

A Narrative Synthesis Of Literature On Suicide Prevention In Schools And Universities (2009-2024)

Angela A. Galsim¹, Jamila Jewel P. Dalangin¹, Daniella V. Centeno¹, Christian A. Lim¹, Julie Ann R. Clemente-faustino²

¹College of Social Sciences & Philosophy, Bulacan State University, City of Malolos, Bulacan, Philippines

²Center for Psychological Wellness, Bulacan State University, City of Malolos, Bulacan, Philippines

Abstract

Suicidality is a public health issue that calls for action. As suicide rates become prominent among the youth, specifically the teenagers and young adults, studies on suicide prevention is warranted. Drawing on a database search strategy focused on 15 years of researches on suicide prevention in schools and universities, this narrative synthesis study integrates the findings published on the management of suicidality in the school setting. Guided by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Statement Guidelines, a novel acronym **DEFINE** was spawned to represent the themes generated from the included papers, which stands for: **D**etecting occurrences; **E**nhancing awareness; **F**ostering relationships; **I**mproving help-seeking behavior; and **N**egotiating challenges. These findings support the need for crafting training programs for school administrators, teachers and staff in the management of students with suicidal ideation and other mental health concerns. Moreover, findings of this inquiry may lead to the development of projects intended to raise awareness on suicide as well as the promotion of mental health and sound psychological well-being.

Keywords: academe, mental health, narrative synthesis, suicide awareness, suicide prevention

INTRODUCTION:

Globally, mental health concerns are prominent nowadays among the youth. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2019) confirmed that suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescent and young adults aged 15-29 years. It is important to note that this age range covers students either in the middle school or in college. More extensively, it is observed that a vast number of college students who took their lives were either moderately or severely depressed and did not receive any treatment (Garlow, Rosenberg, Moore, 2008). Moreover, in the study of Satherley et al., 2022, an increase in the diagnosis of common mental health disorders were also declared as well as an upsurge on the prevalence of self-harming behavior.

Self-harming behavior, more specifically in clinical terms, non-suicidal self-injurious (NSSI) behavior refers to the intentional self-inflicted destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent (Hooley & Franklin, 2018; Masana et al., 2020); such as in the engagement to self-cutting and self-burning (Green et al., 2018). However, though perceived as non-suicidal, these were also found to be pre-cursor to suicidality. A direct association between deliberate self-harm and suicide attempts were noted in the study of Duarte and associates (2020). Hence, presenting that engagement in these behaviors display significant suicide risk.

Apparently, in a recent study by Lovero and colleagues (2023), it was noted that those with poor socioeconomic status display higher vulnerability to suicide. Furthermore, the study stated that the youth from low-to-middle income countries (LMICs) have much higher rate of suicide attempts as compared to the youth from higher income comes. More specifically, the Philippines, one of the countries classified as an LMIC, about 33 million Filipinos are depressed and 8 in every 100, 000 commit suicide (Cimene, Buko & Nacaya, 2022). Furthermore, according to the study of University of the Philippines Population Institute (2022), close to one in five Filipino youth aged 15-24 have ever considered ending their lives; and six in 10 of those who ever thought of committing suicide did not reach out to anyone about it. Remarkably, it is very unfortunate to know that in every 10 young adults in the Philippines, only one is aware of any suicide prevention program or service.

Over the years, there had been attempts to prevent suicide in the educational setting, many researches with good findings were already published showcasing the management of suicidality. However, a knowledge gap in the implementation of these researches applied to adolescent suicide prevention in the educational context is likewise observed (Vargas, et al., 2023). Hence, their significant findings remain under-utilized. Thus, this research endeavor aims to integrate these findings through the rudiments of Narrative Synthesis method. Narrative synthesis is perceived as an effective way to recognize the “story” behind a distinct body of evidence by providing reviewers a strategy to develop themes that bring unity to previously presented data (Briner and Denyer, 2012; Popay et al., 2006). Essentially, this study will focus on the published articles from 2009-2024 to take another look at how these pertinent studies may shed light to suicide prevention in schools and universities at this present time. Findings of this inquiry may lead to the development of projects intended to raise awareness on suicide as well as the promotion of mental health and sound psychological well-being of students.

METHODS

Drawing on a database search strategy focused on 15 years of researches on suicide prevention in the schools and universities, this narrative synthesis study integrates the findings published on the management of suicidality in the school setting, using three databases, namely; *PsycArticles*, *PubMed Central and Emerald Insight*. The search terms were “suicide prevention,” “suicide in schools,” “suicide in universities,” “studies on suicide.”

