

# Teachers as Catalysts for Change: Advocating Mental Health and Wellbeing in Education

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## Abstract

*The main focus of this qualitative study is to explore secondary school teachers' perceptions of their roles in supporting adolescent mental health in classrooms, emphasizing the need to empower them as agents of change. Semi-structured interviews with teachers from twelve secondary schools were conducted, offering deep insights into their experiences and perceptions. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis, highlighting key themes: understanding adolescent development, the expanding role of teachers, the role of other support systems, and barriers to effective mental health intervention. Themes emphasize the interplay of teacher roles and the needed institutional support for addressing mental health. Teachers recognize their unique position to influence adolescents' mental health positively but are often underprepared and unsupported due to a variety of factors. The study recommends developing comprehensive training programs for mental health teachers and comprehensive school support systems. It also highlights the importance of a collaborative approach that includes parents, mental health professionals, and community organizations to strengthen the support network for adolescents. For policymakers and educational leaders, the research suggests strategies that empower teachers as frontline advocates for mental health in schools. With an emphasis on the integral role of teachers, this study contributes to the ongoing discussion about improving mental health outcomes in schools.*

**Keywords:** Mental Health, Well-being, Adolescents, School Support System.

## Introduction

"Heal Your Mind, Shine Your Light." "A World of Support, A World of Hope." These slogans from World Mental Health Day, celebrated annually on 10 October, highlight the pressing need to address mental health worldwide. Mental health is a fundamental human right and a critical component of overall health and quality of life (WHO, 2005). Although mental health has always been important, it has recently garnered increased attention and concern. The World Health Organization defines *good mental health* as "a state of well-being in which every individual realizes their potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and can contribute to their community" (WHO, 2018, p.2).

Despite growing awareness, mental illnesses are rising globally, underscoring the need for interventions. According to the WHO (2022), mental disorders significantly contribute to the global disease burden, constituting a substantial part of the overall health challenges faced worldwide. The same report reveals that 1 in every eight people globally lives with a mental

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disorder, including conditions such as depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. The situation in Pakistan is even more alarming, with over 50 million people estimated to suffer from mental health issues, indicating a mental health crisis (British Asian Trust, 2021). While mental health disorders can affect individuals of all ages, adolescents often experience heightened vulnerability. According to WHO (2018a), adolescence is a formative and unique period marked by significant physical, emotional, and social changes. The brain's development during this stage triggers hormonal shifts and shapes the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural traits typical of adolescence (Griffin, 2017). Globally, mental health conditions are a significant burden among adolescents, with an estimated one in seven experiencing mental disorders in 2019 (WHO, 2021). In Pakistan, 10%–20% of children and adolescents are estimated to have behavioural and cognitive disorders (Munawar et al., 2020).

The delicate interplay between hormonal fluctuations, cognitive maturation, and societal influences during adolescence can significantly impact mental health, making this group particularly vulnerable to mental health issues. If these issues are not identified and addressed early, they can affect individuals well into adulthood. The increasing concerns over youth mental health in recent decades have led to a widespread belief, especially in the West, that there is a "crisis" in adolescent mental health (Fink et al., 2015; Gunnell et al., 2018).

In response to this growing concern and the lack of adequate mental health resources, particularly for young people, the WHO developed task-shifting and task-sharing strategies to improve mental health access in low-resource settings (WHO, 2007). The WHO's Mental Health Gap Action Program (mhGAP) underscores the importance of straightforward approaches that can be implemented even by those without specialized mental health training, such as teachers, to help close the mental health treatment gap. However, the role of teachers in mental health support programs has not been fully explored, especially in Pakistan, where initiatives like the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office's School Mental Health Program (SMHP) are still in the pilot stage (Imran et al., 2022). Although the literature suggests teachers can improve students' mental well-being, there is limited qualitative research on this role, particularly in Pakistan. Therefore, this study explores teachers' perceptions of their role in adolescent mental health within the Pakistani context.

For several reasons, understanding teachers' perceptions of their roles and challenges is crucial. First of all, teachers are the first persons to notice adolescents' mental health problems; therefore, their insights can help shape effective support mechanisms within schools (Gunnell et al., 2018; Fink et al., 2015). Second, acknowledging their perspectives is crucial for identifying specific training needs that empower teachers to effectively address students' mental health (Imran et al., 2022; Hamdani et al., 2021). Finally, teachers' beliefs about mental health shape their support for students, directly influencing their emotional well-being and academic performance (Abdinasir, 2019; Johnson et al., 2011).

## **Literature Review**

Pakistan, classified as a developing nation, has an estimated population of 229 million people (Pakistan Demographic Survey, 2020). With 60% of the population under 30, Pakistan has one of the world's largest youth populations (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). However, the country is facing a critical mental health crisis, with over 50 million people—about 1 in 5—suffering from mental health issues (British Asian Trust, 2021). Among them, adolescents in Pakistan are particularly vulnerable, experiencing a wide range of mental health challenges. Depression, anxiety, stress, eating disorders, substance abuse, PTSD, obsessive-compulsive

disorder (OCD), and self-harm are among the most prevalent conditions affecting young people (refer to table 1).

Several factors contribute to the mental health challenges facing Pakistan's youth, ranging from socioeconomic pressures to cultural stigma and limited access to mental health resources (Sartorius, 2007). The political instability in Pakistan, exacerbated by frequent natural disasters and the disruptive impact of social media, contributes to increased stress and uncertainty among the youth (Yousafzai, 2022). Economic difficulties further complicate the situation, as Pakistan's low ranking on the Human Development Index reflects widespread poverty, pushing many young people into labour markets and limiting their educational opportunities (Chachar & Mian, 2022). This lack of opportunities leaves many adolescents without the necessary support to succeed. Additionally, Pakistan's mental health care system faces serious challenges. The government allocates only 0.4% of its healthcare budget to mental health, significantly less than neighboring countries like India and China (PBS, 2017). Most services are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural populations underserved. This disparity is worsened by a severe shortage of qualified professionals, with just one psychiatrist per million people (Chachar et al., 2019). The mental health policy, last revised in 2003, fails to meet current needs, and inadequate training for hospital staff often forces individuals to rely on faith healers or traditional methods (Irfan, 2010; Choudhry et al., 2016).

