

From Awareness to Action: A Systematic Literature Review of Barriers and Recommendations for Mental Health Promotion and Problem Prevention in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Despite the widespread implementation of school-based mental health programs, understanding the barriers to their effectiveness and identifying strategies for improvement remains essential. While numerous studies have examined these issues individually, there is limited comprehensive research that integrates the perspectives of teachers, counselors, stakeholders, and students. This study presents a systematic literature review (SLR) conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, synthesizing evidence on barriers and recommendations for enhancing school-based mental health support among secondary school students. The review process involved developing a structured protocol, formulating research questions, conducting systematic searches across major databases such as SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, Scopus, and Google Scholar, appraising study quality, and performing data extraction followed by thematic analysis. Findings were organized into two overarching categories: barriers and recommendations. Barriers included challenges faced by teachers, counselors, and educational psychologists; obstacles involving parents, families, and caregivers; insufficient support; and inadequate resources. Recommendations encompassed fostering collaborative relationships among stakeholders, providing targeted training, empowering teachers and counselors with mental health knowledge, and developing coping skills for addressing mental health challenges. These themes were further refined into fifteen sub-themes, offering a comprehensive framework to inform policy, practice, and future research on school-based mental health.

Keywords: Barriers, Recommendations, School-Based, Mental Health, Systematic Literature Review

Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical period for the development of social and emotional well-being, yet it is also a stage marked by heightened vulnerability to mental health challenges. Global data indicate that depression, anxiety, and behavioral disorders are among the leading causes of illness and disability in this age group, with suicide ranking as the primary cause of death among adolescents aged 15–19 years (WHO, 2021). In Malaysia, the National Health and Morbidity Surveys (NHMS) of 2017 and 2019 revealed alarmingly high rates of mental health problems among adolescents, describing the situation as a “hidden epidemic.” These issues not only affect students’ well-being and social relationships but also have long-term implications for academic performance and life outcomes.

Mental health promotion and problem-prevention programs in secondary schools aim to address these concerns proactively and equip students with coping skills. Despite increasing recognition of their importance, the implementation of such initiatives faces persistent barriers, including limited resources, inadequate stakeholder collaboration, and insufficient long-term evaluation of program effectiveness (Kessler et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2019). Calls from the Malaysian Ministry of Health for coordinated efforts between government and non-government agencies underscore the urgency of strengthening mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for youth. However, limited comprehensive review has specifically synthesized barriers and recommendations for mental health promotion and prevention at the secondary school level.

This study addresses this gap by conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine existing evidence on these barriers and recommendations. Employing the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, the review adopts a transparent, replicable process to ensure rigor, minimize bias, and enhance the reliability of findings. By consolidating insights from diverse perspectives, the study aims to inform policy, guide educators and counselors, and support the effective integration of mental health initiatives within secondary school settings.

Methodology

The systematic literature review is driven by a set of rules of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses it is called the PRISMA review technique aiming to achieve accuracy, replicability, and increased transparency. The study followed the four stages of PRISMA as depicted in Fig. 1.

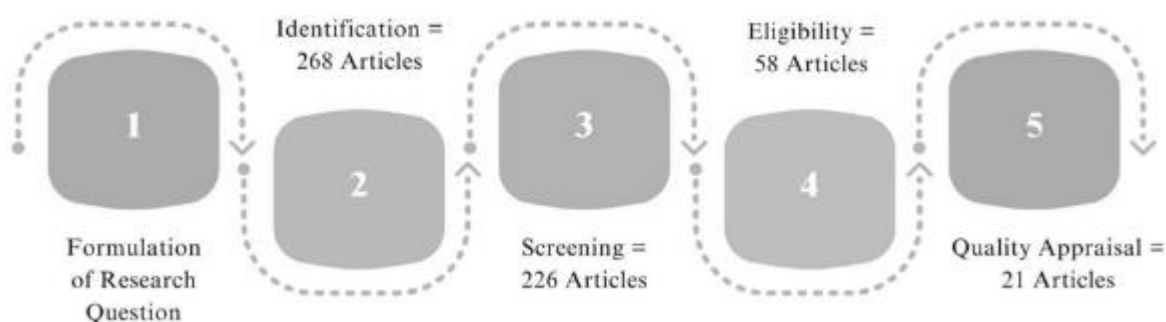


Fig. 1 Process involved in systematic literature review guided by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA).

