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● Health Services ● Life Skills Education ● Healthy School Environment

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The National Life Skills, Values Education & School Wellness Program

Healthy Schools ..... Healthy India

Education is not preparation for life...
Education is life itself

- John Dewey

Submission Guidelines

- All submissions should follow the APA 7th Edition style
- All submissions should have an abstract summarizing the main points.
- The submission should have a clear and informative title
- The submission should be original and should not be in the process of consideration by any other publication at the same time.
- The submission should have rigorous and reliable information and provide a deeper level of understanding.
- Submissions should be engaging and accessible to non-expert readers as well.
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- Initial acceptance of any submission does not guarantee publication. The editorial board shall do the final selection.
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Faculty members are invited to be the guest editors of the journal on a theme relevant to school health and wellbeing.

The Manuscripts for publication in the peer-reviewed and refereed Indian Journal of School Health and Wellbeing (IJSHW) are to be submitted via e-mail to journal@expressionsindia.org along with a copy of the email to the editor.

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Message from the Editors

Violence against children in all its forms, from the slap of a parent to the unwanted sexual advances of a peer, is harmful, morally indefensible and a violation of every child's rights. Research in neurosciences shows that violence and abuse faced for prolonged durations in early years is 'toxic stress' that can impede brain development and learning, along with long term emotional consequences. In this context, it becomes important to understand how violence in childhood is being perceived and managed and what is being done to provide safe spaces for a safe childhood.

Though there is growing awareness of violence against children, yet there is also a belief that it is rare and doesn't happen with 'our children'. One doesn't need to look far to find violence in the lives of children. The different types of violence children face are violent discipline, corporal punishment, domestic violence, sexual abuse and violence at school. Whatever the context or underlying cause, the mere trivialization of violence leaves scars. Children grow up to be adults, but continue to hide behind the shame of those experiences or fear of reprisal. But, it keeps affecting their lives forever.

Children face violence and abuse in multiple contexts. Home is supposed to be the safest place for the child. So are schools considered safe haven where parents send their child with a free mind, but not anymore. Studies indicate that violence and abuse at home and school is quite common, perpetrated often by known persons and in many instances culturally sanctioned and believed as 'best for the child'. In many instances, violence against children, specially by parents and teachers, gets rationalized as necessary and inevitable or is tacitly condoned and ignored. The fact that mostly those who inflict violence on children are people they trust, this makes it very hard for them to complain and stand against the perpetrators without feeling guilt or rejection of other adults. This results in under reporting of violence against the youngest members of our society.

Whereas the Millennium Development Goals did not address violence directly, three targets in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2015) speak to the issue of violence against children. Many additional targets integrated throughout the framework address related risk factors. Protecting children against violence is a path towards more peaceful and inclusive societies, as called for by SDG 16.

It is important the issue of violence and abuse against children is taken up in India. India has enacted the POCSO act, which focuses on sexual violence, but it is silent on other forms of violence like physical, verbal and psychological violence. There is no special protection for children against violence. The act of violence would come to fore only if violence is severe, else it is likely to remain in wraps. It will take individual and collective action to right this global wrong. It is hoped that the hidden oppression which children face in form of violence, will get some attention through this issue.

This issue of **Indian Journal of School Health and Well Being** attempts to address Violence, Abuse and Child Rights issues in the context of school, home and society. The issue would explore instances of violence ranging from corporal punishment, violent disciplining, bullying, physical, emotional, sexual abuse, violations of right to education, and preventive measures too. The purpose is to bring to the fore child rights infringements in school, child rights awareness of teachers and sensitization of educators on child rights. It is important to break the silence around violence and abuse of all forms which children face, and teachers and educators can play a vital role in this.

Dr. Geeta Chopra

Message from the Patrons

It is a matter of great happiness to note that the latest issue of the Indian Journal of School Health & Wellbeing published by the Expressions India is being released. It is a well known fact that Research publications and Journals in particular are the most authentic sources of verified knowledge and experiences. The sharing of such knowledge and experiences not only amongst the Researchers, Scientists, Policy Planners and Implementers, but also the Activists working in the concerned area and persons having special interest in that area benefits all. It is our privilege to reiterate that the Expressions India has been doing pioneering work since long, in the field of Health Education under its banner of "Holistic Health and School Wellness Programme" to enable the school education and teachers holistic facilitation in realizing the goal of Health Education in Schools. The present publication is a momentous indicator of this initiative.

The major bottleneck in the way of achieving the objective of Health Education has been the particularistic conceptualization of its transaction process. The goal of development of holistic health and wellbeing of young learners cannot be attained by making them gather certain information and rote-learn those. It can be attained only by a transaction process focused on experiential co-scholastic methodology that ensures active participation of learners and substantially contribute to the development of life skills enabling young children to manage their lives more competently and grow as truly empowered human resource of the nation and human society at large. To facilitate this process it is very critical to encourage and empower the teachers, so that they act like facilitators and mentors.

The formal school education system need to look towards interacting and taking the support from the initiatives like the one taken by Expressions India under its National Life Sills Education & School Wellness Programme aimed at realizing the Goal of "HEALTHY SCHOOL.....HEALTHY INDIA". It is pertinent to state that the Schools and other educational institutions that have been associated with such endeavours have strongly felt the need for such programs to be a adopted by all schools including Higher Education System.

It is this context the Journal of School Health has potential to reinforce the process of realizing the vision of Health Promoting Schools getting integrated into the education system in India. We are more than confident that the present issue of the Journal will strengthen this grand endeavour and empower all who are creatively engaged in the promotion of Health Education in Schools. With immense pleasure we would like to express our gratitude for Advisory group, Editorial Board and Members of the Executive Editorial Committee for their valuable contribution, ungrudging cooperation and keen interest and also for making available the benefits of their rich experiences and knowledge.

"If there is will, there is way, and if the will is reinforced by enlightened path-breakers, the way would lead to the destination at the earliest ".

Dr. Jitendra Nagpal, M.D., D.N.B.

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Otherness: A Levinasian Framework for Educational Institutions' Wellbeing

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Abstract

Policymakers, educators, and teachers make numerous efforts to provide an adequate school environment for teaching and learning. Despite these continuous efforts, there are instances of marginalisation of certain identities, experiences and ways of being, causing dropouts, absenteeism, and burnout amongst students and teachers. This affliction of individuals in the school system indicates the deleterious results of poor institutional well-being. This paper discusses the foundational flaws in understanding inclusion and further argues that the central cause of poor institutional well-being is the negation of the Other, an idea advanced by Levinas. This repudiation of the Other leads to a lack of belonging, even within the school system, which Young terms "internal exclusion." Furthermore, this article explores ways to address these problems through ethical responsibility toward the Other.

Keywords: *Internal Exclusion; Marginalisation; Other(ness); Health and Wellbeing; Responsibility*

Introduction

The landscape of schooling has shifted from segregation to integration and then to inclusion. The state has taken multiple measures to universalise education, including Operation Blackboard (1987), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001), District Primary Education Programme (1994), Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (2009), and various other schemes and policies. One such landmark step was the arrival of the RTE Act 2009, which made education free and compulsory for children aged 6-14 (RTE Act, 2009). Studies have shown that many significant and successful efforts have been made to improve the enrollment rate in schools through various affirmative action, such as seat reservation for students from Economic Weaker Section (EWS) in private institutions (Romero & Singh, 2022), mid-day meal scheme (Jayaraman & Simroth, 2011), scholarships & financial assistance (Farooqui et al., 2018), Ladli yojna (Singhal & Anand, 2017), commutation assistance (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017) etc.

On the contrary, over the years, reports have shown that the dropout rate across schools in India remains high, despite a significant increase in enrollment. As per the UDISE+ report, the Primary Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) is above 100%; however, the national dropout rate at the secondary school level is approximately 12.6%-14% and is significantly higher in particular rural and marginalised sections of India (MoE, 2022). The recently developed educational policy, NEP 2020, also highlights that a large number of students from socially disadvantaged groups leave school early (MHRD, 2020, Section 3).

Student retention in schools remains a critical challenge for policymakers, curriculum designers, and other education stakeholders. Most of the factors identified by Vishishtha & Jain (2020) behind this phenomenon are social, such as discrimination, violence, bullying, and illness, and political and legal, such as the absence of legal safeguards in the RTE and its ineffective implementation. Apart from them, the limited success of education-related schemes and programmes, operational gaps in the Mid Day Meal Scheme, and household factors such as family and individual issues, gender-based discrimination, and financial instability, along with the quality of curriculum and scarcity of resources, are some of the other crucial causes (Vishishtha & Jain, 2020). Similarly, it is also observed that the discriminatory practices pursued by teachers and classmates, such as caste-based discrimination during mid-day meal distribution and sitting arrangements in the class, create an environment of alienation for the

students coming from marginalised communities (Thorat & Lee, 2005; Thorat & Sabharwal, 2010; Bajoria, 2014). This further causes isolation, disengagement, and exclusion within the institution, leading to high absenteeism and dropout rates.

Most of the above-mentioned factors concern institutional and physical access to schools and can be mitigated through external support and administrative effectiveness. However, some of the factors at the individual level are often subtle and attitudinal, and require immediate attention, such as biased and discriminatory behaviours by teachers and fellow students, and the neglect of the experiences of students from diverse/ marginalised backgrounds. To address these concerns, this study aims to understand the most fundamental attitude that leads to the feelings of exclusion and identity-based discrimination linked with the negation of the Other (Levinas, 1961/1969, 1974/1998) that directly or indirectly pushes students out of the school system, especially those coming from the marginalised sections with diverse and unique experiences. It further proposes implications for teachers, administrators, and school management to eliminate discrimination and marginalisation by looking for solutions in the spirit of Otherness.

Furthermore, this study employs a qualitative research design, drawing on secondary data, to explore and understand the phenomenon of internal exclusion, discrimination, and marginalisation. Researchers conduct library-based work to gather information and develop conceptual and analytical understanding by examining existing literature and implementation gaps. The current scenario of marginalisation is then analysed through Levinas's conceptual framework, utilising the concept of the Other. Later, recommendations are given to bridge the gaps existing at ground level, rooted in the acknowledgement and acceptance of the Other(ness).

Since this study is theoretical, it relies on secondary data, engages with the ideas of educational thinkers and philosophers such as Levinas, and reframes the traditional norms of validity and reliability typically followed in empirical research. For instance, validity takes the form of credibility and is ensured by utilising well-researched, reliable sources of information and literature, such as official government reports and peer-reviewed articles. Further, reliability is maintained through a coherent, structured, and logical analysis and argument in understanding the causes of existing phenomena of internal exclusion and marginalisation through the lens of philosopher Levinas' concept of Other(ness). Rigour is achieved through conceptual clarity, logical soundness, and precision in argumentation.

Institutional Marginalisation and Negation of the Other

Indian society represents an ideal site of diversity. It encompasses diverse classes, castes, cultures, ethnicities, genders, languages, religions, and abilities. Within this diverse space, every individual rejoices in having multiple identities. These identities do not persist in isolation but interact with one another to shape lived experiences, resulting in instances of privilege and disadvantage. When multiple identities intersect, they give rise to complex forms of exclusion within educational institutions. Thus, it becomes important to understand institutional marginalisation through this intersectional perspective. This understanding provides a lens through which marginalisation is viewed not only as the absence of access or representation but also as a prerogative of certain kinds of experiences, identities, and ways of being, thereby rendering others invisible.

Public and policy discourse often views inclusion as the key solution to the injustices faced by the marginalised (Enslin & Hedge, 2010). Contemporary discourses presuppose that educational institutions incorporate identities perceived as 'different', defined by caste, class, gender, religion, language, and so on. The implicit understanding of these discourses is that there are dominant or normative identities, against which the 'different' is identified and subsequently accommodated—such an understanding risks reducing inclusion to a process of assimilation rather than transformation. Thus, the underlying assumption of inclusion needs a critical evaluation. To eliminate the exclusion of certain 'different' identities, physical access and representation may help address the issue; however, experiences of exclusion within the educational institution often persist due to practices that sideline them, resulting in what Young (2000) calls internal exclusion.

Many research conducted states the reasons for school dropout or lack of retention to be poor quality of learning at school, bullying/harassing school environment (Prakash et al., 2017), schools not having usable or gender specific toilets for tribal girls (Nayak & Kumar, 2022), lack of menstrual hygiene management (Sinha & Paul, 2018), teacher absenteeism (Chatterjee et al., 2018), teacher competence (Nayak & Kumar, 2022), use of corporal punishment (Dehadray, 2019), lack of support for students falling behind with their studies, peer pressure influencing the dropout behaviour (Paraman & Mohd Hussain, 2022), use of standardised language and standardized textbooks and syllabus (Nayak & Kumar, 2022), institutional assumptions and teachers' beliefs and attitude towards EWS students (Geetha, 2014). Such instances reflect the exclusion of individuals within the educational institution, leaving them feeling invisible and pressured to suppress aspects of their identity in order to belong.

Such issues raise fundamental questions concerning fairness and inclusion in educational institutions. If 'to be included' is to homogenise the institution by conforming to its pre-existing institutional norms and practices. This approach to inclusion can inadvertently reproduce the inequalities it initially seeks to address. To address these concerns, a critical view of the universalistic conception of the individual is needed. The pursuit of universal ideals often represents the normative or dominant understanding, against which all differences are measured. Such universalisation negates the Other by understanding the difference as a deviation. Thus, inclusion may be better understood and practised by recognising the Others as irreducible, unique individuals, as discussed more elaborately in the next section.

