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Student Mental Health, Social Pressures, and Academic Culture: Insights from Bangladesh's Education Policy Changes

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of Bangladesh's National Curriculum Framework 2022, a core component of the country's new education policy, on student anxiety, stress, and social dynamics. Aimed at shifting away from rote learning and high-stakes examinations, the policy introduces continuous assessment, digital learning integration, and project-based pedagogy. While these reforms align with global trends emphasizing competency-based education and holistic student development, emerging literature suggests that such transitions may have unintended psychosocial consequences. Guided by theories of educational change and student well-being, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, including surveys from 300 students and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 20 teachers. Findings indicate a significant rise in student anxiety and stress, particularly in rural areas where access to digital tools is limited. Teachers reported increased emotional challenges among students and a lack of preparedness to offer mental health support. The study concludes that although the policy has the potential to improve academic quality. It also contributes to mental health concerns and social disconnection.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen substantial changes to Bangladesh's educational system, including the implementation of a new education strategy intended to raise educational standards and improve student learning outcomes with its emphasis on project-based learning, ongoing assessment, and integrating technology into the classroom, this approach departs from the conventional exam-based learning framework. This new system's main objective is to help students develop their critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving abilities. This is in keeping with worldwide trends that emphasize a more competency-based and holistic approach to education (Catacutan et al., 2020). Nevertheless, despite the new policy's goal of modernizing Bangladeshi education, there has been increasing worry about its possible effects on students' social and mental health dynamics. Given the significant changes it introduces, it is crucial to examine the secondary implications of this policy on student well-being, particularly in terms of anxiety, stress, and social relationships.

Educational reforms have long been a subject of interest for researchers around the world, particularly regarding their influence on students' psychological health. Studies have shown that the introduction of new educational policies can significantly impact students' mental health, both positively and negatively. For example, the introduction of standardized testing in the United States and Europe has been linked to increased levels of anxiety and stress among students (Mulvenon et al., 2005; Högberg & Horn, 2022; Baker et al., 2015; Salmela-Aro et al., 2008). While standardized tests aim to provide a fair assessment of students' abilities, they often place immense pressure on students, leading to heightened levels of stress and a decline in mental well-being (Kohn, 2000). The same concerns are raised in the context of Bangladesh's new education policy, where the shift from high-stakes exams to continuous assessment could increase the psychological burden on students, especially those who are unaccustomed to such changes. In a society where academic success is highly valued, students may feel anxious about their performance, fearing the cumulative effect of ongoing assessments and the pressure to perform well at all times (Alam et al., 2023a).

Moreover, the introduction of continuous assessment is not the only factor contributing to the potential rise in stress levels among students. Another key aspect of the policy is the increased use of technology in the classroom, which aims to align the education system with global digital trends. While the integration of technology is intended to enhance learning experiences and foster digital literacy, it has also raised concerns about its accessibility and the challenges it presents to both students and teachers (Mudra, 2020). In Bangladesh, where access to technology is still uneven, particularly in rural areas, students may face significant difficulties in adapting to technology-based learning (Karim et al., 2024). While urban students in Bangladesh were more likely to have access to digital learning tools (Rahman et al., 2021), rural students often lacked the necessary resources, creating a digital divide that could exacerbate educational inequalities (Badiuzzaman et al., 2021). For students without adequate access to technology, the pressure to engage with digital learning platforms may lead to feelings of inadequacy, stress, and frustration.

In addition to the academic and technological challenges, the social implications of the new education policy have also garnered attention. Education is not only a process of acquiring knowledge but also an essential medium for developing social skills and emotional intelligence. In traditional classroom settings, students often form strong peer relationships and learn to navigate complex social interactions (Wentzel & Watkins, 2002; Alam et al., 2023b). However, the emphasis on individualized learning and the increased focus on digital education may undermine these social interactions, leading to potential social isolation. In

many schools, the lack of in-person interactions and collaborative learning may diminish the opportunities for students to engage with one another, affecting their social development (Cockerham *et al.*, 2021; Bowers & Cummings, 2017). Research has shown that social interactions are crucial for the emotional well-being of students, as they provide opportunities for emotional support, the development of empathy, and the building of interpersonal skills (Barry *et al.*, 2017; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, any policy that limits these interactions may have long-term consequences for students' social and emotional development.