To be included in this review, research had to be: (i) Written in the English language; (ii) qualitative or scoping reviews published from 2009 to 2024; (iii) Presented findings in the context of suicide prevention in the educational setting; and (iv) Can be printed or downloaded. The protocol for the review was preregistered in the PROSPERO database (CRD569176). In addition, the review process was guided by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) Statement Guidelines, a structured approach to reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Moher et al., 2009). From the study of Clemente-Faustino & de Guzman, 2022, the steps incorporated are as follows: (1) creating a protocol with clear and focused topic on what to review; (2) choosing the databases for a structured search; (3) developing a search strategy by carefully choosing what word to consider; (4) running and recording search by keeping accurate records of previous searches; (5) managing the results; (6) evaluating the results against the set inclusion criteria; and (7) synthesizing the results.

The search elicited 68 potential articles, of which 4 articles were excluded for duplication. The remaining articles were screened by title and abstract, and 42 were excluded because they were studies about suicide awareness and not prevention, some were quantitative studies and others are not focused in the educational setting. Using the eligibility criteria, the remaining 22 full-text articles were further assessed, of which fifteen (15) were excluded due to the inability to meet the stated inclusion criteria. The remaining seven (7) articles were judged to be eligible. The flowchart of the selection process is presented in Figure 1.

Furthermore, data were obtained by following the three stages of narrative synthesis: (1) developing an initial synthesis; (2) investigating relationships within and between researches; and (3) assessing the strength of the synthesis (Leamy et al., 2011). Lastly, to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, cross validation process was executed through the help of research experts in the academe who are practicing clinicians as well. These expert consultation process added validity to the generated themes and strength of the findings.

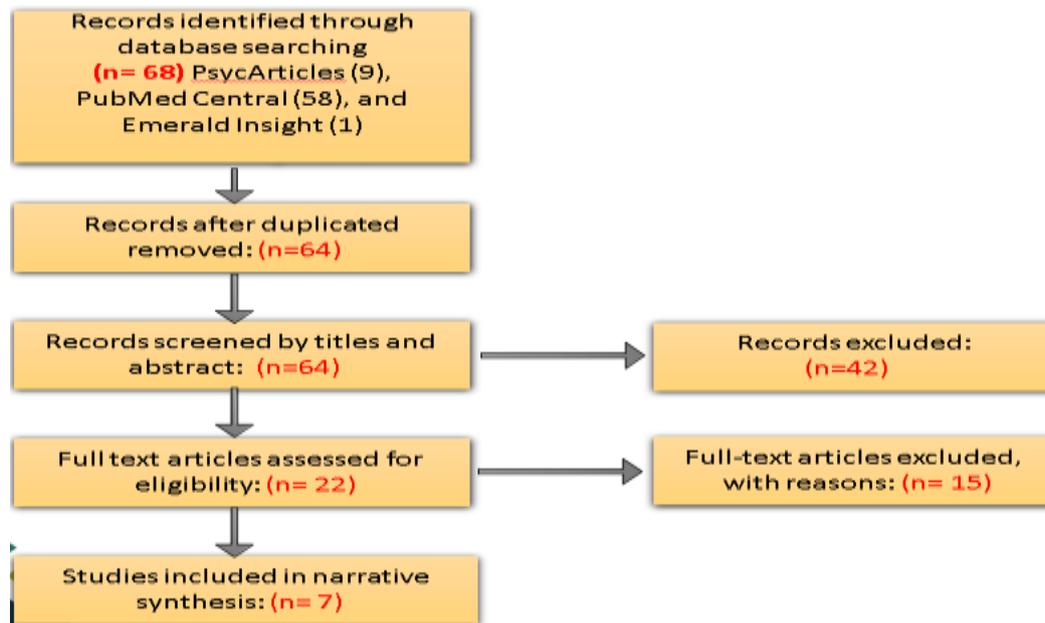


Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart of the record selection process.

Findings:

After careful analysis of the findings of the 7 included papers (see Table 1), and as guided by Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Statement Guidelines, a novel acronym **DEFine** was spawned to represent the themes generated from the included papers: *D*etecting occurrences; *E*nhancing awareness; *F*ostering relationships; *I*mproving help-seeking behavior; and *N*egotiating challenges.

