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Research Article

Examining the Integration of Mental Health Awareness in Curriculum Design: A Policy and Practice Perspective

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Abstract:
This study explores the integration of mental health awareness into educational curriculum design, with a focus on both policy and practice perspectives. Mental health in educational settings has become increasingly important, and the integration of mental health education into school curricula is essential for addressing student well-being. This qualitative research aims to understand the extent and effectiveness of mental health awareness in the curricula of government and private schools. The study includes 22 students (12 boys and 10 girls) from D.El.Ed programs at DIET, Karkardooma, who participated in semi-structured interviews. These students provided insights into their experiences with mental health education within the school curriculum. The study also utilizes other data sources, including curriculum frameworks, policy documents, and expert opinions, to assess how mental health awareness is being integrated into the educational system. Findings suggest that while there is some degree of integration of mental health awareness in schools, the approach is inconsistent and fragmented. Students reported benefits such as improved mental well-being and reduced stigma, but the impact on academic performance was less clear. The study highlights the need for more structured and comprehensive policies, teacher training, and curriculum designs to ensure that mental health awareness is effectively integrated into the educational experience for all students.

Keywords: Mental Health Awareness, Curriculum Design, D.El.Ed Students, Educational Policy, Student Well-being, Government and Private Schools, Teacher Training, Mental Health Education, Academic Performance.

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Introduction:

The introduction serves as a vital component of any research study, laying the groundwork for the entire project by clearly defining the research topic, outlining the problem, and presenting the study's objectives and significance. Mental health has become an increasingly

important issue in educational systems globally, with significant consequences for students' overall well-being, academic performance, and long-term development. The integration of mental health awareness in educational curricula is crucial to ensuring that students not only receive academic knowledge but also develop the necessary emotional and psychological resilience to navigate the complexities of modern life. Educational institutions, being one of the most influential environments for young people, are uniquely positioned to address mental health challenges and to foster a culture of support, understanding, and resilience.

In many educational settings, mental health issues among students have risen substantially, driven by factors such as academic pressure, social isolation, family dynamics, and societal expectations. Adolescents, particularly those in the higher secondary and early tertiary phases of education, face immense pressures related to identity formation, academic achievement, and future career choices. These pressures can manifest as stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges, which, if left unaddressed, can impede students' academic progress and personal development. In this context, integrating mental health awareness into curricula becomes a strategic approach to equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to manage their mental health, seek help when needed, and reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues.

The career preparedness of higher secondary students is profoundly affected by social influences and the perceived attractiveness of various job opportunities. In today's rapidly evolving world, these factors have become increasingly relevant as adolescents navigate an ever-changing job market shaped by technological advancements and global economic shifts. Understanding these influences is essential for equipping students with the necessary tools to make informed career decisions, ensuring they are well-prepared for future challenges. However, the connection between mental health and career preparedness remains underexplored, especially in the context of how mental health awareness within educational curricula may impact students' perceptions of their future and their ability to make sound, informed decisions about their career paths.

Mental health awareness within educational curricula can also help in reducing the stigma associated with mental health disorders. Historically, mental health issues were often ignored or stigmatized in school settings, leading students to conceal their struggles or avoid seeking help. This can have detrimental effects, including worsening symptoms and long-term consequences for students' academic and social development. By normalizing discussions around mental health and embedding awareness in the curriculum, educational institutions can foster an environment where students feel more comfortable addressing their mental health needs and accessing support when required.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of mental health in education, the integration of mental health awareness into curricula is still in its infancy in many regions. Schools often face challenges in implementing consistent, well-structured mental health education programs due to a lack of resources, insufficient teacher training, and the absence of clear policies or guidelines on how to address mental health. This variability in the integration of mental health awareness across schools, particularly in the context of government and private institutions, raises important questions about how mental health education is being delivered, its impact on student outcomes, and the barriers to its widespread implementation.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how mental health awareness is currently integrated into the curricula of both government and private schools, with a specific focus on the experiences of D.El.Ed students at DIET Karkardooma. D.El.Ed students, as future educators, play a critical role in the implementation and delivery of mental health education, and understanding their perspectives on the current state of mental health awareness within their training programs is essential for improving future curricula and policies. The study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of mental health integration on students' overall well-being, academic performance, and preparedness for future teaching roles.

