



Neglected Needs: A Policy Gap Analysis and Perspectives of School-Based Mental Health Support in Pakistani Schools

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ABSTRACT

Education serves as the essential basis for national development which needs both intellectual development and emotional plus social health to be developed. Guidance and counselling (G&C) establish themselves as international necessities which help to provide complete education while decreasing student dropouts and increasing student coping abilities and protecting their mental wellbeing (UNESCO 2002 Gysbers Henderson 2012). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019; 2022) International standards require a student-to-counselor ratio of 250 students per counselor while maintaining confidentiality and equity standards and defining professional roles. Pakistan currently lacks effective and consistent G&C services which function at all educational levels but especially affect elementary education. The university introduced counselling services for its students in 1983 according to Ibrahim and Almas yet the service never developed to support primary school students. National policies, including the NEP 2009 and the Single National Curriculum 2020, mention life skills but fail to provide operational frameworks, defined roles, or accountability mechanisms (Zahid et al., 2019). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2017–2025 gap analysis study examines chapter 21 which focuses on Guidance and Counselling and Character Development. The researchers used qualitative document analysis according to Bowen 2009 and Creswell and Poth 2018 to assess eight dimensions through the Policy Analysis Framework which included definition level specificity role clarity student to-counsellor ratio implementation mechanisms and accountability. The comparative analysis between UNESCO (2019) and WHO (2020) and ASCA models shows that Pakistan's policy lacks crucial elements. The research findings show that counsellor roles remain unspecified while teachers perform counselling duties without proper training and there is no oversight system or financial support for these activities. The study concludes that Pakistan needs an operational framework for G&C at elementary schools which should include staffing standards and training programs and methods for accountability and assessment of results. The educational system in Pakistan needs these gaps to be addressed because their resolution will help decrease student dropouts and enhance student psychosocial growth and bring Pakistani education standards up to global benchmarks.



Introduction

Education is widely regarded as the backbone of any nation nurturing not only the intellectual capacities of individuals but also their emotional and social development. Guidance and counselling have become the crucial part of the holistic education. International organizations have emphasized on the importance of guidance and counselling. It has been highlighted by the UNESCO (2002) that systematic counselling level can lower the dropout rates, enhance learning outcomes and enhance the psychosocial health of a child. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019; 2022) recommends a ratio of 250 students per counsellor and mandates clear guidelines centered on confidentiality, privacy and equity. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019) and World bank also stresses on structured social-emotional learning frameworks and accountability measures which draws attention to that omission connected with corresponding frameworks under Pakistan's policy.

However, the guidance and counselling have been seen weak and inconsistent particularly at elementary level. Moreover, the counselling was first introduced at the university level and it was never expanded to primary level in schools. National policy of Pakistan mentions about the life skills but fails to provide a clear role of a teacher, counsellor and administrators. This study focuses on elementary level guidance and counselling that has not been properly established and developed. Critically examining and analyzing Pakistan's education policies would clarify the gaps that prevent guidance and counselling from being established and embedded.

Background of the Study

Guidance and counselling are recognized to be an integral and essential part of any academic institution. International organizations like UNESCO (2002) emphasized that structured guidance and counselling programmes at elementary level improve learning outcomes, reduce dropout rates, and support children's psychological wellbeing. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, Guidance and Counselling systems for elementary level have not yet been given the importance that they deserve. Policy document such as National Education Policy (2009) and the Single National curriculum (2020) include general life skills content but they do not mandate a clear framework for guidance and counselling at elementary level.

At Elementary level it is found to be a crucial part of an institution to help children transition from the pre-school phase to the elementary school level as they are expected to learn new rules, follow more complex instructions and curriculums than before. Furthermore, some children face social and psychological issues, learning difficulties, fear and anxiety of being left behind or confusion in the classrooms, all this can be easily avoided or resolved if there is a structured and efficacious Guidance and Counselling Program in place.

The idea of counselling at university level was introduced by Ibrahim and Almas (1983) but it was limited to higher education only. No significant work has been done to establish an effective guidance and counselling system at Elementary level despite its importance. More recent studies, such as Suhag et al. (2017), point out that issues like political instability, inflation, law and order situation have prevented counselling services from being established in school. Moreover, administrators and teachers have not been fully equipped with an understanding of their counselling responsibilities. They have not been trained to support students' psychosocial development or character formation. As a result, students are deprived of structured platforms through which they could discover their strengths and develop their potential.

Guidance and counselling systems in place would train academic professionals to be a role model for their children who willingly and unwillingly influence the lives of their children for good.