Considering the 'Other'

The moment children are sent to a formal setting The problem of marginalisation is not merely external or a systemic failure, but rather the kind of exclusion that occurs at the most individual and rudimentary level, whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally. Some questions may arise in one's mind when looking at the site of this marginalisation: why are standardised provisions and institutional norms not enough to include everyone in the institution (schools, in this case)? What could be the possible cause behind that? Is the entry into the institution not enough to ensure justice, equality, and inclusion?

Some may argue that rules should be strict enough to ensure inclusion, but would it be inclusion in essence if it is enforced from the outside or caused by external factors? Where does the actual exclusion begin - outside or inside? These questions draw our attention to the interactions one has with the Other. If one has not accepted the Other in their mental space, then all attempts to change formal setups by introducing procedural changes and institutional norms seem in vain.

Levinas would see the site of discrimination and internal exclusion as the result of totality. Totality is the tendency in which the subject, which can be an individual, a group or a whole institution, sees everyone and everything as a closed category that can be grasped easily (Levinas, 1961/1969). In an attempt to do so, they reduce the infinite Other to finite boundaries. For instance, as discussed in the previous section, when a teacher sees all of their students and colleagues as the same, they negate their unique and diverse experiences to fit into their own pre-assumed stereotypical categories. This is what happens in mainstreaming as well, where, in order to include everyone, one tries to fit the marginalised with different experiences and diverse backgrounds (say, some tribal communities, religious minority groups) into existing rigid categories. However, this is not inclusion in the proper sense, in which one seeks to include the Other in a fragmented and reduced form. True inclusion can only happen when a person is included in their whole being, including their experiences, choices, individual culture, and characteristics. For one has to know the Other completely.

Now, the question arises: is it possible to know the Other completely? Can we know someone with their whole being? Levinas would say, "No". As per Levinas' concept of 'alterity' (1961/1969, p. 33- 40), it is not possible to reach the Other, since it is infinite or endless. When someone claims to have known the Other, they reduce the Other's existence to a mere object. This is where both ontological and ethical violence happen; one's individuality, uniqueness, and core existence come into danger of systemic dehumanisation.

The only way to include the Other is through one's infinite ethical obligation towards the Other. However, the question is: When does one's ethical obligation begin/arise? Levinas would say one's ethical responsibility begins when the vulnerable face of the Other emerges. This face of the other being is not some physical appearance that can be captured by looking. Instead, it is infinite, which overflows or escapes the category one may attempt to reduce it to. This vulnerable face that is defenceless, naked, or capable of being hurt possesses a power that makes you ethically responsible for it. It says, "thou shalt not kill" (Levinas, 1961/1969, p.199) or do not reduce me to an object.

However, through the process of effacement, an attempt is made to make the face and the ethical command it gives invisible (Levinas, 1961/1969, p.194-219). For instance, structural layers within the educational institution reduce the Other, their lived experiences, and vulnerability to statistical data based on the principles of measurement and productivity. This way, the faces of students, teachers, and other stakeholders, often working at the grassroots level, are masked by institutional checklists. Through this, even after gaining entry to the institutional space, systemic or subtle forms of discrimination persist, simultaneously eradicating alterity by reducing it to fixed, known categories.

Reconceptualising inclusion through the lens of the ethics of the Other helps acknowledge and consider the Other's existence as absolutely other, separate from the self. Rather than attempting to assimilate the Other into the pre-existing normative institutional structure, inclusion, with the spirit of Otherness, seeks to ethically consider the Other with openness, recognition, and responsibility. Further, in Levinas's understanding of the Other, the encounter with the Other, whether at the individual or group level, precedes all forms of categorisation or institutional classification. He encapsulates the essence of this understanding in "Thou shalt not kill", extending it beyond the literal sense of physical harm or violence (Levinas, 1961/1969, p.199). It signifies that the Other should not be negated, dominated or bounded in our own categories of understanding. In practice, within educational institutions, where every learner is an Other, they should not be compelled to conform to dominant ideals or homogenised standards to be considered or recognised.

For Levinas, ethics precedes ontology, showcasing that responsibility for the Other comes before identity, rationality or any self-interest. The self is constituted not by any reasoning or self-directed interests, but rather by the infinite responsibility for the Other. In an educational context, institutions shall not ask individuals to fit or fix themselves to be part of the institution. However, they shall hold absolute responsibility for responding ethically to Others' diverse identities and experiences.

Therefore, inclusive educational institutions are responsive to alterity by recognising and considering the agency, dignity, and uniqueness of the Others/learners. Such a lens offers to transform the policy of inclusion from merely a practice of assimilation into an ethical commitment that considers the Other with mutual recognition and reverence for diversity.

Institutional Health and Wellbeing: Ways to eliminate marginalisation

Institutional health and well-being extend beyond a school's physical infrastructure and administrative efficiency. This implies that the health and well-being of any institution is determined by the well-being of all its members, who constitute the whole system. Here, the meaning of health is not restricted to an individual's physical and mental health; rather, it also encompasses ethical relationships with other stakeholders, including the institutional ethos, spirit, commitment to one another, and the institution's overall harmony. Thus, health and well-being reside fundamentally in the space the school creates for its learners and other stakeholders within the school system.

When one denies responsibility for creating such spaces, exclusionary and/or discriminatory practices emerge. The manifestation of the institutional marginalisation, as discussed in the previous section, including poor quality of learning, bullying and harassment, inadequate sanitation facilities for girls, lack of menstrual hygiene management, teacher absenteeism, corporal punishment, peer induced dropouts, standardised language and/or curricula, teachers' attitude and assumptions, should not be understood as isolated administrative failure but is case in point the institutional inability to recognize and respond to the Other.

Rooted in Levinas's understanding of the Other, the institution's well-being can be reimagined as a responsibility of every teacher, student, and administrator. Here, each member of the school system is the Other, possessing distinct identities and being infinitely responsible for every Other. Such innate responsibility manifests beyond prescribed directives. Thus, this responsibility is primary and inevitable. When students tease one another for their appearance, performance or for any other reason, they fail to recognise the Other. In a similar vein, when female students are denied the opportunity of having adequate sanitation facilities or even the feeling of being safe in school, it is a prime example of negating the Other by the teachers, peers, administration and the entire school system. Similarly, when teachers fail to attend school or arrive on time, practise corporal punishment, and hold deficit-oriented assumptions about EWS students, it demonstrates a breakdown of their ethical responsibility. They fail to see their responsibilities as individuals for the Other. In addition, when school systems burden teachers with excessive administrative duties, it causes professional burnout, compromising their individual well-being and, in turn, institutional health.

One may suppose a stricter adherence to rules and policies to address these instances of discrimination or neglect. These rules may ensure systemic equality and fair treatment to a certain extent, but they risk marginalising individuals' responsibility. Such an approach jeopardises individuals' sense of responsibility, reducing it to mere adherence to externally imposed rules. Assuming that members of the institution are unaware of their ethical responsibilities or hold no ethical position implies that ethics must be imposed on them. By doing so, the essence of responsible action is reduced to mere formalities. Such mechanisation of ethics reduces the uniqueness of the Other to external and objective reality. From Levinas's lens, the existence of the Other is in itself enough to make one realise their ethical responsibility towards them and further preserves the dignity of the Other. For him, ethics precedes ontology since ethics is the first philosophy (Levinas, 1989, p. 75); the responsibility towards the Other arises long before any institutional assumption, classification, rule, or rational thought. Therefore, institutions' well-being rests on openness to alterity and responsiveness to the Other, without reducing them to the institution's own existing categories or standardised norms. Efforts should be made to raise every individual's awareness of the presence of the Others and, eventually, to recognise their ethical responsibility. Hence, it becomes imperative to reimagine institutional health as an individual's responsibility rooted in ethics rather than an edict.

For instance, the conventional education system treats students and teachers as mere statistics on paper. Even the health of the institution as a whole is reduced to mere attendance, marks, and physical well-being. However, from Levinas's perspective, the face of the Other ensures one's ethical position towards them. It suggests a gradual shift from numbers to being. The presence of students, teachers, and other members is sufficient to support claims of just and fair actions. For this, a shift from objective, standardised norms to an understanding of the Other is required. For instance, instead of viewing a student as an object, like a blank slate to be shaped, or as part of a homogeneous group, it is important for a teacher and the educational institution to consider each student as a unique presence with distinct experiences. Here, the site of the Other becomes the teaching moment, as the Other possesses an infinite perspective. One way to realise this aim is through dialogue. As Levinas proposed:

> To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression…It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. However, this also means: to be taught.(Levinas, 1961, p.51)

Dialogue can help a teacher engage with students' experiences and acknowledge the emerging, vulnerable Other. Nevertheless, this practice does not suggest that one can reach the whole of Other, as Other is infinite. It simply encapsulates the idea that, despite infinite differences, schools should continually work to fulfil students' most fundamental needs, given their diverse socio-economic backgrounds and prior experiences. Similarly, higher officials and administrators should recognise the teachers' vulnerable Otherness. This will help bring out teachers' infinite creative potential for new experiences, practices, and pedagogical approaches within the school system. Schools

ought to adapt to the needs of students and teachers rather than fitting them into a fixed, normative school system. Thus, such an adaptive approach by the educational system shall establish harmony.

Another major barrier that restricts the true inclusion of Others is the top-down bureaucratic structure. The Bottom-up or participatory approach can help in considering the Other by incorporating the immediate needs of students, teachers, and parents, who are often marginalised or rendered invisible. The Face of the Other makes one responsive, and this can only be realised when one comes into proximity to the other. Through encountering the vulnerability of the Face, one emerges as a responsible being. Such measures need to be implemented to bring students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other education stakeholders closer together. For instance, such platforms and opportunities shall be provided to students where they share their experiences with teachers and other officials.

Similarly, administrators should actively participate in school activities, engage with students and teachers, and discuss the problems being faced. Higher authorities, given their proximity to students' experiences, such as a lack of sanitation facilities, should more firmly affirm their ethical responsibility. Bringing them closer to one another can prevent the loss of the Other and unethical practices.

Further, it is observed that the contemporary system of education is working on the approach of students' becoming rather than being, and even that becoming is too fixated on or rigid in a certain ideal scenario. Apart from that, the whole institution is working within an instrumentalist approach, in which people treat others, relationships, or duties as means to an end rather than as ends in themselves. For instance, teachers facilitate students' learning with the expectation of good exam performance, which in turn leads to teachers' promotions or other incentives.

Similarly, schools expect teachers to teach in ways that significantly improve the school's overall results compared to other schools. In a larger circle, this competitive and productive zeal has seized the spirit of infinite innate responsibility towards the Other. For instance, the functionalist and capitalist structures of society have influenced the functioning of educational institutions, with an emphasis on reproducing existing social structures, emphasising class distinctions and the allocation of resources. Nevertheless, through Levinas's lens, the education system has an asymmetric responsibility towards its members, in which it should help realise the full potential of teachers and students, not because of external validation and incentives, but because of their unconditioned responsibility towards each other.

Moreover, conventional classroom assessment practices often reduce students' knowledge and learning to paper-based assessments. It is often assumed that students' response sheets can capture their holistic understanding. However, language cannot be the medium to reach or understand the infinite Other, as these are mere symbols that replicate what one has in their mind, but they cannot fully realise or explicate their thoughts. Hence, its true essence may remain partially unaddressed. In such a case, Levinas would say that objective standardised tests operate on the principle of totality and lack the capacity to assess students' learning fully. Assessment of students should capture not only their learning in terms of a final product but also their learning as a process. This could be achieved by continuously assessing students' learning. This continuous assessment involves teachers creating a dialogic classroom space where students explore and engage with one another meaningfully. Further, students' assessment should represent their own progress over time, rather than being based on a standardised norm or any external reference.

The classroom is a significant part of any school and determines the institution's overall health. Hence, the teaching-learning process is crucial to ensuring the well-being of both students and teachers. Teaching-learning practices are often based on teacher-centred, student-centred, or content-centred pedagogy. However, in these particular frameworks, one component is neglected. For instance, in a teacher-centric classroom, the Otherness that students bring from their unique experiences does not get enough space. Similarly, in a content-centric classroom, the positionality of both teachers and students often gets ignored.

Therefore, to ensure that every individual finds their space in the entire teaching-learning process, an Other-centred approach could be

practised. The fundamental essence of the approach is to recognise the unique Other and to have infinite ethical responsibility for them. This enables the creation of a classroom conducive to learning and inclusive for everyone, since everyone is considered the revered Other. Such an approach encourages students and teachers to be ethical individuals and offers a harmonious learning experience. Teachers have the ethical responsibility to make the Other visible to their students through their practice and actions.

Further, teacher education, both preservice and in-service, should engage teachers in understanding the Other and the ethical significance of difference. This encourages them to engage with students with irreducible identities or experiences, rather than reducing them to categories such as caste, class, gender, disability, religion, language, or academic performance. Such an understanding enables teachers to practice hospitality, pedagogical responsiveness, recognition, empathy and respect for difference.

Last but not least, the Other-centred approach can be adopted by policymakers when designing and implementing educational policies. This will enable them to be receptive to the diverse needs, experiences, and voices of those affected by institutional ill-being or marginalisation. They should consider critical engagement with students, teachers, parents, and other education experts as their ethical responsibility. These perspectives and experiences can reveal forms of exclusion, institutional neglect or inequity that may remain invisible at the policy level.

Conclusion

Educational institutions are widely recognised as spaces for knowledge transmission. To make the environment conducive to meaningful learning, it should also be viewed as a social and ethical space where students experience crucial years of their lives. The instances discussed throughout the paper showcase institutional marginalisation that is embedded in the space through everyday practices and structures. These practices put individuals' well-being at risk and largely damage institutional health. The disharmony that follows is not restricted to schools but extends to society.

