



Right To Education and Its Psychological Impact on Child Development

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Abstract

Education is not merely a process of transferring knowledge from teacher to learner; it is a transformative experience that shapes the cognitive, emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of a child's personality. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act), which came into force on 1 April 2010, marked a historic milestone in India's educational journey by making elementary education a fundamental right for all children aged 6 to 14 years. This paper examines the provisions of the RTE Act, its implementation frameworks, and critically analyses its psychological implications for child development.

Drawing upon the classical philosophy of Aristotle - who defined education as the creation of a sound mind in a sound body - and integrating contemporary psychological frameworks, this paper argues that physical well-being (supported by initiatives such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme) is inseparable from mental well-being in achieving educational objectives. Furthermore, the paper explores how mental health challenges can undermine educational outcomes, and underscores the relevance of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) in acknowledging psychological well-being as a cornerstone of a holistic education system.

Keywords: Right to Education, RTE Act 2009, Child Development, Psychological Well-being, Mid-Day Meal Scheme, Aristotle, NEP 2020, Mental Health, Holistic Education

1. Introduction

Education stands as the most powerful instrument for social transformation, individual empowerment, and national development. It is through education that a child evolves from a dependent being into a self-reliant, critically thinking, and socially responsible individual. However, the realization of this potential depends not only on access to schooling but also on the quality of the environment - physical, emotional, and psychological - in which learning takes place.

In India, the constitutional promise of education as a fundamental right was fulfilled when Parliament enacted the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. This legislation, which became operational from 1 April 2010, was a paradigm shift in educational governance. It placed a constitutional obligation on the State to provide free and compulsory elementary education to every child between the ages of six and fourteen years.

Yet, the mere enactment of a law does not guarantee educational achievement. Research across disciplines - education, psychology, sociology, and public health -

consistently demonstrates that a child's psychological health is a fundamental prerequisite for effective learning. A child grappling with hunger, anxiety, trauma, or social exclusion cannot engage meaningfully with academic content, regardless of the quality of instruction.

This paper, therefore, investigates the interface between the legal framework of the RTE Act and the psychological dimensions of child development, arguing that true educational equity requires not just open school doors but psychologically nurturing environments within those doors.

2. Philosophical Foundations of Education and Child Development

2.1 Aristotle's Definition: A Sound Mind in a Sound Body

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, in his seminal works on education and ethics, articulated a vision of education that was holistic and humanistic. His famous dictum - often rendered as 'A sound mind in a sound body' (derived from Juvenal's *Mens Sana in corpore Sano*, but philosophically attributed to Aristotle's educational

philosophy) - encapsulates the belief that the intellectual and physical development of the child are inseparable.

"Education is the creation of a sound mind in a sound body. It develops man's faculty, especially his mind, so that he may be able to enjoy the contemplation of supreme truth, goodness and beauty." - Aristotle

Aristotle believed that education must address the whole child - body, emotions, character, and intellect. He emphasized that moral and intellectual virtues are cultivated through habit, environment, and deliberate practice. A child who is physically unhealthy, emotionally disturbed, or socially marginalized cannot develop the cognitive faculties necessary for intellectual growth.

This philosophical insight finds remarkable resonance in modern developmental psychology, which recognizes that physical health, emotional security, social belonging, and cognitive stimulation are all essential prerequisites for optimal learning and development. Aristotle's framework, thus, serves as the philosophical bedrock upon which contemporary educational psychology rests.

2.2 Education as Holistic Development

Contemporary educational thought, as reflected in the works of Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, and Bronfenbrenner, reinforces the Aristotelian view that development is multidimensional. Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development, Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages, and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory all converge on the understanding that a child's learning is deeply embedded in their physical, emotional, social, and cultural context.

For education to fulfil its purpose - the creation of a sound mind in a sound body - schools must be environments that simultaneously stimulate intellectual curiosity, provide emotional safety, promote physical health, and foster social inclusion. The RTE Act, in this regard, must be evaluated not only as a legal instrument of access but as a psychological and developmental framework.

3. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009

3.1 Legislative Background and Enactment

The journey towards legislative recognition of education as a fundamental right in India was long and arduous. Article 45 of the original Constitution of India (1950) placed the provision of free and compulsory education for children up to the age of fourteen years in the Directive Principles of State Policy - aspirational but not enforceable. For six decades, this constitutional aspiration remained incompletely realized.

