



Position Paper

**COUNSELLING AND GUIDANCE
IN SCHOOL EDUCATION**

Richa Goswami and Sushmita Mukherjee
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Richa Goswami
Sushmita Mukherjee
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Executive Summary

The position paper is an outcome of analysis of counselling in the National Education Policy-2020, with the explicit purpose of furthering educational outcomes for girls and children from marginalised sections. In our national perception, education has always been considered essential for all, and has been a major State concern since independence. All policy documents and reports of multiple commissions, as well as influential advocates of education, have stressed on the universalisation of education with special focus on marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged sections.

As a result of this continued focus, the enrolment rates have increased significantly in the past few decades, even in remote locations and amongst historically marginalised sections, but systemic retention and transition to higher education continues to be a challenge. The position paper seeks to present well supported position on the area of Counselling.

Academic attainments and learning in the school are not solely a consequence of in-classroom activities and experiences but are also significantly influenced and shaped by extracurricular factors. Economic necessities, disenchantment with schools, a feeling of learnt helplessness, discrimination, humiliation and other examples of symbolic violence, or engagement in criminal activities are some of the factors that lead to young adolescents leaving schools. Achieving quality education hinges upon the presence and continuous engagement of students within the school environment. The NEP refers to the role of school counsellors, social workers and counselling support in ensuring school retention and completion. It acknowledges the concern of mental health emanating from schooling, family and community dynamics, and pressures related to livelihood, and underscores a commitment to addressing these issues by advocating for the inclusion of school counsellors and social workers within the educational system (Government of India, 2020, pp. 9).

The position paper adopts a broader perspective on counselling, with two distinct approaches: Proactive and Remediation. Proactive school counselling implies a systemic approach of anticipating the student's needs and providing for long-term solutions and support that mitigate the risk of school drop-out, due to frustration, learned helplessness, lack of decision making or aspiration, etc. Remediation counselling refers to the support provided to children and adolescents when issues like anxiety, low mood, depression, conduct and learning or eating disorders present themselves.

Inclusion of counselling with a defined focus on career opens the potential of bringing a career-oriented perspective in the scheme of mainstream education. Career and Psycho-Social Counselling are not standalone areas; nor are they an either/or choice. Setting up of counselling resources, especially in the public school system, needs to be cognizant of the need to fulfil the need for both.

We need to look at the different roles a counsellor needs to fulfil and their eligibility and preparation will emanate from there. Based on an analysis of the current situation, provisions in the policy and the possibilities emerging from a rigorous literature review, the position paper makes the following specific recommendations:

1. It is crucial that we move away from the notion that teachers can perform all the roles needed for the optimum development of young adults and acknowledge the need for a distinct counselling support structure in the school education system.

2.The first step is to provide the much-needed counselling and mental health support, including a counsellor in schools/ school complexes. In addition, a systemic change in terms of other types of primary support available at school level, secondary support available at block level and tertiary support available at district level is required.

3.This position paper recognises adolescence as a pivotal stage where distinct needs often remain unaddressed within the current school system. Adolescents struggle with issues related to identity crisis and formation, physical, emotional and mental changes, as well as a search for one's place in the society.

4.One of the important and pragmatic recommendations flowing from the NEP is regarding ensuring a shared counsellor and social worker within a school complex. Considering this is not an identified need in the ecosystem, it's possible that getting good candidates in requisite numbers may prove to be a challenge.

5.Implementing any significant change in the field of school education, such as appointment of counsellors, necessitates the engagement and preparation of teachers.

6.In addition to initial orientation, ongoing support is crucial for teachers. The establishment of supportive networks within school clusters or complexes, led by trained facilitators, can effectively fulfil this need.

7.Securing adequate numbers of qualified and good candidates to act as counsellors may pose a challenge. To address this, a rigorous programme of capacity building over the next few years is necessary. Involving academic institutions and civil society organisations in the effort would ensure proper preparation of individuals via pre-service and in-service training.

8.Vulnerability has multiple layers. Factors such as caste, religion, and economic class serve as layers that can either heighten or diminish an individual's vulnerability with regard to continuing school education. As an example, when it comes to the risk of school dropout, girls are more susceptible than boys and among girls, those residing in rural areas face a greater risk compared to their urban counterparts. Similarly, children belonging to lower castes, especially scheduled castes or tribes, experience marginalisation in school and have lower rates of completion of schooling.

9.In the same context, it is important to highlight that while the NEP has addressed girls' education and the needs of disabled children, it has overlooked the specific challenges faced by girls with disabilities. The position paper recommends that this is an area deserving of focused attention from counsellors, both in their interactions with students and in their engagements with parents and community members.

10. Counselling, even when primarily focused on instilling aspirations for higher education and careers, must take all factors such as economic pressures, absence of role models, limited aspirations, and a sense of hopelessness for a better life into consideration. In this sense, counselling should acknowledge that early school dropouts cannot solely be attributed to students' lack of awareness about potential career paths or their own inability to leverage their unique interests and strengths; but that it is a more complex issue.

11. Counselling should include efforts to introduce young students to alternative role models, different family structures, and diverse societal models as part of its approach.

Acronyms

ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
CWSN	Children with Special Needs
DNEP	Draft National Education Policy
ECR	Report of the Education Commission
GER	Gross Enrollment Ratio
GoI	Government of India
JBAV	Jharkhand Balika Awasiya Vidyalaya
JEPC	Jharkhand Education Project Council
J-PAL	Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab
KGBV	Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya
KSK	Kishorawastha Shikshan Karyakram
NCERT	National Council of Educational Research and Training
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
NEP	National Education Policy
NFE	Non-Formal Education
NPE	National Policy of Education
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial

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1. Context

In our national perception, education has always been considered essential for all and has been a major State concern since independence. Article 45 of the Constitution of India promulgated in 1949 states that:

"The State shall endeavour to provide within a period of 10 years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years."

The perceived urgency and immediacy to fulfil the need for education is clear from the fact that this is the only Directive Principle of State Policy where the makers of the Constitution put a deadline. However, this could only become a justiciable right in 2009, with the advent of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act.

India's 'education for all' journey started in a very challenging environment. At the time of independence educational accessibility was very poor and the differential between various segments of society very large. The Census of India, 1951 reports the general literacy rate was 18.3%, for men it was 27 %, women lagged at 8.9%. For Urban population it was 34.6%, while for rural populations it was 12.1 %. In 1961, only 10.3% of the Scheduled Castes were literate, while amongst the Scheduled Tribes the literacy rate was 8.5%.

Given this environment of extremely scarce educational resources, distributed unequally due to existing socio-economic disparity, the challenge of 'education for all' was twofold. It meant a manifold increase in educational resources, while ensuring equitable access. This would not be possible without proactive and concerted efforts by the State. We have seen that all policy documents and reports of multiple commissions, as well as influential advocates of education, have stressed on the universalisation of education with special focus on marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged sections.