In the rapidly evolving educational landscape, the integration of mental health awareness in curriculum design represents not only an educational need but a societal imperative. As schools evolve to address a broader range of student needs, it becomes crucial to ensure that mental health is recognized as a key component of students' educational experiences. By exploring the intersection of policy, practice, and student experiences, this research seeks to contribute to the development of more effective, comprehensive mental health education strategies that can better support students in their academic journey and personal growth.

Through qualitative analysis, including interviews with 22 students (12 boys and 10 girls) from government and private schools within the D.El.Ed program at DIET Karkardooma, this study seeks to gain deeper insights into how mental health is addressed in the curriculum. The research will also examine other data sources, such as curriculum documents and policy frameworks, to understand the broader landscape of mental health integration in education. Ultimately, this study aims to provide recommendations for enhancing the integration of mental health awareness within educational curricula, thus promoting a more holistic and supportive environment for students' academic and emotional development.

Operational Definitions:

Independent Variable:

1. Integration of Mental Health Awareness in Curriculum: This refers to the inclusion of mental health education, awareness, and related activities within the educational curriculum. It encompasses the policies, strategies, and content that schools implement to promote mental health understanding and support among students.

Dependent Variables:

1. **Student Well-being**: This refers to the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of students, including their ability to manage stress, form healthy relationships, and maintain a positive mental state as a result of exposure to mental health education.
2. **Academic Performance**: This refers to the academic success of students, which can be measured through grades, test scores, participation, and overall achievement in school. It reflects the impact of mental health awareness on students' educational outcomes.

Review of Related Literature:

The integration of mental health awareness into school curricula is gaining attention globally due to its potential impact on students' overall well-being and academic performance. Several studies highlight the importance of addressing mental health in educational settings, exploring both the theoretical frameworks and practical implementation of mental health programs in schools.

Mental Health and Educational Outcomes: Research has shown that mental health issues significantly affect students' academic outcomes. According to **Weare (2015),** mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and stress can lead to lower academic performance, increased absenteeism, and a decrease in engagement with school activities. A study by **Hughes et al. (2016)** found that students who reported better mental health demonstrated higher levels of academic success. Similarly, **Eklund & Lichtenstein (2019)** highlighted the positive correlation between students' well-being and improved academic performance, emphasizing the need for mental health education to foster positive learning environments. These studies underline the critical role that mental health plays in students' ability to perform academically and the necessity of integrating mental health awareness into curricula.

Curriculum Design and Mental Health Education: The design of school curricula, especially about mental health, is still evolving. Several studies have examined how mental health topics are incorporated into educational frameworks. **Murray et al. (2017)** noted that the curriculum in many schools often lacks formal mental health education despite increasing recognition of its importance. In contrast, **Weist et al. (2018)** found that schools with structured mental health education programs reported better student outcomes in terms of emotional regulation and academic success. Their research advocates for a curriculum that includes mental health education as a mandatory component to provide students with the skills to recognize, manage, and address mental health challenges.

Barriers to Implementing Mental Health Awareness: The integration of mental health awareness in school curricula faces several challenges. According to **Langley et al. (2015)**, some of the primary barriers include lack of teacher training, insufficient resources, and societal stigma surrounding mental health. **Sullivan et al. (2019)** also identified that many educators feel unprepared to handle mental health issues in the classroom and are uncertain about how to implement mental health programs effectively. Furthermore, **Mendelson et al. (2015)** argue that mental health initiatives in schools often face resistance from parents, communities, and policymakers who may perceive mental health education as unnecessary or stigmatized. These studies underscore the challenges schools encounter when trying to incorporate mental health awareness into their curricula and highlight the need for comprehensive training, policy support, and cultural shifts to overcome these barriers.

