Literature as an Educational Tool for Promoting Mental Health Awareness among Rural Government School Students in Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT:

Mental health education has become an important concern in contemporary schooling, especially in rural contexts where students often lack proper emotional guidance and structured support systems. for promoting mental health awareness among rural school students. The study aims to analyse how literary texts can contribute to emotional understanding, empathy, and behavioural development within classroom settings. The research adopts a qualitative and observational methodology, based on classroom experiences during B.Ed. training in rural government schools in Tamil Nadu, along with conceptual insights drawn from philosophical and psychological perspectives. The findings suggest that literature-based teaching methods, when supported by interactive approaches such as storytelling, role play, and multimedia integration, can significantly improve students' emotional awareness, classroom engagement, behavioural responses, and education quality. The study concludes that literature, when used effectively, can go beyond academic instruction and serve as a meaningful tool and learning opportunity for mental health education, helping students develop emotional stability and responsible behaviour..

Keywords: Educational Tool, Literature, Mental Health Awareness, School Students, Tamil Nadu

1. Introduction

Education is generally understood as a process of acquiring knowledge and developing intellectual abilities. However, in practice, especially within many school systems, education is often reduced to the process of preparing students for examinations. Marks and academic performance become the primary focus, while other equally important aspects such as emotional development, behavioural growth, and social understanding are often neglected. This imbalance becomes more visible in rural educational contexts, where students face additional challenges due to their social and economic background (Apampa et al., 2024; Barjestesh et al., 2025).

In rural areas of Tamil Nadu, many students come from families where parents are not formally educated and are engaged in daily labour. Due to the nature of their work, parents may not have sufficient time or awareness to guide their children in terms of behaviour, emotional control, and interpersonal relationships. As a result, students grow up without structured guidance on how to manage emotions, respond to authority, or interact respectfully with others. These gaps become visible in classroom settings, where students often struggle with discipline, engagement, and communication (Clark et al., 2023).

During classroom observations, it becomes clear that students are not intentionally trying to behave inappropriately. Rather, they are mentally unstable because of the lack in awareness and guidance. Their behaviour is shaped by their surroundings, including peer influence and the social environment in which they grow up. In many cases, students observe older youth in their communities who are not engaged in formal education and who may be involved in unhealthy habits. These patterns gradually influence younger students, affecting their attitudes towards education and behaviour (Farashaiyan et al., 2025; Pritchard & Dockerty, 2025).

At the same time, the current method of teaching does not adequately address these issues. Teachers often focus on completing the syllabus and preparing students for exams, leaving little room for discussions on emotional well-being or life skills. Even when literature is taught, it is usually limited to reading the text and explaining its meaning, without connecting it to students' real-life experiences. As a result, students fail to see the relevance of what they are learning, and their interest in studies remains low (Smith & Harris, 2022; Wang, 2026).

In this context, there is a need to rethink the role of education. Instead of focusing only on academic achievement, education should also aim to develop emotionally stable and socially responsible individuals. Literature offers a unique opportunity in this regard. Through stories, characters, and situations, literature reflects human emotions and experiences, making it a powerful tool for teaching mental health awareness. When used effectively, it can help students understand themselves and others better, leading to positive behavioural change (Luan et al., 2024; Vijayaratnam et al., 2025).

1.1. Research Gap and Objectives

Although there has been increasing discussion on the importance of mental health in education, its practical implementation in classroom teaching remains limited, particularly in rural school contexts. Most studies focus on theoretical aspects of mental health or suggest the need for counselling services, but there is less emphasis on how regular classroom subjects can be used to address emotional and behavioural issues.

In the case of literature, its potential as a tool for emotional development is often acknowledged, but in practice, it is not fully utilized. Literature classes are frequently conducted in a traditional manner, focusing on reading and explanation rather than engagement and reflection. As a result, students do not benefit from the deeper emotional and psychological insights that literature can provide.

The objective of this study is to examine the role of literature in promoting mental health awareness among rural school students. The study aims to understand how literature can be

used to improve students' emotional understanding, empathy, and behaviour. It also seeks to identify effective teaching strategies that can make literature more engaging and meaningful for students.

2. Methodology

This study follows a qualitative and observational research approach, combining classroom-based experiences with conceptual analysis. The purpose of the study is not to measure behaviour through numerical data, but to understand the patterns of student behaviour, emotional responses, and the effectiveness of literature as a pedagogical tool in real classroom situations.

