

Examining the Role of Mental Health Literacy Programs in School in Enhancing Help-seeking Behaviors among Adolescents in Malaysia: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Mental health literacy programs have been shown to play a significant role in fostering awareness, reducing stigma, and promoting help-seeking behaviors among adolescents. However, there is limited research on the implementation and impact of such programs within Malaysian schools. This study aims to investigate the role of mental health literacy programs in enhancing help-seeking behaviors among Malaysian adolescents. A systematic literature review was conducted, analyzing six recent studies published in recent years that met the inclusion criteria, following the PRISMA guidelines. The findings indicate that mental health literacy programs positively influence adolescents' attitudes toward mental health, increase their likelihood of seeking help, and improve overall psychological well-being. The key outcomes from the analyzed studies included stigma reduction, awareness levels, and support-seeking behaviors. The review highlights the importance of integrating mental health literacy into school curricula as a means to empower students and address mental health needs proactively. This study suggests that educators and policymakers should prioritize mental health literacy in schools to support adolescent mental health and enhance help-seeking behaviors.

Keywords: Mental health literacy; Help-seeking behaviour; Adolescents; Malaysian education; School-based program

1.0 Introduction

Adolescence is a critical period for mental health development, as young people often encounter significant emotional and psychological challenges. Despite the rising prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents globally, many struggle to seek help due to stigma, lack of awareness, or limited understanding of mental health resources. Mental health literacy programs, which aim to increase awareness, reduce stigma, and promote positive attitudes toward mental health, have been shown to play a key role in encouraging help-seeking behaviors (Nasir et al., 2024). These programs equip students with knowledge about mental health issues, coping strategies, and available support systems, which can empower them to seek help when needed.

Mental health issues among adolescents are a growing concern, as this critical developmental stage is marked by significant physical, emotional, and social changes (Osokina et al., 2023). Factors such as academic pressure, social media influence, family dynamics, and peer relationships can contribute to stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. Adolescents may struggle to articulate their feelings, leading to unaddressed issues that can affect their academic performance, relationships, and overall well-being. Early recognition and support, including open communication, education on mental health, and access to professional resources, are essential for fostering resilience and ensuring healthy emotional development during this formative period.

In Malaysia, mental health issues among adolescents are of increasing concern, yet mental health literacy programs are not widely integrated into the school curriculum (Samsudin et al., 2024). Many adolescents remain unaware of the importance of mental health and how to access support, which can delay intervention and exacerbate mental health challenges. To address these gaps, mental health literacy programs in schools could serve as vital tools in fostering a more supportive environment, encouraging open dialogue, and normalizing help-seeking behaviors among students.

This systematic literature review aims to evaluate the role of school-based mental health literacy programs in enhancing help-seeking behaviors among Malaysian adolescents. By synthesizing findings from recent research, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of these programs and to identify key factors that may enhance their effectiveness. Specifically, this review addresses the following research questions: (1) What are the main components of mental health literacy programs implemented in schools? (2) How do these programs influence help-seeking behaviors among adolescents? The findings aim to guide educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals in designing and implementing effective mental health literacy initiatives within the Malaysian education system.

2 Methods

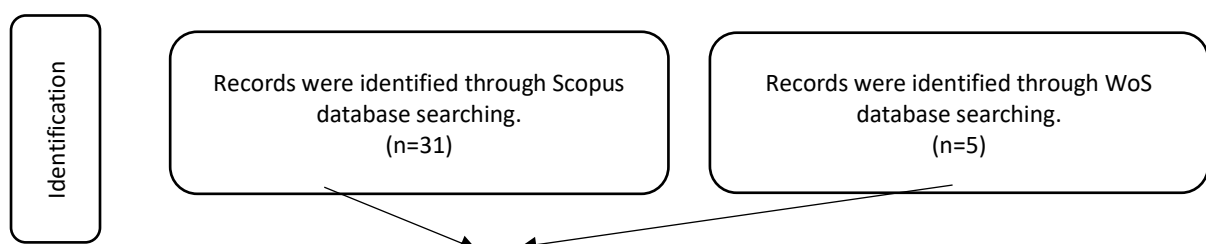
The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology was adopted in this study to ensure a rigorous and transparent approach to conducting the systematic literature review. PRISMA provides a comprehensive framework designed to enhance the clarity, structure, and reproducibility of systematic reviews, making it a widely respected and utilized method in evidence-based research. The PRISMA process consists of four distinct stages: identification,

screening, eligibility, and inclusion, which guide researchers in methodically selecting and analyzing relevant studies. Each stage plays a crucial role in refining the search process and enhancing the quality of the review.

