



Literature as a Pedagogical Tool for Empathy Development: A Survey-Based Study of Adolescent Well-Being in Indian Schools

Ms. Kavita Bhalothia¹ Dr. Dipa Chakrabarti²

Abstract:

Rising academic pressure, family expectations, future uncertainty and teacher-student relational gaps present compounding socio-emotional challenges for Indian adolescents. Despite the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's emphasis on holistic development, structured socio-emotional learning (SEL) frameworks remain largely absent from mainstream school practice. This study investigates adolescent emotional well-being among school students in Rajasthan and Delhi and examines the potential of literary engagement as a deliberate pedagogical instrument for empathy development and SEL. A descriptive survey research design was employed. A structured questionnaire comprising ten close-ended items and one open-ended item was administered to 137 school students from Grades VI–XII in Rajasthan and Delhi through school teachers and principals, via Google Forms. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency-based descriptive statistics; qualitative open-ended responses (Q11) were subjected to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Academic pressure (22.1%), family expectations (21.2%), and future uncertainty (18.6%) emerged as the dominant stressors. A substantial 72.3% of respondents reported hiding their feelings either sometimes (42.9%) or very often (29.4%). Teacher-student relational distance was pronounced: only 21.4% felt very comfortable sharing concerns with teachers, while merely 3.2% sought teacher support during difficulties. Paradoxically, while 72.2% of respondents reported moderate-to-high self-confidence and 59.5% expressed general life satisfaction, emotional concealment and institutional trust deficits persisted. Reading was identified as a coping strategy by only 9.5% of respondents, the lowest of all options, despite its established socio-emotional benefits. Thematic analysis yielded six emergent themes: empathetic failure, academic overload, comparison and self-worth, communicative safety, student agency, and systemic reform. The study proposes a five-strand framework of Pedagogical Translation, wherein literary engagement, encompassing Indian folk narratives, reflective fiction reading, guided storytelling, Socratic discussion, and bibliotherapy functions as a culturally grounded bridge between abstract emotional concepts and lived empathetic experience. Integrating this framework with the holistic vision of NEP 2020 offers a scalable, evidence-supported strategy for nurturing emotionally responsive classroom communities.

¹Research Scholar, Amity School of Languages, Amity University Rajasthan, India
Email: kavitalamba1979@gmail.com

²Professor and Head, Amity School of Languages, Amity University Rajasthan, India, Email:
dchakrabarti@jpr.amity.edu

Corresponding Author*: Ms. Kavita Bhalothia, Email: kavitalamba1979@gmail.com

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Introduction

Contemporary secondary school education in India stands at a critical intersection of academic expectation and emotional complexity. Students in Grades VI through XII navigate multiple, often competing, pressures, examination performance, family expectations, social media exposure and uncertainty about the future that collectively erode emotional well-being and undermine the capacity for empathy (Sarfika et al., 2024). Despite growing awareness of these challenges, a structured, institutionally embedded framework for socio-emotional learning (SEL) remains largely absent from mainstream Indian schooling.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges this gap by foregrounding holistic development through empathy, collaborative learning, and stress-free educational environments as central to India's educational vision (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, the operationalisation of these objectives within daily classroom practice remains largely aspirational. Students are thus left without guided resources for emotional processing, empathetic development, or meaningful interpersonal skill-building.

This study proposes that literature particularly culturally rooted folk narratives, contemporary fiction, and poetry is a powerful yet underused pedagogical resource that can address this gap. The paper introduces the concept of Pedagogical Translation, which refers to the purposeful use of literary engagement to transform abstract emotional and moral ideas into lived empathetic understanding. Within this framework, literary narratives act as social translators and help students to decode both their own emotional experiences and the subjective inner lives of others.

Grounded in survey data collected from 137 school students across Rajasthan and Delhi, this study pursues two complementary aims: (a) to document, with empirical precision, the nature and extent of emotional well-being challenges facing Indian adolescents; and (b) to examine how literature can serve as an evidence-grounded pedagogical tool for empathy development, aligned with the holistic vision of NEP 2020.

Literature review

Student well-being in school contexts

Student well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, social, physical and academic dimensions. Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of interpersonal relationships within schools, between students and teachers and among peers constitutes a primary determinant of students' sense of belonging, safety and engagement. Castro et al. (2025) demonstrated that positive school climate substantially improves emotional regulation and reduces internalising and externalising symptoms of distress, while teacher-student relational dynamics significantly predict student resilience and emotional adaptability.

Hernández and Darling-Hammond (2024) identified relationship-centred classroom practices as critical mediators of SEL outcomes, demonstrating that supportive teacher-student bonds reduce psychological stress and foster school belonging. Their findings are directly relevant to the present study's observation that only 21.4% of respondents felt very comfortable sharing concerns with teachers, a finding that aligns with what the present study terms the teacher-student empathy gap.