This paper presents a Levinasian lens showing that the fundamental cause of exclusion within and beyond the system is the negation of the Other(ness), which results in the institution's state of ill-being. Such exclusion cannot be addressed and eliminated through strict rules and regulations, but by realising one's infinite responsibility towards the Other. This perspective provides a deeper ethical foundation by placing responsibility towards the Other before the autonomous self. This pictured inclusion is not simply about incorporating the marginalised into existing structures, but about transforming these structures to be responsive to those who encounter them.

The spirit of Otherness thus offers a way to rethink institutional health and wellbeing. Inclusion in the truest sense is achieved in the spirit of Otherness when one recognises, acknowledges and accepts the infinite presence behind attendance sheets, checklists, marksheets, etc. A presence that comes with unique identities, experiences, needs, and ways of being and that commands unconditional respect, dignity, care, and responsibility. This understanding places ethical responsibility on all members of the educational institution for every Other. Therefore, institutional health and well-being are inseparable from the well-being of the Other. In this sense, recognising the Other is not only a philosophical stance but a necessary condition for building institutions that are just, inclusive and conducive to the health and well-being of all.

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Exploring Critical Thinking Dispositions in Primary School Children

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Abstract

The development of critical thinking has widely been understood as a 'skill-set' that evidently develops at the formal operational stage, when the child can think abstractly. The present study seeks to explore evidence of critical thinking dispositions in children aged 5 to 12 that can be fostered and refined over time in critical thinking ability. A total of 10 primary school children from grades two, three, four and five were selected through purposive random sampling based on their academic class and language expression. The children were assessed through guided open-ended tasks, including storytelling, picture analysis, and dilemma situations. The recorded interviews and focus group discussions were analysed through a qualitative task analysis method. The results showed that children as young as five years old showed dispositions towards critical analytic thinking, with adults playing a major role in scaffolding their thinking. The findings suggest that critical thinking dispositions can be fostered from an early age, as early as five years.

Keywords: *critical thinking; dispositions; primary school children; task analysis*

Introduction

From birth, humans strive to understand the world around them. Young children, in particular, are exceptionally curious about their newly discovered environment. Infants start by processing sensory information to familiarise themselves with their surroundings. As they grow, they begin to engage with more complex concepts. However, during this developmental process, they are often given guidelines and rules about what to think and how to think, which can restrict their cognitive development. By adulthood, many individuals have become compliant and passive, accepting authority without question and adhering to routine. In this context, critical thinking becomes essential. It enables individuals to challenge authoritative assertions and examine reality from multiple perspectives, leading to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding.

As the world enters the era of artificial intelligence, students no longer face the difficulty of accessing the time required for reflection that guarantees the appropriation of information. Students also need to be protected from superficial interpretations of the content. Therefore, it is vital to cultivate a strong foundation in critical thinking from early childhood, when children are highly observant and inclined to ask "why" questions. As Malaguzzi (in Edwards et al., 2011) notes, children are born with an extraordinary ability to question, view the world from various perspectives, and explore their environment in diverse ways.

The focus on critical thinking in education began with John Dewey's proposal to empower children with critical thinking, which helps them become clear-minded and democratic members of society (Dewey, 1933). This becomes possible when students are motivated to identify the most distinctive feature of a problem using the given information. Jean Piaget (1962) held that, by the preoperational stage of cognitive development, which occurs between the ages of 2 and 7, children are capable of symbolic thought, that is, creating mental images of objects and storing them in memory for later use. Children's imagination and creativity are correlated with their capacity for symbolic thinking. The foundations of critical thinking begin to emerge at this point. Empirical evidence indicates that children can begin to display dispositions towards critical thinking as early as age 3, when

they can engage in symbolic thought (Heyman, 2008; Hubscher Esteve-Gibert, Igualada & Prieto, 2017).

The development of critical thinking is a priority under Agenda 2030, as outlined by UNESCO (2016) under Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4). In India, NEP 2020 placed special emphasis on developing critical thinking skills as part of twenty-first-century skills. These approaches have led to major modifications in the curriculum and school education, making research into thinking skills relevant and essential for the development of educational approaches. Given the technological advances that have increased dependence on applications, AI, and the web, this further necessitates the development of critical thinking to help interpret reality autonomously and avoid being preyed upon by technology.

This paper explores the concept of critical thinking and its dispositional aspects, analysing data from children aged 5-12 through a set of cognitive tasks prepared by the researcher. It presents an out-of-classroom study of critical thinking, in contrast to traditional classroom intervention studies that view its development solely as the school's responsibility. The paper finally discusses cultivating these dispositions related to critical thinking from an early age and the responsibility of adults at home or at school for their development.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Thinking

Introduced 2,500 years ago by the Greek philosopher Socrates, critical thinking is not a new concept. Socrates philosophised about a method of question-probing and emphasised the importance of analysing and evaluating ideas with sufficient evidence (Emerson, 2013).

Often referred to as ‘careful, goal-directed’ thinking, Critical Thinking is a form of thought that requires higher-order cognition, such as concept formation, decision-making, evaluation, and reflection. The process of thinking critically involves carefully exploring one's own thought processes to clarify understanding and make more informed decisions.

Before the term itself was coined, different terms had been used to describe critical thinking. In the past, ‘critical thinking’ and ‘problem solving’ were two names for the same thing. Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives used the phrase “intellectual abilities and skills” to refer to what had previously been called "critical thinking" by some, "reflective thinking" by Dewey and others, and "problem solving" by others (Bloom et al. 1956).

With various definitions and the precise abilities covered by the term 'critical thinking', it can be described as a careful goal-directed process which is self-regulated and independent in nature and requires reflection on all possible sides of an issue to make a decision whereby one is self-correcting, sensitive to the context and open to disconfirmation of one's own ideas through making claims with evidence and inference from available facts. (Bailin et al., 1999; Ennis, 1985; Facione, 1990; Paul, 1992).

Critical Thinking Dispositions

While there have been different conceptions of Critical Thinking, most conceptualisations have been framed in terms of broader concepts such as problem-solving, decision-making, reasoning, and standards of adequacy and accuracy. The major conceptions of critical thinking present it as a skill or skill set, which can give the impression of a well-developed, unapproachable phenomenon. In reality, many people may never develop critical thinking as a skill, yet they more or less engage in it. Therefore, critical thinkers have argued that critical thinking ability alone is insufficient and that critical thinking dispositions are also required (Facione, 1995; Ennis, 1996). Critical thinking dispositions refer to an individual’s consistent internal motivation to engage in critical thinking. It reflects an individual's attitude and habits of engaging critically. Thus, critical thinking involves both abilities and dispositions/propensities (Siegel 1999; Facione 2015; McPeck 2016). It implies that an individual may possess critical-thinking skills but lack critical-thinking dispositions. An individual may be capable of making logical arguments but may avoid questioning given information, may resist feedback, or may be biased. Similarly, a child may compare two events but may lack the curiosity to engage deeply in a given situation. Thus, Robert Ennis (1996) argued that being a critical thinker requires both ability and dispositions.

Research in the field of cognitive development supports the view that, to think critically, one must cultivate the inclination to do so (Bailin et

al. 1999; Daly 2001; Facione et al. 1994). According to Facione et al. (1995), a critical thinker uses seven dispositions to develop or make judgments. Peter Facione, along with other experts from different disciplines, proposed an overall disposition towards critical thinking that consists of seven sub-dispositions: Truth-seeking, Open-mindedness, Analyticity, Systematicity, Self-confidence, Inquisitiveness, and Maturity (Facione & Facione, 1993).

The following Delphi description of the attributes of the mind of an ideal critical thinker, what some have called "The Critical Spirit", about expert consensus, is as follows:

"The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit" (APA, 1990, p. 3).

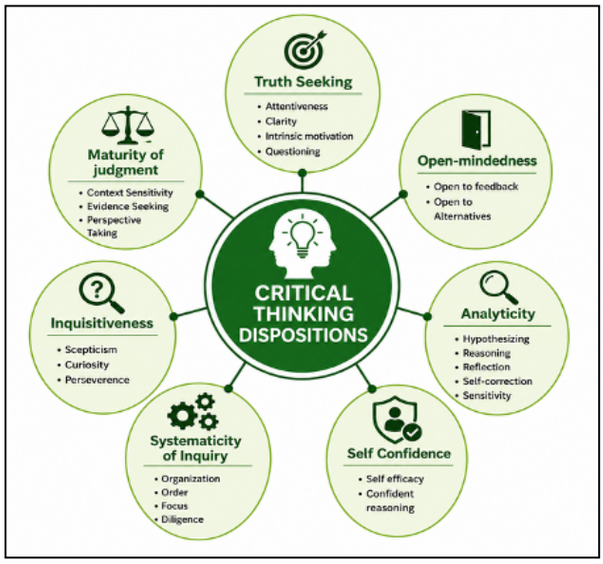


Figure 1. *Representation of seven critical thinking dispositions proposed by Facione (2007), including the disposition towards creativity*

Perkins, Jay & Tishman (1993) describe thinking dispositions as ongoing tendencies that guide intellectual behaviour. They propose a theory of good thinking based on dispositions. They offer a triadic theory of critical thinking dispositions, suggesting that these dispositions have three components, each equally important. These components are (1) sensitivity to the occasion and context, (2) inclinations, which may reflect motivation, habit, policy, or other factors, and (3) abilities of critical thinking. All three factors play equally important roles in good thinking.

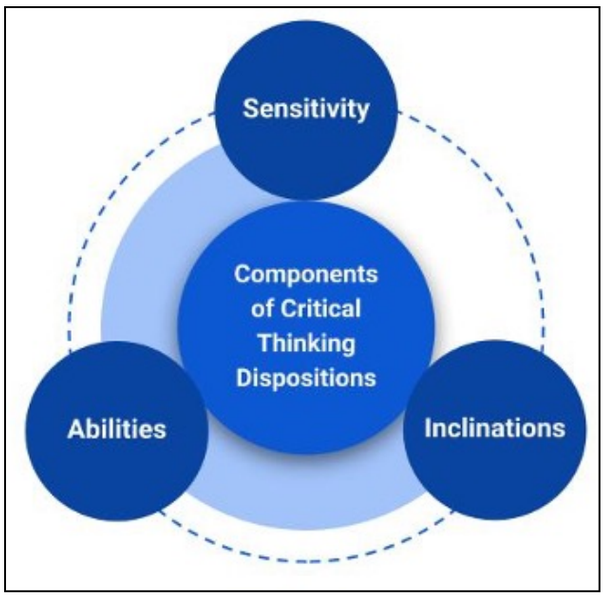


Figure 2. *Representation of 3 components of critical thinking dispositions proposed by Perkins, Jay & Tishman (1993)*

Policy Frameworks promoting Critical Thinking

The National Education Policy (NEP 2020, 4.5, 0.12) emphasises the development of each individual's creative potential. In addition to the 'foundational capacities' of literacy and numeracy, it highlights the need to develop 'higher-order' cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem-solving. It aims to move towards a more competency-based assessment system that would promote learning and development and test higher-order skills such as analysis, critical thinking, and conceptual clarity. The National Curriculum Framework (2005), in its Aims of Education, presents a more flexible, dispositional conception of critical thinking, including independence of thought and action, pointing to a capacity for carefully considered, value-based decision-making, both independently and collectively; a sensitivity to others' well-being and feelings, together with knowledge and understanding of the world, forming the basis of a rational commitment to values; and learning to learn and the willingness to unlearn and relearn, which are important as means of responding to new situations flexibly and creatively. It also expresses the need for a critical framework that

would help children see social issues from different perspectives and understand how these issues connect to their lives. Finally, cultivating critical thinking in early childhood involves varied learning experiences that enable the child to explore, question, reason, reflect, make sense, and develop values that support autonomous decision-making. Such an initiative would cultivate tendencies and dispositions from an early age, enabling young minds, which are not yet fully indoctrinated by society's unquestioned value system, to develop perspectives essential to survival and thriving.

Research Gap

Critical thinking has long been recognised as a fundamental educational goal. Early work by Dewey (1933) emphasised reflective thinking as essential for informed judgement, while Ennis (1996) and Facione et al. (1995) highlighted the importance of both critical thinking skills and dispositions. Research in developmental psychology suggests that the foundations of critical thinking emerge in early childhood. Empirical studies by Heyman (2008) and Hübscher et al. (2017) support this, indicating that children as young as three years can demonstrate early forms of critical thinking through questioning, evaluating information, reasoning, and interpreting communicative cues.

A systematic review by O'Reilly, Devitt, and Hayes (2024) found that young children can demonstrate reasoning, problem-solving, and meaning-making skills, and that classroom dialogue, questioning strategies, and story-based pedagogies can support the development of critical thinking. Moreover, most studies have focused on observable thinking skills rather than on the dispositional dimensions that motivate children to think critically. The National Education Policy (2020) recommends experiential learning, inquiry-based learning, problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity as essential competencies for the twenty-first century. There is ample research on foundations, literacy, numeracy, school readiness, and cognitive development. In contrast, comparatively little research has examined how children demonstrate critical thinking dispositions, such as truth-seeking, analysis, inquisitiveness, decision-making, reflective judgement, and openness, at the primary level. Secondly, limited research has explored these dispositions outside the classroom, in and around school environments, such as children's parks.

Therefore, a significant research gap remains in understanding the nature, manifestation, and cultivation of critical thinking dispositions among children in the Indian context. The present study seeks to address this gap by exploring critical thinking dispositions among children in and out of school settings. The study aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of critical thinking in childhood, with practical implications aligned with pedagogical practices for nurturing critical thinking ability.

Research Questions

Focusing on critical thinking in children aged 5-12 years, the research addressed the following questions:

1. How do children demonstrate dispositions for critical thinking when they interact and engage in and outside the school settings?
2. What aspects of critical thinking dispositions are evidenced while engaging with designed tasks?
3. What can teachers do to nurture critical thinking dispositions and critical thinking ability?