The consequences of these factors result in adverse outcomes that affect both their current lives and future potential. Poor mental health can lead to higher dropout rates, reduced academic engagement, and diminished social interactions, which in turn weaken ties to the workforce and lower future earnings (Skogen et al., 2018). Adolescents with unresolved mental health issues are at higher risk for substance abuse, criminal activities, and even suicide—a leading cause of death among adolescents globally (WHO, 2013). Notably, a study by Imran et al. (2023) reported 2,295 suicide deaths published in selected newspapers between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021, with 289 cases (13%) involving adolescents aged 10 to 18 years. These findings underscore the urgent need to recognize and address adolescent mental health issues to mitigate their long-term impact on individuals and society. However, this raises several critical questions: Why aren't mental health issues diagnosed earlier in adolescents? What measures should be implemented to prevent or mitigate these challenges? How can those around adolescents, including family members, educators, and healthcare providers, better support them in recognizing and addressing mental health concerns effectively?

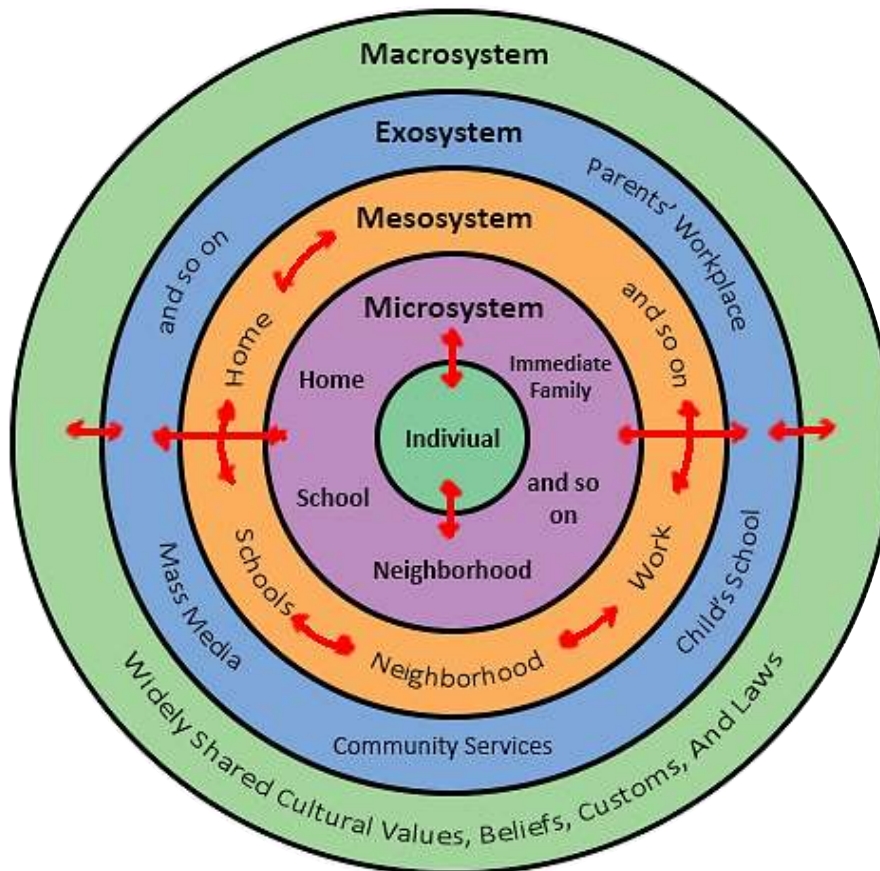
**Table 1: Prevalence of Mental Health Issues in Pakistan**

<b>Mental Health Issues</b>	<b>Contributing Factors</b>	<b>Recent Research</b>
Depression and Anxiety	Academic pressure, economic instability	Ahmad & Khan (2020): Anxiety and Depression in Karachi students.
Stress	Education pressures, familial expectations	Mirza & Jenkins (2019): Social media's impact on stress.
Eating Disorders	Body image issues, media influence	Hussain (2019): Eating disorders in Karachi teenagers.
Substance Abuse	Peer influence, lack of recreation	Khan & Saeed (2021): Substance abuse trends in Karachi teens.
PTSD	Regional conflicts, domestic violence	Qureshi & Amin (2018): PTSD in Northern Pakistan children.
OCD	Genetic factors, behavioral patterns	Saleem & Zaidi (2020): OCD rise in Karachi adolescents.

### Role of Microsystem: School and Teachers in Supporting Mental Health of Adolescents

Urie Bronfenbrenner's biological model, developed in 1994, better responds to these questions, especially the last one. Bronfenbrenner's model is made up of five different layers, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, see figure 1:

**Figure 1: Urie Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1994)**



Each of these layers helps shape the environment around a child and directly impacts their mental health development. By examining each layer, we can see how a child's environment influences their growth and mental health. For example, in the microsystem, positive interactions at school and supportive family relationships can enhance an adolescent's well-being. Understanding these layers helps us see the big picture of a child's life and the various factors that contribute to their mental health.

