



REVIEW ARTICLE

Enhancing academic well-being in Bangladesh: Lessons from school culture research

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Abstract. The education system in Bangladesh remains heavily exam-oriented, often at the expense of students' psychological well-being and holistic development. This article explores how reforming school culture—defined as the network of beliefs, practices, and relationships that shape the learning environment—can enhance academic well-being. Drawing from global best practices and empirical studies, particularly in socio-economically similar contexts, the article advocates for integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL), improving teacher training, reducing educational inequality, and implementing constructivist or project-based assessment methods. These interventions can create a more inclusive, student-centered environment that promotes both academic success and emotional resilience. The scope of this article is conceptual and policy-oriented, aiming to synthesize evidence and propose actionable strategies rather than report findings from original empirical research. Limitations include the absence of primary data and the need for contextual adaptation of international models to Bangladesh's unique socio-cultural setting. Practical implications of SEL integration include improved classroom climate, reduced student anxiety, and enhanced interpersonal skills—factors increasingly vital for 21st-century education. Ultimately, the article emphasizes that fostering positive school culture is essential for sustainable education reform in Bangladesh.

Keywords: School Culture, Academic Success, Psychological Well-Being, Socio-Emotional Learning, Educational Policies

Abstrak. Sistem pendidikan di Bangladesh masih sangat berorientasi pada ujian, sering kali mengorbankan kesejahteraan psikologis dan perkembangan holistik siswa. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana reformasi budaya sekolah—yang didefinisikan sebagai jaringan keyakinan, praktik, dan hubungan yang membentuk lingkungan belajar—dapat meningkatkan kesejahteraan akademik. Dengan mengacu pada praktik terbaik global dan studi empiris, khususnya di konteks sosial ekonomi yang serupa, artikel ini merekomendasikan integrasi pembelajaran sosial-emosional (SEL), peningkatan pelatihan guru, pengurangan ketimpangan pendidikan, serta penerapan metode penilaian konstruktivis atau berbasis proyek. Intervensi-intervensi ini dapat menciptakan lingkungan yang lebih inklusif dan berpusat pada siswa, yang mendukung keberhasilan akademik sekaligus ketahanan emosional. Cakupan artikel ini bersifat konseptual dan berorientasi pada kebijakan, dengan tujuan mensintesis bukti dan mengusulkan strategi yang dapat ditindaklanjuti, bukan menyajikan temuan dari penelitian empiris asli. Keterbatasan mencakup ketiadaan data primer dan perlunya adaptasi kontekstual dari model internasional ke dalam situasi sosio-kultural khas Bangladesh. Implikasi praktis dari integrasi SEL antara lain adalah peningkatan iklim kelas, penurunan kecemasan siswa, dan peningkatan keterampilan interpersonal—faktor-faktor yang semakin penting dalam pendidikan abad ke-21. Pada akhirnya, artikel ini menekankan bahwa penguatan budaya sekolah yang positif merupakan elemen kunci dalam reformasi pendidikan yang berkelanjutan di Bangladesh.

Kata kunci: Budaya Sekolah, Keberhasilan Akademik, Kesejahteraan Psikologis, Pembelajaran Sosial-Emosional, Kebijakan Pendidikan.

INTRODUCTION

School culture refers to the set of beliefs, relationships, norms, and practices that define the educational environment within an institution. A supportive school

culture is widely recognized for its role in enhancing academic achievement, fostering psychological well-being, and promoting holistic student development (Deal & Peterson, 2016). In Bangladesh, high-stakes examinations have historically exerted substantial influence on teaching and learning practices, contributing to test-oriented instruction and negative washback within secondary education (Ali et al., 2020; Ali & Hamid, 2020). These assessment pressures are particularly important when considered alongside evidence of substantial psychological distress among Bangladeshi adolescents, including elevated levels of stress, depression, and anxiety among secondary-school students (Anjum et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2021).