In the identification phase, relevant studies are initially gathered from various databases and sources, often yielding a large pool of research articles. This stage involves using specific keywords, search terms, and criteria tailored to capture a wide range of studies related to the topic of interest. Following identification, the screening phase helps to refine the list by removing duplicate records and eliminating studies that are irrelevant or do not meet the initial inclusion criteria. This ensures that unique and potentially relevant articles proceed to the next stages.

The eligibility phase involves a more detailed evaluation of the screened studies. Each article is carefully assessed against predefined criteria to determine its suitability for the review, focusing on factors such as study design, sample characteristics, and alignment with the research objectives. Finally, in the inclusion phase, the studies that meet all eligibility requirements are selected for analysis, forming the foundation for the systematic review's findings.

The choice of PRISMA as the guiding methodology for this study was intentional, given its structured approach and adaptability to various types of systematic reviews, including those in social sciences and educational research. PRISMA's thorough process enhances the credibility of the review by minimizing bias and ensuring that only relevant, high-quality studies contribute to the conclusions drawn. The four PRISMA stages used in this systematic review, depicted in Figure 1, provide a detailed roadmap for examining the role of mental health literacy programs in enhancing help-seeking behaviors among Malaysian adolescents. This careful adherence to PRISMA's phases underscores the reliability of the findings and supports their applicability to education and mental health policy development.



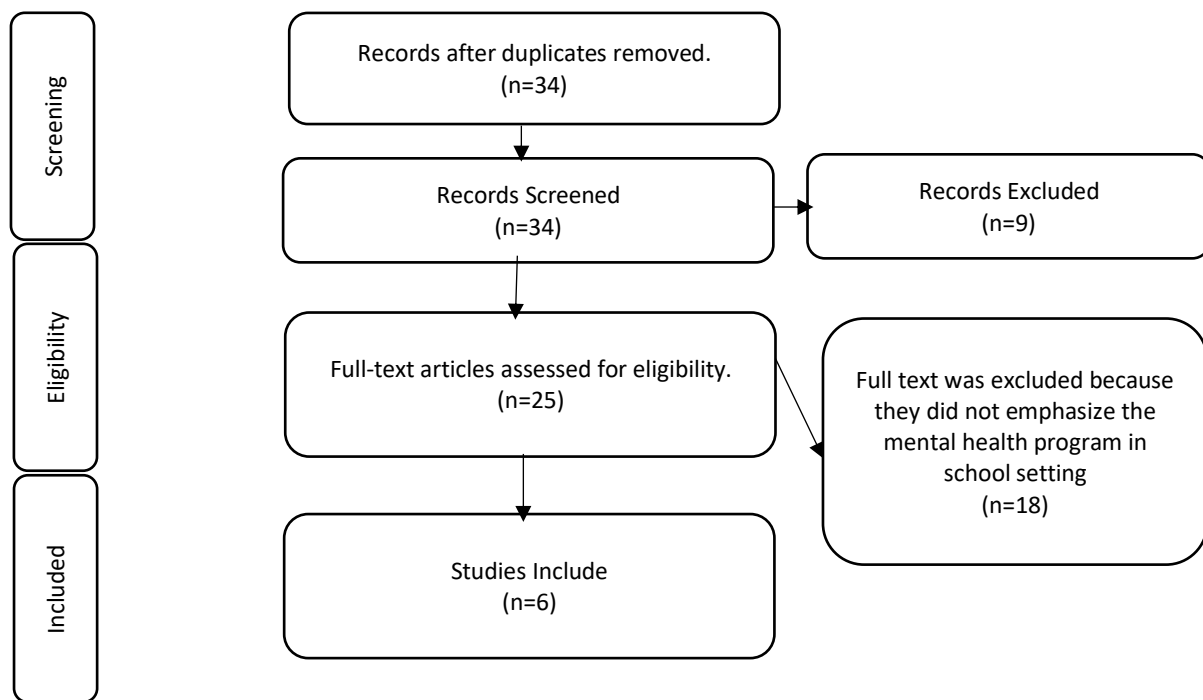


Figure 1. A systematic review using the PRISMA method.

