

Education Policy, Student Mental Health and Social Dynamics in South Asia: A Scopus-Based Bibliometric Review and Empirical Evidence from Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Research Problem: Education policy reforms can generate unintended psychosocial consequences for students, particularly when curriculum changes, digital learning, assessment demands, and institutional adjustments interact with existing social inequalities. However, research connecting education reform, student mental health, and social dynamics in South Asia remains fragmented.

Research Purposes: This study examines the intersection of education policy reform, student mental health, and social dynamics, combining regional research trends with empirical evidence from Bangladesh.

Research Methods: A mixed-methods design integrated Scopus-based bibliometric analysis of 96 documents published between 2001 and 2026, survey data from 278 students, and thematic analysis of teacher interviews.

Results and Discussion: Bibliometric findings indicate rapid growth after 2020, with 50 documents published during 2024-2026 and 1,171 citations, highlighting an emerging research area connecting curriculum reform, digital learning, stress, assessment, and student well-being. Empirical findings show that 64.4% of students identified difficulty adapting to new procedures as the main stressor, while 52.2% reported increased stress, 55.4% increased anxiety, 61.5% negative mental-health effects, and 64.0% negative impacts on social relationships. Qualitative findings identify ineffective training, unclear assessment, digital inequality, teacher workload, weakened peer relations, and employment uncertainty as key factors shaping these outcomes.

Research Implications and Contributions: The study demonstrates the need to approach education reform through a psychosocial and equity-oriented perspective. It contributes integrated evidence linking policy reform with student well-being and social dynamics, while recommending mental-health-sensitive reforms supported by equitable digital access, effective teacher training, and institutional support.

Keywords: Education policy, student mental health, academic stress, social dynamics. Bangladesh.

INTRODUCTION

Education systems across the world are undergoing a profound transition from content-

heavy, examination-centred models toward competency-based, technology-supported, and learner-centred policy frameworks. These reforms are often justified by the need to prepare students for uncertain labour markets, digital transformation, and complex social futures (OECD, 2019, 2024; World Bank, 2024). In South Asia, where large youth populations coexist with persistent educational inequality and weak school-to-work transitions, education policy has become central to national development, employability, and social resilience (World Bank, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). However, the growing policy emphasis on skills, continuous assessment, digital learning, and employability has also raised an important question: whether educational reform improves student development without increasing psychological pressure, social disconnection, or future anxiety. Recent global evidence shows that students' social and emotional skills are strongly linked with academic achievement, lower test anxiety, life satisfaction, and career expectations, suggesting that education policy must be evaluated not only by learning outcomes but also by psychosocial well-being (OECD, 2024; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

Student mental health has become a major educational and public health concern. The World Health Organization and UNICEF report that approximately one in seven adolescents aged 10–19 experiences a mental health condition, with anxiety and depression among the most common problems; many of these conditions emerge before adulthood and remain untreated because of stigma, limited services, and weak institutional support (WHO & UNICEF, 2024; UNICEF, 2021). Academic stress, examination pressure, uncertainty about future employment, and social comparison are widely recognized as risk factors for psychological distress among students (Pascoe et al., 2020; Högberg & Horn, 2022; Heissel et al., 2021). Evidence from Asia and low- and middle-income countries further indicates that students experience heightened stress during periods of educational disruption, digital transition, and institutional uncertainty, while support systems often remain inadequate (Kaur et al., 2022; Juniar et al., 2025). These concerns are particularly relevant to South Asia, where family expectations, competitive academic cultures, limited counselling services, and unequal access to technology may intensify the psychosocial consequences of reform (Badiuzzaman et al., 2021; Dayal, 2023).

The digitalization of education has further complicated the relationship between policy reform and student well-being. Digital tools can expand access to learning resources, support flexible pedagogy, and strengthen system management, yet their benefits depend on equity, teacher preparedness, relevance, and evidence-based implementation (UNESCO, 2023; Daniel, 2020). UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report cautions that technology should complement rather than replace human interaction and that unequal connectivity may deepen educational exclusion, especially for disadvantaged learners (UNESCO, 2023). During and after COVID-19, studies showed that online and hybrid education often generated stress, isolation, screen fatigue, and unequal participation, particularly where students and teachers lacked infrastructure or training (Burns et al., 2020; Dayal, 2023; Kaur et al., 2022). Thus, technology-centred reforms may unintentionally reshape classroom relationships, peer interaction, and teacher-student engagement, all of which are important determinants of student well-being and learning (Wentzel, 2017; Barry et al., 2017).

Bangladesh's recent education reform reflects these global and regional policy shifts. The National Curriculum Framework 2022 and associated policy changes seek to move away from rote memorization and high-stakes examinations toward continuous assessment, project-based learning, digital integration, and competency-based education. In principle, these reforms align with international agendas emphasizing creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, and future readiness (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2023). Yet, implementation in Bangladesh occurs within a context of uneven institutional capacity, rural-urban disparity, limited teacher training, inadequate digital access, and strong social expectations around academic success (Alam et al., 2023). The revised Bangladesh policy manuscript prepared for this study identifies continuous assessment, digital learning, and project-based pedagogy as key features of reform, while also noting emerging concerns regarding student anxiety, teacher preparedness, infrastructure gaps, and social disconnection.

Despite growing scholarly attention to education policy, mental health, digital learning, and youth employability, the evidence remains fragmented. Bibliometric research

can reveal how a field evolves, which countries and institutions contribute most, and which themes dominate scholarly debate (Donthu et al., 2021; Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). However, bibliometric mapping alone cannot explain how policy is experienced by students and teachers in specific contexts. Conversely, local empirical studies provide contextual depth but often lack connection to broader knowledge structures. This study addresses that limitation by integrating a Scopus-based bibliometric review with empirical evidence from Bangladesh. By combining publication trends, citation patterns, keyword structures, student survey findings, and teacher interview themes, the article examines how education policy reform intersects with student mental health, social dynamics, stress, and future uncertainty in South Asia.

