

Beyond Physical Inclusion: Mental Health Support Systems in Inclusive Schools in India — A Systematic Literature Review of Challenges, Policy Gaps, and Emerging Practices

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ABSTRACT:

An inclusive educational model has become one of the core principles of modern-day education that aims at ensuring equality and inclusivity of learning opportunities for students with different types of disabilities and diverse backgrounds. However, true inclusion involves not only placing such students into ordinary schools but also taking into account their psychological, social, and emotional well-being. Issues that may impede the process of learning and integration of children with special needs include mental health problems such as anxiety, behaviour disorders, emotional disturbance, and social exclusion. While in India, policies such as the National Education Policy (2020) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) have reinforced the commitment to the idea of inclusion, there are few school-based mental health supports that can help students cope with their learning challenges more effectively. This systematic review seeks to provide an insight into the current state of mental health support systems in inclusive schools in India by assessing implementation problems, exploring best practices, evaluating policies for mental well-being of students, and creating a theoretical framework for strengthening school mental health programs. The review was conducted on the basis of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), and it included analysis of pertinent studies selected via Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed and Google Scholar databases by means of key words associated with inclusive education, mental health, counseling, student wellbeing, disability and India. Five major themes have been identified based on the results of analysis: insufficient availability of trained professionals in mental health, teacher unpreparedness, stigma associated with mental health, the gap between policy and practice and some

positive evidences that can serve as an argument for whole-school approaches, social-emotional learning, counseling, peer support and multi-stakeholder cooperation. It is concluded that mental health services need to be considered as an integral part of inclusive education.

Keywords: Inclusive education; school mental health; psychological wellbeing; inclusive schools; school counselling; students with disabilities; social-emotional learning; India; educational inclusion; student wellbeing

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The inclusive education system has risen worldwide to become a prominent philosophy in education founded on the basis of equality, participation, and human rights. The concept of inclusion rejects past practices of segregating learners due to their disabilities, learning problems, or disadvantaged background and promotes the notion of an educational setting that is able to adapt to the needs of diverse learners. Contemporary views of inclusion indicate that all learners must have the opportunity to be part of mainstream education.

Inclusive education in India has evolved through various policy and legal actions such as the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), and National Education Policy (2020). These have bolstered the efforts for achieving equitable opportunities for children with disabilities and other vulnerable children. However, inclusive education is not only about providing physical opportunities to study in regular classrooms. Inclusion requires a proper environment that meets all the needs of the learner including academic, social, emotional, and psychological.

Mental well-being is becoming more understood as an essential ingredient in engaging with education, in learning, in relating to others, and in one's overall growth. Child and adolescent years are developmental stages where problems related to emotions, stress, behavioral problems, and social situations may arise. If not properly recognized and addressed, they may impact education and socializing in a negative way.

The setting of schools is crucial in promoting good mental health since schools offer consistent contact with young people in the natural social environment of their lives. In contrast to clinical services, school mental health strategies can include both universal preventive measures and early identification, counseling, emotional-social learning, and referrals. Research from around the world indicates that the most effective school mental health programs are those that are embedded within overall school programs.

When it comes to inclusion in school settings, there is a need for additional psychological assistance since people with various disorders and disabilities might have extra psychological problems due to their disabilities. These may include stigma, peer rejection, communication problems, educational frustrations, low self-respect, etc. Consequently, psychological wellbeing is an aspect of inclusion that should not be overlooked.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

Despite the growing awareness about inclusive education and school mental health worldwide, both fields have evolved independently in educational research. Inclusive education literature has been concerned with accessibility, teacher readiness, curriculum adjustments, and disabilities. On the other hand, school mental health literature has primarily emphasized prevention, counseling, well-being, and psychological interventions.

Little has been done to explore the link between the two fields in the context of education in India. There are many different social, cultural, economic, and institutional environments in which schools in India function. Issues like lack

of professionals, lack of proper counseling facilities, poor training of teachers, and gap between policy and practice affect the efficacy of mental health systems.

The increasing emphasis on wellbeing of the students in educational policy presents an avenue for the assessment of the potential of incorporating mental health services within inclusive education systems. In the context of India, for example, the National Education Policy (2020) emphasizes the importance of holistic development, socioemotional learning, and wellbeing of the learners as essential elements of education.

1.3 Problem Statement

Even with the efforts by the government towards inclusive education, most schools in India continue to struggle in providing their learners with adequate mental health services. The lack of organized school counseling programs, the shortage of professionals, the unpreparedness of teachers, and the existing social stigma act as some of the barriers to psychological intervention.

Teachers often act as the first port of call for detecting any changes in the behavior and emotions of their pupils. But most teachers admit to having little confidence and training in recognizing mental health issues or dealing with students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. School administrators, too, can find it difficult to develop a system of mental health support within an inclusive framework.

The above problems demonstrate the need for a deeper knowledge about the current practices, obstacles, and potential solutions for improving mental health service programs within Indian inclusive schools.

1.4 Research Gap

The current literature contributes greatly to our knowledge about inclusive education as well as about school-based mental health initiatives; still, there are certain gaps:

1. Lack of systematic review of existing mental health support practices in Indian inclusive schools.
2. Lack of inclusion of psychological well-being perspective in research related to inclusive education.
3. Lack of empirical information on sustainable models of school-based mental health for Indian settings.
4. Lack of information on the role of teachers and collaboration in providing such support.

Considering these shortcomings, one can suggest ways of creating more holistic approaches to inclusive education where mental health is considered an important part of it.

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of conducting this systematic review is to explore mental health services available in inclusive schools in India through an analysis of the problems that exist and provision of recommendations for improving psychological systems.

