

Psychological First Aid as a Framework for Mental Health Promotion in Schools: a Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The increasing prevalence of mental health issues among adolescents highlights the urgent need for effective promotive and preventive interventions in schools. Psychological First Aid (PFA) offers a practical and evidence-informed framework for supporting students experiencing psychological distress while simultaneously promoting resilience and well-being. This literature review synthesizes findings from recent studies (2015–2025) that examine the integration of PFA into school-based mental health promotion initiatives. The analysis identifies four key themes: (1) the core components of PFA, safety, calmness, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope as foundational principles for mental health support; (2) the role of teacher and peer training programs in strengthening knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy for early psychological intervention; (3) the integration of PFA with broader frameworks such as Mental Health Literacy (MHL) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL); and (4) contextual challenges, including resource limitations and the need for rigorous program evaluation. Overall, the review demonstrates that PFA can effectively enhance the mental health capacity of school communities by equipping educators and peers with the competencies to provide immediate, compassionate support. Future studies are encouraged to develop culturally adapted, technology-assisted PFA training models to strengthen sustainable mental health promotion in educational contexts.

Keywords: *Psychological First Aid; Mental Health School-based Intervention; Adolescents.*

INTRODUCTION

Adolescent mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, academic stress, and emotional dysregulation, have become increasingly prevalent worldwide, reinforcing the urgent need for strengthened promotive and preventive mental health systems within schools. Evidence demonstrates that psychosocial difficulties arising during adolescence can escalate into long-term psychological conditions when not addressed early. Because schools serve as daily environments where students interact with teachers and peers, they represent a strategic setting for the implementation of scalable early intervention frameworks.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) has emerged as one such framework. Defined as an evidence-informed, compassionate, and non-intrusive approach, PFA aims to reduce initial distress, promote adaptive functioning, and enhance resilience in individuals experiencing acute stress. Across the literature, PFA is consistently grounded in five core principles, safety, calmness, social connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope, commonly referred to as Hobfoll’s essential elements. These principles are also highlighted in the literature map as the theoretical basis of PFA and are operationalized through structured stages such as establishing rapport and safety, psychological stabilization, information gathering, and problem resolution.

Research demonstrates that PFA training enhances knowledge, attitudes, skills, and confidence among diverse trainee groups. For example, randomized trials by Sijbrandij et al. (2020) found significant improvements in trainees' understanding of psychosocial support principles following structured PFA training. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021) conducted a scoping review showing that PFA training is associated with improved competency, reduced distress, and greater readiness to respond during crises. Systematic reviews by Movahed et al. (2023) and Adewunmi et al. (2025) further confirm that PFA training increases self-efficacy, psychological preparedness, and perceived competence across healthcare and community settings.

In the context of school mental health, PFA has been increasingly positioned not only as a crisis-response tool but also as a promotive framework to strengthen school-wide well-being initiatives. This aligns with emerging paradigms such as Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that MHFA training leads to significant gains in mental health knowledge, stigma reduction, and supportive behaviors (Hadlaczky et al., 2014; Morgan, Ross, & Reavley, 2018). The literature map similarly emphasizes that PFA and MHFA play complementary roles, PFA supports immediate emotional stabilization, while MHFA and SEL cultivate long-term mental health literacy, resilience, and social emotional competencies within schools.

Despite its potential, implementing PFA in school contexts presents challenges. Studies highlight issues such as training accessibility, variability in instructional quality, limited documentation of procedural fidelity (Ledford & Gast, 2014), and the need for culturally adapted models (Wang & Havewala, 2025; Hart et al., 2009). Furthermore, the literature map notes gaps in long-term outcome research and adolescent-specific implementation, underscoring the importance of culturally sensitive, sustainable, and contextually responsive training models. Overall, growing international evidence suggests that PFA can strengthen school mental health systems by equipping teachers and peers with essential skills to provide safe, immediate, and empathetic support. This review synthesizes findings from 2015–2025 to examine PFA as a framework for mental health promotion in schools, explore its integration with broader well-being models, and identify contextual considerations for effective implementation

METHOD

Subjects of Research

The subject of this research consists of a comprehensive body of academic literature published between 2015 and 2025, focusing on the implementation and efficacy of Psychological First Aid (PFA) within school settings. The scope is specifically delimited to studies that examine PFA as a promotive and preventive framework for adolescent mental health, involving key stakeholders such as educators, school staff, and peer groups. By targeting this specific decade, the study ensures that the

synthesized evidence reflects contemporary psychological practices, recent global mental health trends, and modern educational policy shifts. The research subjects encompass a diverse range of scholarly works, including randomized controlled trials, systematic reviews, and conceptual papers that address the intersection of psychosocial support and the school environment.