Academic pressure represents a particularly salient stressor for Indian adolescents. Bharawmani and Sharma (2024) demonstrated using a two-way ANOVA that parental involvement independently and significantly influences academic stress levels ($p < .01$), while Sarfika et al. (2024), in a cross-sectional study of 525 junior high school students in Indonesia, confirmed a statistically significant positive correlation between peer pressure and academic anxiety ($r = .14, p < .05$) — findings that resonate with the Indian context documented in the present study. Michelson et al. (2020) further demonstrated the feasibility of low-intensity psychological interventions in Indian secondary schools, underscoring the urgency and institutional tractability of addressing adolescent mental health through non-clinical, school-based mechanisms.

Empathy as a Core Educational Construct

Empathy, defined as the ability to understand and vicariously share the feelings of others, is foundational component of social and emotional learning. It includes both cognitive empathy (intellectual perspective-taking) and affective empathy (emotional resonance). These dimensions have significant long-term implications for interpersonal competence, moral reasoning and community cohesion (Zhou, 2022). Martinez and Gomez (2024) further emphasised that empathy enables students to develop healthy relationships, manage conflict and develop social responsibility.

Nosirova (2025) observed that prevailing classroom practices in many educational systems continue to prioritise cognitive and academic outcomes over emotional engagement, creating what the present study terms a curriculum gap: the systemic absence of structured, evidence-based pathways for empathy development as a distinct educational objective. This gap is compounded in the Indian context by an examination-centric pedagogical culture that positions literature as a content-delivery mechanism rather than as an instrument of emotional and moral development.

Literature as a Pedagogical Resource for Empathy

An expanding body of scholarship confirms the role of literary narratives in fostering empathetic understanding. Denham (2024) argues that through engagement with fictional characters, readers develop moral imagination, the capacity to inhabit perspectives radically different from their own and that this imaginative identification transfers effectively to real-world social interactions. Kucirkova's (2019) Empathy Building through Children's Storybooks (EBCS) framework identifies three dimensions of empathy; cognitive/emotional, in-group/out-group and positive/negative, and demonstrates how storybook engagement activates these through mirror neuron mechanisms and self-other identification.

Ciesielska et al. (2025) validated these claims in a meta-analysis of 47 studies, confirming that interactive shared reading, rather than text exposure alone, yields the strongest empathetic gains. Carney and Robertson (2022) found that sustained engagement with literary fiction produced measurable reductions in physiological stress markers across five experimental studies. Prabaningrum et al. (2025) observed that literary narratives provide structured imaginative spaces for processing difficult emotions and identifying adaptive coping strategies through fictional role models. These findings are directly relevant to the present study's findings on emotional concealment and academic stress. Gviniashvili (2025) further observed that regular recreational reading among adolescents is associated with reduced stress and depression, broader social worldviews, and greater confidence in articulating personal challenges.

Within the Indian educational context, folk literature is particularly promising as a pedagogical vehicle. Thakar and Prajapati (2025) demonstrate that culturally rooted narratives, from the Panchatantra and Jataka Tales to regional oral traditions function as moral mirrors, enabling students to examine ethical dilemmas and develop empathy through immersive engagement with diverse characters. Cultural familiarity reduces the affective distance between reader and text, making folk literature an accessible entry point for emotional engagement in diverse classrooms. Despite this convergent evidence, the deliberate integration of literature as a structured empathy-building intervention remains limited and inconsistent in Indian school settings. The present study empirically documents this gap while also providing a theoretical framework to address it.

Research gap and research questions

Despite robust evidence for literature's socio-emotional benefits, three interrelated gaps remain in the literature:

The Integration Gap: How can literary engagement be systematically embedded in existing school structures as a well-being intervention in the absence of a formal SEL curriculum?

The Peer-Support Gap: Can deliberate literary perspective-taking increase the availability of empathetic peer support within classrooms?

The Teacher-Empathy Gap: What literary instructional approaches can most effectively repair the documented deficit in teacher-student emotional trust and communicative safety?

These gaps generate the following research questions:

RQ1: How can educators translate the emotional complexities of literary texts into concrete, empathetically responsive classroom interactions that address documented student well-being deficits?

RQ2: Does integration of culturally resonant literary narratives, particularly Indian folk literature, improve students' willingness to share personal challenges with peers and teachers?

RQ3: What narrative elements in Indian folk literature most effectively foster moral reasoning and perspective-taking among adolescents experiencing academic and comparison-related stress?

