

The Importance of Mental Health Education in School Curriculum in Post-COVID India

Dr Mahfuz Alam*

Assistant Professor

Dept. of Education, Rammohan College (C.U)

mahfuzalamofficial2014@gmail.com

Rimpa Mondal**

Assistant Teacher

M.M Academy, Murshidabad

mrimpa235@gmail.com

Abstract

According to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, in addition to acquiring knowledge, students must also focus on their overall development. During the COVID-19 pandemic, India, like the rest of the world, was forced into confinement. During that period, people of all ages experienced a sudden disruption in their daily routines, and for a long time, they remained confined within four walls. To prevent the spread of the virus, all schools were shut down for an extended period. During this time, students moved from physical classrooms to online classes. As they spent long hours on social media, their mental health was significantly impacted. Children began experiencing psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression. Understanding the impact of the post-COVID period on students' mental health is extremely important. This paper discusses the importance of mental health education in the post-COVID era. The study thoroughly explores strategies for incorporating mental health education into the school curriculum.

Keywords: *Mental health, curriculum, COVID 19, school student*

Introduction:

During childhood, mental health is as important as physical health for achieving development. It helps children with their emotional wellbeing and social skills. Schools play a significant role in shaping a child's mental health. A positive and supportive school environment can help children build self-confidence, improve social skills, and cope better with stress. During the COVID-19 period, children's daily routines were disturbed. Because of online classes and social isolation, students faced more depression and mental restlessness.

Mental health education is important for everyone. In school, children undergo significant emotional and psychological development. School allows children to interact with society, and it brings about changes in students' behavior and conduct. Students spend a major part of their lives in school. From childhood to adolescence, children receive education under the school system. During this period, they acquire various forms of knowledge and, alongside that, undergo noticeable changes in their behavior and social interactions.

Adolescence is often referred to as a turbulent phase because during this time, physical and mental changes are especially prominent. It is only when students have good mental health that they can truly understand how to guide themselves on the right path, distinguish between right and wrong, and make healthy decisions. To help students lead a healthy life and grow into responsible individuals, it is essential to include mental health education in every school curriculum.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were suddenly confined to their homes. They became isolated from society. This sudden and prolonged confinement, along with the shift from classroom learning to long hours of online classes and social isolation, increased mental restlessness and depression among them.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

- To understand the impact of COVID-19 on students' mental health.
- To assess the importance of mental health education in the post-pandemic school system.
- To suggest strategies for integrating mental health education into school curriculum.

Methodology:

This paper is mainly based on secondary data gathered from various primary and secondary sources. The researchers have used empirical and qualitative analysis methods to meet the research objectives.

Means of mental health:

Mental health is generally defined as a state of well-being in which individuals realize their own abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2022). According to current research, mental health is shaped by various biological, psychological, and social factors. Self-esteem, cognitive patterns, emotional regulation, and resilience are central issues to maintain the mental health. Effective coping strategies, problem-solving skills, and emotional intelligence support psychological well-being (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). Mental health can be supported through regular exercise, a balanced diet, sleep hygiene, and mindfulness practices. Magazines such as Psychology Today and Scientific American Mind highlight the benefits of meditation, journaling, and structured daily routines (Psychology Today, 2023).

For the Public Health Agency of Canada, mental health is “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2025).

Impact of Covid 19 on the mental health condition of the students

The COVID-19 epidemic had a major effect on Indian students' mental health, increasing stress, worry, and depression as a result of social isolation, academic setbacks, and future uncertainty. The transition to online learning as a result of abrupt school and university closures increased academic expectations and digital divisions, while extended seclusion fuelled feelings of loneliness and mental misery (Sahu, 2020). According to the research by Chatterjee (2021), about 70% of Indian students reported feeling more anxious, and many of them had trouble adjusting to distance learning and financial difficulties. Furthermore, psychological well-being deteriorated due to restricted access to mental health services, underscoring the necessity of counselling interventions and institutional support (Roy, 2020). Students' long-term mental health issues were highlighted by the epidemic, which prompted policymakers to rethink and readjust the mental health environment of the academic institutions.

Importance of mental health education in school curriculum

School plays a very important role in shaping our life not just academically, but also socially, emotionally, and personally. It also helps build confidence, creativity, and leadership skills through activities. A good school environment supports students emotionally and helps them cope with stress, failure, and social challenges.