Inadequate guidance and counselling system is a contributing factor to the dropout of many children from school as their academic and psychosocial challenges go unaddressed. This study aims to analyze existing policy provisions, identify gaps and propose evidence-based recommendations for establishing an effective guidance and counselling system at elementary school level in Pakistan.

Statement of the problem

Guidance and counselling is globally recognized as a crucial support for holistic development. It has been highlighted by UNESCO (2020) and the American School counsellor's association (ASCA, 2019), that how important is for counselors to be there in elementary level. Programmes and counsellors help to reduce the dropout rates, increase resilience and enhance the overall wellbeing of students. But in Pakistan guidance and counseling services are limited and are underrated leaving without a proper support during formative years

The challenge is that Pakistan lacks a clear, enforcement policy framework for guidance and counselling at the elementary level. While the national education policy (2009) and the Single National Curriculum (2020) include general life skills content they do not mandate structured guidance and counselling programmers of defined roles of teacher's counselors and administrators, as a result, school without an operational framework and counselling functions are either ignored or performed partially by teachers who are not trained for those role Zahid et al. ('2019).

This issue is crucial to address since it directly affects the Pakistan's educational performance and wellbeing. Without the early year's guidance and counselling, students face many challenges for example adjusting in society, how to control emotions and stress and stay motivated in school. Such challenges contribute to higher dropout rates and weak academic records. Therefore, evaluating the current policy and identifying inadequacies and giving evidence-based recommendations is necessary for strengthening Pakistan's elementary education system.

Research Questions

What are the policy gaps in Pakistan at elementary level for guidance and counselling?

- How do existing national and provincial education policies in Pakistan address guidance and counselling at the elementary level, and to what extent do they provide an operational framework for implementation?
- What are the clear defining roles and responsibilities for teachers, counsellors and administrators for guidance and counselling at elementary level in school?

Research Objectives

The main objective of the research is to:

- Critically analyze the policy limitations for guidance and counselling facilities at elementary level in Pakistan
- Examine how National Education Policy (2009) and Single National Curriculum (2020) address the guidance and counselling, and consider whether these policies contribute to an effective structure for application.
- Investigate and clarify the roles and responsibilities of administrators, counsellors, and teachers in delivering guidance and counselling services, and examine how the lack of clearly defined roles has contributed to ineffective practice in schools.
- Recognize gaps and highlight their impacts on children's holistic development.
- Improve the educational structures and practices, ensuring systematic and long-term support and guidance for elementary school students through established evidence.

- Create a framework for educational struggles and strengthening the reforms and student wellbeing.

Justification

The importance of guidance and counselling system in any elementary institution cannot be emphasized enough considering the fragile age of the children falling into this category. Early years shape much of the long-term academic and social trajectory of the child as they are developing and facing challenges on a daily basis. They are in dire need of close attention by well-informed adults that support the child's coping mechanisms. The system will help resolving issues that children face in their academic phase as well as in personal development.

Pakistan continues to struggle with over 22 million out of school children who have dropped out due to lack of proper guidance and counseling in academic and psychosocial challenges (UNICEF, 2021). International evidences demonstrates that early guidance and counselling intervention reduces the dropout rate, enhances the resilience and promotes social adjustment (UNESCO, 2002; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012).

While the National Education policy (2017) dedicates a separate chapter to this matter titled "Guidance, Counselling and Character Building" (Chapter 21), there is no specific guideline for implementation of the policy. The scope of this study is to analyze the strength of the policy in terms of implementation, resource allocation and accountability rather than focusing on classroom practices.

The study potentially contributes to the importance of specific education reforms where Guidance and Counselling is added as a professional course to any training concerning an academic teaching professional as it is an integral part of the implementation of the policy. Previous research in Pakistan highlighted the lack of trained counsellors and the burden placed on teachers to perform counselling functions without preparation (Zahid et al, 2019). Addressing the issue ensures identification of specific roles of teaches and realistic expectations. Furthermore, the study contributes to comparative education by situating Pakistan's challenges within global standards, offering insights of policymakers, educators and researchers. The justification of this study lies in the immediate need to fortify Pakistan's Elementary Educational system by integrating structured Guidance and counselling services. Without secure establishment and implementation of the policy, the gap in policy and practice cannot be bridged.