RQ4: What institutional and pedagogical limitations arise when literature is used as an effective tool in classrooms characterised by examination-centric cultures?

objectives of the study

1. To examine key dimensions of emotional well-being among school students in Rajasthan and Delhi, including stress sources, emotional concealment, coping strategies, self-confidence, and life satisfaction.
2. To identify the primary emotional and social challenges reflected in students' survey responses, with attention to teacher-student relational gaps.
3. To situate empathy as a core educational need emerging from the well-being data and to connect this need with available evidence on literary pedagogy.
4. To propose a structured framework of Pedagogical Translation that operationalises literary engagement as a school-based empathy development intervention aligned with NEP 2020.

Methodology

Research design

A descriptive survey research design was employed to examine students' emotional well-being, stress factors, support systems, coping strategies and self-perceptions. A descriptive design was selected for its capacity to generate a population-level snapshot of student experiences across diverse socio-educational contexts, consistent with exploratory research in educational psychology (Creswell, 2014). The mixed-methods approach, integrating close-ended quantitative items with one open-ended qualitative item facilitated both measurable pattern recognition and deeper interpretive engagement with students' lived emotional experiences.

Sample

The study sample comprised 137 school students from institutions in Rajasthan and Delhi, India. Purposive convenience sampling was employed with teachers and school principals facilitating instrument distribution through existing school networks. Students represented Grades VI through XII across diverse socio-economic backgrounds. All 137 responses were retained as complete submissions. Demographic data for 18 respondents who did not provide gender identification are included in total counts but not in gender-disaggregated analyses. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the sample.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 137)

Category	Sub-category	n	%
Age Group	11–12 years	7	5.6
	13–14 years	28	22.4
	15–16 years	62	49.6
	17–18 years	25	20.0
	19 years	1	0.8
Gender	Male	76	63.9
	Female	43	36.1
Prefer not to say / Unspecified		18	13.1*
Total		137	100.0

Note. Age data are based on 125 valid numeric entries; 12 responses recorded non-numeric or ambiguous values and were excluded from age-band calculations. Gender data are based on 119 respondents; 18 respondents did not specify gender. *Percentage calculated on N = 137.

Research Instrument

Data were collected via a structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms and distributed through school teachers and principals, ensuring no personally identifiable data were collected. The instrument comprised ten close-ended items and one open-ended item exploring: (a) comfort levels in sharing emotions with teachers, parents, and peers (Q1–Q3); (b) coping strategies and emotional concealment patterns (Q4–Q5); (c) stress-relief activities (Q7); (d) primary sources of academic and social stress (Q6); (e) self-confidence and life satisfaction (Q8–Q9); (f) sources of peer-comparison distress (Q10) and (g) aspirations for improvement at school and home (Q11, open-ended). Content validity was established through review by subject-matter experts prior to administration. The open-ended item enabled the capture of nuanced student experiences not reducible to fixed-response formats.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using frequency-based descriptive statistics to identify prevalence patterns across the sample. For multi-response items (Q7), the number of respondents selecting each option is reported as a proportion of the total sample (N = 137). Qualitative responses to Q11 were subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and report production. Two independent coders reviewed Q11 responses; themes were confirmed through consensus review, ensuring analytic credibility. The mixed-methods integration facilitated triangulation of quantitative prevalence data with qualitative thematic insight.

Ethics Statement

This study involved an anonymous survey conducted through school teachers and principals with no collection of personally identifiable information. Participation was entirely voluntary. Informed assent was communicated through school leaders, clearly stating the study's purpose and its academic objectives. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage. All data were collected anonymously and analysed in aggregated form solely for academic purposes. In accordance with standard Indian educational research guidelines, formal Institutional Review Board approval was not mandated for anonymous survey-based research of this nature. One open-ended response (Q11,

Response 101) disclosed severe emotional distress; including explicit reference to suicidal ideation linked to academic pressure and perceived adult indifference. This finding is reported here only at the level of thematic pattern, without reproduction of the specific text, and underscores the urgency of structured well-being support mechanisms in Indian schools.

Results and findings

Emotional Comfort and Peer Support (Q1–Q3)

Table 2 presents findings related to students' emotional comfort and perceived social support across the three primary relational contexts examined: teachers, parents/guardians, and peers.