The imagination of a woman's life journey, her role as a mother and wife and the constraints on her mobility implied that girls were kept out of schools for a very long time. Thus, as a first step there was recognition for the need of girls only schools where parents would send their girls with little hesitation. Report of the Education Commission (ECR) 1964-66 (popularly known as the Kothari commission report) talked about the need for special schools only for

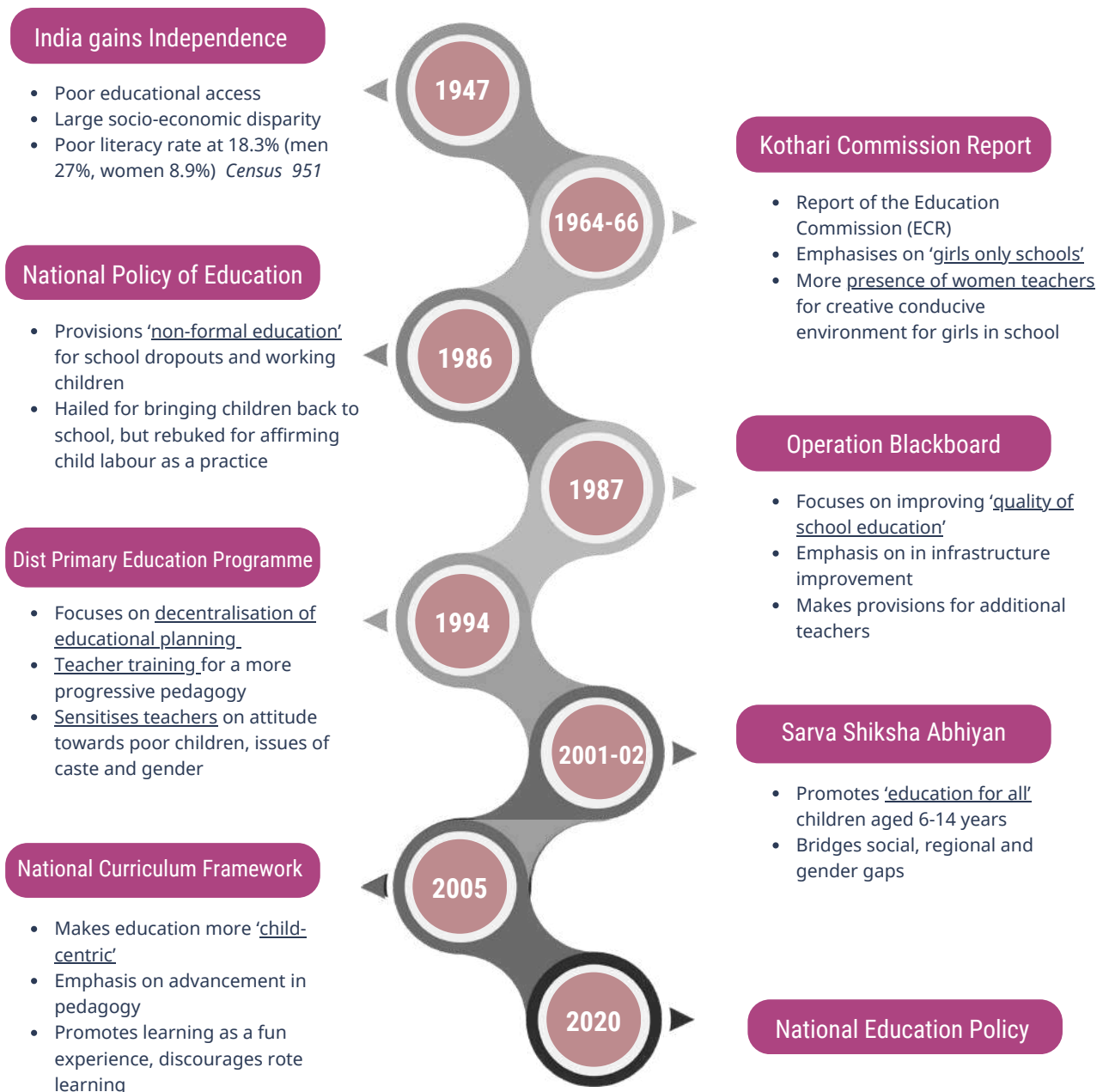
girls at the upper primary stage, especially for rural areas, for at least some time to come. They took this concern one step further and emphasised on the need for employing women teachers, as they believed that "the presence of a woman teacher will bring more girls to schools." (GOI, 1966). They also made a recommendation of increasing the proportion of women teachers in centres of higher education to motivate girls' participation in higher education and in vocational education.

In the period post-ECR, there was considerable growth of educational facilities all over the country. A common structure of education was adopted nationwide, and both girls and boys studied under this common scheme.

The National Policy of Education (NPE) -1986, with modifications in 1992, raised an important idea, which was that equality in education was not limited only to opportunity, but also extended to successful outcomes. The policy acknowledged that education can play the role of a 'change agent in the status of women' and also 'neutralise the accumulated distortions of the past' (GOI, 1992). To operationalize this it proposed redesigning curricula, textbooks, training and orientations of teachers, decision makers and administrators; and prioritising access and retention of girls in elementary schools. While these are all positive recommendations, policies also sometimes have antithetical provisions built in them. NPE-86 provisioned 'non-formal education' for school dropouts, children from habitations where there were no schools, working children and girls who could not attend regular day-schools. While Non-

India's journey of educational policies

Post independence, India faced two-fold challenge - the need for increasing educational resources, while also ensuring equitable access. Here's a glimpse of India's efforts towards universalisation of education with a special focus on marginalised and socio-economically disadvantaged sections through various policy and documents



formal education (NFE) was presented as a revolutionary solution to bring the working children into the folds of education, it was also a tacit acceptance of the reality of the pernicious practice of child labour, including the employment of young girls as domestic help. Notwithstanding the Constitution's commitment to equality for all, this attitude and approach severely compromised educational opportunities for learners in this group. This approach perpetuated segregation in education. It paved the way for a two-tiered education system where children from privileged backgrounds were to attend schools; but for others, such as those mentioned earlier in the paragraph, a makeshift arrangement was acceptable.

In 1987, Operation Blackboard was launched which was, in a way, an attempt to improve the quality of school education by investing in infrastructure improvement. It also made provisions for additional teachers, and asked states to ensure that 50% of the hired teachers are women so that families find schools more amenable for girls to attend.

In 1994, the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) was launched to work on improving the quality of education and the focus was on decentralisation of educational planning. Teacher training for a more progressive pedagogy was also an important aspect of the programme. Teacher training efforts attempted to impact both the attitudes of teachers towards poor children, and the manner of addressing issues of caste and gender; as well as content knowledge and pedagogy. But studies have shown that it did not lead to any lasting change and the change visible at the time of the intervention was also more at the level of incorporation of appropriate vocabulary (Clarke, 2000, in Sarangapani & Vasavi, 2003).

Another programme followed DPEP which, in a way, subsumed and universalised it—the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), 2001-02. The aims of the SSA programme can be stated as providing useful and relevant education for all children in the 6 to 14

years age group and to bridge all social, regional and gender gaps with the active participation of the community in the management of the schools. This period saw a great deal of improvement in accessibility.

The last significant document, before the National Education Policy (NEP)-2020, that has had an impact on the educational scene is the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) - 2005, which brought advances to pedagogy by making education more child-centric, attempting to make learning joyful by reducing stress in education, by making a shift from rote learning to more application-based learning, bringing in content from a rural experience of life to textbooks and fostering a national identity.

While it is true that the enrolment rates have increased significantly in the past few decades, even in remote locations and amongst historically marginalised sections, but systemic retention continues to be a challenge. Around 1.5% of total enrolled children still drop out of schools before completing primary classes, approximately 2.6% drop out in elementary grades and 16.1 drop out from secondary classes (UDISE, 2020-21). The rate of dropout is more in rural areas in comparison to urban areas and is linked to the socio-economic hardships of the family. (Mahalanabi and Acharya, 2020)

The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for Grades 6-8 was 90.9%, while for Grades 9-10 and 11-12 it was only 79.3% and 56.5%, respectively – indicating that a significant proportion of enrolled students drop out after Grade 5 and especially after Grade 8 (NEP, 2020). A counterintuitive trend also shows that the rate of dropout is higher among boys in comparison to girls (UDISE, 2019-20) as they get involved in daily wage labour or in some cases migrate for work. This remarkable feat of ensuring school enrolments for girls and a reasonable retention rate is no small feat and significant policy interventions as per the understanding of challenges at different time periods are worth recognising.