Study Delimitation

This study is limited to analysis of policy framework and documents related to Elementary level Guidance and Counselling in Pakistan. although the secondary and university level policies are also ineffectively improvised, the focus of the study is on the early years of Education as social, academic and emotional support are vital for healthy development of children at this age and have long-term impact. The focus is mainly on The National Education policy (2017-2025) and its stated provisions regarding 'Guidance and Counselling'. Although earlier Policies are acknowledged, they are not the primary focus in this research. Geographically, the research is restricted to accessible urban and rural schools, some rural schools may be excluded. The perspective here is from the academic institution professionals. The Students' or Parents' perspective is not taken into account due to scope constraints.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this study is to address the major issue at elementary level in Pakistan that needs immediate attention: The unavailability of a structured guidance and counselling. Guidance and counselling is globally recognized as essential for holistic development, ensuring that students'

emotional, social, and academic needs are adequately addressed. As Pakistan is one of those countries where dropout rates are highest because there is no proper guidance and counselling for students in their formative years because academic and psychosocial difficulties are ignored (UNICEF, 2021). As a result, students suffer from stress, anxiety, poor motivation and social challenges, such issues causes' low performance in academic and poor retention.

This study elaborates the policy rather than restricting it to classroom practices only. Examining how Pakistan's National Education Policy (2009) and Single National Curriculum (2020) fail to instruct proper guidance and counselling system or clarify roles and responsibilities allotted to administrators, counsellors and teachers to deliver it. Although it mentions about the life skills. In Pakistan teacher who give guidance and counselling are not trained often leads to ineffective assistance and depending on punitive discipline, for example corporal punishment that results in poor academic performance.

Addressing these struggles faced by student gives the evidence-based guidance to policymaker to work on it and make such policies that meet the global standards. Adding new policies and reforms for guidance and counselling can reduce the dropout rates, emotional problem and enhance student in academics. This will also fulfill the sustainable development goal 4 (inclusive and quality education). It highlights the need for proper training of teachers, counsellors and administrator with clearly defined role that assists students effectively in psychosocial support without burdening any staff.

It can facilitate to enhance the elementary education in Pakistan by focusing on the challenges and make new laws that are applicable, providing enough resources and giving teacher well-structured training in guidance and counselling. This ensures the student aged five to thirteen get regular emotional and social assistance during their formative years, leading to lower dropout rate and strong scholastic achievement. Through this approach Pakistan can match the international standards and build a structured system that ensures best academic achievement and student welfare.

Literature Review

Educational guidance can be described as directing, overseeing, or guiding students along a specific path of action. (Adu & Nimo, 2014). It refers to assistance given that can help students to take informed decisions by identifying and utilizing their own abilities. At Elementary level, this is especially important as children undergo complex development, learn new social and life skills. The Guidance and counselling system is not distinct from the Education Department but rather a crucial part of it that prevents students' problems, resolves their issues as well as enhances their development and progress. On the other hand, counselling is a talking therapy in which a student (client) openly discusses and shares their issues and feelings with the counsellor, who advises or assists the student in coping with the problems (Karan, 2023). It helps children to overcome psychosocial obstacles that make them uneasy and they are not able to unleash their potential.

Educational guidance and counselling, like curricula and teaching staff, are essential to successful education (Nkechi, 2016). Globally, guidance and counselling are recognized as an essential part to fortify Education systems. UNESCO (2019) emphasizes that counselling services contribute to inclusive education by addressing diverse learner needs, reducing dropout rates, and promoting holistic child development. Guidance and counselling started becoming prominent in the 20th century after the industrial revolution when children were to be taught trade and skills. Jesse B. Davis is considered the first guidance counselor in schools (Studer,

2015). He pioneered vocational counseling in Michigan public schools during the industrial revolution. After that much progress has been made to develop structured systems in schools.

There are different theories supporting the fact that guidance and counselling have significant impact. The Nation Education Policy of Pakistan (2017-2025) also emphasizes the importance of Guidance and Counselling in a child's character development as well as his success and prosperity. The current situation analysis states that the education programmes in the country unfortunately lack adequate training curriculums. Due to lack of teacher trainings, the responsibility of character building has been neglected. The policy further states the objectives of Education have been blurred and thus lack proper mention of guidance and counseling strategies. The goal of education is found to be limited to equipping children with just enough knowledge to be eligible for white-collar jobs. The emphasis on the importance of building strong children character that would help them become better humans and also overcome the psychological or social obstacles that they face is largely neglected.