Methodology

The study employs qualitative research methodology to allow the children to express themselves spontaneously. The open interaction outside the classroom between the researcher and the children helped create a familiar environment, supported by carefully designed questions and simulations. Their responses were observed and tapped for analysis.

Participant and Context

The participants in the study were 10 children in primary classes (grades 1st to 5th), aged 5 to 12 years at the time of data collection. Children were selected by school year, and data were collected both within and outside school settings, but not in formal classrooms. They were approached in school playgrounds with their teachers' permission, or in parks in the presence of their guardians. Formal permission from the school principal was obtained to adhere to research ethics. The procedure continued only if a child was interested in listening or engaging in discussion.

Research Design and Data Collection

The study advocates a qualitative, exploratory research design to investigate evidence of critical-thinking dispositions among primary school children. The method is more inductive, as it seeks to explore a lesser-known or under-researched phenomenon and uses specific scenarios to reach a more generalised conclusion about it. Children were engaged in a guided, open-ended assessment comprising three tasks - Storytelling, Picture analysis, and Dilemma situation. Data were collected through in-depth, open-ended interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and observations, and procedures were conducted both in and out of the school setting. The data were later organised by task and analysed according to the objectives set for each task.

Tasks Design for Data Collection

A total of three tasks were designed and shaped to facilitate the guided open-ended assessment. They included storytelling, picture analysis and dilemma resolution. The tasks remained the same for all the children selected from each grade, from 1st to 5th. Each task aimed to assess evidence of critical-thinking dispositions, with some weighted more heavily than others. While all the tasks remained the same throughout the age group selected, with the same pictures to be analysed and the same dilemmas to ponder, the stories changed with the child's context according to the child's age.

The first task, Storytelling, provided the children with context for assessing their understanding, reasoning, and problem-solving, with follow-up questions probing their thinking (Fahim, 2014). According to Temple (2015), when people engage with a story, form their own interpretations, and support them with reasons, they are engaging in critical thinking. The task was designed to engage children in the thinking process and observe their critical-thinking dispositions. The task was developed around seven critical thinking dispositions proposed by Facione (2007), examining dispositions that span the mental processes involved in critical thinking, including truth-seeking, open-Knowledge elicitation, data analysis, and knowledge representation are the three main elements of Cognitive Task Analysis. The process began with knowledge elicitation, followed by data analysis, and finally by the mindedness, analyticity, systematicity, self-confidence, inquisitiveness, and maturity of judgement.

In the second task, three pictures were shown to the respondents, who were asked to describe what they saw in each picture, then explain what they thought might be happening, or raise any questions they had about them. It assessed children's ability at different ages to go beyond the explicitly visible information, enabling them to think deeply about different aspects of the pictures and to develop hypotheses about the scenes depicted. This task sought to explore dispositions towards truth-seeking, analyticity and inquisitiveness.

The third task presented the children with situations in which a dilemma needed to be resolved. The situations remained contextual and related to children's daily life to encourage authentic engagement. The objective of the task was to engage children in decision-making, judgment-making, and problem-solving, thereby enabling the assessment of critical-thinking dispositions, including maturity of judgment, systematicity, open-mindedness, and truth-seeking.

Task Analysis Approach

The data collected from the guided open-ended assessment, conducted through interviews and focus group discussions, was organised into task-wise groups and analysed against the objectives set for each task. The analysis used a qualitative task analysis method. One purpose of task analysis is to inform instructional design decisions by examining the learning situations. To ascertain what is actually taught or learned, task analysis begins with a statement of learning goals (Hannum et al., 1999). It is not sufficient to merely observe people's activities and behaviours while they are engaged in complex tasks. It is also important to understand how people perceive the world, what they know, how they organise and structure information, and which concepts they understand better. Therefore, to examine and describe reasoning and knowledge, cognitive task analysis is used (Klein et al., 2006).

presentation of the findings. The data was analysed using specific objectives developed for each task. The analysis and findings focus primarily on the seven attributes used in the scales for measuring critical thinking

dispositions, as given by Facione in the California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory (CCTDI, Facione, 1990). These attributes of mind of an ideal critical thinker are considered dispositions towards critical thinking, namely: Open Mindedness, Analyticity, Cognitive Maturity, Truth-seeking, Systematicity, Inquisitiveness, and Self-Confidence.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The primary objective of the study was to explore the critical-thinking dispositions of primary school children in an out-of-school context. This necessitated a research study aimed at fostering critical-thinking dispositions in school and home settings, such as parks where children in the vicinity come to play. Data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions, which were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Three tasks were conducted to explore and evidence children's critical-thinking dispositions.

Task 1: Storytelling

The first task of storytelling was designed to provide an engaging and stimulating opportunity for children to engage in cognitive processes and, in turn, observe their critical-thinking dispositions. Storytelling is widely understood as an effective pedagogical approach in which children can interpret information, connect stories and characters to experience, and reason within highly relevant contexts.

The first type of question in the task assessed the maturity of contextual understanding and comprehensive ability, which are the basis of any cognitive task. The second kind of question sought to assess the dispositions to apply content and contextual knowledge to analyse a situation. The third and fourth kinds of questions explored whether children were disposed towards analysis and judgement. The final kind of question attempted to engage children in creative thinking.

Some of the questions posed to the children were:

Q.1 Retell the story in your own words.

Q.2 Could the same strategy of saving be used if the leopard had caught the fox instead of the tortoise?

Q.3 Is it fair for the leopard to catch the tortoise to eat? Why?

Q.4 What might you see around if you were a fish?

The responses collected from the children are categorised in the following table, aligned with their dispositions and sub-dispositions.

Dispositions	Sub -Dispositions	Evidence
Truth seeking And Maturity	Contextual understanding and Knowledge	Comprehensive ability was observed in children as they retold the stories in their own words. They seemed attentive, they tried seeking truthness about the event and even retold the stories with clarity. Their narrations showed their effort to understand the what and why of situations and the characters involved in them. Facione (1990) supports truth seeking involves desire to understand the situation under given evidences.

Open -mindedness	Sensitivity	Children seemed Re-telling the story with their own empathetic perspective as a second-grade child said"choti machli bahut acchi aur samajhdar thi…… Isliye wo kehti hai main toh khush hu apne chotepan se" Here the child is able to imagine himself in the fish life situation evidencing emotional understanding; it is also a disposition called openness.
Analyticity	Hypothesising	A 4th grade chaild said "Mujhe lagta hai ki wo planning kar rahe the ek dusre ko tiger ya lion se bachaane ki". Such kind of hypothesis generation shows children ability to evaluate evidence and make logical explanations out of it.
Self- Confident	Confident with their own responses Openness to alternatives	Children were able to consider the possibility of responses. They respected other's opinions and supported them wherever needed. R1: hume jeev dikh rhe hain, octopus chote chote R2: octopus kafi bade hote hain R1: haan, chote bhi hote hain R2: dolphins bhi dikh rhe hain, small dolphins, big dolphins Such confidence in their viewpoints evidence the trust in themselves to make decisions.

Maturity of Judgement	Perspective taking Differences in judgement of the situation and empathy	The children seemed taking different perspective. They empathise with the characters and rationalized their responses. "Galat kiya, kyuki jaanwar jo hote hain wo bhi ek insaan hote hain. Unhe nahi khana chahiye" "Sahi kiya, kyuki humko bhookh lagti hai toh hum khana khate hain aur usko bhookh lagegi toh woh kaise khaega! Toh usne lomdi ko khaane ka faisla kiya kyuki wo kachue ko nahi kha paega (because of the shell)" This perspective of feeling others before making conclusions shows they are not self-centred. It also evidences the moral reasoning required for higher order thinking.
Analyticity	Providing clarification for the judgement Self-correction and self-reflection	"Main pahad par kyun chadhti jab hum pahad ke neeche ghum sakte hain. Aur wo (strange men) jab dikhte toh door se bhi toh dikhte…toh main wahan se chali jaati…..Haan par unke paas toh jaadu hai na wo kahin par bhi aa sakte hain, directly aa sakte hain, toh main bhaagne ki koshish karti." Their reasoning and explanation for their own views is an approach for reflecting and correcting themselves.
Maturity	Independent thinking, Fluency of ideas and Expression	Children were able to make dialogues for the characters, acting out the characters.

Table 1. *Responses of the students on the Critical Thinking Dispositions Dimensions and their analysis*

Throughout the engagement, children were attentive and focused on the task, which evidenced a disposition towards truth-seeking and intrinsic motivation to gain understanding or solve problems. The storytelling task clearly identified the seven elements of critical-thinking dispositions in children, as proposed by Facione (2007). This naturally confirms children's ability to think. The role of education is to nurture this seed of critical dispositions into critical-thinking ability.

Task 2: Picture Analysis

The picture analysis task provided children with stimulating pictures that would prompt them to analyse, think deeply about different aspects of the pictures, and develop hypotheses about them. This task sought to explore dispositions towards truth-seeking, analyticity and inquisitiveness.



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

The first picture shown to the children had two dimensions: the visible physical aspects and the more abstract aspects, which required developed abstract thought.

While a first grader explains the picture as, "wo seedhi se books par chadh rhe hain."

The second grader shows curiosity and willingness to seek truth and asks, "ye jo ladka hai, winner, wo wahan tak jeeta kaise hoga?" The child himself attempts to answer as he hypothesises, "Inki race ho rahi hogi aur ye aage nikal chuka hoga, baki sab peeche reh gaye honge.. Toh ye jaldi se apni seedhi upar lakar chadh gaya hoga."

A third grader describes the stack of books as 'jahaaj'.

On asking why he thinks so, they responded, "ye inhone iss liye banaya hai kyuki unhe naav banani hai lekin unke paas naav banane ka samaan nahi hai aur wo paper nahi faad sakte kyuki fir paap lagega isliye wo books se naav bana rahe hain." A fourth grader expresses with sensitivity as he takes the perspective of a character in the picture, "ye wala upar chadh chuka hai isliye khush hai, wo dono bhi use dekh ke upar jana chahte hain",

A fifth grader in the same picture shows confident reasoning as she points out, "Ye ek picture hai jisme ye books par chadh rahe hain, jo book mein stories hoti hai usme laga dete hain beech me, taki wo dikhe." The child shows evidence of sufficient content knowledge to reason confidently.

The above reasoning shows that children are making assumptions beyond what they see. In

this way, they are moving towards more abstract thought. The spontaneity in their responses reflects the openness crucial to thinking, imagining, and accepting their thoughts without judging them as right or wrong. This thinking, involving sensitivity, possibilities, and perspective-taking, expands as the children move into the upper

The second picture is intended to engage the child in imagination and hypothesising-

Looking at the picture, a first grader makes a judgment by projecting her own wants onto the character, ye ladki soch rahi hai ki ye doggy bhi padhai kare school me aur main bhi karu. When asked why the dog must be dreaming about studying, a second grader responded, "Taaki uski naukri lag jaaye." Here, the child makes a judgment by drawing an analogy from her own life, since she must have heard that children need to study to get a job in the future.

The third graders were more fluent in expression and language as they described the picture. While analysing the picture, the girls demonstrated what Bruner referred to as a 'community of learners' by completing each other's sentences and asking questions when needed. The children conversed among themselves, "This doggy can go to school." Another said,"Yes, he will study maths with us and can solve sums and subtraction." A third said,"When the teacher is going to ask questions, he will raise his hand and answer." The first one added, "Yes, yes, dogs are as intelligent as we are. They can not only study but also play football. It will be so much fun to play with the doggy."…. "Let us admit him to the class… Ha…ha…ha." Thus, the students reinforced each other's ideas, making the conversation fun and imaginative.

The fourth- and fifth-grade children were more fluent in expressing different perspectives on their analysis of the picture. When asked who is having the dream in the picture, a fourth grader responded, "Dono ko", but corrected himself after looking back at the picture, "Nahi, ladke ko aa raha hai sirf… uske sar se nikal raha hai na ye baadal sa". Fifth graders showed similar responses, first pointing to the child in the picture, then self-correcting based on the evidence. Children showed a disposition towards self-reflection and self-correction, with a willingness to seek the truth. Imagination allows the child to go beyond what is given and what they know and explore new ideas, which is the basis of critical thinking, going beyond the given. Older children had more developed language and vocabulary to express their thoughts and move beyond the visible perspective. They were more confident not only because of their knowledge of the tasks but also because of their language development and communication skills.

From the above task, it is evident that while the younger children were unable to analyse the abstract aspects of the pictures, they could only describe their empirical aspects. The older children moved from the empirical to the abstract elements in the pictures and looked at images from multiple perspectives. Abstract thought is one of the major critical-thinking abilities, allowing a person to look beyond what is visible and to consider different perspectives.

The third picture was included to help children understand sociological aspects, such as differentiation and social inequality.

While the younger children in the first and second grades could only grasp the concrete aspects of the picture, the older children could pick up some abstract concepts through their own experiences and understanding of similar contexts. One of the characters in the picture, with blond hair and fair skin, represented an upper-class child with a rich lifestyle, and the other two children, with darker complexions and uncovered bodies, represented the lower strata of society. Most of the children who attempted to analyse the picture understood it as a scene of play in which the three children are playing with a car. The older children were more attentive to the different gestures in the picture and concluded that the car belongs to one child who doesn't let the other play with it.

A first-grader described the picture as a scene from the play and the boy's blond hair as nothing more than sunlight reflecting off it. Similarly, the second grader described the picture as children playing with the car, and added that they were cleaning it: "ye teeno car ke saath khel rahe the, ye gandi(dirty) ho gayi to use nehla rahe hai," before explaining the process of car cleaning. The child here uses heuristics to approach problem-solving, that is, by explaining the picture.