Formulation of the Research Question

This systematic literature review (SLR) began with the formulation of a research question using the PICO framework, which comprises three components: population/problem (P), interest (I), and context (Co). In this study, the population refers to secondary school students, the interest focuses on barriers and recommendations in mental health promotion and problem prevention, and the context is the secondary school setting. Accordingly, the research question guiding this review which is “What are the issues and recommendations in mental health promotion and problem prevention among secondary school students?”.

Systematic Searching Strategies*Identification*

The identification stage formed the foundation of the review, ensuring a comprehensive search for relevant academic literature on barriers and recommendations in school-based mental health promotion and prevention. Search was conducted systematically across major databases, including SpringerLink, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and Scopus, guided by a detailed search strategy integrating core keywords such as barriers, recommendations, mental health promotion, mental health problem prevention, and secondary school. To enhance search sensitivity, synonyms and related terms were identified through literature reviews, expert consultation, and reference to prior studies (see Table 1).

In addition to database research, manual techniques were applied to ensure coverage of highly relevant literature. Key articles known to the authors were handpicked based on relevance and expert recommendations. Citation and reference tracking of retrieved articles was also conducted to identify additional studies not captured in the initial search. This iterative process ensured the inclusion of relevant sources, including those less visible in conventional database searches.

By combining database searches, manual screening, and citation tracking, the identification process provided a robust and comprehensive foundation for subsequent screening, quality appraisal, and analysis. This approach maximized the likelihood of capturing diverse perspectives on the barriers and recommendations for mental health promotion and problem prevention in secondary school contexts.

Table 1

Search strategy- keywords

Keywords Category	Search Keywords and Terms
Barriers Terms	Issue OR barrier OR challenge Or difficulties
Recommendation Term	Recommendation OR suggestion
Mental Health Promotion	Mental health promotion OR mental wellness promotion OR emotional health promotion OR psychosocial health promotion
Mental Health Problem Prevention	Mental health problem prevention OR prevention strategy OR early intervention OR risk prevention OR crisis prevention
Population Terms	Secondary school students OR high school students

Screening

In the PRISMA framework, screening and eligibility are essential stages that follow the identification phase. Titles and abstracts of retrieved studies were reviewed to determine their relevance based on predefined inclusion criteria aligned with the research question. These criteria considered factors such as target population (secondary school students), focus on mental health promotion and problem prevention, school-based interventions, study design, subject area, timeline, language, and accessibility (see Table 2). The review concentrated on mental health issues most relevant to Malaysian adolescents, including academic stress, anxiety, depression, bullying, cyberbullying, suicide, family pressure, stigma, peer pressure, and lack of awareness or support. Topics such as LGBTQ issues, eating disorders, and sleep disorders were excluded to maintain contextual relevance. Two independent reviewers conducted the screening, and disagreements were resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer. Studies meeting the inclusion criteria proceeded to the eligibility phase for full-text assessment.

Table 2

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Schooling sector	Secondary school, high school	Elementary school, tertiary sector, and primary school level.
Subject areas	Academic stress, anxiety, depression, bullying and cyberbullying, family pressure, stigma, peer pressure, lack of awareness and support	Eating disorder, LGBTQ+, sleep disorders
Timeline	2017-2023	< 2017
Language	English	Non-English
Content-Type	Article	Book, Chapter, Conference Proceedings, Reference Work, Reference Work Entry
Research Design	Qualitative	Quantitative, Mixed Method
Accessibility	Subscribe to journals, full text available online	Unsubscribe journal, full text unavailable online, preview content

Eligibility

After the initial screening, the researchers proceed to the eligibility phase, where they obtain and assess the full texts of the selected studies. During this stage, the researchers thoroughly evaluate each study based on the inclusion criteria to determine whether it should be included in the final review. The screening and eligibility phases ensure that only relevant and high-quality studies are included in the systematic literature review. By following a strict and transparent process, researchers can minimize bias and ensure the reliability and validity of the review's findings. This rigorous approach also enhances the overall credibility and

usefulness of the systematic review as a valuable source of evidence for decision-making and further research.

The study selection process adhered to the PRISMA framework, encompassing identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases. After removing duplicates, titles and abstracts were screened according to the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, followed by full-text assessment to determine final eligibility. Figure 2 presents the PRISMA flow diagram, which summarizes the number of records identified, screened, excluded, and ultimately included in this review.