Accordingly, this study contributes to three areas of scholarship. First, it maps the intellectual structure of research on education policy, student mental health, and social dynamics in South Asia. Second, it provides empirical evidence on how Bangladesh's new education policy is perceived by students and teachers. Third, it advances a policy argument that educational reform should be evaluated through a psychosocial lens, not merely through curriculum design, assessment innovation, or employability goals. Such an approach is essential for ensuring that reforms are academically transformative, socially inclusive, and mentally supportive.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education Policy Reform and Student Well-Being

Contemporary education policy reform increasingly links curriculum modernization with competency-based learning, digital literacy, continuous assessment, social-emotional development, and employability. International evidence suggests that such reforms can improve student engagement when they are implemented with adequate teacher preparation, institutional support, and equity-sensitive design (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). However, reform also creates psychosocial risks when students are required to adapt rapidly to unfamiliar assessment systems, digital platforms, and new pedagogical expectations without sufficient guidance. UNESCO (2023) cautions that technology in education should support human interaction rather than replace it, because poorly implemented digital reform may deepen exclusion and burden learners. Similarly, meta-analytic evidence on social and emotional learning shows that education systems improve both academic and psychosocial outcomes when well-being is embedded into formal schooling rather than treated as an external support service (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017).

Student Mental Health, Stress, and Anxiety

Student mental health is strongly shaped by academic demand, assessment pressure, uncertainty, and institutional climate. Pascoe et al. (2020) argue that academic stress can reduce learning capacity, motivation, achievement, sleep quality, and long-term educational participation. High-stakes assessment systems are also associated with increased school stress; Högberg and Horn (2022), using data from more than 300,000 European students, found that high-stakes testing increased the likelihood of moving from low to high school-related stress. In low- and middle-income settings, stress is intensified by resource inequality, limited counselling services, family expectations, and weak institutional mental-health infrastructure. Recent systematic evidence further indicates that stress-management interventions can reduce student stress in low- and middle-income countries, although methodological quality remains uneven (Juniar et al., 2025). These findings are highly relevant to Bangladesh, where education reform occurs in a context of digital inequality, competitive social expectations, and limited school-based mental-health services.

Social Dynamics, Peer Relations, and Teacher-Student Relationships

Education is not only a cognitive process but also a social environment where students develop peer support, emotional regulation, self-confidence, belonging, and cooperation. Strong peer and teacher support are associated with motivation, effort, academic self-efficacy, and social adjustment (Wentzel et al., 2017). Positive teacher-student relationships

can buffer stress by creating emotional security, classroom belonging, and help-seeking opportunities, while weak relationships may increase isolation and disengagement. SEL evidence also confirms that social-emotional competencies improve prosocial behaviour, emotional well-being, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). In technology-driven reforms, however, excessive digital dependence and reduced face-to-face interaction may weaken peer relationships, especially among students with limited access to devices or stable internet. Therefore, social dynamics should be treated as a core indicator of education policy success, particularly in South Asian settings where family, peer, and teacher relationships strongly influence educational participation.

Employment, Career Anxiety, and Future Uncertainty

Education reform is frequently justified by labour-market transformation and the need to prepare young people for future work. The World Bank (2024) emphasizes that South Asia must convert its demographic potential into productive employment, yet employment growth remains insufficient relative to the expanding working-age population. This creates pressure on education systems to enhance employability, skills, and school-to-work transitions. However, when curriculum reform fails to communicate clear pathways between learning, assessment, skills, and employment, students may experience career anxiety and future uncertainty. Pascoe et al. (2020) note that academic stress can have long-term consequences for educational persistence and sustainable employment, while OECD (2024) shows that social-emotional skills are associated with more ambitious career expectations and better life outcomes. Thus, education policy should be evaluated not only by curriculum innovation but also by whether it reduces uncertainty, supports career readiness, and protects student well-being.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed-methods design integrating bibliometric analysis, quantitative survey analysis, and qualitative thematic analysis to examine the relationship between education policy reform, student mental health, and social dynamics in South Asia, with empirical emphasis on Bangladesh. Convergent mixed-methods designs are appropriate when quantitative and qualitative strands are analyzed separately and then integrated to generate meta-inferences about complex social and educational phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The bibliometric component mapped the intellectual and thematic structure of Scopus-indexed research, while the empirical component examined student and teacher experiences of Bangladesh's new education policy. The design was selected because education reform is both a macro-level policy phenomenon and a lived psychosocial experience, requiring triangulation between publication trends, survey patterns, and interview narratives (Fetters et al., 2013; Greene, 2007).

Scopus Data Collection and Bibliometric Procedure

The bibliometric dataset was exported from Scopus and contained 96 documents published between 2001 and 2026, including 91 articles and 5 reviews, with bibliographic fields such as authors, titles, years, source titles, citations, affiliations, abstracts, author keywords, index keywords, references, DOIs, and document types. Scopus was selected because it provides broad multidisciplinary coverage and standardized metadata suitable for bibliometric mapping (Donthu et al., 2021; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). The bibliometric procedure followed established science-mapping guidelines, including performance analysis and conceptual, intellectual, and social structure analysis (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Descriptive indicators included annual scientific production, document type, citation distribution, source productivity, affiliation contribution, and country-level production. Network-based analysis emphasized keyword co-occurrence, country collaboration, thematic mapping, and three-field relationships among sources, keywords, and countries. The reporting logic was aligned with PRISMA principles of transparent identification,

screening, and synthesis, although the study was bibliometric rather than a conventional systematic review (Page et al., 2021).

The PRISMA selection procedure identified 120 records through Scopus database searching. After removing five duplicates, 115 records were screened. Nineteen studies were excluded because essential metadata were missing, leaving 96 full-text articles for eligibility assessment. Finally, all 96 eligible studies were included in the bibliometric and systematic review analysis phase (Figure 1).

Bibliometric data exported from Scopus were analyzed using VOSviewer and Bibliometrix/Biblioshiny in R. VOSviewer was used to visualize keyword co-occurrence and country co-authorship networks, while Bibliometrix generated annual production, citation trends, source productivity, affiliation patterns, thematic maps, tree maps, and three-field plots for scientific mapping.