Table 2: Emotional Comfort and Availability of Peer Support

Question	Response Option	n	%	Rank
Q1: Comfort sharing thoughts/problems with teachers (n = 126)	Sometimes Uncomfortable	43	34.1	
	Mostly Comfortable	31	24.6	
	Very Comfortable	27	21.4	
	Not Comfortable	25	19.8	
Q2: Comfort sharing thoughts/problems with parents/guardians (n = 132)	Very Comfortable	55	41.7	
	Mostly Comfortable	46	34.8	
	Sometimes Uncomfortable	17	12.9	
	Not Comfortable	14	10.6	
Q3: Availability of a supportive friend (n = 126)	Yes, Definitely	79	62.7	
	Not Really	32	25.4	
	No	15	11.9	

Note. Percentages calculated on valid responses per item: Q1 n = 126, Q2 n = 132, Q3 n = 126. Rank column is left available for journal-level completion.

Responses to Q1 reveal a significant teacher-student empathy gap. Only 21.4% of students reported feeling 'very comfortable' sharing their thoughts with teachers, while a combined 54.0% indicated some degree of discomfort either 'sometimes uncomfortable' (34.1%, the modal response) or 'not comfortable' (19.8%). Taken together, the data indicate that more than half of respondents do not experience the teacher-student relationship as a reliable channel for emotional disclosure. This finding aligns with Hernández and Darling-Hammond's (2024) identification of teacher-student relational quality as a critical determinant of school-based well-being.

In contrast, students expressed substantially greater comfort with parents and guardians. Q2 shows that 76.5% were either 'very comfortable' (41.7%) or 'mostly comfortable' (34.8%) sharing with parents. The 23.5% reporting some discomfort nonetheless warrants attention, as this population may constitute a particularly vulnerable subgroup lacking both institutional and familial emotional support.

Q3 reveals a meaningful peer support deficit: 37.3% of respondents did not have a reliably supportive friend, 25.4% 'not really' and 11.9% 'no'. Over one in three adolescents thus navigates emotional difficulty without a trusted peer confidant, a condition associated with elevated stress, social isolation, and reduced emotional regulation capacity (Martinez & Gomez, 2024). This finding provides a direct empirical rationale for classroom-based peer empathy interventions.

Coping Strategies, Emotional Concealment, and the Role of Reading (Q4, Q5, Q7)

Table 3 presents findings related to students' coping behaviour, emotional concealment patterns, and preferred stress-relief activities.

Table 3: Coping Strategies, Emotional Concealment, and Stress-Relief Activities

Question	Response Option	n	%	Rank
Q4: First response to difficulty (n = 126)	Try to handle it myself	60	47.6	
	Talk to parents/family	31	24.6	
	Talk to a friend	22	17.5	
	Avoid thinking about it	9	7.1	
	Talk to a teacher	4	3.2	
Q5: Frequency of hiding feelings (n = 126)	Sometimes	54	42.9	
	Very Often	37	29.4	
	Rarely	20	15.9	
	Never	15	11.9	
Q7: Stress-relief activities — multi-response (N = 137)	Listening to music	44	32.1	
	Spending time alone	42	30.7	
	Physical activity	40	29.2	
	Talking to someone	32	23.4	
	Reading	13	9.5	

Note. Q4 and Q5 percentages calculated on valid responses (n = 126 each). Q7 was a multi-response item; values represent number of respondents (of N = 137 total) who selected each option. Total Q7 selections = 171 across 116 respondents.

Q4 reveals that self-reliance is the dominant coping strategy: 47.6% of students reported that their first response to difficulty is to handle it alone. Notably, parents/family (24.6%) were the second most preferred source of support more so than friends (17.5%), confirming the family as a critical emotional anchor for Indian adolescents. Only 3.2% sought support from a teacher, the lowest of all structured options. This profound institutional trust deficit is consistent with the low comfort levels reported in Q1 and underscores the urgency of rebuilding teacher-student relational trust.

Q5 presents a significant finding: 72.3% of students reported hiding their feelings either ‘sometimes’ (42.9%) or ‘very often’ (29.4%) to avoid worrying or being judged. Only 11.9% reported never concealing emotions. This pervasive emotional concealment pattern indicates that current classroom cultures do not consistently provide the psychological safety necessary for adolescent emotional disclosure, a deficit that literary engagement is uniquely positioned to address by externalising emotional experience onto fictional characters (Denham, 2024).

Q7 (multi-response) reveals that students, most commonly turned to music (32.1%), spending time alone (30.7%) and physical activity (29.2%) as stress-relief strategies. Only 9.5% of respondents identified reading as a coping activity, the lowest of all structured options. This represents a significant pedagogical paradox: reading is the least utilised coping strategy among adolescents who demonstrate clear need for empathy-building and emotional processing, yet it is the strategy most extensively documented as capable of meeting these needs (Carney & Robertson, 2022; Gviniashvili, 2025; Prabaningrum et al., 2025). This gap reflects not disinterest in narrative per se, but the institutional framing of literature as examination content rather than as an emotional or therapeutic resource.