1.6 Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Determining the current state of mental health care service provision in inclusive schools in India.
2. Determining critical obstacles in the development of mental health service delivery in schools.
3. Determining effective strategies which foster psychological wellness and inclusive practices.
4. Proposing an integrated model of enhancing mental health services in Indian inclusive schools.

1.7 Research Questions

The review addresses the following questions:

1. What mental health support services are currently available in inclusive schools?
2. What challenges influence the implementation of mental health support services in India?

3. What practices contribute to improved psychological wellbeing among students in inclusive settings?
4. How can mental health support be integrated into inclusive education systems?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Education: From Access to Meaningful Participation

Inclusion in education has shifted from a limited perspective of including learners with disabilities in regular classroom settings to a broader one of eliminating all kinds of obstacles that hinder their access, performance, and belonging. In contemporary times, inclusion is seen as an effort to change the education system so that it caters to diverse learners.

As stated by Ainscow (2005), for inclusion to be a success there needs to be cultural, policy, and practice change in schools. In the same line of thought, Booth and Ainscow (2011) have asserted that inclusion means greater participation and less exclusion from learning and social interactions.

Inclusion in Indian education systems is the result of both domestic and international commitments regarding educational equality. There have been efforts on legislative and policy level to include children with disabilities in the process of receiving mainstream education. Nonetheless, research shows that there is inconsistency in the execution of such efforts due to various reasons.

Singal (2008, 2016) pointed out that even though there have been great strides taken towards promoting inclusive education in India, it still faces many practical problems on a classroom level. Some of these practical problems include lack of specialized help, teacher training, and discrepancies between policy and practice.

Therefore, inclusion in the modern era entails a move from being focused on placement to being more inclusive, taking into account not only academic but also social, emotional, and psychological aspects of participation

2.2 Mental Health and Wellbeing in School Contexts

There has been an increasing awareness in recent times about the importance of mental health in child development and education. The World Health Organization states that mental health entails a sense of wellbeing where people can make use of their abilities, manage normal stresses, and be engaged members of society.

The psychological problems encountered by children and adolescents include issues like anxiety, emotional problems, behavioral problems, stress, and social adjustment problems. According to Patel et al. (2007), youth mental health was recognized as a global public health priority.

It is unique to the setting of schools that mental health can be promoted effectively as it involves many children in their natural setting. The school mental health approach normally consists of:

- Universal mental health promotion
- Social-emotional learning programmes
- Early identification of difficulties
- Counselling and psychological support
- Referral pathways to specialised services

According to Weare & Nind (2011), it is important to note that school mental health interventions are most successful when they are conducted using whole-school methods.

2.3 Relationship Between Inclusive Education and Mental Health Support

Inclusive education and mental health are highly inter-related. Acceptance, belonging, and participation of the students have shown positive outcomes for their psychological well-being and involvement in school life. On the other hand, rejection, stigma, discrimination, and learning problems may create mental issues.

Students with disabilities can face further problems such as:

- Social isolation
- Negative peer attitudes

- Reduced confidence
- Communication barriers
- Difficulties accessing support services

It should be noted that according to Koster et al. (2009), social participation was one of the key components of inclusion, suggesting that physical presence at classes is not always equal to inclusion.

Therefore, mental health provision must not be considered a supplementary service which is unrelated to inclusive education; rather, it should be regarded as a fundamental part of inclusive education.

2.4 Teacher Role in Supporting Student Mental Health

The teachers are extremely important in any inclusive educational environment since they regularly deal with children and become the first professionals who notice certain behavioural or psychological changes in them.

It is evident that the attitudes of teachers towards inclusive education have a significant impact on its effectiveness. Research by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) shows that teacher attitudes have a significant bearing on the acceptability of children with different requirements. Professional training has been identified to increase teachers' confidence for inclusive education.

Nonetheless, most teachers lack the preparation in:

- Identifying mental health concerns
- Supporting emotional regulation
- Managing behavioural difficulties
- Making appropriate referrals
- Implementing social-emotional learning activities

Thus, increasing the competence of teachers is crucial for creating good school mental health systems.

2.5 Social-Emotional Learning as a Preventive Approach

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has gained popularity as an effective intervention for improving the well-being of students. The main features of social-emotional learning include:

- Self-awareness
- Emotional regulation
- Empathy
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

According to Durlak et al. (2011) via a meta-analysis on the impact of SEL programmes in schools, there are notable gains in the emotional competencies, behaviors, and academic outcomes of students.

Another study by Taylor et al. (2017) shows that SEL helps provide long-lasting impacts by enhancing resilience and positive social relations.

In the case of inclusive schools, SEL offers a universal strategy that helps all students in the learning process.

2.6 School Counselling and Professional Support Systems

School counseling programs offer possibilities for early intervention, emotional support, and referral to specialized services. Based on international experience, integrated counseling approaches tend to be more successful if linked to wider school programs.

Atkins et al. (2010) recommended cooperation between educational and mental health sectors for developing sustainable school mental health programs. Such cooperation is especially relevant to India, where there are often shortages of trained counselors and psychologists within schools.

Effective school counseling programs need:

- Clearly defined professional roles
- Confidential support mechanisms
- Referral procedures
- Teacher collaboration
- Parent involvement

2.7 Indian Context: Challenges and Emerging Initiatives

School mental health services face challenges in India because of the following reasons:

- Large and diverse student populations
- Unequal resource distribution
- Shortage of trained professionals
- Social stigma surrounding mental health
- Limited school-based psychological infrastructure

The National Education Policy (2020) acknowledges the need for student wellbeing, counselling services, and overall development of children. The examples of student wellbeing programs and psychosocial approaches prove the growing interest of policies to the issue.

However, effective implementation will require proper coordination between the stakeholders.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study draws upon three complementary theoretical perspectives to guide the analysis and interpretation of the literature.

