PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN MODERN HIGHER EDUCATION: EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM, EMOTIONAL REGULATION, AND AGGRESSIVENESS IN ALIGNMENT WITH NEP 2020

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Abstract :

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a paradigm shift in Indian higher education, emphasizing holistic, multidisciplinary, and inclusive learning. However, the psychological well-being of students—a cornerstone of this vision—remains underexplored in the context of ongoing reforms. This paper examines the interplay between self-esteem, emotional regulation, and aggressiveness among higher education students, situating these dynamics within NEP 2020's objectives. Drawing on empirical evidence from diverse contexts, the study proposes a conceptual framework wherein emotional regulation serves as a mediating mechanism between self-esteem and aggressive tendencies. Findings suggest that while NEP 2020 provides a progressive policy scaffold for mental health and well-being, implementation gaps—particularly in institutional partnerships for mental health support—undermine its transformative potential. The paper concludes with recommendations for policy alignment, institutional capacity-building, and future research directions.

Keywords : Psychological Well-being, NEP 2020, Self-Esteem, Emotional Regulation, Aggressiveness, Higher Education, Mental Health.

Introduction :

The landscape of higher education in India is undergoing profound transformation with the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Envisioned as a comprehensive framework for educational reform, NEP 2020 emphasizes holistic development, multidisciplinary learning, and the cultivation of cognitive, emotional, and ethical capacities in students. Central to this vision is the recognition that education must nurture not only intellectual excellence but also psychological resilience and emotional well-being.

Yet, the mental health crisis in higher education institutions (HEIs) presents a formidable challenge to these aspirations. Global studies indicate that university students experience elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and stress compared to the general population . In India, the transition to NEP-aligned pedagogies coincides with increasing

academic pressures, digital learning demands, and lingering effects of pandemic-related disruptions. The policy's success hinges on addressing these psychological dimensions, yet empirical research on student well-being within the NEP framework remains nascent.

This paper investigates the interplay between three critical psychological constructs—self-esteem, emotional regulation, and aggressiveness—within the higher education context. Self-esteem, defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of their self-worth, has been consistently linked to both adaptive and maladaptive outcomes. Emotional regulation, the capacity to manage and modulate emotional responses, serves as a protective factor against psychological distress. Aggressiveness, encompassing hostile and reactive behaviors, represents a significant concern in educational settings, undermining both individual well-being and institutional climate.

The core research question guiding this inquiry is: How do self-esteem and emotional regulation interact to influence aggressiveness among higher education students, and what are the implications for realizing NEP 2020's objectives for psychological well-being?

By integrating empirical findings from diverse cultural contexts and policy analysis, this paper aims to (1) elucidate the mechanistic pathways linking self-esteem, emotional regulation, and aggressiveness; (2) assess the alignment of NEP 2020 provisions with these psychological dynamics; and (3) identify implementation gaps and actionable recommendations for fostering psychologically supportive learning environments.

Literature Review :

1. Self-Esteem and Aggressiveness: The Paradox of Threatened Egotism :

The relationship between self-esteem and aggression is neither straightforward nor unidirectional. Traditional perspectives posited that low self-esteem predisposes individuals to aggressive behavior as a compensatory mechanism. However, contemporary research reveals a more nuanced picture: aggression often emerges not from low self-worth but from threatened egotism—a defensive response when inflated self-esteem is challenged.

2. Emotional Regulation as a Mediating Mechanism :

Emotional regulation—the processes through which individuals influence which emotions they experience, when, and how they express them—has emerged as a critical mediator in the self-esteem-aggression nexus. Research reveals that emotion regulation helps individuals transform negative cognitions into constructive behaviors, thereby reducing destructive outcomes.

A seminal study by Akbar et al. (2021) investigated the mediating role of emotion regulation between self-esteem and aggressive behavior tendencies among adolescents in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Using quantitative survey methods with 155 students, the study found

that emotion regulation fully mediated the relationship between self-esteem and aggression. When controlling for emotion regulation, the direct effect of self-esteem on aggression became non-significant (p=0.706) . This finding underscores a crucial insight: self-esteem does not directly determine aggressive behavior; rather, its influence operates through the individual's capacity to regulate emotional responses.

