



HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GOVERNMENT AND NEO-HUMANIST SCHOOLS IN PURBA MEDINIPUR, WEST BENGAL

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Backdrop: Primary education in India is undergoing reform to balance academic achievement with holistic development. Government schools emphasize structured learning and measurable outcomes, while Neo-Humanist schools adopt a value-based and child-centered philosophy. A comparative analysis of these models provides insights into their strengths and limitations.

Objective: The study aimed to compare the academic achievement, emotional intelligence, moral development, and school environment of students in Government and Neo-Humanist primary schools of Purba Medinipur, West Bengal. It further sought to analyze teachers' and parents' perceptions and propose an integrated framework for balanced primary education.

Methodology: A mixed-method research design was employed with a sample of 300 students (150 from Government schools, 150 from Neo-Humanist schools), 30 teachers, and 100 parents. Standardized tests, observation schedules, interviews, and curriculum analysis were used to collect data. Both quantitative (t-tests, mean and SD) and qualitative analyses were applied.

Results and Discussion: Quantitative findings indicated that Government school students scored higher in mathematics and language (M = 68.4, SD = 9.2) compared to Neo-Humanist students (M = 61.7, SD = 10.4). However, Neo-Humanist students outperformed in emotional intelligence (M = 72.1, SD = 8.5) and moral reasoning (M = 75.6, SD = 7.9) compared to Government school students (M = 61.4, SD = 9.3; M = 63.2, SD = 8.1). Qualitative evidence revealed that Government schools provide structured curricula but often lack in fostering emotional and moral growth, while Neo-Humanist schools nurture ethical, spiritual, and social values within a supportive environment.

Conclusion: The study concludes that both Government and Neo-Humanist schools hold complementary strengths – Government schools excel in academic rigor, while Neo-Humanist schools foster holistic development. An integrated model combining these strengths is recommended to achieve balanced primary education that equips children with both scholastic competence and life-oriented values.

Keywords: Government Primary Schools, Neo-Humanist Schools, Academic Achievement, Emotional Intelligence, Moral Development, Holistic Education, West Bengal

Introduction

Primary education is universally acknowledged as the foundation of lifelong learning and social development (UNESCO, 2015). In India, Government Primary Schools serve as the backbone of the education system, providing free and compulsory education to millions of children under the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. These schools aim to ensure equity and universal access, yet they often face challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, large class sizes, and a reliance on rote learning methods (Choudhury, 2017; Reddy, 2016). These systemic constraints raise questions about their ability to nurture the holistic growth of children, including their emotional, social, and moral development.

In contrast, Neo-Humanist Schools, founded on the philosophy of Prabhat Ranjan Sarkar (1982), adopt an alternative vision of education. Rooted in Neo-Humanism, these schools emphasize *ātmanmokṣārtham jagaddhitāya ca* ("for self-realization and the welfare of the world") as their guiding principle, integrating academics with moral, spiritual, and environmental education. They prioritize value-based learning, emotional intelligence, and ethical reasoning as essential components of child development (Bussey, 2009; Anandarama & Srivastava, 2020).

The co-existence of these two school models in Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, provides a unique context to study their relative effectiveness. While Government schools represent the mainstream, state-driven model, Neo-Humanist schools provide a holistic alternative aligned with cultural, moral, and spiritual ideals. Despite the growing interest in alternative schooling, limited

empirical studies compare the outcomes of these models in terms of academic achievement, emotional well-being, and moral growth.

This study therefore seeks to bridge that gap by empirically examining how Government Primary Schools and Neo-Humanist Schools shape student outcomes. It aims to answer a critical question: *Can a value-integrated educational model provide advantages over the conventional, academically-focused system in fostering holistic development?*

Need and Significance of the Study

The present study is situated within the larger debates on how education can meaningfully balance academic achievement with emotional and moral growth. Contemporary policy frameworks, both global and national, strongly emphasize this shift. Internationally, the UNESCO *Education 2030 Agenda* and *Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4)* call for inclusive, quality education that fosters not only cognitive abilities but also emotional intelligence, social responsibility, and ethical values (UNESCO, 2015). In the Indian context, the *National Education Policy (NEP), 2020* advocates for a departure from rote learning towards competency-based, experiential, and value-oriented education. This research responds to these imperatives by comparing Government and Neo-Humanist schools, asking whether one paradigm is better suited to these goals or whether a synthesis of the two is required.

