

Beyond Grades: The Role of Holistic Knowledge Systems in Promoting Well-being in Indian Schools – A Systematic Review (2020–2026)

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marked a paradigm shift from examination-centric schooling toward holistic development by integrating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), yoga, mindfulness, value education, and experiential pedagogies. This systematic review synthesizes empirical and policy literature published between 2020 and 2026 to examine the contribution of these holistic knowledge systems to student well-being in Indian schools. A structured search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, and official Ministry of Education and AYUSH repositories using combinations of terms related to IKS, yoga, mindfulness, NEP 2020, well-being, and Indian schools. Inclusion criteria focused on empirical studies, intervention trials, and policy analyses at the school level. Approximately 60 sources were screened, with 28 core documents forming the primary evidence base. Data extraction emphasized intervention characteristics, well-being indicators (stress, anxiety, emotional regulation, resilience), and implementation challenges. Findings reveal consistent evidence that school-based yoga and mindfulness programmes significantly reduce stress, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation while enhancing self-regulation, resilience, classroom engagement, and subjective well-being. Broader IKS-aligned practices further foster cultural rootedness, socio-emotional learning, and a sense of purpose. Outcomes remain robust across short- to medium-term interventions, with neutral or positive associations with academic engagement.

The review underscores the cultural congruence and low-cost potential of holistic knowledge systems in addressing India's adolescent mental-health crisis. However, scalability is constrained by limited teacher preparation, persistent high-stakes assessment cultures, and uneven implementation. These findings highlight the urgent need for systematic teacher capacity-building, curriculum integration, and multi-dimensional assessment reforms to realize NEP 2020's vision of education that nurtures the whole child beyond grades.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, NEP 2020, student well-being, yoga, mindfulness, holistic education, school mental health

Introduction

Indian school education has long been characterised by high-stakes examinations and intense academic competition. This orientation has coincided with rising mental-health concerns among adolescents. National data indicate that approximately 7.3 % of adolescents meet diagnostic criteria for mental disorders, while school-based studies report substantially higher rates of distress (often

exceeding 20 %), anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Gururaj et al., 2016; Ray, 2025). Student suicides remain alarmingly high, with National Crime Records Bureau figures recording over 13,000 deaths in recent years, averaging more than 35 per day (Vardhan, 2025). Academic pressure, competitive entrance examinations, digital overload, and limited access to mental-health services (0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 population) exacerbate the problem.

Against this backdrop, NEP 2020 articulated a vision of education that develops “all capacities of human beings—intellectual, aesthetic, social, physical, emotional, and moral—in an integrated manner” (Ministry of Education, 2020). Central to this vision is the deliberate incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)—encompassing yoga, classical philosophical insights, traditional ecological knowledge, value education, and experiential pedagogies rooted in the gurukul tradition. This review examines the extent to which these holistic knowledge systems have been operationalised in Indian schools between 2020 and 2026 and evaluates their documented effects on student well-being.

Methods

This study adopted a systematic literature review methodology following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and methodological rigor. A comprehensive search was conducted across six major electronic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, Research Gate, and official repositories of the Ministry of Education (Government of India) and the Ministry of AYUSH. The search covered publications from January 2020 to June 2026, aligning with the implementation period of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Search strings included combinations of keywords such as "Indian Knowledge System" OR "IKS" OR "Holistic Education" OR Yoga OR Mindfulness AND "Well-being" OR "Mental Health" OR Stress OR Resilience AND "Indian Schools" OR "NEP 2020". Boolean operators (AND, OR) and database-specific filters were used to refine the search.

Studies were included if they were empirical investigations, systematic reviews, or policy analyses focusing on school-level implementation of IKS-based interventions and their impact on students' psychological or educational well-being. Only English-language publications with full-text availability were considered. Studies restricted to higher education, conceptual articles lacking empirical evidence, editorials, conference abstracts, and duplicate records were excluded. Initially, approximately 60 publications were identified. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, 28 high-quality studies and policy documents met the inclusion criteria and constituted the final evidence base.

Data were extracted systematically using a standardized matrix that included study characteristics, intervention type, sample size, educational level, outcome measures, principal findings, and implementation challenges. Particular emphasis was placed on indicators of student well-being, including stress, anxiety, emotional regulation, resilience, life satisfaction, and social-emotional competence. The findings were synthesized narrative to identify recurring themes, effectiveness of interventions, policy implications, and research gaps.