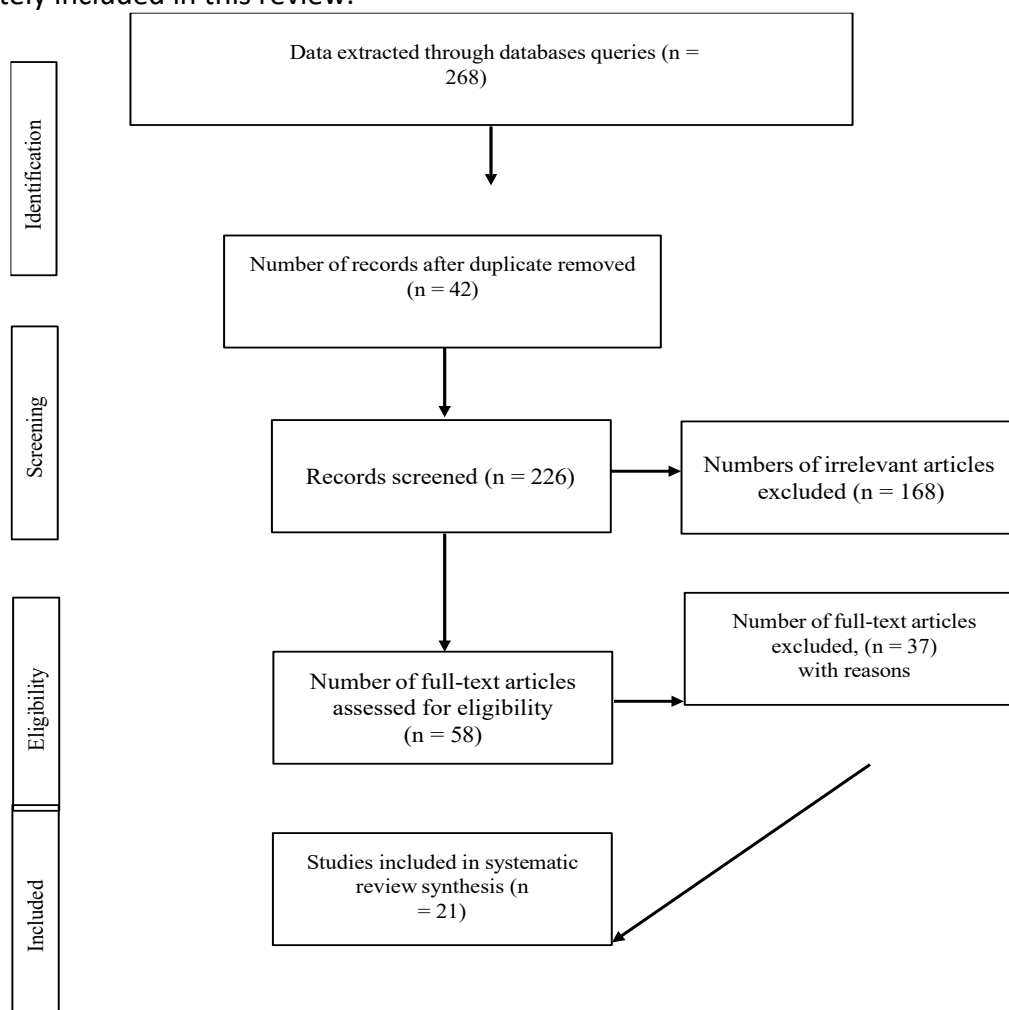


Figure 2: Flow diagram of screened and included studies

Quality Appraisal

The quality assessment of the selected articles was independently assessed (see Table 4) by three reviewers who focused on the abstract, results, and discussion. In this research, the researcher employed the Mixed- Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) developed by Hong et al. (2018) to assess the methodological quality of the qualitative studies included in my analysis (see Table 3). The use of MMAT helped to review each study carefully, looking at things like the research questions, how they collected data, and how they analyzed it. By applying this standardized tool, it is to ensure the qualitative studies integrated into this research are well and reliable. This will have made this research more trustworthy and helped to draw solid conclusions. According to Petticrew and Roberts (2006) they were suggested that reviewers

should assess the articles by categorizing them into low, moderate, and high levels of quality. Articles should only be included if they meet high or moderate quality.