The regional focus of this study adds further relevance. Purba Medinipur, characterized by its socio-economic and cultural diversity, mirrors the challenges faced by Indian primary education more broadly. In such a context, examining how Government and Neo-Humanist schools address the varied academic and non-academic needs of children provides valuable insights. Government schools, with their structured and curriculum-driven approach, are often effective in preparing students for standardized academic assessments but tend to overlook emotional, social, and moral dimensions of learning. Conversely, Neo-Humanist schools emphasize holistic growth by nurturing values, empathy, and self-reflection, but their emphasis on non-cognitive outcomes raises concerns about students' preparedness for academic competition. This study seeks to address these tensions through its guiding research questions, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the relative strengths and limitations of both systems.

The academic significance of this research lies in its effort to bridge a notable gap in existing scholarship. While previous studies have often critiqued the limitations of Government schooling (Rana & Sharma, 2016) or highlighted the promise of value-based alternatives (Bussey, 2009; Bhadra, 2022), few have undertaken an empirical, comparative evaluation of the two. By employing a mixed-method design to assess academic performance alongside emotional intelligence and moral reasoning, this study moves beyond unidimensional assessments. Its findings are expected to enrich policy discussions, inform curriculum reforms, and guide teacher training programs aimed at developing an integrated model of education. In doing so, the study contributes not only to academic scholarship but also to the practical realization of inclusive and compassionate educational systems that combine rigor with holistic development.

Objectives of the Study

1. To compare the academic achievement of students in Government and Neo-Humanist primary schools, with a focus on mathematics and language performance.
2. To examine the emotional intelligence of students across both school types and identify factors influencing observed differences.
3. To assess moral development among students and explore how Neo-Humanist pedagogy contributes to higher moral reasoning.
4. To analyze the role of school environments in shaping complementary strengths of academic achievement, emotional intelligence, and moral growth.
5. To explore teachers' and parents' perceptions of the effectiveness of Government and Neo-Humanist schooling in nurturing holistic development.
6. To propose an integrated framework that combines the academic strengths of Government schools with the socio-emotional and moral strengths of Neo-Humanist schools.

Research Questions

1. Why do Government primary school students demonstrate higher academic achievement in mathematics and language compared to Neo-Humanist students?
2. What pedagogical and environmental factors contribute to the higher emotional intelligence of Neo-Humanist students?
3. How do Neo-Humanist schools foster stronger moral development relative to Government schools?
4. In what ways do differences in school environments explain the contrasting outcomes across the two models?
5. How do teachers and parents perceive the strengths and limitations of each schooling model?
6. What integrated framework can be developed to ensure balanced primary education by drawing on the complementary strengths of both models?

Delimitations of the Study

1. The study focused only on primary education (classes I–V), excluding secondary and higher levels of schooling.

2. Only Government Primary Schools and Neo-Humanist Schools in Purba Medinipur district were included, leaving out private, NGO-run, or other alternative schools.
3. The study examined academic achievement, emotional intelligence, moral reasoning, and school environment, without addressing other aspects such as creativity, physical development, or digital literacy.
4. The sample was limited to teachers and parents directly associated with the selected schools; policymakers and community leaders were not included.
5. A mixed-method approach was chosen, but deeper ethnographic or longitudinal methods were not employed, keeping the scope focused and manageable.

Methodology

Research Design: The study employed a mixed-method research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the multidimensional aspects of student development (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative methods allowed measurement of academic performance and emotional intelligence, while qualitative methods provided deeper insights into school environments, moral development, and teacher-student interactions.

Sample: The study was conducted in Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, involving two groups of schools: Government Primary Schools and Neo-Humanist Schools. The sample included:

- 300 students (150 from Government Primary Schools and 150 from Neo-Humanist Schools), Classes III–V.
- 30 teachers (15 from each school type).
- 100 parents (50 from each group).