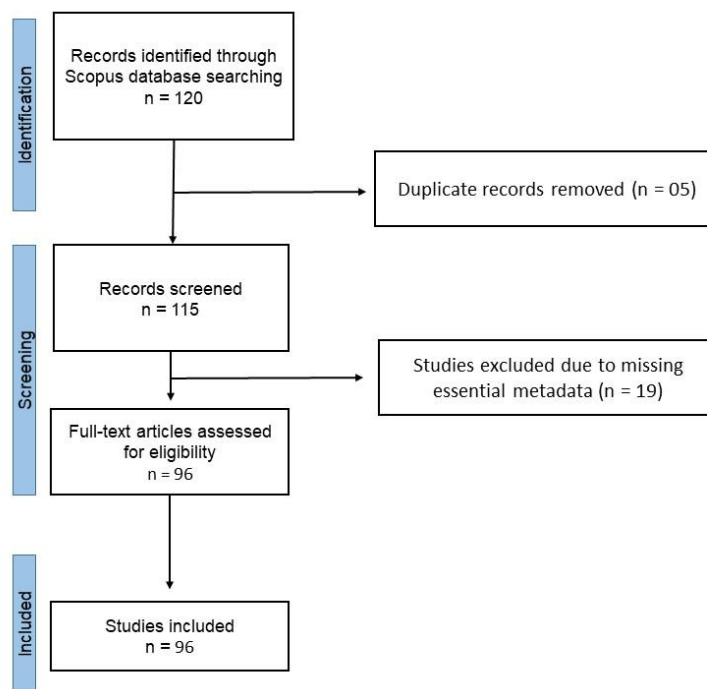


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

Sampling and Primary Data Collection

The primary data were collected using a mixed sampling strategy. Student participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across gender, age, academic level, and geographic location. A total of 300 students participated, including students from both urban and rural areas and from primary to higher education levels. This approach enabled the study to capture diverse experiences of Bangladesh's new education policy across different learner groups. Alongside the survey, 20 teachers were purposively selected for interviews because of their direct experience with policy implementation. Teacher interviews generated qualitative insights into classroom practices, student well-being, social dynamics, and teacher-student relationships.

Quantitative Survey Analysis

The quantitative empirical component used student survey output containing 278 valid responses on knowledge of the new education policy, perceived policy impact, stress, anxiety, mental health, social relationships, educational goals, teacher-student relationships, and demand for policy change. Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using frequencies, percentages, valid percentages, and cumulative percentages, which are appropriate for categorical perception data in policy and educational research (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020). The analysis focused on identifying dominant response patterns rather than

causal estimation because the available dataset is cross-sectional and perception-based. Key variables included policy awareness, perceived quality improvement, type of stress, increased anxiety, mental-health impact, friendship quality, teacher-student relationship, clarity of educational goals, and preference for policy amendment. These indicators were interpreted as psychosocial outcome measures reflecting students' subjective experiences of reform implementation.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Teacher interview responses were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis to explain the mechanisms behind student stress, anxiety, and social disruption. The interview data covered teachers' views on policy understanding, student stress, social relationships, teacher role change, teacher workload, student confidence, mental health, policy amendments, and coping support. Thematic analysis followed six recursive phases: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme naming, and analytic writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Codes were generated inductively from repeated patterns in teacher narratives and then grouped into higher-order themes, including inadequate training, unclear assessment, digital inequality, student anxiety, weakened social relationships, teacher workload, and employment uncertainty. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation with survey results and bibliometric trends, allowing qualitative explanations to contextualize statistical patterns (Nowell et al., 2017; Patton, 2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Annual Scientific Production and Citation Trend

The temporal distribution of Scopus-indexed publications indicates that research on education policy, student mental health, and social dynamics in South Asia has moved from a fragmented early stage to a rapidly expanding field. The dataset comprises 96 documents published between 2001 and 2026, including 91 articles and 5 reviews. Table 1 shows that only 11 documents, representing 11.5% of the dataset, were published between 2001 and 2015; however, this early phase generated 185 citations, suggesting that foundational studies retained long-term influence. The field remained relatively modest during 2016–2020, with 10 documents and 191 citations, but citation intensity was high, with a mean citation rate of 19.10. The strongest citation phase occurred during 2021–2023, when 25 publications accumulated 664 citations and achieved the highest mean citation rate of 26.56, reflecting the post-pandemic scholarly focus on digital learning, student stress, educational disruption, and psychosocial well-being.

Table 1. Temporal Growth and Citation Structure

Period	Documents	Citations	Mean citations	Median citations	Share (%)
2001-2015	11	185	16.82	9.00	11.5
2016-2020	10	191	19.10	8.50	10.4
2021-2023	25	664	26.56	9.00	26.0
2024-2026	50	131	2.62	1.00	52.1

The most visible expansion occurred in 2024–2026, when 50 documents accounted for 52.1% of the total corpus, although the mean citation rate remained low at 2.62 because these papers are recent and have had limited citation time. Figure 2 confirms this accelerated growth, particularly after 2020, with annual production rising from 4 articles in 2020 to 9 in 2021, 12 in 2024, and 28 in 2025. This pattern is consistent with bibliometric theory, which interprets rapid publication growth combined with low recent citation maturity as evidence of an emerging research front rather than weak scholarly impact (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015).

