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Teachers at the Frontline: Awareness, Action, and Gaps in School Mental Health Support

Abstract

Teachers act as key influencers and frontline stakeholders as they play a central role in mitigating and curbing the mental disorders experienced by adolescents through early identification and referrals. With time, several teacher-centered mental health training models have been conceptualized and implemented in order to strengthen teachers' capacity as mental health gatekeepers. This review aims to examine the effects of teacher-focused mental health training programs on teachers' awareness, translation of awareness into action, and the gaps that hinder this transition. A literature review was conducted using previously available research, with sources primarily drawn from Google Scholar, PubMed, and ResearchGate. Keywords such as 'teachers as mental health gatekeepers', 'teachers mental health literacy in India', 'gatekeeping training programs', and 'gatekeeper training effectiveness' were used to identify relevant studies. Out of 23 research papers initially found, 13 met the inclusion criteria. Findings indicate that even with an above average understanding of mental health problems among teachers, there were many (80%) instances of erroneous beliefs and lack of positive attitude towards mental health concerns. Additionally, teachers who were given training showed an increase in awareness; favorable belief; identification; improvement in practices, approach, skills and expertise; and referrals. However, there were various gaps identified that act as hindrance in the transition of awareness to action. These include, stigmatization, acute shortage of professionals, reluctance by school/ teachers, non-cooperation, low parental engagement, etc. The findings thus highlight the need to develop training programs that can be implemented at ground level while simultaneously addressing the gaps, emphasizing the need for further research and targeted training programs for early interventions, assistance, and referrals for students at-risk.

Review Article

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Keywords: Mental Health Gatekeeping, Adolescent Mental Health, Teacher Training, Stigmatization.

Introduction

Adolescence is a crucial transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, characterized by substantial growth and development [1]. As reported by WHO, one in every seven adolescents worldwide faces a mental disorder, representing 15% of the global disease burden within this age category [2,3].

A notable disparity exists between the occurrence of mental disorders and the help seeking among young people in India. Factors include insufficient understanding of mental illness and access to mental health resources, societal stigma around seeking help, etc. [3,4].

In order to mitigate and curb the issues by early identification and referrals, it becomes essential to target frontline stakeholders. Since teenagers dedicate a significant amount of time in educational settings, teachers act as key influencers [5]. They can act as essential connectors between students, parents, and mental health professionals, helping to make referrals to school counselors, psychologists, or outside mental health services when necessary [6].

Thus, it becomes crucial to imbibe in them the skills they need to directly and supportively help the students at risk [7,8].

With time, several teacher-focused mental health training models have been conceptualized and, in some contexts, implemented in order to strengthen teachers' capacity as mental health gatekeepers. While some initiatives have demonstrated improvements in awareness and attitudes, the translation of such awareness into consistent classroom-level action remains questionable. Furthermore, challenges related to implementation continue to limit the effectiveness of these programs. In the light of this context, the present review seeks to examine existing literature across three key domains: teachers' mental health awareness, the extent to which training translates into action, and the limitations encountered in implementing teacher-led mental health gatekeeping initiatives within educational settings [3,5,6,8].

Aim

The aim of this narrative review is to examine the effects of teacher-focused mental health training programs on teachers' awareness, translation of awareness into action, and the gaps that hinder this transition.

Methodology

To understand the effects of teacher-focused mental health training programs, an analysis was done on previously available research. Relevant literature was primarily sourced through Google Scholar and PubMed, with some full-text articles retrieved from ResearchGate. Various search terms were used to find relevant articles, such as 'teachers as mental health gatekeepers', 'teachers mental health literacy in India', 'gatekeeping training programs', 'gatekeeper training effectiveness', 'gaps in teacher gatekeeper training in India' and 'teachers attitude towards mental health in India'.

The search was limited to studies published in English that discussed teacher-focused mental health training programs, its effectiveness, and gaps in implementation. All of the studies included were from India. A total of 23 research papers were found, out of which 13 were included in the review. This narrative analysis included studies that met following criteria:

1. Conducted between 2022 and 2025.
2. Focused on teacher-centered mental health training programs, its effectiveness, and gaps in implementation
3. Published in English.

