



## **Learning to Survive Schooling: Academic Pressure, Student Mental Health, and the Urgent Case for Social-Emotional Learning in India's Classrooms**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the growing crisis of academic pressure and its impact on student mental health in Indian schools, highlighting a critical gap between the vision of the National Education Policy (2020) and actual classroom practices. Drawing on recent empirical studies, it demonstrates that a significant proportion of adolescents experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional distress due to high-stakes examinations and societal expectations. The paper argues that the current education system prioritizes performance metrics over holistic development, leading to the normalization of psychological strain among students. In response, the study advocates for the systematic integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as a foundational component of schooling rather than an auxiliary intervention. Reviewing global meta-analytic evidence, the article establishes that SEL not only enhances emotional well-being and interpersonal skills but also improves academic achievement. However, in the Indian context, challenges such as limited teacher training, lack of culturally relevant SEL frameworks, and time constraints hinder effective implementation. The paper concludes that embedding culturally responsive SEL within the curriculum, supported by teacher capacity building and policy alignment, is essential for transforming education. It emphasizes that addressing student well-being is not optional but fundamental to achieving meaningful and sustainable educational outcomes in India.

**Keywords:** Social-Emotional Learning (SEL); academic pressure; student mental health; National Education Policy 2020; K–12 education; CASEL framework; teacher well-being



## Introduction

A successful education system requires students to reach their fundamental educational goals. The main evaluation process for educational quality in India continues to use examination scores and percentile rankings and cutoffs and competitive entrance results as its primary success metrics which create this ongoing crisis. The system creates a circular mechanism because it depends on pressure to produce high achievers who prove system effectiveness while people pay the hidden costs of pressure through their personal breakdowns instead of addressing the underlying system issues.

India's National Education Policy 2020 proposes a different educational framework through its policies. The program creates a complete educational system which develops students academically while teaching them social skills and critical thinking abilities (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). The program includes student wellbeing as its component. The program supports experiential learning together with competency-based education as the preferred method of teaching. The correct terms exist which demonstrate authentic educational understanding.

The use of aspirational language in a policy document does not function as an educational method. The educational system in Indian classrooms operates under examination preparation which takes control of teaching time while handling emotional distress through two methods which include emergency counselling after crisis and complete neglect of the problem. The educational purpose of Indian classrooms has encountered a fundamental breakdown because of this wide gap between NEP 2020's vision and classroom implementation. The article investigates the existing educational gap which exists in the research. The Social-Emotional Learning framework which has been developed through extensive research with supporting evidence functions as the fundamental base for academic instruction according to academic evidence. The educational system in India requires comprehensive student mental health solutions which current curricula fail to provide because India needs to attain its educational goals through full student development. The proper integration of Social-Emotional Learning into Indian educational systems functions as a fundamental requirement which establishes quality standards for educational institutions.



## The Pressure Machine: What Research Reveals

The academic pressure experienced by Indian students extends beyond individual accounts because research evidence shows its dangerous effects. A school-based survey conducted by Haritay et al. (2025) among 1,426 students aged 13–15 in Belagavi district, Karnataka, found that 74% of students reported high levels of academic stress, with only a small minority reporting low stress levels. The research study results show a consistent pattern that extends across different states and school types and all student age groups.

The forces that create this pressure exist as both structural components and cultural elements that operate simultaneously. The higher education system in India functions through a system that produces scarcity because medical and engineering and law and civil service programs have limited available seats which are sought after by numerous applicants. The Joint Entrance Examination (JEE), the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET), and the UPSC examinations for the Indian Administrative Service function as assessments that determine life outcomes which affect entire families and communities. Students develop a belief system from their early years which makes them think that passing exams brings them value while failing exams brings them shame and academic competition determines their ability to live.

The research study conducted by Pienyu et al. (2024) through their cross-sectional survey which involved 570 adolescents from Karnataka who were preparing for competitive entrance examinations discovered that students deal with academic stress which leads to anxiety and depression and nervousness. The study results show that adolescents experience two sources of pressure because they believe their parents expect them to perform academically while they themselves establish academic standards that they must meet. The pressure leads to mental health problems which result in negative impacts that extend beyond academic performance. The study conducted by Steare et al. (2023) is the first comprehensive systematic review examining how academic pressure relates to adolescent mental-health problems depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicidality across international studies. Published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, the review concludes that academic pressure is a strong candidate for public-health intervention and a likely causal risk factor that should be targeted through school- and policy-level action. The authors carefully frame this conclusion as conditional on causality,