When asked how they know the car belongs to the blonde boy, one girl replied, "Kyunki ye aameer hai, to inhone rok rakha hai ye gaareeb log meri car ko na chhute (touch)", highlighting their perception of societal hierarchy and differences. When asked why this boy has different-coloured hair, one girl responded spontaneously, "kuch log alag dikhne ke liye apne ballon ko bhi colour karwa lete hain", another girl added, "jo deewar par paint hota, wo bhi karwa lete hain", and the third girl contradicted, "deewar wala paint kaun karwata hai, apne baalon par?" This was followed by a loud burst of laughter. This conversation shows them as a community of learners who contribute to each other's learning by adding alternative ideas. The girls' openness to alternatives reflects their open-mindedness. When the girls were asked why the other two boys washed the car if it belonged to the blonde boy, one girl responded, "kyunki unhe paise milenge", which was followed by another question, "but the kids are very young to work", for which the girl said, "mam, ye gaareeb hai, to inhe kuch to karna padega na." Another girl interrupted, "Aisa nahi karna chahiye, warna baad mein paachhte hain." These girls are experiencing the class differentiation existing in society. This reflects their disposition towards contextual sensitivity and the maturity of judgement.

These findings are supported by Rindengan's (2023) study, which found that visual stimuli enable children to analyse patterns, interpret meaning, and generate explanations. They can even negotiate their viewpoints through discussion. Children not only visualise and describe the features but also connect the picture with existing human experiences.

Task 3: Dilemma Situation

Like the other two tasks, the dilemmas in the third task were also developed around children's lives so that they could relate and engage with those. The objective of the task was to enable children to engage in decision-making, judgment-making, and problem-solving aspects of critical thinking, and to observe the critical-thinking dispositions in process.

Dilemma 1: If you ask your mom for the cookies, she will give you two cookies. But if you take away the cookies when no one is around, and you are caught, you would be given no cookies. What would be your action?

Dilemma 2: You were playing with the ball in the house and broke your mom's favourite table decoration. Mom hears the crash and comes running to see what has happened. What would be your action?

Analysis:

A first grader makes a decision about the first dilemma on the basis of her own prior experiences in similar situations. She exclaims, "main chor thodi na hu, mummy se maang kar khaungi do (two) biscuits." Similarly, in another dilemma, she responds by supporting avoiding punishment and maintaining her image. The child, aged 6, makes judgements and decisions based on preconventional morality, concerned with what is expected of her as a good girl and what should be done to avoid punishment.

Children in grades two and three pursue creative problem-solving rather than relying on morality-based reasoning. In the second dilemma, their responses included fixing the broken item, hiding it, buying a duplicate in its place, and writing on it whatever was written on the broken one. They offered alternatives to the problem and showed a disposition towards clarification and elaboration as they provided a solution. They approached the problem by putting themselves in the situation and demonstrating perspective-taking, context sensitivity, and systematic inquiry into it. Some children held the conception that telling lies leads to god's curse, as they remarked, "agar chori karenge toh bhagwan hume shraap (curse) dete hain". To the first dilemma, about whether to take two biscuits with permission or to take as many when no one sees, a fifth grader decided, "Jab mummy do biscuit de rahi hain toh wohi kha lo pitai khaane se accha hai."

On another dilemma, about what they would do if they mistakenly broke something at home, she replied, "Mummy ko bata kr pitai kha lenge." When asked whether they would try to hide it, she gave an elaborate response that shows a disposition towards clear judgment, analyticity, and confident reasoning.

Within each dilemma, children showed dispositions towards analyticity and maturity of judgement, taking systematicity and creativity into account as they approached the dilemma and suggested an alternative.

The responses suggest that rationality at this level is largely based on moral developmental

stage, as they show evidence of either punishment avoidance, a characteristic of the preconventional stage of moral development, or the maintenance of a good boy/good girl image, a feature of the conventional stage of moral development, as given by Kohlberg (1969, 1976).

Findings

The present study made several important findings with respect to critical thinking in children:

The children exhibited more than one critical thinking disposition. While one disposition was expressed more than the others, these do not work in isolation; they are interdependent. The task analysis showed many dispositions at work in the thinking process.

The tasks were designed with their interests and grade in mind. These tasks successfully kept students engaged. It was only when they found tasks mentally challenging that they began to engage in critical thinking.

The younger children were able to describe only the surface meaning of pictures. While the relatively older ones moved on to the abstract aspects, such as truth, lies, God's curse, punishment, and social inequality. This refutes Piaget's (1952) claim that abstract thinking is possible only in the formal stage of adolescence. This study supports the view that when children are directed to think, they can look critically at their own beliefs, self-reflect, and correct them.

It was found that scaffolding plays an important role in the development of children's thinking. Children interviewed in a group seemed more confident and fluent in their verbal communication. They provided alternative ideas and showed respect for others' views. Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1996) advocated the importance of a collaborative learning environment for communication and higher-level thinking.

Educational Implications

Recent research (Reilly et al., 2024; Liu & Yun, 2024; Rindengan, 2023; Martinez, 2024) has acknowledged the importance of developing children's critical thinking to build higher-order skills in analysis, interpretation, decision-making, and negotiation, as well as to cultivate sensitivity and empathy. The study's findings provide evidence of critical thinking dispositions in children. It also supports storytelling as a powerful pedagogy for engaging students cognitively, socially, and emotionally. It contributes to reasoning, reflection, questioning, analysis, and judgment. Children feel secure in an environment meant for learning, reasoning, empathy, and free communication. Teachers can also use meaningful visuals to enhance critical thinking, as they remove barriers to cognitive processing, foster reflection and imagination, and make abstract thinking more accessible. Dilemma situations are useful for developing decision-making ability. The presence of critical thinking dispositions in children suggests that their development should be the primary goal, rather than treating them as a skill reserved for older learners. Their development does not require a separate subject but must be embedded in science, the arts, language, and everyday classroom experiences. Educational assessment must evaluate children's critical-thinking dispositions, as they are the foundation for the development of critical thinking.

Conclusions

This study explored the dispositions of critical thinking among young children aged 5 to 12 years through tasks. Critical thinking dispositions are the tendencies or habits of mind that enable critical engagement (Facione, 1995). Critical thinking is the primary responsibility of schools, yet teaching it alone is not sufficient to achieve the goal. Children as young as 5 years exhibit dispositions for critical thinking in and out of school contexts, at home, on the playground, and in pre-school. The responsibility of schools is to nurture critical dispositions into critical thinking abilities. The study's findings revealed that children exhibit critical-thinking dispositions such as open-mindedness, analyticity, and self-confidence, as proposed by Facione (2007). Children seemed to hypothesise, imagine, and accept their thoughts. Their thinking involved sensitivity, possibilities, and perspective-taking. These expand with age as children move into upper grades. Those children were more expressive in their language. Their experiences communicated the sociological aspects of class differentiation existing in their surroundings. In dilemma situations, they seemed to be making judgments. They reasoned for their responses. The presence of critical thinking dispositions calls for nurturing critical thinking in childhood through meaningful, child-

centred pedagogies. Such evidence makes a meaningful contribution to the existing body of knowledge and provides scientific grounds for the inculcation of inquiry-based, experiential approaches, questioning, reflective practices, and independent inquiry in school teaching and learning. Cultivating critical thinking dispositions helps children become reflective, independent, and thoughtful learners who can engage meaningfully with the world around them.

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Exploring Critical Thinking Dispositions in Primary School Children

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented event that shocked the entire world. The virus's infectious and transmissible nature compelled the world to stand still. The world shifted to online mode, and schools were no exception. In this mode, teachers were supposed to teach using electronic devices and the internet. The shift from offline to online learning was challenging for adolescent students, as it required them to stay home with their families and forgo face-to-face interactions with peers. This study seeks to examine the multiple impacts of online learning on secondary school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study intends to identify the different concerns of secondary school students in the Gajapati district of Odisha regarding the teaching-learning process through an online mode.

Furthermore, the study intends to examine the socio-cultural inequalities that surfaced after the introduction of online education during Covid-19. I interviewed secondary-class students, their teachers, and parents from two types of schools (Rural and urban) to collect data. Students' responses were rated using a 5-point Likert scale. The study concluded that existing social inequality increased during the pandemic and that there is a digital divide among learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. It was also found that due to staying closed at home and being unable to socialise with their peers for many days, adolescent students experienced anxiety, depression, and irritation.

Keywords: *COVID-19 pandemic, Online Education, Digital divide, Anxiety, Depression, Socio-economic inequalities*

Introduction

The school provides an environment for formal teaching. The formal educational procedures that schools provide can lead to new ways of seeing and connecting with the world (NCF, 2005). This school environment helps foster attitudes and a tendency to learn among students, which are necessary for a progressive life in society. That is why school acts as an active instrument for social change and progress. Learning can occur everywhere. It is active and social. Learning helps modify behaviour. The school acts as a vehicle in bringing about the modification of behaviour through its daily activities and teaching-learning practices. It also plays a vital role in bringing about changes in students' behaviour by giving them a platform to gain diverse experiences. The school provides a space for students to learn collaboratively with their peers, teachers, and others. School helps raise students' social skills and awareness, in addition to their fun and curricular activities. With both formal and informal interactions between teachers and students, learning occurs within a network of social relationships. Hence, the quote "School is the miniature of society" (Dewey, 1899) fits here. Thus, school plays an important role in every child's life.

High school is an important period of time in an adolescent's life. Adolescence is the gap between childhood and adulthood. It is an important time for the formation of one's self-identity. Developing a sense of self is associated with both learning to cope with the social and psychological pressures of young adulthood and with physiological changes (NCF, 2005). During this stage, students love spending time with peers and growing with them. That is why Erikson categorised adolescence as the event of 'peer relationships' (Woolfolk, 2016). School is the place where students can form different cliques, each with unique norms and beliefs. With peers, students share their values and ideas. They actively participate and do the work collaboratively. According to Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development, adolescence to

adulthood comes under the 'Formal operational stage'. At this stage, their thinking becomes more critical. They solve abstract problems logically. They can consider multiple perspectives and develop concerns about social issues, personal identity, and justice. They can think hypothetically and deductively (Mukunda, 2012). To better understand concepts and abstract things, there is a need for procedural, conceptual, and activity-based learning (Woolfolk, 2016). This is better practised in schools with appropriate infrastructure, equipment, and teaching methods, such as practical, hands-on activities and discussions. The classroom allows students and teachers to discuss, share ideas, and debate various topics, enhancing their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Active participation involves enquiry, exploration, debate, questioning, application, and reflection, which help build theories and generate ideas. Thus, classroom and school activities are the most important factors in enhancing learners' learning.

The outbreak of the deadly disease COVID-19 suddenly threatened the world. The world is locked inside the four walls of home. Globally, 'hundreds of millions of students' are said to have been affected by school closures (UNESCO, 2020). This situation challenged the education system worldwide and forced educators to shift to online teaching overnight. Consequently, catering to the needs of all stages of education from pre-primary to university level, online learning has emerged as an alternative to ordinary/regular face-to-face classes. Relying on and adapting to online learning during a pandemic may lead educators to adopt more online elements in teaching. In view of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the Government of India stated that it was "actively promoting online education" through internet-based digital platforms and broadcasting educational content on TV through dedicated education channels (Prasad, 2021, p. 4). The new paradigm that is 'fully' online was new for teachers as well as students. Sitting in confined spaces and attending online classes for long hours left children exhausted. One cannot assume that all students, as well as educators, would have access to internet connectivity and powerful devices outside their school to communicate. The COVID-19 crisis could mark a momentous shift in social and political structures and processes, much like past humanitarian crises have done. This scenario prompted the researcher to study the psychosocial impact of online learning on secondary-grade students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarship is available on various aspects of COVID-19. Various positionalities inform this scholarship. Many scholars have highlighted the increasing importance of technology and technological tools. They seem to be thrilled with the outreach and impact of technological devices on human life. They are amused by the sharp rise in the scope of technology, which has now captured the domain of education, from Early childhood care education to higher education. In contrast, there is an abundance of literature that tends to examine the entire venture of technologization of education through a sociological/socio-scientific lens and investigate its various facets critically.

The literature has highlighted a basic framework for understanding students' perceptions of online education. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a major shift in communication. Advancements in technology played a central role in facilitating this shift. Many studies have discussed the psychological impacts on students' learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Irawan et al., 2020; Nazmul et al., 2020). These results indicate that practical and robust social support is needed during public health emergencies. According to AlAzzam et al. (2021), Adnan (2020), and Mahapatra & Sharma (2021), during the COVID-19 pandemic, senior high school students experienced depression and anxiety that were impacted by their parents' level of education and problems with online education. They talked about various psychological issues that have emerged, leading to academic stress among adolescents and their potential to lead to shootings and long-term psychological morbidity. This study contributes to the understanding of adolescents' mental health problems and related factors during the pandemic (Yu et al., 2022). The study presented evidence that, despite some challenges, undergraduate students could adapt to the new learning methods of distance learning and agreed that distance learning was more efficient than classroom learning (Amir et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020). According to Burns (2020), this transition mobilises the technological utopian imagination

that digital technologies can rescue populations from disease. It also raises the risk of deepening neoliberal educational reforms and, by extension, poses a threat to democracy itself.

