



Examining the Role of Guidance and Counseling Interventions in Promoting Inclusive Education at the Secondary Level

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Abstract: The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and holistic education as a central objective of the Indian education system. In this context, guidance and counseling interventions have emerged as significant support mechanisms for addressing the socio-emotional and academic needs of secondary school students. Adolescents at the secondary level frequently encounter challenges related to emotional adjustment, academic stress, peer relationships, low self-esteem, and ineffective study habits, which may adversely affect their participation and performance in school. Inclusive education, therefore, requires supportive institutional practices that ensure the well-being and active engagement of all learners. The present paper explores the role of guidance and counseling interventions in promoting inclusive education at the secondary level. It examines how school-based counseling services contribute to students' socio-emotional well-being, emotional resilience, positive behaviour, and effective study habits. The paper further discusses the importance of counseling support in creating learner-friendly and equitable educational environments that encourage participation, adjustment, and holistic development among diverse groups of learners. The study is conceptual in nature and is based on the analysis of educational policies, contemporary literature, and research studies related to inclusive education, adolescent development, and school counseling practices. The discussion is situated within the framework of NEP 2020 and the broader vision of quality and inclusive education reflected in the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP). The paper highlights the need for teacher preparation programmes to equip future educators with guidance and counseling competencies essential for fostering inclusive classroom practices. The paper concludes that effective guidance and counseling interventions are indispensable for strengthening inclusive education at the secondary level. Integrating counseling support within school systems and teacher education programmes can contribute significantly to students' socio-emotional well-being, academic engagement, and overall educational equity.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Guidance and Counseling, Socio-Emotional Well-Being, Study Habits, Secondary Education.

INTRODUCTION

Education in the twenty-first century demands far more than the transmission of academic content. It calls for a vision of schooling in which every learner, regardless of background, ability, socioeconomic status, or learning need, is welcomed, supported, and empowered to

reach their fullest potential. Inclusive education represents precisely this vision: a commitment to reshaping schools so that they can respond meaningfully to the diversity of their student populations. In the Indian context, this commitment has been formally articulated through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 [1], which places equity, inclusion, and holistic development at the heart of educational reform.

Secondary school is a critical phase in the educational journey of any learner. Students at this stage are navigating the complex terrain of adolescence, managing academic pressures, forming identities, negotiating peer relationships, and beginning to consider their future pathways. For many students, particularly those from disadvantaged groups or with special educational needs, these challenges are compounded by institutional barriers, insufficient support systems, and a lack of responsive pedagogical practices. The result is often disengagement, underachievement, or dropout, outcomes that are antithetical to the goals of inclusive education.

Against this backdrop, guidance and counseling interventions have come to occupy an increasingly important position in inclusive education discourse. School counseling is not merely a remedial service offered to students in crisis. When embedded thoughtfully within the school system, it becomes a proactive and preventive mechanism that supports the emotional, social, and academic growth of all learners. Counselors and teachers equipped with guidance competencies can help create classroom environments where students feel safe, respected, and capable of learning.

The present paper undertakes a conceptual examination of the relationship between guidance and counseling interventions and inclusive education at the secondary level. Drawing on NEP 2020, the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP), and a body of contemporary educational literature, the paper explores how counseling support can address the diverse needs of secondary school students, promote socio-emotional well-being, and contribute to the creation of genuinely inclusive learning environments. The paper also highlights the centrality of teacher preparation in ensuring that future educators possess the skills and sensitivity required to implement inclusive and counseling-informed practices.

CONCEPTUALIZING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Meaning and Scope

Inclusive education has evolved considerably since its early articulation in international policy frameworks such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) [2], which called for schools to accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic, or other conditions. In its mature form, inclusive education is understood not merely as the physical placement of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms, but as a comprehensive restructuring of educational systems, cultures, and practices to ensure meaningful participation and equitable outcomes for all learners (Ainscow, 2020) [3].

The UNESCO (2017) [4] definition of inclusion emphasizes the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs among all learners by increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities and reducing exclusion from education. This definition acknowledges that barriers to participation arise not only from within individuals but from the structures, attitudes, and systems that shape educational environments. Inclusive education thus challenges schools to examine and transform those structures so that diversity is recognized as a resource rather than a problem.