Instruments

The primary instruments utilized for the identification and evaluation of data include the Scopus bibliographic database and a structured "Literature Map: Psychological First Aid as a Framework for Mental Health Promotion." The Scopus database served as the fundamental tool for retrieving high-impact, peer-reviewed publications, while the Literature Map functioned as a conceptual instrument to categorize findings into essential thematic pillars, such as core PFA components, training mechanisms, and implementation challenges. Furthermore, a rigorous set of eligibility criteria was employed as an evaluative instrument to filter the literature; studies were only included if they provided substantive data on teacher or peer training outcomes, adolescent well-being, mental health literacy (MHL), or the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) with PFA frameworks.

Data Collection

The data collection phase was executed through a systematic and rigorous retrieval of scholarly literature from the Scopus database, covering the period from 2015 to 2025. The search strategy was meticulously designed to capture a wide array of evidence-informed research, utilizing Boolean operators to combine keywords such as "Psychological First Aid," "School Mental Health Promotion," "Adolescent Resilience," and "Psychosocial Support." Inclusion criteria were strictly applied to identify studies that specifically examined the implementation of PFA frameworks within educational settings, including randomized controlled trials, systematic reviews, and high-impact conceptual papers. This process prioritized literature addressing teacher and peer training, the development of mental health literacy (MHL), and the integration of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) principles. By utilizing a "Literature Map" as a guiding instrument, the collection process ensured that the resulting dataset provided a robust and representative foundation for examining both the theoretical underpinnings and the practical utility of PFA in school communities.

The analysis was conducted using a narrative thematic synthesis approach, which allowed for the systematic categorization and interpretation of diverse qualitative and quantitative findings across the selected literature. This analytical process involved a multi-stage coding strategy to identify recurring patterns, which were subsequently organized into four overarching themes: the foundational pillars of PFA (safety, calmness, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope), the efficacy of training programs for educators and peers, the systemic alignment with broader psychosocial frameworks, and the identification of contextual implementation

barriers. Furthermore, the analysis incorporated a critical evaluation of methodological quality, with a specific focus on intervention fidelity and the sustainability of PFA models in low-resource or digitally-mediated environments. By synthesizing evidence from both empirical trials and simulation-based studies, the analysis sought to bridge the gap between theoretical PFA principles and their practical efficacy in enhancing the mental health capacity of school systems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Core Components and Theoretical Foundations of PFA

Across the reviewed literature, Psychological First Aid (PFA) is consistently described as a framework grounded in five essential principles, safety, calmness, social connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope. These elements, often referred to as Hobfoll's essential components, are widely acknowledged as central mechanisms supporting psychological stabilization and adaptive recovery in both children and adults.

Structured PFA models, including the RAPID-PFA model and the SIX Cs model, reaffirm these principles by outlining practical procedures for establishing rapport, reducing distress, and fostering empowerment in crisis situations (Everly et al., 2012; Farchi et al., 2024).

Insights from the literature map further emphasize the relevance of these components for adolescent populations, noting their alignment with developmental needs and school-based socio-emotional goals. Additionally, neurobiological evidence demonstrating the role of emotional regulation and perceived safety in trauma recovery (Nicholson et al., 2020; Brunetti et al., 2017) reinforces the theoretical grounding of PFA as a promotive framework for school mental health systems.

Teacher and Peer Training Outcomes

The synthesis of empirical studies indicates that PFA training consistently enhances teachers' and peers' abilities to provide early psychosocial support.

Findings from randomized controlled trials demonstrate that participants show notable improvements in PFA-related knowledge, preparedness, and confidence following structured training interventions (Sijbrandij et al., 2020; Mtiraoui et al., 2025; Peng et al., 2024). These outcomes are further supported by digital and simulation-based training studies, which show enhanced skill acquisition and greater perceived competence due to immersive learning modalities (Park & Choi, 2022; Choi & Song, 2024).

The development of validated PFA self-efficacy measures adds additional support for these findings, as post-training assessments consistently show significant improvement in participants' confidence and perceived readiness to support distressed individuals (Kılıç Bayageldi & Şimşek, 2022; Alshareef et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies highlight PFA's potential for scalable capacity building within school environments.

Integration with Mental Health Literacy (MHL) and SEL Frameworks

A prominent theme across the literature is the conceptual and practical synergy between PFA and broader frameworks such as Mental Health Literacy (MHL) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL).

Meta-analytic evidence from MHFA studies demonstrates that literacy-based interventions significantly improve recognition of mental health problems, reduce stigma, and increase supportive behaviors among both adults and youth (Hadlaczky et al., 2014; Morgan et al., 2018). The literature map situates PFA within this continuum by highlighting its role in providing immediate emotional stabilization, while MHL and SEL programs contribute to long-term resilience and socio-emotional competence among students.

