STUDENT WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH IN PUNJAB'S SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The well-being and mental health of students have become at the heart of Punjab's educational reform, reflecting the transformation of global development over narrow academic achievements. This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the current situation, challenges and strategies related to student well-being in Punjab schools. The State has made important progress in expanding access and infrastructure, but many students still face intense academic pressure, sociocultural barriers, and stigma associated with mental health problems. Initiatives such as Bag-Free Days and ASMAAH's mental health assistance line highlight Punjab's innovative responses, promote emotional support, creativity and accessible counselling services. Policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy 2020 and the Punjab School Playing Policy emphasize the integration of value education, attention to detail and life skills into the curriculum, in order to create a safe, inclusive and nurturing environment. However, challenges continue, especially for marginalized groups who are subjected to additional stress factors related to poverty, discrimination and limited access to resources. The paper emphasized the importance of teacher training, community engagement and reducing academic pressure to promote resilience and emotional well-being. Finally, lasting cooperation between policymakers, educators, families and communities is essential to overcoming stigma, eliminating systemic obstacles, and ensuring that every child in Punjab can thrive both academically and emotionally.

KEYWORDS: *Student well-being, mental health, Academic pressure, Socio-cultural barriers, Policy initiatives, Value education, Mindfulness*

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1.1   INTRODUCTION

The education scenario now a daysin Punjab is based on the well-being of students and mental health as the focus of debates on school reform and high-quality education.Although the state has made considerable progress in expanding access and improving infrastructure, this educational progress is being carried out without taking into account the emotional, psychological, and social aspects of each learner.The 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) and the policies of the Punjab State set ambitious global development goals and recognised that the well-being of students is not only an attractive supplement, but a fundamental condition for learning, growth, and long-term success.The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the situation, challenges, and strategies associated with the health and mental health of Punjab school students based on research findings, policies, and best practices in the region.

The importance of student well-being goes far beyond the classroom as it shapes future workers and social leaders. In Punjab, education is often seen as a gateway to economic mobility and social progress, and the stakes are particularly high. The pressure of academic achievement, the demands of society, and the rapid technological changes can create an environment in which students face stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. The solution to these problems will not only improve individual results, but also promote a more equitable and resilient society. Therefore, value

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education, mindfulness, and a strong emotional well-being support system must be considered a fundamental part of any comprehensive educational strategy.

1.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL BEING IN EDUCATION

Student well-being is a multifaceted concept that encompasses emotional stability, psychological resilience, social relations, and physical health. In school education, happiness is not only the absence of illness or distress, but also the presence of positive attributes such as self-esteem, sense of belonging, and ability to face challenges. Mental health is a fundamental component of well-being and influences all aspects of students' lives, from academic achievements and classroom behaviour to relationships with colleagues and teachers. The importance of student well-being is underlined by a growing body of research linking emotional health with academic success.

Students who feel supported and valued are more likely to attend school regularly, participate in classroom activities, and reach higher grades.They are also less likely to induldge in antisocial behaviour or drop out of school prematurely.In Punjab, traditional education systems emphasise repetition and examination performance, but if students' emotional and psychological needs are taken care of, these results will only be more sustainable. This shift in perspective is reflected in the new policy documents and practices that place global development above narrow academic achievements.

Furthermore, the cultivation of well-being in schools has a wider social purpose.The school teaches students to manage emotions, resolve conflicts, and have empathy with others and contributes to the development of responsible citizens who can participate constructively in the rapidly changing society.In this respect, value education is an important tool for promoting ethical principles, respect for diversity, and commitment to social justice. Mindful practices such as meditation and reflection further strengthen students' ability to regulate emotions and keep focus on challenges. Together, these elements create a supportive.

1.3 CURRENT STATUS AND RECENT INITIATIVES IN PUNJAB

Punjab has begun to recognise and address the importance of student well-being and mental health through various policy measures and grassroots initiatives.One remarkable example is the introduction of Bag-Free Days in the district of Fazilka, where more than 72,000 students in 468 schools spend a day, each week by taking part in group activities like story telling, yoga, and group discussions, rather than traditional academic activities.