Table 3

Quality assessment criteria

Assessment Criteria	
QA1 -	Is the qualitative approach appropriate to answer the research question?
QA2 -	Is the qualitative data collection method adequate to address the research question?
QA3 -	Are the findings adequately derived from the data?
QA4 -	Is the interpretation of results sufficiently substantiated by data?
QA5 -	Is there coherence between qualitative data sources, collection, analysis, and interpretation?

Table 4

Results of the quality assessment

Study	QA1	QA2	QA3	QA4	QA5	Number of criteria fulfilled	Inclusion in the review
Brown et al. (2017)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Bruening et al. (2017)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
O'Reilly et al. (2018)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Kodish et al. (2019)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Finan et al. (2019)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Halliday et al. (2019)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Mulla & Bawazir (2020)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Nguyen et al. (2020)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Dennehy et al. (2020)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Abuhammad and Al-Natour (2021)	✓	✓	C	✓	✓	4/5	✓
Hernández-Torrano et al. (2021)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Dimitropoulos et al. (2021)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Nordmyr & Forsman (2021)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Green et al. (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Giles-Kaye et al. (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Maclean and Law (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Beukema et al. (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Behera et al. (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Marinucci et al. (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Garbacz et al. (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓
Braam et al. (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5/5	✓

QA= Quality assessment; C= Can't tell

Results

Background of Selected Studies

The studies included in this systematic literature review represent a diverse range of research examining barriers and recommendations for mental health promotion and problem prevention among secondary school students. Selection was based on relevance to the research question, with sources retrieved from Springer Link, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and Scopus using targeted search criteria. The review focused on mental health issues most pertinent to Malaysian adolescents, specifically depression, anxiety, behavioral disorders, and suicide, which the World Health Organization (2021) identifies as leading causes of illness, disability, and mortality among those aged 15 to 19 years. Issues such as LGBTQ-related concerns, eating disorders, and sleep disorders were excluded, as they are not among the primary mental health challenges faced by Malaysian adolescents.

The selected studies were published between 2017 and 2023, reflecting a growing research interest in school-based mental health promotion and problem prevention. Two studies were published in 2017, one in 2018, three in 2019, three in 2020, four in 2021, four in 2022, and four in 2023 (see Fig. 3). This distribution demonstrates a consistent and increasing scholarly focus over the past seven years, contributing valuable insights into the barriers and recommendations for implementing mental health promotion and prevention initiatives in secondary school settings.