In the HEC 2010 document, Curriculum of Education: B.Ed. (Hons.) 4-year Degree Programmed, Guidance and Counselling is added as a professional course. Student teachers are trained to address the personal and social problems of the students. (Introduction to Guidance and Counselling, 2012). Teacher education programs in Pakistan, including the **B.Ed. curriculum**, provide minimal exposure to counselling theories or practices. Teachers are often expected to act as informal counsellors without specialized training (Bhutto, Zafar, & Ullah, 2023). There is a lack of dedicated space in the Structure of schools for counsellors. They are expected to informally guide the student which results in ineffective outcome. The practices are not efficacious to bring about the desired results. Moreover, the document by HEC on Introduction to Guidance and Counselling states the misconceptions carried in carried in Pakistan. Counselling is perceived to be approached only someone who is disabled or faces learning difficulties. When the policies are enforced, these misconceptions will be eluded and counseling services will become more widely available.

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The policy provision is quiet comprehensive in terms of stating the significance and objectives of the guidance and counseling system in the education department. The roles and responsibilities of not only teachers but also entire school leadership have been stated. Though the roles of academic administrators, teachers and school leadership have been highlighted in the policy provisions, there is a gap in the practice of the policies. This is due to lack of any implementation strategies and strict accountability actions. Suggests that when the external stakeholders review and enforce the educational plans, teachers demonstrate responsible conduct in their roles. (Mohammad Nur Sholeh, 2023). This brings about integrated development in students and the efficacy of guidance provisions is enhanced.

It has been globally recognized that guidance and counselling services have much positive impact on the academic and mental well-being of students. A recent study shows that students demonstrate improved academic performance after guidance and counselling services in school. (Shehu Ibrahim, Iklima Ibrahim Bandi, Jabir Aliyu Danyaya, Mustapha Sahabi, Ibrahim Abubakar, 2021). Nowadays, mental health has become a matter of great concern not only for adults but also young children. Studies show that these mental issues develop early in life and can be avoided or resolved if active measures are taken to counsel children. “The science of child development shows that the foundation for sound mental health is built early in life, as early experiences—which include children’s relationships with parents, caregivers, relatives, teachers, and peers—shape the architecture of the developing brain.” (*In Brief: Early childhood mental health*, 2024)

Research from around the world has shown that mental health programs in elementary schools can be very helpful to increase emotional stability. These programs include things like guidance and counselling services, Social Emotional Learning (SEL), and one-on-one or group counseling. Studies have proven that they work: for example, one study that looked at 43 different programs found that counselling services were not only helpful to students who had special needs but also had an overall impact. When kids learn skills like self-awareness, self-management, and relationships skills, they navigate better and are set-up for success in the long run. (Muhammad Arsyad, Aslamiah, Noohapizah & Novitawati, 2025)

There are no dedicated and specific allocations for guidance and counselling in Pakistan that results in poor academic progress of students, psychosocial problems and reduces fairness (Center for Peace and Development Initiative, 2024). The article Teacher Training and Development in Pakistani Schools published by Educations.pk (2023) mentions the issues faced at elementary level in Pakistan and present inadequate professional development of teacher. Due to lack of budget allocation to the specific development of guidance and counselling systems in schools, teachers are deprived of engaging in modern practices of counselling. The budget is directed towards infrastructure and teacher salaries rather than sustainable growth systems. Research conducted in Pakistan regarding the establishment of guidance and counselling systems specifically at Elementary level are scarce. Most researches are mainly descriptive rather than evaluative. The Educational Policy has not been delved deep into and there is insufficient exploration of obstacles in the way of implementations. Practical recommendations need more focus so active measures can be derived and a structured system can take place.

This study aims to critically analyze the gap in the national policy and implementation through highlighting evidence-based research on the significance of the urgent need of measures to practically enforce the policies developed by the National Education System on all levels of the governance in schools as well as potentially contributing to the addition of guidance and counselling courses in Teacher training Programs.

Research Methodology

This study follows qualitative research approach, it emphasizes on ideas, meaning and context rather than numbers. Document analysis is the core approach where text is carefully read to understand their content, structure and omissions. Qualitative research is crucial for identifying social and educational problems that require interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since the study examines their content, structure and even the leave out, qualitative research helps to elaborate and explain them in depth. Bowen (2009) depicts the document analysis as a systematic way of examining both printed and digital text to disclose the interpretation and build clear understanding. This approach is specifically useful when the focus is on policies, laws, or official frameworks (Rapley, 2007).