Furthermore, the impact of educational reforms on social dynamics is not limited to students alone. Teachers, who are at the forefront of implementing these changes, have also expressed concerns about the increased workload and the challenges associated with adapting to the new policy. Studies have highlighted the importance of teacher preparation and professional development in the successful implementation of educational reforms (Haque et al., 2024; Darling-Hammond, 2000). However, in the case of Bangladesh, there has been insufficient investment in teacher training, particularly with regard to the integration of technology into the classroom and the new methods of assessment. As a result, teachers have reported feeling unprepared and overwhelmed, which can negatively affect their ability to effectively support students, especially in terms of addressing mental health concerns (Islam et al., 2025; Akter & Islam, 2019). The emotional strain experienced by teachers may, in turn, influence their interactions with students, potentially leading to a decrease in the quality of the teacher-student relationship. This could have a ripple effect on students' social dynamics and their ability to form healthy relationships with their peers and educators.

The relationship between education policy and student well-being is a complex one, influenced by a multitude of factors, including socio-economic conditions, access to resources, and the quality of teacher training (Boeve-de Pauw et al., 2015). While the new education policy in Bangladesh aims to improve educational outcomes, its effects on students' mental health and social interactions remain a subject of concern. As the new education policy continues to be implemented, it is essential to examine its secondary effects on student mental health and social dynamics to ensure that these reforms do not inadvertently harm the very individuals they aim to benefit. This study will contribute to the broader understanding of the implications of educational reforms on student well-being, providing valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers interested in the future of education in Bangladesh and beyond.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Global Context of Education Policies

There has long been scholarly research into the effects of changes in educational policies on student outcomes, including social dynamics, mental health, and academic performance. Global and national issues, from changing societal expectations to technological improvements, have caused major changes in educational institutions around the world. The main goals of educational reforms are usually to improve student outcomes, modernize curricula, and improve teaching methods. However, there are frequently unforeseen implications associated with these reforms, especially when it comes to the general well-being, social dynamics, and mental health of students. An examination of international developments in educational policy offers important insights into the possible ramifications of Bangladesh's recent education reform as well as more general patterns seen in other nations.

One of the most extensively observed trends in education reform across the globe has been the shift toward competency-based education (CBE), where the focus is on the development of specific skills and competencies rather than solely on content knowledge (Anderson, 2018). Countries such as Finland, Singapore, and Canada have led the way in implementing CBE frameworks, with positive outcomes in terms of student engagement, academic achievement, and emotional well-being. Finland, in particular, is known for its emphasis on student well-being and teacher autonomy, fostering a learning environment that prioritizes student mental health and holistic development. Finnish educational reforms have been lauded for their ability to reduce academic stress and increase social cohesion among students. Teachers in Finland are highly trained professionals, trusted to design and implement curricula that meet the needs of their students while balancing academic rigor with social and emotional learning. This approach has been associated with lower levels of student anxiety, reduced competition, and an emphasis on cooperative learning, which promotes both cognitive and social skills.

In contrast to the Finnish model, other countries have embraced high-stakes testing as a central feature of their educational reforms. The United States, for example, has undergone numerous educational reforms aimed at increasing accountability and improving student performance through standardized testing (Hamilton *et al.*, 2012). From the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 and its successor, Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, both emphasized standardized testing as a means of measuring educational outcomes. While these policies were designed to improve educational equity and student achievement, they have faced significant criticism for contributing to student stress and anxiety. Research has shown that the pressure associated with standardized testing has adverse effects on student mental health, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and disengagement from the learning process (Baker *et al.*, 2015). The overemphasis on test scores has been found to limit the breadth of educational experiences for students, with a narrowing of curricula to focus on test preparation rather than broader skill development, including social and emotional learning (Kohn, 2000). These negative consequences highlight the potential risks of policies that prioritize assessment at the expense of student well-being.

The rise of digital technologies in education has also been a key driver of reform in many countries, with policymakers striving to integrate technology into the classroom to enhance learning experiences and prepare students for the future workforce. Countries like Estonia and South Korea have been pioneers in leveraging digital tools to improve education. In Estonia, the government has implemented a nationwide program aimed at integrating technology into the curriculum, ensuring that students have access to digital resources from an early age (Leoste et al., 2022). This policy has been linked to improvements in digital literacy and academic performance, as well as greater student engagement. However, the rapid introduction of technology in education has not been without challenges. In South Korea, for example, the push towards technology in education has led to concerns about students' overreliance on digital tools, which may contribute to increased feelings of isolation and disconnection from their peers (Jo, 2023; Lee & Choi, 2020). While technology can offer innovative ways to engage students, it also has the potential to exacerbate issues related to mental health, particularly when students are exposed to excessive screen time or digital learning environments that lack sufficient face-to-face interactions.