Though all the stakeholders presented in this theoretical framework hold a special place in child growth, schools and teachers play a significant role in supporting adolescents' mental health. In the current educational landscape, schools are increasingly recognized as pivotal in shaping not just academic competencies but also in fostering socialization, effective communication, and overall mental health (Hoover & Bostic, 2021). It is noted that three-fourths of children who received mental health services were found to receive them through the education sector (Farmer et al, 2003). Hence, mental health interventions, when integrated into a holistic school-wide well-

being approach, bring about positive outcomes throughout the entire school system (Barry, 2009). Adolescents spend a significant time in school and teachers become a primary point of contact for those seeking assistance with their mental health concerns, therefore, the teacher's role is crucial for not only academic development but also for fostering a supportive environment that actively engages in the mental well-being of students (Abdinasir, 2019). In addition, teachers demonstrate care and concern for their students, having the power to either uplift or undermine a student's self-esteem, making or breaking a student's day in an instant. In their interactions with students, teachers adapt into counselors, surrogate parents, nutritionists, and advocates, consistently keeping the best interests of every child at heart (Siddiqui & Ahmed 2020).

Teachers can be involved at several stages to support the mental health of their students. Teachers often find themselves at the forefront, being among the first individuals to hear the alarm calls of students facing challenges that impact their well-being. They possess the ability to identify signals that might sometimes be overlooked in a home setting (House of Commons, 2017). Thus, the teacher's crucial role in recognizing symptoms of mental distress can help prevent students from facing dangerous situations or assist them in getting support to prevent potential mental health crises. After identifying deviant behavior, the teacher's role in referring these cases to an authentic person is again very crucial. Alongside this, promoting emotional awareness and regulation equips students with essential skills to navigate their feelings effectively, reducing the likelihood of stress or anxiety. Moreover, building strong relationships and support networks within the classroom fosters a sense of belonging and trust, providing students with essential buffers against mental health challenges (Hightower et al., 2011). In the context of Pakistan, where patients with mental disorders are stigmatized, the provision of these types of preventive services in school leads to a higher likelihood of students seeking mental health support. In essence, by incorporating mental health education into their role, teachers become instrumental in building a foundation for the overall well-being and resilience of adolescents.

While there is growing research on the positive impacts of teacher involvement on student mental health in Western contexts, similar studies are notably scarce in Pakistan, particularly in Karachi. Teachers play a vital role in supporting adolescent mental health, yet their perspectives are often overlooked in mental health service discussions. There is a significant lack of detailed information on how teachers in Karachi view mental health interventions, their confidence in making referrals, and their comfort in managing students' emotional and behavioral issues. These insights are crucial as teachers' perceptions and attitudes significantly influence how they interact with and respond to students experiencing mental health issues. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the perceptions of teachers in Karachi regarding their role in adolescent mental health and their contributions to students' overall well-being. By examining teachers' views on their roles in mental health, this research seeks to provide contextually relevant insights that can inform more effective support strategies in Pakistani schools.

## Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative methodology focused on the perceptions, roles, and capabilities of secondary school teachers in supporting adolescents' mental health in Karachi. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants, aiming for a diverse group of secondary school teachers who have direct classroom interaction with students for over 20 hours/week and have engaged in discussions about mental health with their students, refer to Table 2 for demographic details of the participants. This method ensures that the data collected is rich and relevant, providing a comprehensive understanding of the varied experiences and insights across different educational

contexts. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences and perceptions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns within the data. To ensure ethical considerations, confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the process, safeguarding the participants' identities and the sensitive information shared during the interviews.

**Table 2: Demographic details of the participants**

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Years of experience	Grades teach
Sana	33	<i>F</i>	Moderate	9,10
Ayesha	29	<i>F</i>	Moderate	7,8,9
Maham	32	<i>F</i>	Low	8,9
Atif	29	<i>M</i>	Low	9,10
Sadia	35	<i>F</i>	Moderate	7,8,9
Rafiq	31	<i>M</i>	Low	9,10
Zara	43	<i>F</i>	High	<i>Multigrades</i>
Ahmed	35	<i>M</i>	Moderate	7,9
Marium	28	<i>F</i>	High	8,9,10
Fahad	28	<i>M</i>	Low	6,7
Hira	37	<i>F</i>	Moderate	9,10
Bilal	41	<i>M</i>	High	Multigrades

## Results

The data collected from teachers in this study revealed four major themes that reflect their experiences and perceptions regarding their role in supporting adolescent mental health. The first theme explores understanding adolescents' development, focusing on the psychological and emotional changes that adolescents go through and how critical this stage is for their overall mental health. The second theme looks at the complex role of teachers in mental health, pointing out their duties as observers, supporters, and intervenors when it comes to the mental health challenges faced by their students. The third theme discusses the role of schools and other support systems in creating a supportive environment for mental health, highlighting the need for teamwork among various stakeholders. Finally, the fourth theme examines the barriers to addressing mental health challenges, indicating both the internal difficulties within educational setups.

### Theme 1: Understanding Adolescent Development

Teachers shared their insights into the significant role mental health plays in the lives of adolescents. Almost all participants described the stage of adolescence as 'important and critical,' one that requires proper attention. Teachers like Bilal underscored the need to view health holistically—emphasizing that mental health is as crucial as physical health, particularly during the formative adolescent years. Bilal explained, "Health includes everything—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual. All these aspects are equally important, and neglecting mental health can be just as harmful as neglecting physical health" (Bilal, March 11th, 2024).

Sana echoed this sentiment by pointing out how critical mental health is for academic success and personal growth. She noted,

Mental health truly is central to adolescent development. It affects their academic success, social interactions, and personal growth. By nurturing their emotional well-being, we enhance their ability to develop healthy relationships, make sound decisions, and cope with the challenges of growing up (Sana, March 1st, 2024).

Ahmed shared his personal experience, explaining how neglecting mental health leads to both short-term impacts and long-term consequences if not addressed early. He stated:

I got hydrophobia after nearly drowning as a kid. At that time, everyone took care of my physical injuries, ensuring I healed properly on the outside. However, I was affected mentally as well, but no one paid attention to how terrified I was (Ahmed, March 28th, 2024).