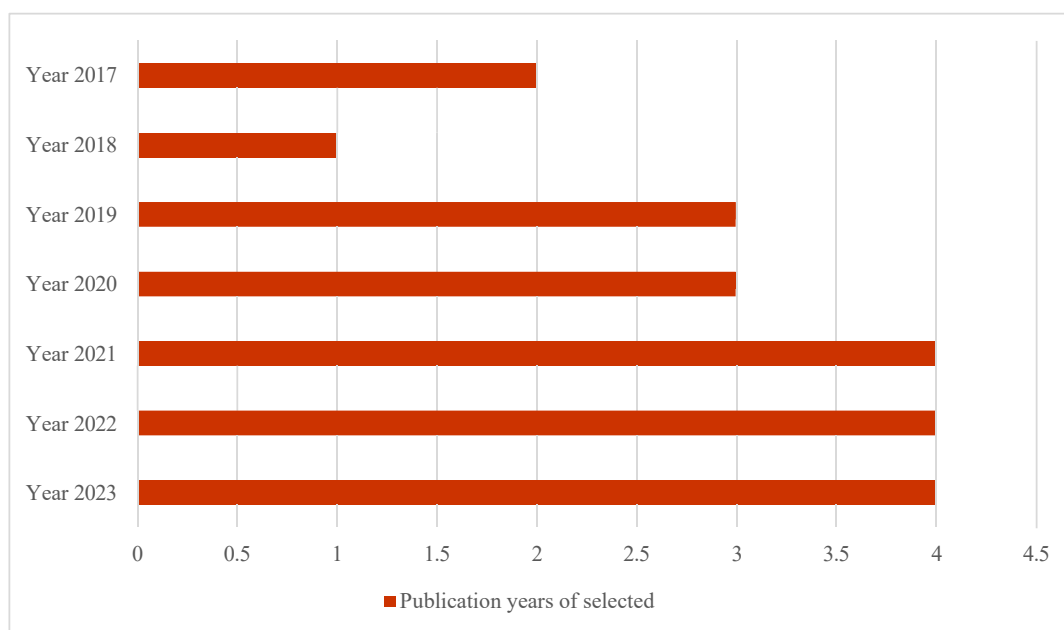


Fig. 3 Publication years of selected studies

The selected studies were also conducted across a range of countries, underscoring the global relevance of school-based mental health promotion and problem prevention. Research originated from Finland, Ireland, the United States, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Australia, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, India, the Netherlands, and Canada (see Fig. 4). This geographical diversity provides a broad evidence base, enabling the review to draw on varied cultural contexts, educational systems, and implementation strategies, thereby offering valuable insights for adapting such initiatives to the Malaysian secondary school context.

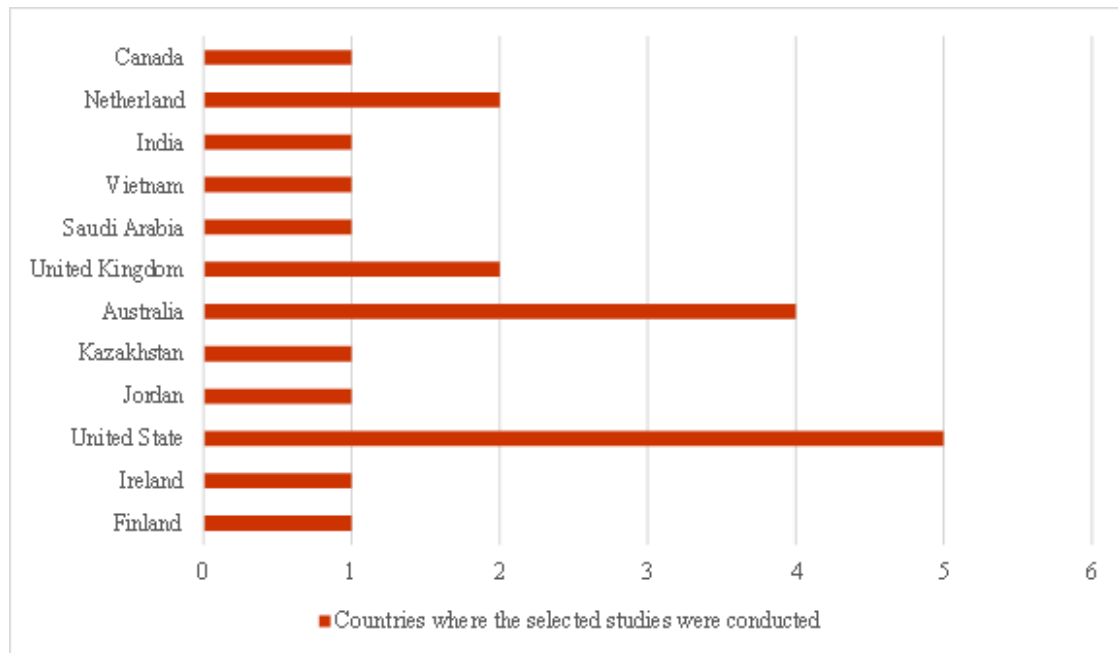


Fig. 4 Countries where the selected studies were conducted

Developed Themes and Recommendations

School-based mental health promotion and problem prevention are vital for safeguarding the well-being of secondary school students. However, the findings of this review indicate that despite the recognition of their importance, these initiatives face persistent implementation barriers. Through thematic analysis, four major categories of barriers were identified: challenges faced by teachers, counsellors, and educational psychologists; constraints among parents, families, and caregivers; lack of institutional and parental support; and limitations in resources. Correspondingly, the literature offers four broad areas of recommendation: strengthening collaborative relationships, enhancing stakeholder training, improving mental health literacy, and ensuring adequate resources and communication systems.

Barriers

The first barrier relates to the challenges encountered by teachers, counsellors, and educational psychologists, whose roles often overlap in promoting students' academic progress and well-being. Across multiple studies, a lack of adequate training was reported, limiting their ability to identify early signs of mental health issues and provide appropriate interventions (Maclean & Law, 2022; Behera et al., 2023; Dimitropoulos et al., 2021). This gap in training is compounded by limited knowledge, which can delay early intervention and hinder support for students (Nguyen et al., 2020; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021). The combination of insufficient training and limited knowledge often results in low confidence in managing mental health cases within school settings (Beukema et al., 2022; Giles-Kaye et al., 2022).