The primary data for this study is drawn from direct classroom observations made during B.Ed. training in rural government schools in Tamil Nadu. During this period, careful attention was given to students' behaviour, their interaction with teachers and peers, their level of participation in classroom activities, and their response to different teaching methods. These observations helped in identifying recurring behavioural patterns and the underlying issues related to emotional instability and lack of guidance.

In addition to observational data, the study also incorporates conceptual insights from literary and psychological perspectives. The ideas of Aristotle on emotional experience and catharsis, and Viktor E. Frankl on meaning and psychological resilience, provide a theoretical framework for understanding how literature can influence emotional development. These perspectives support the study that engagement with narratives can help individuals process emotions and develop a deeper understanding of life experiences.

The methodology also includes an analysis of teaching practices that were either observed or experimented with during classroom sessions. Different approaches such as traditional lecture methods, storytelling, discussion-based teaching, and activity-oriented learning were considered to understand their impact on student engagement and behaviour.

Thus, the methodology combines observation, theoretical understanding, and pedagogical analysis to explore how literature can be effectively used to promote mental health awareness among students.

3. Results

3.1. Classroom Observations and Student Behaviour

The classroom observations made during the training period reveal several important aspects of student behaviour in rural school settings. One of the most noticeable patterns was the lack of active engagement among students during lessons. When questions were asked, many students remained silent or showed little interest in responding. Even when encouraged, they often avoided participation and appeared indifferent to the learning process. This was actually because of their mental instability.

In some instances, students displayed disruptive behaviour during classroom activities. For example, while the lesson was being written on the board, a few students engaged in actions such as throwing pen caps or objects, indicating their worst behaviour and they thought that disrespecting teachers was awesome behaviour. Such behaviour not only disrupted the class but also reflected a deeper issue related to emotional control and awareness.

Another significant observation was the students' response to instructions. When asked to stand up, answer questions, or participate in activities, some students chose not to respond at all. During tests, a few students did not attempt to write answers, and homework assigned in class was often left incomplete. These behaviours were consistent and not limited to a single group of students.

What was particularly notable was that this behaviour was not restricted to interactions with trainee teachers alone. Even when regular schoolteachers intervened, students sometimes responded casually or ignored instructions. In

certain situations, students displayed a lack of respect in their tone of communication, speaking in a manner that suggested indifference or mild defiance. For instance, when corrected, some students responded in a casual or dismissive tone, as if their behaviour was normal and acceptable.

Further observations indicated that such behaviour might be influenced by the students' social environment. Many students seemed to model their behaviour on older individuals in their communities. In some rural areas, it is common to see youth who are not engaged in formal education and who may be involved in activities such as substance use or irregular work patterns. Younger students, observing these behaviours, may begin to imitate them without fully understanding their consequences.

In addition, students often appeared to associate assertive or oppositional behaviour with confidence or strength. Speaking back to teachers, ignoring instructions, or behaving in a careless manner was sometimes seen as a way of gaining attention or status among peers. This perception further reinforces negative behavioural patterns.

These observations suggest that the issue is not merely one of discipline but of awareness and guidance. Students are not necessarily acting with the intention of being disrespectful; rather, they lack the emotional understanding and behavioural direction needed to function effectively in a structured learning environment.

Another important aspect is the connection between emotional instability and academic performance. When students are not mentally settled or emotionally supported, their ability to concentrate on studies is significantly affected. Lack of interest in learning, incomplete tasks, and poor classroom participation can often be linked to underlying emotional challenges.

Therefore, these classroom observations highlight the need for an educational approach that goes beyond academic instruction and addresses students' emotional and behavioural development in a meaningful way.

3.2. Literature as a Tool for Mental Health Education

Literature has always been considered an important part of education, not only for language development but also for understanding human experiences. Through stories, poems, and narratives, literature reflects different aspects of life, including emotions, relationships, struggles, and personal growth. Because of this, it has the potential to influence students' mentality in a meaningful way (Korosidou & Griva, 202).