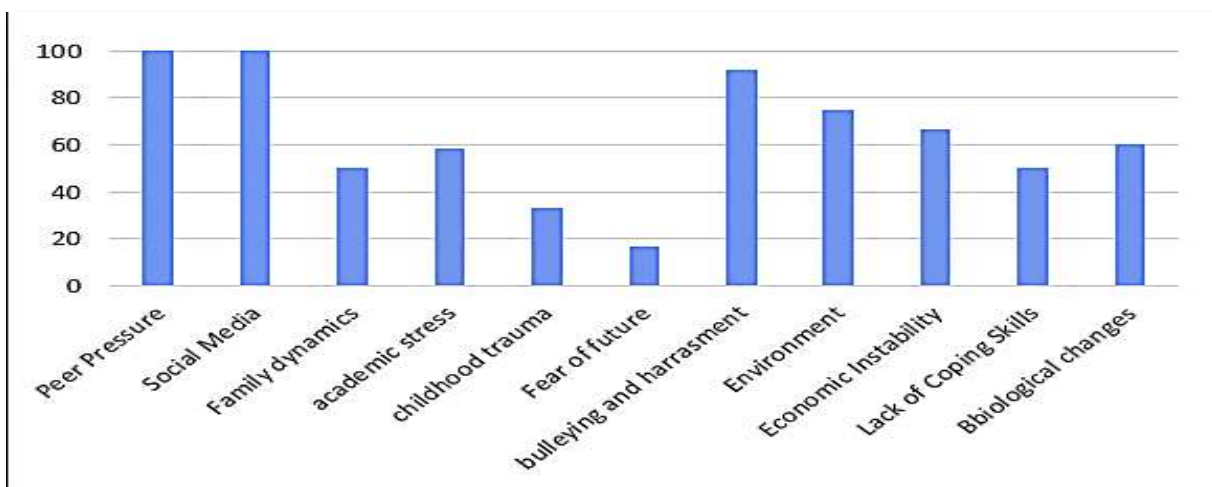
Moreover, most of the participants were aware of the major mental health challenges faced by adolescents nowadays. Drawing from her 22 years of teaching, Zara shared her experiences with a wide range of mental health issues, from mild to severe, that she has encountered in the classroom. “I have observed issues like low self-confidence, anxiety, and depression among adolescents, significantly affecting their daily lives” (Zara, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024).

Zara's experience highlights that teachers frequently encounter students showing signs of mental health issues throughout their careers. Additionally, the stories shared by Ayesha and Marium highlight reasons such as peer pressure, bullying, academic pressure, and family dynamics as the top contributors to mental health issues (refer to figure 2 for other factors). Sana discusses the importance of family dynamics in a child's development:

Family dynamics significantly shape a child's development, encompassing how members interact, communicate, and follow norms. This includes how parents converse with each other and elders, the language they use, and even details like TV habits. The family serves as the first environment where a child learns and forms behavior patterns (Sana, March 1st, 2024).

These insights and personal stories show that teachers are acquainted with the transitions this group goes through. This shows that they are not only aware of and concerned about their students' academic success but also their overall well-being.

**Figure 2: Factors that affect the mental health of Adolescents**



## Theme 2: The Multifaceted Role of Teachers in Mental Health

This theme emphasizes the various roles teachers play in the mental health continuum, from early detection of symptoms to actively supporting and referring students to appropriate mental health resources. Refer to Figure 2 for different roles teachers play in fostering mental well-being. While highlighting some preventive strategies, Fahad, mentioned a notable strategy “I use mindfulness and deep-breathing exercises to ease exam stress and help students reflect through free art. These avenues provide them to reflect and share their feelings and exhaustion.” (Fahad, April 3rd, 2024) Atif also highlighted his practice of incorporating social-emotional learning (SEL) aspects, which include self-esteem, relationship skills, decision-making, and identifying emotions in his classes. He narrated:

I teach Islamiyat, and I think I find this subject best to incorporate religious and ethical values. I have my research in SEL; hence I try my best to incorporate its aspects in my teaching. Either implicitly, within the curriculum, or explicitly by conducting a one-day session. For example, I was teaching about the migration of Muslims from Mecca to Medina during Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) time. I picked decision-making and identifying emotions from the SEL model and talked in detail about managing emotions in difficult situations. In my view, these approaches prepare students for life challenges (Atif, March 20th, 2024).

Atif's integration of SEL within the curriculum reflects a holistic approach to education, where academic content is intertwined with emotional and ethical development. Besides preventive efforts, teachers highlighted their role as “identifiers” in supporting mental health issues which leads to timely interventions that can greatly improve student well-being and resilience. Zara shared her observations, saying,

In my role as the initial contact for students, I often notice subtle changes that might not be immediately apparent to others. Noticing a student's consistent underperformance and lack of engagement allowed me to initiate a one-on-one dialogue. It soon became apparent that she was battling anxiety. Early identification like this is key in connecting students with the necessary support services, improving their educational and personal outcomes (Zara, March 25, 2024).

Once the issue is identified, teachers put in their efforts to manage and resolve it effectively, refer to Figure 3. While discussing several strategies, Ahmed highlighted what he does with his students who face any mental health issues:

For these types of issues, I first acknowledge the issue to validate students' feelings, actively listen, and involve peers, parents, and professionals to ensure a supportive network. Moreover, I avoid being too prescriptive initially because that can make students feel unheard or neglected (Ahmed, March 28th, 2024).