3.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The ecological system theory, put forth by Bronfenbrenner, provides an explanation for development of children as follows:

- **Microsystem:** Family, teachers, peers, classroom settings.
- **Mesosystem:** Interaction between school, family, and community.
- **Exosystem:** Education policies and institutions.
- **Macrosystem:** Social, cultural values, and laws.

The above framework provides evidence for the fact that mental well-being of students is affected by several environmental factors other than individual factors.

3.2 Social Cognitive Theory

The Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura emphasizes the interplay between the individual, behavior, and the environment.

In inclusive schooling, this theory can account for:

- Teacher self-efficacy
- Peer modelling
- Student confidence
- Social learning processes

Teachers who show behaviors that support the students can affect their attitude towards inclusion.

3.3 Positive Psychology Perspective

The study of positive psychology is concerned with human strengths, resilience, wellbeing and human potential.

It connects to inclusive education in that it emphasizes:

- Student strengths
- Belongingness
- Emotional competence
- Positive relationships

In this way, the theories mentioned above become a basis for the analysis of mental health in inclusive schools.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodological approach was used in this study to analyze the available literature on mental health support systems in Indian inclusive schools. A systematic review method was chosen since it provides the opportunity for researchers to find, appraise, synthesize and interpret the available scholarly literature in an objective manner.

In contrast to a conventional review, a systematic literature review method is based on a clearly outlined set of procedures related to literature search, inclusion criteria, data extraction and analysis. It ensures higher validity of research results and helps to reveal research trends, knowledge gaps and innovative practices.

This review was carried out using the guidelines from the **Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework**.

4.2 Review Process

The review process consisted of four stages:

1. Identification of relevant studies
2. Screening of titles and abstracts

3. Full-text eligibility assessment
4. Inclusion of studies for qualitative synthesis

4.3 Database Search

The literature search procedure was conducted systematically within leading academic databases in order to ensure broad coverage and identification of appropriate academic literature.

Table 1: Database Search Strategy

Database	Purpose
Scopus	Peer-reviewed interdisciplinary research
Web of Science	High-quality indexed publications
ERIC	Education-focused research literature
PubMed	Child and adolescent mental health studies
Google Scholar	Supplementary academic sources
JSTOR	Educational and social science literature

The search focused on literature published between 2000 and 2026.

4.4 Search Terms

The database search was performed by using keywords and Boolean operators. The following set of keywords were used: ("inclusive education" OR "inclusive school*" OR "students with disabilities") AND ("mental health" OR "psychological wellbeing" OR "school counselling" OR "emotional wellbeing") AND ("India" OR "Indian schools"). It was expected that the search string would help find research on the relationship between inclusive education and school-based mental health services in the Indian setting.

Additional keywords used include:

- School psychology
- Child mental health
- Social emotional learning
- Teacher mental health awareness

- Special education
- Student wellbeing
- Counselling services
- Educational inclusion

4.5 Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria of this systematic review entailed studies that investigated the issue of school-going children and adolescents, including those with special needs and inclusive education learners. The review involved studies carried out in Indian schools or similar educational institutions in developing nations, which were concerned with issues such as mental well-being, school counseling, psychological well-being, emotional well-being, teacher preparedness, and inclusive education. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports, PhD dissertations, policy documents, and scholarly book chapters written in the English language.

Table 2: Selection Criteria and Inclusion Requirements

Criterion	Inclusion Requirement
Population	School students, teachers, counsellors, inclusive education stakeholders
Setting	Inclusive schools/mainstream educational settings
Topic	Mental health support, wellbeing, counselling, SEL
Publication type	Peer-reviewed research articles and relevant reports
Language	only English
Time period	2000–2026

4.6 Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

- Focused only on higher education populations
- Were unrelated to school settings
- Addressed disability without psychological wellbeing dimensions
- Lacked sufficient methodological information
- Were opinion articles or editorials

4.7 Data Analysis

The technique for analyzing extracted information is thematic synthesis.

The process comprises:

1. Identifying recurring concepts
2. Grouping findings into themes
3. Comparing evidence across studies
4. Developing recommendations and an integrated framework

5. Results

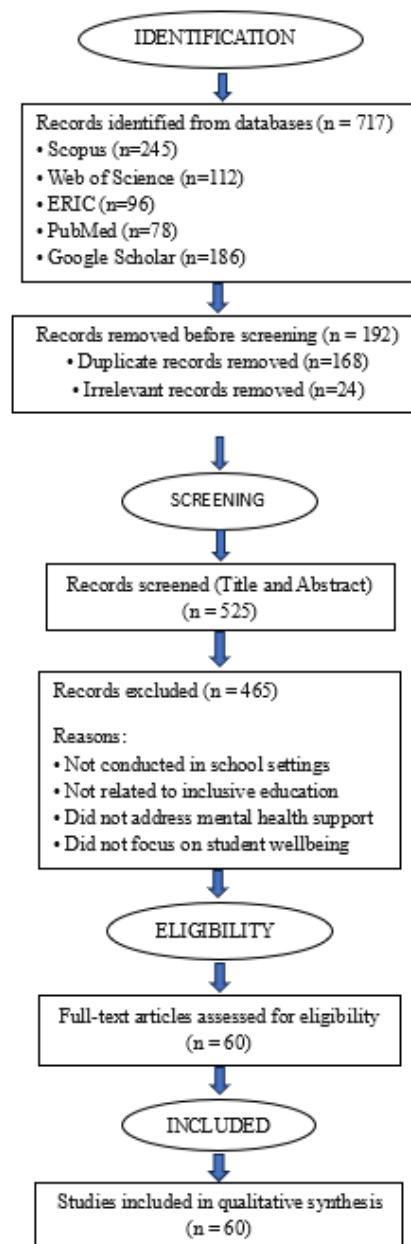
5.1 Study Selection Process

Study selection was done through the PRISMA 2020 methodology. The number of records obtained from the database searches through Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, and Google Scholar was 717. After the elimination of duplicates and irrelevancies, 525 studies were left for screening.