Theme 1: Detecting occurrences

In this study, the theme “detecting occurrences” refers to the prevention efforts focused on catching the early warning signs of suicide ideation among students (e.g. engagement in self-harming behavior, risky behaviors).

Findings of the included papers have expressed the importance of training in order to raise awareness on suicide and its prevention. These are highlighted the call to train staff and teachers to act as front liners in the management of suicidality. Adept to that is the implementation of school programs that would be able to detect the manifestations of the early warning signs shown by students at risk.

“Gatekeeper training is a strategy proved to be efficacious in increasing awareness about suicide and its prevention. (Cecchin, et al., 2022, page 13)

“With respect to the detection stage of suicide prevention, our findings suggest that school staff viewed teachers as the frontline in detecting students in crisis or at risk for suicide.” (Nadeem, et al., 2011, page 217)

“The Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) program is based to recognize suicide warning signs.” (Katz, et al., 2013, page 1033)

Theme 2: Enhancing awareness

Included articles identified the prevention efforts concentrated on providing enhanced awareness campaigns in schools/universities about the importance of mental health, hence, the theme, “enhancing awareness”.

A delicate matter as it is, saving a student life entails being aware of not just the warning signs but also of evidence-based practices on psychological assessment and evaluation. Added to this, training for mental health professionals who will craft suicide prevention programs that would raise awareness and give the psychoeducation to the school/university community are significant findings found in the included papers.

“Some other participants then point to the importance of suicide prevention programs held at school or in universities and that might be based more on awareness raising on the issue of suicide.” (Testoni, Piol & De Leo, 2021, page 12)
“This apparent lack of awareness seems to suggest that school based mental health care professionals in SA might benefit from additional training and education to introduce them to more contemporary evidence-based ways of conceptualizing suicide risk assessments.” (Woolf, Bantjes & Kagee, 2015, page 37)

Theme 3: Fostering relationships

Within this context, the theme “*fostering relationships*” are prevention efforts focused on utilizing peer and other important relationships in the academe to be the source of strength and support.

Like any other mental health concerns, the need for a strong support system is imperative. In this study, findings of the included articles also saw the need to involve family and friends of the youth at risk of suicide. Having someone whom they can confide to are important protective factors in their decision to continue living. Hence, in preventing suicide, teachers and school administrators must capitalize on the benefit of partnering with the loved ones of the student/s identified with ideation and manifestations of early warning signs as well as to the management of those who actually had an attempt. Summarily, a collaborative effort between and among teachers, parents and friends of these youth plays a crucial role in the prevention of this act.

“Participants’ narratives seem to suggest that more intimate or proximal relationships, like family and friends, are important reasons for living.”(Testoni, Piol & De Leo, 2021, page 12)

“Some teachers would like to be involved in helping children post-crisis and it may be useful for mental health professionals to discuss with families if partnering with teachers is an option that would benefit their child.” (Nadeem, et al., 2011, page 218)

Theme 4: Improving help-seeking behavior

Findings from the qualified studies also described the theme, “*improving help-seeking behavior*” as prevention efforts concentrated on teaching/encouraging students to seek help when needed.

In this study, included papers expressed the need for prevention programs that are geared towards teaching positive strategies to reduce the occurrences of students experiencing suicidal thoughts and those engaging in actual attempts. Moreover, included studies highlighted that it is essential for schools to be proactive in preventing critical incidences by being equip on identifying potential cases.

“Sources of Strength suicide prevention program is designed to decrease risk factors such as social isolation and ineffective coping skills, by creating positive coping norms and building in protective influences within the school. The program aims to increase the likelihood that students will receive help, and thereby reduces the likelihood of suicidal ideation and attempts.” (Katz, et al., 2013, page 1033)

“These findings draw attention to the lack of proactive approaches to suicide prevention in SA schools and seem to suggest that school based mental health care professionals are forced (due to resource constraints and heavy caseloads) to adopt a reactive approach to suicide prevention by simply responding to youth who self-identify as at risk or who are identified by peers and teachers. More attention needs to be paid to how proactive approaches to suicide prevention.”(Woolf, Bantjes & Kagee, 2015, page 37)

Theme 5: Negotiating challenges

This theme uncovers the prevention efforts focused on teaching students on how to negotiate life’s challenges by self-efficacy and positive coping skills.