This initiative aims to reduce academic stress, foster creativity, and provide students with opportunities for social and emotional development. Bag-free days are not just a break from the routine; they involve a conscious effort to redefine the purpose of education. By identifying activities that promote teamwork, self-expression and relaxation, schools send a strong message about the value of emotional well-being. Teachers reported that students seemed to be more deeply engaged and enthusiastic in these days, and parents appreciated the holistic approach to education. The success of this initiative has led to discussions about its expansion to other districts, highlighting the potential for systemic changes.

The ASMAAH Mental Health Helpline was launched in Ludhiana and provides students with confidential counselling and support at all times. This service is especially useful for those who are suffering from stress, anxiety, or emotional difficulties related to the exam and provides practical advice and safe spaces to express their concerns.

The popularity of the helpline reflects the growing awareness of mental health problems and the inordinate need for accessible support services among Punjabi students. Counsellors report that students often seek help for a variety of problems, ranging from academic pressure and family conflict to bullying and self-esteem problems. The anonymity and accessibility of the helpline have made it a lifeline for many young people who otherwise might suffer silence.

At the policy level, Punjab's School Play Policy has set new standards for early childhood education by emphasizing the importance of nurturing, safe and hygiene environment. The policy focuses on children's emotional well-being through play-based learning, regular health checks, and strictly prohibits physical and mental harassment. By integrating well-

being into the first years of schooling, Punjab aims to lay a solid foundation for health and learning throughout life. This approach recognizes that early childhood habits and attitudes have a lasting impact on future well-being and academic success.

Despite these positive developments, research shows that there are still glaring gaps. A study conducted in Amritsar revealed that although some students have basic knowledge of mental health, negative attitudes and stigma are widespread. Most of the students surveyed had negative views about mental illness, and only a small number had good knowledge of this topic. This emphasizes the urgent need for awareness campaigns and educational interventions to change perceptions and encourage help-seeking behaviour. Schools must work in partnership with families and communities to create a social environment where mental health is discussed openly and support is readily available.

1.4 THE CHALLENGE OF ACADEMIC PRESSURE

One of the most urgent challenges to the well-being of Punjab students is the intense academic pressure on students at all levels. The competitive ethics that ha penetrated the state's education culture and the high expectations of parents and teachers often lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and fatigue. According to Ludhiana's mental health experts, the number of students who seek psychological help for academic stress has doubled in recent years, and many students show symptoms such as low mood, anger, lack of interest, and even suicide. Pressure to improve in exams and secure limited seats at prestigious universities and colleges can be overwhelming, especially for students of the poorest or middle class sections who see academic success as a major path to upward mobility.

The environment is further complicated by the widespread presence of private school and training centres, which often extend school days into the evenings and weekends. Although these services are intended to provide additional support, they can unintentionally contribute to a culture of relentless competition and perfectionism. Students may feel that their value is assessed only by academic achievement, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure. Focusing on manual learning and high-scoring assessments exacerbates the problem and leaves little room for creativity, play or development of life skills.

Parental pressure is another significant factor, as families often equate academic achievement with future security and social status. This can result in unrealistic expectations, excessive monitoring, and a lack of understanding of the emotional toll that such pressure takes on children. Parents may inadvertently dismiss signs of stress or anxiety, viewing them as temporary episodes rather than serious concerns. Teachers, too, may feel compelled to prioritize syllabus completion and exam preparation over the emotional needs of their students, especially in the absence of institutional support or training in mental health.

The cumulative effect of these pressures can be devastating. Students who struggle to meet academic standards may experience feelings of shame, isolation, and hopelessness. In extreme cases, these emotions can lead to self-harm or suicidal behaviour. It is therefore imperative that schools, families, and policymakers work together to create a more balanced and supportive educational environment—one that values well-being as much as academic success.

1.5 SOCIO-CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS

The challenges to student well-being in Punjab are not limited to academic pressure. Socio-economic and cultural factors also play a crucial role in shaping students' experiences and mental health outcomes. Children from marginalized communities may face additional stress related to poverty, discrimination, or family instability. For example, students from low-income families may struggle with inadequate nutrition, lack of access to healthcare, or unsafe living conditions, all of which can have a direct impact on their emotional and psychological well-being.

