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**A Qualitative Study about Engagement in a School-based Prevention Programme for  
Secondary School Students**

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### **Abstract**

School-based prevention programmes are one avenue of support for students with internalising symptoms. Research has primarily focused on programme implementation and evaluation, with less emphasis on the experiences of the programme participants and the programme features that influence participant engagement. This qualitative study explores the experiences of secondary school students, aged between 13 to 14 years old, who participated in an abbreviated six-session school-based prevention group programme, the Positive Thoughts and Actions (Singapore) (PTA-SG). The aim was to identify programme features (e.g. programme content and strategies) that contributed to students' engagement in the PTA-SG programme. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight secondary school students at the end of the programme and transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Students described that the programme 1) incorporated personally meaningful interactive activities, 2) enabled them to gain concrete results and feelings of competence and 3) provided a supportive small-group environment with positive peer modelling. The students' perspectives about their participation and engagement helps provide recommendations for future development of prevention programmes in secondary schools.

*Keywords: programme adaptation, at-risk students, mental health, social-emotional, prevention, engagement*

## Introduction

Internalising problems are a group of emotional symptoms, characterised by feelings of low self-esteem, fear, and sadness, which the individual directs inwardly rather than express outwardly (Novak & Mihić, 2018). Internalising problems, such as depression and anxiety, put youths at higher risk of short-term and long-term negative outcomes, hence providing effective prevention programmes for this group of vulnerable individuals is crucial. They are typically associated with poorer academic performance (Patalay et al., 2015), physical health problems and decreased physical activity (Jamnik & DiLalla, 2019). Negative self-concept and emotional distress associated with these symptoms have also been predictors of suicidal ideation (Wong et al., 2007). Hence, providing effective prevention programmes for this group of vulnerable individuals is crucial.

Implementing evidence-based prevention programmes is an important way to support youths at risk of developing internalising symptoms. For them to benefit from these programmes, it is important that they maintain high levels of engagement. Poor attendance and premature dropouts are common barriers to effective services (Bruwer et al. 2011). Participants who drop out are likely to experience higher levels of symptoms and worse functioning impairments than those who stay engaged in programmes (Pellerin et al., 2010). On the other hand, participants who stay engaged are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Chu & Kendall, 2004).

Prevention programmes for youths are commonly implemented in schools, with many programmes incorporating components such as psychoeducation (e.g., understanding psychological symptoms), cognitive coping (e.g., challenging maladaptive thoughts) and emotion regulation (e.g., relaxation) (Yong & Lee, 2020). According to a recent review, prevention programmes for internalising problems had an average dropout rate of 9.5% (see Table 1) (Yong & Lee, 2020). Another programme for preventing depression in youths with

elevated depressive symptoms, the Op Volle Kracht 2.0 (OVK 2.0), also reported a dropout rate of 11.5% (de Jonge-Heesen et al., 2020).

Other prevention programmes conducted in schools that target other health risk behaviours have reported slightly higher dropout rates. For example, the Climates Schools prevention programme for alcohol reported a retention rate of 69% immediately post-programme (Newton et al., 2009). A pilot Climates Schools study in the UK has also reported positive evaluations from participants, where 78% agreed that the programme was able to keep them interested (Newton et al., 2014). The Health4Life school-based programme is another online programme that simultaneously addresses six key lifestyle risk factors among secondary school adolescents and is still being implemented in 72 schools (Teesson et al., 2020).

The statistics gathered from the above studies are likely to be conservative estimates as they were conducted as evaluation studies. Evaluation studies are often run in controlled experimental settings by the intervention developers who are most familiar with the programme protocols, leading to the strongest programme effects (Gilham et al., 2007). It is estimated that the dropout rates in school-based prevention programmes run by school staff are likely to be higher. This could be due to fewer resources, where school staff may not be as well trained and discrepancies that depend on a teacher's time, motivation, and general likeability from students, possibly contributing to higher dropouts.