Sampling Technique: A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure representativeness across schools and gender.

Tools for Data Collection

1. Academic Achievement Test – Developed for Language and Mathematics to assess cognitive performance.
2. Emotional Intelligence Scale – Standardized tool with Cronbach’s alpha reliability of $\alpha = .81$, measuring self-awareness, empathy, and social skills.
3. Moral Development Interview Schedule – Semi-structured interviews based on Kohlberg’s stages of moral reasoning.
4. Classroom Observation Schedule – Used to evaluate teaching strategies, learning environment, and value-based practices.
5. Parent and Teacher Questionnaires – To assess perceptions of child development and school practices.

Procedure: Data collection took place in two phases. In the first phase, quantitative data were collected through academic tests and emotional intelligence assessments. In the second phase, classroom observations, teacher interviews, and parent surveys were conducted to capture qualitative dimensions. Triangulation was employed to validate findings across different sources (Denzin, 2012).

Data Analysis: Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and independent sample t-tests to compare group differences. Qualitative data, including interviews and observations, were thematically coded and analyzed to capture emerging patterns related to moral development, teacher competence, and school environment. This comprehensive methodology ensured reliability, validity, and a holistic understanding of the comparative impacts of Government and Neo-Humanist schools.

Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the comparative outcomes of Government Primary Schools and Neo-Humanist Schools across four key domains: academic performance, emotional intelligence, moral development, and school environment.

Table 1: Comparison of Academic Performance between Government and Neo-Humanist Schools

Subject	Government Schools (M ± SD)	Neo-Humanist Schools (M ± SD)	t-value	p-value
Language	69.2 ± 8.7	63.5 ± 9.4	3.87	p < .01
Mathematics	67.6 ± 9.8	59.9 ± 11.2	4.21	p < .001

Interpretation: The findings indicate that Government school students performed significantly better in both language and mathematics than their Neo-Humanist counterparts. This aligns with prior studies suggesting that Government schools, with their structured curriculum and standardized testing systems, tend to prioritize academic performance over non-cognitive skills (Reddy, 2016; Sharma & Singh, 2017). While Neo-Humanist schools focus more on holistic development, this may at times limit the emphasis on rigorous subject-specific achievement (Bussey, 2009).

Table 2: Comparison of Emotional Intelligence Scores

Dimension	Government (M ± SD)	Neo-Humanist (M ± SD)	t-value
Self-awareness	62.3 ± 8.5	74.5 ± 7.2	6.11***

Empathy	60.8 ± 9.1	71.7 ± 8.3	5.89***
Social skills	61.2 ± 8.7	70.2 ± 9.0	4.92***

(*p < .001 for all dimensions)

Interpretation: Neo-Humanist students scored significantly higher across all dimensions of emotional intelligence. This reflects the pedagogical emphasis of Neo-Humanist Education (NHE) on value-based learning, self-reflection, and cooperative practices (Sarkar, 1982; Anandarama & Srivastava, 2020). Emotional competencies are considered critical for 21st-century learners (Goleman, 2006), and these findings demonstrate that Neo-Humanist schools successfully integrate emotional literacy into their educational framework. Government schools, with their exam-driven structure, appear to underemphasize these skills, confirming earlier research that rote learning may undermine socio-emotional growth (Joshi, 2017).

Table 3: Comparison of Moral Development between Government and Neo-Humanist Schools

Moral Development Indicators	Government Schools (%)	Neo-Humanist Schools (%)
Preconventional reasoning (fear of punishment, self-interest)	54	22
Conventional reasoning (conformity, social approval)	33	41
Postconventional reasoning (ethical principles, universal values)	13	37
Demonstrated cooperative behavior	48	76
Environmental concern expressed	39	72
Respect for diversity observed	42	74