Unlike direct instruction, where students are told how to behave, literature presents situations indirectly through characters and events. This allows students to observe, reflect, and form their own understanding. When students engage with a character who faces challenges, they begin to see how emotions such as anger, fear, or confusion are experienced and expressed. This process helps them relate these situations to their own lives (Lo & Hew, 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, this idea can be supported by the concept of catharsis as discussed by Aristotle. According to this view, experiencing emotions through narratives allows individuals to release and understand their own feelings. He said that tragic drama allows audiences to experience feelings such as fear and pity, leading to emotional release and deeper understanding of human suffering. This concept suggests that literature has the power to influence human emotions and promote psychological awareness. For example, in Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck, the relationship between George and Lennie highlights the themes of loneliness, loss, and the burden of responsibility. The novel's tragic ending often elicits strong emotional reactions from readers, encouraging them to confront their feelings about friendship, isolation, and moral dilemmas. A psychological study published in The Journal of Literary Studies found that exposure to tragic literature can increase emotional resilience by allowing readers to process grief and develop coping mechanisms (Parker, 2016).

Similarly, the work of Viktor E. Frankl emphasizes the importance of finding meaning in life experiences, even in difficult situations. In this autobiographical work, Frankl describes his experiences in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. He explains how prisoners faced extreme suffering, loss, and psychological trauma. Despite these harsh conditions, Frankl observed that individuals who were able to find meaning in life often maintained greater psychological strength. Frankl argues that finding purpose, even in the most hopeless situations, is crucial for mental survival

Based on his argument, his philosophy has been widely adopted in modern psychology, particularly in therapy practices that emphasize meaning-making as a tool for overcoming despair. Frankl later developed this psychological theory known as logotherapy, which emphasizes the importance of meaning in human life. His work continues to influence modern discussions about mental health and psychological resilience. This narrative demonstrates how literature can present real human experiences that inspire hope, reflection, and emotional strength. When students are exposed to literary texts that reflect struggle and resilience, they begin to understand that challenges are a part of life and can be approached in constructive ways (Vistorte et al., 2024).

In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Palace of Illusions, the author presents a powerful character, Draupadi, not like a voiceless woman in the original text The Mahabharata, the epic. Divakaruni rewrite the Mahabharata from the view of Draupadi and portrayed her as a symbol of resilience and inner strength. From the beginning of her life, she faces many emotional and social challenges, yet she never allows these struggles to break her spirit. Even after the humiliation she suffers in the royal court, Draupadi transforms her pain into determination and courage. Her resilience helps her endure suffering, gives her the strength to question injustice and demand dignity in a patriarchal society. Instead of remaining silent, Draupadi expresses her anger and questions the unfair treatment given to her.

During the years of exile with the Pandavas, she continues to support and inspire them despite her own suffering. Her strength shapes many important events in the story and influences the fate of those around her. This unwavering resilience not only shapes her personal identity but also becomes a driving force behind the events that lead to the Kurukshetra War. Through Draupadi's character, the novel highlights how resilience can empower an individual to survive adversity and transform suffering into strength (Zhang, 2024).

In addition, literature encourages empathy. By reading about different characters and their experiences, students learn to see situations from multiple perspectives. This helps them understand the feelings of others, which is an important aspect of emotional and social development. In classroom settings where students struggle with peer interaction and respect, this kind of understanding can lead to positive changes in behaviour. Along with the stories teachers also must share some of their personal experiences, which will help students the more to get the point.

However, the effectiveness of literature depends largely on how it is taught. Simply including literary texts in the syllabus is not enough. Because there was a saying**, "Today's students, tomorrow's citizens"** the motive the education system is not only make the students to get high marks but actually the aim is to create a good generation and good citizens. The method of teaching plays a crucial role in determining whether students are able to connect with the content and benefit from it (Shao et al., 2025).

3.3. Limitations of Traditional Teaching Methods

In many classrooms, literature is taught in a very traditional manner. The teacher reads the text, explains its meaning, and asks students to remember key points for examinations. While this method may help students understand the basic content, it does not create a meaningful

connection between the text and the students' lives (Tan & Farashaiyan, 2016; Vijayaratnam et al., 2025).

One of the major limitations of this approach is that it treats literature as a subject to be memorized rather than experienced. Students are expected to learn the story, understand the summary, and reproduce it in exams. There is very little opportunity for them to express their thoughts, share their opinions, or relate the text to their own experiences. As a result, literature loses its emotional and educational value. This issue becomes more significant when we consider the present generation of students. Today's students are highly influenced by visual media such as films, social media, and digital content. They observe and imitate what they see around them. For example, it is common to see students adopting the dressing styles, mannerisms, and attitudes of characters they admire in films. These influences shape their behaviour more strongly than classroom instruction (Brown & Thomas, 2023; Muthusamy & Farashaiyan, 2016).