Several other reasons for poor attendance and high dropout rates have been postulated. One reason could be the stigma associated with mental health which undermines participation in mental health programmes (Li, 2020). Stigma and embarrassment were perceived by young people as the most important barriers to seeking help (Gulliver et al., 2010). Participants may fear being ostracised as having mental health challenges, making it harder for them to fully engage in programmes (Brunwasser & Garber, 2016). A second

reason could be that programmes that are long may be perceived as too demanding or irrelevant, leading to disengagement and dropouts (O'Keeffe et al., 2019). A third reason is that some programmes may also share similar goals to school health and mental well-being classes resulting in students feeling less motivated to attend or stay engaged in another similar programme (Brunwasser & Garber, 2016).

A conceptual model of student engagement was proposed by Parker and Hodgson (2020). The researchers interviewed teachers to explore what facilitates students' engagement during social-emotional learning sessions. Three key factors in the model are ensuring safety, providing proper resources and environment, and giving individualised attention to students by trained experts. Structural considerations including the use of systematic implementation protocols, monitoring systems and guidelines for integrating programmes into the school curriculum also help ensure programme fidelity and reduce dropouts (Chong & Lee, 2021).

To understand the programmes features that could enhance participant engagement, we have drawn upon two studies that explicitly discussed the key programmes features that were likely to have helped their participants stay engaged. The first programme, FRIENDS, is a family-based group cognitive-behavioural intervention programme for anxious children, which has recently been suggested for implementation as a prevention programme in schools (Fjermestad et al, 2020). Several features seemed to improve programme engagement. First, the group context normalised the experience of anxiety, encouraging the children to support each other and learn from positive modelling. Second, the programme incorporated experiential and learning activities such as feel-good activities. 69% of children were diagnosis-free upon completion of the programme and 68% were diagnosis-free 12 months post-intervention (Shortt et al., 2001). 88.9% of participants completed the programme and 83% rated the programme as fun and enjoyable, which could have contributed to good programme engagement.

The second programme, MindBalance, is an online cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) programme for university students (Doherty et al., 2012). This programme incorporated four strategies to enhance engagement. The first strategy emphasised the use of interactive therapeutic activities where participants viewed graphical content and online exercises for self-reflection. The second strategy emphasised the provision of a personal experience and space to encourage a sense of ownership. The third strategy emphasised a supportive relationship with a therapist where participants could contact a therapist for guidance. The fourth strategy emphasised an online support community for participants to share and reduced feelings of isolation. The researchers reported a significant decrease in depression symptoms post-intervention. 80% of participants were still actively engaged at the fifth session and 64% at the target eighth session.

It is crucial to maintain full participation and high levels of engagement because programmes tend to be sequential, component-based, and skills-focused where participants are often encouraged to build on their knowledge in a stepwise manner and learn to apply their skills beyond the programme (McCarty & Weisz, 2007). Participants who miss or are disengaged in sessions may miss out learning important content and skills and may find the programme less effective. Hence, it is important to identify programme features, in terms of content and strategies, which can help students maintain their interest and participation.

The current study aims to identify programme features in a group school-based prevention programme, Positive Thoughts and Actions (Singapore) (PTA-SG) (see below), which was adapted from the evidence-based Positive Thoughts and Actions (PTA) programme (McCarty et al., 2011). This could help researchers improve current programmes and develop more effective programmes.

### **PTA-SG Programme**

The PTA-SG was an abbreviated six-session pilot programme adapted from the 12-session PTA prevention programme for students at risk for depression (McCarty et al., 2011). It targeted secondary school students identified as at risk of internalising problems and included culturally relevant examples and language. It was a group programme run at the students' school after classes ended. The PTA-SG was adapted to align with the social-emotional learning curriculum taught within the Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) in Singapore secondary schools (Chong P.S., 2021)<sup>1</sup>. The CCE aims to develop students' social-emotional well-being by strengthening resilience, self- and social awareness and promoting help-seeking. In line with the CCE, the PTA-SG programme incorporated individual and group activities where students learnt to identify and regulate emotions and change unhelpful thoughts. Students learnt about how thoughts and feelings are related and to use positive actions to boost their mood. Each session concluded with home practice, where students planned how to apply their skills learnt at home. Their homework was reviewed, and the learning outcomes were reinforced in the next session<sup>2</sup>.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Eight secondary two school students (Australian Year 8), aged between 13 to 14 years old, participated in the PTA-SG programme after they were identified to be at risk of internalising problems, such as depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms (Bask, 2015). These eight students were highlighted to the school counsellor by their teachers for displaying internalising behaviours such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and motivation, and hence referred for the programme. The students were from the same class and were split into two groups, each with two male and two female students. Alex, Baiyin, Maris, and Cherie were in group one while Frank, Nick, Sinwei, and Carrie were in group two. All names are



pseudonyms. All students gave consent to participate in this study which had ethical approval from the NTU Institutional Review Board.

