations can significantly alleviate pressure on students. Yet, changing assessment culture requires collective buy-in from teachers, parents, and students alike. Another promising trend lies in collaborative models like counselling hubs that share expertise across schools, ensuring that wellness support is not confined to elite institutions. Parental attitudes and societal expectations remain substantial barriers. Despite policy guidelines discouraging undue academic pressure, competition for admissions and success narratives continues to influence how families perceive education. Awareness campaigns and partnership with community stakeholders are essential to align societal values with policy reforms. NEP 2020 has charted a plausible roadmap toward stress-reduced education, but actual impact depends on coherent implementation, adequate resource allocation, community engagement, and ongoing evaluation mechanisms.

Conclusion:

The National Education Policy 2020 marks a transformative moment in India's educational history by acknowledging the critical relationship between academic structures and student well-being. Its emphasis on holistic learning, social-emotional development, continuous assessment, and mental health support speaks directly to reducing stressors that have long burdened school students. Early policy-inspired initiatives such as counselling networks, experiential learning days, and mandated wellness services indicate positive momentum toward nurturing emotionally balanced learners. Challenges related to uneven implementation, limited resources, teacher training, and entrenched societal expectations require sustained attention. To fully realise NEP's stress-reduction goals, comprehensive strategies that include community partnerships, awareness programmes, and robust monitoring frameworks are imperative. As India progresses with policy rollouts, continuous research and feedback loops will ensure that the education system evolves into an environment where academic growth and emotional well-being coexist harmoniously, creating resilient and empowered future generations.

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