

School-Based Suicide Prevention Through Gatekeeper Training: The Role of Natural Leaders



Highlights

- Natural Leader (NL) training is a promising approach to providing teachers with long-term implementation support. It identifies natural leaders in the school building and offers them more intensive training so that they can go on to coach and support their colleagues.
- Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR®) training consists of a 60-minute online training designed for school staff to learn the warning signs of suicide and how to respond to students in crisis using three steps:
 1. Question the youth's intent regarding suicide
 2. Persuade the youth to seek and accept help
 3. Refers the youth to an appropriate resource
- Researchers examined how NL and QPR training benefits educators.
- Researchers found that both the NL and QPR training improved educators' preparedness to respond and their knowledge of role-appropriate responses to suicide prevention.

What is this research about?

In Canada, suicide is the leading cause of death for children and youth aged 10-14 and the second leading cause of death for those aged 15-24. Since many at-risk youth can be reluctant to ask for help, teachers and other school staff in daily contact with them play a crucial role in comprehensive school-based suicide prevention. However, many teachers and school staff feel they would benefit from suicide prevention training to overcome common barriers such as discomfort with helping, not knowing how to ask about suicide, and the fear of making the situation worse.

This study explored the development of a natural leader (NL) training designed to support the real-world implementation of the Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR®) gatekeeper program, and the mixed-methods pilot evaluation of this implementation strategy.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers used existing connections to recruit educators and staff from three middle and high schools from one school division in Western Canada for the pilot evaluation. The intervention schools received both QPR and NL training, while the two attention-control schools only received QPR training.

A two-page flyer with geographically relevant suicide prevention was developed to adapt QPR for the Canadian context. The flyer was emailed to all participants with their QPR log-in code.

Participants were surveyed before and after training to determine their role-appropriate suicide prevention knowledge and their perceived preparedness to perform various prevention activities.

At the end of NL training, four natural leader participants were asked if the training had increased their perceived preparedness and capacity to serve a suicide prevention support person in their building.

Three natural leaders and four teaching/school staff participated in qualitative data collection following training. One focus group was conducted with two natural leaders and the other with two non-natural leaders from the intervention school. Additionally, one natural leader and two school staff from the attention-control schools who could not meet as part of a group due to scheduling conflicts were interviewed independently.

Main findings

Overall, researchers found that both the NL and QPR training improved participants' preparedness to respond and their knowledge of role-appropriate responses to suicide prevention.

Feedback on the flyer indicated that it could be a helpful tool, but there was a need for improvement in communicating its purpose and availability to participants.

A prominent theme across interviews/focus groups was a preference for QPR training over the flyer and other trainings participants had previously taken. Compared to other suicide prevention trainings, participants felt that QPR was appropriate for teachers because it increased the school staff's comfort when asking students about feelings of suicide and confidence that they were responding appropriately.

Consistently, participants on the NL team shared that the most valuable part of NL training was building a team, so they had support and did not feel that one person had to take on everything. The team approach helped ensure members were familiar with school division policies and procedures and allowed members from different backgrounds to share their experiences. The NL training also appeared to increase participants' comfort in intervening because they recognized that they did not have to be an expert in suicide prevention to support a student.

These findings align with data from the NL training feedback form, where all respondents indicated that they felt mostly prepared to serve as a suicide prevention support person in their building after receiving NL training. This preliminary study demonstrates that NL approaches are worthy of further study and provides some directions for this research.

Implications for evidence-based, implementation-sensitive approaches to school mental health

The results from this study suggest that a brief, low-cost training was associated with large changes in school staffs' self-perceived preparedness to intervene with students in distress. Since time to attend training is a key barrier for teachers, using natural leaders as a strategic approach to capitalize on brief training for all school staff is promising. It should be considered more often in school mental health. However, brief training is likely not enough for

all teachers, and additional work is needed to explore the effectiveness of this promising approach across diverse settings.

COVID-19 pandemic impact

Due to interruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, follow-up survey data were still being collected when this article was written, and so were not included in this paper. This study was also being conducted in a second school division with a much larger number of schools to allow a more rigorous assessment of the approach.

About this snapshot

Original research article

For a complete description of the research and findings, see the full research article:

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Research article authors

- Deinera Exner-Cortens, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Calgary.
- Elizabeth Baker, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Calgary.
- Cristina Fernandez Conde, School & Applied Child Psychology, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.
- Marisa Van Bavel, School & Applied Child Psychology, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary.
- Mili Roy, Department of Mathematics & Statistics, Faculty of Science, University of Calgary.
- Chris Pawluk, Rocky View Schools, Airdrie, AB.

Research Snapshot author

This summary was written by Morena Hernandez, Innovation and Scale Up Lab Coordinator at the Centre for School Mental Health, Western University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Deinera Exner-Cortens, University of Calgary, Department of Psychology, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary AB, T2N 1N4, Canada.
Email: deinera.exner2@ucalgary.ca

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