Identification

In the identification phase, relevant studies are gathered from multiple databases using specific keywords and search criteria. This often results in a large pool of articles that are potentially relevant to the topic. In alignment with PRISMA standards, two primary databases, Scopus and Web of Science (WoS), were utilized during the identification stage to gather relevant studies for this research. These databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of academic publications in social sciences, education, and psychology. To ensure that all pertinent studies were identified, the researcher developed key search terms tailored to the scope and focus of the study. The specific search strings used for each database are presented in Table 1, outlining the structured approach taken to capture relevant literature on mental health literacy programs and help-seeking behaviors among adolescents.

Table 1: Database Search Strings

Database	Search String
Scopus	mental AND health AND program AND school AND adolescent AND Malaysia AND help-seeking AND behavior AND PUBYEAR > 2014 AND PUBYEAR < 2024 AND

	(LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI")) AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (AFFILCOUNTRY , "Malaysia")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (OA , "all")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final"))
Web of Science (WoS)	ALL=(mental health program) and Open Access and Article (Document Types) and All Open Access (Open Access) and MALAYSIA (Countries/Regions) and English (Languages)

Screening

The screening phase refines the initial pool by removing duplicates and excluding studies that do not meet the inclusion criteria, ensuring that unique and relevant studies advance to the next phase. After the identification stage, the screening process commenced, starting with the removal of duplicate articles from the two databases. This comparison resulted in two eliminations at the first level of screening, leaving 34 articles eligible for further assessment. Next, a more refined screening was conducted, reviewing each title, abstract, and keywords against the study's criteria. This step excluded 9 articles that did not align with the research focus, reducing the pool to 25 relevant articles. These remaining articles were then subjected to an in-depth review based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria, as outlined in Table 2, to ensure their relevance and rigor for this systematic analysis.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus	Mental health program	Non-English
Context	Malaysia	Non-Malaysia
Language Skill	English	Non-English
Sources	Journal Articles	Conferences, proceedings, book chapters, theses, reports, review articles
Field of Study	Education and educational research	Not in education and educational research
Language	English	Non-English
Publication Year	Between 2014 - 2024	Before the year 2014

Inclusion

The articles included in this systematic review were all directly relevant to mental health literacy programs in schools and their impact on enhancing help-seeking behaviors among adolescents. Table 3 lists the research articles selected for inclusion in the review. As shown in Table 3, five articles from Scopus and one article from Web of Science (WoS) were selected for analysis. The majority of the studies focused on school-based mental health literacy programs and their influence on students' attitudes toward mental health, awareness, and help-seeking behaviors. These studies primarily examined adolescents in secondary schools with an emphasis on reducing stigma, improving mental health awareness, and fostering help-seeking behavior to enhance students' psychological well-being.

Table 3: Summary of Search on the Role of Mental Health Literacy Programs in School in Enhancing Help-seeking Behaviors Among Adolescents in Malaysia

Study	Database	Aim	Sample	Findings
Tnay et al (2020)	WoS	The study aimed to explore the level and role of teachers' engagement in the social and emotional guidance of elementary school students. It examined how teachers address the emotional well-being and social development of their students, considering these aspects as essential for holistic educational outcomes.	The study involved elementary school teachers as participants. Specific details about the number of teachers or schools involved were not directly mentioned, but the participants were selected based on their active role in guiding students' social and emotional development. These teachers came from diverse schools, allowing the study to	The study revealed that teachers demonstrated high levels of engagement in the social and emotional guidance of their elementary school students, recognizing its critical importance alongside academic achievements. Teachers utilized various strategies to support their students, including fostering open communication, creating a supportive classroom environment, and offering individualized attention to those

