

## Teachers and schools as change agents in improving mental health among adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

Improving the mental health and well-being of adolescents is the need of the hour. A more substantial proportion of adolescents are more susceptible to develop mental health problems as a result of the stressors they encounter and the changes they undergo. This paper is a systematic review that focused on assessing the several ways in which teachers and schools can offer support and assistance to students with potential mental health concerns. The researcher conducted a systematic literature search using specific online databases, including Springer, Jstor, PubMed, Google Scholar, and identified during this process. The review focused on articles published during the year range of 2000 to 2018. Based on the analysis, teachers could play an active role in identifying students showing signs of mental health concerns. Since teachers encounter a lot of challenges while identifying students with problems, providing sufficient mental health training to teachers will enable them to understand the mental health needs of students and make appropriate referrals to health professionals as needed. Schools should primarily work within the existing setup, equip teachers and other staff members of the school with sufficient resources, create a friendly environment, and create awareness among students through mental health training programs facilitated by teachers on an economic basis. Researchers have developed several school mental health manuals and frameworks. However, schools and teachers customize these frameworks keeping in mind the specific mental health needs of students in line with the culture of their school.

**Keywords:** *Adolescents, Teachers, Schools, Mental Health Problems*

According to WHO (2018), adolescence (10–19 years) is a unique developmental phase. Teenage is a vital period for emerging and sustaining social and emotional habits essential for mental well-being. Globally it is estimated that 10–20% of adolescents experience mental health conditions; however, these remain underdiagnosed and undertreated. A lack of knowledge or awareness of mental health and the stigma attached to mental health problems, which prevents them from seeking help. In such a case, it becomes necessary to improve the well-being of adolescents and protect them from negative experiences and potential risk factors so that it does not have an impact on their physical and mental health during adulthood. We can enhance the well-being of adolescents by establishing a friendly

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atmosphere with the active involvement of the family members, school management, educators, and the wider community.

### *Aim*

To review published research articles and dissertations that have focused on various means through which teachers and schools can act as an effective support system for students with mental health concerns.

## **METHODOLOGY**

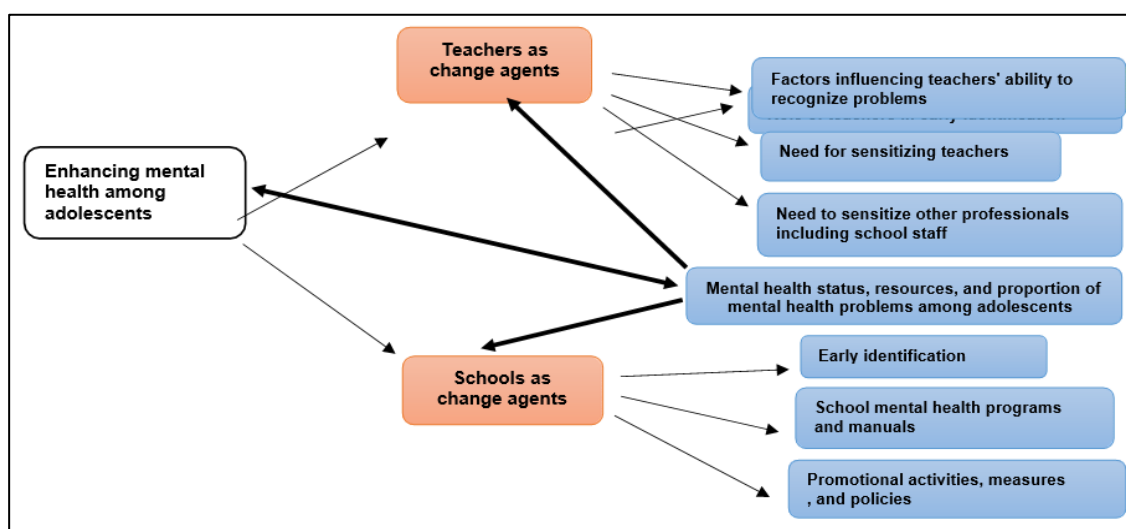
### *Search Method*

The researcher gained familiarity with the background of the prevalence of mental illness among adolescents, the common mental health conditions prevalent among adolescents and school mental health program guidelines. After that, the researcher conducted a systematic literature search utilizing the keywords 'role of teachers in identifying mental health problems in students, sensitizing teachers on mental health, mental health training for teachers, and teachers' role in recognizing mental health problems.' Other keywords included 'the role of schools in mental health education, mental health manuals, the role of schools in screening, and early recognition of the problems.' Four significant databases, including Springer, Jstor, PubMed, and Google Scholar, were utilized for the search.