Research Design

The study adopts both descriptive and analytical design. It is descriptive because it elaborates what does the National Education Policy 2017–2025 proclaims about the guidance and counselling in elementary schools. Simultaneously, it is analytical as it compares the provisions with international standards incorporating with UNESCO, ASCA and WHO to emphasize the gaps, inconsistencies and neglected elements. This type of approach is referred to as gap analysis, which is widely used in education and policy research (Fullan, 2007; Levin, 2010). As the study does not involve testing a new program or intervention, experiments design is not implemented. Instead, the focus remains on evaluating and interpreting existing policy documents.

Target Population

This study scrutinizes policy document in Pakistan that highlights about guidance and counselling at elementary school level. The main text under the review is the National Education Policy 2017–2025, published by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training. Supporting documents include the Single National Curriculum (SNC, 2020), the HEC B.Ed. (Hons.) curriculum (2010), and the National Education Policy 2009. For comparative analysis, the study also reflects on the international frameworks such as UNESCO's Integrating Life Skills in Education (2002), the ASCA National Model (2019, 2022), and the WHO's Mental Health Action Plan (2013–2020). *Taken together these texts make up the documents that are studied and analyzed. They show guidance and counselling in elementary education from a national and global point of view.*

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

As this study is qualitative and document-based, it uses purposive sampling. It means documents are selected that are most related to the research questions (Patton, 2015). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2017–2025 is taken as the foundational sample, as it is the latest and most extensive education policy in Pakistan, where it has a chapter —Chapter 21: “Guidance, Counselling and Character Building” that is directly aligned with study focus. Complementary documents are integrated to provide a clearer and broader perspective to enrich the policy framework under the elementary level. The sample consists of primary documents (three national and three international) along with academic articles published between 2000 and 2025.

Research Hypotheses

1. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2017–2025 consists of major gaps in its provision for guidance and counselling when contrasted with the international standards for example UNESCO and ASCA.
2. The NEP 2017-2025 does not explicitly states the tasks and mandates of teachers, counsellors and administrators in providing guidance and counselling support at elementary level.
3. Pakistani education policy fails to have a proper framework or accountability system to assure that guidance and counselling are implemented uniformly implemented in all schools.

Research Instruments

The core analytical framework in this study is a systematic Policy Analysis frameworks (PAF) created especially for this research. It relies on the comparative policy analysis method of Bowe, Ball, and Gold (1992) and the document analysis approach of Bowen (2009). The PAF act as a systematic coding tool to evaluate each policy document across eight key dimensions: how guidance and counselling are defined, the levels of education examined, the roles of counsellor's teachers and administrators, suggested student-to-counsellor allocations, procedures for carrying out implementation and the provisions for supervision and evaluation. Each dimension is evaluated

with three-point scale: fully present, partly present, or absent. This framework provides an explicit and systematic approach for recognizing inadequacies and limitations within the policies.

Pilot Study

Before analyzing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2017–2025, the framework was initially implemented to the National Education Policy 2009 as a pilot study. The pilot study aimed to do two things: to assess whether the eight areas of analysis were evident and applicable, and to determine whether the three-point scale are reliable in reflecting variations across policy provisions. The pilot showed that the framework was reliable and emphasized the importance of differentiating between provisions that are partly present, wherein policies express ideas without enforcing their implementation that are completely included, wherein policies integrate clear provisions that require execution.

Validity of Instruments

The validity of the Policy Analysis Framework (PAF) was developed through two strategies. First, the eight dimensions of evaluation were extracted from internationally validated guidelines including the ASCA National Model (2019), UNESCO's Education for All framework (2002, 2019), and the WHO's School Mental Health Guidelines (2020). This confirmed that the system is built on authoritative measures rather than subjective rules. Second, the PAF was analyzed alongside other gap analysis tools that are frequently applied when doing education research (Levin, 2010; Fullan, 2007) to confirm the alignment with accepted approaches. Analytical validity was consolidated by adopting the uniform system consistently throughout the document as part of analysis.

Reliability of Instrument

Reliability was established by implementing a clear coding protocol that described what documentation was essential for assessment. To maintain the uniformity some rules were implemented: a provision was labelled *fully present* solely if the policy clearly defines responsibility, specified required actions and explained compliance procedures. A provision was labeled partially present if it only mentioned the goal or pathway without mentioning well defined procedures. If the dimension were not mentioned at all, it was labelled as absent. Reliability was reinforced by keeping the analysis transparent. Each declaration was clearly referenced to chapter, clauses, or page numbers, so that anyone could verify the findings and evidences (Bowen, 2009)