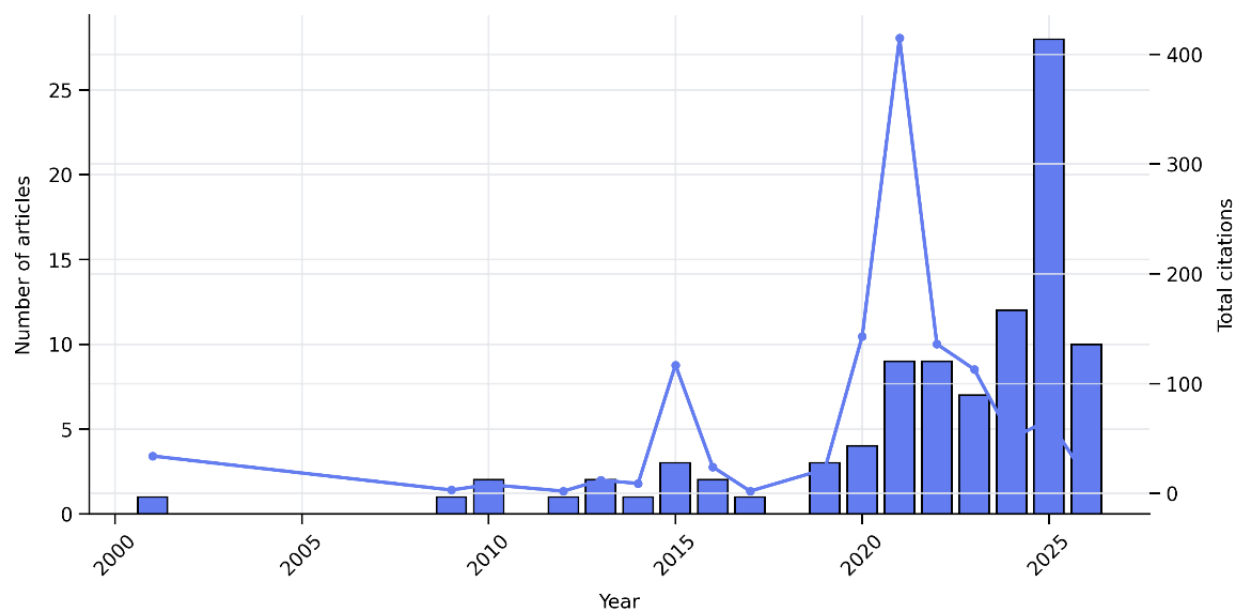


Figure 2. Annual Scientific Production and Total Citations per Year

Sources, Affiliations, and Country Production

The source, affiliation, and country patterns show that the literature is concentrated in a small number of journals and regionally anchored institutions, while international collaboration remains visible. The most productive source in the Scopus dataset was the *Journal of Engineering Education Transformations* with three documents, followed by *Sustainability*, *PLOS ONE*, *International Review of Education*, *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, *Cogent Education*, and other journals with two documents each. Citation impact, however, was not necessarily aligned with publication volume: *Sustainability* accumulated 73 citations and *PLOS ONE* accumulated 62 citations, indicating that interdisciplinary and open-access journals may play an important role in disseminating research on digital learning, stress, and educational transformation (Figure 3).

Institutional production from the bibliometric findings indicates that the University of the Punjab contributed 11 articles, followed by ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute with 9 articles, Uttaranchal University with 8 articles, and Kasturba Medical College Mangalore and Riphah International University with 7 articles each (Figure 3).

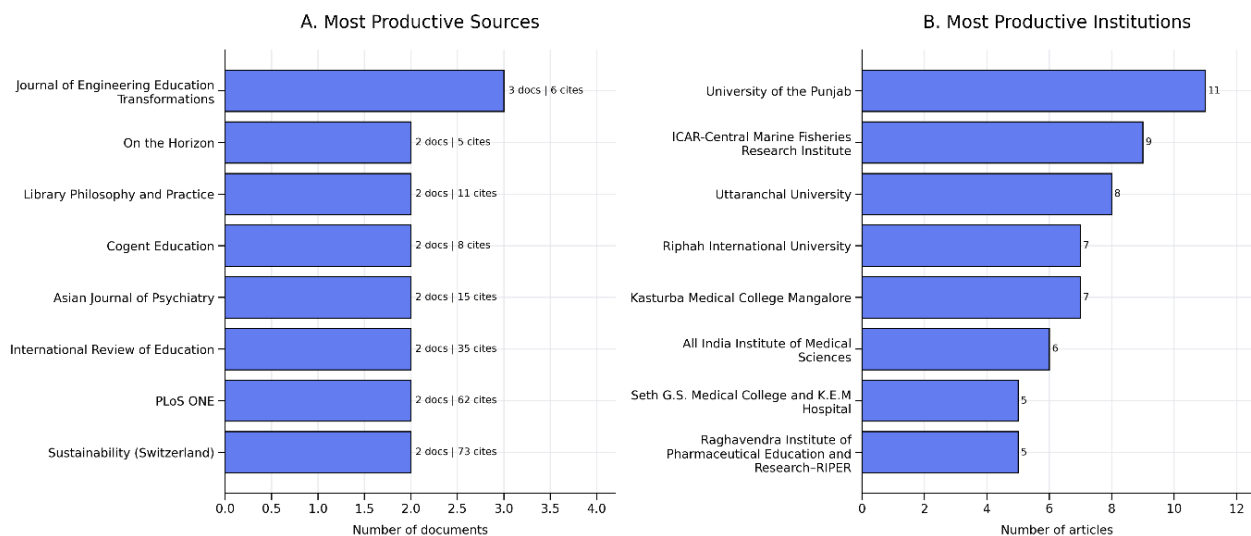


Figure 3. Most Productive Sources and Institutions

Table 2 further shows that India dominates country-level production in the affiliation-based

Scopus extraction, with 54 documents, followed by Pakistan with 15, the United States with 11, Bangladesh with 10, and the United Kingdom with 9. Bangladesh's production is concentrated in the most recent period, with 8 of its 10 documents appearing during 2024–2026, indicating a late but growing engagement with education policy, mental health, and social dynamics.

Table 2. Countries Production over Time

Country	2001-2015	2016-2020	2021-2023	2024-2026	Total
India	0	4	19	31	54
Pakistan	3	2	4	6	15
United States	3	2	2	4	11
Bangladesh	1	0	1	8	10
United Kingdom	1	2	1	5	9
Malaysia	2	0	2	1	5
Australia	0	0	2	2	4
Saudi Arabia	0	0	0	4	4

Figure 4 shows the co-authorship country network, while the generated country-production figure demonstrates temporal expansion across India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and international collaborators. This distribution reflects the regional dominance of South Asian scholarship but also indicates the need for stronger cross-country comparative studies.

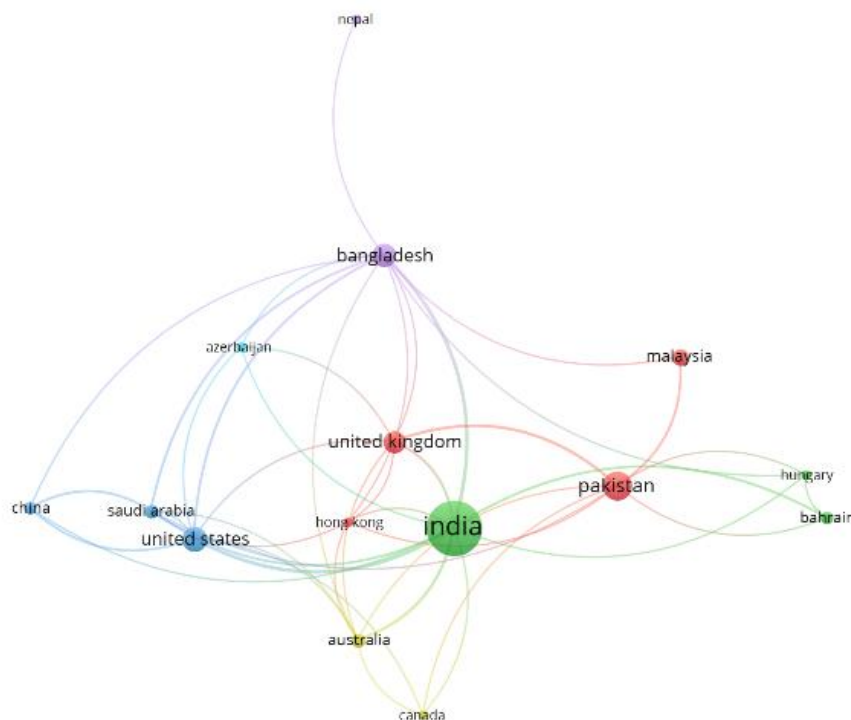


Figure 4. Co-authorship country network

Keyword and Thematic Structure of the Literature

The keyword and thematic structure demonstrates that the literature is organized around three interrelated domains: digital education reform, student mental health, and social-educational adjustment. In the Scopus dataset, the most frequent thematic terms included stress, curriculum, assessment, digital learning, online learning, mental health, anxiety,