Issue - Understanding the problem

“आजकल सबको पता है कि नौवीं दसवीं पास करने से कोई ढंग की नौकरी नहीं मिलती।”

- A house help in Mumbai

A cursory analysis of the above statement shows two things. One - parents across classes see education as a means of making a livelihood and improving life conditions and thus an important thing to pursue. Second - it also shows the reality of educational inflation, as a result of which, graduation has become a must for any reasonable occupation. It is worrisome to see that a 14-15 year-old who has been in school for 11 years should be prepared only for graduating to class 9, and not for family and economic life.

This reality and expectation of 140 crore Indians is what the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 needs to respond to. The NEP 2020 developed by the Government of India with wide consultations to bring the much-needed changes to the education system has many interesting hidden nuggets that have potential for bigger changes.

The NEP, like any policy document, provides guidelines that need to be converted into an effective, implementable roadmap, that will bring changes at all levels of education to:

- meet the needs of students (girls and boys) in the foreseeable future
- build a prosperous, progressive, equitable, just, united and rational nation
- help the nation reap the demographic dividend (and not suffer from a youth bulge)

Three years on, extensive work is being undertaken to revamp the education system to bring about the changes that the NEP envisions.

The paper would dwell on these ideas from the perspective of counselling.

Social and community structures are ever changing, in recent times and in the foreseeable future challenges of breakdown in family and kinship support structures in the face of rapid urbanisation are becoming very real. The potential of counselling in this scenario needs to be studied. Nurturance and learning in family life is decreasing as parents in large numbers have converted to the view that education through school and coaching classes is what will prepare children for life. The extreme scenario of this is seen in the ever-increasing number of children being sent away from home to Kota like cities, towns and mass coaching hubs at young ages.

Looking at this phenomenon it is as if the stress-free learning that the NCF 2005 aimed to achieve, instead of reducing stress, has outsourced it to a burgeoning coaching industry. The need to change this requires revisiting the aims of education and the role it plays in social and economic reproduction. It also requires understanding the current socio-economic realities, and imagine how it will be two decades down the line as the world is changing very fast. The

messaging around school examinations, board examinations, coaching and entrance examinations, competitive examinations for recruitment to government jobs needs to be understood, and perhaps changed.

Communication between school and community, especially parents, has been an identified need for a long time. It has been promoted systematically via parent teacher meetings, formation of school management committees, and informally by encouraging teachers to make community visits. But it is worth reiterating that educating parents and society on a mass scale so that family and school are on the same page or at least in the same neighbourhood is crucial. One wonders whether counselling can play a role in that.

As one examines the construct of counselling it is important to recognise that counselling, as it is broadly understood today, traces its roots only so far back as the 1900's and has developed largely to address needs felt in the western society - in many cases the fallout of an emphasis on individualism. Since ancient times collectivism, social cohesion and interdependence have been an earmark of Indian

social reality. It will be important to study previous examples of its mass application in large-scale state programmes in India to better imagine its use in education. We feel the need to reimagine counselling in the Indian context.

It needs to be explored how schools and the educational system will engage with these realities. The engagement eventually should translate into systemic changes that will equip learners with the tools and resources to deal with these realities and

become functional, socially and economically at a reasonable age.

The paper will study existing models in India and internationally, look at relevant studies and reports and draw on the writer's experience to present well-argued positions in these areas, providing recommendations, highlighting the need for reiterative processes of implementation, and cautioning against likely pitfalls.

2. Methodology

This position paper stands on the bedrock of field-based work carried out by PCI India and builds on this foundation through a rigorous desk review of existing literature, insights from semi-structured interviews with a diverse range of subject-matter experts, and systematic analysis of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The methodological choices made in the development of the position paper have been aligned with the paper's overarching objectives. The paper intends to gain a comprehensive understanding of the provisions pertaining to counselling within the NEP.

As a policy document serves as a vision statement, it should be taken further by formulation of implementation strategies based on its ideas. The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is actively engaged in this process through the development of the National Curriculum Framework, a step being emulated by several other states. However, it is imperative that other facets of the NEP are also meticulously planned and implemented. This position paper represents one such attempt, aiming to engage in thoughtful reflection and establish a position on the topic of counselling within the NEP.

It is worth noting that currently two versions of the National Education Policy are available in the public domain: the National Education Policy 2020 comprising 66 pages and the Draft National Education Policy (DNEP) 2019 spanning 484 pages. The DNEP offers significantly more details and provides practical recommendations for its implementation. Thus, for the purpose of this position paper, both NEP and DNEP have been consulted to ensure a comprehensive grasp of the underlying rationale and spirit behind the most minor inclusions in the NEP.

In all, the research team conducted five interviews. These were semi-structured interactions, each lasting for about an hour.

Methods

1.Desk review: a desk review was undertaken to understand crucial aspects including counselling practices in India and other regions, identifying evidence-based benefits of counselling which are relevant educational outcomes in accordance with both the Constitution and the NEP. To achieve this, we searched for relevant research papers and programme reports, encompassing both government and non-government sources.

2.Semi-structured interview: Subject matter experts and experienced practitioners from the fields of education, gender equity, and counselling were approached. These interactions were guided by carefully prepared semi-structured interview probes. The use of a semi-structured interview approach allowed us to pursue unanticipated strands and topics, in contrast to a more structured interview format, while also helping maintain a fluid structure, coherence and focus during the interactions. The interview schedule focused on NEP, vision of equity as emerging in the NEP, counselling (the challenges it may help resolve, practicality of a nationwide provisioning of counsellors, their role, preparation, profile, and so on).

3.Policy analysis: A policy review and analysis exercise was undertaken to help interpret the impact of changes in government policies on the operational context of a particular organisation or sector. It extended beyond analysis of the policy and rigorously attempted to understand the underlying social issues, enabling the review of the policy provisions and suggesting new policy orientations.

In all the research team conducted five interviews. As mentioned above, these were semi structured interactions; on an average an interaction was about an hour long. With due permission the interviews were audio recorded except one, where some technical glitch persisted and the interviewer had to fall back on taking extensive notes during the interview to be substantiated later on by adding details.

The interviews were largely conducted in English but a bilingual approach, to ease the conversation, was employed, with Hindi as the second language. It was decided that the interview recordings will not be transcribed, but the audio recordings or the notes would be considered raw data and revisited as and when needed.

The position paper seeks to present well supported positions on Counselling that the NEP mentions.

3. Counselling

3.1 Vision of counselling

Academic attainments and learning in the school are not solely a consequence of in-classroom activities and experiences but are also significantly influenced and shaped by extracurricular factors. Constructive peer relationships, positive student-teacher dynamics, a sense of being supported and valued are crucial factors influencing school continuation and completion. This assertion raises the question of who bears the responsibility for ensuring a positive relationship between students and the school. While it is intuitively apparent that teachers play a pivotal role in this endeavour, we should be cognizant that teachers cannot shoulder the entirety of this responsibility and need support to meet the additional expectations.

Factors leading to learners dropping out of school are located both within and outside the school. Economic necessities, disenchantment with schools, a feeling of learnt helplessness, discrimination, humiliation and other examples of symbolic violence, or engagement in criminal activities are some of the factors that lead to young adolescents leaving schools. Most children caught up in conflict with the law are school dropouts (Dutta Prasad, 2020) who have not experienced the potential positive impact schools could have had on their lives. Similarly, adolescents subjected to child marriages are often found to be outside the school system.