**Inclusion Criteria:** The researcher excluded research studies conducted before the year 2000, studies wherein full-text was not retrievable, and those that were not in English. The researcher conducted a further review of studies meeting the following criteria.

### **The paper must**

1. Be a research article, published dissertation or meta-analytic study
2. It must be related to the role of teachers in various aspects including early detection, prevention and awareness building of mental health concerns among adolescents
3. The review included studies on numerous means through which schools can play a role in helping students with mental health concerns, including programs, manuals, and frameworks developed to carry out school mental health programs Springer, Jstor, PubMed, and Google Scholar.



*Figure 1. Showing the categorization of studies*

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The above flowchart represents the categorization of studies and the key themes that were identified in previous studies. It can be observed that both schools and teachers can play an influential role in improving the mental health status of adolescents. As indicated in the flowchart, there is a bidirectional relationship between the availability of resources, current mental health status, and the higher proportion of adolescents and the need to enhance mental health among adolescents. Insufficient resources, increased incidence of mental health problems among adolescents, and inconsistent mental health services to meet the mental health needs of adolescents, strongly suggest the need for school and teachers to play an active role in enhancing the psychological well-being among adolescents.

### ***Teachers' Role in Improving Adolescent Mental Health***

Teachers have a strong influence on the students' knowledge, attitude, and mindset since they interact with them regularly. They can stimulate positive changes in students and motivate them to excel in all endeavors. But to accomplish this goal, we must make efforts to enhance the well-being and mental health of adolescents. In this regard, teachers can help in improving the mental health status of students by detecting preliminary signs of mental health concerns, making appropriate referrals to health professionals, and also by creating awareness on mental health problems among adolescents. This article has highlighted the various ways through which teachers can contribute to improving the mental health of adolescents.

Studies have explored the role of teachers in identifying psychological problems among students in school settings. A study done by Loades and Mastroyannopoulou (2010) examined the capability of teachers to recognize mental health problems in children when given descriptions of children exhibiting these disorders. They concluded that educators possess the ability to identify the existence of common emotional and behavioral disorders in their students. Rothi, Leavey, and Best (2008) focused on views of teachers on their duty in the timely recognition of students' mental health problems and subsequent referral of these children for appropriate support and concluded that teachers feel incompetently equipped to offer support to students with mental health needs. The conclusions of the above study highlighted that sensitizing teachers on mental health is very important to provide the necessary knowledge to teachers on giving help and making a subsequent referral of students with potential problems.

When it comes to identifying mental health problems among adolescents, teachers noticed some distinguishing changes in students with mental health problems based on their observations of students. Teachers also perceived that as a result of psychological issues in students, there is a decline in their academic performance and, additionally, the stigma attached to mental illness, which prevents them from seeking help. Sensitizing teachers on mental health challenges prove to be extremely beneficial in several ways. Some difficulties that restrict the teachers' ability to help students with mental health concerns include excessive job responsibilities, insufficient training, and unhealthy associations with parents. Suggestions on some approaches and support measures can help teachers overcome these challenges. These included teaming up with suitable health experts, refining their logistic abilities, and planning their curriculum. With the help of these approaches, teachers were able to offer support to students with mental health difficulties in a more efficient way. Further, the outcome of the study indicated that teachers felt that educational institutions, school management, administrators, and unions should work together to encourage and make better efforts to prepare teachers in this respect (McLeod, 2017).

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We cannot overlook the assistance provided to teachers in certain regions. A study by Hunt (2008), inferred that teachers are given enduring support in terms of having increased time to impart personal, social, and health education and to aid them to work in association with other teachers, counselors, school nurses and other professionals. Teachers can deal with the immense pressure arising due to increasing demands placed on them by the school authorities and the students with additional time and better collaboration between professionals.

Several factors may have an impact on the teachers' ability to recognize students with potential emotional problems. On these lines, a study done by Figueroa (2013) reported that there was no positive correlation between training experiences, attained degrees, and years of teaching experience and their ability to recognize pupils experiencing symptoms of anxiety.