Studies in school settings show that when PFA principles are combined with SEL or literacy-building curricula, students demonstrate improved emotional regulation, greater help-seeking behavior, and stronger perceptions of connectedness within their school communities (Leventhal et al., 2018; Harte & Barry, 2024), further supporting the value of integrated mental health promotion strategies.

Implementation Barriers and Contextual Challenges

Despite its potential, the implementation of PFA in school settings faces several challenges. Across studies, insufficient resources, inconsistent training quality, and limited documentation of implementation fidelity emerge as significant barriers (Ledford & Gast, 2014; Berry et al., 2021).

Cultural adaptation also appears critical, as interventions that do not resonate with local norms often experience reduced engagement or limited effectiveness. Research on culturally adapted PFA and MHFA for Indigenous, Asian American, and other minority populations demonstrates that culturally grounded modifications enhance both acceptability and perceived relevance (Crooks et al., 2018; Hart et al., 2009; Wang & Havewala, 2025). The literature map similarly notes substantial gaps in long-term outcome evaluation and a lack of school-specific evidence, signaling an ongoing need for rigorous, context-sensitive research designs to support sustained implementation.

Integrating Psychological First Aid into School Systems: Theoretical Alignment, Implementation Efficacy, and Sustainable Practices

The findings of this review underscore a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for Psychological First Aid (PFA) as a transformative framework for school-based mental health promotion. The core components of PFA—safety, calmness, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope—resonate profoundly with the developmental imperatives of adolescence and the strategic objectives of fostering emotionally resilient school climates.

Rather than being confined to post-crisis intervention, PFA’s compatibility with established frameworks such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental

Health Literacy (MHL) positions it as a versatile, preventative strategy. By embedding these principles into the daily pedagogical landscape, schools can transition from reactive crisis management to a proactive culture that prioritizes emotional regulation, help-seeking behaviors, and peer connectedness, all of which are fundamental to healthy adolescent development.

The evidence further highlights the practical utility of PFA in democratizing mental health support through capacity building among non-specialist school personnel. Educators and peer supporters consistently demonstrate significant gains in knowledge, competence, and self-efficacy following PFA training, suggesting that the framework is highly accessible to those without formal clinical backgrounds. The emergence of digital, online, and simulation-based modalities has further enhanced the feasibility of implementation, offering scalable solutions for resource-constrained environments. However, the successful integration of PFA into diverse school systems necessitates a nuanced approach to cultural and contextual factors. The literature on cultural adaptation emphasizes that for PFA to be effective, its content must be meticulously tailored to local norms and values; such culturally responsive adaptations are critical for ensuring high levels of engagement and acceptability among both trainees and recipients.

Despite these promising outcomes, several systemic challenges remain that may impede the long-term sustainability of PFA initiatives. The analysis identifies significant gaps in the current literature, particularly regarding inconsistent training quality, a lack of rigorous fidelity reporting, and a scarcity of longitudinal evaluations. Without robust monitoring mechanisms and ongoing assessment, it remains difficult to ascertain the enduring impact of PFA on broader student well-being and school climate. Consequently, future research and practice must focus on developing PFA models that are not only theoretically grounded but also contextually relevant and systematically evaluated. By addressing these methodological and implementation barriers, PFA has the potential to serve as a cornerstone of school mental health ecosystems, empowering the entire school community to respond to psychological distress with compassion, clinical competence, and sustained confidence.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that Psychological First Aid (PFA) holds substantial promise as a promotive and preventive mental health framework for school settings. Its core principles, safety, calmness, connectedness, self-efficacy, and hope, are theoretically robust, developmentally appropriate for adolescents, and closely aligned with broader educational goals such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mental Health Literacy (MHL). Empirical evidence consistently shows that teachers, peer supporters, and other school personnel can acquire PFA competencies effectively through structured, digital, or simulation-based training, thereby expanding the capacity of schools to provide early, compassionate, and

practical psychosocial support. When implemented thoughtfully, PFA has the potential to strengthen school climate, enhance emotional resilience, and support students’ well-being in both crisis and everyday contexts. However, the effectiveness of PFA in educational settings ultimately depends on addressing several persistent challenges. Cultural adaptation, implementation fidelity, and long-term evaluation remain underdeveloped areas in the current evidence base. Schools, particularly in low-resource contexts, require accessible training models, institutional support, and mechanisms for monitoring outcomes to ensure sustainable impact. Future research should prioritize culturally grounded, technology-assisted PFA interventions tailored specifically for youth and school communities, as well as longitudinal studies that examine their enduring effects on mental health and resilience. With continued refinement and contextual adaptation, PFA can serve as a vital component of comprehensive school mental health promotion efforts.

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