Certain sections of society, such as girls and children from Dalit and tribal communities, continue to suffer from systemic indifference and symbolic violence leading to lower academic achievements and higher rates of school dropouts. Substantial research has been dedicated to documenting the discriminatory treatment meted out to girls in the school. Studies reveal the presence of gender bias in pedagogic interactions within the classroom, as well as in attitudes and value systems in the school, and the

Bharadwaj, 2011) used there. Girl students often start their schooling at a disadvantage, because their home environment is typically less supportive of their education as compared to boys. Boys tend to enjoy an advantage over their female siblings in terms of the resources invested in their education, the time made available for studies within the home, academic support (such as tuition or private coaching) and other educational experiences (Nambissan, 2004).

It is imperative to acknowledge that equity constitutes a vital dimension of the overall quality of education. While the Right to Education Act is a landmark legislation, it falls short of guaranteeing equitable education to all. The NEP-2020 acknowledges that prior policies and commission reports have concentrated on ensuring access and equity but have “dropped the baton with regard to quality education”.

Achieving quality education hinges upon the presence and continuous engagement of students within the school environment. However, it remains an undeniable reality that student dropouts persist, stemming from a combination of issues within the school system and the absence of essential academic support and guidance for students in dealing with issues related to self-confidence, economics and identity. The NEP refers to the role of school counsellors, social workers and counselling support in ensuring school retention and completion. It acknowledges the concern of mental health emanating from schooling, family and community dynamics, and pressures related to livelihood, and underscores a commitment to addressing these issues by advocating for the inclusion of school counsellors and social workers within the educational system (Govt of India, 2020, pp. 9). The notion of having counsellors in schools is not without precedent. It is a common practice in elite

private schools to offer the services of school counsellors to their students. Public schools catering to children with special needs also employ school counsellors. However, the roles and objectives of these school counsellors vary between these contexts. The elite schools followed a more traditional understanding of school counsellors which revolved around conducting aptitude tests, providing information related to career opportunities, and offering assistance to students seeking mental and emotional support, as well as those referred by their class teachers due to behavioural issues. In the case of public schools, focusing on inclusive education, one primary role of school counsellors is to support children with special needs (CWSN) and create a conducive environment for them within the school. This approach of emphasising on inclusion has resulted in the incorporation of school counsellors into these educational curriculum and textbooks (Bhog, Mullick and

institutions. Many private schools have also adopted this perspective and have explicitly incorporated inclusion of SCWSN into the responsibilities of their school counsellors.

While both approaches to school counselling are not without their merits, their scope is limited. As envisioned in the NEP, counselling necessitates the inclusion of dealing with concerns related to marginalisation, inequity, social injustice, and systemic discrimination. It refers to interpersonal engagement that results in advice or guidance to another person by their family, friends, colleagues or any compassionate individual (Dutta Prasad, 2020). The intention is to help the person in gaining a clearer perspective on issues of importance to them and perhaps consider an alternative viewpoint. An illustrative example would be to support young boys and girls in imagining more equitable peer relations or learn non-violent ways of resolving conflict both of which will have an impact in school continuation and academic achievement.

The position paper adopts a broader perspective on counselling, with two distinct approaches: Proactive and Remediation.

Proactive Approach to School Counselling

Proactive school counselling implies a systemic approach of anticipating the student's needs and providing for long-term solutions and support that mitigate the risk of school dropout due to frustration, learned helplessness, lack of decision making or aspiration etc.

Proactive counselling is aimed at shaping identities of the adolescents, providing the right direction to them or systemic support to ensure school retention and continuation in higher education and professional life. Proactive counselling holds the potential to:

1. Guide career paths and choices: NEP identifies this as a core area of counselling where the focus is "on choice of subjects in secondary grades, including vocational subjects, and on choices in higher education, leading to potential career choices" (GOI, 2019, pp-163).

2. Improve school attendance and enrolment for all children including those with special needs: This role is expected to be fulfilled in collaboration with social workers and school teachers (GOI, 2019, pp- 70).

3. Handle developmental issues: NEP identifies "Support and counselling on age related growth and development issues, especially during the adolescent years" (GOI, 2019, pp-163) as an important area of work for school counsellors. Both boys and girls need to understand the physical and emotional changes that they experience in adolescence. Often, they have no one to discuss this with, neither their parents nor teachers. Even textbook chapters, dealing with physical changes emerging from puberty, are skipped through in a cursory manner.

4. Shape identities: Adolescence is an age marked by physical, emotional and intellectual changes. But it is also a critical period contributing to the development of an identity. It is an age of transitioning to being a man or a woman, of being an Indian or from a particular caste or religion, of forming aspirations. In Piaget's cognitive development theory the formal operational stage begins around the age of 12 years and the thinking of the adolescents becomes much more sophisticated. With the ability to reflect they are able to think about their own selves better and engage in questions such as: Who am I? What do I want to do in my life? What kind of future will I have? What kind of a friend am I? etc.

Gender is one of the most important identity markers and shapes our decisions, actions and relationships. Literature in economics and other fields examines reasons for observed gender differences in developing countries including demand-side explanations focusing on the value of girls and women to parents and employers in the economic or social marketplace (Rosenzweig and Schultz, 1982; Qian, 2008; Jensen, 2012), as well as supply-side explanations such as differences in preferences, competitiveness and skills between women and men (Croson and Gneezy, 2009; Gneezy et al., 2009).

Gender socialisation starts at a very early age and by the time children enter upper primary classes, their gender identities are fairly strong. To initiate a process of reflection requires counselling processes as the discourse can otherwise be very unsettling, especially for boys. This exercise should not be the one which destabilises them, rather open new possibilities and a new worldview.

The Kishorawastha Shikshan Karyakram (KSK) 1996-2004

KSK by Eklavya was a small but sustained intervention undertaken in two villages of Bagli block, Dewas district, Madhya Pradesh. A series of workshops conducted under this programme focused on reproductive health, gender, communication and women's issues as tools for empowering and helping young girls to cope up with the physical, social and emotional changes that accompany adolescence. Often small-scale programmes help us understand some crucial aspects and the ones to be avoided. Some aspects of the programme that are relevant for this context are:

- 1.Space to listen:** More than a didactic programme where a lot of information is given, an adolescent counselling programme needs to focus on creating safe space for adolescents to be able to talk about their experiences, concerns and desires.
- 2.Teachers play a crucial role** in any educational programme: In the context of adolescence education, teachers and counsellors need to be especially sensitive, genuinely interested, friendly and confidential, if they are to handle topics of a delicate nature.
- 3.Value:** While teachers are the closest and most suitable to conduct such sessions, there was also value in having a new person to talk to. Young boys and girls were able to relate easily with someone whom they did not address as 'Ma'am' or 'Sir' and let down their guards after some interactions.
- 4.Gender in everything:** Examples of gender bias, stereotypes and inequality can be seen in different aspects of life, like nutrition, domestic responsibilities, hygiene, body image, planning for future life, etc. Thus it was discussed with each topic and not as a standalone topic.
- 5.Topics** being covered in the programme have to be varied and be able to address the different aspects of development. KSK programme focused on reproductive health and added issues like nutrition, mental health, relationships with family and friends, communication, management of common primary healthcare problems, women and violence, and personality development.

5.Support parents in playing a more positive and engaged role: The NEP mentions instructing parents, students and community members around health, hygiene, cleanliness and vaccination programmes. Apart from this, we also believe that a proactive awareness building or community-based counselling sessions need to be organised to ensure education, issues of adolescence, gender-socialisation and possibilities of higher education and skilling; become collective concerns.