Cultural attitudes towards mental health can also act as a barrier in the way of holistic & complete education. In many parts of Punjab, mental illness is still viewed with suspicion or shame, and families may be reluctant to seek help for fear of social stigma. This can be particularly challenging for girls, who may face additional restrictions on their mobility and

autonomy, or for children with disabilities, who are often excluded from mainstream educational and social activities. The intersection of gender, disability, and socio-economic status creates complex layers of disadvantage that require targeted interventions.

Schools have a critical role to play in addressing these barriers. By promoting inclusive practices and celebrating diversity, schools can challenge stereotypes and create a sense of belonging for all students. This includes providing accommodations for students with disabilities, offering scholarships or financial assistance to those in need, and ensuring that all students have access to extracurricular activities and support services. Teachers and staff must be trained to recognize the signs of distress and to respond with empathy and understanding, rather than judgment or punishment.

Community engagement is also essential. Schools should work in partnership with local organizations, health services, and religious institutions to raise awareness about mental health and to provide resources for families. By building a network of support that extends beyond the school gates, communities can help to break down the barriers that prevent students from accessing the help they need.

1.6 THE IMPACT OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND SOCIETAL STRESSORS

Punjab's struggle with substance abuse, particularly among youth, adds another dimension of complexity to the issue of student well-being. The state government has recognized the link between psychological distress and the risk of drug addiction, and is working to develop a comprehensive mental health policy that includes prevention, counselling, and rehabilitation services. Schoolchildren, along with other vulnerable groups, are being targeted for counselling and skill development programs aimed at building resilience and preventing future tendencies toward substance abuse.

The broader societal context—including economic uncertainty, migration, and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic—also affects student well-being. Disrupted learning, social isolation, and family stress during the pandemic have heightened the risk of anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems among children and adolescents. Many students experienced prolonged periods of school closure, loss of routine, and limited social interaction, which have had lasting effects on their emotional health. Addressing these challenges requires a coordinated, multi-sectoral approach that goes beyond the boundaries of the school.

Schools can play a proactive role by incorporating substance abuse prevention into the curriculum and by providing students with the skills they need to resist peer pressure and make healthy choices. This includes teaching students about the dangers of drug and alcohol use, as well as promoting positive coping strategies and resilience. Counselling services should be available for students who are struggling with addiction or who have family members affected by substance abuse. By addressing these issues early and comprehensively, schools can help to prevent the escalation of problems and support students in making positive life choices.

1.7 POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

The NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for promoting student well-being and mental health in schools. It advocates the integration of socio-emotional learning, life skills, and value education into the curriculum, as well as the establishment of safe and inclusive school environments. The policy calls for regular training of teachers in mental health literacy, the provision of counselling services, and the active involvement of parents and communities in supporting students.

Punjab's Play School Policy echoes these priorities, setting out clear guidelines for the creation of nurturing and protective learning spaces. The policy mandates regular health check-ups, the presence of trained caregivers, and strict measures against any form of abuse. By foregrounding well-being in early childhood education, the policy aims to prevent problems before they escalate and to promote healthy development from the outset.

At the school level, efforts are underway to create environments where students feel valued and supported. This includes the adoption of zero-tolerance policies for bullying and discrimination, the promotion of positive discipline, and the encouragement of student voice in decision-making. Parental and community engagement is also being prioritized, with schools reaching out to families and local organizations to build networks of support around students.

The integration of value education is a central component of these policy responses. By teaching students about respect, responsibility, honesty, and compassion, schools can help to cultivate the ethical foundations necessary for personal and social well-being. Mindfulness practices are also being incorporated into daily routines, with many schools offering meditation sessions, yoga classes, and quiet reflection periods. These activities have been shown to reduce stress, improve concentration, and enhance emotional regulation, making them valuable tools for promoting mental health.

1.8 INTEGRATING MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION

One of the most effective strategies for promoting student well-being is the integration of mental health education into the school curriculum. By teaching students about emotional intelligence, coping skills, and help-seeking behaviours from an early age, schools can equip them to navigate challenges and build resilience. Age-appropriate modules on stress management, mindfulness, and empathy can be woven into existing subjects or delivered through dedicated sessions. This approach not only increases awareness and reduces stigma but also empowers students to take charge of their own well-being.