career, and social support. Text-frequency extraction from titles, abstracts, author keywords, and index keywords showed that “stress” appeared 146 times, “curriculum” 72 times, “assessment” 57 times, “digital learning” 44 times, “mental health” 41 times, “online learning” 38 times, and “anxiety” 38 times. These patterns suggest that the field is not limited to education policy as a formal governance issue; instead, it increasingly examines how policy reforms reshape students’ psychological experiences, learning environments, and future expectations (Figure 5).

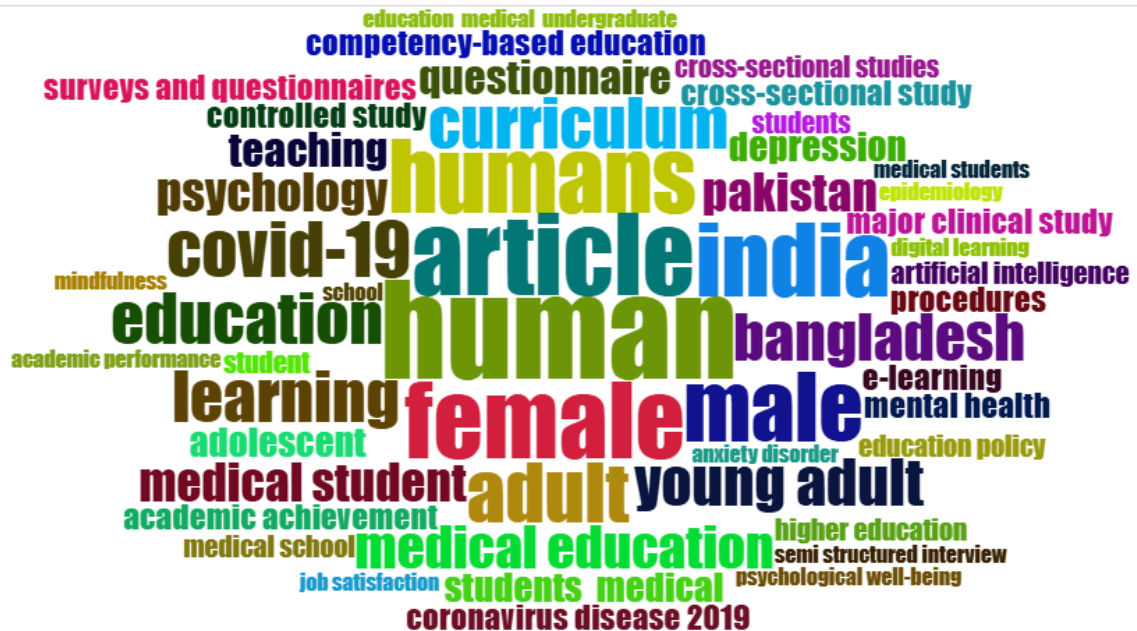


Figure 5. The word cloud

The bibliometric figures support this interpretation. Figure 6 present's keyword co-occurrence and is useful for identifying conceptual clusters around education, digital learning, student stress, mental health, curriculum, and social relationships.

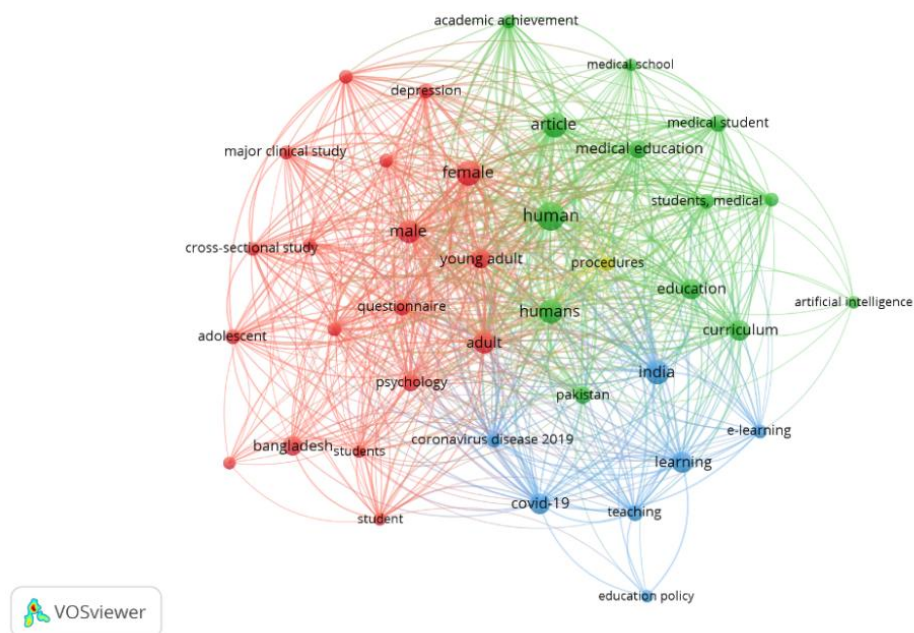


Figure 6. Keyword co-occurrence

Figure 7, the three-field plot, connects knowledge components such as sources, keywords, countries, or authors, allowing the manuscript to interpret how regional production is linked to dominant themes. Thematically, the prominence of digital and online learning reflects the post-COVID transformation of education systems, while the repeated occurrence of stress, anxiety, mental health, assessment, and curriculum indicates concern about reform consequences. This pattern aligns with prior bibliometric and educational research showing that emerging fields often develop through clustered intersections of policy, technology, and well-being (van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Waltman et al., 2010; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; UNESCO, 2023).