since most of the underlying studies are cross-sectional; even on that conservative reading, the case for modifying academic pressure as a population-level prevention strategy is substantial. The international dimension of this problem deserves emphasis. Wuthrich, Jagiello and Azzi (2020) conducted a systematic literature review of academic stress among students in their final two years of secondary school, examining sixty studies across seventeen countries. They report that severity of distress varied across countries and measures, with the consistent finding that approximately one in six students experiences excessive distress. Female gender was the most consistent predictor of heightened distress; the review also found supporting evidence though not always uniform for the role of perfectionism, avoidance coping, low academic self-efficacy, and poor sleep, while family and peer connectedness functioned as protective factors. The recurrence of several of these predictors across settings as culturally distinct as India, Australia, China and the United States suggests that some of the mechanisms generating student stress are embedded at least partly in the structure of high-stakes examination systems broadly, not only in specific national cultures.

What does this crisis look like inside an Indian school? The invisible normalisation of suffering appears in classrooms through students who sacrifice sleep for their academic demands and who face extreme anxiety before tests and who measure their self-worth through marks and who lack emotional vocabulary and who lack access to trained adults in the school system. The mental health language continues to face stigma throughout various school communities. Counsellors, where they exist, are typically undertrained and overwhelmed. The curriculum functions as the most influential educational tool that schools use to convey their essential values yet it fails to address emotional matters and social connections and personal development and life skills necessary for complicated life situations.

### **Understanding SEL: Definitions, Framework, and the Global Evidence**

Social-Emotional Learning enables children and young people to acquire emotional understanding and relationship-building skills and responsible decision-making capabilities and social interaction skills through its educational process. The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) developed and improved a framework that defines five essential competency areas which include self-awareness and self-management and social awareness and relationship skills and responsible decision-making. The skills which people



need to learn show themselves as fundamental competencies which people need to develop for their capacity to interact with others and operate inside organizations and participate in society. The ability to recognise and control emotional states together with understanding other people's feelings and establishing and achieving goals and effective communication and cooperative work and making values-based decisions instead of acting on impulses these abilities matter as much as literacy and numeracy because people can learn these skills through practice.

The evidence base for SEL's effectiveness is now extensive and robust. The foundational meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011), which studied 213 school-based universal SEL programs that included more than 270000 students who attended kindergarten to high school, found that students who participated in SEL programs developed better social and emotional skills while showing improved attitudes and behavior and achieving academic results which matched an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement when compared to control groups. The research demonstrated that classroom teachers could conduct SEL programs successfully because the study showed that such programs did not need specialist professionals for implementation, which made them suitable for regular educational environments.

More recent studies provide strong support for this particular finding. Cipriano et al. (2023) performed their meta-analysis research study which analyzed 424 experimental studies from 53 countries that involved more than 575000 students who attended kindergarten through Grade 12 in their SEL meta-analysis, which they considered their most extensive work to date. Their Child Development study which became one of the most frequently cited papers in the field showed that universal school-based SEL interventions produced statistically significant SEL skill and attitude and behavior and peer relationship and school climate and safety and school functioning and academic achievement improvements when compared to control conditions. The authors discovered that implementation quality together with cultural responsiveness, functioned as major factors which determined program results of SEL programs, which the findings applied to all nations that want to implement large-scale SEL programs, including India.

The evidence base has received additional updates through new meta-analytic studies which have developed evidence-based findings. In their meta-analytic review of twenty-two studies, Zhao and Sang (2025) confirmed that SEL programmes produced positive effects on academic



performance for more than 24000 elementary and middle school students by showing consistent improvements across English language arts and mathematics and science subjects and grade-point averages.

The research finding shows that student social and emotional development programs lead to direct academic improvements which make this discovery one of the most vital findings of the educational research field. It dismantles the false trade-off between academic rigour and student wellbeing, revealing it as the conceptual error it is. Schools that invest in their students' emotional foundations do not sacrifice academic outcomes; they strengthen them. The mechanisms are intuitive: students who can regulate their emotions learn more effectively; students who feel safe and connected attend school more consistently; students who can manage frustration and setbacks persist through difficulty rather than withdrawing or collapsing.

In an editorial introducing a *Frontiers in Psychology* Research Topic on SEL implementation, Barnes, Domitrovich and Jones (2023) emphasise that SEL programmes produce their strongest outcomes when interventions are delivered with fidelity to their intended model, when delivery is sustained over time, and when the surrounding school context leadership, climate, and organisational support actively reinforces the programme. Citing Durlak et al.'s 213-study meta-analysis, they argue that fidelity of implementation is itself a powerful determinant of whether the documented benefits of SEL actually materialise a point with significant implications for any country seeking to integrate SEL at scale.