The other side of the COVID-19 pandemic was the emergence of layered inequalities in society. Vertical class inequality already existed in Indian society, but these two years of the pandemic made it more multi-layered in socio-economic scenarios. When education shifted from offline to online, social inequality was reflected in digital inequality among students. This type of inequality is termed the digital divide. Oxfam's 2022 India Inequality Report: Digital Divide provides some insight into how the digital divide affected inequality in India during the pandemic. It examines how one of the main features of the divide is the lack of access to ICTs, pointing out that almost 70% of people in India have inadequate or no connectivity to digital services. This report identifies education, healthcare, and finance as sectors that underwent rapid digitisation during the pandemic (India Inequality Report - 2022). More important drivers of the digital divide during the Covid-19 pandemic are students' ICT skills, which are strongly related to their socioeconomic background (Werfhorst et al., 2022). In the Gajapati districts of Odisha, only 15.34% of students were able to use mobile phones for their online classes. There were higher dropout rates among SC and ST students in Odisha (Sahani, 2023). It has been inferred that the digital divide is not only an issue in the teaching and learning process during Covid-19. Still, it is also intrinsically embedded in many social, psychological, economic, and political issues.

Research Gap

After reviewing the related literature, the researcher found gaps in the study that needed to be researched. They are as follows:

1. Many of the reviews discussed the problems faced during online classes, as well as the availability of internet and devices, but hardly any discussed the psychological impact on students. Hence, the researcher wanted to study the psychological impact on school students by attending online classes.
2. Although very few researchers have studied the psychological impact on students, many have focused on graduate students, especially medical students, and most are from foreign countries. So, the researcher wants to study the psycho-social impact of secondary school students in the Indian context.
3. Very few of the reviewed studies discussed the sociocultural factors behind online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, no relevant studies have been conducted on schools in the Gajapati district of Odisha. So, the researcher sought to examine the psychosocial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic among secondary school students from different schools in the Gajapati district of Odisha.

Research Questions

A cursory glance at the available scholarship on the two strands above raises the following research questions.

1. To what extent are the students satisfied with online teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak?
2. How do online classes impact the change of moods of secondary school students?
3. How does the use of technology socio-economically affect secondary school students?
4. What are the possible reasons behind the increase or decrease in interest towards learning through technology?
5. What is students' perception of online classes, and of those who are exempted from them due to inaccessibility of infrastructure, such as network connectivity and technological devices?

Research Objective

The purpose of the study is to examine the perspectives on online classes among secondary school students and to study changes in students' moods resulting from daily online classes. Another purpose is to study the socio-cultural inequalities among students resulting from the inaccessibility of the network and technological devices during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The design of the study is a convergent parallel mixed-method type. Both quantitative and qualitative data are collected in parallel by using the necessary tools. Here, because the data were collected during the COVID-19 period, it

became difficult to obtain additional data from students and parents. Hence, the researcher used percentages to analyse quantitative data and triangulated them with qualitative data. The researcher used stratified random sampling and surveyed 90 individuals, of whom 60 were secondary school students (Classes 9 and 10) from various institutes such as Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Kendriya Vidyalaya, Eklavya Model Residential School, and Centurion Public School in Gajapati District, Odisha. The remaining 20 respondents were parents, and 10 were their subject teachers. Here, 'online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic' is the independent variable, and the 'psychosocial impact on secondary school students' is dependent upon the online learning during Covid-19. The Researcher went to the schools to collect the data. There, she distributed the printed 5-point Likert scale for students to complete. At that time, some schools were closed, so the researcher prepared a Google Form and sent it to the students through online mode. The researcher also visited some of the students' homes to meet their parents and interview them. After collecting the data, the researcher transcribed and then translated them for analysis. Quantitative data were obtained from a 5-point Likert scale. The data were analysed to provide a contextual framework for the students' views on online learning. This data was analysed alongside the qualitative data gathered through the semi-structured interview questionnaires of students, parents, and teachers. Pseudonyms were employed during analysis and reporting to safeguard the participants' identities. Analysis and interpretation of the collected data were conducted using percentages, appropriate statistical techniques, and descriptive elaboration. The data obtained has been analysed thematically, and the findings are drawn and discussed.

In the present study, the conceptual delimitation concerns the psychosocial impacts of irritation, anxiety, mood swings, and socio-cultural inequalities among secondary school students attending online classes. The sample comprises secondary school students in Gajapati District, Odisha. Gajapati district is located in southern Odisha. Most of the people belong to tribal and backward communities. With these considerations in mind, the researcher selected two types of schools. Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Model Residential School are residential schools where most of the children are from rural areas. The second type comprises urban schools such as Kendriya Vidyalaya and Centurion Public School. Kendriya Vidyalaya is especially for the children of transferable employees of the Government of India. Centurion Public School is a famous private English medium school in the only municipality of the district

Findings and Discussion

After analysing the data, the researcher presents the findings thematically and discusses them below.

Theme 1: Online classes possibilities and/ versus realities

Online education is no longer an option; it has become a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic. This became one of the hopes for everyone to continue the classes as much as possible. Some parents were somewhat relaxed because their children were safe and reading during the pandemic, but some parents from JNV and EMRS were worried about how to manage their families. As for JNV and EMRS, which are residential schools, all needs were met by the government, but this was stopped for a period as students returned home. When students were asked about their interest in online classes, 15% said online classes are never interesting, 68.3% said they are often interesting, and 16.7% said they are always interesting. 66.7% of total students said online classes are never better than offline classes, and 33.3% said online classes are sometimes better as per Covid-19 guidelines.

Teachers from Kendriya Vidyalaya and Centurion Public School reported that initially, students attended classes enthusiastically, but their numbers gradually declined. They neither submitted their homework nor participated in class. They have been acting strangely, and we have had to ask them repeatedly to submit the assignments. Psychological dynamics reveal the background of boredom among students, caused by various social conditions in their environment. Research subjects experienced emotional disturbances due to homework and also staying inside the four walls of the home. They did not have their peer circle to talk and spend some time with. This brought a drastic change in their attitude and behaviour. M. Chaitanya, a student from class 10th said,

"Classes were boring online. I wanted offline classes soon. I was irritated by having to attend classes at home. I used to miss my hostel, classroom, friends, playground and my school."

Adding to this, Rachana from class 10th mentioned in her form that,

"Yes, I do often want to watch TV instead of online classes, only when I get bored with online classes." She also mentioned that, "I want to play with friends outside the home because there was no one at home to play with us."

From these observations, it is clear that the students are gradually becoming bored and irritated with attending online classes for longer periods. The same is also quoted by Irawan, Dwisona, & Lestari (2020). That is, "Online learning that makes students communicate through gadget intermediaries makes the interaction between one individual and other individuals lack the meaning of non-verbal communication. The absence of these interactions, coupled with restrictions on physical meetings, makes students bored in classes." Prolonged screen time became a cause of headaches among students. One of the mothers said,

"After attending 2 to 3 classes, my son gets irritated and behaves differently. Most of the time, he says I have a slight headache. I want to take a nap."

Many subjects of the study experienced emotional disturbances like irritation and mood swings because of staying inside the four walls of the home and attending online classes for a longer period of time. When they were asked how they felt about attending online classes during COVID-19, 63.3% of the students said that most of the time they felt angry for no reason, 8.3% always felt angry and irritated, and 28.3% said they were not angry or irritated. They were complaining about a lack of social support from their peer circle. According to a mother, Mrs B. Laxmi,

"Most of the time, my daughter, who is in class 9th, is always engaged in mobile games. Sometimes she gets angry without any reason, behaves weirdly and yells at us."

Online education among high school students has increased the level of stress and pressure among students and increased their vulnerability to psychological problems. In this period, 70% of students reported that most of the time they lose interest in studying, 18.3% always lose interest, and 11.7% never lose interest. The results indicated that both anxiety and depression are prevalent among adolescents and are associated with higher risks of psychological distress. Such situations, before the COVID-19 pandemic, were considered serious and exacerbated the pandemic's psychosocial consequences. This is the reflection of students who were able to attend online classes. However, those who were exempted from classes due to the unavailability of gadgets and a proper internet connection were depressed about being unable to attend their regular classes, which might cause them to lag behind others. Thus, it is ironic that both sets of students were virtually reduced to embracing anxiety and depression, though altogether for different reasons. High school students are increasingly vulnerable to social and psychological disturbances due to developmental and academic requirements. Online education among adolescents has increased the level of stress and pressure among students and increased their vulnerability to psychological problems. The results indicated that both anxiety and depression are prevalent among adolescents and are associated with higher risks of suicide and disease prevalence. (AlAzzam M., Abuhammad, Abdalrahim, & Hamdan-Mansour, 2021)

The surge in telecommunications has led people to spend more time looking at screens on their smartphones. Previously, increased exposure to smart devices and screens has been reported to increase stress and burnout levels. Stress is an emotional, physical, or mental reaction that causes tension. The major factors contributing to burnout are overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment. In addition, a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment may result. In the reflection form, one of the students, Akanksha, mentioned that,

"I feel discouraged because I cannot understand anything during classes."

This implies that due to less clarity in online classes, students lose self-confidence and feel discouraged because they are not grasping the concepts. This might be a reason to feel discouraged.

According to Mrs Das, mother of a 9th-class student from KV,

"For a few months, I have been observing that my son is getting depressed. Often, after attending classes, he gets angry and shouts at us. He became so silent. Mobile became his world. Nowadays, he refuses to go outside."

When the researcher asked further about his reactions towards his study and behaviour, she said,

"The whole lockdown is gone, but he never touched (read or wrote) his textbooks. Gradually, he lost his interest towards his passion and hobbies."

Angelina, a student from KV, added,

"Dancing is my passion. I am learning Odissi at a coaching centre. Because of COVID-19, I am neither able to go to my coaching centre nor learn well at home. I am losing my self-motivation for my further courses."

The above responses imply that, due to the pandemic, students are forced to forgo their hobbies, passions, and interesting work. This made them more vulnerable and forced them to stay at home. In response, they reacted with anger and irritation.

Theme 2: School as a site of learning

The researcher found that many students across all schools expressed concern that the online learning environment was not effective for them. They were missing the face-to-face teaching-learning method. The remaining students who had attended the classes initially gradually lost interest in class and started bunking. Attendance decreased along with their participation in online classes. When the researcher interviewed the teachers of Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, the teachers said that "only 35 to 45% of students of class 10th were able to attend the online classes. The others were unable to attend due to the unavailability of electronic gadgets and the accessibility of the network." According to the teacher of the Odia language,

Initially, students attended classes regularly, but gradually their attendance dropped. Their participation level has also decreased. She used to reinforce students again and again to interact in class and also to submit the assignments."

The mathematics teacher added to it that,

"When the online classes were initiated, most of the boys joined the classes. Gradually, girl students joined when their mobile phones were arranged, and they continued to attend daily..."

Again, he said that

"But after a few days, the boys did not join. Maybe this is because boys are saving their mobile data for mobile games and other uses. They get a chance to go outside and to coaching centres, but girls are not allowed to go outside as boys are. During exam time, both boys and girls join the class and ask their queries."

Some students even assume that teachers are not wise in determining useful learning patterns. It's inferred that, due to online classes, students are unable to grasp many abstract and procedural concepts and skills. Their doubts remained unsolved. Many students expressed concern that the online learning environment was ineffective for them. Sonny explained,

"I understand information best during face-to-face conversations. Subjects like Mathematics and science are not very clear in online classes."

He added,

"I crave a learning environment where I can connect with others face-to-face." Sometimes this made them feel worthless, and their self-motivation got lost.

Many individuals wrote in their reflections that they are facing problems understanding physics, chemistry, mathematics, and other practical-based topics. This led to a problem in understanding the next topic. So, when they read them in books, they did not get the concepts properly. This decreases their interest in studies. When some classmates do answer in class and s/he cannot, they feel worthless. According to Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development, adolescence to adulthood comes under the 'Formal operational stage'. At this stage, their thinking becomes more scientific and curious, with a desire to learn by doing. They solve abstract problems logically, and are able to grasp abstract concepts easily. They can think hypothetically and deductively. (Woolfolk, 2016) To better understand the concepts and abstract things, there is a need for procedural and skill-based learning. So, by attending online classes, students have trouble grasping procedural and skill-based learning. Although they were promoted to higher classes, those doubts remained unaddressed, leading to further misconceptions about related concepts.

Regarding this, another student, Titikhya from class 9th, said,

"Due to poor network connection, most of the time the teacher is not audible. So, I am unable to grasp the contents. Gradually, those topics are left misunderstood only."

Most of the teachers said that, at first, it took a lot of time for them to become acquainted with using gadgets and taking classes online. Again and again, students used to ask us when the schools would reopen so that we could meet our friends and teachers in person and enjoy hostel life. This shows that there is an urgent need for a school environment for students during this pandemic. Especially during adolescence, school is an important place for students to be with their friends and socialise.

Theme 3: Digital divide- Social divide

There is a vast "digital inequality" that exists in society. This new type of inequality is also known as 'digital divide'. As defined by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the digital divide refers to "the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels about both their opportunity to access information and communication technologies and to their use of the internet for a wide variety of activities. (India Inequality Report, 2022) Affordability is another factor limiting access to online learning, with students from economically weaker sections facing a greater burden. Economic inequality is a key driver of the digital divide. Accessibility and affordability can have serious implications for students in the education system.

Many parents mentioned that the gradual implementation of the learning process at home led to a loss of interest in their kids' studies. Their children used to get angry at small things. Parents from Kendriya Vidyalaya and Centurion Public School were more or less conscious of their children's mental health. Some of them tried to substitute their daily routine and engage with their children in activities. As Mrs Das, a parent of a student from Kendriya Vidyalaya, said,

"We felt that he needed a change, so we booked a cab and took him to the beach, so that a trip might refresh him."

Whereas parents from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Model Residential Schools were not conscious of their children's mental health. They were already tense, as some had lost their jobs during COVID-19, and others were, as usual, at work. A parent of a student from EMRS said that,

"Maám, due to this pandemic, I have already lost my work, and I am disturbed. How could I bother about the mental situation of my kids when I am already stressed?"