The screening stage entailed the exclusion of studies that had no focus on school setting, inclusive education, mental health services, and student well-being. Out of this, 60 studies satisfied the inclusion criteria and hence were used in qualitative synthesis.

Through the PRISMA method, it was evident that even as research is developing concerning inclusive education and children's mental well-being across the globe, there is less number of studies on the integration of mental health services in inclusive schools, especially in India.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Systematic Literature Review



5.2 Characteristics of Included Studies

All the studies in this review were characterized by various methodologies, making it possible to get an all-rounded comprehension of the concept of mental health interventions in inclusive educational institutions. In the review, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, qualitative researches, quantitative studies, policy studies, and conceptual papers were included, making it possible to combine different types of evidence.

In the selection process of the literature, Indian and international studies on inclusive education and school mental health have been considered. The major topics under study include inclusive education, readiness of teachers to handle the issues of mental health, school counseling, social and emotional learning, wellbeing of students, disability inclusion, and school climate in terms of building inclusive learning environments.

A summary of selected studies is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Characteristics of Included Studies

Author(s) & Year	Method	Context	Major Findings
Weare & Nind (2011)	Systematic review	International	Whole-school approaches are effective for promoting student mental health.
Durlak et al. (2011)	Meta-analysis	International	SEL programmes improve emotional skills, behaviour, and academic outcomes.
Fazel et al. (2014)	Review study	International	Schools provide important platforms for early mental health intervention.
Ainscow (2005)	Conceptual analysis	International	Inclusion requires systemic changes in school structures and practices.
Thapa et al. (2012)	Literature review	International	Positive school climate supports student wellbeing and engagement.
Avramidis & Norwich (2002)	Literature review	International	Teacher attitudes influence successful inclusion.
Sharma et al. (2009)	Survey study	India	Teacher preparation affects confidence toward inclusive education.
Singal (2008)	Qualitative study	India	Policy implementation faces classroom-level challenges.
Singal (2013)	Review study	India	Disability, poverty, and resource limitations affect educational participation.
Sagar & Schindler (2012)	Review study	India	Child mental health requires greater attention and early support.
Bronfenbrenner (1979)	Theoretical framework	International	Demonstrated that child wellbeing is influenced by interconnected systems including family, school, community, and policy environments. Provides theoretical foundation for school mental health approaches.
Patel et al. (2007)	Review article	Global	Highlighted youth mental health as a major public health concern and emphasised early intervention through community and educational systems.
Taylor et al. (2017)	Meta-analysis	International	Demonstrated sustained positive effects of school-based SEL programmes on student wellbeing and social competence.
O'Reilly et al. (2018)	Systematic review	International	Reported that successful interventions require teacher involvement, institutional support, and sustainability planning.
Florian (2014)	Conceptual review	International	Highlighted the need for inclusive pedagogical approaches that address learner diversity.

Osterman (2000)	Review study	International	Demonstrated that a sense of belonging is strongly associated with student motivation, engagement, and emotional wellbeing.
Forlin et al. (2009)	Survey study	International	Found that training and experience reduce teacher concerns regarding inclusive classrooms.
Loreman et al. (2013)	Survey research	International	Demonstrated that teacher self-efficacy is a key factor affecting inclusive classroom practices.
Singal & Muthukrishna (2014)	Conceptual review	India/South Asia	Argued for inclusive education approaches that consider social, cultural, and economic contexts.
Das et al. (2013)	Survey study	India	Reported that many teachers require additional training to effectively support students with disabilities.
Gururaj et al. (2016)	National survey	India	Demonstrated the burden of mental health problems and the need for accessible services.
Kutcher et al. (2016)	Review article	International	Emphasised the importance of mental health awareness among teachers, students, and communities.
Atkins et al. (2010)	Policy analysis	International	Recommended coordinated school mental health systems involving education and health sectors.
Weist et al. (2003)	Framework development	International	Proposed comprehensive models integrating prevention, intervention, and referral services.
Cohen et al. (2009)	Review study	International	Demonstrated that supportive school environments contribute to positive student outcomes.
Hymel & Swearer (2015)	Review article	International	Identified bullying and social exclusion as significant predictors of psychological distress.
Koster et al. (2009)	Literature review	International	Found peer relationships and social belonging to be central elements of meaningful inclusion.
UNESCO (2020)	Policy report	Global	Emphasised that inclusion requires removing educational, social, and psychological barriers.
WHO (2022)	Policy report	Global	Recommended community-based and rights-oriented approaches to mental health support.

5.3 Thematic Findings

The thematic synthesis generated seven major themes:

1. Availability and accessibility of mental health services
2. Teacher preparedness and professional capacity
3. School climate and psychological inclusion
4. Social-emotional learning and preventive approaches
5. Family and community engagement

6. Policy implementation challenges
7. Integrated support systems for inclusive schools

Theme 1: Availability and Accessibility of Mental Health Services

Findings

Another commonality found in literature was the shortage of mental health professionals available in schools. There are a number of schools, especially in rural and poor regions, which lack access to trained counselors and psychologists. Studies by Fazel et al. (2014) and Weist et al. (2003) have shown that a successful mental health system in schools necessitates coordinated efforts from both educational and health domains.

However, in Indian schools, there is an absence of mental health support systems in everyday practices and relies on external services provided occasionally.

Interpretation

The lack of easily available mental health experts in the educational institution is one of the problems that affect the early detection of psychological issues among the students, the timely evaluation and counseling as well as proper referrals to specific treatment facilities. The above results show that there is a necessity for the shift from the reactive approach of mental health management to the preventive one.