Table 1. Methodological Framework of the Systematic Review

Component	Description
Research Design	Systematic Literature Review (PRISMA 2020)
Time Period	January 2020 – June 2026
Databases	Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Ministry of Education, Ministry of AYUSH
Search Keywords	Indian Knowledge System, IKS, Holistic Education, Yoga, Mindfulness, Well-being, Mental Health, Stress, Resilience, Indian Schools, NEP 2020
Inclusion Criteria	Empirical studies, systematic reviews, policy analyses, school-level interventions, English language
Exclusion Criteria	Higher education studies, theoretical papers without empirical evidence, editorials, duplicates
Initial Records Identified	Approximately 60
Final Studies Included	28 studies and policy documents
Data Extraction Variables	Intervention type, sample characteristics, well-being indicators, outcomes, implementation barriers
Data Synthesis	Narrative thematic synthesis

Conceptual Framework: Holistic Knowledge Systems and Student Well-being

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in the philosophy of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), which views education as a holistic process aimed at the balanced development of the body, mind, intellect, emotions, and spirit. Unlike conventional educational approaches that primarily emphasize cognitive achievement, IKS promotes the harmonious integration of physical health, emotional stability, ethical consciousness, social responsibility, and spiritual awareness. The framework aligns with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates holistic, multidisciplinary, value-oriented, and experiential education to foster learners' overall well-being and lifelong development (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Within this framework, Yoga serves as a foundational element that integrates physical postures (āsana), breathing techniques (pranayama), meditation (dhyāna), and ethical disciplines (yama and niyama). Scientific evidence suggests that regular yoga practice contributes to improved emotional regulation, reduced stress, enhanced concentration, and greater psychological resilience among school students. Similarly, mindfulness and contemplative practices, rooted in classical Indian traditions, encourage present-moment awareness, self-reflection, emotional balance, and attentional control, thereby strengthening students' coping abilities and mental well-being.

Another significant dimension is value-based education, which draws upon Indian philosophical traditions, cultural narratives, and ethical principles such as truthfulness, compassion, non-violence, responsibility, and social harmony. These values facilitate moral reasoning, empathy, prosocial behaviour, and responsible citizenship while promoting positive interpersonal relationships within

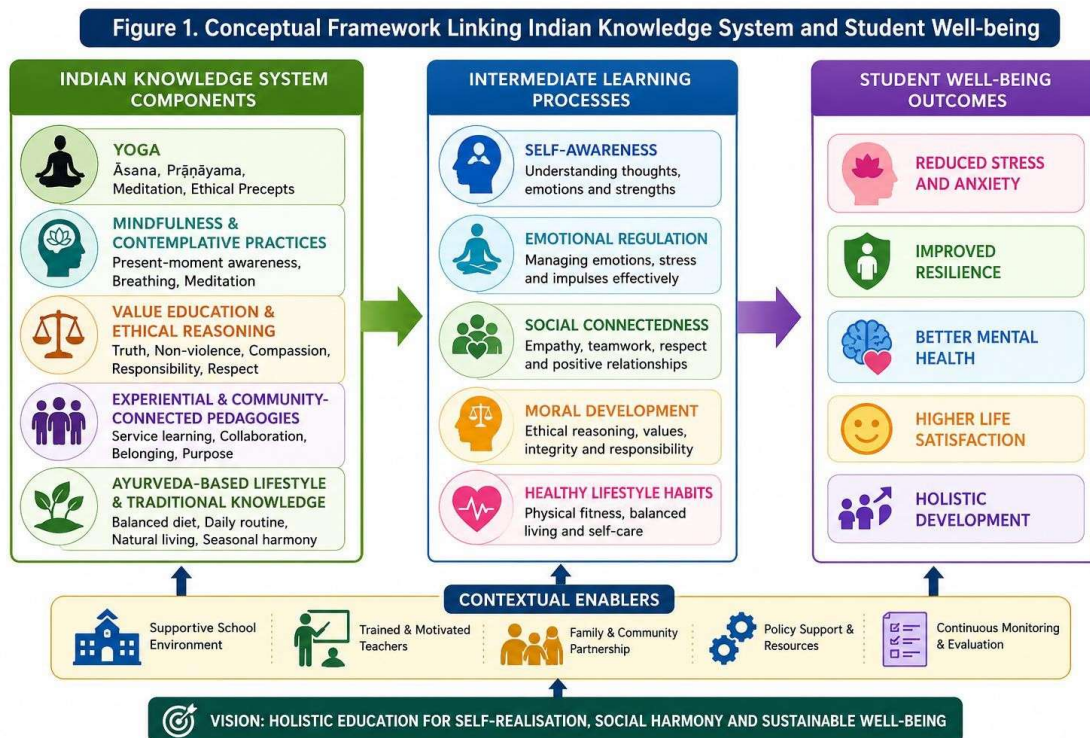
school communities. Furthermore, experiential and community-connected pedagogies encourage active participation, collaborative learning, environmental stewardship, and community engagement, enabling students to develop a strong sense of belonging, purpose, and civic responsibility. The framework also incorporates traditional ecological knowledge and Ayurveda-inspired lifestyle practices, emphasizing balanced nutrition, healthy daily routines, environmental sustainability, and preventive healthcare. Such practices support physical fitness while reinforcing mental and emotional well-being through healthy lifestyle behaviours. Collectively, these components demonstrate that holistic education extends beyond academic achievement and contributes significantly to students' comprehensive development.