Remediation Approach to School Counselling

Remediation counselling refers to the support provided to children and adolescents when issues like anxiety, low mood, depression, conduct and learning or eating disorders present themselves.

NEP mentions mental health issues, including stress and mood disorders, as an area of support and we place it in the second category of support. This requires specific preparation and qualification. Remediation approach is for CWSN and would often be individual or small group support based on their experiences or diagnosis.

1.Substance abuse: Due to ease of availability of addictive substances like tobacco, drugs or alcohol. school children are also getting exposed to and forming a habit of consuming such substances. This impacts physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of adolescents and severely hampers their school outcomes. An intervention requires a comprehensive, multimodality treatment approach which can be anchored by the counsellors.

2.Children in conflict with law: Often children in conflict with law are school dropouts or involvement in such groups may lead to their leaving the schools. But a common thing remains that their experience of school is neither positive nor intellectually stimulating. It perhaps failed to develop a significant engagement and thus could not become a deterrent from engaging in illegal activities. In terms of support they would require behavioural counselling for adjustment and self-regulation.

3.Mental health: In current times, especially the post pandemic scenario, incidences of anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies among adolescence and young children have increased. Sometimes the symptoms or indicators are the same among adults, but often in the case of children or adolescents, these may be more diverse which require specific orientation to the counsellors to identify the same.

Proactive counselling is well suited to be conducted in a group setting as large as the whole class. On the other hand, remediation counselling would be one-on-one or in small groups of students who are struggling with similar issues. Group sessions, for children aged 12 and more, need to be built into school curriculums across the country, across various school boards and mediums of education.

A well-developed set of multi-year modules around these areas once developed, would be translated to multiple languages, and further customised to the context of a school; could be delivered by a teacher or counsellor, who has done a short online training course.

3.2 Developing career intentionality through counselling

Inclusion of counselling with a defined focus on career opens the potential of bringing a career oriented perspective in the scheme of mainstream education. The concept of a 'career' and counselling to help children chart a path towards it by choosing subjects and streams, needs rethinking. Career and Psycho-Social Counselling are not standalone areas; nor is it an either/or choice. Setting up of counselling resources, especially in the public school system, needs to be cognizant of the need to fulfil the need for both. To be able to do this, 'career' needs to be understood as work that:

- helps fulfil economic needs
- supports individuals and families
- gives a sense of self-worth and a path to improve the circumstances of one's life

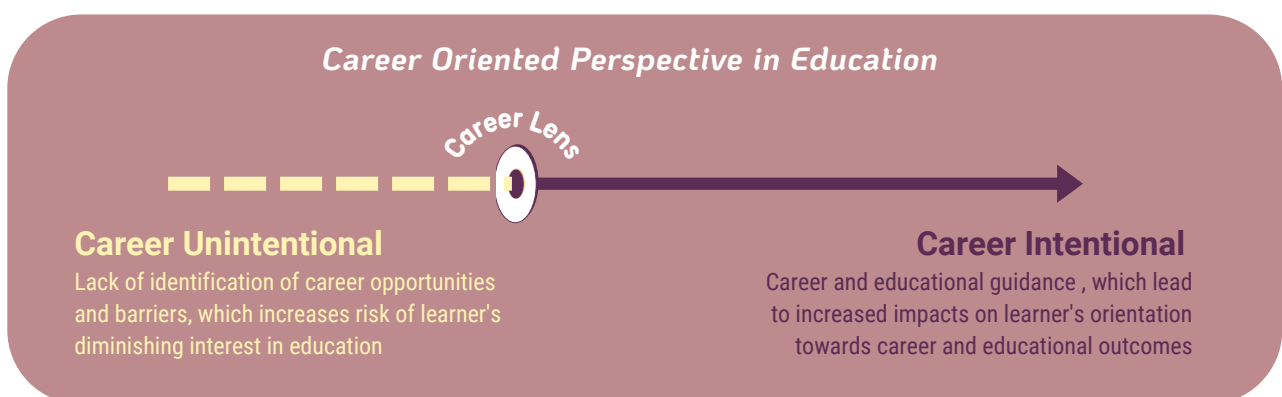
while making individuals functional parts of the larger socio-economic context around them.

Increasingly, an individual's career is not one kind of work that a person does for their entire working life. But in society the understanding around a career is still often limited to:

- Becoming something – like doctor, police officer, govt. servant, teacher, etc; or
- Pursuing an interest – like dancing, singing etc

For understanding career in the present context, it is important that young children at an early age are exposed to the reality that any individual will do multiple kinds of work in different fields during their lifetime.

If schools can give inputs around these two areas (what is work and what are careers looking like today) at an early age, like in grades 6,7 and 8; it can allow children the time to observe adults in their own familial and community context to identify the possibilities that can be for them, so that by the time they need to make choices, they can be better informed and aware of the possibilities of their life path journey. The school can also be a part of this exploration by continuing to provide exposure to adults that are engaged in different kinds of work – not only adults that are seen as 'very successful' but other people who are engaged in livelihood activities like mechanics, artisans, painters, dancers, home-based women workers, individuals running SME units, shop keepers, traders, sales persons, etc. The more the variety of exposure the better it is. This can be a big step in building a sense of dignity of labour – something which, we repeatedly hear in public discourse, is missing in the Indian society.



The model of career intentionality is adapted from - Gender Intentional Strategies to Enhance Health Social Enterprises in Africa: A Toolkit by Sarah Harrison. It can be part of the holistic development of adolescents, preferably starting from grade 6th till 12th.

This may include:

- Psychometric tests to understand personalities
- Assistance in goal setting and educational pathways
- Life skills and adolescence issues
- Career guidance
- Interaction with parents to ensure their support to fulfil their daughter's aspirations.

Counselling sessions conducted in group settings have specific benefits. It is a pragmatic approach and allows for students to take benefit of peer experience, reflections and articulations. When initiating new and contentious topics in a general manner like gender discrimination a group setting may provide anonymity and allow for general thoughts to be shared instead of personal experiences. It would however require sometimes forming groups to allow for discussion around specific experiences, like a divided session of girls and boys separately.

Children having participated in these sessions would then move on to more individualised career counselling in higher classes. Such individualised counselling would then place the individual child at the centre – helping that individual to make sense of their context, which would include their socio-economic background, familial situation, aptitude, interest and aspirations; so that an informed choice can be made. This can be achieved by giving exposure to a career fair organised at a cluster level.

3.3 Is the introduction of counselling in schools a new idea? Yes and No!

Throughout history, one of the enduring expectations placed upon school teachers has been to assume the role of a mentor to their students. They are expected to provide guidance to students in personal and professional pursuits, cultivate a relationship built on trust and empathy, foster an environment where students feel comfortable confiding in them, and facilitate access to appropriate support whenever required. Innumerable teachers have been playing this role admirably and gone the extra mile as needed.

But it is perhaps unjust to maintain such expectations on teachers. The demands placed on teachers have consistently grown, often without recognition of the inherent complexity of their core responsibilities, which demand extensive preparation and engagement. Also, divergent expectations from any professional leads to role ambiguity which often becomes a reason for occupational stress and low motivation. Furthermore, in the present landscape, new career and vocational opportunities are rapidly emerging continuously, making it challenging for teachers to stay updated without additional support. Similarly, a teacher may be able to support a counsellor in organising parental

sessions on their roles vis-a-vis their adolescent children or adolescent sessions on gender equity, but may not have the orientation to do it on her own.