In such a context, teaching literature only through reading and explanation becomes ineffective. Students may not show interest in the lesson because it does not match the level of engagement they experience outside the classroom. When the teaching method does not capture their attention, the opportunity to use literature as a tool for emotional development is lost.

Another important point is that students who already face emotional and behavioural challenges may not respond to direct instructions about behaviour. If a teacher simply tells them how to behave, they may resist or ignore the advice. However, when the same ideas are presented through stories and characters, students are more likely to accept and reflect on them. Therefore, it is necessary to move beyond traditional teaching methods and adopt approaches that make literature more engaging, relatable, and meaningful for students (Chounta et al., 2022; Farashaiyan et al., 2017).

3.4. Innovative Pedagogical Approaches

To make literature effective as a tool for mental health education, it is important to adopt teaching methods that actively involve students in the learning process. Instead of being passive listeners, students should be encouraged to participate, express their ideas, and engage with the content in different ways (Nyamupanemunda & Deshinta, 2022).

One effective approach is storytelling. When a lesson is presented as a story rather than a text to be read, students show greater interest and attention. Storytelling allows the teacher to bring characters and situations to life, making it easier for students to understand and connect with the emotions involved. Role play and drama are also powerful methods. When students act out scenes from a text, they begin to experience the emotions of the characters. This helps them understand not only the story but also the feelings and motivations behind the characters' actions. Such activities also improve confidence and communication skills (Williams & Johnson, 2022).

Another important method is the use of visual and digital media. Since students are already familiar with movies and videos, integrating these into the classroom can make learning more engaging. For example, showing a short video related to a literary theme and then discussing it in class can help students connect the lesson to real-life situations. In this way, literature can be linked to the kind of content students already engage with outside the classroom (Kumar & Vairavan, 2024).

Classroom activities such as group discussions, reflective writing, and opinion sharing can also be used to deepen understanding. Students can be asked questions like: "What would you do if you were in this situation?" or "How do you feel about this character's decision?" These questions encourage students to think critically and reflect on their own behaviour. It is also important to observe students' responses during these activities. Teachers can identify patterns in how students think and behave and use this

understanding to guide them in a positive direction. Over time, such methods can help students develop better emotional awareness, improve their behaviour, and become more engaged in learning (Farashaiyan et al., 2018; Kalra, 2024).

Thus, by combining literature with interactive and modern teaching approaches, it is possible to create a classroom environment that supports both academic learning and mental health development.

4. Discussion

4.1. Behavioural Concerns and Social Context

The classroom observations discussed earlier are not isolated cases. Similar patterns of behaviour can be seen in broader social contexts, particularly in rural school environments. Recent incidents reported from Tamil Nadu provide strong evidence of increasing behavioural and emotional challenges among school students, indicating that the issue extends beyond individual classrooms and reflects a larger social concern (Clark et al., 2023).

In one reported case, a senior student lost his life following a violent assault by a group of junior students after a classroom-related conflict. This incident highlights the presence of uncontrolled aggression and the inability to manage emotions in a healthy manner. Such extreme reactions to minor issues suggest that students are not equipped with the necessary emotional skills to handle conflict.

Similarly, there have been instances where students brought weapons to school and used them during disputes. In one case, a disagreement between classmates escalated into a violent attack inside the classroom. These situations demonstrate a lack of awareness regarding the consequences of one's actions and point to the absence of effective behavioural guidance.

Another serious concern is the changing nature of student-teacher relationships. In certain reported incidents, students have not only shown disrespect towards teachers but have also engaged in direct acts of violence. For example, in a government school in Tamil Nadu, two students who were reportedly under the influence of alcohol assaulted a teacher with liquor bottles when questioned about their behaviour. In another instance, teachers reported that students consumed alcohol, damaged school property, and issued threats, creating an unsafe learning environment.

These incidents reflect a breakdown in discipline and respect within the educational system. However, it is important to understand that such behaviour cannot be viewed only as a disciplinary issue. It is closely connected to the students' emotional state, social environment, and lack of proper guidance. Many students are influenced by what they observe in their surroundings, including peer groups and community behaviour. When negative behaviours are normalized in their environment, students may begin to accept them as standard or even desirable.

In addition to behavioural issues, broader social factors also play a role in shaping student attitudes. Studies on classroom environments in rural India suggest that factors such as social hierarchy and group identity can influence student interactions. These influences may affect how students relate to one another, how they perceive authority, and how they respond in different situations. As a result, behavioural issues are often linked not only to individual psychology but also to social context (Garcia & Patel, 2023).