One of the critical debates surrounding educational reforms is the balance between individual achievement and collective well-being. Policies that prioritize competition, such as standardized testing and merit-based assessments, often lead to increased student stress and anxiety, as students strive to meet external expectations and outperform their peers. The

pressure to perform at a high level can undermine students' emotional health and create a competitive environment that erodes social cohesion. In Japan, for instance, the intense pressure placed on students to succeed in competitive entrance exams has been linked to high rates of academic burnout and mental health issues, including depression and suicide (Saito, 2017). The Japanese education system places significant emphasis on entrance exams, which are seen as the gateway to success and social mobility. However, this competitive culture has created an environment where students feel immense pressure to perform, leading to negative psychological outcomes. Similar trends have been observed in countries such as South Korea and China, where the pursuit of academic excellence is often prioritized over student well-being (Su & Lee, 2023; Sung & Park, 2018).

Conversely, there is an emerging body of research that advocates for the inclusion of social and emotional learning (SEL) as part of educational reforms. SEL programs, which focus on developing students' emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and interpersonal skills, have been found to have positive effects on both academic performance and mental health (Prince & Uzoamaka, 2024). In the United States, for example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has promoted SEL as an integral part of the curriculum, with schools that implement SEL programs showing improvements in student behavior, academic achievement, and emotional well-being (Durlak et al., 2011). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the introduction of social-emotional programs in schools has been shown to reduce student anxiety and improve their ability to manage stress (Berry et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2013). These programs provide students with the tools they need to cope with the emotional challenges they face, both inside and outside the classroom. The emphasis on SEL reflects a growing recognition that education should not only focus on academic achievement but also on fostering the emotional and social development of students.

2.2. Impact of Education Policies on Mental Health

In the context of changes to educational policy, research on students' mental health has grown in importance. The learning environment frequently undergoes major changes with the implementation of new educational policies, including adjustments to teaching strategies, technological integration, and assessment techniques. Although the overall goal of these reforms is to raise the standard of education, there is mounting evidence that they may also have unforeseen negative effects on students' mental health. Global research has demonstrated the strong correlation between educational policy and mental health, especially anxiety, stress, and depression. This section examines the body of research on the effects of educational policy on students' mental health, paying special attention to stress and anxiety, which are prevalent issues among students undergoing educational reforms.

The introduction of high-stakes standardized testing is one of the most widely discussed educational policies that has been shown to negatively affect student mental health. In many countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, standardized testing is seen as a critical measure of academic achievement and a means of holding schools accountable. However, numerous studies have linked the pressure to perform well on these tests with increased levels of student stress and anxiety. Standardized tests contribute to a competitive environment where students are more focused on achieving high scores than on learning, leading to heightened stress levels. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and its emphasis on standardized testing have been associated with negative psychological outcomes for students, particularly among those from low-income backgrounds (Kohn, 2000). The constant focus on test preparation, combined with the fear of failure, led to significant increases in anxiety and depression among students (Baker et al., 2015; von der Embse et al.,

2015). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the introduction of high-stakes exams in secondary education has been shown to increase academic pressure, which in turn negatively affects students' mental health (George, 2024; Jones *et al.*, 2013).

In addition to the psychological burden caused by standardized testing, other policy reforms have also been linked to rising levels of student anxiety and stress. The shift toward more continuous assessment systems, as seen in countries like Singapore and Finland, is often touted as a more holistic approach to evaluating student progress. While continuous assessment is intended to reduce the pressure of high-stakes exams, it has also been found to create its own set of challenges for students. In particular, the continuous nature of assessments can lead to ongoing anxiety, as students feel that their performance is constantly being evaluated. This feeling of perpetual scrutiny can result in chronic stress, which may affect students' emotional well-being. Students who are subjected to frequent assessments report higher levels of anxiety (Salmela-Aro et al., 2017), particularly when they feel that they are underperforming or unable to meet expectations (Colbert-Getz et al., 2013). In Finland, despite the country's emphasis on student well-being, students participating in a system of continuous assessments have expressed concerns about the impact on their mental health, with many reporting feelings of burnout (Salmela-Aro, 2017). These findings suggest that while continuous assessment is intended to alleviate some of the pressure associated with traditional exams, it can still contribute to mental health issues by creating a different form of academic stress.