Inclusive Education in the Indian Policy Framework

In India, the journey toward inclusive education has been shaped by a series of legislative and policy milestones. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act [5] mandates inclusive education for students with disabilities, specifying a range of support measures to be provided by educational institutions. Similarly, the Right to Education Act (2009) establishes the entitlement of children to free and compulsory schooling, with particular attention to children from disadvantaged groups.

NEP 2020 marks a significant step forward in articulating a comprehensive vision of inclusive education for all learners, not only those with disabilities. The policy acknowledges the diverse backgrounds of Indian learners, including linguistic minorities, socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, girls, and students with special needs, and calls for the creation of inclusive, supportive learning environments that respond to these diversities (MHRD, 2020). The policy also emphasizes the need for social-emotional learning, mental health support, and the development of guidance and counseling services within school systems as integral components of inclusive practice.

The ITEP, introduced as part of NEP 2020 reforms, reflects this broadened understanding of inclusive education by integrating competencies related to guidance, counseling, and inclusive pedagogy into the professional preparation of teachers. Future educators are expected to understand and address the diverse needs of learners, including their emotional and psychosocial needs, as part of their core professional responsibility.

ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

The Adolescent Phase: Developmental Considerations

Secondary schooling broadly corresponds with the period of adolescence, typically understood as spanning the ages of twelve to eighteen years. This phase is characterized by rapid and multidimensional change encompassing biological, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Adolescents are engaged in the critical developmental task of identity formation, seeking to answer fundamental questions about who they are, where they belong, and what they value [6]. This process is simultaneously exciting and destabilizing, and schools play a significant role in either supporting or impeding healthy adolescent development.

Cognitively, adolescents develop the capacity for abstract reasoning, hypothetical thinking, and metacognition during this period [7]. These emerging capabilities open new intellectual horizons but also generate heightened self-consciousness and susceptibility to self-doubt. Emotionally, adolescents experience intense and often fluctuating feelings, and they are particularly sensitive to the social dimensions of school life, including peer acceptance, teacher relationships, and perceived belonging within the academic community.

Key Challenges Affecting Participation and Achievement

Research consistently identifies several areas of difficulty that affect secondary school students' engagement and learning outcomes. Academic stress is among the most pervasive. Students in Indian secondary schools face considerable pressure related to examinations, competition, and career decisions, and this stress can manifest in anxiety, avoidance behaviours, and declining motivation [8]. Students from marginalized backgrounds may experience compounded stress, as they navigate both academic demands and socioeconomic pressures.

Peer relationships and social dynamics also exert a powerful influence on students' school experiences. Adolescents are acutely attuned to questions of belonging and social acceptance, and experiences of peer rejection, bullying, or social isolation can have profound negative effects on their emotional well-being and academic engagement. Conversely, positive peer relationships and a sense of social connectedness are strongly associated with higher levels of motivation, resilience, and achievement [9].

Self-esteem and self-efficacy present additional challenges, particularly for students who have experienced repeated academic failure or who belong to groups that face social stigma or discrimination. Low self-esteem can become a self-reinforcing cycle, leading students to avoid challenges, disengage from learning, and ultimately withdraw from schooling altogether. Effective study habits and organizational skills are also underdeveloped in many secondary school students, limiting their ability to manage academic demands effectively.

For students with disabilities, learning difficulties, or other special educational needs, these challenges are often exacerbated by inadequate accommodations, inaccessible curricula, and teachers who may lack the training or resources to respond effectively. The cumulative effect of these barriers is a system in which the promise of inclusive education remains, for many learners, unrealized.

GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING: FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS AND SCHOOL-BASED APPLICATIONS

Meaning and Dimensions of Guidance

Guidance refers to a broad process of providing assistance, direction, and support to individuals as they navigate challenges and make decisions across various life domains. In educational settings, guidance encompasses a range of activities including academic advising, career orientation, personal counseling, and group support programmes. It is a proactive, developmental process aimed at maximizing the potential of all learners rather than merely addressing problems after they arise [10].

Counseling, as a component of the broader guidance framework, is a more specialized, relational process in which a trained professional provides a supportive and non-judgmental space for individuals to explore their concerns, develop insight, and build the skills and confidence needed to address their difficulties. The counseling relationship is grounded in principles of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness, reflecting the client-centered theoretical tradition established by Rogers (1951) [11] and subsequently developed within educational counseling frameworks.