Taken together, these observations and reported incidents indicate that the current educational approach is insufficient in addressing students' emotional and behavioural needs. Focusing only on academic achievement does not prepare students to handle real-life challenges or develop responsible behaviour. There is a clear need for an educational model that integrates mental health awareness and emotional development into everyday learning.

4.2. The Role of Literature in Addressing Behavioural Issues

In the context of these challenges, literature can serve as a meaningful tool to address behavioural and emotional issues among students. Unlike direct instruction, which may be resisted or ignored, literature provides an indirect yet powerful way of influencing students' thinking (Pritchard & Dockerty, 2025).

When students read or engage with stories, they encounter characters who experience different emotions and face various challenges. By observing how these characters respond to situations, students begin to reflect on their own behaviour. For example, a story that portrays the consequences of anger or impulsive actions can help students understand the importance of self-control without being directly instructed.

One of the key advantages of literature is that it allows students to learn without feeling judged. Instead of being told that their behaviour is wrong, they are given the opportunity to observe and think. This reduces resistance and encourages internal reflection. Over time, this process can lead to gradual behavioural change (Johnson & Clark, 2022).

It is also important to note that students' negative behaviour is not entirely their fault. In many cases, they have not been exposed to proper guidance or examples of positive behaviour. When they lack awareness about emotional control and social responsibility, they may act in ways that appear inappropriate or disrespectful. Therefore, instead of simply correcting or punishing behaviour, it is necessary to provide them with opportunities to learn and develop (Aminath et al., 2024).

Literature, when combined with effective teaching methods, can fulfil this role. By presenting real-life-like situations through narratives, it helps students understand the impact of their actions. When students recognize similarities between the characters and their own lives, they are more likely to reflect and make changes. Furthermore, integrating literature with modern teaching tools such as visual media can enhance its effectiveness. Since students are already influenced by movies and digital content, using similar formats in the classroom can capture their attention and make learning more relatable. When literature is presented through engaging methods, students not only understand the content better but also develop interest in learning (Shao et al., 2025; Tan et al., 2020).

Thus, literature has the potential to bridge the gap between academic learning and emotional development. It can help students move from a state of confusion and instability towards greater awareness and responsibility.

5. Conclusion

The observations and discussions presented in this study clearly show that the challenges faced by students in rural school environments are not limited to academic performance. Issues related to behaviour, emotional instability, lack of respect, and poor interpersonal relationships indicate a deeper problem that cannot be addressed through traditional teaching methods alone. When students are not mentally and emotionally stable, expecting them to focus only on studies and perform well in examinations does not lead to meaningful development.

Students are often described as the future citizens of a nation. If this is the case, their development must go beyond academic achievement and include emotional strength, social responsibility, and ethical understanding. If students continue to grow without proper guidance in these areas, the same patterns of behaviour will continue into the next generation. This makes it essential for the education system to take responsibility not only for intellectual growth but also for shaping behaviour and character.

One of the important insights of this study is that students' negative behaviour should not be viewed only as their fault. In many cases, it is the result of a lack of awareness, limited guidance at home, and the influence of their social environment. When students are not taught how to understand and manage their emotions, they may express themselves in inappropriate ways. Therefore, instead of focusing only on correction

or punishment, it is necessary to create learning experiences that help them understand themselves better.

In this context, literature emerges as a powerful and practical tool. However, its effectiveness depends on how it is used in the classroom. Simply reading and explaining a text is not enough to create meaningful impact. Students today are highly influenced by visual and interactive forms of content such as films and digital media. When they see something engaging, they tend to imitate and internalize it. This shows that if literature is presented in a similar engaging manner—through storytelling, role play, discussions, and visual support—it can have a strong influence on students' thinking and behaviour.

By involving students actively in the learning process and allowing them to connect literary texts with real-life situations, teachers can help them develop emotional awareness and better decision-making skills. When students begin to understand the consequences of actions through characters and stories, they are more likely to reflect on their own behaviour and make positive changes.

Thus, literature should not be treated only as a subject for examination, but as a meaningful tool for life education. When used effectively, it can contribute to the development of emotionally stable, socially responsible, and thoughtful individuals. Integrating mental health awareness into regular classroom teaching through literature can create a more balanced and effective educational system, especially in rural contexts where such guidance is most needed.

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7. Author Declaration

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