Teacher training is another vital component. Educators are often the first point of contact for students experiencing distress, yet many feel ill-equipped to respond effectively. Regular professional development programs can help teachers recognize the signs of mental health problems, provide initial support, and refer students to appropriate services. Building a culture of care and openness within the staff room is equally important, as teachers' own well-being influences their ability to support students.

The establishment of counselling and support services within schools is essential for addressing the diverse needs of students. Every school should have access to a trained counselor, either on-site or through a referral network. Confidential counselling, peer support groups, and drop-in centres can provide safe spaces for students to discuss their concerns and seek guidance. Digital platforms and helplines, such as the ASMAAH service in Ludhiana, can complement in-person services, especially in areas where resources are scarce.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs offer a structured approach to building the skills students need to manage emotions, set goals, and form healthy relationships. By incorporating SEL into daily routines—through group discussions, cooperative projects, and reflective activities—schools can foster a climate of trust and mutual respect. Mindfulness exercises, yoga, and art therapy are additional tools that can help students regulate their emotions and reduce stress.

Reducing academic pressure is also critical. Schools can balance academic rigor with opportunities for play, creativity, and relaxation by implementing flexible assessment methods, project-based learning, and initiatives like bag-free days. Encouraging students to pursue hobbies and extracurricular interests can provide outlets for self-expression and stress relief.

Creating safe and inclusive environments requires a whole-school approach. This means not only enforcing anti-bullying policies but also actively promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. Schools should celebrate cultural and linguistic differences, accommodate the needs of students with disabilities, and ensure that every child feels seen and heard. Physical safety, hygienic facilities, and a welcoming atmosphere are foundational to student well-being.

Engaging parents and the wider community is indispensable. Schools can organize workshops and awareness campaigns to educate parents about mental health and the importance of emotional support. Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) can serve as platforms for collaboration, enabling families and educators to work together in addressing students' needs.

Partnerships with local health services, NGOs, and mental health professionals can further strengthen the support available to students.

1.9 ADDRESSING STIGMA AND BUILDING AWARENESS

Reducing the stigma associated with mental health is a long-term endeavour that requires sustained effort at multiple levels. Schools can play a leading role by normalizing conversations about emotions and mental health through assemblies, classroom discussions, and awareness events. Celebrating occasions like World Mental Health Day can help to break the silence and encourage students to share their experiences. Incorporating stories, role-plays, and testimonials into the curriculum can humanize mental health issues and foster empathy among students.

Peer education programs, where older students are trained to support their younger peers, can also be effective in creating a culture of openness and mutual support. By empowering students to look out for one another, schools can build resilient communities where help-seeking is seen as a sign of strength rather than weakness.

2.0 MONITORING, EVALUATION, AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Ensuring the effectiveness of well-being and mental health initiatives requires ongoing monitoring and evaluation. Schools can conduct regular surveys and screenings to assess students' emotional health, identify emerging trends, and tailor interventions accordingly. Feedback from students, parents, and staff should be systematically collected and used to refine programs. Collaboration with external experts and organizations can provide access to up-to-date resources, training, and evidence-based practices.

2.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND EDUCATORS

To advance the cause of student well-being and mental health in Punjab's schools, policymakers and educators should prioritize the integration of well-being objectives into school development plans and curricula. Adequate resources must be allocated for the recruitment of counsellors, the training of teachers, and the development of mental health infrastructure. Capacity-building efforts should be ongoing, ensuring that educators remain equipped to address the evolving needs of students. Special attention must be paid to the needs of marginalized groups, including girls, children with disabilities, and those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, research and data collection should be supported to inform policy and practice, ensuring that interventions are evidence-based and contextually relevant.

2.2 CONCLUSION

The pursuit of inclusive, equitable, and quality school education in Punjab is inextricably linked to the well-being and mental health of its students. While notable progress has been made through innovative initiatives and policy reforms, significant challenges remain. Overcoming stigma, reducing academic pressure, and building robust support systems will require sustained commitment from all stakeholders. By fostering environments that nurture the whole child—emotionally, socially, and academically—Punjab can lay the foundation for a healthier, more resilient generation, fully equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

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