

Teachers' Knowledge Regarding Preschool Children's Mental Health

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Abstract

The stigma surrounding children's mental health is gradually disappearing, especially in environments where early childhood education is provided. This study was conducted to identify teachers' knowledge regarding preschool children's mental health. A quantitative approach with a survey research design was employed in this study. Therefore, the questionnaire is the leading research instrument in data collection. Using convenience sampling, the sample consisted of 90 preschool teachers around Kuala Selangor district. The IBM Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 27 software was used in data analysis. The study's findings show that the Teachers' Knowledge Regarding Preschool Children's Mental Health is high with $M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.05$. Also, combining a supportive learning environment with comprehensive teacher training and early education is key to promoting positive mental health in children. This study aims to assist teachers in creating effective interventions for supporting the mental health of preschool-age children.

Keywords: Teacher, Knowledge, Preschool, Children, Mental health

Introduction

Children's mental health is a crucial concern for society as a whole, particularly for parents and caretakers. Generally, mental health is a condition of mental well-being that allows people to cope with life's circumstances, recognize their capabilities, pursue educational and professional goals effectively, and contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2018). According to Oldehinkel (2019), adults are crucial in creating an environment that allows preschoolers to develop the necessary physical and mental foundations for carrying out normal functions to their fullest potential. This implies that parents and guardians are the closest people in shaping and nurturing their development and growth in supporting mental health and well-being.

The awareness of children's mental health is a growing issue that receives fewer resources among adults (Rozali, 2021). This explains the statistics on Malaysian medical and morbidity survey data in 2019; 424,000 children are expected to be diagnosed with mental health conditions (Bernama, 2022). According to Maftei et al (2022), the Covid-19 outbreak adversely affected children's cognitive and emotional development, resulting in them learning in more challenging settings. Usually, children interact with their peers and teachers at school. However, due to the less pleasing environment within their homes, children grow

bored and worn out display episodic emotions like tantrums, and are more inclined to act aggressively. Studies related to child mental health issues are rarely found in open journals but in children's psychiatry journals written in case studies.

In dealing with mental health issues at school, teachers are often with children. Children's development and growth are intervened through a periodic assessment which becomes the teacher's responsibility in evaluating their children. According to Moon et al (2017); Phoa et al (2023) stress that many educational employees, particularly teachers and support staff, lack trust to fulfill their tasks to advocate mental health to children. In contrast, teachers' mental health knowledge is the foundation of many programs to improve mental health in school (Imran et al., 2022; Marinucci et al., 2023). On top of that, teachers' knowledge regarding beliefs concerning mental health has been substantially enhanced as a result of educational intervention involving teachers to recognize children who are struggling with psychological problems.

Like physical education, mental health literacy involves prior knowledge and values concerning mental health issues, whether the command is required from in-service training or fundamental university qualifications to become a preschool teacher. This is due to diagnosed children with mental disorders requiring a professional clinical psychologist or psychiatrist, but awareness in terms of children's mental health issues must be involved among teachers.

The initiative to improve health literacy is a program that focuses on developing the health literacy and healthy lifestyle index set out in the Malaysian Ministry of Health Action Plan 2021-2025 (Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia, 2021). The individuals in human development must determine the following facts to increase the nation's mental health knowledge and literacy. A community knowledgeable about mental health issues may reduce the social stigma linked to mental health conditions (Phoa et al., 2023).

Mental Health Knowledge among Teachers

Based on research by Kamel et al (2020), it is believed that efforts to develop information policies that can enhance instruction and intervention in schools are necessary for applying awareness and knowledge in child mental health well-being education. He recommends that teachers' pre-service and continuous professional learning improve their understanding of mental health issues, to detect and refer early signs of psychiatric health problems.

In the study conducted by Whitley et al (2018), most educators expressed their passion for improving mental health literacy. On top of that, the types of training including curriculum and teaching methods that are most effective in developing mental health literacy among teachers have not yet been determined. Tay et al (2019) explain that the exposure of teachers in Malaysia to basic knowledge of children's and adolescent health, inability to learn, and educational psychology throughout pre-graduate training and teaching experience increase teacher awareness and understanding of mental illness.