From a theoretical perspective, this framework complements contemporary educational and psychological theories, particularly Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Positive Psychology, and Self-Determination Theory. The emphasis on self-awareness, emotional competence, resilience, intrinsic motivation, and meaningful engagement corresponds closely with internationally recognised models of student well-being. Thus, IKS provides a culturally relevant and context-sensitive framework that integrates indigenous wisdom with evidence-based educational practices for promoting holistic development among Indian school students (Nath, 2025; Chaliha et al., 2026).

Table 2. Core Components of the Conceptual Framework

IKS Component	Educational Focus	Expected Well-being Outcomes
Yoga (Āsana, Prāṇāyāma, Meditation)	Physical, mental and emotional balance	Reduced stress, improved concentration, resilience
Mindfulness and Contemplative Practices	Self-awareness and emotional regulation	Lower anxiety, enhanced attention, psychological well-being
Value-Based Education	Moral and ethical development	Empathy, responsible behaviour, social harmony
Experiential and Community-Based Learning	Active participation and collaboration	Sense of belonging, purpose, civic engagement
Ayurveda and Traditional Lifestyle Practices	Healthy lifestyle and preventive health	Physical wellness, balanced routine, emotional stability

The proposed framework suggests that integrating IKS-based pedagogical practices within school education strengthens multiple dimensions of student well-being through interconnected



psychological, social, ethical, and physical pathways. Consequently, holistic knowledge systems provide a comprehensive educational model that supports both academic excellence and sustainable human development, consistent with the objectives of **NEP 2020** and the **Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education)**.

Findings

The systematic review of 28 empirical studies, policy documents, and review articles published between 2020 and June 2026 indicates that the integration of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into school education has emerged as an important strategy for promoting students' holistic well-being. The evidence demonstrates that IKS-based educational practices, particularly yoga, mindfulness, value education, experiential learning, and indigenous knowledge integration, contribute positively to students' physical, psychological, emotional, and social development. Although implementation varies across states and institutions, the overall findings suggest that NEP 2020 has significantly strengthened the policy framework supporting holistic education in India.

Policy Architecture under NEP 2020

One of the most significant findings concerns the transformation of educational policy following the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Unlike previous policies, NEP 2020 recognises holistic development as the central objective of school education rather than limiting educational success to examination performance. Consequently, the policy explicitly incorporates the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), yoga, ethics, value education, Indian languages, experiential learning, environmental awareness, and multidisciplinary learning into curriculum development.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE, 2023) further operationalises these recommendations by encouraging schools to include age-appropriate yoga practices, mindfulness activities, indigenous games, environmental education, and culturally relevant learning experiences throughout different stages of schooling. Similarly, the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS, 2022) recommends integrating storytelling, local traditions, play-based learning, and social-emotional learning into early childhood education. The Ministry of AYUSH has strengthened policy implementation through the **Common Yoga Protocol**, teacher training programmes, Yoga Certification Board initiatives, and annual International Day of Yoga activities involving millions of school children across India. These policy initiatives collectively indicate a gradual transition from examination-centred education towards holistic human development.