Method of Data Collection

Data collection extracting and evaluating relevant documents. The primary policy documents were extracted from official government and institutional sources: the NEP 2017–2025 was taken from the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, the Single National Curriculum 2020 was extracted from Federal Directorate of Education, and the HEC B.Ed. Curriculum from the Higher Education Commission. International documents were tested through the official websites of UNESCO, American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and WHO. Moreover, the academic literature was gathered from Google Scholar, JSTOR, and the Pakistan Journal of Education. All the documents were read in full and specific sections were coded using Policy Analysis Framework Described earlier

Ethical Considerations

This study is confined to publicly available policy documents and published academic literature. Therefore, it does not rely on human participation and need formal ethics approval. Nevertheless, the research maintain compliance with academic ethical norms. All sources are properly cited

using APA (7th edition) style and quotations from policy documents are recorded exactly as stated, with clear references to chapters and clauses to reduce the risk of misunderstanding. This study focuses on wider concerns and framework weaknesses in policy themselves. Any analytical insights made about Pakistani education policy are supported by documented references not on unfounded beliefs.

Data analysis

Overview of Analytical Approach

This study applies a systematic and structured approach to assess the National Education Policy (NEP) 2017-2025. The process involves comprehensive clause by clause analysis of each policy, given by Policy Analysis Framework (PAF). Each clause is evaluated alongside with international standards published by UNESCO, ASCA and WHO. The comparison identifies the points of consistency and gaps. The analysis examines the policy thoroughly to the exact wording rather than relying on general impressions. For Further context the (SNC, 2020) and the National Education Policy 2009 are also examined. This study ensures that the evaluation are clearly explained, fair and evidence based.

Dimension 1: Definition and Scope of Guidance and Counselling

According to the international standards, guidance and counselling are described as a systematic function that encourages the academic, vocational and personal-social growth of all the learners, not merely those identified difficulties. UNESCO (2002) elaborates it as a proactive system that is assessable to each and every student, whereas the ASCA National model (2019) contributes these programmes should be universal in scope, development in nature and enforced by trained school counsellors with a proper plan. This creates a structural gap: The NEP 2017-2025 leaves the definition of guidance and counselling ambiguously and does not align with the international standards. As a result, schools make their own policy which causes in inconsistent practices (Zahid et al., 2019). These complications are more critical at elementary level, here children aged five to thirteen needs well defines framework of support.

Dimension 2: Target Educational Level- Elementary Level specificity

The ASCA National model (2022) and UNESCO'S Education for All framework (2002) underscores that guidance and counselling should be offered at every level of schooling, along with life skills and psychosocial support. At elementary level students come up with different challenges such as building friendships, anxiety during transitions, struggling in early reading and numeracy and pre-adolescent stress. These challenges can be resolved with age-appropriate programs. In Pakistan's NEP 2017-2025 Chapter 21 mentions about guidance and counselling broadly but fails to separate the provision by school level. The policy does not clearly mention any specific statement for elementary schools and neglects the needs of students aged five to thirteen. This gap contributes to structural weakness. Schools are left without clear direction hence they are unable to resolve the early challenges faced by students that include academic, social and emotional in a systematic way.

Dimension 3: Role specification for School Counsellors.

International standards, such as ASCA National Model (2019), explicitly articulates the roles of school counsellors. They are qualified professionals who are responsible for conducting structured programs with a specific ratio of one counsellor per 250 students. Counsellors focuses on holistic development and their role is different from teachers. Pakistan's NEP 2017–2025, Chapter 21 addresses guidance and counselling but it fails to define what is the role of counsellors. It omits the

precise specification such as qualification, responsibilities and ratios. Instead of mentioning the clear role and responsibility of counsellors it blends it with teachers, and hope they give counselling without proper training and resources creating major gaps. Without predefined clear roles schools cannot hire counsellors or plan resources properly. Even though teachers try their best to fill the space but still without proper training and resources their efforts are uneven. The NEP lack clarity and structure while international standard clearly mentions everything about guidance and counselling.

Dimension 4: Role Specification for Teachers in Guidance and Counselling delivery

UNESCO (2002) suggests that classroom teachers should receive basic foundational training in psychosocial support and detect students who needs to be directed to counsellors. Teacher's support should be help-focused and referral driven not therapeutic. In Pakistan's NEP 2017–2025, Chapter 21 stresses that teachers should be trained so they are able to facilitate student's psychosocial development and serves as an example. The policy lacks details about the type, provider and timings of training. It lacks differentiation between the role of a teacher and the role of professional counsellors. The lack of outlined responsibilities teachers is assigned to do counselling without clear boundaries and resources. As a result, guidance and counselling in school are not up to the best level and is limited.