The second barrier involves parental, family, and caregiver constraints, with stigma emerging as a central issue (Johnson & Williams, 2016). Some parents resist acknowledging mental health challenges due to fears of social judgment or being perceived as inadequate caregivers (Finan et al., 2019). Concerns about gossip or bullying further discourage them

from seeking help for their children. Moreover, for students under the age of 18, obtaining parental consent for interventions can be difficult, delaying access to necessary support (Mulla & Bawazir, 2020). Generational differences also affect engagement, as some parents may lack awareness of adolescent mental health needs or avoid discussing them openly (Dennehy et al., 2020).

The third barrier is the lack of support from schools and parents. In some cases, students perceive school-led initiatives as inadequate or insincere, which can undermine trust in the system. Parental underestimation of the impact of mental health on academic performance further limits their willingness to participate in collaborative initiatives (Greenwood et al., 2020). Insufficient communication between schools, families, and mental health professionals compounds these challenges, weakening program delivery.

The fourth barrier is the limitation of resources, encompassing the absence of standardised guidelines, inadequate funding, restricted access to trained professionals, and a lack of up-to-date materials (Behera et al., 2023; Brown et al., 2017). Accessibility issues are particularly pronounced in underserved schools, while cost constraints limit program development, procurement of resources, and staff training (Maclean & Law, 2022). Furthermore, time constraints within academic schedules make it challenging for educators to integrate mental health content effectively (Dimitropoulos et al., 2021).

Recommendations

To address these barriers, the literature consistently advocates for strengthening collaborative relationships at multiple levels. Schools are encouraged to establish partnerships with parents, public health agencies, community organisations, and mental health professionals to enhance program reach and quality (Braam et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2020). Multi-sectoral engagement and the inclusion of student perspectives in program design are particularly important for ensuring relevance and sustainability (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Behera et al., 2023).

Targeted training for stakeholders, especially teachers and counsellors, is essential for building capacity in mental health awareness, early detection, and intervention (O'Reilly et al., 2018; Beukema et al., 2022). Ongoing professional development programs, supported by mentorship from educational psychologists, can equip educators with the skills needed to provide proactive and responsive care.

Enhancing mental health literacy is another priority. This can be achieved through curriculum integration, either as a dedicated subject or across multiple disciplines, ensuring that students, educators, and parents have the knowledge to recognise early warning signs and take appropriate action (Giles-Kaye et al., 2022; Beukema et al., 2022). Parents, in particular, benefit from resources that empower them to support their children's well-being at home (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Program content should also reflect principles of positive psychology to promote resilience and self-esteem (Nordmyr & Forsman, 2021).

Cultural competence is also vital for reducing stigma and addressing cultural perceptions that limit help-seeking behaviour (Abuhammad & Al-Natour, 2021; Kodish et

al., 2019). Adopting culturally sensitive strategies can facilitate the creation of stigma-free school environments (Dimitropoulos et al., 2021).

Finally, adequate resources and effective communication are fundamental to program success. This includes securing sufficient funding, providing accessible support services, disseminating information through varied channels, and offering comprehensive guidelines for stakeholders (Bruening et al., 2017; Behera et al., 2023). Regular dialogue between students and stakeholders ensures that programs remain relevant, trusted, and responsive to emerging needs (Maclean & Law, 2022; Giles-Kaye et al., 2022).

By addressing these barriers through targeted, evidence-based strategies, schools can develop a holistic and sustainable approach to promoting mental health and preventing mental health problems among secondary school students.