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Evidence from South Asian educational contexts indicates that examination pressure and academic stress are associated with substantial psychological distress among students. Studies from Bangladesh have documented examination-related stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, while longitudinal evidence from India has demonstrated an association between academic stress and subsequent anxiety symptoms. Similarly, research among Sri Lankan adolescents has identified examination-related stress as a prominent contributor to anxiety and depressive symptoms (Arusha & Biswas, 2020; Rodrigo et al., 2010; Trevethan et al., 2022).

The intense pressure to perform academically in Bangladesh's education system results in a competitive atmosphere that undermines student motivation, creativity, and well-being. Several studies have established a strong association between examination pressure and increased levels of depression and disengagement among students (Akter & Barua, 2025). Despite these challenges, little scholarly attention has been paid to the role of school culture as a mediating factor in promoting academic well-being. This article addresses this gap by exploring how transforming school culture can offer sustainable pathways for enhancing students' psychological and academic outcomes.

In addition to the psychological consequences of exam-driven education, there is a growing call within the educational policy discourse in Bangladesh to reform systemic structures that perpetuate inequity and disengagement. By examining school culture through the lens of global best practices and grounded in socio-cultural realities, this article contributes to the national conversation on educational reform. Specifically, the findings and arguments aim to inform policymakers and educators on feasible approaches to restructure the learning environment, thereby aligning educational goals with student well-being and national development priorities (UNESCO, 2025).

Theoretically, this study draws on the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that fulfillment of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is critical for motivation, performance, and well-being. A school culture that supports these needs can empower students to thrive both academically and emotionally (Bozhani et al., 2025). Unfortunately, in Bangladesh, the prevalent hierarchical structure in schools suppresses student voice and autonomy, which undermines emotional resilience and learning engagement. This paper, therefore, advocates for a shift towards a more inclusive, student-centered educational culture that integrates socio-emotional learning and respects students' psychological needs as part of its core mission.

THE CRISIS: BANGLADESH'S EXAM-ORIENTED SCHOOL CULTURE

The exam-oriented nature of Bangladesh's education system continues to impose disproportionate psychological burdens on students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. Structural inequalities between urban and rural regions exacerbate these pressures. According to data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS, 2023), students in rural schools are nearly 60% less likely to have access to trained counselors or psychological services, and only 27% of rural schools are equipped with functioning libraries or laboratories—essential components for a holistic learning environment.

These disparities may have important implications for both educational participation and students' psychological well-being. Persistent rural–urban inequalities in educational resources and opportunities continue to pose substantial challenges to equitable access and participation in Bangladesh (Tareque & Ahmed, 2024). Financial hardship, low socioeconomic status, and limited family and educational resources have also been identified as important contributors to secondary-school dropout (Rahman, 2021; Sheikh et al., 2022). At the same time, depression and anxiety remain prevalent among school-going adolescents, highlighting the broader psychological challenges faced by students within the education system (Islam et al., 2021).

The psychological burden associated with Bangladesh's education environment is also evident in students' mental health. A large study of secondary school adolescents in Dhaka reported a high prevalence of stress symptoms, with sleep dissatisfaction significantly associated with elevated stress (Anjum et al., 2022). Examination-related evidence among Bangladeshi youth further indicates substantial levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, with sleep patterns and other lifestyle factors associated with these psychological outcomes (Arusha & Biswas, 2020). These findings underscore the need for educational environments that reduce excessive academic pressure while promoting students' psychological well-being. One student in the study stated, "I don't study to learn, I study to survive exams," encapsulating a widespread sentiment that learning has become a tool for survival rather than growth. These findings illustrate that the system fails to foster curiosity, creativity, or critical thinking, instead encouraging memorization at the expense of mental health and personal development.

Learning from international comparisons, countries such as Vietnam and Bhutan have implemented structural reforms that mitigate these challenges. Vietnam has gradually transitioned to a competency-based curriculum that emphasizes applied learning and teacher autonomy, yielding both strong academic outcomes and improved student satisfaction (OECD, 2020). Similarly, Bhutan has integrated Gross National Happiness principles into its education system through initiatives that emphasize students' well-being, values education, social and emotional development, and holistic learning. These reforms illustrate how educational systems can broaden their goals beyond academic performance by embedding well-being and culturally grounded values into school practices (Gyamtsot et al., 2017; Kaka et al., 2022; Schuelka et al., 2019). These models show that investing in school culture and socio-emotional learning can lead to both academic success and psychological resilience, even in resource-constrained settings.