Interpretation: The results highlight a clear divergence in moral development between the two school systems. A majority of Government school students (54%) remained at the *preconventional stage*, focusing on immediate consequences and fear of punishment. By contrast, a higher proportion of Neo-Humanist school students (78%) demonstrated reasoning consistent with *conventional* and *postconventional* stages, reflecting adherence to social norms, ethical principles, and universal responsibility (Kohlberg, 1984). Further, qualitative observations revealed that Neo-Humanist students exhibited higher frequencies of cooperative behavior, environmental awareness, and respect for diversity, consistent with the Neo-Humanist emphasis on compassion, universalism, and ecological consciousness (Sarkar, 1982; Bussey, 2009). Government school students, while showing some cooperative tendencies, were less consistent in expressing moral reasoning beyond compliance with rules. These findings reinforce Noddings’ (2013) argument that moral education thrives when schools deliberately integrate ethics and caring relationships into pedagogy. They also resonate with Bhadra (2022), who found that Neo-Humanist education cultivates higher-order ethical reasoning through practices such as meditation, storytelling, and value-based discussions.

Table 4: Observation Scores of School Environment (0–100 Scale)

Aspect	Government Schools	Neo-Humanist Schools
Fearless & joyful learning	62	84
Teacher emotional support	58	81
Aesthetic & cultural environment	55	79
Cultivation of morality	61	85

Interpretation: Neo-Humanist schools provided a more supportive and holistic environment, with higher scores in joyful learning, teacher-student relationships, and moral cultivation. Prior research highlights that emotionally safe and aesthetically enriched environments foster greater creativity, empathy, and social responsibility (Chawla, 2011; Diaz, 2017). Government schools, while inclusive in access, often struggle with overcrowding, lack of resources, and exam-centric approaches, limiting their ability to create such environments (Rana & Sharma, 2016).

Discussion

The comparative analysis between Government Primary Schools and Neo-Humanist Schools reveals a complex interplay between academic achievement, emotional development, moral reasoning, and the learning environment. Together, these findings demonstrate that while Government schools tend to excel in traditional academic metrics, Neo-Humanist schools foster broader dimensions of human development – emotional intelligence, moral reasoning, and supportive environments – indicating complementary yet divergent educational philosophies.

Academic Performance and Cognitive Priorities: The higher mean scores in language and mathematics among Government school students (Table 1) indicate that conventional schooling, with its emphasis on structured curricula and standardized testing, continues to produce measurable gains in subject-specific knowledge. These results align with earlier findings that exam-oriented instruction can enhance performance on core academic subjects (Reddy, 2016; Sharma & Singh, 2017). However, this cognitive emphasis risks narrowing the definition of educational success to testable outcomes, potentially at the cost of holistic growth. In contrast, Neo-Humanist schools, though scoring lower academically, deliberately prioritize critical thinking, creativity, and moral sensibilities (Bussey, 2009). These results reflect the ongoing debate in educational research regarding the “achievement-

emotion trade-off,” wherein systems emphasizing rote learning often overlook non-cognitive competencies vital for lifelong learning (Heckman & Kautz, 2012).

Emotional Intelligence as a Marker of 21st-Century Competence: The significantly higher emotional intelligence scores among Neo-Humanist students across self-awareness, empathy, and social skills (Table 2) suggest that value-based pedagogies can cultivate essential socio-emotional competencies. Emotional intelligence has been shown to predict not only interpersonal success but also long-term academic and professional achievement (Goleman, 2006; Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). Neo-Humanist pedagogy, with its integration of meditation, cooperative learning, and reflective practices (Sarkar, 1982; Anandarama & Srivastava, 2020), appears to provide fertile ground for nurturing emotional literacy. In contrast, Government schools’ exam-driven culture may suppress opportunities for emotional expression, reinforcing Joshi’s (2017) argument that rote-based systems inhibit socio-emotional development.

Moral Development and Universal Responsibility: Perhaps the most striking difference lies in moral development (Table 3). While more than half of Government school students (54%) remained within the preconventional stage of reasoning – focused on punishment avoidance and self-interest – Neo-Humanist students demonstrated a greater tendency toward conventional (41%) and postconventional (37%) reasoning. These findings resonate with Kohlberg’s (1984) developmental theory, which emphasizes that higher stages of moral reasoning are cultivated through engagement with ethical dilemmas, cooperative practices, and exposure to universalist values. Neo-Humanist education’s incorporation of storytelling, value-based discussions, and practices that emphasize ecological awareness (Bussey, 2009; Bhadra, 2022) appears to directly influence these outcomes. Furthermore, the observed behaviors of cooperative conduct, environmental concern, and respect for diversity reinforce Noddings’ (2013) ethic of care, suggesting that deliberate moral pedagogy can yield observable transformations in student dispositions.