The integration of technology in education, which has been an integral part of many recent educational reforms, also raises concerns about its impact on student mental health. The growing reliance on digital tools for learning has changed the way students interact with educational content and has introduced new stressors into their daily lives. In many cases, students are expected to learn through digital platforms, which may require them to spend more time on screens. The constant engagement with technology has been linked to increased feelings of social isolation, anxiety, and stress, particularly in environments where face-to-face interactions are minimized (Jo, 2023; Lee & Choi, 2020). A study conducted in South Korea found that students who spent long hours on digital devices for educational purposes reported higher levels of stress and social anxiety, as the excessive use of technology often led to a reduction in direct social interactions with peers (Jo, 2023; Lee & Choi, 2020). Similarly, research from the United Kingdom has shown that students' mental health is affected by the growing demands of digital learning, which can contribute to feelings of isolation and digital fatigue (Burns et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2013). The shift to online education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has underscored these concerns, with many students reporting that the lack of face-to-face interactions exacerbates feelings of loneliness and anxiety.

Furthermore, the implementation of policies that prioritize academic performance over emotional well-being can contribute to a culture of stress and anxiety within educational institutions. This is particularly evident in countries where educational systems place a strong emphasis on academic success as a measure of personal worth and future opportunities. In Japan, for example, the pressure to succeed in highly competitive entrance exams has been linked to a range of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and even suicide (Saito, 2017). The Japanese education system, which places significant importance on passing entrance exams to prestigious universities, creates an environment where students feel intense pressure to perform. Students preparing for exams experience heightened levels of stress (Saito, 2017), leading to physical and psychological exhaustion. This overemphasis on academic achievement, while intended to foster a competitive and efficient education

system, has been shown to negatively affect students' mental health, particularly when students feel that their self-worth is tied to their academic success.

While the focus on academic achievement and performance remains a dominant feature of many educational policies worldwide, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of addressing students' emotional and psychological needs. In recent years, there has been an increasing shift toward integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into educational curricula. SEL programs, which teach students to manage their emotions, develop empathy, and build healthy relationships, have been shown to have a positive impact on mental health. SEL programs in schools resulted in improved mental health outcomes, including reductions in anxiety and depression (Durlak et al., 2011), as well as improvements in academic performance and social skills. In the United States, CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) has been at the forefront of promoting SEL as a core component of education. SEL programs have been found to reduce the negative psychological effects of academic pressure by providing students with the skills to cope with stress and manage their emotions effectively (Durlak et al., 2011). The positive impact of SEL highlights the potential for educational policies to improve student mental health by prioritizing emotional development alongside academic achievement.

3. METHODS

The research for this study was designed to explore the effects of Bangladesh's new education policy on student anxiety, stress, and social dynamics. A mixed-methods approach was chosen to provide a comprehensive analysis, combining both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. This approach allows for a broad understanding of the impact of the new policy by combining numerical data from surveys with the rich, detailed insights provided by teacher interviews. The use of a mixed-methods design enables triangulation, a process that enhances the validity of the findings by comparing and contrasting results from multiple sources of data.

For the quantitative component, a survey was distributed to students to measure the effects of the new education policy on their mental health and social interactions. The survey was designed to capture various aspects of student life, including levels of anxiety and stress, perceptions of their academic and social environments, and their experiences with the new assessment methods introduced by the policy. This data was essential to quantify the prevalence and intensity of the issues students were facing, particularly those related to anxiety and stress due to the reforms. The survey was also designed to assess students' perceptions of their relationships with peers and teachers, offering insights into how the policy might be affecting social dynamics within the school environment.