### **Data Collection**

The six-session PTA-SG programme was conducted in-person at the students' school for two groups of four students each. The sessions were guided by a master's student in applied psychology (counselling) and was supervised by a doctoral-level psychologist registered in Singapore. The sessions were conducted between 8<sup>th</sup> October 2020 and 21<sup>st</sup> October 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic with safe distancing measures in place. Each session was 75 minutes long. Immediately after the last session of the programme concluded, seven students were interviewed about their experience in the programme by the first author. The eighth student was absent on the last session and was interviewed a week later by the first author.

A one-to-one semi-structured interview format was used and took approximately 15-20 minutes each. An interview schedule was developed based on the research question to guide the interview (Barker et al., 2016). It outlined the key questions related to the programme features, including content and strategies, to understand how these features affected the students' experiences and engagement (see Appendix A). Questions were phrased in an open-ended manner to allow the students to provide unrestricted responses. The first author assisted with the logistics aspect of the programme but had no direct interaction with the students until the interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the interviewer, who is the first author, for analysis.

### **Analytic Strategy**

Thematic analysis (TA) was used to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of students in the PTA-SG programme and identify the factors that encourage programme engagement. In particular, Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive form of TA was chosen as it

is a flexible and effective approach for analysing qualitative interview data and exploring individual experiences as the key objects of analysis. Reflexive TA encourages an interactive and recursive process to reflect and engage with the data to identify meaningful and significant patterns within the data.

A six-phase reflexive TA framework was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Prior to Phase 1, the students' responses were collated, and interview questions were removed so that subsequent data analysis was unconstrained by a priori structures imposed by the semi-structured interview format. During Phase 1 (Data familiarisation), the first author read the transcript repeatedly to familiarise herself with the data. During Phase 2 (Generating initial codes), each data item was evaluated. Codes that captured the essence of relevant segments of data and which could potentially form meaningful patterns were typed next to the transcript. Open coding was utilised where instead of having a coding framework, the codes were generated as the author reflected and interpreted the data. The codes were predominantly semantic and provided an explicit description of the students' experiences. During Phase 3 (Searching for themes), all codes were collated and the relationship between the codes was considered. The codes were organised into potential themes and supported by relevant data extracts. The themes were mostly descriptive to depict meaningful patterns in the data relevant to the research question. During Phase 4 (Reviewing themes), themes were reviewed to ensure that there were clear distinctions between the themes and within each theme, the data clustered meaningfully. Data extracts within each theme were reread to ensure they formed an internally coherent pattern. Each theme was reviewed against the dataset to ensure it accurately reflected the meanings in the data. During Phase 5 (Defining and naming themes), themes were reviewed again to ensure they were supported in detail by well-interpreted data. During Phase 6 (Producing the report), all themes supported with data

extracts were written in an analytic narrative to address the research question of how to engage students in prevention programmes.

This reflexive TA process resulted in the generation of themes that captured the essence of the interview data based only on the first author's interaction with the data. The reflexive TA approach emphasises researcher subjectivity in coding and developing the themes. Therefore, following the guidelines from Braun and Clarke (2021), a research team was not required for analyses and only the first author was involved in the analysis of data.

### **Results**

Eight students took part in the PTA-SG programme and seven students completed all sessions, except Baiyin, who was absent from school and missed the last two sessions. The seven students were interviewed after the last session concluded while Baiyin was interviewed a week later. All students completed the post-intervention interview individually, and their data were analysed using reflexive TA. The interview questions asked about the students' experiences in the programme, including what they enjoyed, what and how the programme was beneficial and suggestions to make the programme more helpful and engaging. Based on the results of the reflexive TA, three main themes related to programme features that encouraged engagement during the programme emerged. Each theme is illustrated by quotes from the students.