Dimension5: role specification for administrators

The ASCA National Model (2019) specifies some roles and responsibilities that are allocated to the principle and district administrator concerning about counselling program. It means that schools make sure counselors have proper time in the timetable to meet students, and protected from non-counselling duties and supporting professional development. In Pakistan's NEP 2017–2025, Chapter 21 quotes that the school leaders play a crucial part in guidance and counselling. However, the policy lacks a clear description of duties for administrators. The policy mentions that accountability relies on external oversight, demonstrating that responsibility depends on outsiders rather than institutionalized. This creates a significant gap. It happens because there is no systematic approach to check if head teachers and districts officers make sure counselling services are carried out. The absence of unassigned responsibility lead to failure of reforms. As Fullan (2007) affirms that when individuals are not officially accountable the reforms collapse.

Dimension 6: Student-to-Counsellor Ratio

International standards explicitly mention the ratio of students that are allocated to each counsellor. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) suggest the ratio of one counsellor per 250 students. If a school has more than 200 students then there should be one full time counsellor available for students, this is strongly recommended by the UNESCO. These standards stress the significance of balanced proportions to establish effective and meaningful guidance. Whereas, no specific student-to-counsellor ratio mentioned in Pakistan's NEP 2017-2025. This absence leads to serious gaps. If there is no predefined policy on student-to-counsellor ratio, schools cannot request for counsellors and justify the fund allocations. Therefore, elementary schools lack policy reforms to make resources available, leaving counselling facilities weak.

Dimension 7: Implementation Mechanism

International standard accentuated that strong systematic framework must include mechanism for application. Levin (2010) identified some of the crucial elements that are essential includes the timelines, budgets, designated authorities and tracking benchmarks. The ASCA model (2017) instructs school to keep a documented and evidence-based plan that is examined on a yearly basis. In Pakistan's NEP 2017–2025, Chapter 21 lacks these components: milestones, schedules,

financial plans, implementing organizations and tracking frameworks. The policy itself accepts the deficiency in implementation due to missing procedures and accountability (Government of Pakistan, 2017), and does not offer any interventions. Creating a structural gap. Investigation by Fullan (2007) illustrates that guidelines or policy lacks when their lack of infrastructure it often collapses. On the other hand, Sholeh (2023) identifies in Pakistan that guidance and counselling implementation is sustained mainly by teacher's effort instead of organizational directives. The policy addresses about the guidance and counselling but due to the absence of a defined plan school are not implementing it consistently.

Dimension 8: Accountability and Monitoring Provisions

International frameworks emphasize transparency as a crucial component of policy reinforcement. UNESCO (2019) and WHO (2020) demands for the evaluation systems in academic and psychosocial programs including documentation processes and accountability assessments. In Pakistan's NEP 2017–2025 there is a lack of monitoring processes for guidance and counselling. The policy does not include the standard, record keeping duties, assessment rules and penalties for non-compliance. The National Education Assessment System (NEAS) and provincial authorities only assess the students' academic performance and ignores the counselling services creating a major gap. Without established system and accountability the guidance and counselling services cannot be applied as part of school operations. Schools and administrators are not made accountable for counselling and ultimately teachers and head teachers takes this responsibility. Consequently, counselling is uneven and broken. Therefore, lack of accountability and monitoring, counselling stays weak and NEP 2017-2025 show a significant gap compared to international standards.

Summary

The study follows qualitative research approach, it emphasizes on ideas, meaning and context rather than numbers. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2017-2025, was analyzed across the eight dimensions: how guidance and counselling are defined, the levels of education examined, the roles of counsellors, teachers and administrators, suggested student-to-counsellor allocations, procedures for carrying out implementation and the provisions for supervision and evaluation.

Findings of the Study

This study found six main problems in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2017-2025 pertaining guidance and counselling. First, the policy fails to provide an explicit or functional definition of guidance and counselling. Second, it addresses the guidance and counselling vaguely without distinguishing the measures for multiple learning stages particularly for elementary. Third, the policy does not specify the occupational duties or qualifications for school counsellors. Fourth, educators are obliged to function as untrained guidance providers despite the fact that they are deprived of structured coaching and facilities. Fifth, there are no frameworks for operationalization and the policy fails to provide schedules, financial plans and mandated organizations to make sure guidance and counselling services are given. Finally, the policy does not contain accountability and evaluation systems. Indicators, record keeping structures or penalties for violations are missing in the policy. As a whole, these flaws illustrate that G&C in Pakistani schools remain poor, fragmented and based on teacher discretion instead of organized frame work.