The Unnikrishnan J.P. v. State of Andhra Pradesh (1993) judgment of the Supreme Court of India held that the right to education is implicit in the right to life under Article 21. The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act of 2002 subsequently inserted Article 21-A into the Constitution, making education a fundamental right. To give effect to this constitutional mandate, Parliament enacted the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 - commonly known as the RTE Act or the Right to Education (RTE) Act.

3.2 Year of Enactment: The RTE Act was enacted by the Parliament of India in the year 2009.

3.3 Date of Implementation: The Act came into force on 1 April 2010, marking a transformative moment in India's educational history.

3.4 Psychological Significance of RTE Provisions

The prohibition of corporal punishment and mental harassment under the RTE Act is of profound psychological significance. Research in developmental psychology and trauma studies consistently shows that physical punishment and emotional abuse in school settings cause lasting psychological damage - including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and diminished academic motivation. The RTE Act, by outlawing such practices, creates a legal basis for psychologically safe schools.

Similarly, the emphasis on a child-friendly environment, non-discriminatory admission, and inclusive education for children with disabilities reflects an awareness - even if not fully articulated - of the psychological prerequisites for effective learning. Children who feel safe, valued, and included are significantly more likely to engage actively with learning, develop positive self-esteem, and achieve academic success.

4. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme: Nourishing the Body to Educate the Mind

4.1 Overview of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme

The Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme - officially known as the PM POSHAN Scheme (formerly the National Programme of Nutritional Support to Primary Education) - is one of the world's largest school feeding programmes. Launched nationally in 1995 and expanded significantly after the Supreme Court's landmark order in PUCL v. Union of India (2001), the scheme provides freshly cooked, hot meals to children enrolled in government and government-aided schools across India.

4.2 The Aristotelian Principle in Practice

The Mid-Day Meal Scheme is, in essence, the practical application of Aristotle's philosophical principle that a sound mind requires a sound body. It recognizes that intellectual development cannot be divorced from physical well-being. A child who is hungry, anaemic, or physically weak cannot concentrate, participate, or learn effectively. By addressing the physical dimension of development, the MDM scheme creates the biological and neurological conditions necessary for cognitive growth.

Moreover, the shared experience of the mid-day meal has important social-psychological dimensions. It promotes a sense of community, belonging, and equality among children from diverse backgrounds. For many children from disadvantaged homes, the mid-day meal is not only a source of nutrition but also a moment of normalcy, dignity, and social inclusion - all of which are fundamental to psychological well-being and academic motivation.

5. Psychological Impact of Education on Child Development

5.1 Education and Cognitive Development

Quality education stimulates the development of higher-

order cognitive functions - including logical reasoning, abstract thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and metacognition. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underscores the role of skilled instruction and social interaction in pushing the child's cognitive development beyond what they could achieve independently. When schools provide stimulating, supportive, and appropriately challenging learning environments - as envisioned by the RTE Act - they serve as powerful engines of cognitive development.

5.2 Education and Emotional Development

Schools are not merely academic institutions; they are emotional ecosystems. The relationships children form with teachers and peers, the successes and failures they experience, and the feedback they receive - all profoundly shape their emotional development. A positive school environment fosters emotional regulation, empathy, resilience, and a growth mindset. Conversely, a toxic school environment - characterized by bullying, discrimination, academic pressure without support, or teacher indifference - produces anxiety, depression, school refusal, and emotional dysregulation.

5.3 Education and Identity Formation

Erikson's psychosocial theory identifies the school-age years (approximately 6 to 12 years) as the stage of Industry vs. Inferiority - during which the child develops either a sense of competence and industry or a sense of inferiority and inadequacy. The quality of educational experiences during this period profoundly shapes the child's self-concept, academic self-efficacy, and sense of identity.

Children who receive encouragement, recognition, and appropriate challenge during the elementary years develop a healthy sense of competence and a positive academic identity. Those who experience repeated failure, neglect, or stigmatization develop a sense of inferiority that can persist into adolescence and adulthood, creating lifelong barriers to learning and social participation.