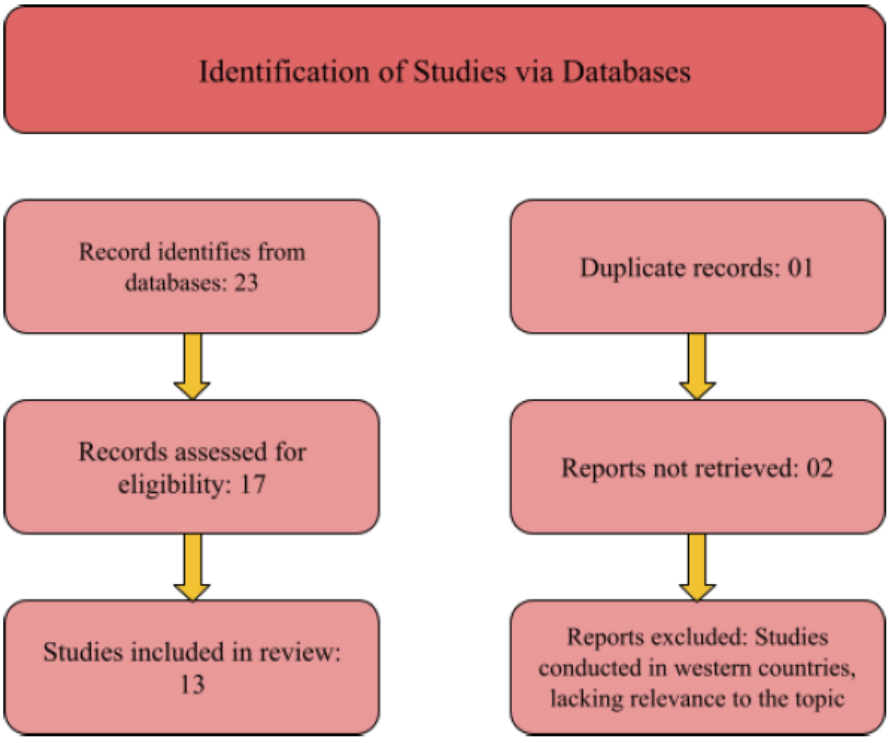


Figure 1. Identification of studies via databases

Discussion

The present narrative review aims to examine the effects of teacher-focused mental health training programs on teachers' awareness, translation of awareness into action, and the gaps that hinder this transition. Primarily relevant literature was sourced through Google Scholar, PubMed, and ResearchGate. Various search terms were used to find relevant articles, such as 'teachers as mental health gatekeepers', 'teachers mental health literacy in India', 'gatekeeping training programs', etc. A total of 23 research papers were found, out of which 13 were included in the review.

To better understand the impact of teacher-focused training programs, a table is included that summarizes key details of studies included that outlines the authors, year of publication, sample size, methodology and major findings of the same.

Study Author(s)	Study Author(s)	Study Author(s)	Study Author(s)	Study Author(s)
[6]	2024	404	Cross-sectional Survey method	The findings illuminate less favourable attitudes of teachers toward individuals with mental health problems, along with lower awareness of mental health issues.
[8]	2024	60	Experimental Method	Results indicated that structured teaching programs proved to be beneficial for improving awareness levels among the participants.
[9]	2025	306	Experimental Method	Results indicate that training had a positive effect on the Mental Health Literacy (MHL) & positive attitude of the teachers post-intervention.
[10]	2022	130	Experimental Method	It was found that perceived social support is a positive predictor of professional help-seeking, and mental health stigma is observed as the negative predictor.
[11]	2023	90	Cross-sectional Study	Results highlighted the negative beliefs about mental illness among the teachers with only 2% of them ever receiving training related to mental health issues.
[7]	2023	39	Survey Method	It was concluded that evaluation of mental health literacy is crucial to help support mental health needs of students.
[12]	2024	42	Experimental Design	Concludes that there was substantial increase in knowledge, implementation of practice, improvement in preparedness, and skills for teachers post-training.
[13]	2024	Not defined	Mixed Method	The study concludes the significance of training programmes to equip educators with essential skills and knowledge.
[14]	2024	1073	Cross-sectional Survey Method	From the present study, it can be concluded that training programs will help gatekeepers at the grassroots levels to identify the risk of suicide among students while improving knowledge, attitude, and gatekeeper behaviour.
[3]	2023	102	Experimental Method	Results concluded that identification of students with concerns increased after implementation of training. Moreover, willingness to help, positive modification in methods adopted, and referrals was also observed.
[5]	2024	136	Experimental Method	Through this study it was concluded that there was a significant difference in teachers' awareness, preparedness, and strategies implemented post-training session.
[15]	2023	42	Thematic Framework Analysis	Concludes that stigmatization, lack of collaboration & funding, scarcity of staff, and lack of knowledge were primary challenges in implementation.

[4]	2023	Not defined	Literature Review	The analysis showed that there is an acute shortage of professionals, reluctance by schools, stigma, unavailability of counsellors, & more that act as hindrance in the implementation.
Abbreviations: MHL = Mental Health Literacy; RS = Research Study.				

Table 1. Summary of the studies examining teachers' mental health awareness, training, attitudes, and implementation challenges.

The results from analyzed studies show that mental health training programs focused on teachers effectively enhanced their awareness, knowledge, and ability to apply that awareness into action. Nonetheless, obstacles were also identified that impeded this shift. To provide clearer understanding, the collected data has been organized into key themes for further analysis.

Awareness

Awareness is crucial as it addresses the fundamental issue of neglect regarding mental health. It is essential for minimizing stigma and fostering early intervention. Therefore, in order to mitigate and curb down the mental health issues among adolescents, it becomes essential to train teachers accordingly.