The participants in this study were selected using a stratified random sampling method to ensure that a representative sample of students was included. A total of 300 students participated, ensuring diversity in terms of gender, age, and geographic location, with students from both urban and rural areas being represented. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure that the data captured a wide range of experiences, as students from different backgrounds may have been affected differently by the changes in the education system. The students ranged from primary to higher education levels, offering a broad perspective on the policy's impact across different academic stages. Alongside the student participants, 20 teachers were interviewed to provide qualitative insights into the policy's implementation and its impact on students' mental health and social dynamics. Teachers were selected purposively, ensuring that those with direct experience in the implementation of the new education policy were included in the study. The aim was to gather their

perspectives on how the policy affected students' well-being, how it had been implemented in their classrooms, and how the changes had influenced their teaching practices and relationships with students.

Data collection was carried out in two phases. First, the student survey was administered, either online or on paper, depending on the availability of resources and the students' access to technology. The survey was designed with a mix of closed-ended questions, which utilized Likert scale items to measure levels of anxiety, stress, and social relationships, as well as openended questions that allowed students to elaborate on their personal experiences with the new policy. The survey was distributed over three weeks, and the responses were collected anonymously to encourage honest and unbiased feedback. After the survey data were collected, the second phase involved conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers. These interviews were designed to gather qualitative data on teachers' perceptions of the new policy's impact on students' mental health and social behavior, as well as on the teachers' experiences in adapting to the changes in the educational environment. Interviews were conducted in person or via video calls, and each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, ensuring accuracy in transcription and analysis.

The data analysis process for this study was divided into two main parts: the analysis of quantitative survey data and the analysis of qualitative interview data. The survey data were first analyzed using descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and standard deviations, to summarize the overall trends in student responses. This initial analysis allowed for a broad understanding of how students perceived the impact of the new education policy on their anxiety, stress, and social relationships. Inferential statistics were then used to explore any significant differences in the data, such as variations based on gender, academic level, or geographic location. This analysis helped identify which groups of students were most affected by the policy and provided a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand. Statistical tests, such as chi-square tests and t-tests, were used to examine the relationships between variables and determine whether there were any statistically significant differences in the experiences of different groups of students.

For the qualitative data, a thematic analysis approach was employed. The interviews with teachers were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analyzed to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data. Thematic analysis allows for the identification of key issues and concerns that arise from participants' accounts, providing a deeper understanding of how teachers view the new education policy and its effects on students' mental health and social dynamics. The analysis began with a careful reading of the transcripts, followed by the development of initial codes based on the interview questions and emerging themes. These codes were then grouped into broader categories to highlight the key factors influencing the implementation of the policy and its impact on students. The final stage of the analysis involved interpreting the themes and drawing connections between the qualitative data and the quantitative findings. This process enabled the researchers to synthesize the results from both the student surveys and teacher interviews, providing a holistic view of the policy's effects.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The student survey results reveal that the introduction of the new education policy has had a profound effect on student anxiety and stress. When asked about the stress induced by the new education policy, the majority of students reported significant increases in their levels of stress. Specifically, 52.2% of students indicated that their stress had increased

"much," while 41% felt that their stress had increased "very much" (**Table 1**). These results suggest that the changes in assessment methods, the shift towards continuous evaluations, and the increased academic workload have significantly contributed to student anxiety. A smaller proportion of students (4.7%) felt that their stress had increased "a little," with a negligible percentage reporting no increase in stress at all. This finding aligns with the concerns raised by teachers in the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), where many noted that the shift to continuous assessments, without proper infrastructure and adequate training, was one of the key contributors to increased student stress levels.

Table 1. Impact of New Education Policy on Student Anxiety and Stress.

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Stress increased due to the new	Little	13	4.7
education policy	much	145	52.2
	Neutral	2	.7
	Very little	4	1.4
	Very much	114	41.0
	Little	13	4.7
Increased feelings of anxiety	much	154	55.4
	Neutral	6	2.2
	Very little	4	1.4
	Very much	100	36.0
The kind of stress the new education	Comparison with others	3	1.1
policy has created	Difficulty adapting to	179	64.4
	new procedures		
	Exam pressure	82	29.5
	No pressure	12	4.3
	Others	2	.7
Mental health has been affected by	Good	4	1.4
the new education policy	Negative	171	61.5
	No effect	1	.4
	Very negative	102	36.7
The new education policy affected	Negative	178	64.0
your social relationships	No effect	6	2.2
	Very negative	94	33.8
Quality of relationship with friends	good change	1	.4
	Negative change	177	63.7
	No change	3	1.1
	Very negative change	97	34.9

In addition to the increased stress levels, a considerable proportion of students reported elevated feelings of anxiety due to the new policy (**Figure 1**). According to the survey, 55.4% of students reported increased anxiety "much," and 36% reported it "very much" (**Table 1**). Teachers similarly observed that the introduction of continuous assessments, coupled with the lack of clear guidelines and sufficient support, has exacerbated student anxiety. During KII, a teacher noted, "The abundance and difficulty of the curriculum, although intended to enhance skills, is creating various challenges for students, leading to increased anxiety levels as they absorb more information".