Another participant, Sadia, shared a personalized approach while dealing with severe emotional trauma:

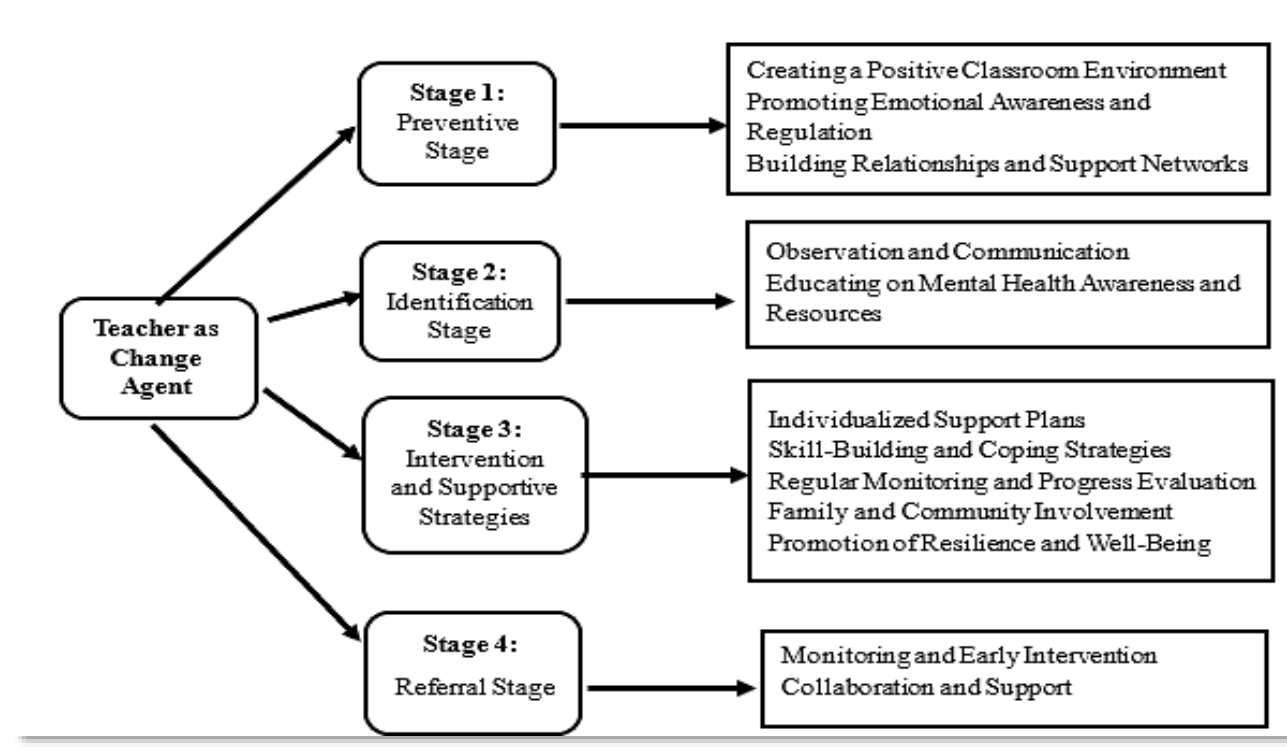
One of my students had a brother who committed suicide. It deeply affected him, and you could see the sadness on his face. They were only two brothers, so it was tough on him. I started giving him one-on-one counseling and kept a close watch on his daily routines. I also took some therapy sessions myself, which helped me learn the best ways to conduct these meetings. Through all these efforts, he slowly accepted his brother's loss and started to move on with his life (Sadia, April 5th, 2024).