Theme 2: Teacher Preparedness and Professional Capacity

Findings

The teachers are normally the most available source of help to the students, but not all of them are equipped enough to handle issues related to emotions, behavior, and psychology of students. Research conducted by Avramidis & Norwich (2002) and Sharma et al. (2008, 2009) demonstrates a close link between proper training of teachers and increased levels of self-confidence, positive attitude, and successful inclusion. These are the key areas where professional development is required for teachers.

Interpretation

In addition to learning about disabilities, teachers need to learn the necessary competencies in the areas of mental health literacy, psychological first response, behaviour management and appropriate referral. It is necessary to incorporate such competencies of mental health in the training of teachers in order to be able to help them to take care of their students properly.

Theme 3: School Climate and Psychological Inclusion

Findings

School climate is an important variable in determining the wellbeing of students and the success of inclusive education. The findings from Thapa et al. (2012) and Cohen et al. (2009) show that positive school climates ensure safety, support and a sense of belongingness among students, which ensures their psychological well-being.

In order for children with special educational needs to be psychologically included, they need to be accepted among peers, have respectful interactions with teachers, face less discrimination and have opportunities for participating in school activities. The researchers Koster et al. (2009) stressed that participation was an important component of inclusion.

Interpretation

An inclusive school goes further than merely having students together in one classroom; rather, an inclusive school provides a setting that makes all learners feel included, valued, respected, and emotionally safe. Inclusion is only reached when learners feel they belong, hence, the importance of psychological inclusion in evaluating school performance.

Theme 4: Social-Emotional Learning as a Best Practice

Findings

It should be noted that social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been repeatedly recognized as a highly efficient prevention method in the context of comprehensive

development of students. According to Durlak et al. (2011), these programs improve emotional self-regulation, social skills, behavior in class, and academic performance of students. These beneficial effects are supported by Taylor et al. (2017).

Interpretation

SEL has great value in inclusive schools as it facilitates not only the social, emotional, and academic growth of all children but provides extra advantages to those who encounter difficulties on the social and emotional levels. In order to be most effective, SEL should be integrated into all curricular activities, teacher-student interaction, teaching techniques, and educational programs.

Theme 5: Family and Community Engagement

Findings

From the literature, there is a need for collaborative efforts between the school system, families, and the community to enhance the well-being of students. This collaboration will not only help students feel supported emotionally but also help in detecting any mental health problems they may be having and accessing resources necessary. Nevertheless, certain factors may impede the success of such collaboration including lack of awareness among parents regarding mental health problems, stigma associated with mental health, and poor communication among the involved parties.

Interpretation

The families have to be viewed as active partners in any inclusive mental health system of the schools since the engagement of families is very important in the provision of emotional, social, and academic support to the learners. Some of the ways through which family engagement can be increased include carrying out parent education programs that will ensure there is increased awareness on the need for mental health, maintaining communication between schools and families, and collaborative interventions involving the parents and the educators.

Theme 6: Policy Implementation Challenges in India

Findings

India has come up with effective policy commitments towards inclusive education and student well-being in various ways. There has been increased awareness regarding the significance of developing a favorable environment within schools to cater to the different requirements of the students. Despite these efforts, there have been major implementation challenges facing the effectiveness of these policies.

The major challenges include unequal resource allocation to the different regions, lack of monitoring processes to measure the implementation of inclusion and mental health projects, and a lack of experts who would help in the welfare of the students. Furthermore, differences have also existed in terms of provision of quality facilities and special systems within rural and urban schools.

Interpretation

The development of any policy needs to go hand in hand with appropriate implementation measures so that the intended objectives can be met successfully. In order to do this, there should be implementation guidelines, provision of sufficient finance to maintain programs and activities, professional development systems for educators and practitioners, as well as evaluation measures for monitoring the process and overcoming any challenges.

Theme 7: Need for Integrated Support Systems

Findings

It is evident from the reviewed literature that isolated approaches have little or no effect on the mental well-being of the learners. There is need to put in place coordinated mental well-being approaches that will bring on board all parties, such as the school administration, educators, counselors, parents, health experts, and policymakers. Collaboration between these

parties is very vital in the creation of frameworks aimed at the well-being of the learners.

Interpretation

In light of the evidence, the implementation of an inclusive school mental health system that provides students with the necessary emotional, social, and psychological interventions is called for. This system must incorporate the joint efforts of schools, families, communities, and mental health experts to ensure accessibility of mental health interventions to all students in a balanced way.

5.4 Overall Interpretation of Findings

It is evident from the results that mental health services form an essential but underdeveloped

aspect of inclusive education in India. While the policies are becoming aware of the well-being of the students, its actual implementation has not been possible due to various issues of structure, profession and society.

Effective inclusion within schools needs the adoption of prevention measures, professional intervention, training of teachers, a healthy culture in the school, involvement of families and policy commitment. Inclusion must be seen as a multidimensional process.

Based on the reviewed studies, the reviewed literature, this thematic synthesis explores the problems in providing mental health services in inclusive schools and develops evidence-based practices to improve such services in India.