This study is carried out to evaluate the missing elements of guidance and counselling at elementary level. The primary source that was studied is the National Education Policy (NEP) 2017-2025, what was evaluated along with the international standards from UNESCO, WHO and ASCA. The investigation was prompted by the shortage of systematic guidance and counselling

facilities in Pakistani school. International evidences like UNESCO (2002) emphasized that structured guidance and counselling programmers at elementary level improve learning outcomes, reduce dropout rates, and support children's psychological wellbeing.

Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2017-2025 acknowledges guidance and counselling as crucial, mentioning officially in Chapter 21. Policy cannot succeed without specific measures. This study proves that NEP has not constructed the framework that is required for guidance and counselling services at elementary level. The policy does not talk about the definition, grade-level rules, job specification, qualification, action plans and evaluation frameworks. This gap has significant impacts for the 47 million children in Pakistani elementary school who go through many challenges such as academic, social and emotional without proper support (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023; UNICEF, 2021). International findings demonstrates that early, structure counselling decreases the dropout rates, enhance the performance and encourages psychosocial progress (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2021; Muhammad Arsyad et al., 2025). High dropout rate it acknowledged by NEP itself which mention is because due to the lack of transformation of guidance and counselling pledges, compulsory, equipped and overseen processes. The conclusion is evident that Pakistan needs to have more revised policy. It needs to mention the key elements: definition, grade-level rules, job specification, qualification, action plans and evaluation frameworks. Without these element chapter 21 will remain a statement but not be practical as explained by Ibrahim (1983).

Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of this study, there are some specific recommendations for educational supervisors, institutional heads and provincial directorates.

Recommendation 1: Design a Practical Guidance and Counselling Framework

Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training needs to create National Guidance and Counselling Implementation Framework, an autonomous plan for elementary schools. UNESCO, ASCA, and WHO should be integrated and it must encompass of timelines, financial allocations, qualification standards and transparency to make this framework strong and applicable. This initiative will make Chapter 21 of the NEP 2017–2025 practical and meaningful (Levin, 2010; Fullan, 2007)

Recommendation 2: Fix a Student-to-Counsellor Ratio

All elementary schools having more the 300 students must be mandated to ensure at least one permanent certified school counsellor. Schools with lower enrollment can use cluster model. This means a counsellors serve more than one schools (ASCA, 2019; UNESCO, 2019).

Recommendation 3: Modify Teacher Training Curriculum:

The Higher Education Commission needs to update the B.Ed. (Hons.) curriculum with the aim that all fresh teachers acquire fundamental proficiencies in psychosocial support, timely spotting of wellbeing challenges and guidance procedures. Current elementary school teachers must also get training to enhance their skills. This will help them to give provide proper academic guidance, emotional support psychosocial assistance to students (Bhutto, Zafar, & Ullah, 2023; HEC, 2010).

Recommendation 4: Specify Individual Responsibilities for Stakeholders

The ministry is advised to publish an explicit role of individuals in a document. It must document occupational boundaries of school counsellors, articulate the assisting and direct responsibilities of teacher and set forth the obligation of administrators to maintain consultation periods and allocate sufficient resources. This document is expected to be integrated as a part of school inspection and standards (ASCA, 2019; Sholeh, 2023).

Recommendation 5: Create a Guidance and Counselling Supervision and Evaluation Scheme

Provincial education authorities must include guidance and counselling parameters within the school evaluation and validate the frameworks. This needs to encompass the number of students benefiting from counselling services, counsellor-to-student ratio, teacher training completion and student health indicator divided according to the level and gender (UNESCO, 2019; WHO, 2020).

Recommendation 6: Allocate an Exclusive Guidance and Counselling Budget Line.

Both the federal and provincial governments should have dedicated budget allocation for guidance and counselling at the elementary level. This budget should be set apart from teacher's salary. Global organizations such as UNESCO and UNICEF should be invited to support initial phase of counsellor hiring and training (I-SAPS, 2021; Center for Peace and Development Initiative, 2024).

Recommendation 7: Address Misunderstandings through Public Awareness Drive

A nationwide initiative must be launched in order to confront the cultural and social misconception that counselling is only meant for the students facing challenges or learning difficulties. Counselling needs to be presented as support available to all students serving as a foundation for holistic development, in line with UNESCO's inclusive education framework (HEC, 2010; UNESCO, 2019).

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