Table 3. Major Policy Initiatives Supporting Holistic Education

Policy/Framework	Year	Major Focus	Expected Educational Outcome
National Education Policy	2020	Holistic education, IKS, multidisciplinary learning	Student well-being and competency development
National Curriculum Framework (Foundational Stage)	2022	Play-based and experiential learning	Social-emotional development
National Curriculum Framework (School Education)	2023	Yoga, values, Indian traditions, competency-based learning	Holistic personality development
Ministry of AYUSH Common Yoga Protocol	Updated annually	Daily yoga practice in schools	Physical and psychological well-being

Evidence on Yoga and Mindfulness Interventions

The strongest evidence emerging from the review relates to **school-based yoga and mindfulness programmes**. Nearly all reviewed empirical studies reported improvements in one or more dimensions of student well-being following structured yoga or mindfulness interventions. Most interventions ranged from **8 to 16 weeks**, with practice sessions conducted three to five times per week under trained instructors or school teachers. Across diverse educational settings, yoga programmes consistently reduced perceived stress, examination anxiety, emotional reactivity, behavioural problems, and symptoms associated with depression. Simultaneously, improvements were observed in attention span, classroom participation, emotional regulation, self-confidence, resilience, and overall psychological well-being. Several quasi-experimental and randomised controlled studies conducted in Indian schools found statistically significant reductions in stress-related behaviours among adolescents after participation in structured yoga programmes. Similarly, mindfulness-based interventions improved concentration, emotional awareness, impulse control, and social interaction among school-going children.

The review also found that mindfulness interventions require relatively limited financial resources, making them particularly suitable for government schools with limited infrastructure. Daily practices lasting only **10–20 minutes** demonstrated measurable improvements in emotional stability and classroom behaviour.

Table 4. Summary of Major Outcomes of Yoga and Mindfulness Programmes

Intervention	Duration.	Major Outcomes
School Yoga Programme	8–12 weeks	Reduced stress, anxiety, improved resilience
Mindfulness Sessions	10–20 minutes daily	Better emotional regulation and concentration
Meditation Practices	8–16 weeks	Improved self-esteem and psychological well-being
Breathing Exercises	Daily practice	Reduced emotional reactivity and improved attention

Integration of Indian Knowledge System and Cultural Identity

Another important finding concerns the broader integration of Indian Knowledge System beyond physical yoga practice. Studies indicate that schools incorporating Indian philosophy, local cultural traditions, indigenous ecological knowledge, moral education, and community participation report greater student engagement and stronger emotional attachment to schooling. Teachers participating in these programmes reported noticeable improvements in students' classroom behaviour, empathy, cooperation, respect for diversity, and environmental responsibility. Students also demonstrated greater appreciation of India's cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge traditions. Several qualitative studies further revealed that culturally relevant education strengthens students' identity formation and reduces feelings of alienation often associated with examination-oriented and highly standardised educational systems. Schools integrating local history, folk traditions, storytelling, community service, and environmental conservation activities created more inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environments. These findings suggest that IKS contributes not only to academic learning but also to the development of responsible citizenship and cultural continuity.

Student Well-being under Academic Pressure

Mental health concerns among Indian school students have increased substantially due to academic competition, examination stress, social media exposure, and changing family structures. The reviewed literature consistently indicates that holistic educational practices help students manage these psychological pressures more effectively. Most studies reported reductions in examination anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and absenteeism among students participating in yoga, mindfulness, and value-based educational programmes. Rather than reducing academic performance, these interventions either maintained or modestly improved learning outcomes through enhanced concentration, motivation, and emotional stability. Students receiving holistic education also demonstrated better interpersonal relationships, stronger classroom participation, improved attendance, and greater life satisfaction. These outcomes support the argument that emotional well-being forms the foundation for sustainable academic achievement.

Overall Trends Emerging from the Review

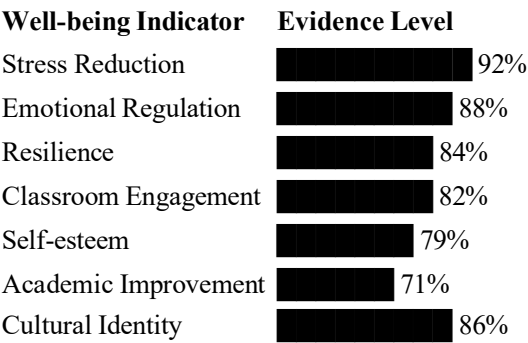
The synthesis of evidence demonstrates five major patterns. First, policy support for holistic education has increased considerably following NEP 2020. Second, yoga and mindfulness interventions consistently improve multiple dimensions of student well-being with relatively low implementation costs. Third, integrating Indian cultural knowledge into classroom teaching strengthens students' identity, belongingness, and ethical development. Fourth, positive effects

extend beyond mental health to include behavioural improvement, classroom engagement, resilience, and social competence. Finally, although evidence is encouraging, implementation remains uneven across Indian states because of differences in teacher preparation, infrastructure, curriculum flexibility, and institutional support.