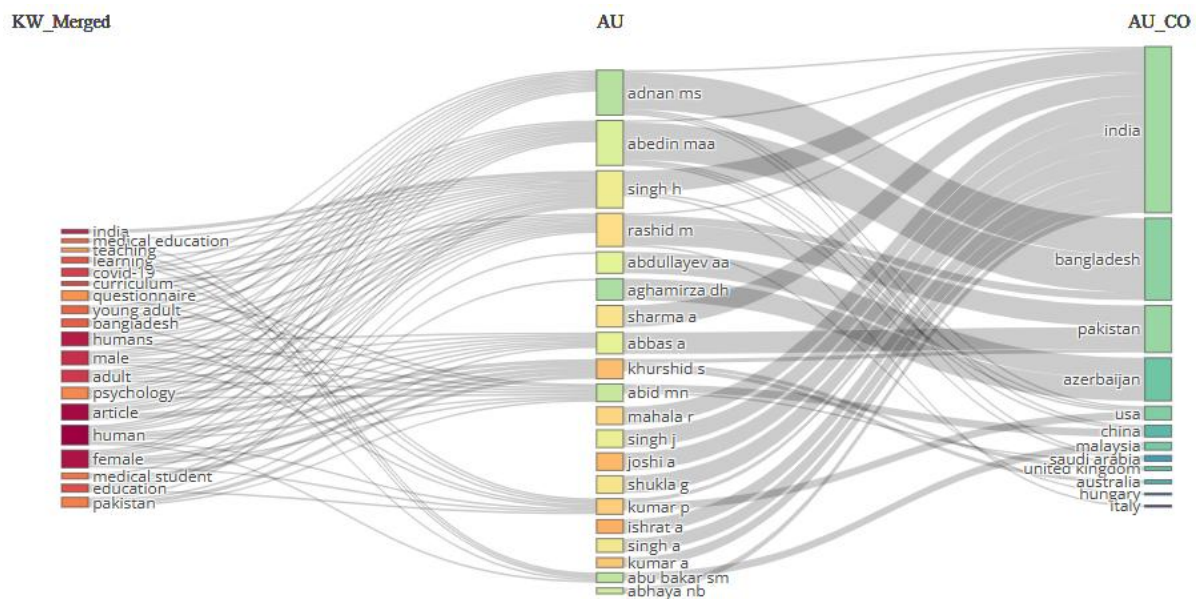


Figure 7. The three-field plot (Keyword, Authors, Countries)

Student Mental Health and Social Dynamics

The student survey findings indicate that Bangladesh's new education policy is perceived as a significant psychosocial stressor rather than merely a curricular or pedagogical adjustment. As shown in Table 3, policy awareness was limited, with 125 students, representing 45.0% of respondents, reporting only "little" knowledge of the new education policy. This weak awareness is important because educational reform studies suggest that students' adjustment depends partly on clarity, predictability, and institutional communication (Pascoe et al., 2020; OECD, 2024). The dominant perception of the policy was negative: 143 students, or 51.4%, described the policy impact as "very bad," while 216 students, or 77.7%, reported that the policy was "not helping" improve educational quality. Psychological indicators were similarly concerning. The most frequently reported stressor was "difficulty adapting to new procedures," selected by 179 students, or 64.4%, suggesting that reform-related stress emerged primarily from implementation uncertainty rather than from conventional academic pressure alone. Stress increased "much" among 145 students, or 52.2%, while anxiety increased "much" among 154 students, or 55.4%. Moreover, 171 students, or 61.5%, reported a negative mental-health impact, and these findings are consistent with literature linking academic uncertainty, assessment reform, and institutional transition with psychological distress (Högberg & Horn, 2022; Heissel et al., 2021; Juniar et al., 2025).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Student Survey Findings

Variable	Dominant response	Frequency	Percentage	Analytical interpretation
Policy awareness	Little knowledge	125	45.0	Limited student awareness of reform
Perceived overall impact	Very bad	143	51.4	Strongly negative policy perception
Quality of education	Not helping	216	77.7	Perceived failure to improve quality
Main stressor	Difficulty adapting to new procedures	179	64.4	Adaptation difficulty is dominant stress source
Mental health impact	Negative	171	61.5	Negative psychosocial effect
Stress increased	Much	145	52.2	High perceived stress
Anxiety increased	Much	154	55.4	High perceived anxiety
Social relationships affected	Negative	178	64.0	Negative social impact
Friendship quality	Negative change	177	63.7	Weakening peer relationships
Educational goal clarity	Unclear	175	62.9	Reduced clarity about future education
Teacher-student relationship	Negative effect	173	62.2	Deterioration in relational climate
Policy change desired	Yes	278	100.0	Universal demand for reform modification

The study also show deterioration in social dynamics. A total of 178 students, or 64.0%, reported that social relationships were negatively affected, and 177 students, or 63.7%, reported negative changes in friendship quality. In addition, 173 students, or 62.2%, reported a negative effect on teacher-student relationships, while 175 students, or 62.9%, felt unclear about educational goals. These findings suggest that reform implementation has implications beyond mental health, extending into peer belonging, relational trust, educational motivation, and future orientation. Most strikingly, all 278 respondents, or 100.0%, supported changes to the policy, indicating strong demand for reform modification.

Teacher Interview Findings

The thematic analysis of teacher interviews provides explanatory depth to the survey findings by identifying implementation-level mechanisms behind student stress, anxiety, and social disconnection. Table 4 presents seven major themes derived from the interview responses: limited policy awareness and ineffective training, infrastructure and digital divide, assessment uncertainty and academic stress, social isolation and weakened relationships, teacher workload and role strain, employment and future uncertainty, and recommended amendments. Teachers repeatedly reported that they had limited prior understanding of the policy and that training was insufficient, which corresponds with students' low policy awareness and negative perception of reform.

Teachers also identified inadequate infrastructure and unequal access to technology as central barriers to implementation. Several responses emphasized that students without digital devices, learning materials, or institutional support were being pushed outside the mainstream of learning. This theme converges with the survey finding that difficulty adapting to new procedures was the dominant stressor among students. It also reflects wider literature showing that digital learning reforms can deepen inequality when technological access, teacher preparation, and learner support are uneven (UNESCO, 2023; Badiuzzaman et al., 2021; Dayal, 2023).