An analysis of these studies found that teachers exhibited more frequent erroneous beliefs and stereotypes, indicating poor awareness of mental health issues [6]. Additionally, studies show that almost 80% of teachers demonstrated a negative attitude towards mental health concerns. This may stem from insufficient formal mental health education in their training programs, supported by a study showing that only 2% of teachers ever received training concerning mental health [11]. Moreover, only 29% teachers have addressed concerns raised by students regarding mental health issues throughout their teaching career. This indicates negative views regarding mental illness among educators. These results are consistent with earlier research carried out with higher secondary school educators in Ahmedabad and Puducherry, India, emphasizing negative perceptions and stigma among teachers. Such perceptions may arise from deep-seated and stigmatized beliefs that exist within society [7,11].

Various experimental studies concluded that teacher-focused mental health training for educators at the frontline enhances their understanding of mental health concerns, promotes more positive beliefs, and attitudes regarding mental health issues. Furthermore, enhancing mental health literacy in school allows teachers to significantly contribute to the early detection, referral, and assistance that adolescents require. This could ultimately enhance positive mental well-being in school settings [9]. Since teachers are the first formal institution for child development, a positive attitude and acceptance from educators will ultimately influence students and a whole pool of generations [3,5,11].

Transition of Awareness into Action

While awareness serves as the basis, application of this knowledge in an actual classroom environment is what truly influences the effectiveness of teacher-centered mental health training. It was found that post mental health training sessions there was relatively significant enhancement in 'practices' employed by educators. Moreover, an improvement in self assessed capabilities to identify, approach, and support was also seen [12]. Additionally, results emphasized prevalence of school-based gatekeeper training initiatives and their effectiveness in providing gatekeepers with confidence and abilities needed to cater to mental health concerns of adolescents.

Another study highlights the beneficial measures implemented, including a rise in the identification of students facing mental health issues, following administration of gatekeeper training to educators. This became possible because of the advancements in understanding the conditions that resulted in that action. To add on, teachers also reported willingness in addressing concerns, making alterations in teaching methods, and making referrals to concerned professionals for timely treatment [3].

Furthermore, it was also concluded that teacher-focused mental health training equipped educators with an improved plan of action for their students thus suggesting its effectiveness in making teachers prepared. Change in teachers' body language and behaviour, relationship with students, and teaching strategies was also observed [5]. Collectively, these findings suggest that structured training can move teachers beyond passive awareness toward active engagement in early detection and support.

Gaps in Implementation

While training initiatives demonstrate clear improvements in knowledge and preparedness of the educators, implementing these skills within everyday school environments is far more complicated. The shift from theoretical understanding to real-world application is often hindered by various variables that hampers ground reality. According to research, there is an acute shortage of mental health professionals to deal with mental illness in the India. Another biggest challenge that is relevant to Indian society is stigma, which is often cited as a reason for not seeking mental health treatment or fully participating in it [4]. More such challenges that were cited included reluctance from school to run training programs, lack of collaboration among stakeholders, lack of readiness among teachers to act, lack of funds to conduct such training programs, lack of scarcity of staff, and lack of knowledge [15]. These challenges indicate that successful implementation of training programs doesn't always involve one factor rather is an interplay of multiple. These obstacles often dilute the long-term impact of otherwise effective interventions. Addressing these gaps therefore becomes a prime importance to ensure that teachers are not only trained as gatekeepers in theory, but also empowered to function at ground level effectively and sustainably.

Limitations

The presented narrative review has certain limitations. The primary limitation is the limited number of studies included, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the review overemphasized on teachers' capacity while neglecting systems' readiness to support the role. Another limitation is the relatively small sample size, which may restrict the applicability of the results.

Recommendations

Given the significant advantages of training teachers as frontline gatekeepers to keep in check adolescents' mental wellbeing, several measures can be taken. Firstly, school mental health programs should prioritize training initiatives for teachers that focus on their mental wellbeing through stress management, coping strategies, and emotional intelligence. Furthermore, regular workshops and continuous professional development sessions should be held that are aimed at reducing the stigma around mental illness and can enhance teachers' abilities and understanding to create inclusive and nurturing classroom settings [6,7,9].

Additionally, schools should provide positive environment for students where they learn and imbibe in them positive qualities like empathy. Moreover, schools should establish a clear referral pathway and should ensure availability of an effective counsellor. Collectively, these steps can help translate teachers' preparedness into actionable support for adolescents' wellbeing [3,4].

Conclusion

This review aimed to examine the effects of teacher-focused mental health training programs on teachers' awareness, translation of awareness into action, and the gaps that hinder this transition. From the findings, it is clear that teachers are the frontline supporters of adolescent mental health when equipped with appropriate training. Findings suggest that educators possess basic awareness of mental health concerns however still hold erroneous beliefs. Administration of structured training programs demonstrated clear benefits in improving teachers' awareness, attitude, strategies, identification, and referrals. However, the transition from awareness into sustained action remains inconsistent due to practical challenges such as stigma, shortage of professionals, lack of resources, etc. The findings thus highlight the need to develop training programs that can be implemented at ground level while simultaneously addressing the gaps, emphasizing the need for further research and targeted training programs for early interventions, assistance, and referrals for students at-risk.

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