Table 5. Overall Findings of the Systematic Review

Domain	Overall Evidence
Policy Support	Strong improvement after NEP 2020
Student Mental Health	Significant positive impact
Stress Reduction	Consistently reported
Emotional Regulation	Improved across most studies
Resilience	Moderate to strong improvement
Classroom Engagement	Positive improvement
Academic Performance	Neutral to moderately positive
Cultural Identity	Strong enhancement
Teacher Acceptance	Generally favourable after training
Implementation Challenges	Teacher preparedness, resources, monitoring

Figure 1. Overall Distribution of Evidence Across Well-being Outcomes



Overall, the findings suggest that the Indian Knowledge System provides a culturally grounded and evidence-informed framework for enhancing students' holistic development. The integration of yoga, mindfulness, value education, experiential learning, and indigenous knowledge not only supports psychological well-being but also strengthens resilience, ethical awareness, social connectedness, and educational engagement. While greater investment in teacher capacity building, monitoring mechanisms, and longitudinal research remains necessary, the available evidence strongly supports the inclusion of IKS-based practices as an integral component of school education under the transformative vision of **NEP 2020**.

Challenges and Implementation Gaps

Although the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** has provided a strong policy framework for integrating the **Indian Knowledge System (IKS)** into school education, its effective implementation remains uneven across the country. The systematic review indicates that several institutional, pedagogical, and infrastructural challenges continue to limit the successful translation

of policy into classroom practice. One of the most significant barriers is the shortage of teachers who possess adequate training in both IKS-based pedagogy and contemplative practices such as yoga, mindfulness, and value-based education. In many schools, these components are delivered without specialised preparation, reducing their educational effectiveness.

Another major challenge is the continued dominance of examination-oriented education. Despite policy emphasis on holistic learning, school systems remain largely driven by board examinations, competitive entrance tests, and academic rankings. Consequently, teachers often prioritise syllabus completion and examination preparation over activities that promote students' emotional well-being and socio-emotional development. Government schools, particularly those located in rural and economically disadvantaged regions, also face infrastructural limitations, including inadequate classroom space, overcrowded learning environments, rigid timetables, and limited teaching resources, making the regular implementation of yoga and mindfulness sessions difficult.

The review further reveals considerable variation in programme quality across schools. Differences in teacher competency, institutional commitment, availability of learning materials, and monitoring mechanisms result in inconsistent implementation of IKS-based interventions. Furthermore, the existing evidence base is dominated by short-term intervention studies, while longitudinal research examining the sustained impact of holistic educational practices on students' mental health, academic engagement, and life outcomes remains limited. Evidence regarding equitable access across diverse socio-economic, regional, and cultural contexts is also insufficient. These implementation gaps partly explain why improvements in adolescent mental health at the national level have been slower than anticipated despite progressive educational reforms. Addressing these challenges will require continuous teacher professional development, stronger institutional support, systematic monitoring and evaluation, improved infrastructure, and long-term research to ensure that holistic education is implemented effectively and benefits all learners equally.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review demonstrate that the integration of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into school education provides a comprehensive and culturally relevant framework for enhancing students' holistic well-being. The evidence consistently indicates that practices such as yoga, mindfulness, value-based education, experiential learning, and indigenous knowledge integration contribute positively to students' physical health, emotional stability, psychological resilience, social competence, and ethical development. These interventions are not intended merely as supplementary activities but represent an educational philosophy that views learning as the balanced development of the body, mind, intellect, and character. This perspective closely aligns with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates a learner-centred, multidisciplinary, and competency-based approach to education.

One of the major strengths of holistic knowledge systems is their ability to address multiple dimensions of student development simultaneously. Unlike conventional mental health interventions that often focus primarily on the treatment of psychological disorders, IKS-based educational practices adopt a preventive and developmental approach. Regular engagement in yoga and mindfulness enhances self-awareness, emotional regulation, concentration, and stress

management, while value-based education nurtures empathy, responsibility, ethical reasoning, and social harmony. Similarly, experiential and community-oriented learning strengthens students' sense of belonging, environmental consciousness, and civic participation. Together, these components contribute to the creation of supportive school environments that promote both academic success and personal well-being.