#### **Theme 1: Engaging in personally meaningful interactive and structured activities**

The first theme relates to meaningful learning and being able to participate in interactive activities in the programme. This was in response to the questions about the activities they enjoyed and what could help make the programme more interesting. In each session, students were engaged in active reflection where they were encouraged to relate what they learnt in the programme to real life. They were given a variety of scenarios and tasked to actively reflect on their thoughts and behavioural reactions in those situations. Carrie

expressed that it helped her “to acknowledge the negative and positive thoughts and how to handle the situations”. Alex mentioned learning to “put the positive thoughts in” the situations given.

The students reported to benefit from the behaviour and emotional management techniques taught in the programme. Frank described that “the calming methods” were “really helpful”, especially learning about consciously “taking deep breaths”. Moreover, these skills were easy to learn and apply in real life and Nick reported that these techniques “helped [him] a lot on what to do when [he] encountered a problem... helped [him] focus on what [he] need[s] to do”. Students were encouraged to devise a personal plan during each session and carry out their plan at home. According to Sinwei, creating this plan meant that they had to “do it by [themselves]” at home and practise the skills learnt in different situations.

Students also shared that hands-on group activities encouraged interaction which made the sessions “fun” and engaging. Alex asserted that having hands-on and “more interesting activities so that [the] people taking part [will be] more engaged.” Carrie also suggested that programmes should incorporate “activities, mostly games that can engage the whole group” and “involves them discussing together and working together as a group”. Nick conveyed the same sentiment where they “had fun while presenting” in groups.

Being proactive during the sessions helped the students remember what they have learnt as compared to passive listening and Cherie mentioned that being a “visual learner and hands-on learner”, the interactive activities were “helpful because by doing it hands-on, it’s like [she can] remember [her] actions, and by remembering the actions, [she] can kind of trigger remembering [her] thoughts”.

One student, Nick, also suggested using interactive quizzes. such as “a Kahoot” regularly to help them review what they have learnt. He felt that in “each of the quizzes, [they

can] recall what [they] learnt from the past two sessions.” Carrie also suggested they “use things that they learnt in the previous sessions” so that they can “recap and learn more about it”. This would help them to “branch out to more situations and wider ideas”.

## **Theme 2: Experiencing concrete results and feelings of competence**

The second theme relates to the noticeable improvements the students shared about when they were asked what and how their participation in the programme was able to help them cope. Carrie felt that the programme made her “think about the emotions in the situation” and she could “worry less”. She had “things that [she could] use from the programme” that help her “prevent the negative responses and effects”. Nick recalled the “emotion pathway” and felt he could “apply it to [his] problems, to identify what to do, and identify the positive and negative effects”. The programme also taught the students about recognising triggers which Cherie said was a key takeaway. She “had no idea what a trigger was at first” but after the programme, she was aware of the effects of certain triggers and “it changed the actions [she] did to have a different effect”.

Understanding their emotions also improved the students’ ability to manage their behaviours. Alex described that he often had a “difficult time dealing with the class. Through these sessions, they made [him] calmer”. Cherie explained that she received “good advice” on how to “stop the negative results”. She felt that “a lot of people just say, to just relax but they don’t tell you how to do it. It’s like this programme kind of just makes it less vague, so actually tells you what to do”. Marie mentioned she could “see the improvement in [them]”. She was a “more relaxed and much more positive thinker” which made her “feel more motivated to study”. Nick similarly felt motivated to “do better” for himself.

Students also reported increased self and social awareness, as they were more aware of their thoughts and those of others. Sinwei expressed that she could “find new ways to look at things”. Their improved perspective-taking skills helped them cope better with different

situations and opinions. Cherie was more aware that it was important “to think about what other people are thinking” and it broadened her perspective, something she achieved after the programme.