### **India and SEL: Disconnect Between Vision and Reality**

The implementation of social-emotional learning in Indian public schools still needs development because schools lack proper resources and show inconsistent progress despite existing global research and India's official commitment to comprehensive educational methods. Ahmad et al. (2025) conducted a current empirical study which *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy* published to investigate how educational officials in three Indian states implemented social-emotional learning programs across Delhi and Uttarakhand and Nagaland. The study shows that educational institutions increasingly recognize social-emotional wellbeing needs for educational support but institutions face



serious difficulties that prevent them from turning this recognition into actual classroom methods which should be included in full educational programs.

Ahmad et al. (2025) documented various obstacles which existing academic research already identified as serious challenges. Teacher capacity is foremost among them: most Indian schoolteachers have received no training in SEL, have no professional vocabulary for it, and operate in institutional cultures that measure their performance through students' examination results rather than their students' wellbeing or social development. The requirement for teachers to implement social-emotional learning programs in schools requires them to acquire new abilities because these programs demand teachers to shift their entire work role without receiving essential development resources needed for this transition.

The situation becomes more difficult because Indian schools lack an approved SEL curriculum which has been developed through cultural testing. The development of international SEL frameworks began with the CASEL framework which was mainly designed for North American and European educational systems. The assumptions about emotional expression and family structures and social norms and the connection between individuals and communities require adjustments to match the educational environments which exist in India. The SEL program which suits urban middle-class schools in Mumbai will not work for tribal schools in Nagaland or rural government schools in rural Bihar because those schools have different linguistic and cultural and social needs. The project to develop SEL resources through India's twenty-two scheduled languages and its many social and educational contexts presents an enormous challenge to accomplish.

The existence of time as a structural component creates an additional obstacle. The Indian school system dedicates its entire teaching time to educational content which prepares students for their upcoming examinations. Teachers and parents and school administrators view any time dedicated to SEL in this environment as a reduction of time needed for academic studies. Schools in India currently operate under a zero-sum framework which misinterprets the relationship between SEL and academic learning because both elements interact with each other instead of competing with one another. Most Indian schools operate under this method because of its common use although their goals for improvement will not bring about any change.



## What NEP 2020 Says, and What Schools Actually Do

The commitments of NEP 2020 to student wellbeing show authentic dedication although they lack proper development in their structural framework. The policy explicitly identifies holistic development as the purpose of education: "The purpose of the education system is to develop good human beings capable of rational thought and action, possessing compassion and empathy, courage and resilience, scientific temper and creative imagination, with sound ethical moorings and values" (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020, p. 3). The policy recommends that educational institutions should implement programs which teach arts and sports while promoting learning based on values. The document explains that schools must develop programs which support students' mental wellness through the work of school counsellors and a supportive school environment.

The educational institutions should use a specific SEL curriculum. And requires educational institutions to establish social-emotional outcomes which they should assess along with academic results. The law establishes assessment procedures that will enable schools to officially acknowledge social and emotional growth as a school accomplishment. The educational system needs these structural elements to establish processing pathways which will advance holistic development as an active educational goal. Educational institutions face evaluation from parents and communities and state authorities who judge their performance based only on students' academic achievements. The educational institutions continue to follow this pattern of behavior.

The Manodarpan initiative of the Ministry of Education launched as part of the Atmanirbhar Bharat programme to deliver psychosocial assistance during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The initiative shows a genuine effort to create a policy which will help students who experience mental health problems. The system needs to implement social-emotional learning through complete integration because crisis counseling and additional support services will not fulfill its requirements. The system creates pressure which leads to problems but they treat the resulting issues without addressing their original problems. A student who receives counselling after a mental health crisis and then returns to a school environment that generated the crisis



unchanged has not been helped toward wellbeing, they have been patched up and returned to the machine.

### **What Culturally Relevant SEL Looks Like in Indian Schools**

The process of implementing SEL in India requires a solution that suits the specific cultural needs of the country. The framework of SEL needs to be implemented through authentic methods which match the particular cultural and social environments that children experience. The issue requires both methodological analysis and ethical assessment. The implementation of SEL programs which introduce emotional scripts from foreign cultures and create negative effects through their practice of devaluing group identity while failing to understand the family-based role that children learn from their family and community and cultural traditions will produce harmful results. The evidence from Indian schools shows that schools can successfully implement culturally appropriate SEL programs when they use traditional indigenous teaching methods.

