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AN ANALYSIS OF LEGAL PROVISIONS AND REGULATORY MECHANISMS IN ENSURING STUDENT WELL-BEING AND MENTAL WELL BEING

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Abstract

Student well-being, encompassing both physical and mental health, has emerged as a critical concern in India. The immense pressure to excel academically, coupled with a social stigma surrounding mental health, has resulted in alarming student suicide rates. This paper analyses the existing legal provisions and regulatory mechanisms in place to ensure student well-being and mental health in India. It examines key legislation like the Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009, the Mental Healthcare Act (MHA) 2017, and guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC). The paper then identifies gaps in implementation, such as a lack of qualified mental health professionals in educational institutions and limited awareness about mental health resources. Finally, it proposes recommendations for strengthening the legal framework and suggests practical strategies for promoting student well-being, including mandatory mental health education, increased counsellor-to-student ratios, and anti-discrimination policies.

Keywords – Mental health legislations, stigma, depression, India, suicide rates

Introduction

Education is widely regarded as the cornerstone of individual and societal progress. However, in India, the relentless pursuit of academic excellence has come at a heavy cost – the well-being and mental health of students. The pressure to perform well in examinations, coupled with societal expectations and a competitive educational environment, has been linked to a rise in stress, anxiety, and depression among students. This, unfortunately, manifests in alarming student suicide rates across the country.

This paper delves into the legal and regulatory landscape governing student well-being and ensuring student well-being and mental health in India. It explores the existing legal framework, including landmark legislation and guidelines, and evaluates its effectiveness in promoting mental well-being within educational institutions. The paper further identifies challenges in implementation and proposes

recommendations for strengthening the legal framework and promoting a culture of mental health awareness and support within educational settings.

Legal framework for student well-being and mental health

1. The Right to Education Act (RTE) 2009: This act guarantees free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6 and 14. While not explicitly focusing on mental health, the RTE Act lays the foundation for fostering a supportive learning environment. It mandates schools to provide a "healthy and safe" learning environment, which can be interpreted as encompassing mental health considerations.

2. The Mental Healthcare Act (MHA) 2017: This act represents a significant step forward in recognizing mental health as an integral part of overall health. It enshrines the rights of persons with mental illness, including the right to treatment and confidentiality. The MHA

emphasizes the importance of creating a service delivery system for mental health services, which could be extended to educational institutions.

3. University Grants Commission (UGC) Guidelines: The UGC, the apex regulatory body for higher education in India, has issued guidelines promoting student well-being and mental health. These guidelines advocate for establishing counselling centres, promoting physical fitness and sports activities, and fostering a positive and supportive environment for students. Challenges in Implementation and Gaps in the Legal Framework

Despite the existence of a legal framework, significant gaps remain in implementation on the ground. Here are some key challenges:

Limited Access to Mental Health Professionals: Educational institutions often lack qualified mental health professionals like counsellors and psychiatrists. This hinders access to timely intervention and support for students in distress. A 2019 study by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) found that India has a mere one psychiatrist for every 200,000 people, highlighting the severe shortage of mental health professionals. This shortage is even more acute in educational settings, leaving students struggling to find adequate support.

Stigma Surrounding Mental Health: A persistent social stigma surrounds mental illness in India. This discourages students from seeking help due to fear of judgment or discrimination from peers, teachers, and even family members. This stigma stems from a lack of understanding about mental health issues, often seen as personal weakness or character flaws. The stigma also leads to social isolation and a reluctance to discuss mental health concerns, further hindering access to support.

Lack of Awareness: Students, teachers, and parents often lack awareness about mental health issues and available resources. This hinders early identification of problems and

timely intervention. Early recognition of symptoms is crucial for effective treatment and preventing escalation of mental health issues. However, a lack of awareness can lead to students suffering in silence, unaware that their struggles have names and solutions.

Resource Constraints: Schools and universities may face resource constraints, limiting their capacity to implement comprehensive well-being programs or hire additional mental health professionals. Budgetary limitations can restrict schools from establishing counselling centres, hiring qualified counsellors, or organizing mental health awareness campaigns. This lack of resources translates into a gap in the services provided to students, jeopardizing their well-being.

Gaps in the Legal Framework: While the aforementioned legal provisions offer a foundation, there are gaps that need to be addressed. The RTE Act, for instance, while mandating a "healthy and safe" learning environment, lacks specific provisions regarding mental health support. Similarly, the MHA focuses on treatment for existing mental illness but doesn't explicitly address preventive measures or early intervention strategies within educational institutions.

Recommendations for strengthening the framework and promoting well-being

To create a more supportive environment for student well-being and mental health, the following recommendations are proposed:

Mandate Mental Health Professionals in Schools: A minimum counsellor-to-student ratio should be mandated for all educational institutions. This ensures a baseline level of support and allows for more personalized attention to students in need. Additionally, collaboration can be encouraged with mental health professionals from nearby hospitals or clinics, expanding the support system available to students.

Mental Health Education Programs: Integrate mandatory mental health education programs

into the curriculum. These programs should address topics like stress management, recognizing mental health issues, and seeking help. Education can equip students with the knowledge and skills to navigate challenges and build resilience. Programs should also be designed for teachers and parents, enhancing their ability to identify potential issues and provide support to students.

Anti-Discrimination Policies: Implement anti-discrimination policies within educational institutions to combat the stigma surrounding mental illness. These policies should clearly define acceptable behaviour and outline consequences for discrimination against students seeking mental health support. A safe and accepting environment can encourage students to open up about their struggles and seek the help they need.

Awareness Campaigns: Organize regular awareness campaigns within educational institutions and the wider community. These campaigns can utilize workshops, seminars, and interactive events to destigmatize mental health and educate students, teachers, and parents about available resources. Partnerships with mental health organizations can be crucial in developing effective awareness campaigns that reach a wider audience.