Teachers play a pivotal role in either perpetuating or transforming Bangladesh's exam-centered educational culture. However, secondary-school teachers continue to face constraints such as overcrowded classrooms, heavy workloads, inadequate infrastructure, and limited opportunities for professional development (Haque, 2025). At the same time, growing recognition of students' psychosocial needs has prompted national initiatives to strengthen teachers' capacity in mental health and psychosocial support, including Psychological First Aid training and the integration of mental health and well-being into the national curriculum (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024). Strengthening sustained professional development and institutional support for teachers is therefore essential for creating more responsive,

emotionally supportive, and student-centered learning environments.

The teacher-student dynamic often remains authoritarian, limiting student voice and contributing to a culture of silence around mental health issues. A cultural and policy shift is needed to empower teachers as facilitators of holistic development and emotional safety, rather than mere gatekeepers of academic achievement.

GLOBAL LESSONS: HOW SCHOOL CULTURE SHAPES ACADEMIC WELL-BEING

International research consistently highlights school culture as a foundational factor in shaping students' academic and emotional outcomes. Closely related research on school climate demonstrates that the quality of interpersonal relationships, safety, institutional norms, teaching and learning practices, and students' sense of belonging are associated with academic achievement, psychological well-being, and behavioral outcomes (Kutsyruba et al., 2015; Wang & Degol, 2016). A positive school culture fosters collaboration, inclusivity, and emotional safety—conditions that support student engagement, academic resilience, and social development (School of Education, 2022). Evidence from meta-analytic research further indicates that supportive teacher–student relationships are positively associated with student engagement, achievement, motivation, and well-being (Emslander et al., 2025; Roorda et al., 2011).

Countries like Finland and the Netherlands have adopted holistic, student-centered educational frameworks that prioritize well-being alongside performance. In Finland, the integration of trust-based school management and minimal standardized testing has created learning environments where students feel empowered and less pressured (Sahlberg, 2015). The Netherlands promotes inclusive education with a strong emphasis on student autonomy and teacher collaboration, resulting in high levels of student satisfaction and motivation (Santia et al., 2024). More specifically, evidence from Dutch secondary education indicates that autonomy-supportive learning environments can enhance students' intrinsic motivation and academic achievement (Admiraal et al., 2024), while PISA evidence also demonstrates the importance of school belonging, safety, and supportive teacher–student interactions for students' experiences at school (OECD, 2023a).

The relevance of these international examples to the Bangladeshi context is strengthened by parallel reforms in socio-economically comparable countries. Vietnam, for instance, has transitioned toward competency-oriented curriculum reform with greater emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, and practical application. Despite resource constraints, the country has demonstrated comparatively strong performance in international assessments such as PISA (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2023b). Similarly, Bhutan has embedded the philosophy of Gross National Happiness in its education system, balancing cognitive learning with social, emotional, ethical, and broader dimensions of student development (Gyamtsso et al., 2017; Kaka et al., 2022; Schuelka et al., 2019). Research on the Educating for Gross National Happiness initiative further illustrates both the potential of holistic education reform and the importance of teacher capacity, institutionalization, and implementation support in translating policy principles into school practices (Kaka et al., 2022). These models demonstrate that transformative change is possible even within resource-constrained settings—an insight especially relevant for Bangladesh.

To ground these global perspectives in theoretical understanding, Bozhani et al. (2025) conducted a large-scale study exploring how school culture enhances academic well-being by fulfilling students' basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Drawing from Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), their findings showed that students in supportive school cultures reported significantly higher motivation, better stress management, and improved academic performance. This theoretical mechanism is consistent with broader educational evidence showing that satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is positively associated with autonomous motivation, enjoyment, perceived value, and adaptive learning experiences (Wang et al., 2019). The study emphasizes that when students feel respected, capable, and connected to peers and teachers, their psychological well-being becomes a powerful driver of learning. Meta-analytic evidence on teacher–student relationships similarly demonstrates that supportive relational environments contribute to students' engagement and achievement (Emslander et al., 2025; Roorda et al., 2011). This insight is particularly useful for Bangladesh, where rigid hierarchies may constrain student agency and emotional expression.