The philosophical and spiritual traditions of India provide valuable materials which enable schools to develop authentic social and emotional learning programs that respect local cultural traditions. The concept of samabhavana (equanimity) together with the practice of seva (service) and karuna (compassion) which exists in various Indian traditions and the gurukul system's belief that teachers function as moral and emotional guides who provide intellectual instruction, all serve as present-day cultural resources which enable Indian children and families to experience social-emotional learning through their traditional practices. The SEL framework which integrates these cultural traditions through its psychological foundation, will create greater transformational impact when compared to an educational system which adopts traditional methods from entirely different cultural backgrounds.

### **The Teacher as Emotional First Responder**

The implementation of SEL requires a fundamental examination of two essential factors which determine its execution. The evidence is clear that teachers are the primary vehicle for SEL in schools not specialist counsellors visiting once a week, but classroom teachers who are present with their students every day and who shape the emotional climate of every lesson whether they intend to or not.



The situation creates an excessive duty for teachers who work in conditions of stress and excessive workload while lacking proper assistance. Research consistently shows that teachers' own social-emotional competence is a powerful predictor of their students' social-emotional development. The teachers who possess emotional regulation and relational proficiency together with psychological safety demonstrate the abilities which they must teach to their students. Teachers who experience burnout and anxiety while concentrating solely on teaching require special assistance.

The evidence for SEL's impact on teachers themselves is now substantial. Oliveira et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 43 empirical studies which evaluated SEL interventions targeting teachers who worked with 3,004 in-service pre-K through Grade 12 educators. The research found statistically significant small to medium effect sizes in favor of SEL-trained teachers across social-emotional competence ( $g = 0.59$ ), overall wellbeing ( $g = 0.35$ ), and reduced psychological distress ( $g = -0.34$ ). The finding that SEL interventions improve teachers' own emotional functioning, not merely their pedagogical techniques, is crucial: it positions SEL not as an additional demand placed on an already burdened profession but as a genuine support to teacher health and sustainability.

The study conducted by Chaudhry and Chhajer (2023) in *Frontiers in Psychology* examined three factors energy management, thriving (defined as the simultaneous experience of vitality and learning at work), and stress and their role in shaping the psychological well-being of school teachers in India in the post-pandemic period. Drawing on data from 356 teachers in Rajasthan, the authors found that energy management supports thriving and reduces stress, with both pathways feeding into improved psychological well-being the research demonstrates that Indian school teachers experience high levels of emotional labor while showing that schools need to establish wellbeing programs to support teachers because this need represents their fundamental duty to provide effective education. Active financial support for teacher professional development needs to become a mandatory requirement because schools require teachers to function as social-emotional learning facilitators.

Teacher support systems in India primarily focus on teachers' professional needs while disregarding their personal wellbeing. The NEP 2020 mandates that teachers should receive continuous professional development which needs to include social and emotional aspects of



teaching because ITEP graduates and serving teachers require emotional competencies to achieve effective social-emotional learning outcomes.

The request does not ask teachers to take on additional tasks. The educational system needs to change its approach because it needs to understand that teachers' emotional bonds with students directly affect learning outcomes. The educational system requires funding to create professional environments which enable teachers to perform their job duties while maintaining their complete human identity.

### Conclusion

The educational system in India needs to improve its school structures because the current system focuses on generating examination results which harms student well-being instead of fulfilling the complete educational goals of NEP 2020. The student mental health emergency which shows itself through increasing suicide rates and widespread academic anxiety and through the hidden struggles of millions of young students who view their education as a source of danger instead of development represents an urgent matter. The educational system faces its main challenge because this issue needs educational institutions to provide their main solution. Social-Emotional Learning provides that response: not as an add-on to the academic curriculum, not as crisis counselling after the fact, but as an integrated, evidence-based, culturally grounded dimension of every student's school experience. The international evidence shows that SEL helps students academically while developing their social skills and emotional abilities and civic competencies which schools use for their most profound educational mission. All educational institutions in India should follow its traditional approach of holistic development which supports education for all students and mental health needs of students. India needs to implement Social-Emotional Learning in its educational system because it serves as a necessary requirement for schools. The evidence has answered that. The question is whether its educational system has the institutional will, the financial commitment, and the pedagogical imagination to build it not as a policy aspiration, but as a daily, living, breathing reality in its classrooms.



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