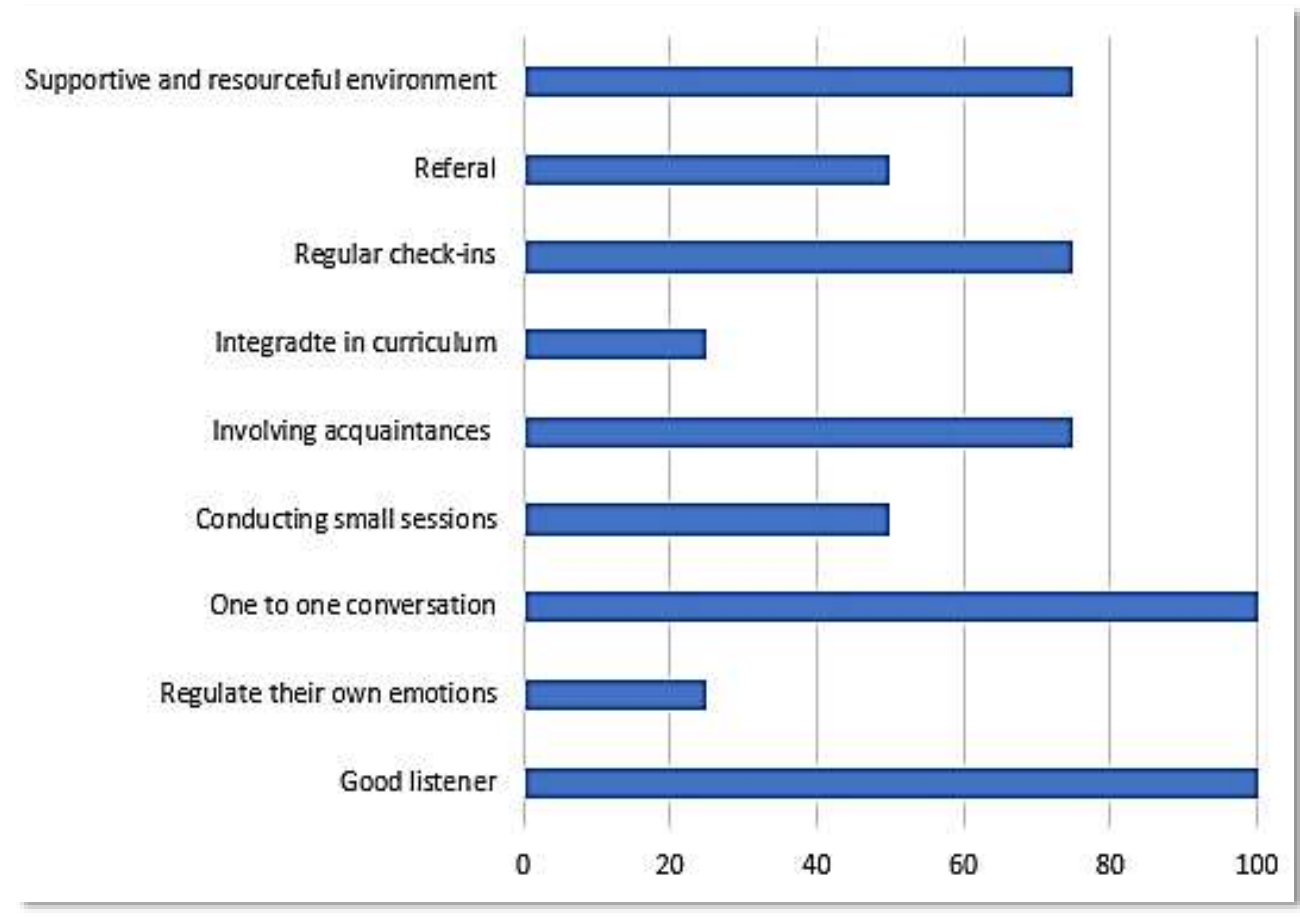


Despite these proactive measures, many teachers encounter challenges in accurately identifying specific mental health issues. They often struggle to determine the exact nature of a problem a child might be experiencing. Moreover, the limited time available during school hours can leave teachers feeling overwhelmed. This time constraint makes it challenging for them to provide the individual attention needed to thoroughly identify and address these issues. Hira mentioned:

As a teacher, it's often quite difficult to precisely identify the specific mental health issues our students might be struggling with, as I am not trained for it. Additionally, the limited time available during school hours adds to our challenges, making us feel overwhelmed. We barely get enough time to focus on each student individually (Hira, April 3, 2024).

**Figure 3: Teachers as Change Agents: Multifaceted Role of a teacher in supporting Mental Health in the classroom**



**Figure 4: Various proactive approaches employed by teachers as Managers**

Another challenge highlighted by some of the teachers is that they feel overwhelmed by these issues and hence just remain listeners. While articulating her struggles, Ayesha mentioned:

Sometimes, I feel overburdened because these incidents affect me deeply too. I am dealing with some personal issues, so there are times when I find it hard to fully engage with these stories unless it's urgent. That's why I mostly focus on being a good listener, which is important. It helps me manage my well-being while still supporting my students (Ayesha, March 16th, 2024).

Ayesha's reflections highlight the emotional strain on teachers acting as mental health managers, emphasizing the need for strong institutional support. Ensuring teachers' mental well-being is essential, as it directly impacts their ability to effectively support students.

### **Theme 3: Role of School and Other Support Systems**

Creating a school culture that prioritizes mental health is essential for students' well-being. This involves establishing clear policies and practices to actively support mental health initiatives. For example, Hira describes how her school uses year tutors and mentors to oversee students' mental and social well-being, emphasizing the importance of these roles by stating,

In our school, we have a special system where year tutors and mentors are assigned to different age groups. A year tutor stays with the same group of students for four

years but doesn't teach any specific subjects. Instead, their role is focused on monitoring the student's progress and overall well-being. They have regular casual chats with the students, sometimes talk to their parents, and keep a close watch over their development—both academically and personally. This system works best for us as we try our best to prevent any issues (Hira, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024).

Building on this foundational strategy, Fahad shared additional institutional initiatives that underscore the importance of mental health as a crucial element of overall well-being:

As part of our continuous professional development (CPD), our school organized a three-day workshop titled 'Hope for Life' where various mental health issues were addressed. A clinical psychologist leading these sessions informed us about strategies that teachers can use as first responders to mental health issues. Furthermore, our school supports teachers who wish to explore this field by funding their further education in relevant courses (Fahad, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024).

Moreover, the school's commitment to creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment is clear through its mental health facilities as Hira mentioned:

Our school has made important efforts to ensure that mental health is given as much importance as physical health, creating a supportive and non-judgmental environment for everyone. We have a psychologist available at our school where students who are feeling mentally distressed can freely and confidentially discuss their feelings and challenges. This supportive setup guarantees that all students feel comfortable to openly share their difficulties without fear of being judged, which is essential for building a truly inclusive school community (Hira, April 3, 2024).

The role of partnerships with families and other stakeholders is crucial in extending the reach and effectiveness of mental health initiatives beyond the school environment. As Ayesha mentioned:

In my view, students spend the majority of their time at home, hence parents should take care of their well-being. Moreover, teachers sometimes miss the signs of distress due to several reasons such as lack of time, class strength, and the need to complete the curriculum. However, parents have only one or two children to look after. Therefore, if parents notice any issues, they can talk to us and vice versa. This collaboration is important because it fosters a supportive network that ensures no signs of distress go unnoticed (Ayesha, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024).

Besides teacher-parent partnerships, the importance of partnerships extends to collaborations with mental health professionals and community organizations, as Sadia points out the benefits of such cooperative efforts. She notes,

As a teacher, we understand that we are not therapists. We, as first-line responders' do whatever best we can however, we need field experts for difficult cases. Hence, we have a nurse and a psychologist in our school, so if any teacher notices any changes in behavior or any mental health issues, we usually keep these professionals in the loop and work closely with them to address the situation. This team approach ensures that students receive timely and appropriate support, and helps us create a coordinated care plan that meets their specific needs (Sadia, April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024).

Building on this theme of comprehensive support, Fahad emphasized the crucial role of local and national government bodies in fostering mental well-being in schools. He mentioned,

As part of a teachers' community, I have observed that the government has initiated programs aimed at improving mental health literacy among teachers. However,

these initiatives are progressing slowly and remain largely in their pilot phases. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen the collaboration between government and schools to ensure uniform implementation and to fully realize the benefits of mental health education in all schools (Fahad, April 3rd, 2024).