Further, teachers stated that they utilized somewhat parallel approaches to handle social and attitudinal difficulties experienced by pupils and pupils presenting with symptoms of anxiety. They also expressed that teachers experienced significantly higher levels of stress while educating students with social and attitudinal difficulties than students with problems with anxiety. Overall, teachers stated that they required additional training to handle issues related to anxiety among students.

Apart from the need for additional training recognized by teachers, several other reasons strongly highlight the necessity to sensitize teachers on mental health problems prevalent among adolescents. One of the primary reasons is students spend a considerable amount of time in the schools. According to a study done by Yates (2017), children spend about 32 hours of their time a week during an academic year in schools. The widespread stigma attached to mental health problems and lack of access to mental health services act as barriers, and as a result, the students in need of mental health services do not get the required help. As discussed, teachers can help in the timely recognition and referral of students to seek appropriate advice as and when it is required. In schools, teachers can act as principal sources of referrals for students' mental health services due to their opportunities to have close personal and professional interactions with them regularly. Teachers make referrals of students to professionals based on their sensitivities and observations of the students' mental health needs. Providing specific mental health training to teachers can help them accurately identify students with mental health issues. We must realize that expectations are placed on teachers to act as primary mental health professionals by assisting in recognizing students who may be showing signs of mental health problems and redirect them to professionals through referrals besides imparting education to them. But teachers are not well equipped to manage students with mental health needs. Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, and Goel (2011) highlighted that teachers considered school psychologists should assume the primary responsibility of monitoring the mental health status of students, their progress, conducting screening and behavioral assessments, and refer them to seek professional services as per the needs. They indicated that they have to take the sole responsibility for executing classroom-based behavior, but they strongly felt they lacked the expertise and skillsets to help students with mental health problems.

Apart from teachers, Stormont, Reinke, and Herman (2011) suggested that all the professionals in the schools should be well-equipped to offer help to pupils with emotional and behavioral difficulties. Teachers should also be aware of the available resources and types of services available at the schools to help the behavioral and emotional needs of students. Teachers should make efforts to improve their overall knowledge of empirically

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tested interventions and assessment facilities available at schools to help students with behavioral difficulties so that they can make referrals to appropriate mental health professionals as and when it is required. The outcomes of the study inferred that teachers were not familiar with the majority of the empirically tested interventions. They were also not sure whether the schools offered precise assessments and interventions to support students.

This study concluded that there is a need for teachers to be aware of the specific resources and interventions available at schools as they will be in a better position to redirect students to make optimal use of these facilities.

Graham, Phelps, Maddison, and Fitzgerald (2011) considered schools as suitable places for mental health promotion. He anticipated that teachers are well equipped to identify issues concerning students' social and emotional well-being. However, we must bear in mind the fact that there are high levels of expectations on the part of the teachers. Still, in reality, the training provided to them is inadequate to enable them to carry out these responsibilities efficiently. This study highlighted the views of teachers concerning students' mental health and mental health education, and their sense of self-efficacy for providing backup support to enhance the psychological well-being of students in schools. A multifaceted relationship existed between teachers' framework of mental health, the significance of mental health promotion in schools, challenges of teachers' self-confidence, conflict relating to role clarity and school ethos, as well as teachers' perception of psychological well-being. We must give sufficient emphasis to the expectations, ideas, opinions, and state of mind of teachers concerning the mental well-being of students. Giving adequate importance to the views of teachers can help in enhancing the self-confidence and skills of teachers and in enabling them to accommodate the social and emotional needs of students. Additionally, it can help improve the overall mental well-being of students.

Maelan, Tjomsland, Baklien, Samdal, and Thurston (2018) discovered the teachers' and headteachers' understandings of what means they put effort into helping students' mental health needs during their routine. The findings of the study focused on the various ways in which teachers assisted students with mental health needs. They considered this as an integral part of their role as a teacher and helped students both through proactive and reactive means. Another study by Mazzer and Rickwood (2015) highlighted the opinions of teachers concerning their role in enhancing students' mental health and how resourceful they felt to be able to accomplish this goal. The inferences drawn from the study showed that overall, educators considered offering support to students with mental health needs as an inherent part of their role as a teacher. However, they expressed that their level of knowledge and skillsets on mental health was insufficient.