			capture a broad range of insights.	experiencing emotional challenges. However, they also faced significant obstacles, such as insufficient training in managing students' emotional issues and limited time due to the heavy emphasis on academic responsibilities. The findings emphasized the need for professional development programs to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to provide effective social and emotional guidance in schools.
Lee et al (2023)	Scopus	The study aimed to examine the factors influencing mental health awareness among Malaysian adolescents. It specifically explored the mediating roles of knowledge on mental health, knowledge on professional help, and attitudes toward mental health, focusing on the impact of familiarity and media exposure.	The research was conducted among 450 secondary school students aged 15 to 19 years from Kuala Lumpur and Melaka. The participants were recruited using purposive sampling methods.	The study found that mental health awareness is significantly influenced by knowledge of mental health and attitudes toward mental health. Media exposure and familiarity with mental health topics were identified as key determinants in shaping students' knowledge of mental health and professional help, as well as their attitudes. Knowledge about mental

health mediated the relationship between media exposure and awareness, while attitudes mediated the relationship between familiarity and mental health awareness. These findings highlight the importance of tailored media campaigns and familiarity-building initiatives to improve adolescents' mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviors.

Berry et al (2020)	Scopus	The study aimed to explore the views of young people in Malaysia about mental health problems, help-seeking behavior, and unusual psychological experiences. It focused on understanding the factors influencing mental health treatment-seeking and the challenges faced by adolescents in	The study involved nine young people aged between 16 to 23 years, all from low-income backgrounds in Malaysia. Participants were selected to provide insights into the mental health challenges and help-seeking behaviors typical within this demographic.	The study found that young people in Malaysia generally viewed mental health issues with empathy, though societal stigma remained a barrier to help-seeking. Participants associated mental health problems with family issues and emphasized the importance of seeking help despite cultural stigmas. They recognized the challenges in accessing
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		seeking help for mental health issues.		psychological therapy, which may be difficult due to both stigma and practical barriers. The study concluded that enhancing mental health literacy could reduce stigma and promote earlier help-seeking behaviors among Malaysian youth
Ibrahim et al (2019)	Scopus	The main goal was to determine how depression literacy, mental illness beliefs, and stigma influence the attitudes toward seeking help for mental health issues among students from B40 backgrounds.	The study involved 202 university and secondary school students, all from low-income households in Malaysia.	The results indicated that self-stigma was the strongest predictor of mental help-seeking attitudes. Higher levels of self-stigma were associated with more negative attitudes towards seeking mental health assistance. Younger students also exhibited more negative help-seeking attitudes. University students demonstrated better depression literacy and lower levels of stigma compared to secondary school students, suggesting that educational level influences attitudes toward mental health help-seeking. The study concluded that efforts to

				reduce self-stigma, particularly among younger individuals, should be prioritized to improve mental health help-seeking behaviors in this demographic.
Singh et al (2022)	Scopus	The study aimed to investigate the determinants influencing mental health literacy (MHL) among young adolescents in Malaysia, focusing on adolescents aged 13–14 years, to better understand factors that impact their knowledge and attitudes towards mental health, particularly depression.	The study involved a sample of 1,396 secondary school students from 9 schools in Malaysia, with participants aged 13–14 years. The students were randomly selected from various schools, and their parents provided consent for participation. The sample was chosen specifically to examine this age group due to the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among young adolescents.	The study revealed that mental health literacy among young adolescents in Malaysia was influenced by factors such as gender, age, and socio-economic status. Female students and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds demonstrated better mental health literacy. Students who recognized symptoms of depression and were willing to seek help exhibited higher mental health knowledge. The study highlights the importance of educational interventions to enhance mental health literacy, particularly targeting male adolescents and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds

Lam (2014)	Scopus	The study aimed to explore the relationship between mental health literacy (MHL) and the mental health status, specifically depression, in adolescents. The goal was to examine how well adolescents could identify depression and whether this knowledge influenced their mental health status and help-seeking behaviors.	The study involved 1,678 adolescents who were surveyed using a two-stage sampling technique. The participants were assessed for depression, and their MHL was evaluated using the Australian National Mental Health Literacy and Stigma Youth Survey, with a focus on depression.	The study found that only 16.4% of adolescents had adequate mental health literacy, correctly identifying depression and intending to seek help. The majority of students did not demonstrate the necessary understanding of mental health. Furthermore, adolescents with inadequate mental health literacy were 1.52 times more likely to experience moderate to severe depression. This suggests that improving mental health literacy is crucial for identifying and addressing mental health issues, particularly depression, among adolescent
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3. Data Analysis