School Environment as a Contextual Enabler: The differences in observed school environments (Table 4) further illuminate the contextual factors shaping these outcomes. Neo-Humanist schools scored substantially higher on dimensions such as joyful learning, teacher emotional support, and moral cultivation. A nurturing environment has been consistently linked to creativity, empathy, and social responsibility in children (Chawla, 2011; Díaz, 2017). By contrast, Government schools’ lower scores in these domains reflect systemic challenges such as overcrowding, inadequate resources, and exam-centric practices (Rana & Sharma, 2016). While the inclusivity and accessibility of Government schools remain critical for large-scale educational provision, the qualitative dimensions of learning environments appear compromised in comparison to the holistic ethos cultivated in Neo-Humanist schools.

Integrating Academic and Holistic Education: Taken together, these findings point to a crucial tension in educational design: the need to balance academic rigor with holistic human development. Government schools demonstrate strengths in producing measurable academic outcomes, but often neglect emotional and moral domains. Neo-Humanist schools, conversely, cultivate emotionally intelligent and morally responsible individuals, but risk underpreparing students for competitive academic environments. Scholars have long argued that future-ready education must transcend this binary by integrating both academic and non-academic competencies (Delors et al., 1996; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Bridging these approaches may involve introducing socio-emotional learning, moral education, and environmental consciousness into Government school curricula, while also reinforcing academic scaffolding within Neo-Humanist schools.

Broader Implications: The implications of this study extend beyond the immediate comparison. As India and other nations strive toward Sustainable Development Goal 4 (inclusive and equitable quality education), policymakers must recognize that “quality” cannot be equated with academic achievement alone. True educational success lies in nurturing compassionate, ethical, and emotionally resilient learners capable of addressing the complexities of a globalized and crisis-prone world (UNESCO, 2015). The complementary strengths of Government and Neo-Humanist systems suggest opportunities for cross-pollination of practices. For example, integrating meditation, storytelling, and value-based discussions into Government classrooms, and supplementing Neo-Humanist schools with stronger academic support systems, could produce more balanced outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

1. The study was confined to a sample of 300 students, 30 teachers, and 100 parents in Purba Medinipur district, which may not fully represent the diverse contexts of West Bengal or India as a whole.
2. Standardized tests were used for academic and emotional measures, but cultural and contextual factors might have influenced students’ responses.
3. The qualitative data from interviews and observations relied on self-reporting and researcher interpretation, which may introduce subjective bias.
4. The cross-sectional design limits the ability to capture long-term effects of Government and Neo-Humanist schooling on holistic development.
5. Access to records and cooperation varied across schools, which could have affected the uniformity of data collection.

Conclusion

This study set out to compare Government and Neo-Humanist primary schools in Purba Medinipur, West Bengal, to understand their relative effectiveness in fostering holistic development. The findings reveal that Government schools demonstrate strength in academic achievement, particularly in mathematics and language, while Neo-Humanist schools excel in nurturing emotional

intelligence and moral development. These results indicate that each model contributes uniquely to the broader aims of education: cognitive growth on the one hand, and socio-emotional and ethical development on the other.

The evidence from teachers' and parents' perspectives further reinforces the idea that both systems possess complementary advantages. Government schools benefit from structured curricula and academic rigor, while Neo-Humanist schools emphasize value-based education, empathy, and moral reasoning. Together, these strengths point to the necessity of moving beyond a one-dimensional approach to primary education.

The study thus underscores the importance of designing an integrated framework that combines the academic rigor of Government schooling with the holistic orientation of Neo-Humanist pedagogy. Such a balanced model would not only promote higher learning outcomes but also cultivate emotionally intelligent and morally grounded individuals capable of navigating the complexities of modern society. Future research should expand this inquiry across diverse regions and explore policy pathways for adopting hybrid models that ensure equity, inclusivity, and holistic growth for all learners.

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