Adapting these global best practices to the Bangladeshi context requires culturally sensitive strategies that address systemic constraints. First, school leaders must foster environments where student voices are valued and emotional safety is prioritized. This includes integrating socio-emotional learning into curricula, reforming disciplinary practices to be more restorative than punitive, and promoting peer mentoring programs. Large-scale meta-analytic evidence indicates that universal school-based social and emotional learning programs can improve students' social-emotional competencies, attitudes, behavior, well-being, and academic performance, with benefits that can persist beyond the immediate intervention period (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Restorative practices may also contribute to reducing disciplinary referrals and suspensions and strengthening relationships within schools, although the strength of evidence varies across outcomes (Weber & Vereenoghe, 2020).

Second, teacher training programs must be revamped to include modules on inclusive pedagogy, emotional intelligence, and culturally responsive teaching. Inclusive pedagogy emphasizes extending learning opportunities to all students rather than treating difference as a problem requiring separate provision (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), while culturally responsive teaching highlights the importance of connecting pedagogy with students' cultural experiences and backgrounds (Gay, 2018). Finally, community and parental engagement should be strengthened to reinforce values of empathy, collaboration, and resilience beyond the classroom (UNESCO, 2025). Evidence synthesized across multiple meta-analyses demonstrates a generally positive relationship between parental involvement and students' academic achievement, although the magnitude of the association varies according to the form of involvement (Wilder, 2014). By aligning these practices with Bangladesh's socio-cultural realities, policymakers can cultivate a school culture that not only improves academic outcomes but also supports the holistic development of students.

A Call For Reform: Policy Recommendations For Bangladesh

To cultivate a healthier school culture in Bangladesh, targeted and multi-level policy reforms are essential. First,

integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL) into the national curriculum should not be treated as a supplemental agenda but rather as a core pedagogical principle. Strong international evidence supports this direction: a meta-analysis of 213 universal school-based SEL interventions involving more than 270,000 students found improvements in social-emotional skills, behavior, attitudes, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011), while follow-up evidence indicates that positive effects on well-being and developmental outcomes can persist over time (Taylor et al., 2017). The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), in collaboration with the Ministry of Education (MoE), should be tasked with developing contextually relevant SEL modules. These must be infused across subjects and grade levels. To ensure sustainability, a monitoring unit under the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) should oversee the implementation and assess school readiness through regular capacity audits (UNESCO, 2025).

Second, comprehensive teacher training reforms are critical. The National Academy for Educational Management (NAEM) and the National Curriculum and Training Institute (NCTI) must jointly develop and institutionalize professional development programs that emphasize psychological first aid, trauma-informed teaching, inclusive pedagogy, and mental health literacy (BRAC, 2022). This recommendation is reinforced by recent developments in Bangladesh, where school-based Mental Health and Psychosocial Support initiatives have included Psychological First Aid training and efforts to strengthen teachers' capacity to integrate mental health and well-being within educational practice (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2024). Research among Bangladeshi secondary-school teachers also identifies overcrowded classrooms, heavy workloads, inadequate infrastructure, and limited professional development opportunities as important constraints on effective teaching (Haque, 2025). Moreover, experimental evidence from Bangladesh indicates that structured teacher training can improve teachers' competencies and instructional practices, with incentives potentially strengthening participation and program effects (Biswas et al., 2025). These trainings should be embedded within the teacher certification and recertification process. To address implementation barriers—such as high teacher-student ratios, lack of substitute teachers, and limited incentives—the MoE should provide financial support for temporary teacher hiring and incentives for completion of certified mental health training modules.