The selected journal articles were imported into the citation management software, Mendeley, for efficient organization and reference management. Following this, a thematic analysis was conducted to address the research questions. The researcher carefully examined the content of the articles, interpreting and categorizing the themes in alignment with the specific research questions. For the first research question, "What are the main components of mental health literacy programs implemented in schools?", the articles were analyzed to identify the key components of mental health literacy programs, such as the curriculum content, teaching methods, and student engagement strategies. For the second research question, "How do these programs influence help-seeking behaviors among adolescents?", the

analysis focused on categorizing the articles based on their findings related to how mental health literacy programs affect adolescents' attitudes toward mental health, reduce stigma, and encourage help-seeking behaviors. This thematic analysis helped to synthesize the results and provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of mental health literacy programs in promoting help-seeking behaviors among adolescents.

4. Results

RQ1 What are the main components of mental health literacy programs implemented in schools?

Based on the findings, the studies consistently highlight three key variables related to mental health literacy programs in schools: (a) **professional training** for teachers, which enhances their ability to support students' mental health; (b) **education on mental health conditions**, which increases students' awareness and recognition of mental health issues; and (c) **stigma reduction**, which encourages help-seeking behavior among adolescents.

Table 4: Common Variables Studied

Variables	Study
Professional Training	Tnay et al (2020) & Lee et al (2023)
Education on Mental Health Conditions	Lam (2014), Singh et al (2022) & Lee et al (2023)
Stigma Reduction	Ibrahim et al (2019) & Berry et al (2020)

RQ2 How do these programs influence help-seeking behaviors among adolescents?

Research indicates that mental health programs significantly influence adolescents' help-seeking behaviors by improving their mental health literacy (MHL) and reducing the stigma associated with mental health issues. For instance, programs that increase awareness and understanding of mental health conditions such as depression help adolescents recognize symptoms in themselves and others, leading to a greater willingness to seek help (Lam, 2014).

In a study examining adolescents in Malaysia, it was found that those with higher MHL were more likely to seek help for mental health issues, particularly depression (Mushaddik et al., 2022). Participants who could identify depression and understood the importance of professional help were more inclined to seek support from mental health services. This highlights the critical role of educational programs in improving mental health recognition and help-seeking intentions. Additionally, the reduction of self-stigma through mental health education plays a pivotal role in encouraging help-seeking behavior. Studies have shown that when adolescents learn about mental health without judgment and are provided with positive models of help-seeking, they are more likely to reach out for assistance.

In the Malaysian context, where mental health stigma is significant, educational programs that reduce stigma can lead to more proactive help-seeking behaviors among adolescents, especially in recognizing early signs of depression and seeking support before issues worsen. Programs that target specific factors, such as enhancing knowledge about available mental health services and normalizing seeking help, have also proven effective (Phoa et al., 2023). For example, adolescents in both school-based and community mental health initiatives that provide access to resources and trained professionals are more likely to use these services. These initiatives empower adolescents by creating an environment where seeking help is seen as a positive and responsible action, rather than a sign of weakness.

In summary, mental health literacy programs that enhance knowledge about mental health conditions, reduce stigma, and encourage positive attitudes towards help-seeking behaviors are essential in fostering better mental health outcomes among adolescents. By improving adolescents' understanding and willingness to seek help, these programs contribute significantly to preventing and addressing mental health issues at an early stage.

5. Discussion

Mental health is a critical component of adolescents' overall well-being, and enhancing help-seeking behaviors among this population is essential for early intervention and effective management of mental health issues. Mental health literacy (MHL) programs implemented in schools play a crucial role in equipping adolescents with the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors needed to understand mental health issues and seek appropriate help when required. This systematic literature review aims to examine the impact of school-based mental health literacy programs on adolescents' help-seeking behaviors in Malaysia.

5.1 The Role of Mental Health Literacy Programs in Schools

Mental health literacy programs in schools typically involve educating students about various mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety, stress, and other psychological disorders. These programs aim to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues, increase knowledge about symptoms, promote healthy coping strategies, and encourage early help-seeking behaviors. The overall goal is to empower adolescents with the tools they need to recognize mental health issues in themselves and their peers and to seek help when necessary.