Stress Sources, Confidence, Satisfaction, and Peer Comparison (Q6, Q8–Q10)

Table 4 presents data on sources of stress, self-confidence levels, overall life satisfaction, and primary sources of peer-comparison-related distress.

Table 4: Stress Sources, Self-Confidence, Life Satisfaction, and Peer-Comparison Distress

Question	Response Option	n	%	Rank
Q6: Primary source of stress (n = 113)	Academic Pressure	25	22.1	
	Family expectations	24	21.2	
	Future uncertainty	21	18.6	

	Fear of failure / Comparison	20	17.7	
	Social Media / Phone use	10	8.8	
	Health or Sleep issues	7	6.2	
	Peer pressure / Friend issues	6	5.3	
Q8: Confidence in handling stressful situations (n = 126)	Very Confident	47	37.3	
	Somewhat Confident	44	34.9	
	A Little Confident	27	21.4	
	Not Confident	8	6.3	
Q9: Satisfaction with self and daily life (n = 126)	Satisfied	75	59.5	
	Not Satisfied	51	40.5	
Q10: Primary source of peer-comparison distress (n = 125)	Nothing bothers me	46	36.8	
	Academic Performance	38	30.4	
	Money or Lifestyle	22	17.6	
	Looks / Appearance	12	9.6	
	Gadgets / Accessories	7	5.6	

Note. Q6 valid responses = 113; Q8, Q9 valid responses = 126 each; Q10 valid responses = 125.

Q6 indicates that the dominant stressors are structural and future-oriented in character. Academic pressure (22.1%) emerged as the primary stressor, followed by family expectations (21.2%) and future uncertainty (18.6%), a triad that collectively accounts for 61.9% of all stress nominations. Fear of failure or comparison (17.7%) ranked fourth, while social media and peer pressure ranked below expectation (8.8% and 5.3%, respectively). This pattern suggests that adolescent distress in the present sample is primarily driven by systemic-evaluative demands and future anxiety rather than social or digital comparison. This finding carries significant implications for the design of literary interventions aimed at enhancing resilience and strengthening future-orientation among students.

Q8 reveals a notably resilient self-confidence profile: 72.2% of respondents described themselves as ‘very confident’ (37.3%) or ‘somewhat confident’ (34.9%) in handling difficult situations. Only 6.3% reported being ‘not confident’. This finding challenges deficit-centric narratives about Indian adolescent well-being and suggests that students possess existing psychological resources, self-efficacy, agency and resilience that structured literary pedagogy can further activate and channel toward empathetic development rather than inward self-focus.

Q9 shows that 59.5% of respondents expressed satisfaction with themselves and their daily lives, while 40.5% reported dissatisfaction. This majority-satisfied profile, taken alongside Q8’s resilience findings, indicates that the well-being challenges documented in this study, emotional concealment, teacher-distrust, stress are real but do not constitute a generalised state of negative affect. Rather, they represent specific, structurally addressable deficits in institutional support, communicative safety, and emotional skill development.

Analysis of Q10 reveals that 36.8% of respondents reported that nothing in particular bothers them in peer comparison. As the modal response, this finding reinforces the psychological resilience previously indicated in Q8 and Q9. Among those who do experience comparison-related distress, academic performance (30.4%) and socio-economic disparities in lifestyle (17.6%) were the primary concerns, while appearance (9.6%) and material possessions (5.6%) ranked lower. This profile challenges assumptions that Indian adolescents are primarily distressed by material or appearance-based social comparison, pointing instead to an achievement-and-opportunity comparison dynamic.

Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses (Q11)

Q11 invited students to identify one change they would make to improve life at school or home. Valid, substantive responses were obtained from 97 of 137 respondents; the remaining 40 provided minimal responses (e.g., ‘nothing’, ‘school’, and single words) that were documented but not thematically coded. Responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Six robust themes emerged, presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses: What Would You Change? (Q11, N = 137)