While Baiyin mentioned “behaving differently” and seeing concrete results. He also suggested that the programme should “be more negative” and that they should “share the negative things [rather] than the positive things”. He felt that the students should not always be given “a very good, a very positive imagination about the future”, because “when they go out into society, they [would] feel that the world suck[s]” and “it doesn’t seem like what they are thinking, like what others [taught] them”. He reiterated that “think[ing] in the negative way”, so that “if the real negative things come out, the real troubles come out, then [they] will not feel that depressed” as they would have “already expected what the worst is”.

### **Theme 3: A supportive small-group environment with positive peer modelling**

The third theme relates to the students' perception of the programme environment. When asked for suggestions to make the programme more helpful and interesting and what could engage students more, students commended having a comfortable and safe space to talk and learn from positive modelling. Carrie asserted that the “sharing part was the most memorable” and she was “more comfortable with talking about [herself], all [her] personal experiences”. Baiyin felt that “sharing is kind of good as [he could] know [his] classmates better”, which could create a supportive environment both during and after the programme. One activity that fostered a positive atmosphere was the “gratitude cards” where students wrote notes of encouragement for each other and showed collective and mutual support for each other. Nick shared similar positive feedback, noting that he “enjoyed” the card activity.

Carrie asserted that she could “talk about some things easily because [she was] used to talking to the people [she knew]”. While Frank shared that he was “nervous at the first [session], as it was something new” but it was “better” later and suggested to “put the closer

friends together so, like, it's not so unfamiliar". However, Cherie mentioned that sharing in groups was not something that she particularly enjoyed as "there are some things that [she] tried to, tried not to go into... too personal" and it would have been better to have individual sessions. Nonetheless, she also reaffirmed that group programmes could incorporate "a smaller group with people you trust and can share around".

Additionally, a skilful programme facilitator can help support a conducive space for sharing, learning, and practising new skills. Nick praised the "support of [the facilitator]" as an encouraging facilitator "did help" the students get more comfortable during the activities and sharing.

### **Discussion**

This qualitative study explored the experiences of students at-risk of internalising symptoms who participated in a group school-based prevention programme and aimed to identify key programme features that support student engagement. The reflexive TA process resulted in three themes that highlighted 1) including meaningful interactive and structured activities, 2) providing concrete results and feelings of competence and 3) establishing a supportive small-group environment with positive peer modelling. These themes represent features which could have contributed to programme engagement. The first and third themes illustrate the importance of interactive activities and a supportive environment which are consistent with the programme features highlighted by Shortt et al. (2001) and Doherty et al. (2012). Our study's second theme is an additional feature which other programmes have not previously identified, where experiencing concrete results and gaining feelings of competence appears to be an important feature for the students and their engagement (Shortt et al., 2001; Doherty et al., 2012).

In terms of the first theme, opportunities to engage in meaningful learning could help incentivise students to actively participate as they may gain new ways of thinking and

perspectives by consolidating pre-existing and new knowledge (Giorgdze & Dgebuadze, 2017). In the PTA-SG programme, students participated in group and self-reflection activities where they learnt to identify thought processes, evaluate their reactions, and explore ways to cope with different challenging scenarios. The students had weekly individual home practice where they planned how to actively apply their skills. These meaningful activities where students learnt personally applicable skills could have encouraged them to stay engaged (Stice et al., 2007). Hands-on, interactive activities in the PTA-SG programme also involved students sharing and presenting to their peers during the group activities which are promotive interaction factors that are optimal for fostering engagement (Hodges, 2020). These group interaction components seemed to make the learning memorable, and students asserted that they had fun interacting with peers. These results mirror those of previous programme which reported that having fun and experiential activities contributed to good programme engagement and evaluation (Shortt et al., 2001).

In terms of the second theme, students appeared to see the benefits of their participation and reported concrete results such as being more aware and better at recognising feelings. The students seemed to have gained feelings of competence as they shared that they could understand and manage their reactions to triggers which provided a sense control of their social situations and confidence in their ability to make good decisions about their behaviours (Munson et al., 2016). Students also felt that the skills they learnt were applicable and beneficial to various aspects of their lives outside the programme (Burns & Birell, 2014), which promoted feelings of achievement and competence and helped motivate the students to stay engaged and continue learning. To help a student increase a sense of competence, one student reflected that the programme should do more to validate the students' negative experiences. Doing so could provide realistic perspectives about life expectations to help students gain a greater sense of confidence and competence in dealing with real-world



challenges. Another way that students can feel a sense of competence is when the programme have clear and objective goals. The PTA-SG programme goal, which was to increase positive thinking and action, was communicated repeatedly to the students throughout the programme. Having clear objectives and outcomes that support participants to achieve their goals could tip the programme's cost-benefit analysis favourably and encourage engagement (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020).