Further, they indicated their desire to work within a well-organized structure. We can equip teachers to provide help to students through additional training in mental health, and role clarity within the school may enable teachers to offer support to adolescents more effectually. In one such study, Shah and Kumar (2012) observed the importance of a sensitization program for teachers. The results inferred that the sensitization program was beneficial in helping teachers become aware of the mental health issues prevalent among school children. The program also helped in promoting the concept of positive mental health and problems on preventive aspects of mental health among teachers. Also, teachers were able to gain knowledge on the early detection of mental health problems, and getting access to intervention and treatment from experts for children with such difficulties.

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Further, in the future, the adverse influence on the busy years of the students due to the mental health difficulties experienced by students could be avoided. Additionally, teachers would work in partnership with institutions and professionals offering mental health services once they realize the significance of positive mental health. Training teachers can enable them to aid in sensitizing the parents of pupils on mental health.

Undoubtedly providing mental health training to teachers has been feasible and beneficial in many ways. Woods (2014) studied the efficacy of mental health training provided to teachers. The findings of the study indicated that after participating in a structured training program on mental health, the potential knowledge, level of awareness, and skillsets of the teachers significantly improved. At the end of the study, teachers were in a better position to recognize and provide sufficient assistance to students suffering from concerns related to anxiety and depression.

Kidger, Gunnell, Biddle, Campbell, and Donovan (2010) stated that policy initiatives highlight the role of schools in helping children and youth to deal with mental and emotional difficulties. However, the part of teachers is not given sufficient impetus in this regard. The study revealed that there is an association between psychological health and well-being (EHWB) activities and teaching. A possible reason for the inability of teachers to focus on the mental and emotional needs of their students could be due to ignorance of the emotional and health needs of teachers.

Further, the results of the study supported whole-school approaches that focused on specific and clear objectives on the mental health of students and offered provision for preliminary and enduring training for all teachers. We must give importance to the requirements of teachers and the challenges faced by them in their occupation. We can implement these measures keeping in mind the goals of the schools.

Imparting knowledge on mental health challenges to 14- and 15-year-olds students can help lessen stigma and encourage positive attitudes among them. Besides, it also helped in decreasing the self-reported behavioral difficulties and improved altruistic behavior.

Overall, the students who participated in the training felt optimistic about the importance of mental health training offered to them (Naylor, Cowie, Walters, Talamelli & Dawkins, 2009). By integrating a single mental health curriculum resource or a guide in regular classrooms and utilizing regular teachers to impart knowledge on mental health, the overall experience and attitudes of students significantly improved. Incorporating this guide on mental health within the curriculum is cost-effective since it can be utilized repeatedly and does not require specific budget allocations to implement it. Further, it helps access and then improves the mental health literacy of both the teachers and the students (Kutcher, Wei & Morgan, 2015). Schools have taken measures to enhance the teachers' overall knowledge and awareness of mental health and to provide assistance to the teachers for effectively implementing mental health programs for students. Imran, Rahman, Nakhshab, and Asif (2018) developed a manual on aspects related to mental health in school settings. The study indicated that the manuals aid in refining teachers' mental health knowledge and providing support, encouraging them to learn some practical methods to implement their mental health knowledge in school settings on an economic basis. Realizing the prevalence of mental health problems among adolescents, Jayaprakash and Sharija (2018) developed a framework on school mental health among adolescents. This framework helped in the reintegration of

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students with mental health challenges back into schools. It helped prevent the widespread tendency of such students from being terminated or suspended from class. Thus, teachers have played a vital role in the early recognition and prevention of mental health problems. To improve the knowledge and awareness of teachers, sensitization programs, and mental health training programs have been provided to teachers in certain regions. However, we must take efforts to refine the role of teachers in the identification, prevention, and promotion of mental health among adolescents in schools.

### ***Schools' Role in Improving Adolescent Mental Health***

When it comes to helping adolescents with mental health concerns, the role of teachers and schools is integral. Previous researchers examined the novel functions of the schools and awareness of the intensified mental health requirements observed in school settings. This section discusses several ways in which schools can help students experiencing mental health problems.