Effectiveness of Mental Health Programs in Schools: Several studies have examined the effectiveness of mental health programs in schools. A systematic review by **Fazel et al. (2014)** found that school-based mental health programs, especially those that focus on early intervention and prevention, significantly reduce the symptoms of mental health disorders and improve students' social and academic skills. **Jorm et al. (2017)** also reviewed global mental health education programs, emphasizing that programs which engage both students and teachers yield better outcomes in terms of reducing stigma and increasing mental health literacy. Similarly, **Reavley et al. (2013)** demonstrated that mental health education programs in schools not only improve students' knowledge of mental health issues but also reduce the negative attitudes and stigma associated with mental illness, fostering a more supportive environment for students.

Student Well-being and Curriculum Integration: In addition to academic performance, student well-being is a crucial factor in the success of mental health education initiatives. **Fazel et al. (2014) and Seligman et al. (2009)** highlighted that when mental health education is integrated into the curriculum, students tend to have a better understanding of their emotions, coping strategies, and interpersonal relationships. As a result, they report increased self-esteem, better mental health, and a more positive outlook on life. **Cohen et al. (2016)** further emphasized that integrating well-being into the curriculum not only benefits students' mental health but also contributes to the overall school climate, promoting a culture of inclusivity and support.

Policy and Practice Perspectives: A key factor in the successful integration of mental health awareness into school curricula is the role of policy and practice. National and local policies play a significant role in determining the extent to which mental health education is incorporated into school curricula. **Patel et al. (2016)** argued that robust policies are essential for creating an environment where mental health education is prioritized, adequately funded, and implemented consistently. **Tennant et al. (2016)** found that countries with clear mental health policies integrated into educational systems reported better student outcomes, indicating the importance of strong policy support for mental health education. Furthermore, **Saxena et al. (2018)** noted that there is a need for international collaborations to develop effective mental health education frameworks that can be adapted to various educational systems.

Research Methodology:

The methodology section outlines the systematic approach undertaken to address the research problem. It

encompasses the research design, objectives, hypotheses, participant details, tools used, data collection methods, and the procedure adopted for analysis.

1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the integration of mental health awareness in curriculum design. The approach focuses on understanding the perceptions, experiences, and insights of the participants through interviews and supplementary secondary data analysis. This design enables an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon within its real-life context.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To examine the extent to which mental health awareness is integrated into the curricula of government and private schools.
- To analyze the perceptions of D.El.Ed students regarding the effectiveness of mental health education in fostering student well-being and preparedness for academic challenges.

3. Hypotheses

- There is a significant difference in the integration of mental health awareness in the curricula of government and private schools.
- Mental health awareness integration in the curriculum positively impacts students' well-being and academic performance.

4. Participants

The study involved 22 students (12 boys and 10 girls) enrolled in the D.El.Ed program at DIET, Karkardooma. These students had diverse academic and social backgrounds, and they represented both government and private schools.

Sampling Method

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct experiences with the curriculum and its emphasis (or lack thereof) on mental health awareness. This ensured that the selected participants provided relevant and insightful data.

5. Tools Used

Primary Tool:

- **Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**: This tool consisted of open-ended questions to capture participants' perspectives on:
- The inclusion of mental health topics in the curriculum.
- The perceived effectiveness of these topics in addressing students' emotional and psychological needs.
- Suggestions for improvement in curriculum design related to mental health.

Secondary Sources:

- Curriculum frameworks of government and private schools.
- Policies and guidelines related to mental health education from national and regional education boards.
- Relevant research articles, reports, and documents that provide insights into global practices in mental health education.

6. Data Collection

Primary Data Collection:

- **Interviews**: One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 22 participants to ensure a comfortable environment for sharing honest and detailed responses. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was recorded with participants' consent for accuracy in data transcription.

Secondary Data Collection:

- Official curriculum documents, policy guidelines, and previous studies were reviewed to gather comprehensive insights into the integration of mental health awareness in curricula.