Navigating life is a difficult task among adolescents and young adults due to the proven effects of hormonal changes in the study, such as impulsivity and heightened emotionality. In a similar vein, findings from the included articles also suggested that in order to prevent suicide in schools/universities among this age group, programs for self-improvement compromising self-efficacy and positive coping skills training are needed. Also, it was underscored that prevention programs must not only be implemented but must also be thoroughly evaluated so that it could maximize its benefit to these youth. Moreso, the

results of the evaluation should make the necessary improvements in the next implementation of the program.

"It was anticipated that participation in experiential exercise and role play practice would contribute to significant improvements in self-efficacy and skills."(Pasco, et al., 2012)

"Incorporating implementation effectiveness into program evaluations makes assessing interventions' internal and external validity possible, helping determine whether their failure or success was due to a lack of effectiveness in the new context, how they were delivered, or both. An exemplary implementation makes it possible to maximize the benefits for participants, for example, in prevention programs"(Vargas, et al., 2023, page 2)

DISCUSSION

The primary intent of this narrative synthesis is to integrate research studies on suicide prevention in schools/universities. The aim is to highlight the perspectives in the educational setting on suicide prevention from investigations in the last 15 years.

Seven eligible articles were reviewed that enabled the integration of the five themes, collectively known as DEFINE. The analysis yielded key insights on the various viewpoints presented in the included papers. As elucidated in the themes, detecting warning signs, raising awareness, capitalizing on support system, improving help-seeking behavior and settling to more efficient and adaptive coping skills are the prevention efforts utilized in the school setting in the hope to both reduce and prevent the occurrences of suicide cases.

By and large, the management of suicidality in schools/university must be headed toward an intensive training not just for mental health professionals, but also for classroom teachers, peer facilitators and guidance advocates. Moreover, the support of the school/university administrators is also vital in the delivery of appropriate and comprehensive psychological services for these young adolescents and adults through the purchase of adequate psychological tools needed for assessment as well as in providing the essential facilities for counseling and psychotherapy sessions. Markedly, a collaborative effort between and among the students, teachers, parents, administrators and community members are necessitated to build a strong support system where these youth at risk may lean on to. Lastly, government agencies concerned on education and health may also consider funding projects that would prioritize the mental health and well-being of the adolescents and young adults through integration of resiliency both emotionally and academically.

CONCLUSION:

These findings support the need for crafting training programs for school administrators, teachers and staff in the management of students with suicidal ideation/attempt and other mental health concerns. Moreover, findings of this inquiry may lead to the development of projects intended to raise awareness on suicide as well as the promotion of mental health and sound psychological well-being in the educational setting.

Theoretical Contributions

This study offers beneficial theoretical contributions toward a better understanding of suicide prevention efforts in the educational setting. This research endeavor extended interest in suicidality by investigating the suicide prevention management in schools and universities. More importantly, this paper spawned a novel summarization of these prevention efforts through the acronym DEFINE (*D*etecting occurrences; *E*nhancing awareness; *F*ostering relationships; *I*mproving help-seeking behavior; and *N*egotiating challenges)

Practical Implications & Recommendations

Suicide prevention necessitates a comprehensive assessment geared towards careful evaluation, training of frontline mental professionals and promotion of sound psychological well-being through intervention programs. Due to the lack of mental health professionals in the educational setting, training for classroom teachers and peer facilitators on basic listening and supportive skills is proposed. More specifically, educational policies on addressing the concerns of students battling mental health issues must be of

utmost consideration by school administrators. Lastly, developing a care-response team approach is suggested to facilitate psychoeducation directed toward empowerment and resiliency.

Limitation and Future Directions

We recognize the inherent limitations of this study from its design and context that future researchers can explore. First, our study focused on published articles within a 15-year range, future researchers may delve into suicide prevention focused during and post pandemic times, to elicit the differences in the management of mental health concerns due to the effects of lockdown. Second, we performed a narrative synthesis on suicide prevention studies, other studies may explore on a meta-analysis of quantitative studies on suicide awareness. Lastly, since this research endeavor advocates raising awareness about suicide prevention efforts in the academe, future studies should expose the need for intensive training suicide management and delivery of more comprehensive psychological services in schools and universities.