Theme	Description	Sample Responses	Prevalence / Focus
T1: Empathetic Failure	Students express frustration at perceived absence of emotional understanding from teachers and parents; requests for non-judgmental communication spaces.	"More empathy"; "Teachers don't understand what students feel"; "Teacher will try to understand students"	High frequency; spans teacher, parent, and peer domains; linked to Q1 comfort gap (54.0% uncomfortable with teachers)
T2: Academic Overload	Requests to reduce homework, examination pressure, and narrow academic focus; calls for balance between academics and co-curricular activities.	"Less academic pressure"; "Burden of study on students should be less"; "Less homework — I spend 2 hours just doing homework"	High frequency; directly corroborates Q6 finding (academic pressure as primary stressor, 22.1%); cross-age prevalence
T3: Comparison and Self-Worth	Distress over family-driven peer comparison in academic achievement, appearance, and lifestyle; internalised self-doubt; desire for individual recognition.	"Stop comparing yourself to others"; "My family compares me with other children about academic performance"; "Change the comparison of students"	High frequency; validates Q10 pattern; notably, 36.8% report no comparison distress, suggesting within-group variation
T4: Communication and Safety	Students seek open, non-hierarchical dialogue at home and school; desire for kind, inclusive classroom environments; peer solidarity as unmet need.	"Better communication at home"; "A friendlier school environment"; "Everyone should talk with kindness, everyone listens to each other"	Moderate-high frequency; corroborates Q1 and Q4 findings; teacher-student relational gap consistently flagged
T5: Agency and Self-Development	Students articulate desire for personal growth, disciplined time management, skill development, and freedom to pursue interests without guilt or institutional constraint.	"Improving time management"; "Normalising doing passion projects without guilt"; "Building more supportive and communicative environments"	Moderate frequency; concentrated among 15–18 age cohort; suggests receptivity to structured self-development programmes
T6: Systemic Reform	Calls to reform school structures, address teacher bias, and recognise diverse intelligences beyond academic metrics; desire for equity and inclusion.	"Change the school system and teachers' mind-set"; "Give equal priority to every subject, sport, and extracurricular activity"; "Treat everyone equally"	Moderate frequency; concentrated among older students (16–18); one response disclosed acute crisis with self-harm ideation (reported thematically)

Note. Themes are not mutually exclusive; individual responses may reflect multiple themes. One response (male, age 16) disclosed acute emotional crisis including explicit suicidal ideation related to academic pressure and perceived indifference from teachers and family. This response is documented at the level of thematic pattern only, consistent with ethical obligations to participant confidentiality and responsible reporting.

The thematic distribution confirms and extends the quantitative findings. Theme 1 (Empathetic Failure) directly corroborates the Q1 teacher-comfort gap and the Q4 teacher-support deficit: students do not merely lack comfort with teachers, they actively name the absence of empathy as the central problem they wish addressed. Theme 2 (Academic Overload) validates academic pressure's rank as the primary stressor in Q6, with students across multiple age groups articulating a desire for curricular balance and a reduction in examination-centric demands. Theme 3 (Comparison and Self-Worth) maps onto Q10 findings while revealing its relational dimensions; specifically, that comparison distress is not merely peer-generated but significantly family-mediated. Theme 4 (Communication and Safety) aligns

with the peer support deficit (Q3) and teacher-comfort gap (Q1), articulating the specific quality students need: environments of kindness, non-hierarchy and mutual listening. Theme 5 (Agency and Self-Development) is particularly significant: it indicates that the 72.2% of students who express confidence (Q8) are not passive well-being recipients but active agents seeking structured channels for self-development, exactly what a literature-based SEL framework can provide. Theme 6 (Systemic Reform) confirms that students are not merely asking for individual interventions but for institutional transformation, a call that aligns with NEP 2020's systemic ambitions.

The disclosure of acute suicidal ideation by one respondent represents a critical ethical finding. It affirms, with urgency, that the well-being deficits documented across the quantitative findings are not merely moderate in degree; in some cases, they represent acute and immediate psychological crises. This finding underscores the indispensability of both structured literary empathy interventions and parallel institutional crisis support mechanisms.

Discussion

The findings of this study present a nuanced and empirically grounded portrait of adolescent well-being in Indian secondary schools. The data challenge two common assumptions: first, that Indian adolescents are uniformly distressed and deficit-laden; and second, that emotional well-being interventions must begin from a position of crisis. The findings indicate instead that students possess meaningful reserves of self-confidence and life satisfaction, but are simultaneously constrained by institutional structures particularly the teacher-student relational gap and the examination-centric framing of literature that prevent these reserves from translating into healthy emotional expression, empathetic engagement, and help-seeking behaviour.

The most empirically significant finding of the present study is the profound asymmetry between institutional and familial emotional trust. While 76.5% of students expressed comfort sharing concerns with parents or guardians, only 46.0% were comfortable sharing with teachers, and merely 3.2% sought teacher support during difficulties. This asymmetry is not merely a finding about individual teachers. It is a structural feature of an educational culture that has trained both students and teachers to treat the classroom as an academic rather than an emotional space. Literary pedagogy, through its deliberate invitation to explore characters' interiority and moral complexity, can begin to dismantle this structural barrier.