#### **Theme 4: Barriers to Addressing Mental Health Challenges**

This theme highlights the barriers that teachers have expressed while addressing mental health concerns among adolescents, Refer to Figure 4 for general barriers highlighted by teachers. One significant barrier that has emerged from our analysis is the issue of time constraints faced by teachers when addressing mental health concerns among adolescents. Maham shares,

Time is one of our biggest hurdles when addressing mental health issues. From the moment we arrive at school until we leave, our schedules are completely packed. Between teaching classes, grading, and handling administrative tasks, there is barely any time left to focus on the individual mental health needs of our students. Furthermore, the lack of time prevents us from building the strong relationships necessary for students to feel comfortable discussing their mental health issues."(Maham, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 24)

In addition to time constraints, many teachers expressed a lack of confidence in dealing with mental health issues among adolescents due to insufficient training and knowledge. Atif shares his experience,

When I encounter a student showing signs of mental distress, I often feel overwhelmed and unsure of the best way to help. My instinct is to provide support, but without a strong background in mental health, I am constantly worried about saying or doing something that might make their situation worse. We need more resources and guidance on effectively addressing these issues in a school setting (Atif, March 20th, 2024).

Although some schools arrange training sessions focused on well-being, their effectiveness and frequency are lacking. Rafiq adds to this point, noting the deficiencies in the training provided:

Our school organized a workshop on mental health last year, but it was only for a day and covered the basics. It felt more like a checkbox activity rather than thorough training. We need ongoing, detailed training that covers various aspects of mental health, including how to recognize early warning signs, how to provide initial support, and when to refer students to professionals. I feel more comprehensive and ongoing training is essential (Rafiq, April 11th, 2024).

Maham further added,

Our system does not have essential resources like psychologists and nurses. Without these specialized professionals, we, as teachers, are often left to manage complex mental health issues that we are not adequately trained to handle. This gap in resources makes it extremely difficult to provide the support that our students need (Maham, April 9th, 2024).

Besides institutional and professional barriers, there are social and cultural barriers that can hinder effective support and interventions. Ayesha shared her thoughts on the stigma associated with mental health:

In our community, and generally in Pakistan, talking about mental health is often seen as a sign of weakness. Many students and their families hesitate to seek help because they worry about what others will think. This stigma is deeply embedded

in our cultural norms, where mental health issues are sometimes viewed as personal failings or spiritual problems. Because of this, those who are struggling might feel even more alone and unsupported, making their difficulties even harder to handle (Ayesha, March 16th, 2024).

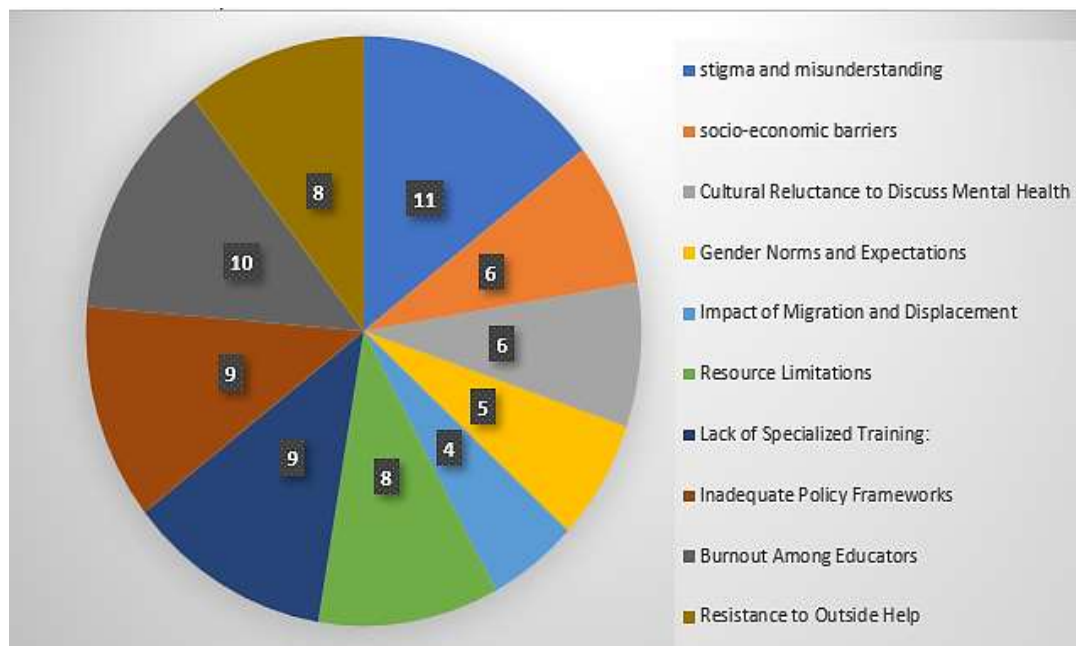
Rafiq added another layer to the discussion by highlighting the role of economic status on access to mental health resources:

A lot of our students come from backgrounds where there is not much money, and this limits their access to good healthcare. Without proper mental health services, many of their issues just don't get the attention they need. Many students at our school have recently moved here. Adjusting to a new place can add to their mental stress. On top of that, they are often without their usual support networks and might not yet have the language skills to express what they are going through (Rafiq, April 11th, 2024).

Atif also contributed a unique perspective on the gender dynamics within the educational system:

Being a male teacher sometimes makes it harder to connect with students facing mental health issues. There's a cultural reluctance, especially among boys, to talk about their feelings because they think it might make them look weak. This attitude comes from traditional gender roles where showing emotions is seen as a sign of weakness in men. As a result, these students might choose to suffer silently rather than seek help, which can make their mental health problems worse. The challenge for teachers, like me, is not only to encourage these students to share their struggles but also to create an environment where doing so is seen as strong, not weak (Atif, March 20th, 2024).

**Figure 5: Barriers Faced by Teachers while proving Mental health support**



Teachers are at the forefront, keenly observing and addressing mental health concerns. Moreover, working with parents and external experts significantly strengthens the support network available to students, ensuring they receive the comprehensive care they need. Finally, the data highlighted several obstacles to addressing mental health in schools. These include not only institutional issues like insufficient resources and training but also broader social and cultural barriers such as stigma and misconceptions about mental health.