Learners from KV and CPS rarely faced any internet connection issues, as they live in well-organised municipal towns, whereas children from JNV and EMRS faced many network issues. Some of the boys used to go to the tops of small mountains where they grew vegetables and cereals (bagada in the local language) to connect to the network and attend online classes, unless the weather was good. On rainy days, they are forced to miss classes. Rajat from class 10th of JNV said that,

"I used to go to Bagada, at the top of the mountain, for network connectivity and attend the classes, but when it was raining, I could not. I was bothered by my studies as I am in class 10th."

Another thing is that only boys were allowed to go to network-connected places, whereas girls were not allowed for safety reasons. So, the girls from remote villages were exempted from attending online classes. At that time, teachers from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Residential Model Schools said that very few students initially enrolled in the classes because most lacked reliable internet access and devices. After a couple of months, the number increased as children began buying mobile phones. Still, the number was not satisfactory. Some teachers also shared their experiences of how they faced problems adopting the technologies to deliver daily classes all of a sudden. (Nambissan, 2024, pp 62-63) writes that, "Digital inequality and lack of teacher preparedness in relation to online learning have been raised as key issues during the pandemic in India and are concerns that will have to be addressed in the short run."

Most students from Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Residential Model School disrupted their academic lives due to reduced family income, limited access to digital resources, lack of internet access, and the high

cost of internet connectivity. Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya and Eklavya Residential Model School are located in rural areas and primarily serve underprivileged, socio-economically disadvantaged communities. The children from urban areas attended classes with their personal devices and reliable internet connectivity. On the other hand, many children did not get a chance to attend class at all. Either they do not have gadgets, or they have an unavailable internet connection. Some children from JNV and EMRS used to go to work outside as daily wage workers to feed

themselves as well as their families. In this scenario, how could we expect them to attend classes instead of working to survive? It is more than just the haves and have-nots; it is not only about those with access and those without. It concerns the development of knowers and know-nots, doers and do-nots, and those with and without the ability to communicate with the outside world. Students from KV and CPS also attended their classes at school, and some enrolled in private online coaching platforms. Whereas students from rural areas did not have a chance to attend any. The researcher found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant digital divide emerged in the education system. This gap transparently reflects the presence of multilayered inequalities within our society. This pandemic recreated many new sublayers within the multilayered class system of our country. Another major issue was the availability of proper internet connections. According to NCF,2005, "Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should be used in such a way that it becomes an opportunity equaliser by providing information, communication and computing resources in remote areas." Now, it is the need of the hour to recognise that ICT is not accessible to a large section of rural students, especially during the COVID-19 period. Similarly, ASER (2021) also found that, among both reopened and not reopened schools, COVID caused financial distress; free facilities provided by government schools and classes not being held in private schools were cited as the major reasons for this increase in the digital divide.

Conclusion

The study concludes that online education among high school students has increased stress and pressure and heightened their vulnerability to psychological problems. Students' mental health is highly affected when faced with this pandemic, and they need attention, help, and support from the community, family, and educational institutions. In addition to the psychological impact, the study highlighted significant digital divides and multilayered socioeconomic inequalities in our society. The study emphasises that school is a learning site that has a greater role in our society. There is a need for a deep and complex understanding of online education during Covid-19 for the deprivations and disadvantages suffered by people experiencing poverty. We can imagine the future of digital teaching-learning practice, which is proposed to continue in the future.

Further suggestions

The study covered only 9th- and 10th-class students; it warrants further study. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic period. So, the sample size is limited. It can be further studied using large amounts of data for quantitative analysis or qualitatively through in-depth research. The researcher delimited the study to the psycho-social impacts of COVID-19 on adolescents. Further, it can be studied through other lenses, such as socio-economic and gender differences.

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Spectre of Assessment and Examination: A Historical Retrospection

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Abstract

The Ministry of Education recently rolled out the national curriculum framework for secondary education to implement the imperative of the National Education Policy 2020 (henceforth Nep2020) across various stages of school education, including secondary education. This framework claims to make radical shifts in many aspects of school education, including assessment and examination. This paper reflects on the historical evaluation of the trajectory of assessment and examination, especially in the post-independence period. At the same time, there is a significant development milestone in this respect. The paper concludes that, despite the lofty claim of revitalising assessment and examination, NCFSE 2023 seems far short of providing a realistic Mechanism for this purpose. All claims related to establishing the regime of skill, competency, and creativity seem half-hearted, as they don't seem ready to invest time, energy, and money in the process. It is doomed to lower academic standards and critical skills among students, as it seems committed to reducing the academic weightage of board examinations to a considerable extent. It would be very interesting and critical to see how all these claims are integrated into the upcoming textbooks.

Keywords: *Assessment, Examination, Evaluation, Colonial system, Policy Document, Textbooks, Rote learning, Competency and Criticalities*

Introduction

The spectre of the exam has assumed the status of eternality. Every formal/informal relationship is in the grip of the dispector in general; it can support a wide-ranging interpretation, from an extremely philosophical one to a totally emotional one. It is an instrument which has a timeless, spaceless impact. Each one of us can try to test others in the requisite and desirable test. There are famous jatakas tales named “The Tale of the Courteous Mistress”. In this story, the servant Kali puts her owners to a test of patience with a critical question: Is she really benevolent, or is her benevolence contingent on my ability to do every task efficiently and on time? Ultimately, she could not pass her test. She scolded and beat Kali badly because she was getting up very late for the last three successive days. Kali concluded that her owners were only generous up to the time and day. When I was working properly, when I deliberately got up late, she lost all her generosity (tale of the courteous mistress, Cities of the Mahajanapadas. In Social Studies: Class 6. Pp 56). The conundrum of exams is most commonly discussed in the context of academic exams at various levels. There is hardly any ladder of educational up-scaling that can be climbed without going through exams. Even in the memorial, most of the educational phase of the discipline ended with one or another kind of exam. The nature and frequency of the exams, however, were quite different from those of recent times. In recent years, there has been a growing tendency towards irregularities across different kinds of exams. The spectrum of irregularities is quite comprehensive, ranging from mass copying to the leakage of question papers for various exams. The above-referred irregularities often lead to numerous controversies that are less academic than political.

These controversies raised questions primarily about the contradictions and practical aspects of assessment and evaluation methodologies. The central question is whether there is a distinction between education and exams, or if they are synonymous. In other words, does the exam ensure learning, or does it merely test it? How did education become so exam-centric that we

began to view it as synonymous with examinations? In this paper, we examine the inherent contradiction between assessment and examination from multiple perspectives. We will also briefly survey the available literature on this subject. Literature on assessment and exams began to emerge during the colonial era, following the introduction of a standardised, uniform system of education and examination. Numerous educational administrators have, over time, commented on the merits and flaws of these assessment and exam practices. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was perhaps the first Indian educationist to emphasise the need for transparency in assessment and evaluation processes. The Sadler Commission (also known as the University Commission) expressed concern that assessment and evaluation were becoming increasingly focused on rote memorisation. Fictional literature addressing the examination system and its associated problems also began to appear in the early 20th century (and even a decade or two prior). Notable examples include the novel “Pariksha Guru” by Lala Srinivas Das and the short story “Bade Bhai Sahab” by Munshi Premchand.

Literature Review

Since independence, almost all the commissions, committees, and expert groups constituted to address educational issues in India have highlighted the problems and available alternatives regarding assessment and evaluation in their reports. These commissions and committees range from the University Education Commission to the National Curriculum Framework formulated in 2023.

Beyond these commissions and committees, assessment and evaluation have also remained the nucleus of the discussion in India's three National Education Policies (1968, 1986, and the New National Education Policy 2020, chapter four); these policies have analysed the flaws inherent in existing evaluation methods while emphasising the development of alternative suggestions and improved assessment processes. In addition to the alternatives proposed by these commissions and policies, various scholars have examined the issue of assessment and evaluation in great depth.

For instance, Suresh Chandra Shukla, in his seminal book “Education, economy and social structure in British India”, highlighted the evolution of the examination system in colonial India while tracing its implications. To him, colonial policy used written examinations to evolve a bureaucratic, centralised governance of education, implying that for all official purposes, such as promotion and employment, one needs to appear in a homogeneous, standardised examination system. Shukla further noted that this homogeneity of the examination system was meant to serve social purposes, namely to instil the sense and spirit of administrative fairness in the minds of the pupils of India. (S.shukla. pp 112-25).

While echoing the same sense provided by Shukla, Krishan Kumar, in his seminal article, " The Origin of Textbook Culture in India analysed the origin of the uniform examination system in India during the colonial period. He pointed out that examinations were impersonal in the sense that students were examined by someone other than the teacher. The establishment of norms for the public written examination, coupled with the notion of spot testing by inspectors, was an effort to impose the hegemonic elements of the colonial system on Indians, with a view to convincing them that the colonial system was fair and impartial. Krishan Kumar further noticed how the colonial examination systems virtually turned into a system of examining memorised content, along with speed and writing capacity, with some accuracy. This system led to the emergence of many malaises that are currently prevalent in the current education examination system. (Kumar, K., pp. 457, 458) The inherent traumatic fear of a strange atmosphere and of unknown entities who administer the examination systems as an external element plays havoc with the minds of the children, many of whom are seldom able to display their self-confidence in front of strangers.

Yashpal committees, which were constituted in 1993 as the National Advisory Committee to suggest ways to reduce the academic burden on school students. This committee made significant remarks regarding the entire assessment and examination system. They not only recommended minimising the intervention of external agencies, such as the board, but also sought to reaffirm faith in the teacher's agency. While commenting on the issue of reproducing memorised content, the committee specifically noted that a sense of understanding and analysis

of the phenomenon is sorely lacking in our textbooks and exam-centric education system, which is deeply entrenched in information and recall. The committee pointed out very, very specifically that "Recall-type questions outnumber the questions that test the child's capacity to speculate, evaluate or judge, and to apply all ideas in an unfamiliar context." The committee strongly recommended introducing the application-based question. (Learning without burden, 1993) This report seems to be a landmark document in that it identifies key attributes of assessment and examination that are neither mentioned in any official document nor significantly different in theory. It is altogether an issue that, in practice, most documents failed to strengthen these theoretical ideas with varying exceptions.

Tenner and Jones, in their book Assessment: A Practical Guide for Secondary Teachers,2006. He identified key assessment functions that serve three primordial functions: managerial, communicative, and pedagogical. The managerial function consists of a variety of policies, programmes, and schemes aimed at ensuring students' progression. The communicative purpose is closely aligned with the students' judgment/state of learning. It also includes considerations regarding the nature of the knowledge and skills imparted to students. The pedagogical purpose is to assess the basic processes of classroom teaching, including lesson planning, feedback, and other activities. They found that it is quite difficult to maintain the appropriate balance among the above purposes; often, one of them seems to dominate the others. (Tenner and Jones cited in Ritesh Khunyakari,144)

Ritesh Khunykari in his contributed chapter " Assessment and Learning in Indian Context: Compelling Association, Invariance or an Educational Folly?" in the edited volume on the occasion of the completion of 30th year of yashpal committee report under the title " Learning without Burden Where are We a Quarter Century after the Yash Pal Committee Report" edited by Mythili Ramchand, Ritesh Khunyakari and Arindam Bose" highlighted number of disjuncture features and multiple role of assessment and examination in the process of teaching learning. To him, assessment affects the learning process in a multidimensional manner, especially in curricular, effective, pedagogical, and psychological terms. He found that each of the above aspects is critically associated with assessment as it profoundly impacts all of them. He highlights that assessment is an unavoidable tool and medium; therefore, society tends to consider the systemic and institutional position on quality and learning, along with the prevailing environment and conditionalities of any institution. He tried to figure out some of the sociocultural shifts in approaches to assessment in the Indian education system that stem from an overemphasis on one purpose of assessment at the expense of the other. He concluded that in most cases, managerial and communicative purposes take precedence over the pedagogical purpose. (Khunykari, pp 144)

Disha Navani has comprehensively covered the various dimensions of assessment and examination through her papers and articles over the last 20 years. She has written extensively on issues such as the no-detention policy, continuous comprehensive evaluation, and legal changes in the domain of assessment and examination. She has widely argued that, to develop a proper assessment matrix, the teacher's agency needs to be restored. No system of assessment can work efficiently unless teachers are accorded legitimate autonomy. A brief survey of the field reveals two key facts: first, the majority of work on assessment and evaluation has focused on school education.

In contrast, higher education largely faces the same challenges as the school sector. Second, studies have predominantly focused on strictly academic aspects of assessment and evaluation, with insufficient attention to methods involving co-educational and co-curricular activities, except in a few exceptions. Consequently, the role and contribution of these latter areas within the processes of learning, assessment, and evaluation remain limited. Key Functions of Assessment and Evaluation: Assessment and evaluation are integral components of the education system. Throughout an individual's educational journey, assessment and evaluation begin early and span both brief and comprehensive stages, often forming what is referred to as the "labyrinth" or "maze" of assessment and examination (the "gatekeeping" perspective). Beyond its operational function, assessment and evaluation hold significance due to their multifaceted roles. It profoundly influences the curriculum, educational

institutions, and the creative, psychological, and social dimensions of learning; how it interrelates with these aspects is crucial and highly sensitive from a learning perspective. Assessment and evaluation are the processes through which society reviews itself and provides feedback on implemented procedures, methods, and environments. In other words, assessment and evaluation determine the quality and accountability of the education system in relation to society. Currently, evaluation has come to dominate learning to the point that, if not approached carefully, it could fundamentally alter the nature of learning itself. It is hardly surprising, then, that assessment and evaluation have become a major concern for both the academic community and the general public.