The Pedagogical Translation framework proposed in this paper addresses this misalignment through five specific literary-pedagogical strategies, grounded in the present study's empirical anchors and the broader evidence base. First, the finding that 72.3% of students regularly conceal their feelings indicates that current classroom environments do not provide sufficient psychological safety. Literary engagement specifically through folk narratives and shared reflective reading establishes this exact sense of safety. By externalising emotional experience onto fictional characters, it makes vulnerability feel less personally exposing (Denham, 2024; Prabaningrum et al., 2025). Second, the 37.3% peer support deficit identified in Q3 signals a need for targeted empathy-building in the classroom. Structured literary discussions address this by guiding students to collaboratively analyse characters' motivations and emotional distress, a process that directly strengthens the perspectives taking skills underlying peer empathy (Ciesielska et al., 2025; Kucirkova, 2019). Third, the dominance of academic pressure, family expectations, and future uncertainty as stressors (Q6) calls for literary resources that normalise struggle, resilience, and moral complexity, precisely the qualities encoded in Indian folk literature's narrative traditions (Thakar & Prajapati, 2025). Fourth, the paradox that only 9.5% of students use reading as a coping strategy despite their evident need for empathetic processing reflects not individual preference but institutional framing: when literature is repositioned from content to care, its uptake as an emotional resource is likely to increase. Fifth, the positive self-confidence and satisfaction data (Q8: 72.2% confident; Q9: 59.5% satisfied) indicate that literary interventions can build on existing strengths rather than requiring a deficit remediation model, a pedagogically significant distinction.

Table 6 presents the full Pedagogical Translation framework, mapping five literary-pedagogical strategies onto specific empathy dimensions, instructional mechanisms, and evidential links from the present study's findings.

Table 6: The Pedagogical Translation Framework: Literature as a Five-Strand Empathy Intervention

Literary Genre / Strategy	Empathy Dimension Addressed	Pedagogical Mechanism	Evidence Link from Survey
Indian Folk Narratives (e.g., Panchatantra, Jataka Tales, regional folklore)	Cognitive empathy; moral reasoning; perspective-taking	Character analysis; dilemma discussions; community-of-inquiry dialogue	Addresses T1 (empathetic failure) and T3 (comparison distress); culturally proximate, reduces affective distance
Reflective Reading of Literary Fiction (contemporary and classical)	Affective empathy; emotional identification; stress processing	Reading journals; guided reflection prompts; character emotional mapping	Counters emotional concealment (72.3% hide feelings); provides fictional safe space for vulnerability (Q5)

Guided Collaborative Storytelling	Peer empathy; in-group / out-group bridging; social cohesion	Story circles; peer narrative sharing; co-authored classroom stories	Addresses peer support deficit (37.3% lack reliable friend, Q3); builds interpersonal trust structures
Reader-Response and Socratic Discussion	Critical empathy; teacher-student relational repair; communicative safety	Open-ended questioning; Socratic seminars; multi-perspective analysis	Directly targets Q1 gap (54.0% teacher-discomfort); repositions teacher as empathetic co-inquirer, not authority
Bibliotherapy (structured therapeutic reading)	Emotional resilience; crisis processing; future-orientation	Curated reading lists; counsellor-led discussion; narrative exposure to resilience models	Targets Q6 stressors (academic + family expectations + future uncertainty); aligns with Prabaningrum et al. (2025)

Note. The Pedagogical Translation framework is proposed as a theoretically grounded and empirically anchored set of strategies, not as a prescriptive curriculum. Implementation should be responsive to school-specific resources, teacher professional capacity, and regional cultural context. All five strands are consistent with NEP 2020's emphasis on holistic, culturally responsive, and joyful learning.

The thematic analysis of Q11 amplifies these quantitative findings with qualitative specificity. Students particularly those in the 15–18 age cohort are not passive recipients of institutional inadequacy; they are articulate, self-aware agents who identify precisely what is missing: empathy, communicative safety, freedom from comparison, and recognition of diverse forms of intelligence. These expressed needs map directly onto what structured literary engagement, when pedagogically framed through the Pedagogical Translation model, is able to provide. The disclosure of acute suicidal ideation by one student further confirms that the emotional gap in current Indian schooling represents, in some cases, a public health concern of immediate urgency.

Educational implications

Reframing literary pedagogy

Literature classrooms must integrate reflective and dialogic practices enabling students to explore values, process emotions, and navigate moral dilemmas through structured engagement with texts. Shifting from exclusively comprehension-based to meaning-making and discussion-based approaches would more effectively develop the empathetic capacities the present data demonstrate students require. This shift does not necessitate new resources, it requires a reorientation of pedagogical intention within existing curricular materials.