In Malaysia's university system, the faculty does not organize mental health education directly in the teacher's training curriculum. The training emphasizes the teaching and learning process, focusing on the practical aspects of child's mental health. However, the knowledge of mental health exists in the training of special education teachers such as disability, progressive development, differentiation problems, and recovery teachers. Additionally, a study in the United States requires an understanding of preservice teachers' knowledge of prevalent mental health issues and behavior management techniques, which is vital to identify improvement areas in teacher education programs (Poznanski et al., 2018).

Methodology

Research Design

A survey was conducted to gather quantitative data and gain insights into teachers' knowledge of preschool children's mental health. The data were collected to assess the participants' understanding and analyzed using descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean, frequency, and standard deviation. The study recruited participants through social media advertisements and posts by the researchers, using a method known as convenience sampling. Before agreeing to participate, the preschool teachers were aware of the survey's focus. The survey data was gathered between February and June 2023, across all preschools in Kuala Selangor District under Malaysia's Ministry of Education (MOE).

Preschool teachers were grouped and recorded as ($n = 90$). Raosoft sample size calculator was used to calculate the study's minimal sample size, consisting of 90 preschool teachers with a sample error of 5% and a significance level of 95%. The study predominantly comprised 85 females (94.4%), followed by 5 male participants (5.6%). Notably, most preschool teachers, precisely 53 participants (58.9%), hold a bachelor's degree. The teaching experience survey indicates most teachers have served for less than five years (33.3%) and 21 to 25 years teachers served in preschool with 6 people (6.7%). The rest of the respondents' profiles are recorded in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant characteristics (N = 90)

Category	Sub-category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	5	5.6
	Female	85	94.4
Race	Malay	72	80.0
	Chinese	3	3.3
	Indian	10	11.1
	Other	5	5.6
Age (years)	20 – 30	31	34.4
	31 – 40	20	22.2
	41 – 50	28	31.1
	51 – 60	11	12.2
Educational Background	SPM	5	5.6
	STPM/Diploma	27	30.0
	Bachelor degree	53	58.9
	Postgraduate	5	5.6
Years in profession	0 – 5	30	33.3
	6 – 10	16	17.8
	11 – 15	13	14.4
	16 – 20	14	15.6
	21 – 25	6	6.7
	26+	11	12.2

Instruments

A quantitative survey consisting of 12 items was conducted to determine teachers' knowledge regarding preschool children's mental health. The survey was rated on a 5-point Likert scale. The questions for the survey were created by referencing previous research conducted on educators' perspectives. The questionnaire addressed various topics identified through a literature review conducted by experts in children's mental health in school settings (Giles-Kaye et al., 2022; Soares et al., 2014). The rating system varied for each item, with options ranging from strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree to strongly agree.

Analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 27. Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics, percentage, mean, frequency, and standard deviation.

Research Findings

Mental Health Knowledge among Teachers

According to Table 2, the respondent provided favorable feedback on a scale of 2 to 5 and responded to the items with "somewhat agree" and "strongly agree". In conclusion, this study shows that preschool teachers have a high level of knowledge about preschool children's mental health $M = 4.54$, $SD = 0.05$.

Table 2

Distribution of responses of the overall sample (n = 90) based on teachers' knowledge regarding preschool children's mental health.