7. Procedure

1. **Preparatory Phase:**
   - Ethical clearance was obtained from DIET Karkardooma.
   - Participants were briefed about the study's objectives, procedures, and confidentiality measures.
   - Consent forms were distributed and collected.
2. **Data Collection Phase:**
   - Interviews were conducted in a quiet and neutral setting to ensure participants' comfort.
   - Field notes were taken to record non-verbal cues and contextual observations.
3. **Data Management:**
   - Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim.
   - Secondary data was systematically organized for thematic analysis.
4. **Data Analysis Phase:**
   - Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes emerging from the qualitative data.
   - Responses were categorized under broad themes such as "curriculum gaps," "perceptions of mental health awareness," and "impact on student well-being."

8. Scope and Delimitations

- **Scope:** The study focuses on the D.El.Ed students' perspectives and the integration of mental health awareness in the curricula of government and private schools.
- **Delimitations:** The study is limited to 22 participants from DIET Karkardooma. Insights are based on their specific experiences and the curriculum frameworks reviewed.

9. Ethical Considerations

- Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.
- Informed consent was obtained prior to participation.
- The research adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring respect and fairness throughout the study.

10. Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover key

insights and trends. Secondary data sources were triangulated to validate the findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. This systematic methodology ensures the collection of rich, meaningful data to explore the integration of mental health awareness in curriculum design and its impact on student outcomes.

Data Analysis, Results, and Findings:

The data analysis focused on identifying patterns, themes, and insights from the interviews conducted with 22 D.El.Ed students (12 boys and 10 girls) from DIET Karkardooma, along with secondary data from curriculum documents and policy frameworks. The results are presented in alignment with the study's objectives and hypotheses.

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis of Interviews:

The responses from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Key themes that emerged include:

1. **Awareness of Mental Health Concepts**

- Many participants recognized the importance of mental health education but reported limited exposure to structured content on the topic within their curriculum.
- Students noted a lack of focus on mental health-related topics in both government and private school curricula.

2. **Curriculum Gaps**

- Participants observed that while some aspects of mental well-being (e.g., managing stress) were informally discussed, there were no formal lessons or structured activities to address mental health awareness.
- Government school curricula were perceived as less comprehensive in addressing mental health compared to private school curricula, although gaps existed in both.

3. **Perceived Impact on Students**

- Students felt that a lack of mental health education led to stigma and misconceptions about mental health issues among peers.
- They emphasized the need for inclusion of mental health awareness to promote emotional resilience, reduce stigma, and support academic success.

4. **Suggestions for Improvement**

- Participants suggested adding workshops, seminars, and classroom discussions on mental health.
- Practical activities such as mindfulness exercises and access to counseling services were also recommended.

Secondary Data Analysis

- A review of curriculum documents revealed minimal mention of mental health topics. Policies emphasized inclusivity and holistic development but lacked specific guidelines for integrating mental health education.
- Reports from educational boards highlighted ongoing efforts to address mental health but noted that implementation remained inconsistent across schools.

Results and Findings:

Objective 1: To Examine the Extent of Mental Health Awareness Integration in Curricula

1. **Limited Integration in Curricula**

- **Government Schools:** Mental health topics were almost entirely absent from the formal curriculum in government schools. Participants noted that any reference to mental health was indirect, limited to broader themes like stress management during exams or occasional health education sessions.
- **Private Schools:** While private schools showed marginally better inclusion, it was mostly through extracurricular activities such as stress-relief workshops or motivational talks. These efforts were inconsistent and not part of a structured curriculum.
- **Common Gaps:** Across both school types, there was a lack of specific lessons, structured activities, or systematic programs addressing mental health awareness. This indicates a systemic oversight in prioritizing mental health within educational frameworks.

2. **D.El.Ed Curriculum and Training**

- Participants expressed concern that their own teacher training did not adequately cover mental health education.
- They reported feeling ill-prepared to address mental health issues in their future classrooms, highlighting a critical gap in their professional development.