Research has consistently shown that school-based mental health literacy programs can lead to improved mental health awareness among adolescents. For example, a study conducted in Malaysia found that adolescents who participated in mental health literacy programs exhibited higher levels of knowledge about depression, stress, and anxiety, which subsequently increased their willingness to seek professional help when needed (Lam, 2014; Lau et al., 2022)

By integrating mental health education into the school curriculum, educators can help foster an environment where students feel comfortable discussing mental health concerns and accessing support resources.

5.2 Mental Health Literacy and Stigma Reduction

One of the primary objectives of mental health literacy programs is to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues among adolescents. The Malaysian context is marked by a high level of stigma surrounding mental health, particularly among young people. Mental health stigma can act as a barrier to help-seeking, leading adolescents to avoid discussing their mental health struggles and hindering access to professional support (Mohamed et al., 2019). Literacy programs that focus on reducing stigma can be effective. By teaching students about mental health, dispelling myths, and promoting empathy and understanding, these programs help to create a more supportive school environment that encourages adolescents to seek help when experiencing mental health issues (Wei et al., 2013).

5.3 Effectiveness of School-Based Mental Health Literacy Programs in Malaysia

Several studies in Malaysia have evaluated the effectiveness of school-based mental health literacy programs. These programs have shown varied levels of success, with factors such as program content, teacher engagement, and student participation playing significant roles. Programs that are interactive, engaging, and culturally sensitive are more effective in enhancing MHL among adolescents (Wong et al., 2018). For instance, workshops, discussion groups, and educational videos have been shown to increase mental health literacy and reduce stigma among students (Lau et al., 2021). These programs

often use local examples and cultural context to make mental health education more relevant and impactful.

5.4 Impact on Help-Seeking Behaviors

The systematic review found that adolescents who participated in mental health literacy programs were more likely to seek help when experiencing mental health challenges compared to those who did not receive any mental health education. For example, adolescents who understood the signs and symptoms of depression and other mental health conditions were more inclined to reach out to teachers, school counselors, or parents when experiencing distress (Koh et al., 2018).

Moreover, school-based mental health literacy programs normalize the act of seeking help among adolescents. By integrating mental health into the school curriculum and providing consistent support through teachers and school counselors, adolescents were more likely to view seeking help as a positive and proactive step toward managing their mental health (Lau et al., 2021).

5.5 Barriers to Effective Implementation

Despite the importance, there are challenges in implementing effective mental health literacy programs in schools. These include limited teacher training and awareness about mental health issues, insufficient resources, cultural sensitivity, and a lack of comprehensive integration into the school curriculum (Mak et al., 2023). Additionally, many teachers and school staff are not adequately equipped for mental health issues, which can affect program effectiveness and consistency in support offered to students (Lau et al., 2021).

5.6 Implications for Mental Health Policy and Practice

The findings from the review have important implications for mental health policy and practice in Malaysia. Firstly, there is a need to ensure that mental health literacy programs are adequately resourced, culturally sensitive, and supported by teachers and school staff. Mental health education

should be integrated into the school curriculum from an early stage, with ongoing training for educators on mental health issues (Cheah et al., 2022). Furthermore, schools should have clear protocols and access to mental health resources, such as school counselors, support groups, and referrals to external mental health professionals.

Secondly, mental health literacy programs should be regularly evaluated and updated based on feedback from students, teachers, and parents to ensure they are relevant and effective in addressing local mental health challenges (Lau et al., 2021). This iterative process will help refine the curriculum, teaching methods, and resource allocation program outcomes over time.

Finally, a whole-school approach is essential. Mental health literacy initiatives should engage all school stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, parents, and local communities, to create a supportive environment for students to seek help (Taufik et al., 2022). This holistic approach will foster a culture of mental health awareness, empathy, and support, ultimately enhancing help-seeking behaviors among adolescents in Malaysia.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, while implementing mental health literacy in Malaysian schools is a commendable step toward fostering a supportive environment for students' well-being, several challenges and limitations may hinder its full realization. Limited resources, such as trained mental health professionals and funding, can impede the development and sustainability of such programs. Additionally, cultural stigmas and a lack of awareness surrounding mental health issues may discourage open discussions and proactive measures. Schools may also struggle to integrate mental health education into an already-packed curriculum without compromising academic priorities.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach, involving government support, community involvement, and professional development for educators. By prioritizing mental health as an integral component of education, schools can help create a more inclusive, understanding, and resilient generation equipped to navigate life's challenges.

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