Education on mental health provides necessary awareness and resources for students. Additionally, it can promote efforts for treatment and recovery. Over the last two years, most schools have been conducting classes with a hybrid model due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only does it change the way a child learns and stores information, but it also has an effect on the child's interaction with teachers and peers on a personal level. Therefore, the process of adapting and adjusting to this new way of learning and engaging has had a considerable impact on the mental health of students. (UNICEF,2021). According to UNICEF, school-going students face different amounts of stress and anxiety due to varying factors. In addition to that, with an offline and hybrid model of schooling, factors such as adjusting and adapting to a new environment, physical interaction with peers and teachers, group activities, physical activities, etc. have become even more challenging. Students were confined to the four walls of their house, and therefore found it difficult to share their experiences and feelings with their friends, teachers and even parents. (UNICEF,2021). According to the UNICEF India 2021 report, over 50% of adolescents reported mental health concerns during the pandemic. The NEP 2020 (National Education Policy) also acknowledged the need for holistic education, including emotional and psychological well-being. Global prevalence of anxiety and depression rose by about 25% in the first year of the pandemic, (WHO ,2022). Among U.S. high schoolers (grades 9–12), 37.1% reported poor mental health during the pandemic, and emergency visits for suspected suicide rose 50.6% among girls compared to 2019. (CDC , 2021) . Nearly 60% of U.S. adolescent girls reported persistent sadness or hopelessness; nearly half of LGBTQ youth seriously considered suicide, with pandemic isolation, remote learning, and scrolling social media cited as contributing factors .(AP News,early youth mental health, U.S.) . Pandemic stress and isolation accelerated cognitive and emotional issues in adolescents, particularly impairing memory, attention, and social interaction—comparable to brain-aging effects .(Time Magazine)

- 1. Promotes Emotional Well-being:** It helps students understand and manage emotions like stress, anxiety, anger, and sadness and builds emotional resilience and coping skills.
- 2. Improves Academic Performance:** Mentally healthy students are more focused, motivated, and better at problem-solving and it also reduces absenteeism and drop-out rates caused by mental health issues.
- 3. Reduces Stigma:** Educating students early removes the shame or fear around discussing mental health. Encourages openness and support-seeking behaviour.
- 4. Encourages Healthy Relationships:** it teaches empathy, communication, and conflict-resolution skills and helps prevent bullying and builds positive peer connections.
- 5. Early Identification of Issues:** Students and teachers can become more aware of signs of mental health problems.
- 6. Supports Holistic Development:** It aligns with the idea of educating the “whole child,” including emotional, social, and psychological growth and fosters self-confidence, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making.
- 7. Builds a Safer School Environment:** It reduces aggression, violence, and self-harm by encouraging expression and support and creates a more inclusive, respectful, and compassionate school culture.
- 8. Prepares Students for Life Challenges:** It equips them with tools to handle future life stress, relationships, and career pressure and builds life-long mental wellness habits.

Strategies for Integrating Mental Health Education into the School Curriculum:

School plays a very important role in a child's life. While primary education begins at home after birth, socialization, discipline, knowledge acquisition, and character development take place through the school environment. A school not only imparts academic knowledge but also contributes significantly to the mental, social, and moral development of children. Interaction with friends, guidance from teachers, and participation in various cultural and sports activities help shape a child's personality. Teachers can often identify any physical or mental issues in children at an early stage, which helps prevent more serious problems in the future. Therefore, school is one of the most essential institutions for a child's overall development. If any signs of physical or mental issues are observed in a child, it is essential that they are identified at an early stage. For this reason, including mental health education in every school curriculum is extremely important. Schools should adopt the following strategies to implement mental health education effectively.

- 1. Inclusion as a Separate Subject:** Mental health-related topics should be included as a separate subject from the primary to secondary level.
- 2. Teacher Training:** Teachers should be trained and made aware of mental health issues so they can identify problems and provide appropriate support.
- 3. School Counselling Services:** Every school should have a trained mental health counselor available to support students.
- 4. Social and Emotional Learning:** By integrating social and emotional learning programs into the curriculum, students can improve self-awareness, relationship skills, and decision-making abilities.
- 5. Parental Awareness:** We need to organizing seminars or workshops for parents can help educate them on mental health issues and how to support their children.
- 6. Creating a Compassionate Classroom Environment:** A safe and supportive classroom environment should be established where students feel mentally secure and free to express themselves.
- 7. Age-Appropriate Learning Materials:** We need to use age-appropriate and easy-to-understand mental health-related books, posters, and videos for students.

Conclusion:

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a wake-up call, exposing deep vulnerabilities in the mental health of students across the globe, and especially in India. Extended school closures, online learning, isolation from peers, and a lack of social interaction led to a significant rise in anxiety, depression, and emotional distress among children and adolescents. These impacts have had lasting consequences on students' academic performance, emotional stability, and social development. In this context, the inclusion of mental health education in school curriculum is essential. Schools are a critical environment where early signs of mental distress can be identified, and timely interventions can be made. Integrating mental health education equips students with the tools to understand and manage their emotions, build resilience, and seek help when needed. If India is to ensure the overall well-being and future success of its youth, then mental health education must be institutionalized across all schools. By doing so, we can promote a generation that is not only academically strong but also emotionally intelligent, socially responsible, and mentally resilient.

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