The Role of School Counselors in Inclusive Settings

School counselors occupy a unique and indispensable position within inclusive educational institutions. Unlike classroom teachers, whose primary focus is on content delivery and academic skill development, counselors are trained to attend to the whole person, addressing the emotional, social, and developmental needs that shape students' readiness and capacity to learn. In inclusive schools, this role takes on additional significance, as counselors serve as bridges between students, teachers, families, and external support services.

The American School Counselor Association [12] model describes school counselors as advocates, leaders, collaborators, and agents of systemic change. In the Indian context, where school counseling remains relatively nascent compared to Western educational systems, the ASCA framework offers valuable guidance, though it must be adapted to the specific cultural,

linguistic, and institutional realities of Indian schools. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has increasingly recognized the importance of counseling in schools and has issued guidelines for the appointment of trained counselors, particularly in light of growing concerns about adolescent mental health and examination-related stress.

Types of Counseling Interventions in Schools

School-based counseling interventions can be broadly categorized into individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom-based guidance activities. Individual counseling involves one-to-one sessions between the counselor and a student, and is particularly appropriate for addressing personal concerns, emotional difficulties, or specific learning challenges. Group counseling brings together students who share common concerns and provides opportunities for peer learning, mutual support, and the development of social skills in a structured, facilitated environment.

Classroom guidance activities, which may be led by counselors, trained teachers, or in collaboration with both, represent the most universal level of counseling support. These activities might include lessons on study skills, emotional regulation, peer conflict resolution, career exploration, or awareness of mental health. When integrated into the regular curriculum, classroom guidance reaches all students and helps to normalize the process of seeking support, reducing stigma and building a culture of openness and well-being within the school community.

GUIDANCE AND COUNSELING AS PATHWAYS TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Supporting Socio-Emotional Well-Being

The socio-emotional domain is foundational to inclusive education. Students who feel emotionally secure, socially connected, and capable of managing their feelings are significantly better positioned to engage with learning and navigate the complexities of school life. Guidance and counseling interventions address this domain directly by providing students with the skills, strategies, and support systems they need to develop emotional resilience and social competence.

Social-emotional learning (SEL), which encompasses competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making [13], has emerged as a central framework for understanding the link between emotional development and academic success. Counseling-informed approaches to SEL can be particularly powerful in inclusive settings, where the emotional and social needs of students vary widely and where a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective.

Research by Durlak et al. (2011) [14], in a landmark meta-analysis involving over 270,000 students, found that SEL programmes produced an eleven-percentile-point gain in academic achievement compared to control groups, alongside significant improvements in social skills and reductions in conduct problems and emotional distress. These findings underscore the academic as well as personal benefits of investing in socio-emotional support within schools.

Building Emotional Resilience

Resilience, understood as the capacity to adapt positively in the face of adversity, challenge, or significant stress, is an increasingly recognized outcome of effective guidance and counseling work in schools. Secondary school students encounter numerous stressors, including academic pressure, family difficulties, peer conflicts, and, for marginalized students, structural

disadvantages. Counseling interventions that build resilience equip students with the cognitive and emotional resources to navigate these challenges without losing their sense of agency or hope.

Resilience-building in school counseling draws on a range of evidence-based approaches, including cognitive-behavioral techniques, strengths-based perspectives, and mindfulness practices. Cognitive-behavioral approaches help students identify and challenge unhelpful thought patterns that can intensify emotional distress. Strengths-based approaches, drawing on positive psychology, focus on identifying and building upon students' existing competencies and resources rather than dwelling exclusively on deficits or problems [15]. Mindfulness-based interventions have been shown to reduce anxiety and improve emotional regulation among adolescents [16].

Promoting Positive Behaviour and a Conducive Learning Environment

Inclusive schools depend on a school culture characterized by respect, cooperation, and a shared commitment to the well-being of all members. Guidance and counseling interventions make a direct contribution to this culture by addressing behaviours that undermine inclusion, such as bullying, discrimination, and peer exclusion, and by promoting prosocial behaviours, empathy, and conflict resolution skills.

Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS), which align closely with counseling-informed approaches, represent a systemic framework for promoting positive behaviour across the school environment. PBIS emphasizes the creation of clear expectations, consistent reinforcement of prosocial behaviour, and tiered levels of support for students who require additional assistance. When implemented effectively, PBIS has been associated with reductions in disciplinary incidents, improved school climate, and higher levels of student engagement [17].