Discussion

Teachers and counsellors are central figures in a student's life and hold a unique position to promote mental health and prevent mental health problems. However, their effectiveness is often constrained by inadequate training and limited knowledge, which can be traced to several factors. Teacher preparation programs frequently lack comprehensive training in recognising and addressing mental health concerns (Smith et al., 2018), leaving educators ill-equipped to identify subtle signs of emotional distress. Moreover, the rapidly evolving nature of mental health research is not always reflected in educational curricula, resulting in outdated or insufficient knowledge. Without adequate preparation, educators may be unable to impart essential mental health knowledge or coping strategies to students, thereby limiting the availability of timely and appropriate support. As trusted mentors in the school environment, teachers who lack mental health literacy may inadvertently contribute to gaps in intervention, whereas those with higher literacy levels report greater confidence in assisting students in need (Dey et al., 2022). The persistence of mental health stigma further compounds these challenges. Societal attitudes, cultural perceptions, and negative portrayals in the media contribute to misunderstanding and fear (Johnson & Williams, 2016). Cultural norms that discourage open discussions about personal struggles perpetuate silence and limit help-seeking behaviours. Addressing this stigma requires coordinated awareness campaigns and cultural change to normalise conversations about mental health. Incorporating cultural sensitivity into program design has been shown to facilitate the creation of stigma-free school environments (Abuhammad & Al-Natour, 2021; Kodish et al., 2019; Dimitropoulos et al., 2021).

Collaboration between schools, parents, and mental health professionals remains insufficient, often due to competing administrative priorities, low parental awareness of the relationship between mental health and academic outcomes, and socioeconomic barriers that limit parental engagement (Greenwood et al., 2020). Building effective partnerships requires active involvement from schools, parents, government bodies, and non-governmental organisations to strengthen support for mental health promotion in secondary schools. Resource scarcity also poses a substantial obstacle, with many schools facing budget constraints that restrict investment in training, assessment tools, and dedicated facilities (Miller et al., 2017). A lack of prioritisation by administrators and policymakers further exacerbates underfunding in this area. Time constraints add to the challenge, as heavy

workloads and curricular demands leave little room for mental health activities (Brown & Jones, 2019). The emphasis on academic performance and standardised testing often shifts focus away from students' emotional well-being, while insufficient time for professional development hinders educators from acquiring necessary skills.

These barriers are interconnected and multifaceted, necessitating a comprehensive approach that engages educational institutions, policymakers, communities, and families. Strategies should include sustained investment in teacher training, societal efforts to challenge mental health stigma, provision of adequate time and resources for mental health activities, strengthened school–parent collaboration, and increased funding to ensure that mental health promotion is a consistent and integral part of the secondary school environment.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Studies

The evidence from this review underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to addressing mental health challenges in secondary school settings. Effective solutions require collaboration among teachers, counsellors, school administrators, parents, government agencies, policymakers, and non-governmental organisations, with each stakeholder addressing barriers within their own sphere of influence. The literature highlights a range of recommendations that can enhance mental health promotion and problem prevention, including the integration of collaborative strategies, capacity-building measures, and culturally sensitive approaches. Future research should prioritise the development and evaluation of comprehensive modules or guidelines that serve as practical references for stakeholders. Such resources would clearly define roles and responsibilities, outline evidence-based strategies, and provide actionable steps for implementing effective mental health programs in secondary schools. By equipping stakeholders with a unified framework, these guidelines could strengthen coordination and ensure consistent delivery of support services. It is further recommended that future studies explore the essential components of successful school-based mental health initiatives, with an emphasis on their adaptability to different cultural and institutional contexts. Quantitative and mixed-methods research could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of specific interventions and the feasibility of scaling them across diverse educational settings. Longitudinal studies would also help assess the sustainability of program outcomes, thereby contributing to the refinement and continuous improvement of mental health initiatives for secondary school students.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review, conducted in accordance with the PRISMA methodology, examined the complex landscape of mental health promotion and problem prevention in secondary school settings. Twenty-one studies were selected for analysis, and a thematic synthesis was undertaken to identify the key barriers and corresponding recommendations. The analysis revealed four main themes and nine sub-themes under the category of barriers, encompassing challenges faced by teachers, counsellors, school administrators, parents, policymakers, government bodies, and non-governmental organisations. These findings illustrate the multifaceted nature of the obstacles that hinder the effective delivery of school-based mental health programs.

If left unaddressed, these barriers have the potential to undermine both the well-being and the academic success of secondary school students. By implementing targeted, evidence-based strategies such as capacity-building for educators, fostering stakeholder collaboration, reducing stigma, and ensuring adequate resources such as schools can create supportive environments that promote mental health and prevent psychological difficulties. This review offers a comprehensive framework to guide policymakers, educators, and practitioners in strengthening mental health initiatives, ultimately contributing to healthier and more resilient student populations.

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