Financial Support: Allocate dedicated budgetary resources to support well-being initiatives in educational institutions. This funding can be used to hire mental health professionals, develop mental health programs, and implement awareness campaigns. Financial support from the government, private institutions, or through fundraising initiatives is essential for ensuring the sustainability of well-being programs and promoting a culture of mental health support within educational settings.

The role of technology

Technology can play a significant role in promoting student well-being and mental

health. Online platforms and mobile applications can provide students with access to mental health resources, self-help tools, and anonymous support groups. Teletherapy services can connect students with mental health professionals remotely, bypassing geographical limitations. However, it is crucial to ensure these platforms are secure, confidential, and accessible to all students, including those with limited internet connectivity. In conclusion, the legal provisions and regulatory mechanisms in place in India provide a strong foundation for ensuring student well-being and mental health. However, there are several challenges that need to be addressed to ensure that these provisions and mechanisms are effectively implemented and enforced. By increasing awareness and education about mental health, improving access to mental health services, and adopting a more inclusive and supportive approach to mental health, we can ensure that all students in India have the opportunity to thrive and succeed. In recent years, concerns about student mental health have been on the rise, with a significant number of college students experiencing symptoms of common mental disorders (CMD) like stress, anxiety, depression, and somatoform disorders. A study conducted among 500 students highlighted the need for proactive measures to support student well-being and mental health.

Case study findings

The study, led by Dr. Srividya Vikram from KS Hegde Medical Academy, revealed that over 50% of the participating students were grappling with CMD. To address this, the study recommended the establishment of a peer-counselling team to bridge the gap between students and mental health professionals. Positive peer support was identified as a key factor in enabling students to seek appropriate help during times of distress, thereby mitigating the risk of severe mental health issues in the future.

Moreover, the research emphasized the importance of integrating mental health

modules into college curricula. By equipping student volunteers with basic helping skills through a peer-support network, colleges can foster a culture of mental health awareness and support among students. The study also shed light on the coping strategies adopted by students, highlighting the impact of emotion-focused coping and negative coping mechanisms like substance abuse on academic performance and mental well-being.

Recommendations and implications

Based on the study's findings, it is evident that proactive interventions are essential to promote student mental health. Implementing policy-level interventions, such as integrating mental health modules into college curricula and establishing peer-support networks, can play a pivotal role in enhancing student well-being. By addressing the stigma associated with mental health issues and providing students with the necessary tools and resources to cope effectively, colleges can create a supportive environment conducive to positive mental health outcomes.

Policy recommendations:

The Indian government has taken several initiatives to address student mental health, including the recently announced operational guidelines to safeguard the mental and emotional well-being of students. These guidelines include creating an inclusive, integrative, and non-discriminatory environment, sensitization and capacity-building programs for faculty members, and orientation, counselling, and hand-holding mechanisms. It also includes early detection mechanisms for immediate intervention, promoting close-knit student-faculty interactive communities, incorporating team activities within the curricular exercises, effective and speedy grievance redress mechanisms, physical fitness provisions and programs, emphasis on nutrition, personal involvement, and monitoring by the heads of institutions, faculty, and parents.

Ensuring student well-being and mental health requires a multi-pronged approach. While a legal framework exists in India, significant gaps remain in implementation. Addressing these gaps, strengthening the legal provisions, and promoting a culture of mental health support within educational institutions is crucial.

Recent data underscores the urgency of this issue. A study by PeakMind in 2023 reported an approximately 65% increase in the number of students seeking mental health counseling compared to the previous year. This rise aligns with the alarming National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data from 2021, which showed that student suicides were at a five-year high. In that year alone, a staggering 35,950 students lost their lives to suicide, highlighting the devastating consequences of neglecting student mental health.

These statistics paint a concerning picture, but they also demonstrate a growing awareness of the issue. The increased demand for counselling services indicates a willingness among students to seek help. However, the existing infrastructure struggles to keep pace. To bridge this gap, we must prioritize the recommendations outlined earlier.

By mandating mental health professionals in schools, integrating mental health education into curriculums, and implementing robust anti-discrimination policies, we can create a supportive environment where students feel empowered to seek help. Furthermore, ongoing awareness campaigns and dedicated financial resources are essential for ensuring the long-term sustainability of these initiatives.

Investing in student well-being is not just a moral imperative, it's a strategic one. A healthy and mentally sound student population translates into a more productive and engaged future workforce. By prioritizing student well-being today, we can pave the way for a brighter tomorrow.

Conclusion

Expanding the reach of mental health services remains a pressing need in both rural and urban areas of India. While the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 has set a framework for addressing these issues, practical implementation lags behind due to insufficient infrastructure and a shortage of qualified professionals.

To bridge this gap, innovative approaches are necessary. In urban settings where smartphone usage is prevalent, the introduction of interactive mental health applications could be particularly effective. These apps could serve as platforms for individuals to express their emotions and stress, while also offering tools for self-assessment through psychometric diagnostic tests. Additionally, they could provide contact information for mental health professionals, facilitating easier access to care.

However, addressing these challenges cannot solely rely on government initiatives. Public-private partnerships must be fostered, encouraging corporations to invest in mental health initiatives as part of their corporate social responsibility efforts. By leveraging both public and private resources, we can work towards creating a more accessible and inclusive mental healthcare system.

In conclusion, while legislative frameworks exist to support mental health services, their effective implementation requires collaborative efforts from all sectors of society. By addressing infrastructure gaps, fostering innovation, and promoting partnerships, we can strive towards the goal of ensuring mental wellness for all citizens, regardless of their geographic location.

Notes

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2. Mental Health Act 2017, §18–28, Act No. 10, Acts of Parliament, 2017 (India).
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