At the classroom level, teachers who are equipped with basic counseling skills, including active listening, empathic communication, and de-escalation strategies, are better positioned to manage behavioural challenges in ways that are supportive rather than punitive. This is particularly important in inclusive classrooms, where students may exhibit a wide range of behavioural responses to learning challenges or emotional distress.

Enhancing Study Habits and Academic Engagement

Study habits, broadly defined as the patterns of behaviour that students employ in approaching academic tasks, are strongly associated with academic achievement. Students with effective study habits demonstrate greater self-regulation, time management, and persistence in the face of academic difficulty. Conversely, poor study habits are a significant predictor of academic underachievement, particularly at the secondary level where the volume and complexity of academic demands increase substantially.

Guidance and counseling interventions can directly address study habits through structured programmes that teach metacognitive strategies, time management, goal setting, and self-monitoring. Studies conducted in the Indian context have found that counseling-based study skills interventions lead to significant improvements in students' academic performance and self-efficacy [18]. These interventions are most effective when they are tailored to the specific needs and backgrounds of students, recognizing that study habits are shaped not only by individual factors but by cultural, familial, and socioeconomic contexts.

Academic engagement, which encompasses behavioural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of students' involvement in learning, is similarly amenable to counseling-informed intervention. Counselors can work with students to identify and address factors that are undermining their engagement, whether these are related to learning difficulties, emotional concerns, motivational deficits, or external stressors. By addressing these factors early, counseling interventions can prevent the escalation of disengagement into dropout.

Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs

Guidance and counseling services are particularly critical for students with special educational needs (SEN), who may face unique emotional, social, and academic challenges within mainstream school settings. Inclusive education for students with SEN requires not only appropriate pedagogical accommodations but also attentive emotional support to help these students navigate the social complexities of school life and develop positive academic identities.

Students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia often experience significant frustration, anxiety, and low self-esteem as a result of repeated difficulties with tasks that their peers accomplish with relative ease. Counseling can help these students develop more accurate and compassionate self-understandings, build coping strategies, and access appropriate academic support. Similarly, students with emotional and behavioural difficulties benefit from counseling that addresses the underlying emotional needs driving their behaviour while also providing strategies for more adaptive self-expression.

Family counseling and collaboration with parents are also essential components of inclusive support for students with SEN. When counselors are able to engage families as active partners in the educational process, students benefit from greater consistency and coherence between the support they receive at school and at home. This is particularly significant in the Indian context, where families play a powerful role in shaping children's educational attitudes and aspirations.

TEACHER EDUCATION AND COUNSELING COMPETENCIES FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

The Teacher as a Key Facilitator of Inclusion

While school counselors play a central role in delivering guidance and counseling services, the teacher remains the most consistent and influential adult presence in students' school lives. Teachers who possess counseling competencies, including the ability to listen empathically, recognize signs of emotional distress, respond sensitively to diverse learning needs, and create psychologically safe classroom environments, are uniquely positioned to extend the reach of inclusive support systems.

Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of the teacher-student relationship is among the most powerful predictors of students' academic and socio-emotional outcomes. Students who experience warm, supportive, and consistent relationships with their teachers demonstrate higher levels of motivation, engagement, and resilience [19]. Conversely, students who experience teacher-student relationships characterized by conflict or indifference are at elevated risk for disengagement and underachievement. Equipping teachers with counseling-informed relational skills is therefore a high-yield investment in inclusive education quality.

ITEP and the Integration of Counseling Competencies

The Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP), introduced under NEP 2020, represents a major reform of teacher preparation in India. By integrating liberal arts education with professional teacher training in a four-year programme, ITEP aims to produce teachers who are not only subject-matter experts but also reflective practitioners attuned to the full humanity of their students. The integration of guidance and counseling content within ITEP is therefore both logical and necessary.

Counseling competencies that should be embedded within ITEP curricula include an understanding of developmental psychology and adolescent needs, knowledge of mental health and common emotional difficulties, skills in empathic communication and active listening, familiarity with referral pathways for students requiring specialist support, and an understanding of inclusive pedagogy and differentiated instruction. These competencies are not merely supplementary additions to teacher preparation but represent core professional knowledge for any educator committed to inclusive practice.