The discussion on the need for a school counsellor is not new. After the third 5-year Plan (1961), guidance services were initiated in schools by trained counsellors and career masters with assistance from school teachers. Kothari commission (1964) mentions guidance and counselling as a field of specialisation for the post-graduation programme in education. The report also expects that by the time the students come to higher secondary, their interests are fairly formed and with a good system of guidance and counselling they can be helped to choose their future career and educational course. But the prevalence of school counsellors or career masters remained limited to very few schools and that too especially in private well-resourced schools.

Thus, the emphasis on counselling in NEP seems to imply both school teacher-led counselling support and provisioning of a shared counsellor within a school complex. This is a new and welcome idea.

3.4 Who will be the counsellor?

As discussed above we need to look at the different roles a counsellor needs to fulfil. Their eligibility and preparation will emanate from there accordingly. This may also be seen as a layered approach to extend support to all the children and to serve the purpose of:

- developing cognitive and meta cognitive skills such as goal setting, progress monitoring and memory skills
- advancing social skills such as interpersonal skills, social problem solving, listening and teamwork skills
- developing self-management skills managing attention, motivation and anger
- inspiring behavioural and attitudinal shift
- supporting right choices for higher education and career
- ensuring access to mental health services

The need for school counsellors and career masters (GOI, 1966) has been identified earlier also, but the actual presence of counsellors is limited to private schools. To address the practical concern of hiring a school counsellor in every upper primary or secondary school, NEP has recommended that the counsellors are hired at the school complex level and their interaction not be limited to only students, but also be extended to parents, teachers, tutors, IAs and other community members. The role of school counsellors was also seen as significant in encouraging school attendance and learning (GOI, 2019, pp- 67).

NEP has recommended that the counsellors are hired at the school complex level and their interaction not just be limited to students, but also be extended to parents, teachers, tutors and other community members

3.5 What kind of professional skills/capabilities are needed at which level?

As discussed above, there are three kinds of professionals who will be available to support the students in the school:

- Teachers: Apart from their basic educational requirements, it would be expected that they are aware of the online and offline resources that they can guide students towards for making appropriate higher education and career choices. It would also be expected that they are aware of gender stereotypes that creep in their pedagogy, as well as formal and informal interactions with students and parents.
- Counsellors: the first and foremost expectation from the school counsellors would be a commitment to inclusion and the ability of each child to learn and complete school education. They also need to be aware of cultural norms that impede continuation of education for young boys and girls. They would need to develop communication skills and a habit of empathetic listening.
- Social workers: a graduation degree would be preferable but looking at the success of ASHA workers, a mandatory requirement should be completion of school education.

An important area of orientation for all teachers and especially for social workers and counsellors will be sensitivity and understanding of notions of equity and inclusion and respect and dignity of all individuals including the students. In a way these ideas are a part of most pre-service teacher education programmes,

but since these are deep-rooted biases/ beliefs, thus repeated interactions on these via in-service capacity building programmes is essential.

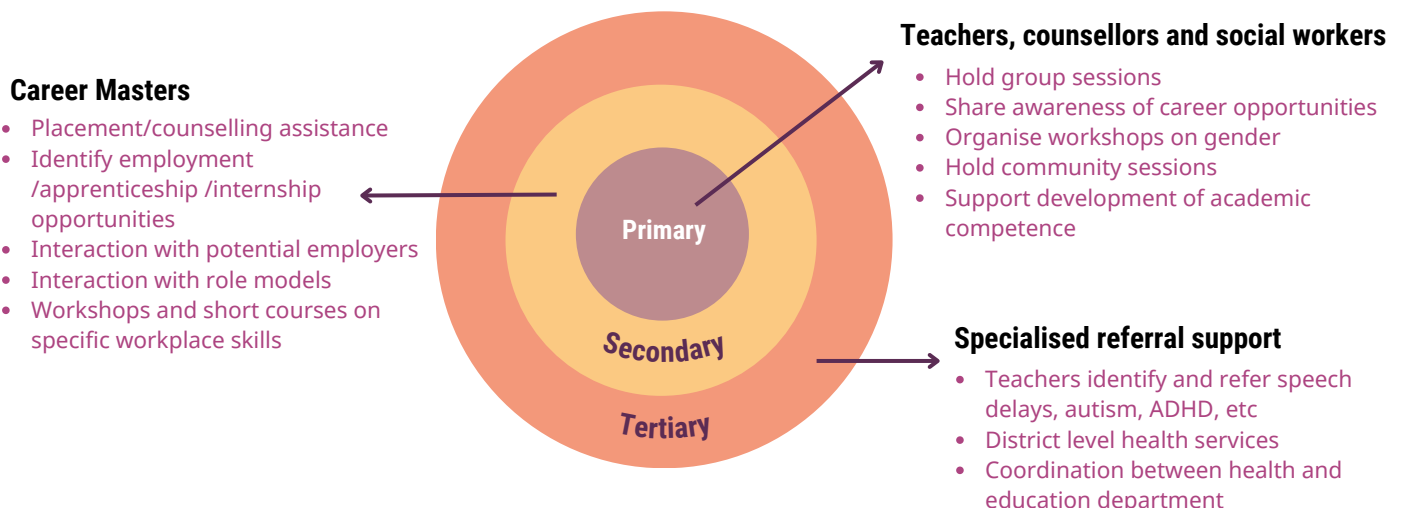
A successful model to learn from

In 2005, the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) programme was established in India as a component of the National Rural Health Mission to address the shortage of healthcare workers in rural areas. It recruits high school educated village women to be trained as community health workers. There is one ASHA worker per village of approximately 1,000 residents. ASHA workers receive training on basic healthcare, and work primarily in the field of maternal and child health. They also participate in health education campaigns on nutrition, sanitation, and basic health. Thus, it is possible to create an effective cadre who starts with very basic education but through capacity building and a focused expectation are now the foot soldiers of expanding basic healthcare for very young children.

3.6 Levels of support

Counselling and provision of mental health support within the school system are complex tasks, spanning a broad spectrum of requirements and assistance. However, while the system is still struggling with persisting teacher shortages across numerous states, it would prove exceedingly difficult and possibly unwarranted to provide such extensive support within every school. Therefore, building upon the ideas of shared resources outlined in the NEP 2020, we are proposing a three tier-support model.

At-scale counselling support model



Primary support

This type of support is characterised by its proximity to the person in need. Within the educational ecosystem, it is the support provided to the students at the school level. The support to the student can be provided by three key professionals within the educational system: school teachers, counsellors, and social

workers. However, it's important to recognise that many issues faced by students are not confined to the school environment and are collectively experienced with their family and community. Therefore, to provide comprehensive support, these primary support individuals must cast a wider net by involving parents and engaging with the broader community.

What is expected from teachers in Primary Tier

Enhanced awareness and overcoming gender stereotypes: Research indicates that gender bias in pedagogic interactions within the classroom, as well as teacher attitudes (Bhog, Mullick and Bharadwaj, 2011), impacts the abilities of girls to learn and thrive in school. Biases such as the belief that girls struggle with mathematics, boys excel in science and sports, girls are proficient in languages, or boys are more talkative and mischievous while girls are quieter perpetuate stereotypical perceptions that often manifest as self-fulfilling prophecies. Thus, as a first step towards promoting gender inclusion, it is essential to orient teachers on inclusion and provide them with opportunities to reflect on their own biases and stereotypes. Given that these notions are deeply ingrained in our culture, ongoing interactions and discussions are crucial in this process.

Career guidance: Teachers can serve as the first level of career counsellors, firstly, by nurturing students' aspirations and, secondly, aiding them in identifying their strengths and weaknesses. Various online portals are available to help students which can help them gain insights into potential career paths aligned with their interest and strengths (eg, Etasha's personalised career guidance tool or the Odisha career portal[1]).