Third, addressing educational inequality necessitates systemic support. Resource allocation should prioritize infrastructure and human capital investment in rural and underserved regions. Evidence from Bangladesh demonstrates persistent inequalities in educational participation and access to learning resources, with rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged children experiencing particularly pronounced barriers, including unequal access to digital learning opportunities (UNICEF, 2023). District Education Offices (DEOs) must conduct annual needs assessments to identify resource gaps in schools and submit these for targeted funding under the Annual Development Programme (ADP). Public-private partnerships can also be leveraged to expand extracurricular, counseling, and digital learning services in underfunded schools (Chowdhury, 2024). A national equity index should be developed to track disparities and inform fund distribution.

Fourth, the reform of assessment systems should be driven by the Bangladesh Examination Development Unit (BEDU). Moving toward formative and competency-based

assessments will require alignment with international standards while ensuring local adaptability. Research on assessment practices in Bangladesh has documented persistent gaps between curriculum objectives and actual assessment practices, underscoring the need for stronger alignment between intended learning outcomes, classroom instruction, and assessment systems (Islam, Hasan, et al., 2021). Evidence from secondary education also indicates that high-stakes examinations can generate negative washback and reinforce teaching-to-the-test practices (Ali & Hamid, 2020). Pilot programs in select districts can test alternative assessment models, and feedback loops must be created to involve teachers, students, and parents in refining these systems (Woolcock, 2025). These reforms should therefore combine technical assessment redesign with teacher preparation, stakeholder participation, and systematic evaluation of implementation.

However, these reform efforts may face significant barriers, including institutional resistance, limited funding, uneven organizational capacity, and lack of inter-agency coordination. Implementation research demonstrates that program outcomes depend substantially on the quality of implementation and on contextual factors such as organizational functioning, provider capacity, training, technical assistance, and community support (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). To overcome these barriers, a cross-sectoral task force composed of representatives from MoE, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), NGOs, teacher unions, and civil society should be established. This task force should coordinate implementation, develop communication campaigns to build public support, establish clear accountability mechanisms, and ensure alignment across administrative tiers.

Evaluation is essential to gauge the success and scalability of these reforms. Key performance indicators (KPIs) should include reductions in student absenteeism and dropout rates, improvements in student mental health and school-belonging metrics, teacher satisfaction and well-being, implementation fidelity, and performance in holistic learning assessments. Because implementation quality itself can substantially influence intervention outcomes, evaluation should assess not only whether outcomes improve but also whether programs are delivered with adequate reach, quality, consistency, and institutional support (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Longitudinal impact studies conducted by national research institutes such as the Bangladesh Education Research Network (BERN) can provide evidence-based feedback to policymakers and help determine whether initial gains are sustained, whether benefits are equitably distributed, and which components should be adapted before national scale-up.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

The future of Bangladesh's education system hinges on its ability to foster environments where students thrive not only academically, but also emotionally and socially. A transformation in school culture is essential—one that prioritizes psychological safety, student autonomy, and holistic development over rote memorization and exam performance. Without such a shift, academic excellence will continue to come at the cost of student well-being, undermining the long-term intellectual and socio-emotional development of the nation's youth.

To make this transformation actionable, specific stakeholder-based recommendations are necessary. For the government, this includes integrating socio-emotional learning (SEL) into national curriculum frameworks,

allocating budgets for mental health services in schools, and supporting nationwide teacher training on emotional intelligence and inclusive pedagogy. For school administrators, the focus should be on creating emotionally safe school climates, facilitating peer mentorship programs, and ensuring accountability mechanisms that monitor both academic outcomes and student well-being indicators.

Teachers, as the linchpin of classroom culture, must be empowered through continuous professional development programs that go beyond subject mastery to include training on trauma-informed approaches and culturally responsive pedagogy. In parallel, community organizations and parents should be engaged as collaborative partners in promoting empathy, respect, and resilience among students both inside and outside of school environments.

To evaluate the success of these reforms, national education authorities should implement a set of performance indicators such as reduced dropout rates, improved student satisfaction surveys, lower instances of school-related anxiety, and teacher reports on classroom engagement. When tailored to Bangladesh's socio-cultural context, such targeted and inclusive reform efforts can serve as the foundation for a more equitable and psychologically enriching education system.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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