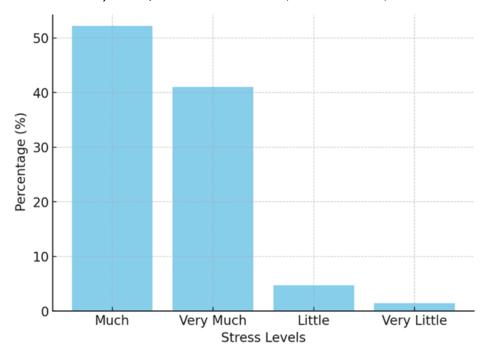


Figure 1. Student Stress Levels after the New Education Policy.

This reflects a broader issue where, despite the policy's intention to improve educational quality, students are experiencing a higher burden of academic pressure (**Figure 2**). The students' concerns about increased pressure were not limited to assessments alone. The new policy also places significant emphasis on the integration of technology in education, requiring students to adapt to digital tools and online learning platforms. While the intention is to enhance learning, many students reported that the increased reliance on technology has added to their stress levels. A teacher highlighted this concern in the KIIs, stating, "Technology-based education systems, but most students do not have access to technology tools, which is holding them back from mainstream education. This is a major cause of concern for students, which is bringing them down mentally".

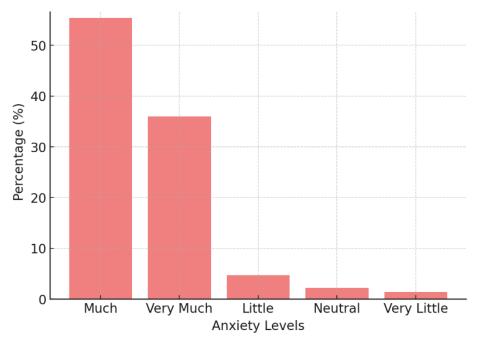


Figure 2. Student Anxiety Levels after the New Education Policy.

The survey results further support this view, as students indicated that their stress was compounded by the digital divide, with 64.4% of students reporting difficulty adapting to the new procedures (**Table 1**). The challenge of adjusting to technology, particularly in rural areas where access to digital resources is limited, contributes to students feeling overwhelmed and disconnected from the educational system.

One of the most striking findings from the survey was the significant proportion of students who reported that the new education policy has had a negative effect on their mental health. A majority of 61.5% of students stated that their mental health had been affected "negatively," with 36.7% reporting that the impact was "very negative" (**Table 1**). These findings are consistent with the feedback from teachers, who expressed concerns about the policy's impact on students' psychological well-being. A teacher noted, "The new education policy requires students to spend more time on digital devices to learn, which has led to mental stress and social isolation among students".

This observation is supported by the data, where 41% of students reported that the policy had led to feelings of social isolation, which in turn affected their mental health. Furthermore, 36% of students indicated that their anxiety levels were exacerbated by the lack of clarity surrounding the policy, leading to a pervasive fear of failure (**Table 1**). This uncertainty about the educational system, coupled with the stress of constant evaluation, appears to contribute to a deteriorating mental health landscape for many students.

The teacher interviews also revealed that the shift towards continuous assessment, as implemented by the new policy, has intensified student stress. Teachers observed that while the policy aimed to reduce exam pressure, it inadvertently introduced new forms of stress related to the need for constant performance evaluations. One teacher described, "Exam pressure and changes in assessment methods, which are new to students, are creating a lot of mental stress for students, requiring them to adapt".

This shift from traditional exams to continuous assessments has created a different kind of pressure, where students feel that their performance is constantly being scrutinized, leading to an ongoing state of anxiety.