In terms of the third theme, a safe environment during the PTA-SG programme was established where students proposed and agreed on ground rules including respect and confidentiality. These rules were displayed and helped remind students to maintain a positive social environment to support and learn from each other. The students also reflected having good rapport and trust for the facilitator. A recent review highlighted three components key to young people's help-seeking behaviour and engagement in mental health treatment: confidentiality and trust, supportive rapport, and collaborative treatment approach (Lynch et al., 2020). Having an understanding environment where facilitators and peers are supportive are important features that facilitate engagement (Sagar-Ouriaghli et al., 2020). Additionally, the PTA-SG programme was built on pre-existing relationships between students as each group consisted of four students from the same class. Including familiar peers in the group could have helped students feel safe and reduced awkwardness. However, one student did highlight that she personally preferred to not share in a group as it can get too personal but nonetheless suggested that programmes could generally aim to have small group sizes.

This study also found that student generally demonstrated positive attitudes toward the programme and seven students attended all six sessions while the eighth student attended at least four of the six sessions. Students seemed to find the programme pragmatic and did not report being ostracised by peers within and outside the programme or that their engagement was impeded by feelings of stigma. The students also appeared to enjoy being

part of the small group programme and shared the positive changes after using strategies and skills acquired in the programme.

Overall, the PTA-SG programme is consistent with other research (Parker & Hodgson, 2020, Shortt et al., 2001; Doherty et al., 2012) where the results suggest that providing participants with a safe space to engage in interactive activities that equip them with the meaningful and applicable skills are key programme features that support engagement. Our study also found that an additional element of helping students gain a sense of competence was a key programme feature. Hence, adapting and implementing programmes with these critical programme features could help foster a positive attitude towards seeking mental health support and could encourage engagement.

### **Limitations**

The PTA-SG programme was a six-session abbreviated programme adapted from the original PTA programme which comprises 12 weekly student sessions, 2 home visits with both parents and students, and 2 group-based parent workshops (McCarty et al., 2011). The PTA-SG programme was adapted to align with the socio-emotional learning curriculum taught in the local secondary schools. Hence, the skills and concepts in the PTA-SG programme were expected to be familiar to students. As the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of students in this programme and understand programme features that could help improve future adaptations of the PTA, it was not focussed on the effectiveness of the PTA-SG programme in reducing internalising symptoms.

Since we only interviewed eight participants, the interview data obtained in this study reflect the experiences of the eight participants in the PTA-SG programme alone and should not be assumed to represent the experiences of the original PTA programme. It is possible that different themes would be generated from the data if the study recruited more students (Salzmann-Erikson & Söderqvist, 2017). However, the goal of this study was not to

generalise results, but to focus on the students' individual experiences including opinions about programme engagement. Future research efforts could recruit more participants as well as interview participants who did not show regular attendance to understand their perspectives about engaging in the programme.

Additionally, as part of the reflexive TA approach, the first author conducted the interview, transcription, and data analysis of the interview data of the eight students in the PTA-SG programme. A limitation could be that the first author could have prior ideas about the data and initial analytic thoughts during the interview and transcription stages. In the reflexive TA approach, Braun and Clarke (2006) advised that immersing with the data during the analytic stage was the crucial point, regardless of the researcher's role in data collection. Additionally, as the analytic process is unique to the first author's interaction with the data, the results should not be generalised across researchers and to other programmes.

### **Strengths**

To the authors' knowledge, this is one of the few studies to examine the perspectives of secondary school students who participated in a group school-based prevention programme qualitatively. This is likely to be highly relevant in today's context as mental health support for students is more critical amidst the rising concern for the mental health of students in recent years (Pitchforth et al., 2019) and youths are particularly vulnerable to mental disorders (Subramaniam et al., 2019). It is important to hear the students' perspectives about the programme developed for them so that we can help provide recommendations to improve future prevention programmes.

