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Citation for final published version:

Parker, Rachel 2019. Developing preventative intervention support for adolescent self-harm in schools. Using a whole-system approach to generate explanatory theory [Conference Poster]. *European Psychiatry* 56, p. 427. 10.1016/j.eurpsy.2019.01.003

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurpsy.2019.01.003>

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Developing preventative intervention support for adolescent self-harm in schools:

Using a whole-system approach to generate explanatory theory from interdisciplinary perspectives for preventative intervention.

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(1) THE PROBLEM & POTENTIAL SOLUTION:

Adolescent self-harm in Europe is a major public health challenge. In the UK the increasing rates in hospital admissions represent the “tip of the iceberg” within the community, with two thirds of the population group not accessing health services for support (Geulayov et al. 2018). Finding a solution to this issue requires a preventative intervention approach for young people which includes community-based delivery. Secondary schools are posited as key settings where this type of support could be delivered.

(2) EXPLORING THE SCHOOL CONTEXT – a non-neutral site.

The impact of the secondary school context upon adolescent self-harm preventative intervention support is not currently understood, nor the wider societal influences which schools reside within. These points about the proposed intervention context have not received sufficient attention up to now in preventative intervention development, and may also offer a way forward to finding a solution for the health topic of adolescent self-harm.

(3) A research project at Cardiff University aims to address the aforementioned points.

The socio-ecological public health model will be applied to generate explanatory theory from interdisciplinary perspectives for preventative intervention support in secondary schools in Wales. This work aims to explore the secondary school context, outlining the perceived barriers and facilitators. Preventative intervention support is heavily influenced and strongly shaped by its context, a point that has not received sufficient attention up to now in public health research (Craig et al. 2018). Some of the barriers within the secondary school context have recently begun to be theorised (Evans et al. 2018), including that of stigma (Parker 2018), but this initial work highlights the need to understand the school-based context more fully in regards to adolescent self-harm.

Potential barriers to the actual incorporation of evidence-based preventative intervention design for adolescent self-harm in schools include the strength of the school culture and the influence of the wider socio-political systems. These should not be underestimated, as they impact the decisions taken about what is acceptable and feasible for use within educational settings. These types of factors can severely limit or negate the uptake of evidence-based practice, even from results informed by Randomised Controlled Trials (MRC 2006).

(4) Project Methodology: This is a critical realist informed qualitative research study which will generate rich and concrete detail about the subject under enquiry to develop explanatory theory, using grounded theory for the analysis. Research interviews with post-16 year old pupils (who have Gillick competence) and school-based staff will take place in four to six schools in Wales, selected by stratified purposeful sampling. The project aims to access a minimum of 45 of these research participants, within small semi-structured focus groups. Additional system level information will be gathered from staff in public sector community-based organisations which have knowledge and expertise about adolescent self-harm (that is relevant to the secondary school context), both at a local and national level. Total study recruitment will be 60 individuals.

An outreach-based research approach within the school and wider community is utilised, to address the public health research barriers and make contact with the “invisible” population group, to work in partnership for the development of preventative intervention support. The World Health Organization recommends this type of outreach approach to support the health needs of adolescents (WHO 2015) in order to facilitate access to public health services and support, and understand and meet the population's needs.

This project is currently in its data collection stage. There have been barriers to conducting this study, which the project will both elicit and exposit within its analysis, to make future research recommendations for preventative intervention support for adolescent self-harm in schools. The full results of this study will be available in 2020.

This work has been developed to explore feasible solutions to help address the public health challenge of adolescent self-harm within the community, in order to promote the health and well-being of young people in secondary schools in Wales.

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