Professional Development and Ongoing Support

Pre-service preparation, however well-designed, is insufficient on its own to sustain counseling-informed inclusive practice across a teacher's career. Ongoing professional development is essential to ensure that teachers are able to apply and refine their counseling competencies in the face of the complex and evolving challenges of classroom life. Collaborative professional communities, mentoring relationships, and structured reflection opportunities are all important mechanisms for supporting teachers' continuous growth in this area.

Schools themselves must also create the structural conditions that enable teachers to exercise counseling competencies effectively. This includes manageable class sizes, allocated time for pastoral care responsibilities, clear referral pathways to specialist counselors, and a school culture that values emotional responsiveness as well as academic achievement. Without these enabling conditions, individual teachers' counseling skills are likely to remain underutilized.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Current Challenges in Implementation

Despite the clear potential of guidance and counseling interventions to strengthen inclusive education, significant challenges remain in their widespread and effective implementation within Indian secondary schools. A primary challenge is the severe shortage of trained school counselors. Many schools, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, have no dedicated counselor at all, and where counselors are available, they are often responsible for prohibitively large student populations. This makes individualized and proactive counseling work difficult to sustain.

Stigma around mental health and help-seeking represent another significant barrier. In many communities, acknowledging emotional difficulties is associated with weakness or shame, and students, particularly boys, may be reluctant to seek counseling support even when it is available. Teachers and school administrators may share these attitudes, leading to a marginalization of counseling services within the school's priority framework. Changing these cultural attitudes requires sustained, community-engaged awareness work that goes beyond the school gates. Inadequate training represents a third challenge. Many individuals occupying counselor roles in Indian schools do not possess formal qualifications in counseling or psychology, limiting their ability to deliver effective evidence-based interventions. Teacher

training programmes have historically given limited attention to guidance and counseling content, leaving most teachers underprepared to exercise counseling-informed pedagogical practices. The reform of both in-service and pre-service training is therefore an urgent priority.

Recommendations for Strengthening Counseling-Informed Inclusive Education

On the basis of the preceding analysis, the following recommendations are offered for policymakers, school administrators, teacher educators, and school counselors committed to strengthening the role of guidance and counseling in inclusive education at the secondary level. Policymakers should mandate the appointment of qualified school counselors in all secondary schools, with clearly defined caseload limits and professional standards. Funding for counseling services should be embedded within school budgets rather than treated as optional additions. National and state-level frameworks for school counseling, aligned with the vision of NEP 2020, should be developed and operationalized.

Teacher education programmes, including ITEP, should systematically embed counseling competencies within their curricula, ensuring that all future teachers receive substantive preparation in empathic communication, adolescent development, inclusive pedagogy, and mental health awareness. Field placement components should specifically expose student teachers to counseling-informed inclusive practices in school settings.

Schools should develop whole-school approaches to emotional well-being and inclusion, creating cultures in which guidance and counseling are perceived as core educational functions rather than marginal services. This includes establishing peer support programmes, student-led well-being committees, and structured opportunities for students to develop their SEL competencies across the curriculum. Community engagement is essential for addressing stigma and building families' capacity to support students' emotional well-being. Schools should develop regular communication channels with parents, offer family counseling services where possible, and work with community organizations to promote mental health awareness and help-seeking behaviour.

CONCLUSION

The pursuit of inclusive education is among the most ambitious and morally compelling commitments in contemporary educational policy. It asks schools to reconceive themselves as communities of genuine belonging, where every learner's presence is valued and every learner's potential is actively nurtured. Guidance and counseling interventions are not peripheral accessories to this vision but rather indispensable instruments for realizing it. At the secondary level, where the developmental imperatives of adolescence intersect with the institutional demands of formal schooling, the need for attentive emotional and social support has never been greater. Students facing academic stress, identity challenges, peer difficulties, and the accumulated disadvantages of socioeconomic or disability-related marginalization require schools that see them fully, respond to them wisely, and support them persistently. Counseling-informed practice, enacted by trained counselors and by teachers equipped with the necessary competencies, is the mechanism through which this kind of seeing, responding, and supporting becomes possible. NEP 2020 and ITEP offer an important policy mandate for moving in this direction, but mandate alone is insufficient. What is required is sustained investment in training, infrastructure, cultural change, and research to build evidence base specific to the Indian context. With this investment, the vision of inclusive, equitable, and holistic education articulated in national policy can move from aspiration to reality, transforming secondary schools into communities where every learner truly belongs.

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