3. The Chain Mediation Model: Self-Esteem, Self-Control, and Aggression :

Recent research extends the mediation framework by incorporating self-control as an additional pathway. A study on physical activity and aggressive behavior among college students constructed a chain-mediated model demonstrating that self-esteem and self-control sequentially mediate the relationship between health behaviors and aggression.

4. The Higher Education Context: Stressors and Vulnerabilities :

Higher education presents unique psychological challenges that may amplify the self-esteem-regulation-aggression dynamic. University students face intense academic demands, competitive environments, social isolation, and uncertain career prospects. The World Health Organization's International College Student Project found that approximately one-third of first-year university students screen positive for at least one common mental disorder.

NEP 2020: Policy Provisions for Psychological Well-being :

1. The Holistic Vision :

NEP 2020 represents a significant departure from earlier educational frameworks by explicitly recognizing the importance of psychological well-being in educational outcomes. The policy envisions an education system that cultivates cognitive, emotional, and ethical capacities, emphasizing "holistic development" as a foundational principle. This approach aligns with the emerging consensus that education must address the whole person, not merely transmit knowledge.

2. Policy-Practice Gaps :

Despite these progressive provisions, significant gaps exist between policy intent and implementation reality. A recent report by QS I-GAUGE tracking NEP 2020 implementation across 165 HEIs found that while student support and service centers are relatively well-established, institutional partnerships for mental health and well-being with national institutes

Discussion :

1. Theoretical Implications :

The findings synthesized in this paper contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying student well-being in higher education. The

identification of emotional regulation as a full mediator between self-esteem and aggression challenges simplistic models that posit direct causal relationships. This suggests that interventions aimed at reducing aggression should target not only self-esteem enhancement but, critically, emotion regulation skills.

The chain mediation model involving self-control extends this framework, indicating that self-esteem's protective function operates through multiple pathways. This aligns with the "energy model" theory and underscores the importance of holistic approaches that address multiple psychological resources simultaneously.

2. Policy Implications for NEP 2020 Implementation :

The findings have significant implications for NEP 2020 implementation:

1. Prioritize Emotional Regulation Skills in Curriculum Design
2. Strengthen Institutional Mental Health Infrastructure
3. Address the Threatened Egotism Paradox
4. Leverage Physical Activity and Wellness Programs
5. Address Implementation Barriers.

3. Limitations and Future Research Directions :

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the empirical evidence reviewed is primarily cross-sectional, precluding causal inferences. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to establish causality and trace developmental trajectories.

Conclusion :

The psychological well-being of higher education students is not merely an ancillary concern but a foundational prerequisite for realizing the transformative vision of NEP 2020. This paper has demonstrated that self-esteem and emotional regulation are intricately linked in shaping aggressive tendencies, with emotional regulation serving as a critical mediating mechanism. Students with robust self-esteem and effective emotion regulation skills are better equipped to navigate the challenges of higher education without resorting to destructive behaviors.

NEP 2020 provides a promising policy framework that recognizes these psychological dimensions through its emphasis on holistic development, equity, and inclusive education. However, significant implementation gaps—particularly in mental health infrastructure, institutional partnerships, and faculty capacity—threaten to undermine the policy's potential.

Bridging these gaps requires a multi-pronged approach: curricular integration of emotional literacy, strengthening of mental health services, fostering of secure self-esteem, and systemic reforms to address implementation barriers. As one study on teacher well-being under NEP 2020 concluded, ensuring psychological well-being is "indispensable for the

successful implementation of NEP 2020 and sustainable educational development".

The road ahead demands sustained commitment from policymakers, institutional leaders, faculty, and students alike. Only by addressing the psychological dimensions of education can India realize NEP 2020's vision of an education system that nurtures not merely knowledgeable individuals but resilient, compassionate, and psychologically thriving citizens.

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