Culturally Grounded SEL Curricula

Schools should incorporate literature-based activities explicitly designed to support empathy development as integral, not supplementary, components of the academic programme. Indian folk narratives (Panchatantra, Jataka Tales, regional oral literature) offer particularly accessible entry points: their cultural familiarity reduces affective distance between reader and text and their moral complexity provides rich material for classroom dialogue. Given that academic pressure, family expectations and future uncertainty are the primary stressors, narratives featuring resilience, intergenerational wisdom, and moral courage are particularly apt. This integration is feasible without additional financial resources and is consistent with NEP 2020's emphasis on cultural rootedness and joyful learning (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Teacher Professional Development

Pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes must equip educators to facilitate empathetic literary discussions and respond sensitively to emotional signals in student engagement. Given that only 21.4% of students felt very comfortable sharing concerns with teachers, and only 3.2% sought teacher support in difficulty, teacher capacity for empathetic engagement is not merely desirable, it is essential to the framework's efficacy. This requires a reorientation from transmission-oriented to facilitation-oriented pedagogy, positioning teachers as co-regulators of classroom emotion and co-inquirers in ethical reasoning.

Institutional Safeguards for Student Well-Being

The disclosure of acute suicidal ideation in Q11 warrants a specific institutional response beyond literary pedagogy. Schools must establish visible, accessible, and non-punitive channels through which students experiencing crisis can seek support. Trained school counsellors, peer-support structures, and teacher training in emotional first response are necessary complements to any pedagogical intervention. The literary framework cannot function as a substitute for mental health provision, it is a preventive and developmental tool, most effective when operating within a broader institutional ecosystem of care.

Future Research Directions

Longitudinal experimental studies are needed to assess the direct effects of structured literature-based SEL interventions on empathy development, emotional regulation, and stress reduction over time. Comparative studies

across different school systems, regional contexts, age cohorts, and socio-economic backgrounds would clarify the generalisability of the Pedagogical Translation framework. Qualitative case studies of individual classrooms implementing this approach would contribute rich, practice-grounded insights. Future research should also examine gender-disaggregated differences in emotional concealment, coping preferences, and responses to literary pedagogy, given the mixed-gender composition of the present sample.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. The study relies on self-reported data, susceptible to social desirability bias and individual variation in introspective capacity. The sample (N = 137), while geographically spanning Rajasthan and Delhi, was collected through purposive convenience sampling and may not be representative of the full socio-economic, linguistic, and geographic diversity of Indian school students. The predominantly 15–16-year-old profile of the sample (49.6%) should be noted when interpreting findings across age groups. The cross-sectional design captures emotional states at a single point in time, precluding longitudinal tracking of well-being dynamics. The absence of a comparison group precludes causal attribution of findings to specific contextual factors. Twelve respondents provided non-numeric or ambiguous age data; these were excluded from age-band calculations. Gender data were unavailable for 18 respondents (13.1%), limiting the scope of gender-disaggregated analysis. Additionally, Q7 multi-response data are based on 116 of 137 respondents who provided at least one selection; the responses of 21 non-selectors may reflect instrument non-completion or genuine absence of a preferred strategy. These limitations notwithstanding, the study provides a necessary empirical foundation for future experimental and longitudinal inquiry.

Conclusion

This study presents empirically grounded evidence of specific and structurally addressable well-being challenges among Indian school students: a pronounced teacher-student empathy gap (54.0% uncomfortable sharing with teachers; 3.2% seeking teacher support), widespread emotional concealment (72.3%), academic and future-oriented stressors, a peer support deficit (37.3%), and the institutional under-utilisation of reading as an emotional resource (9.5%). Crucially, these challenges coexist with meaningful student resilience: 72.2% of respondents expressed moderate-to-high self-confidence, 59.5% reported overall life satisfaction, and thematic analysis of Q11 reveals students as articulate, self-aware agents who understand precisely what they need empathy, communicative safety, and structural reform.

The proposed framework of Pedagogical Translation, comprising five evidence-grounded literary-pedagogical strategies: Indian folk narratives for moral reasoning, reflective reading for emotional safety and guided storytelling for peer empathy, Socratic discussion for teacher-student relational repair, and bibliotherapy for resilience and crisis processing provides a conceptually coherent and institutionally practicable pathway for addressing these needs. This framework is not a wholesale curriculum redesign; it is a reorientation of pedagogical intention within existing educational structures.

Aligning literary pedagogy with the holistic vision of NEP 2020 offers a scalable, culturally grounded, and empirically supported strategy for transforming Indian classrooms into emotionally responsive communities spaces in which every student's inner life is not merely assessed but genuinely seen, shared, and understood. In doing so, schools can move toward an educational model that nurtures not only intellectual achievement but also the empathetic intelligence on which healthy, compassionate, and resilient communities ultimately depend.

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