One such initiative is 'Humein Badhna Hai' that has established the model of offering career guidance to students through teachers, who are trained as counsellors, across government residential girls' schools in Jharkhand.

Humein Badhna Hai: A proven model

'Humein Badhna Hai' is an initiative that offers holistic counselling package, with a stronger emphasis on career counselling, to students from grades 6th-12th at government residential girls schools across the state of Jharkhand. Residential girls schools include Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) supported by the Central Government, and Jharkhand Balika Awasiya Vidyalaya (JBAV) supported by the State Government.

These residential schools are meant for girls from rural, vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds. As an effort to contribute towards enhancing quality of education, Humein Badhna Hai aims to promote career intentionality among adolescent girls in Jharkhand, helping them grow up into productive human resources with clear set goals and developed agency to pursue them. By doing so, the initiative is empowering adolescent girls to become valuable assets for their families, communities, and the economy.

The intervention model is based on building capacities of nodal teachers from each school as counsellors. These teachers, trained as counsellors, are then offering mentorship to students of grades 6th-12th in the form of a holistic counselling package comprising modular sessions, group counselling and individual counselling sessions.

Students are provided guidance on educational pathways, career options, life skills, and on issues related to emotional well-being and mental health.

It is being implemented in Jharkhand by PCI India in partnership with the Jharkhand Education Project Council (JEPCC), Government of Jharkhand, with support from Cummins Foundation and RISEUP.

[1] Career highway (digital tool by Etasha): <https://www.etasasociety.org/career-highway/>, <https://odishacareerportal.com>, https://inpr.odisha.gov.in/sites/default/files/2020-12/newssachi_24122020EEEE.pdf

The concept of start early counselling

The process of career exploration among students in India, especially those from rural communities, often begins much later—mostly after grade 10th or 12th, when they choose their academic stream. Unfortunately for girls, these are also the grades when they are likely to be dropped out of education and married early. With little or no agency to resist such regressive social norms, girls succumb to parental pressures and discontinue their education, thus limiting their prospects of having a career or attaining economic independence in future.

However, by introducing career discussions and aspirations as early as grade 6th can help orient students in advance 'Humein Badhna Hai' places significant emphasis on commencing early – engaging girls from grade 6th onwards – to nurture a sense of direction and purpose within young minds during their formative years of secondary education.

Start Early Counselling helps as it:

Offers time to explore: By providing career counselling early on, students have more time to explore various career options, understand their own preferences, and make informed decisions about their future.

Offers time to prepare: It allows gradual development of essential life skills and awareness about specific educational and career pathways, enabling students to plan and prepare for their academic journey accordingly.

Addresses gender socialisation for education and career: By exposing students to diverse career options and relevant information early in life can broaden their perspective and encourage them to pursue unconventional careers too.

Builds agency among students: Imbibing career intentionality from early years can help develop agency among students, especially girls, to realise their fundamental rights and voice their opinion against regressive social norms.

Role of school counsellors and social workers in the Primary Tier

Development of academic competence: Several studies (Webb, Brigman & Campbell, 2005; Green & Keys, 2001; Isaacs, 2003) provide evidence supporting the assertion that providing counselling in school setting, coupled with explicit teaching of academic enablers (Demaray & Jenkins, 2011) leads to improved student learning. Academic enablers can be understood as “attitudes and behaviours that allow a student to participate in and ultimately benefit from, academic instruction in the classroom” (DiPerna & Elliot, 2002, p. 294 quoted from Barna, J. S. & Brott, P. E., 2013-2014). In fact, interventions centred on counselling and school achievement have discerned student skills that contribute to improved academic and social outcomes, as illustrated in the diagram.



Among the four skill sets, foundational skills stand as the bedrock of academic achievement, and it is a teaching-oriented aspect that school teachers must ensure. Components of the remaining three skill categories can be addressed by the counsellors. The sessions can be group-based, offering both an introduction to the theme and opportunities for practice and reflection to the students. The counsellors should be ideally equipped with group manuals to effectively guide each session. By focusing on these aspects, school counsellors can contribute to cultivating higher education and career readiness for all students.

Addressing developmental challenges: The draft NEP mentions that 'school and school complex counsellors and social workers will be trained to confidentially advise parents and teachers on adolescent problems faced by growing boys and girls (GOI, 2019, pp. 197). Certain adolescent behaviours such as – acting impulsively, defying authority, developing conflicts with peers – have an impact on students' learning. Implementing a three-pronged approach, namely, engagement with students to help them understand and regulate their emotions and behaviours; interactions with parents; and interactions with teachers can prove effective in ensuring that this transitional phase is navigated smoothly by

adolescents without adversely impacting their school achievements.

Assessing school climate: Motivation and engagement in school activities is a strong indicator of school adjustment and continuation among students. School counsellors can boost student motivation and engagement by not only engaging with them, but also by supervising the overall health of the school climate. This encompasses assessments of inclusivity (gender, ability, caste and religion), fair and equitable treatment, availability of basic and essential amenities, interactive pedagogy, group activities, as well as quality of teacher-student and peer relationships, among some critical aspects.

Taaron Ki Toli- An intervention focused on attitudinal shift

Taaron ki Toli is a 3-year, school-based programme that works with adolescent boys and girls in classes 6-9 to shape their gender attitudes and beliefs. It includes 32 in-classroom sessions using interactive games, activities, and learning workbooks; 12 assembly sessions using media, arts and tech; and 45-minute sessions with a trained facilitator every 2-3 weeks. The Curriculum is designed to develop and enhance psychological, interpersonal and social skills of adolescents. It has shown one of the possible pathways of designing school-based, large-scale interventions that not only shift belief systems but can also impact overall educational outcomes.

It was developed by Breakthrough, a human rights organisation, and piloted in four districts of Haryana. The intervention emerged from the belief that by addressing gender stereotypes early, in a structured and phased manner, young adults can themselves become agents of social change in their own settings. This improves the quality of their lives and also prepares them for active engagement in economic activities to shape their future.

The programme conducted a randomised controlled trial (RCT) with Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) and found that the intervention improved gender attitudes by 0.2 standard deviations, an effect size comparable to that of having parents whose attitudes are one standard deviation from gender-equitable. Programme participants also reported more gender-equitable behaviour such as increased interaction with the opposite sex. The change in attitudes was similar for boys and girls, but behaviour change was larger among boys, pointing to the importance of barriers for girls to act in accordance with their own altered attitudes. There are several advantages of this approach:

1. Adolescents are likely young enough to have malleable attitudes but old enough to think about these issues. Since attitudes are more stable post-adolescence, the effects of an attitude change programme could potentially sustain for a long time even, after the end of the programme.
2. The programme is scalable as the trained facilitator is a shared resource between several schools and the books support the interaction with adolescents at the same time giving them an ownership on their learning.
3. While preparing girls for economically productive work, it is important to ensure that boys are also ready to take up domestic chores. This is not possible without an attitudinal shift on the gender stereotyping of domains of work and home.

Secondary support

The draft NEP places an emphasis on developing occupational readiness among students. Some of the ways suggested include “placement/counselling assistance to help them clarify their occupational choices, facilitate processes to identify employment opportunities, and set up interactions with potential employers; and workshops and short courses on specific workplace skills that may not be part of the regular curriculum” (GOI, 2019, pp-244-245).

Such support requires development of networks between school and potential places of work. However, since this support may not be an ongoing commitment, school-level resources might not need to be directly involved. Instead, a group of counsellors at the block level could be deputed to oversee and manage these arrangements for the entire block.