No Item	Item	n (Percentage, %)				
		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Not sure	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Mental health well-being.	-	-	2 (2.2%)	13 (14.4%)	75 (83.3%)
2	Physical and mental health balance.	-	-	1 (1.1%)	13 (14.4%)	76 (84.4%)
3	Level of a healthy lifestyle.	-	-	5 (5.6%)	20 (22.2%)	65 (72.2%)
4	Internal health.	-	1 (1.1%)	4 (4.4%)	28 (31.1%)	57 (63.3%)
5	Application of healthy lifestyle balance.	1 (1.1%)	1 (1.1%)	6 (6.7%)	31 (34.4%)	51 (56.7%)
6	Etiquette towards mental health.	2 (2.2%)	2 (2.2%)	10 (11.1%)	32 (35.6%)	44 (48.9%)
7	Teacher's role model in mental health.	1 (1.1%)	-	4 (4.4%)	26 (28.9%)	59 (65.6%)
8	Maintaining a positive mindset toward mental health.	-	1 (1.1%)	8 (8.9%)	27 (30.0%)	54 (60.0%)
9	Positive emotions in mental health.	-	1 (1.1%)	5 (5.6%)	27 (30.0%)	57 (63.3%)
10	Standard in mental health.	2	1	10	27	50

		(2.2%)	(1.1%)	(11.1%)	(30.0%)	(55.6%)
11	Perception in mental health.	-	1 (1.1%)	6 (6.7%)	34 (37.8%)	49 (54.4%)
12	Level of awareness in actions and thoughts about mental health.	-	1 (1.1%)	6 (6.7%)	34 (37.8%)	49 (54.4%)
		Mean = 4.54		SD = 0.05		

Discussion

The aim of this study is to determine the level of knowledge among preschool teachers regarding the mental health of preschool children and the analysis of the findings indicates that preschool teachers have a high level of knowledge regarding preschool children's mental health. Generally, preschool educators are knowledgeable on how to apply mental health education in the classroom towards teaching, learning, and curriculum activities. Each teacher must periodically acquire knowledge about mental health through in-house training or brief workshops, reading and handling cases, and seminar professional growth initiatives as case study-related learning is experiential for educators. According to prior research, helping children cope effectively with a challenging situation moving beyond merely surviving or existing—allows them to perceive a positive mindset (Armstrong & Potter, 2022).

Furthermore, educators may offer children educational resources that foster children's mental health literacy. These modules have an exceptionally prolonged practical use. Examples of current modules that are used in the classroom, including caring for one's own personal hygiene education can be discussed among children. Another example is the well-being of children's mental health can be promoted by creating a positive connection involving educators and parents during a school open day, a charity event in promoting awareness of children's mental health. According to Pilarinos & Solomon (2017) the absence of community-driven mental health promotion strategies, these issues could prevent children from reaching their full potential in terms of positive development, life trajectory, and academic performance.

Conclusion

The study's findings highlight the significance of teachers having a thorough understanding of children's mental health needs. This allows them to establish a supportive environment that promotes the overall development of children's mental health. Teachers' understanding of mental health should include awareness, application, and a supportive attitude toward children's mental health at school. In order to achieve the desired result, it is crucial for these three sub-domains to work together in a balanced manner.

Additionally, educating children about mental health can have a significant impact on their academic growth and development. When children are taught about mental health and its importance from an early age, they are more likely to be open and receptive to seeking help when needed. This can reduce the stigma associated with mental health at a young age and help to create a more supportive learning environment for all students.

One way to improve future research on teachers' knowledge regarding preschool children's mental health is to conduct longitudinal studies that follow the same group of children and teachers over an extended period. This would allow researchers to track changes in knowledge and attitude toward mental health and identify any factors that contribute to these changes. In addition, this information could be used to design targeted interventions or

training programs to improve teachers' knowledge and promote better mental health outcomes for young children.

Another approach could be to collaborate with mental health professionals and early childhood education experts to create interdisciplinary teams that could provide a more comprehensive understanding of mental health in young children and develop effective strategies for preventing and addressing mental health issues in the classroom. By taking a multi-faceted approach, research in the future may aid in identifying effective strategies for promoting resilience in children and teachers when faced with challenging situations. This is due to the fact that the coping mechanisms of both individuals vary based on the events they encounter in life.

In summary, creating a nurturing learning environment, offering thorough teacher training, and providing early education are crucial aspects in fostering positive mental health among children. By prioritizing these factors, we can help children achieve their full potential and equip them with the necessary resources to do so.

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