The qualitative research design using a semi-structured interview format permitted the use of open-ended questions where students could express themselves freely in their own spontaneous language to get a richer description of their experiences (Barker et al., 2016). Reflexive TA also provided flexibility in interpreting the data from the eight students and was

effective in summarising vital features and identifying similarities that reflected important meanings across the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Overall, our study has helped to provide some insight into the experiences of eight students in a school-based prevention programme and identified the programme features that could have contribute to the students' engagement. These results can help provide recommendations that could guide the future adaptation and development of prevention programmes. For instance, incorporating a range of interactive activities to enhance peer interaction and hands-on tasks to help maintain participants' interest and encourage self-expression. Programmes could also maintain small group sizes, placing peers who are familiar with each other in the same group to build on pre-existing relationships and create a supportive environment. These seem to be critical programme features for effective school-based programmes and optimisation of educational resources.

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**Table 1***Examples of school-based intervention programmes for adolescents*

| <b>Study</b>                             | <b>Programme Name</b>                                  | <b>Dropout rates</b> |
|--|--|----------------------|
| Arnarson & Craighead (2011) <sup>a</sup> | -  | 14.8%                |
| Castellanos & Conrod (2006)              | Personality Matched Cognitive-Behavioural Intervention | 8.0%                 |
| Gillham et al. (2007)                    | Penn Resilience Program                                | 15.9%                |
| Lamb et al. (1998)                       | Teaching Kids to Cope                                  | 14.8%                |
| McCarty et al. (2013)                    | Positive Thoughts and Actions                          | 8.6%                 |
| Shortt et al. (2001)                     | FRIENDS  | 11.1%                |
| Stice et al. (2007)                      | Blues Group  | 0% <sup>b</sup>      |
| Wijnhoven et al. (2014)                  | Op Volle Kracht  | 4%                   |
| Young et al. (2010)                      | Interpersonal Psychotherapy                            | 8.3%                 |

*Note:* The dropout rates reflect those of the study treatment group only (excluding the control group).

<sup>a</sup> For Arnarson & Craighead (2011), no name was given to the prevention programme. <sup>b</sup> For the Blues Group (Stice et al., 2007), make-up sessions were conducted, which functionally resulted in full attendance.

## **Appendix A**

### Interview Schedule for Post-Programme Interview

#### **Greeting and Introduction**

Hi (student name), thanks for participating in the PTA-SG programme.

The purpose of this interview is to talk about your experience in the programme and find out what you think about it. It would be helpful if you could share some suggestions about how we can improve the program for other students.

Let's start our interview.

#### **Questions**

You did many activities during the 6 sessions (*Show the list of the 6 session topics.*) Which topics were find most helpful/interesting for you?

Which activities did you enjoy more?

What about those that you didn't like?

Was the program useful in helping you cope with stress and challenges in your life?

What has changed for you? Has anything changed for you?

How has it been different for you?

What do you think helped you make that change/make it different for you?

Do you have any suggestions to help make our program more helpful and interesting for other students?

What can engage students more in this program?

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The original PTA programme by McCarty et al. (2011) was adapted in two ways. First, it was adapted culturally for implementation in the Singapore school context to make it relevant to the local students' experiences by using language expressions and examples familiar to the Singaporean students' experiences. This was done following Bernal and Saez-Santiago's (2006) framework for providing culturally sensitive interventions. No changes were made to the theoretical framework (i.e. CBT), objectives and structure (i.e. group work, individual work, home practice) of the sessions. Second, the programme was adapted to fit into the school's multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) by aligning it with the school-wide CCE programme at the curriculum level (i.e. linking the learning objectives, concepts and skills taught in the PTA-SG sessions and the CCE curriculum) and at the level of the students' learning experience (i.e. using common activities or methods to deliver the content to the students).

<sup>2</sup> See McCarty et al. (2011) for the PTA prevention programme content from which the PTA-SG was adapted from.