The data also highlights the negative impact of the new education policy on students' social relationships. In terms of changes in social dynamics, 64% of students reported that their social relationships had been negatively affected by the policy, with 33.8% indicating that the change had been "very negative" (**Table 1**). A teacher noted, "The competitive mentality that has developed between them has made them value competition more than a friendly relationship".

The introduction of more rigorous academic demands has led to a reduction in students' social interactions, as many students find themselves consumed by the need to meet academic expectations. Moreover, students indicated that the focus on academic achievement, coupled with the increasing stress levels, has weakened their relationships with friends and family. A significant number of students reported that their relationships with friends had worsened, with 63.7% stating that there had been a "negative change" in their friendships (**Table 1**). This decline in social cohesion is concerning, as positive social relationships are vital for mental health, particularly during periods of academic pressure.

4.2 Changes in Social Dynamics and Relationships

Teachers interviewed in the KIIs observed that the policy's emphasis on continuous assessments and project-based learning, while designed to promote critical thinking and creativity, has inadvertently placed students under immense pressure, reducing their opportunities for social engagement (Figure 3). One teacher shared, "The students are so

caught up in the demands of continuous assessments and technology-based learning that they have little time for extracurricular activities or socializing with peers. Their social skills are being overlooked in the rush to keep up with academic requirements".



Figure 3. New Education Policy Impact on Social Dynamics and Relationships.

This observation underscores the unintended consequences of a policy that, despite its intent to improve educational outcomes, is inadvertently undermining students' social wellbeing. A closer look at the survey results reveals the extent of the deterioration in students' relationships with their friends. Over 63% of students reported a negative change in the quality of their friendships, with 34.9% stating that the change had been very negative (**Table 1**). These findings are consistent with the KIIs, where teachers noted that the increasing focus on individual academic performance has led to greater competition among students, reducing the cooperative, social nature of learning. As one teacher explained, "Students have become more focused on beating each other in grades and assessments, leading to more isolation. It is no longer about collaboration or teamwork, but individual performance".

The emphasis on individual achievement, fueled by the pressure of continuous assessments, has led to a decline in social interactions that were previously fostered through group work, peer support, and classroom discussions.

The shift towards technology-driven learning has also contributed to the disruption of students' social dynamics. Although the policy aims to integrate technology into education, the shift to digital platforms has led to a reduction in face-to-face interactions. A considerable proportion of students (64%) reported that the use of technology in education has had a negative impact on their social relationships (**Table 2**). In the KIIs, teachers corroborated this finding, noting that the increasing reliance on digital tools has isolated students, particularly those in rural areas who have limited access to technology. One teacher commented, "In rural areas, students often feel left behind because they don't have the same access to technology as their peers in urban areas. This digital divide has widened the gap between students, affecting their social interactions".

This digital divide has not only hindered students' academic progress but also diminished their ability to engage in social activities that are integral to their overall development.

The survey data also reveals the negative impact of the new education policy on students' relationships with their families. A significant number of students (49.3%) reported that their families viewed the policy negatively, with an additional 48.2% indicating that their family members felt very negatively about the policy (**Table 2**). Teachers noted that the increased academic workload and the pressure to adapt to new learning methods have created tension

between students and their families. As one teacher explained, "Parents often push their children to perform well academically, but with the added pressure of the new policy, many students feel overwhelmed, leading to conflicts at home".

Table 2. New Education Policy Impact on Social Dynamics.

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
Views of family members about the new	Bad	137	49.3
education policy	Moderate	7	2.5
	Very bad	134	48.2
Attitude towards this policy among classmates	Bad	149	53.6
	Moderate	6	2.2
	Very bad	123	44.2
Views of family members about the new	Little	13	4.7
education policy	much	145	52.2
	Neutral	2	.7
	Very little	4	1.4
	Very much	114	41.0
Feel more clear about educational goals as a	Clear	2	.7
result of this educational policy	Unchanged	11	4.0
	Unclear	175	62.9
	Very	90	32.4
	unclear		

This is reflected in the survey results (**Figure 4**), where 53.6% of students indicated that their classmates also held negative views about the policy, which further isolates students from their social circles. Despite these negative effects, a small proportion of students (41%) reported that the new policy had only a minor impact on their social relationships (**Table 2**). These students indicated that while they experienced some academic pressure, their social interactions were not significantly affected. Teachers in the KIIs noted that these students were often those who had already developed strong social support systems and coping mechanisms, which allowed them to navigate the challenges posed by the policy without significant disruption to their social lives. As one teacher noted, "Students with strong peer networks tend to fare better in adjusting to the changes. They help each other cope with the stresses of the new system". This observation highlights the importance of peer support in mitigating the social and emotional impacts of educational reforms.