6. Mental Health as a Prerequisite for Educational Achievement

6.1 The Mental Health–Education Nexus

The relationship between mental health and educational outcomes is bidirectional and mutually reinforcing. On one hand, positive educational experiences promote mental health - by providing structure, purpose, social connection, competence, and a sense of achievement. On the other hand, good mental health is a prerequisite for effective engagement with education. Children who suffer from untreated anxiety, depression, attention deficit disorders, trauma-related conditions, or other mental health challenges face significant barriers to learning, even when they have access to quality schools.

A society that aspires to universal, equitable, and quality education - as envisioned by the RTE Act and the Sustainable Development Goal 4 - must, therefore, treat the promotion of children's mental health as an integral component of educational policy. Mental health and educational achievement are not parallel tracks; they are deeply intertwined dimensions of child development.

6.2 Prevalence of Mental Health Issues Among School-Going Children

Research indicates that approximately 10–20% of children and adolescents worldwide experience mental health conditions. In India, studies suggest that a significant proportion of school-going children suffer from anxiety disorders, depression, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and behavioural disorders - many of which go unidentified and untreated due to stigma, lack of awareness, and inadequate mental health infrastructure in schools.

Unaddressed mental health issues manifest in schools as chronic absenteeism, poor academic performance, disruptive behaviour, social withdrawal, and, in severe cases, school dropout. These outcomes represent not only individual tragedies but also a systemic failure to translate the legal right to education into a lived educational reality.

6.3 Mental Health and Social Well-being

A society in which mental health is neglected cannot achieve its educational goals, however well-designed its legislative frameworks may be. Education's ultimate purpose - the creation of informed, empathetic, productive, and civically engaged citizens - requires individuals who are not only intellectually capable but also emotionally resilient, socially competent, and psychologically stable.

7. National Education Policy 2020 and Psychological Well-being

7.1 Overview of NEP 2020

The National Education Policy 2020 represents the most comprehensive reform of India's educational framework since the National Policy on Education of 1986. Developed after extensive consultations across the country, NEP 2020 articulates a vision of education that is holistic, multidisciplinary, flexible, and child-centred. It proposes fundamental structural, curricular, and pedagogical reforms from the early childhood level through higher education.

7.2 NEP 2020's Emphasis on Psychological Well-being

In a significant departure from earlier policy frameworks that focused predominantly on cognitive and academic outcomes, NEP 2020 explicitly recognizes the importance of psychological well-being as a central concern of education policy. Several key provisions of NEP 2020 reflect this orientation:

- **Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** NEP 2020 emphasizes the integration of social-emotional learning into the school curriculum, recognizing that emotional intelligence, self-regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills are as important as cognitive abilities for life success.
- **Holistic Report Cards:** NEP 2020 proposes the development of holistic report cards that assess not only academic achievement but also social skills, emotional development, and overall well-being - moving away from the narrow focus on marks and grades.
- **Teacher Training in Child Psychology:** NEP 2020 mandates that teacher education programmes incorporate substantial components of child development, psychology, and inclusive education,

equipping teachers to identify and respond to students' psychological needs.

- **School Counsellors and Mental Health Support:** NEP 2020 acknowledges the need for school counsellors and psychological support services, particularly for adolescents and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Stress Reduction and Examination Reform:** Recognizing the psychological harm caused by high-stakes examinations, NEP 2020 proposes fundamental reforms to the assessment system - including competency-based assessments, reduced emphasis on rote learning, and the elimination of the board examination culture in its current form.
- **Inclusive Education:** NEP 2020 reaffirms the commitment to inclusive education for children with disabilities, recognizing the psychological dimension of exclusion and the importance of belonging for all learners.

7.3 NEP 2020 as a Psychological Framework

NEP 2020's acknowledgment of psychological well-being as a legitimate and central concern of educational policy represents a significant conceptual advance. It recognizes - consistent with both Aristotelian philosophy and contemporary developmental psychology - that education is not merely about academic knowledge but about the cultivation of the whole person: cognitively, emotionally, socially, morally, and physically.

In doing so, NEP 2020 creates a policy bridge between the legal right to education (RTE Act 2009) and the psychological prerequisites of meaningful learning. It moves the discourse from access to quality, and from quality to well-being - recognizing that a child who is psychologically distressed cannot benefit from even the best-designed curriculum or the most qualified teacher.

The alignment of NEP 2020 with contemporary research in educational psychology, neuroscience, and mental health represents a promising direction for Indian education policy. However, the translation of these policy intentions into institutional practice remains a critical challenge that demands sustained commitment, adequate resource allocation, and systemic capacity-building.