Table 4: Thematic Synthesis of Challenges and Evidence-Based Practices for Mental Health Services in Inclusive Schools

Major Theme	Sub-Themes	Evidence from Literature	Interpretation of Findings	Recommended Best Practices
1. Limited Availability of Mental Health Professionals	Shortage of school counsellors, psychologists, and specialised support personnel	Fazel et al. (2014); Weist et al. (2003); Sagar & Schindler (2012); Gururaj et al. (2016)	Many schools lack access to qualified professionals, resulting in delayed identification and intervention for students experiencing emotional or psychological difficulties.	Establish school counselling services; develop district-level mental health resource centres; promote school–health department partnerships; expand tele-mental health services.
2. Insufficient Teacher Preparedness for Mental Health Support	Limited teacher training; lack of confidence in identifying emotional difficulties; inadequate inclusive classroom skills	Avramidis & Norwich (2002); Sharma et al. (2008); Sharma et al. (2009); Das et al. (2013)	Teachers are often the first adults to observe changes in student behaviour but may lack knowledge and skills to respond effectively.	Integrate child mental health and inclusive education modules into teacher education; provide continuous professional development programmes.
3. Policy–Practice Gap in Inclusive Education	Difference between national policies and classroom implementation;	Singal (2008); Singal (2016); UNESCO (2020);	Although policies promote inclusion, implementation remains	Develop school-level implementation plans; strengthen monitoring systems;

	inadequate monitoring and resources	Government of India (2020)	inconsistent due to resource constraints and limited institutional capacity.	allocate dedicated resources for inclusive mental health support.
4. Stigma Associated with Mental Health Difficulties	Negative attitudes; reluctance to seek counselling; misunderstanding of psychological needs	Kutcher et al. (2016); Patel et al. (2007); WHO (2022)	Social stigma prevents students and families from accessing available support services and discussing emotional concerns openly.	Conduct mental health awareness programmes; integrate mental health literacy into curriculum; encourage supportive communication practices.
5. Academic Pressure and Student Emotional Distress	Examination stress; anxiety; reduced motivation; emotional exhaustion	Patel et al. (2007); O'Reilly et al. (2018); UNICEF (2021)	Educational environments may contribute to stress when academic expectations are not balanced with emotional support.	Introduce stress management programmes; provide life skills education; promote balanced assessment practices.
6. Lack of Social and Emotional Learning Programmes	Limited focus on emotional regulation, empathy, relationships, and resilience	Durlak et al. (2011); Taylor et al. (2017); Greenberg et al. (2017)	Schools often emphasise academic achievement while giving insufficient attention to social-emotional competencies.	Implement structured SEL programmes across grade levels; integrate emotional learning into classroom activities.
7. Weak School–Family Collaboration	Limited parent awareness; communication gaps; inadequate family involvement	Weare & Nind (2011); Atkins et al. (2010)	Student mental health outcomes improve when families and schools work collaboratively.	Conduct parent awareness programmes; develop home–school communication systems; involve families in intervention planning.
8. Bullying, Discrimination, and Social Exclusion	Peer rejection; stigma towards disability; reduced sense of belonging	Hymel & Swearer (2015); Arseneault (2018); Koster et al. (2009)	Social exclusion negatively affects psychological wellbeing and prevents meaningful inclusion.	Develop anti-bullying policies; promote peer support programmes; encourage inclusive classroom cultures.

9. Limited Student Participation in Mental Health Decisions	Student voices not adequately represented; limited peer support structures	Osterman (2000); Thapa et al. (2012)	Students benefit when they experience belonging, autonomy, and participation in school life.	Establish student wellbeing groups; encourage peer mentoring; involve students in wellbeing activities.
10. Inadequate Early Identification and Referral Systems	Delayed recognition of emotional difficulties; unclear referral pathways	Weist et al. (2003); Atkins et al. (2010)	Absence of systematic screening and referral mechanisms reduces opportunities for early intervention.	Develop school referral protocols; train teachers in early identification; establish links with mental health professionals.
11. Rural–Urban Inequality in Service Access	Differences in infrastructure, professional availability, and resources	Singal (2013); Gururaj et al. (2016)	Students in rural and disadvantaged areas experience greater barriers to accessing mental health support.	Introduce mobile support services; expand digital counselling platforms; create regional support networks.
12. Limited Research Evidence on Indian School Mental Health Models	Few large-scale intervention studies; limited evaluation data	Sagar & Schindler (2012); Indian education research literature	Evidence regarding effective school mental health models in India remains insufficient.	Conduct longitudinal studies; evaluate intervention effectiveness; develop culturally appropriate assessment tools.

6. Discussion

This systematic review aimed at analyzing various issues regarding mental health support in inclusive schools in India to develop recommendations to improve psychological support systems in terms of practices and strategies. The results obtained reveal that mental health support is not just an extra part of inclusive education but an indispensable base for its successful implementation.

From the review of literature, it can be said that despite India's efforts towards inclusion of children with disabilities and other marginalized learners in schools, the process of inclusion is not complete in the absence of consideration of psychological well-being of these learners. Though learners might be physically present in

general classrooms, they would still face difficulties due to stigmatization, isolation, distress, and lack of support.

These results point to a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion where psychological inclusion should also be considered apart from participation in education and activities.

6.1 Mental Health as a Core Dimension of Inclusive Education

The conventional ways of achieving inclusion within the process of education include access to education, adaptation of the curriculum, involvement in the class, and accommodation of any disabilities that may be present. Such actions have been vital for improving the education of various learners.

However, it should be noted that in the current study, the inclusion has been seen not only as academic but also emotional and psychological in nature. It is very important to provide psychological well-being to students.

Students with anxiety, lack of confidence, or discrimination, or those who are excluded socially can remain unable to participate even where there is physical access to education. The finding reflects the principle of ecological theory of child development, as described by Bronfenbrenner, which states that child development takes place through interlinked systems of family, school, communities, and policies.

In this regard, inclusive education needs to be considered as a comprehensive concept, which ensures not only academic inclusion but also social and psychological inclusion of students.

6.2 Teacher Capacity as a Foundation for Inclusive Mental Health Support

Teachers became one of the most prominent factors of school mental health because of their everyday interaction with children. Teachers can detect warning signs of emotional problems and provide first aid to students.

Nevertheless, many teachers do not possess the necessary knowledge on mental health issues, emotion support techniques, behavior management, and referrals.