Apprenticeships and internships play a crucial role in acquiring practical skills and industry-specific knowledge. They are also effective in nurturing occupational readiness. The Swiss model of apprenticeship, renowned for its contribution to their industrial success, serves as a notable example. Furthermore, DNEP recognizes internships as a means of providing financial assistance to students who are struggling to continue in school for economic reasons (GOI, 2019, pp. 144). These support provisions can be established at the block level, with school counsellors assisting students in accessing these opportunities.

The development of aspirations is closely tied to the perception of what is achievable, often shaped by an individual's exposure. Students who have

the opportunity to observe close or extended family members, friends, or neighbours involved in various professions naturally and intuitively gain insight into multiple possibilities and the associated prerequisites. This exposure is decreasing in nuclear families with limited social interactions. And for children living in remote or rural areas, this type of exposure is negligible to non-existent. Therefore, creating resources and opportunities for students to become aware of different professional fields, the educational qualification required to enter them, and the stories of individuals from humble backgrounds who have entered these fields can help fill the gap created by the dearth of familiar role models.

In the case of girls, having women role models becomes particularly crucial, especially when many women in their families are primarily engaged in unpaid work. This would require workshops to introduce the idea of gender equality followed by ongoing, sustained discussions/ group counselling sessions. Workshops are essential for raising awareness, while continuous counselling can serve as a source of empathy and assist individuals in exploring alternative perspectives.

Tertiary support

There is a severe shortage of mental health resources in India, with approximately one psychiatrist for every 3,00,000 people, and in rural areas, this ratio becomes one psychiatrist per 5,00,000 people (Bansal, Srinivasan & Ekstrand, 2021). NEP has highlighted the importance of both nutrition and mental health in impacting the school achievement of a student (GOI, 2019, pp- 58). It anticipates that the school counsellors and social workers will play a role in improving the mental health of all children. But it is important to acknowledge that social workers and school counsellors may not possess the specialised expertise needed to offer mental health services that a trained and practising psychiatrist or psychologist will have. Thus a referral system needs to be developed wherein individuals requiring specialised support can be directed to. The NEP too emphasises the need for coordination between the health and education departments to facilitate such partnerships (GOI, 2019, pp- 163).

3.7 Some concerns to think about

- Large scale public programmes have big impacts and their potential to contribute to national growth is huge. But the scale itself implies that the financial resources needed for even a small inclusion in a programme are substantial. Apart from financial resources they require capable human resources in big numbers along with a great deal of planning and involvement of multiple stakeholders. This implies that for the success of a programme its design should be minimalist.
- As a system, schools are charged with the audacious aim of developing young people into rational, productive, well adjusted, law-abiding human beings and citizens. In such a situation it is inevitable that the expectation from each individual is high and teachers and school heads have always been burdened with such expectations. Thus, as a word of caution it is imperative that we have reasonable expectations from the school counsellors or social workers being introduced in the existing system. Their connection with the students would be much less than that of school teachers, and thus even with the right amount of preparation there is only so much a person would be able to achieve.
- It is essential to understand what are the areas that would be intervened in by the teachers, counsellors or social workers, and what are the areas where their role is that of a concerned adult. They should be able to identify cases where the students need support (for example dyslexia, speech disorder, symptoms of depression, Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, abuse etc.) and refer the students to the right kind of expert.
- The primary level identification and referral would only take off and sustain if the referral services/ support is available at the secondary and tertiary level.

The programme requires strong connections and a shared vision across departments like State Commission for Protection of Child Rights, health department, education department, etc.

4. Recommendations

The position paper is an outcome of analysis of counselling - a progressive element in the National Education Policy 2020, with the explicit purpose of furthering educational outcomes for girls and children from marginalised sections. As discussed previously, educational outcomes, both academic achievement and school completion rates, are dependent on a multitude of factors within and outside school. Consequently, a multi-pronged approach to address this issue is required. The review of policy and the accompanying recommendations are being presented with this comprehensive perspective in mind.

These recommendations may not carry much weight if taken in isolation and their relevance becomes apparent only when viewed within the context of an overall education system which is geared towards an equitable approach. In other words, an education system committed to ensuring that all the enrolled students in the school are able to complete school education, and by the time they do so, have developed some degree of clarity regarding their future aspirations. This may require higher education but it should not be a mandatory requirement for leading a fulfilling life.

1. It is crucial that we move away from the notion that teachers can perform all the roles needed for the optimum development of young adults and acknowledge the need for a distinct counselling support structure in the school education system. This acknowledgement is pertinent as mental health challenges are on the rise, and as a society our awareness for them is also improving.

2. The first step is to provide the much-needed counselling and mental health support, including a counsellor in schools/ school complexes. In addition, a systemic change in terms of other types of primary support available at school level, secondary support available at block level and tertiary support available at district level is required. The latter should involve shared responsibility between the education and health departments.

3. This position paper recognises adolescence as a pivotal stage where distinct needs often remain unaddressed within the current school system. Adolescents struggle with issues related to identity crisis and formation, physical, emotional and mental changes, as well as a search for one's place in the society. Consequently, this age group would benefit greatly from the presence of a trained counsellor who can address these matters in group and individual sessions.

4. One of the important and pragmatic recommendations flowing from the NEP is regarding ensuring a shared counsellor and social worker within a school complex. Considering this is not an identified need in the ecosystem, it's possible that getting good candidates in requisite numbers may prove to be a challenge. This may require a rigorous programme of capacity building for the next few years and academic institutions and civil society organisations should be included to ensure the right kind of preparation via in-service training.

5. Implementing any significant change in the field of school education, such as appointment of counsellors, necessitates the engagement and preparation of teachers. This preparation should encompass not only fostering a positive attitude towards the proposed changes but also address areas such as gender equity and enhance their ability to recognise signs of conditions like ADHD, speech delays, or depression.

6. In addition to initial orientation, ongoing support is crucial for teachers. The establishment of supportive networks within school clusters or complexes, led by trained facilitators, can effectively fulfil this need.

7. Securing adequate numbers of qualified and good candidates to act as counsellors may pose a challenge. To address this, a rigorous programme of capacity building over the next few years is necessary. Involving academic institutions and civil society organisations in the effort would ensure proper preparation of individuals via pre-service and in-service training.

8. Vulnerability has multiple layers. Factors such as caste, religion, and economic class serve as layers that can either heighten or diminish an individual's vulnerability about continuing school education. As an example, when it comes to the risk of school dropout, girls are more susceptible than boys and among girls, those residing in rural areas face a greater risk compared to their urban counterparts. Also children coming from lower castes and especially scheduled castes or tribes experience marginalisation in school and have lower rates of school completion.

9. In the same context, it is important to highlight that while the NEP has addressed girls' education and the needs of disabled children, it has overlooked the specific challenges faced by girls with disabilities. The position paper recommends that this is an area deserving of focused attention from counsellors, both in their interactions with students and in their engagements with parents and community members.

10. Counselling, even when primarily focused on instilling aspirations for higher education and careers, must take all factors such as economic pressures, absence of role models, limited aspirations, and a sense of hopelessness for a better life into consideration. In this sense, counselling should acknowledge that early school dropouts cannot solely be attributed to students' lack of awareness about potential career paths or their own inability to leverage their unique interests and strengths but that it is a more complex issue.

11. Counselling should include efforts to introduce young students to alternative role models, different family structures, and diverse societal models as part of its approach.

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For more information, please contact:
Project Concern International India.
Address: F-87, Okhla Industrial Estate
Phase -3 New Delhi, 110020
Email: smukherjee@pciglobal.in