## Discussion

Teachers play a transformative role in advocating for students' mental health and well-being, catalyzing change within education systems. Their unique position as consistent observers of students' behavior and emotional states enables them to act as early responders to mental health challenges. However, this study highlights the complexity of their role, the barriers they face, and the systemic changes needed to empower teachers in this capacity.

The study revealed that teachers genuinely care about their student's mental health and are committed to supporting it. All the teachers involved in the study emphasized that their role extends beyond merely delivering academic content; they understand the profound impact they have on their students' lives. While their primary responsibility is education, they also recognize the importance of addressing their students' emotional and mental well-being. This aligns with the findings of Graham et al. (2011) and Reinke et al. (2011), who noted that many teachers consider caring for students' mental health an integral part of their responsibilities.

However, the extent teachers promote, support, and respond to students' mental health varies significantly. This diversity in approach is explored further in the discourse analysis by Antoniadou and Bibou-Nakou (2012), where teachers expressed uncertainty about their role in supporting students' mental health. Some questioned whether caring for students' mental well-being is essential to their duties or merely an additional task that falls outside their core teaching responsibilities.

Despite these differing views, many participants demonstrated a broader understanding of their role, aligning with the four stages of mental health support: prevention, identification, management, and referral, as illustrated in figure 2. Participants such as Ahmed, Atif, and Sadia shared strategies they employed to promote mental well-being, including mindfulness practices, art integration, deep breathing exercises, and using Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategies in classrooms. While having a significant short-term impact, these initiatives provide students with valuable opportunities to share their challenges and express their emotions. For instance, mindfulness practices reduce irritability and stress (Himmelstein et al., 2012), while SEL strategies offer students practical tools for regulating their emotions and making decisions, thus enhancing resilience and empathy.

While proactive classroom strategies are impactful, teachers' role extends further into the early detection of mental health challenges. Participants consistently reported that they are often the first to notice signs of distress in their students. Diaz (2020) suggests that teachers are frequently the first to detect the "alarm calls" of students facing challenges that might be overlooked at home. Similarly, Ginsburg and Drake (2002) argue that the extensive time teachers spend with students equips them to recognize symptoms of anxiety or depression early. However, despite their pivotal role, many teachers, like Hira and Ayesha in our study, expressed a lack of confidence in pinpointing specific mental health conditions. While they can sense when students are struggling, they often find it challenging to diagnose these issues precisely, primarily due to a lack of detailed mental health training. This sentiment is echoed in the literature, with Nash et al. (2016) pointing

out that many teachers have a limited understanding of mental health due to inadequate access to professional support and training.

Working and collaborating with parents, peers, and mental health professionals is crucial for building a solid support system that nurtures students' academic and emotional needs (Weare, 2010). Teachers in the study stressed how involving key stakeholders creates a well-rounded approach to supporting student well-being. This collaborative effort reflects Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights the vital role of a child's immediate environment—family, friends, schools, and the broader community—in shaping their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). By fostering these connections, teachers can help create a caring and supportive environment where students feel valued and empowered to thrive. Moreover, building a supportive and non-stigmatizing environment is crucial for student mental health (Anjum et al., 2024). Positive teacher-student relationships are at the heart of this, as solid connections help students feel safe to seek help when needed (Kourkoutas & Giovazolias, 2015). Teachers like Ayesha and Ahmed use open communication, active listening, and regular feedback to build student trust. They also organize group activities to foster respect and teamwork, creating a more inclusive and supportive classroom. Schools can better support students' mental health and well-being by prioritizing these relationships and creating a welcoming atmosphere.

Despite their willingness to support students, teachers frequently find themselves inadequately prepared to address mental health issues due to gaps in both pre-service and in-service training. This mirrors Goodwin et al. (2023) recommendation to incorporate mental health education into teacher training programs, with an emphasis on early recognition, prevention strategies, and coordination with mental health practitioners. The teachers in this study highlighted the role of training programs that offer practical guidance to better respond to students' mental health needs. Teachers in this study expressed significant frustration with time constraints, a challenge mentioned by Maham, who shared "Our schedules are completely packed... there is barely any time left to focus on the individual mental health needs of our students." This issue is not just about poor time management—it reflects more significant systemic problems, such as overloaded curricula, insufficient staffing, and the lack of specialized mental health professionals in schools. These systemic barriers force teachers to juggle multiple roles, often leaving mental health support as an unintentional afterthought. These challenges are further compounded by socioeconomic disparities, which create unequal access to resources across different types of schools. Some teachers highlighted proactive initiatives within their schools, such as appointing year tutors or conducting sessions on anger and stress management, bullying, and harassment. Sadia noted that these programs help students develop skills to navigate life's challenges. However, such initiatives are often limited to well-funded private schools, while government and low-budget schools struggle to provide similar resources due to financial constraints (Hamdani et al., 2021). This finding aligns with the Teachers as First Responders study, highlighting inequities in resource distribution across schools, leaving underserved students in disadvantaged areas (Gunawardena et al., 2024). It is critical to address disparities to ensure that all schools have access to mental health support. Public health policies must address these inequities so that students, regardless of their economic situation, have access to adequate mental health services.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As we draw this discussion to a close, it is essential to reflect on the profound impact our educational environment has on the mental well-being of our adolescents. This study highlights the crucial roles teachers and schools play—not only as places of learning but also as vital support

systems that can either promote or impede students' mental health. The findings emphasize a clear message “caring for the mental health of our young people is as crucial as their academic success”. We have seen that despite educators' dedication and students' resilience, significant barriers make it challenging to provide adequate mental health support. However, the insights from this research can help us develop more supportive educational practices that include mental health care as an integral part of our schooling system. I hope this research helps inspire educational leaders, policymakers, educators, and parents to unite to make change happen. To truly make a difference, we must embrace the value of compassionate, informed teaching and create school policies supporting every aspect of a student's development. By working together, we can create a learning environment where students excel intellectually and emotionally, setting the stage for a brighter and more balanced future.

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