In addition to the changes in students' relationships with peers and family, the survey data reveal a broader sense of uncertainty and confusion regarding the students' educational goals. This lack of clarity reflects the overall sense of disorientation that many students are experiencing as they try to adapt to the new assessment methods and curriculum. Teachers expressed similar concerns, stating that the lack of clear communication regarding the policy's goals and objectives has left students feeling uncertain about their educational trajectory. One teacher shared, "Students are constantly asking about the long-term implications of these changes, but there's not enough guidance on how these reforms will actually benefit them in the future".

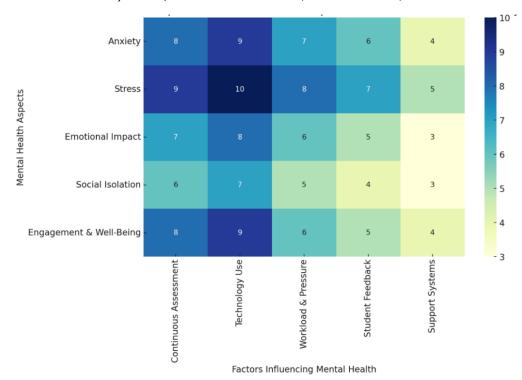


Figure 4. Teachers' Perceptions of Mental Health Impacts.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight that while Bangladesh's National Curriculum Framework 2022 introduces progressive reforms aimed at improving educational outcomes through continuous assessment, project-based learning, and digital integration, it also generates unintended psychosocial challenges. The shift from traditional exam-focused education to competency-based evaluation has led to increased levels of anxiety, stress, and social isolation among students, particularly those in rural areas with limited access to technology. Teachers, though supportive of the reform's pedagogical goals, report being ill-equipped to address the rising emotional and mental health needs of their students.

This underscores the critical need for regular and systematic evaluation of education policies that go beyond academic performance metrics to include psychosocial indicators such as student well-being, emotional resilience, and social cohesion. Such evaluations can help identify emerging risks early and inform evidence-based policy adjustments that prioritize both academic and emotional development.

To ensure that the policy achieves its intended goals without compromising student well-being, a multi-stakeholder approach is essential. Beyond teachers and policymakers, the active involvement of parents, local communities, and NGOs is crucial in building a supportive ecosystem for learners. Parents can reinforce positive coping strategies at home; community leaders can advocate for local educational needs; and NGOs can provide technical support, mental health services, or bridge the digital divide in underserved areas.

Furthermore, the integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs into the curriculum should be prioritized, alongside teacher training in mental health awareness and responsive pedagogy. Equitable access to educational technology must also be addressed through infrastructure investments and targeted outreach in rural and marginalized communities.

The success of Bangladesh's new education policy depends not only on the robustness of its academic framework but also on its responsiveness to the lived realities of students. Ongoing evaluation, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and a balanced focus on psychosocial development are essential to ensuring that educational reforms are both transformative and humane.

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of Bangladesh's National Curriculum Framework 2022 on student mental health and social dynamics, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research design was cross-sectional, capturing a snapshot of students' and teachers' perceptions at a single point in time. As such, it does not account for changes in mental health or social relationships over a longer duration. The lack of longitudinal data limits the ability to assess how these effects may evolve or persist as students and educators gradually adapt to the new policy.

Second, the study did not control for external variables that could influence student well-being, such as the lingering psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, socio-economic conditions, or family dynamics. These external factors may have independently contributed to heightened stress or anxiety levels and could confound the observed outcomes attributed solely to the policy. Without controlling for these variables, caution must be exercised in interpreting the findings as directly or exclusively caused by the policy changes. Additionally, although the sample size was adequate and included both urban and rural participants, the generalizability of the findings is limited to the specific contexts in which data were collected. Cultural and institutional differences across regions or types of schools may lead to varied experiences not captured in this study.

Future research should aim to incorporate longitudinal methods and a broader set of variables to better understand the long-term and multifaceted effects of educational reforms on student well-being. Such approaches would strengthen causal inferences and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the policy's impact.

6. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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