Table 4. Thematic Matrix from Teacher Interviews

Theme	Condensed evidence from teacher interviews	Convergent survey link	Policy implication
Limited policy awareness and ineffective training	Teachers reported little prior knowledge of the policy and described training as inadequate or unclear.	Low student awareness and negative policy perception	Implementation readiness gap
Infrastructure and digital divide	Teachers noted lack of learning materials, technology tools, and institutional infrastructure, especially for poorer and rural students.	Difficulty adapting and perceived quality decline	Equity-sensitive digital implementation
Assessment uncertainty and academic stress	Continuous assessment, projects, research, presentations, assignments, and unclear evaluation created fear and pressure.	Stress and anxiety increased substantially	Assessment reform needs clarity and pacing
Social isolation and weakened relationships	Teachers described reduced empathy, cooperation, respect, peer cohesion, and face-to-face social interaction.	Negative social relationships and friendship quality	Social-emotional learning and peer support
Teacher workload, role strain, and financial pressure	Teachers reported extra administrative work, online reporting, low salary, loss of private tuition, and lack of capacity to teach new methods.	Negative teacher-student relationship	Teacher professional development and support
Employment and future uncertainty	Teachers observed uncertainty about whether work-oriented learning and skills are relevant for future employment.	Unclear educational goals	Career guidance and employability alignment
Recommended amendments and student support	Teachers suggested training, infrastructure, easier assessment, debate/problem-solving activities, teacher benefits, and locally suitable policy.	Universal demand for policy change	Participatory and context-sensitive reform

Assessment uncertainty emerged as another major theme. Teachers reported that continuous assessment, project work, presentations, assignments, and unclear evaluation criteria created fear, fatigue, and pressure among students. This explanation is consistent with the survey results showing high perceived stress and anxiety, and with prior research linking assessment intensity and school stress to mental-health risks (Pascoe et al., 2020; Högberg & Horn, 2022). Teachers further observed that student social relationships were weakening due to reduced empathy, cooperation, respect, face-to-face interaction, and peer cohesion. The teacher data also reveal institutional strain. Teachers described increased administrative workload, online reporting responsibilities, low compensation, reduced private-tuition opportunities, and limited capacity to adapt to new teaching methods. These pressures may explain deteriorating teacher-student relationships reported in the survey. Finally, teachers connected reform uncertainty with employment anxiety, noting that students were unsure whether the new work-oriented curriculum would support future employment. The thematic salience figure shows that training gaps, assessment stress, social relationship decline, teacher strain, and policy amendment demand were the most recurrent interpretive categories.

DISCUSSION

A Rapidly Emerging Field

The bibliometric findings indicate that research on education policy, student mental health, and social dynamics in South Asia has shifted from a marginal topic to a rapidly emerging interdisciplinary field. The Scopus dataset contained 96 documents published between 2001 and 2026, including 91 articles and 5 reviews, with 1,171 citations and a dataset h-index of 17, suggesting that the field has achieved moderate scholarly consolidation while still remaining developmental in scope.

The temporal structure shows that more than half of the publications appeared during 2024–2026, while the strongest citation intensity occurred during 2021–2023, when 25 publications generated 664 citations and a mean citation rate of 26.56. This pattern is consistent with bibliometric theory, which views rapid publication growth combined with uneven citation maturity as evidence of an emerging research front rather than a fully stabilized discipline (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The post-2020 expansion also reflects the global educational disruption caused by COVID-19, during which digital learning, student stress, and institutional resilience became prominent research themes (Daniel, 2020; Burns et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2022). The keyword structure further confirms this transition: “stress,” “curriculum,” “assessment,” “digital learning,” “online learning,” “mental health,” and “anxiety” appeared as dominant terms in the Scopus corpus, indicating that scholarship is increasingly connecting policy reform with psychosocial outcomes rather than treating curriculum change as a purely administrative issue.

This supports UNESCO’s (2023) argument that education technology and reform must be evaluated through equity, relevance, sustainability, and learner well-being, not simply through innovation discourse.

Reform as Psychosocial Pressure

The student survey findings reveal that Bangladesh’s new education policy is experienced by many students as psychosocial pressure. Among 278 respondents, 45.0% reported only little knowledge of the policy, 51.4% perceived the overall impact as very bad, and 77.7% believed that the policy was not helping improve educational quality.

The dominant stressor was difficulty adapting to new procedures, reported by 64.4% of students, while 52.2% reported that stress increased “much” and 55.4% reported that anxiety increased “much.”

These findings are consistent with prior research showing that academic stress reduces motivation, learning capacity, achievement, sleep quality, and long-term educational engagement (Pascoe et al., 2020). They also align with evidence that high-stakes or uncertain assessment systems increase school-related stress, particularly when students perceive long-term consequences for educational progression and future life chances (Högberg & Horn, 2022; Heissel et al., 2021). Although Bangladesh’s reform aims to reduce rote learning and conventional examination pressure through continuous assessment and project-based learning, the empirical findings suggest that continuous evaluation may create a new form of persistent performance anxiety when students lack clarity, preparation, and institutional support. This interpretation is consistent with the revised manuscript’s observation that Bangladesh’s new curriculum framework introduces continuous assessment, digital learning, and project-based pedagogy while generating concerns about student anxiety and adaptation difficulty.

The social findings are equally significant. The survey shows that 64.0% of students reported negative effects on social relationships, 63.7% reported negative changes in friendship quality, 62.2% reported deterioration in teacher-student relationships, and 62.9% felt unclear about educational goals.

These results extend the academic stress literature by showing that reform pressure is not only psychological but relational. Prior studies emphasize that peer support, teacher support, and classroom belonging are central to academic motivation, self-efficacy, and social adjustment (Wentzel et al., 2017; Barry et al., 2017; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this

study, however, reform implementation appears to weaken relational confidence, suggesting that policy change can disrupt the social ecology of schooling if psychosocial safeguards are absent. The universal demand for policy change among surveyed students further indicates a legitimacy gap between reform intention and student experience.

Implementation Gap

The teacher interview findings explain why progressive reform may produce negative student experiences. Teachers identified limited policy awareness, ineffective training, infrastructure gaps, digital inequality, unclear assessment, increased workload, weakened relationships, and employment uncertainty as major implementation barriers.

These themes converge strongly with the survey findings: students' adaptation difficulty corresponds with teachers' reports of unclear assessment and insufficient training; students' social disconnection corresponds with teachers' observations of declining empathy, cooperation, and peer cohesion; and students' unclear educational goals correspond with teachers' concerns about employment relevance.

This triangulation strengthens the validity of the findings because teacher narratives provide causal explanations for student survey patterns, a central advantage of mixed-methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetter et al., 2013).