Various studies highlighted the higher prevalence of mental health problems among adolescents. In a survey by Dray, Bowmana, Campbell, Freund, Hodderb, Wolfenden, Wiggers (2017) it was indicated that globally about 10-20% of adolescents suffer from mental health problems. The study focused on measures intended to enhance resilience and focus on factors that can act defensive and help reduce the prevalence of mental health problems in adolescents. An assessment of the efficacy of a collective, school-based intervention concentrating on resilience and protective factors and decreasing the mental health problems among adolescents helped to accomplish this goal. The results of the study indicated that there were no substantial changes between groups at follow-up for three mental health consequences: total SDQ, internalizing problems, and prosocial behavior. There was an insignificant shift in favor of the control group for externalizing problems. Researchers did not provide sufficient importance to the sustained issues in designing an operative, school-based prevention plans for protective actions for mental health problems among children.

There is a constant lack of proportion between the available resources and the prevalence of mental health problems. The mental health problems are increasing at an alarming rate while efforts to initiate intervention and management of these problems is insufficient to meet these growing needs. A study conducted by Bhargava, Sahu, and Bhattacharya (2017) indicated that the incidence rates of mental illnesses are substantial. Still, the organized efforts that can help in handling mental health problems, particularly among adolescents in settings with scarce resources is often not given importance. The plans and facilities aimed at meeting the mental health needs of children and adolescents are insufficient and not resourceful enough to be able to handle the burden of mental disorders in children and adolescents in comparison to the other medical conditions. Thus, it becomes necessary to focus on implementing specific measures to meet the mental health needs of the adolescent population.

Jones (2015) aimed to critically inspect how schools can intensify provision for students with mental ailments and thereby improve students' level of accomplishments and success and lessen the incidence of suicide. Suicide is the third principal cause of the demise of people under the age of twenty-five. Suffering from mental illness is the common predecessor that drives students to end their lives. Schools provide the most exceptional environment and opportunity to prevent and offer interventions to students who are fighting with mental illness. Further, the study aimed to explore answers to the larger question of how

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administrators, therapists, educators, and students can make efforts collectively to detect and care for students with mental health complaints in a positive, practical, and active way.

Schools can conduct mental health screening and identify students who are likely to be suffering from mental health concerns to detect mental health problems at an early stage. A study done by Weist, Rubin, Moore, Adelsheim, and Wrobel (2007) indicated that the incorporation of mental health screening in schools helps in augmenting outreach and offering aid to adolescents in need. Additionally, organizing the work of the school and community as a whole to promote mental health among students by reducing the factors that act as barriers to their learning. The members of the household, school setting, and society at large should work together to make mental health screening beneficial.

After identifying the mental health problems among adolescents at an early stage, the next step would be to improve the overall knowledge of students on mental health problems. In this regard, McLuckie, Kutcher, Wei, and Weaver (2014) carried out a study since enriching the mental health knowledge of young students has been a cause of concern both among the mental health experts and teachers alike. Schools are considered an appropriate place to impart knowledge on mental health to youth. Presently, there is inadequate evidence regarding the influence of curriculum-based interventions within high school settings. The study examined the outcome of a high-school mental health curriculum (The Guide) in improving knowledge on mental health in Canadian schools. Students' knowledge significantly enhanced. The findings of the study revealed that the overall experience and attitudes of students about mental health improved. The study aimed to establish the positive effect of a curriculum-based mental health literacy program in a Canadian high school population.

Schools should focus on specific mental health activities and programs, besides improving the overall knowledge and awareness of students on mental health, that can help promote the concept of mental health. School mental health promotion programs have been implemented in the Indian context as well. Gujar and Pingale (2018) focused on the School Mental Health Programme in Maharashtra. Inferences drawn from the study revealed that mental health services in schools could ensure to provide an equal opportunity to all students to build their cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities to the fullest level. Additionally, if mental health professionals work together with youth, family, and the community at large, they can contribute significantly to school mental health goals. Reilly, Svirydzienka, Adams and Dogra (2018) aimed to understand the need for mental health promotion interventions in schools. The outcomes of the study indicated that a range of responses had been tried for mental health promotion in schools during the past ten years, with variable levels of positive outcomes. A resilient and extensive evidence base in the field of mental health promotion, with a focus on both the universal approach and targeted approach to completely address the mental health needs of youth, was also recommended. The preliminary step in promoting mental health in schools would be to work in the existing scenario and make resources accessible by enriching school mental health activities.