REFERENCES:

1. Briner, R., & Denyer, D. (2012). Systematic review & evidence synthesis. In D. Rousseau, D. (Ed.), Oxford Handbook of evidence-based management (pp. 112-129). Oxford University Press.
2. Cecchin, H. F. G., Murta, S. G., Macedo, E. O. S. D., & Moore, R. A. (2022). Scoping review of 30 years of suicide prevention in university students around the world: efficacy, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness. *Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica*, 35, 22.
3. Cimene, F., Buko, M. & Nacaya, I. (2022). The Causes of Suicide and Its Socio-demographic Factors in the Philippines. *Pakistan Journal of Life Social Science*, 20(1): 52-56. E- ISSN: 2221-7630; P-ISSN: 1727-4915.
4. Clemente-Faustino, J., & De Guzman, A. (2022). A narrative synthesis of qualitative studies on self-harming behavior in the correctional setting. *The Prison Journal*, 102(6), 718- 744. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00328855221136199>
5. Duarte, T. A., Paulino, S., Almeida, C., Gomes, H. S., Santos, N., & Gouveia-Pereira, M. (2020). Self-harm as a predisposition for suicide attempts: A study of adolescents' deliberate self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts. *Psychiatry research*, 287, 112553.
6. Garlow S, Rosenberg J, Moore J, et al. Depression, desperation, and suicidal ideation in college students: results from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention College Screening Project at Emory University. *Depress Anxiety*. 2008;25:482-488.
7. Green, J., et al. (2018). Association between masculinity and NSSI. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 12(1), 30-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1557988315624508>
8. Hooley, J., & Franklin, J. (2018). Why do people hurt themselves? *Clinical Psychological Science*, 6(3), 428-451. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2167702617745641>
9. Katz, C., Bolton, S. L., Katz, L. Y., Isaak, C., Tilston-Jones, T., Sareen, J., & Swampy Cree Suicide Prevention Team. (2013). A systematic review of school-based suicide prevention programs. *Depression and anxiety*, 30(10), 1030-1045.
10. Leamy, M., et al. (2011). Conceptual framework for personal recovery in mental health. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 199(6), 445-452. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.110.083733>.
11. Lovero, K. L., Dos Santos, P. F., Come, A. X., Wainberg, M. L., & Oquendo, M. A. (2023). Suicide in global mental health. *Current psychiatry reports*, 25(6), 255-262.
12. Masana, L., et al. (2020). Unraveling NSSI: Understanding behavioral dynamics of Filipino adolescents at risk of DSH. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 22(2), 331-354.
13. Moher, D., et al. (2009). Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses. *PLoS Medicine*, 6(7), e1000097. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000097>
14. Nadeem, E., Kataoka, S. H., Chang, V. Y., Vona, P., Wong, M., & Stein, B. D. (2011). The role of teachers in school-based suicide prevention: A qualitative study of school staff perspectives. *School mental health*, 3, 209-221.
15. Popay, J., et al. (2006). Guidance on the Conduct of Narrative Synthesis in Systematic Reviews. Product from the ESRCMethodsProgramme (ref H33250019). Version 1. Lancaster: NCSR.
16. University of the Philippines: Population Institute. (2022). Pinoy youth in worse mental shape today, nationwide survey indicates. Retrieved from: <https://www.uppi.upd.edu.ph/news/2022/pinoy-youth-in-worse-mental-health-shape> today.
17. Susan Pasco LCSW-R , Cory Wallack PhD , Robert M. Sartin PhD & Rebecca Dayton PhD (2012): The Impact of Experiential Exercises on Communication and Relational Skills in a Suicide Prevention Gatekeeper-Training Program for College Resident Advisors, *Journal of American College Health*, 60:2, 134-140
18. Satherley RM, CM Hazell, CJ Jones and P Hanna, 2022. A Systematic Review of the Effects of Urban Living on Suicidality and Self-Harm in the UK and Ireland. *Journal of Urban Health*, 99: 385-408.
19. Testoni, I., Piol, S., & De Leo, D. (2021). Suicide prevention: university students' narratives on their reasons for living and for dying. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 18(15), 8029.

20. Vargas B, Marti´nez P, Mac-Ginty S, Hoffmann T, Marti´nez V (2023) Implementation strategies and outcomes of school-based programs for adolescent suicide prevention: A scoping review protocol. PLoS ONE 18(5): e0284431. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284431>
21. WHO, 2019. Global health estimates: Suicide in the World. World Health Organization, Geneva.
22. Woolf, M., Bantjes, J., & Kagee, A. (2015). The challenges of school-based youth suicide prevention: experiences and perceptions of mental health professionals in South African schools. *The social work practitioner-researcher*, 27(1), 20.