8. Challenges in Implementation

Despite the progressive frameworks established by the RTE Act 2009 and NEP 2020, significant challenges persist in translating legal and policy provisions into psychological and educational realities for children across India:

- **Infrastructure Deficits:** Many schools, particularly in rural and tribal areas, lack basic physical infrastructure - including adequate classrooms, toilets (especially for girls), clean drinking water, and play spaces - that are essential for psychological safety and dignity.
- **Teacher Shortages and Quality:** The shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in remote areas, undermines the quality of instruction and the development of positive teacher-student relationships that are foundational for psychological development.
- **Mental Health Stigma:** Social stigma surrounding mental health issues prevents many families and communities from acknowledging and seeking support

for children's psychological difficulties, leaving many children without necessary interventions.

- **Inadequate Counselling Services:** The vast majority of Indian schools - particularly at the elementary level - do not have trained counsellors or psychologists, leaving teachers ill-equipped to identify and address students' psychological needs.
- **Socioeconomic Barriers:** Poverty, child labour, malnutrition, domestic violence, and community violence create profound psychological burdens for millions of children, which schools alone cannot address without coordinated intersectoral support.
- **Implementation Gaps in RTE:** Despite the legislative mandate, many provisions of the RTE Act - including the 25% reservation, the prohibition of corporal punishment, and the maintenance of pupil-teacher ratios - are inadequately enforced in numerous states.

9. Recommendations

Based on the foregoing analysis, the following recommendations are proposed for strengthening the interface between the right to education and the psychological well-being of children:

- **Integration of Mental Health into the School Curriculum:** Social-emotional learning should be formally integrated into the school curriculum from the primary level, equipping children with the skills of emotional regulation, empathy, conflict resolution, and psychological resilience.
- **Mandatory School Counsellors:** Every school with an enrolment of 500 or more should be mandated to employ at least one trained school counsellor or educational psychologist. For smaller schools, cluster-level or block-level counselling services should be established.
- **Teacher Training Reform:** Pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes must include comprehensive modules on child developmental psychology, mental health first aid, trauma-informed teaching, and inclusive pedagogy.
- **Strengthening the Mid-Day Meal Scheme:** The quality, nutritional adequacy, and universality of the Mid-Day Meal Scheme must be continuously strengthened, with rigorous monitoring of meal quality, coverage, and nutritional outcomes.
- **Psychologically Safe School Environments:** Schools must be supported through training, resource provision, and monitoring to create environments that are free from bullying, discrimination, and all forms of abuse - environments in which every child feels safe, valued, and included.
- **Community Awareness Programmes:** Awareness campaigns must be conducted at the community level to reduce stigma associated with mental health, encourage help-seeking behaviour, and promote understanding of children's psychological needs among parents and community members.
- **Holistic Assessment Systems:** In line with NEP 2020's vision, assessment systems must be reformed to evaluate children holistically - encompassing cognitive, social, emotional, and physical dimensions - moving away from the singular focus on academic marks.

10. Conclusion

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, implemented with effect from 1 April 2010, marked a watershed moment in India's commitment to educational equity. By elevating elementary education to the status of a fundamental right, it created a legal architecture for universal access to schooling. The Mid-Day Meal Scheme, as a complementary intervention, addresses the physical dimension of child development - embodying the Aristotelian ideal of a sound mind in a sound body. However, the analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that legal access and physical nourishment, while necessary, are not sufficient for the realization of education's transformative potential. The psychological well-being of the child is the invisible infrastructure of education - without it, even the most well-designed schools and curricula cannot achieve their intended outcomes. A society that truly aspires to educational equity must, therefore, invest equally in the mental health of its children.

The National Education Policy 2020's explicit acknowledgment of psychological well-being as a central concern of educational policy represents a significant and welcome advance. It aligns India's educational vision with global best practices in educational psychology and reflects the understanding that the purpose of education - as Aristotle articulated millennia ago - is the holistic development of the human person: body, mind, and character.

The imperative, now, is to move from vision to practice - to build schools that are not merely places of instruction but communities of learning, safety, care, and psychological growth. This is the challenge, and the opportunity, that lies at the heart of India's educational mission in the twenty-first century.

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