Mental health promotion in schools has some additional benefits as well. A study done by Jerusalem and Hessling (2009) brought to light how mental health promotion in schools can strengthen self-efficacy. Based on the outcomes of the study, factors like taking efforts to customize task demands and provide performance feedback to the students on an individual basis positively improve self-efficacy. Further, if teachers are open in terms of their demands



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and evaluation criteria, it would be beneficial for the students to develop school self-efficacy. Williams and Lawson (2014) investigated the relationships between student's mental health and their viewpoints of life at school. Based on the conclusions derived from the study, a clear component appeared, presenting a progression from psychological health complications to strengths, in close association with students' accounts about their school experiences.

Atkins, Hoagwood, Kutash, and Seidman (2010) focused on the need to integrate education and mental health in schools. To accomplish this goal, on the first-hand, schooling practices should be made useful by focusing on the healthy functioning of students and modifying the existing framework within the school. We can utilize natural resources within schools to implement and endure operative provisions for students' education and emotive/social health. By devoting a considerable amount of time to advance positive consequences for all students, especially students with severe emotive and social needs and encouraging proactive participation of parents, can help in integrating education and mental health in schools.

Weare and Markham (2005) provided suggestions on the measures; schools need to take to enhance mental health effectually. The findings of the study suggested the need for a whole-school approach in schools, which will help in targeting students with specific needs, and the work of the professional facilities can be much more impactful. Schools have to utilize positive representations of mental health that focus on well-being and capability, not just ailments that will help enhance the concept of mental health and lessen the stigma attached to mental health problems. Further, to implement mental health programs in schools, few more suggestions were given. It will be useful to offer a standard facility to improve the mental health of everyone and, after that, focus on those with distinct needs. Further, providing a friendly environment that encourages warmth, compassion, positive expectations, and clear boundaries is necessary. Also, mental health problems must be given attention at a preliminary stage; focus on a developmental approach that does not expect instantaneous responses can help in the long run. By imparting the necessary skill sets and competencies related to mental health, teachers can identify students who are vulnerable to develop mental health problems and indulge in high-risk behaviors. Providing training to the families and actively involving the facilitators of the programs can help monitor and enhance their mental health as well.

Specific efforts must be taken both by the teachers and the schools to cater to the mental health needs of students. A study by Connelly, Lockhart, Wilson, Furnivall, Bryce, Barbour, and Phin (2008) They employed various approaches to offer support to children, adolescents, and their families. However, we must not overlook the enormous challenges and frustrations experienced by teachers during this process. To help educators handle these challenges, they should have sufficient time and awareness on the agencies and organizations that cater to the needs of students so that they can make timely referrals. Identifying the roadblocks faced by teachers is necessary. Further teachers expressed the need to have better training, information regarding categories of mental disorders. Gamman (2003) suggested that effectual assistance can be provided to children and their family members in environments where teachers consider themselves to have necessary access to support systems, are able to openly express their challenges and are able to collaborate with other health care professionals. The emerging role of school nurses may prove beneficial and will further help in connecting the part of schools and mental health services. Modifications that are taking place in the system of guidance in schools offer hope for the future and will help in eventually shifting the focus towards a more child-centered, pastoral care model and on policy agendas that put

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associations at the forefront of implementation strategies. These two specific role changes may have a constructive impact on what schools in Scotland can offer their students and how they connect with other facilities.

### CONCLUSIONS

This paper has discussed studies on perspectives of teachers on student mental health, evaluation of how teachers can aid in identifying psychological problems, and the impact of mental health training for teachers. Several efforts have been made by previous researchers to implement mental health programs in schools among adolescents; however, they failed to assess the views of teachers in greater detail. There is a need to explore the aspects of teachers on measures necessary to stimulate mental health in schools. Focusing on the potential challenges encountered by teachers while helping adolescents suffering from emotional and behavioral issues and the educational materials required by teachers to incorporate mental health awareness building and promotional activities in educational settings is needed. The contribution of schools in enhancing mental health among adolescents is undisputed. Studies have been undertaken on the role of schools in mental health screening and implementing mental health programs. However, taking more efforts to conduct studies that aim to understand the role of schools in enhancing mental health among adolescents from the perspectives of teachers, thereby helping the teachers and the schools to make a combined effort in this regard.

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The author declared no conflict of interest.

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