It is especially relevant for India, where teachers' functions have greatly extended due to the adoption of inclusive education policies.

Educator preparation programs should go beyond special educator preparation and include additional competencies in mental health issues that would better equip the educators for work in inclusive settings. Competencies should be built around children and adolescents' mental health literacy, trauma-informed interventions, positive behavioral supports, social-emotional learning interventions, and collaborative problem solving.

Building educators' self-confidence and competence in these areas would allow them to identify early problems related to psychological well-being and intervene in a timely manner.

Educators prepared for these kinds of situations can contribute to a positive school environment.

6.3 Whole-School Approaches as Effective Practice

The results reveal that sustainable mental health support cannot be solely based on individual counseling services. Rather, schools need to adopt a whole-school approach that entails prevention, promotion, intervention, and referrals.

Whole-school approach encompasses:

Universal Support

Universal support is offered to all students using preventive measures including social-emotional learning, life skills education, and creating a positive environment within the classroom. These techniques help in ensuring the emotional wellbeing of all learners.

Targeted Support

Targeted support is offered to those students who need more help through targeted interventions including small group programs, mentoring, and behavior support programs. Such programs help tackle issues faced by students related to emotions, social skills, or behavior and ensure that students receive guidance to further develop themselves.

Intensive Support

Support for students with complicated or serious needs is available in the form of professional counselling, psychological evaluation, and referral services. This multi-tiered system makes it possible for educational institutions to respond appropriately to varied student requirements and yet retain the concepts of inclusion and accessibility.

6.4 Indian Context: Moving from Policy Commitment to Implementation

Though policies have been made for inclusive education and wellbeing of children, there are several discrepancies between the goals of the policies and implementation at school level.

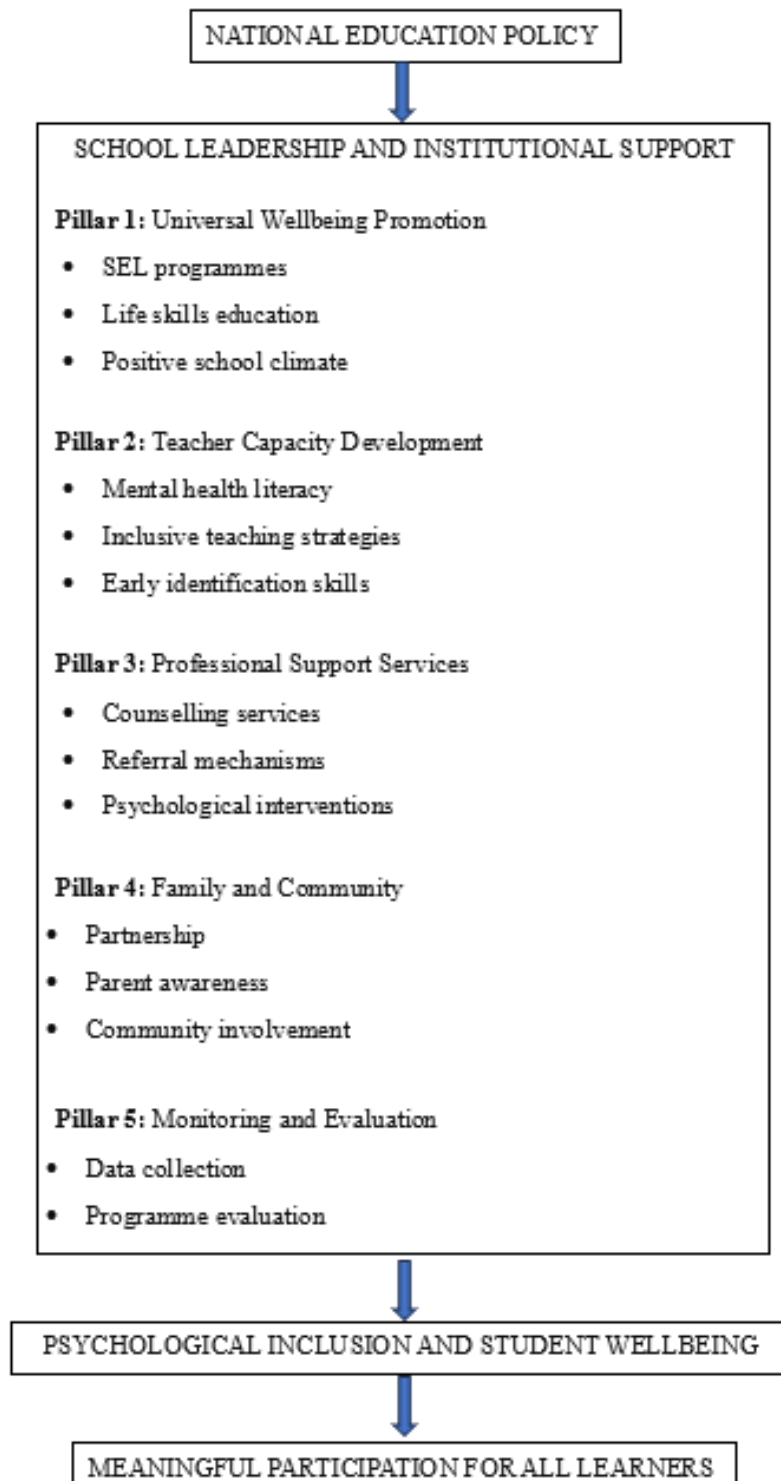
Some of the major issues are scarcity of resources, rural-urban differences, lack of trained

professionals, monitoring deficiencies, and stigma associated with mental health issues. These problems must be addressed by coordination between all parties involved.

7. Proposed Integrated Inclusive School Mental Health Framework for India (IISMHF)

Taking into account the results obtained, we can present the Integrated Inclusive School Mental Health Framework for India (IISMHF). According to this framework, the provision of psychological help should be considered an integral part of inclusive education.