Objective 2: To Analyze Perceptions of D.El.Ed Students Regarding the Effectiveness of Mental Health Education

1. **Positive Perceptions of Mental Health Education**

- **Impact on Student Well-being:**
- A majority of participants (73%) strongly believed that integrating mental health awareness into the curriculum would positively impact students' emotional resilience, social skills, and ability to manage stress.
- Students noted that early exposure to mental health concepts could reduce stigma, promote empathy, and empower students to seek help when needed.
- **Impact on Academic Performance:**
- Participants linked better mental health to improved focus, participation, and academic success. They emphasized that emotionally stable students are more likely to excel academically and form meaningful relationships with peers and teachers.

2. **Challenges in the Current System**

- **Stigma and Misconceptions:**
- 68% of participants noted that the absence of formal mental health education perpetuated stigma and ignorance among students, making it difficult for those with mental health challenges to seek help.
- **Teacher Preparedness:**
- The lack of mental health education in teacher training programs left future educators unequipped to address these challenges, further exacerbating the issue.

3. **Recommendations by D.El.Ed Students:**

- Introducing structured lessons on mental health concepts at various grade levels.

• Organizing regular workshops, role-play activities, and peer counseling sessions to foster practical understanding and reduce stigma.
• Incorporating mental health education modules in teacher training programs to better prepare educators.

Findings on Hypotheses Testing

1. **Hypothesis 1: There is a significant difference in the integration of mental health awareness in the curricula of government and private schools.**

• **Result:** Partially Supported.
• Private schools demonstrated slightly better informal practices in addressing mental health awareness (e.g., workshops, extracurricular activities), but no significant difference was observed in terms of structured curriculum integration. Both types of schools lacked formal, consistent inclusion of mental health topics.

2. **Hypothesis 2: Mental health awareness integration in the curriculum positively impacts students' well-being and academic performance.**

• **Result:** Supported.
• Participants unanimously agreed that structured mental health education would significantly enhance student well-being, reduce stigma, and indirectly improve academic performance by fostering a healthier learning environment.

Key Findings:

Absence of Formal Curriculum: The study highlights a significant gap in the structured integration of mental health awareness within both government and private school curricula. This absence underscores the need for targeted policy interventions to incorporate mental health education as an essential component of school programs.

Stigma and Cultural Barriers: Misconceptions and stigma surrounding mental health continue to be pervasive among both students and educators. This is primarily attributed to the lack of formal education on mental health and the absence of open, informed discussions on the topic within educational settings.

Teacher Training Gaps: D.El.Ed students voiced a pressing need for the inclusion of mental health modules in their teacher training programs. They emphasized that such training is crucial for equipping future educators to effectively address mental health issues in their classrooms and support student well-being.

Policy Implementation Lags: Although national and state-level education policies emphasize holistic student development, the practical implementation of mental health initiatives remains inconsistent and insufficient. This gap highlights a disconnect between policy goals and on-ground realities in schools.

Impact of Informal Practices: While informal activities like workshops, seminars, and motivational talks were noted to have some positive effects, these efforts are not enough to address the broader issue. Participants emphasized that informal practices must be complemented by a structured and formal curriculum to ensure lasting and meaningful impact on students' mental health awareness.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the pressing need to integrate mental health awareness into school curricula and teacher training programs to address critical gaps in education. Both government and private schools lack a structured approach to mental health education, with informal practices such as workshops providing limited and inconsistent support. The absence of formal curriculum elements dedicated to mental health contributes to stigma and misconceptions among students and educators, further exacerbating challenges related to emotional well-being in educational settings.

The perceptions of D.El.Ed students revealed a strong demand for structured mental health modules in teacher training programs to equip future educators with the skills and knowledge to address these issues effectively. Participants also highlighted the potential benefits of mental health education, including fostering emotional resilience, reducing stigma, and improving academic performance. However, the findings also revealed a disconnect between policy goals and their implementation in schools, emphasizing the need for stronger, actionable strategies to bridge this gap.

In conclusion, integrating mental health awareness into educational frameworks is not merely an enhancement but a necessity for fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Addressing these gaps through policy reform, curriculum development, and comprehensive teacher training can ensure that schools become spaces where mental well-being is prioritized alongside academic success, paving the way for healthier and more resilient generations of learners.

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