The implementation gap also reflects broader evidence from digital education and curriculum reform. UNESCO (2023) warns that technology-based reform can exclude disadvantaged learners if connectivity, devices, teacher preparation, and pedagogical evidence are insufficient. Studies from Bangladesh and India similarly show that digital learning transitions can intensify inequality and teacher stress when infrastructure and training are inadequate (Badiuzzaman et al., 2021; Dayal, 2023). In this study, teachers reported that students without digital tools were falling behind, while teachers themselves faced administrative workload, online reporting burdens, financial pressure, and reduced confidence in new teaching methods.

These findings support Darling-Hammond's (2000) argument that teacher capacity is central to reform success and confirm that policy implementation cannot be separated from teacher well-being, professional development, and institutional resources. The teacher data also reveal a career-readiness gap: reform discourse emphasizes skill-based education, yet students and teachers remain uncertain about how new assessment and work-oriented learning connect to future employment.

This is particularly important in South Asia, where the World Bank (2024) identifies employment generation and demographic dividend utilization as major regional development challenges.

Theoretical Contribution

This study makes four theoretical contributions. First, it advances education policy implementation theory by showing that policy success depends not only on formal curriculum design but also on students' interpretive clarity, teachers' implementation capacity, and institutional readiness. Second, it contributes to student well-being literature by conceptualizing reform-induced stress as a multidimensional construct involving cognitive uncertainty, assessment anxiety, social disconnection, and future insecurity. This expands previous stress models that focus primarily on examinations, workload, or academic performance (Pascoe et al., 2020; Högberg & Horn, 2022). Third, the study contributes to social dynamics scholarship by demonstrating that peer relationships and teacher-student relationships are sensitive indicators of policy disruption, consistent with theories of belonging and social support (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Wentzel et al., 2017). Fourth, the study contributes methodologically by integrating bibliometric mapping with primary survey and interview evidence. Bibliometric studies often identify knowledge structures but cannot explain lived experience, while local empirical studies often lack connection to global research trends (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Donthu et al., 2021). This study bridges that gap by showing how an emerging global research field is reflected in the lived realities of Bangladeshi students and teachers.

Policy Contribution

The findings suggest that Bangladesh's education reform requires a mental-health-sensitive implementation framework. First, policy communication must be strengthened because low student awareness and teacher uncertainty appear to intensify stress and negative perceptions.

Second, continuous assessment should be redesigned with clearer rubrics, phased implementation, manageable workload, and student orientation, because assessment uncertainty emerged as the dominant psychosocial pressure. Third, teacher professional development must precede large-scale implementation; teachers need training not only in pedagogy and assessment but also in student mental-health literacy, digital instruction, and social-emotional support. Fourth, digital equity must be treated as a core policy requirement rather than a supplementary infrastructure issue, especially for rural and low-income students. This aligns with UNESCO's (2023) position that technology should serve learners' interests and complement human interaction. Fifth, Social and Emotional Learning should be integrated into curriculum reform because meta-analyses show that SEL improves academic achievement, well-being, social skills, and long-term developmental outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Finally, employability pathways should be made explicit through career guidance, competency mapping, and school-to-work transition support, because uncertainty about future employment contributes to student anxiety and policy distrust. In this sense, the reform should be reframed not as curriculum change alone but as a whole-school ecosystem reform that integrates learning, mental health, social relationships, teacher support, digital equity, and future readiness.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between education policy reform, student mental health, and social dynamics in South Asia by integrating Scopus-based bibliometric evidence with primary empirical findings from Bangladesh. The bibliometric analysis shows that the field has expanded rapidly, particularly after 2020, reflecting growing scholarly concern with digital learning, curriculum reform, assessment change, academic stress, student well-being, and social relationships. The Scopus dataset contained 96 documents published between 2001 and 2026, with the strongest recent growth occurring during 2024–2026, when 50 documents represented more than half of the total corpus.

The citation pattern further suggests that education policy and student well-being have become a high-interest research area, especially after COVID-19, when digital learning, institutional disruption, and mental-health concerns became central educational issues.

The empirical findings from Bangladesh reveal that the new education policy is perceived by many students not merely as a curricular transition but as a psychosocial burden. Student survey results show limited policy awareness, negative perceptions of policy impact, difficulty adapting to new procedures, increased stress and anxiety, negative mental-health effects, weakened peer relationships, deteriorating teacher-student relationships, and reduced clarity about educational goals.

These findings indicate that reform implementation has affected students cognitively, emotionally, socially, and future-orientationally. The fact that all surveyed students supported policy change further suggests a serious legitimacy and communication gap between reform intention and student experience.

Teacher interview findings explain these student-level outcomes through implementation barriers, including ineffective training, inadequate infrastructure, digital inequality, unclear assessment systems, increased teacher workload, financial pressure, and uncertainty about employment relevance.

Teachers' accounts confirm that policy reform cannot succeed through curriculum redesign alone; it requires institutional readiness, teacher capacity, digital equity, assessment clarity, and psychosocial support.

Overall, the study contributes to education policy literature by demonstrating that student well-being and social relationships must be treated as core indicators of reform success. For Bangladesh and similar South Asian contexts, education reform should move

toward a mental-health-sensitive, socially responsive, and equity-oriented implementation model. Such a model should integrate Social and Emotional Learning, teacher professional development, counselling support, digital inclusion, career guidance, and participatory policy evaluation. Without these supports, progressive reforms may unintentionally reproduce stress, inequality, and social disconnection rather than improving educational quality.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, the bibliometric component relied only on Scopus-indexed documents; therefore, relevant publications from Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, Google Scholar, national journals, policy reports, and grey literature may have been excluded.

Second, the Scopus dataset is relatively small, containing 96 documents, which limits broader generalization about the entire global research field.

Third, the student survey data are cross-sectional and perception-based, so the findings cannot establish causal relationships between the new education policy and student mental-health outcomes.

Fourth, although teacher interviews provide important explanatory depth, the interview findings may not represent all teachers, institutions, or regions of Bangladesh.

Future research should expand the bibliometric database by combining Scopus with Web of Science, ERIC, PubMed, and regional South Asian databases. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine whether student stress, anxiety, and social relationship changes persist, decline, or intensify over time as the policy becomes more familiar. Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples from rural, urban, public, private, and madrasah education contexts. Comparative South Asian studies involving Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka would also help identify regional similarities and country-specific reform challenges. Finally, future research should include parents, policymakers, school administrators, counsellors, and employers to better understand how education reform affects student well-being, social development, and employment readiness.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI USE DECLARATION

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation, analysis, or writing of this manuscript.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE

Ethical clearance was not required according to the applicable institutional research ethics procedures. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation was voluntary.

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