Figure 2: Integrated Inclusive School Mental Health Framework for India (IISMHF)



7.1 Components of the Framework

Pillar 1: Universal Wellbeing Promotion

Universal Wellbeing Promotion is concerned with putting into place preventive systems for fostering emotional well-being in all students. It is necessary for schools to adopt practices like teaching programs in social and emotional learning, class discussions about emotions, peer support programs, and wellbeing activities to foster healthy learning environments.

Pillar 2: Teacher Capacity Development

Mental health, disability, inclusion and behavior support training should be part of teacher education so that the teachers will have the capacity to cope with diverse class environments. Continuous professional development training must also be conducted among teachers so that they will become more confident and competent in meeting the needs of the learners.

Pillar 3: Professional Mental Health Support

Schools need to establish a comprehensive mental health support system via the existence of school counselors and psychologists, referrals, and links between schools and community mental health facilities. These resources will assist in ensuring that there is early recognition of students' needs and proper interventions.

Pillar 4: Family and Community Partnerships

Family engagement can be enhanced via awareness programs, proper communication, and shared decision making. Family engagement will improve trust between the school and family members, foster greater understanding of students' psychological needs and lead to the creation of effective support mechanisms.

Pillar 5: Monitoring and Evaluation

Institutions need to develop proper methods of evaluation to gauge how well the well-being of students is being taken care of, availability of services, and effectiveness of the intervention process. Evaluation helps in identifying areas that need improvements, among other benefits.

8. Educational Implications

8.1 Implications for Teachers

Teachers must be ready to detect early warning signs of psychological problems, establish positive environments in classrooms, promote the involvement of students actively, and cooperate with specialists in mental well-being and other interested parties. This will allow teachers to give immediate assistance to students and help in creating psychologically supportive educational environments.

8.2 Implications for School Leaders

The management of schools should be at the forefront in the improvement of mental health support systems in schools through developing sound mental health policies, resourcing counseling services, fostering an inclusive school environment, and advocating for teacher training. Such actions go a long way in ensuring that students' varied mental health needs are acknowledged and taken care of.

8.3 Implications for Teacher Education Institutions

Training in school mental health issues needs to be included in teacher education courses by including modules on awareness about mental health, inclusive teaching techniques, counselling skills, and methods of social and emotional learning. These training programs may help teachers develop skills and knowledge that are necessary for working with diverse groups of students.

8.4 Implications for Policymakers

Policymakers must develop guidelines on mental health services in schools in their countries, ensure more trained professionals are available, have sufficient funding for the service delivery process, and enhance monitoring. Such steps are crucial for ensuring that there is consistent implementation and adequate provision of mental health services to students.

9. Recommendations

Based on the review findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop Comprehensive School Mental Health Policies

In any school which is considered to be inclusive, there should be an established mental health policy that covers important issues such as prevention, early detection, intervention, and referrals.

2. Strengthen Teacher Preparation

Education for teachers needs to include mandatory courses about mental health literacy, inclusivity, and emotional support strategies. Teachers will get the necessary knowledge and skills through such training to be able to determine the needs of students, offer suitable support, and create an inclusive environment.

3. Increase Availability of Mental Health Professionals

It is necessary to increase the number of psychologists, counselors, and other such professional people who can provide proper support to students. It becomes important to have such professional support services strengthened so that all sorts of requirements are met by the students in school.

4. Promote Social-Emotional Learning

Inclusion of social-emotional learning (SEL) in the curriculum of schools will enable the learners to develop their emotional literacy, resiliency, as well as their interpersonal skills. Social-emotional learning (SEL) should be incorporated in the curriculum of schools in order to make learning meaningful to the students.

5. Reduce Mental Health Stigma

The school should undertake programs like awareness campaigns, activities on student well-being, and educational programs for parents regarding mental health in order to make people more aware of mental health issues and make them take an active part in the whole issue.

6. Strengthen School-Community Partnerships

There should be cooperation among schools, families, and medical institutions in order to make up an efficient support system for the mental

well-being of students. A good cooperation will help make the process of getting necessary information easier and provide help in time.

7. Encourage Research and Evaluation

Future research should focus on the effectiveness of mental health programs in Indian schools, rural versus urban variations, student outcomes in the long term, and the scope of digital mental health programs. Such research will be able to give evidence-based guidance in strengthening such mental health programs.

10. Limitations of the Study

There are a number of weaknesses in the present review which must be recognized.

First, the results have been obtained mainly from the existing literature and do not fully reflect any of the unpublished or in-progress programs for school-based mental health.

Second, though foreign studies offer a lot of valuable information, differences in education systems, cultures, and resources can affect their applicability to the Indian context.

Third, the shortage of empirical studies on interventions carried out in India does not allow making firm conclusions about their effectiveness.

Therefore, further research should concentrate on the empirical analysis of school mental health programs in various Indian settings.

11. Conclusion

Mental health provision is an important but inadequately developed aspect of inclusive education in India. The results of this systematic review show that successful inclusion needs more than just physical access to the classroom space; it needs to involve spaces where children feel emotionally safe and supported psychologically.

According to the findings, successful implementation of inclusive school mental health programs involves collaborative work between teachers, school administration, parents, psychologists and policy makers. Professional development of teachers, social and emotional learning, counseling services and supportive

school climate are some of the key elements of this work. This systematic review suggests an Integrative Inclusive School Mental Health Framework for India as a concept of implementation of psychological well-being within inclusive education system. Future education policies must recognize mental well-being as an important part of inclusion and use evidence-based practices that will make it possible for all students to be included successfully.

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Data Availability Statement

The data analysed in this study are available from the published sources cited in the manuscript.

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