Following the announcement of results for any public examination, the importance of evaluation and its democratic appeal reach their zenith. The media plays a particularly notable role in this regard. By glorifying the marks or ranks of top-performing students, the media shapes a specific image and perspective in society. While this fills high achievers and their families with immense pride, it subjects students who lag even slightly or fail to secure a top spot to harsh treatment. Parents and teachers often treat them as if they have committed a heinous crime. Such societal behaviour not only alienates students from education but also breeds feelings of despair, depression, and isolation. Consequently, many students are driven to suicide.

Many scholars believe that an examination of the processes involved in educational assessment and evaluation reveals a context deeply connected to understanding both the students and oneself. According to Tanner and Jones (2006), assessment is a continuous process that broadly serves three objectives: administrative, communicative, and pedagogical. In its administrative capacity, assessment focuses on the system’s policy aspects, establishing accountability based on student progress and evaluating institutional performance. Its communicative objective is to exchange information about knowledge and skills.

Within this scope, it establishes accountability for student progress, diversifies the curriculum to include valuable components, and reviews the growth in student learning. The pedagogical function of assessment and evaluation involves planning the entire learning and assessment process, analysing the activities of both teachers and learners, correcting students' misconceptions, providing appropriate feedback, and encouraging and reinforcing students by acknowledging their successes from time to time. It often happens that a proper balance is not maintained among the three aforementioned tasks; consequently, greater emphasis is placed on one while another is neglected. Thus, we see that assessment and evaluation constitute a multifaceted process; it encompasses not only the structuring of a vision for achieving learning outcomes but also the scope for analysing pedagogical plans, curricular perspectives, and the expectations placed upon the education system by society at large, spanning both local and global contexts.

The historical perspective on assessment and examination: The form of evaluation we see today in India originated in the colonial era, coinciding with the state's takeover of education. The Department of Education, then known as the Department of Public Instruction, was established in India in 1854, based on recommendations that incorporated principles associated with administrative bureaucracy. With the establishment of this department, a hierarchical bureaucratic structure for schooling was created, and schools gradually came under government control. Following this state takeover, teachers and education officials were recruited as government employees; the focus shifted to providing funding and maintaining official records of school activities, prioritising government accountability over the actual teaching-learning process. Policies were introduced to establish a homogeneous and standardised curriculum, textbooks, and assessment systems across the board. (Kumar, pp 75-79)

This marked the beginning of the "textbook-centric culture" that persists in India today, in which examinations were based on reproducing textbook content. Specific chapters and excerpts from particular textbooks were prescribed in the curriculum; effectively, this meant that if a student failed to reproduce the prescribed excerpts verbatim, the student’s marks were deducted accordingly. In other words, under this system, textbooks became de facto with the curriculum, syllabus, teaching methods, and even the guiding principle for assessment and evaluation processes themselves. Consequently,

the broader aims and objectives of education were sidelined, and education became synonymous merely with examinations. (Kumar,82-87)

The resentment against this rigid framework is powerfully depicted in Munshi Premchand's story "Bade Bhai Sahab," which captures the voice of a rebel challenging this system. The famous observations regarding education and assessment found in this story remain strikingly relevant—so much so that the narrative feels as though it could have been written around 2023. In o the story, Bade Bhaisaab, the protagonist's elder brother, explains the importance of studying to his younger sibling, saying: "When you reach my grade, you'll find it an uphill struggle—a truly gruelling task. You'll have to grapple with the 'iron nuts' of Algebra and Geometry, and study the history of England. Memorising the names of kings isn't easy; there were eight Henrys alone, the number of Jameses goes into dozens, and there are too many Williams and Charleses. Trying to memorise them makes your head spin; it takes a lifetime. These stupid people did not find an exclusive name to give their children. They just kept appending 'the Second,' 'the Third,' 'the Fourth,' and 'the Fifth' to the same name. God alone knows the fate of these countless names. Just imagine—write 'A-J' instead of 'J-A,' and you lose all your marks. No one asks these heartless examiners what the actual difference is between 'A-J' and 'J-A,' or why they crucify students over such trifles—what is the practical difference if one ate *dal-bhat-roti* or *bhat-dal-roti*." "What does it matter? But the examiners don't care. They only look for what is written in the book. They want boys to memorise every single letter by rote, and they have labelled this very act of rote learning as an 'education'."

As early as the colonial era, specifically during the Hunter Commission (1882–1886), flaws in the assessment system began to be highlighted. Yet, no significant changes were observed in the system until 1947. The government relied on a core curriculum, essentially the literary education the colonial administration provided to the Indian people, which left no room for practical, technical, or physical activities, and failed to bring about any comprehensive changes in creative or progressive assessment methods. An analysis of the historical perspective on assessment and evaluation reveals a clear fact. There was insufficient consideration of the need to transform the very nature of these processes up to 1970. While there was some deliberation on "what" specific points, competencies, and skills should be evaluated, the prevailing practice has largely been based on rote memorisation and the verbatim reproduction of facts found in textbooks. When designing question papers, the specific standards or criteria intended for assessment are often not clearly identified. Consequently, there is an undue emphasis on questions that merely test the memorisation of textbook facts. The year 1972 is a watershed in the concept of significant consideration in assessment and examination. The establishment of the Kishor Bharti Organisation in Hoshangabad district proved to be a milestone in this respect.

Kishore Bharti, coupled with its sister organisation Eklavya (1971–1982) and (1982–2000), respectively. In their all-innovative and experimental educational program, mainly the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (HSTP), the Social Science Teaching Program (SSTP), and the Primary Education Teaching Program, popularly known as Prashika. The above educational program and the above-mentioned organisations consciously endeavoured to incorporate criteria to assess students' holistic learning. The parent of all these criteria seems to be the Hoshangabad Science Teaching Program (HSTP), implemented between 1972 and 2000 across various schools in the district of Hoshangabad and thirteen other large school complexes in Madhya Pradesh, spread across the fourteen districts of the state. (Never a dull movement, pp 33-36, pp 37-61) The HSTP assessment model was grounded in multiple parameters, including measuring experimental capabilities, conducting tests, formulating new questions, summarising information, interpreting and creating tables, and exercising reasoning, comparison, and analysis. (Never a dull movement, pp. 410- 422)

Curriculum-related documents published before the 2005 National Curriculum Framework (NCF) proposed only partial changes. For instance, instead of continuous assessment, specific lessons were designated for unit-based or term-based evaluations. The 2005 NCF offered progressive suggestions regarding assessment and evaluation, pointing towards positive changes. This document primarily

emphasised understanding and application over rote learning. It advocated for Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE), which entails assessing co-scholastic and co-curricular dimensions alongside academic activities. The document also emphasised the need to ensure the autonomy of both teachers and learners by making the evaluation process constructivist and progressive. It also suggested making board examinations optional, allowing students to choose school-based exams instead. While a National Assessment Council was formally established, the initiative remained largely superficial, existing only as a suggestion or a token gesture. (NCF 2005, PP 4-5 and PP 114-116)

The comprehensive evaluation model required a constructive, creative environment in India; however, due to neglect and a lack of such an environment, it failed to progress. Implementing this requires time and energy from the education system, yet systemic issues prevent teachers from dedicating the necessary time and effort.

Free and Compulsory Right to Education in 2009

The Right to Education Act, 2009 (enacted to guarantee education as a fundamental right for students aged 6–14) included a provision for a 'no-detention policy' up to Class 8; however, this provision has since been significantly modified to account for various social and political considerations. Under a 2019 amendment to the Act, state governments now have the autonomy to decide the grade level up to which they wish to implement the no-detention policy. (RTE Act 2009, pp 9, RTE Amendment Act 2019, pp 1-2)

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced primarily to overhaul the curriculum and assessment, advocates making assessment and evaluation competency-based and formative. The policy proposes the establishment of a national assessment centre named 'PARAKH (Performance Assessment, Review, and Analysis of Knowledge for Holistic Development)', which is also expected to guide the school boards of examination in revitalising their assessment patterns. (NEP 2020, PP19) . The policy does not merely emphasise board examinations but advocates for competency-based assessment. Configuring the idea of holistic assessment is not a new contribution of NEP 2020. National Advisory Committee to Advise on Improving the Quality of Learning While Reducing the Burden on School Students, under the chairpersonship of Prof. Yashpal. As usual, the drafters of NEP 2020 did not acknowledge this borrowing at all.

It is important to note here that the Professor Yash Pal Committee emphasised the need to restructure learning and assessment in education as a holistic process. The Committee held the clear view that assessment should not merely be a means to determine a final result but should be an integral part of the entire learning process. The Professor Yash Pal Committee believed that such an approach would improve the educational environment.(Yashpal committee report1 ,pp 13-14,pp-22) And some efforts have been made to implement holistic assessment in the National Curriculum Framework 2005 and subsequently through the Right to Education Act 2009, especially by ensuring a continuous, comprehensive, and no-detention policy to make assessment a holistic and multidimensional process.

To meet the imperative of the NEP 2020 national curriculum framework, both foundational and secondary stages have been prepared. We will focus briefly on the secondary framework because the issue of assessment for secondary classes has been addressed in this document. Unlike its parent document (that is, NEP 2020), the National Curriculum Framework for Secondary Education 2023, henceforth NCFSE 2023, is an unwieldy document of 650-plus pages with a lot of repetition across various subparts and subsections. It is identical to its predecessor in its use of flowery and dubious language, which sounds very progressive. So the sub-part related to assessment in 3.4 is concerned; it has been beautifully curtained with forward-looking phrases and very sophisticated terminology. For instance, it envisions the assessment as a competency-based, holistic process that should cover the entire gamut of student learning. "The connection between the Competency or Learning Outcome and the assessment should be clear and precise. Appropriate forms of assessments may be chosen in alignment with the Competencies and Learning Outcomes to be assessed". It further advocates timely, credible, and constructive feedback to students. They should be given useful, constructive, and realistic feedback, with ideas to help them understand how they can

further improve their learning. DOCUMENT reiterated the principle position of the Yashpal Committee report and NCF2005. (NCF2023,PP117-118)

Of course, without acknowledging them, the Examinations should move away from testing rote memorisation and instead focus on conceptual understanding, application of concepts, problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and other such capacities. The document also appears fairly progressive when it considers the form of assessment, which includes, among others, written, oral, practical, experimental, demonstration, artefacts, projects, portfolio and open-book tests."(NCf SE2023,pp119-121). NCFSE 2023 emphasises the need for holistic assessment and argues against comparing students with one another.

Up to this point, it seems well advanced and extremely progressive; however, if we lift the curtain in the remaining part of this subpart, it easily exposes the retrogressive elements hidden in the above-mentioned paragraphs. For instance, theoretically, it advocates a no-detention policy up to 8th grade; however, in practice, it does ensure a mechanism for retention while making it optional for parents to keep their ward in the same class if they do not acquire the recognition competency/skill determinant for a particular class. It is important to take into account that the unconditional reference of the no detention policy is in apparent contradiction with the latest amendment of the Right to Education 2009 through the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (Amendment)Act,2019, which does make it optional for the state government to decide about it. (NCFSE2023 PP 124-126)

NCFSE 2023 makes wholesale arrangements to unleash the psychological trauma upon young minds while making provision of examination by external agencies at the third, fifth and eighth grades respectively. In this venture, it even surpasses the colonial bureaucratic apparatus, which provided the external exam at least from the fifth standard. (ncfse2023,pp124) Probably the most detrimental proposal in this document is the recommendation for a written board examination based on only 25% of the total marks. It suggests that the board-written examination must consist of only 25% marks, and the remaining 75% should be divided among various practical aspects, which may include experiments, demonstrations, and creative work, to mention a few. We can visualise how these marks can be awarded very subjectively to various students, depending on the school's and the teacher's likes and dislikes. Certainly, this proposal will contribute to the already deteriorating intellectual capacities of the student. This doesn't seem to provide them with an adequate opportunity to think and reason independently. (NCFSE2023,PP127-128) Last but not least, this document does not inspire confidence in the teacher's ability to undertake serious academic work. It advocates for a pool of test developers, evaluators, and reviewers to develop high-quality question papers and test materials, without providing any space for teachers in this venture. (NCFSE 2023, pp 128)

Conclusion

In light of the conclusion, it can be inferred that assessment is a tool designed to support both teachers and students within the teaching-learning process by ensuring that learning occurs. It enables the realisation of educational objectives, makes the learning experience as meaningful and effective as possible, and ensures that both teaching and learning goals and objectives are clearly defined. Assessment cannot be solely result-oriented; the process of assessment is just as important as the outcome. Assessment must be timely and encompass all aspects of the teaching-learning process. The historical survey of the government's initiative related to assessment and examination reveals that before the report of the National Advisory Committee to Advise on Improving the Quality of Learning While Reducing the Burden on School Students (1993). The government establishment made no serious efforts to improve the assessment and examination process. The experiences of innovative assessment programs were evident in the field, even with the collaboration of government institutions such as the State Council of Educational Research and Training, Bhopal, and Madhya Pradesh; however, these learnings were not taken into consideration before the National Curriculum Framework 2005. It's a complete document to some extent. With the amendment to the Right to Education Act 2009 in 2019, and subsequently with the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020, these innovative efforts were pushed back in many respects. The National

Curriculum Framework 2023 for secondary education promises, at least in theory, to give appropriate weightage to competencies, critical thinking, and related areas. However, its scheme for upgrading students across different classes doesn't suggest this and seems to be completely at odds with its theoretical precepts. It would be interesting to see how the design of skills and competencies is integrated into upcoming textbooks across subjects and classes. It would be necessary to investigate very meticulously whether the tools of skill, competency, and creativity should not be weaponised to reduce / diminish the content of a specific kind. Teachers seem to be, once again, on the losing end, with almost no voice in the most serious processes.

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