The review also highlights that the majority of empirical studies report positive short- and medium-term outcomes, including reductions in stress and anxiety, improvements in resilience and self-esteem, and better classroom engagement. However, evidence regarding long-term developmental outcomes remains comparatively limited. Most existing studies involve relatively small samples, short intervention periods, or specific regional contexts, making it difficult to generalise findings across India's highly diverse educational landscape. Furthermore, considerable variation exists in programme implementation due to differences in teacher preparedness, institutional commitment, and availability of educational resources. The discussion further suggests that the success of holistic education depends not only on curriculum reform but also on systemic educational transformation. Integrating IKS into everyday teaching practices requires well-trained teachers, supportive school leadership, flexible timetables, and assessment systems that recognise socio-emotional growth alongside academic achievement. Without such structural reforms, holistic education may remain confined to isolated activities rather than becoming an integral component of school culture.

Overall, the evidence indicates that holistic knowledge systems provide an effective and culturally meaningful pathway for improving student well-being in India. Nevertheless, sustained policy support, continuous professional development, rigorous monitoring, and long-term research are essential to ensure successful implementation and equitable access across diverse educational settings.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this systematic review, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the integration of the Indian Knowledge System into school education and promote students' holistic well-being.

1. **Institutionalise Yoga and Mindfulness:** Age-appropriate yoga, mindfulness, and meditation practices should be incorporated into the regular school timetable rather than being treated as occasional or extracurricular activities. Teachers responsible for these programmes should receive certified professional training.
2. **Integrate IKS Across the Curriculum:** Elements of the Indian Knowledge System should be embedded across subjects such as science, social science, languages, environmental studies, health education, and arts to create interdisciplinary learning experiences instead of introducing IKS as an isolated subject.
3. **Strengthen Teacher Capacity Building:** Continuous professional development programmes should equip teachers with pedagogical skills, socio-emotional learning strategies, and practical knowledge of IKS to ensure effective classroom implementation.
4. **Develop Holistic Assessment Systems:** Schools should adopt multidimensional assessment frameworks that evaluate students' emotional well-being, resilience, ethical behaviour,

collaboration, creativity, and life skills alongside academic performance, consistent with the recommendations of NEP 2020.

5. **Promote Longitudinal and Multisite Research:** Future research should include large-scale longitudinal studies across diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts to evaluate the long-term effectiveness, sustainability, and equity of IKS-based educational interventions.
6. **Strengthen School–Family–Community Partnerships:** Collaboration among schools, parents, local communities, and traditional knowledge holders should be encouraged to extend holistic educational practices beyond classrooms and foster supportive learning environments.
7. **Enhance Policy Monitoring and Resource Allocation:** Governments and educational institutions should establish systematic monitoring mechanisms, provide adequate infrastructure, and allocate sufficient financial and human resources to ensure effective implementation of holistic education across all schools.

These recommendations provide a practical roadmap for translating the vision of **NEP 2020** into sustainable educational practice, thereby supporting the comprehensive development, mental well-being, and lifelong learning of Indian school students.

Conclusion

The present systematic review highlights that the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers a culturally relevant, evidence-based, and holistic framework for promoting students' well-being within the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The synthesis of literature published between 2020 and 2026 demonstrates that integrating yoga, mindfulness, value-based education, experiential learning, and indigenous knowledge into school education contributes significantly to students' physical health, emotional regulation, psychological resilience, ethical development, and social connectedness. Rather than viewing education solely as a means of improving academic achievement, IKS emphasises the balanced development of the body, mind, intellect, and character, thereby supporting the broader goal of nurturing responsible, resilient, and compassionate citizens.

The review further indicates that holistic educational practices complement contemporary approaches to social-emotional learning and positive psychology while preserving India's rich philosophical and cultural heritage. Although empirical evidence consistently supports improvements in stress reduction, emotional well-being, self-regulation, classroom engagement, and resilience, important implementation challenges remain. Inadequate teacher preparation, examination-centred educational practices, infrastructural limitations, uneven programme quality, and the limited availability of longitudinal evidence continue to restrict the large-scale impact of these interventions.

The successful realisation of holistic education therefore requires sustained policy commitment, comprehensive teacher education, curriculum integration, multidimensional assessment systems, and stronger collaboration among schools, families, communities, and policymakers. Future research should prioritise rigorous longitudinal and multisite studies to strengthen the evidence base and ensure equitable implementation across diverse educational contexts. In conclusion, moving beyond grades requires a fundamental shift from a narrowly achievement-oriented educational model towards one that recognises student well-being as an essential outcome of schooling. By

integrating the principles of the Indian Knowledge System into everyday educational practice, Indian schools can create inclusive learning environments that promote academic excellence alongside emotional resilience, ethical responsibility, cultural rootedness, and lifelong human flourishing, thereby fulfilling the transformative vision of NEP 2020 and contributing to sustainable educational development in the twenty-first century.

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