

Perceptions of Students' Mental Health Issues among Female Elementary School Staff in Saudi Arabia, 2018

Roaa Aggad¹, Monique Hennink², Ahmed Shehabeldin³, Scott JN McNabb⁴, Sulieman Al Shehri⁵, Marwan Bakarman⁶

^{1,2,4} Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA. ³ Houston Methodist Hospital, Houston, TX, USA. ⁵ Ministry of Health, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. ⁶ King Abdulaziz University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

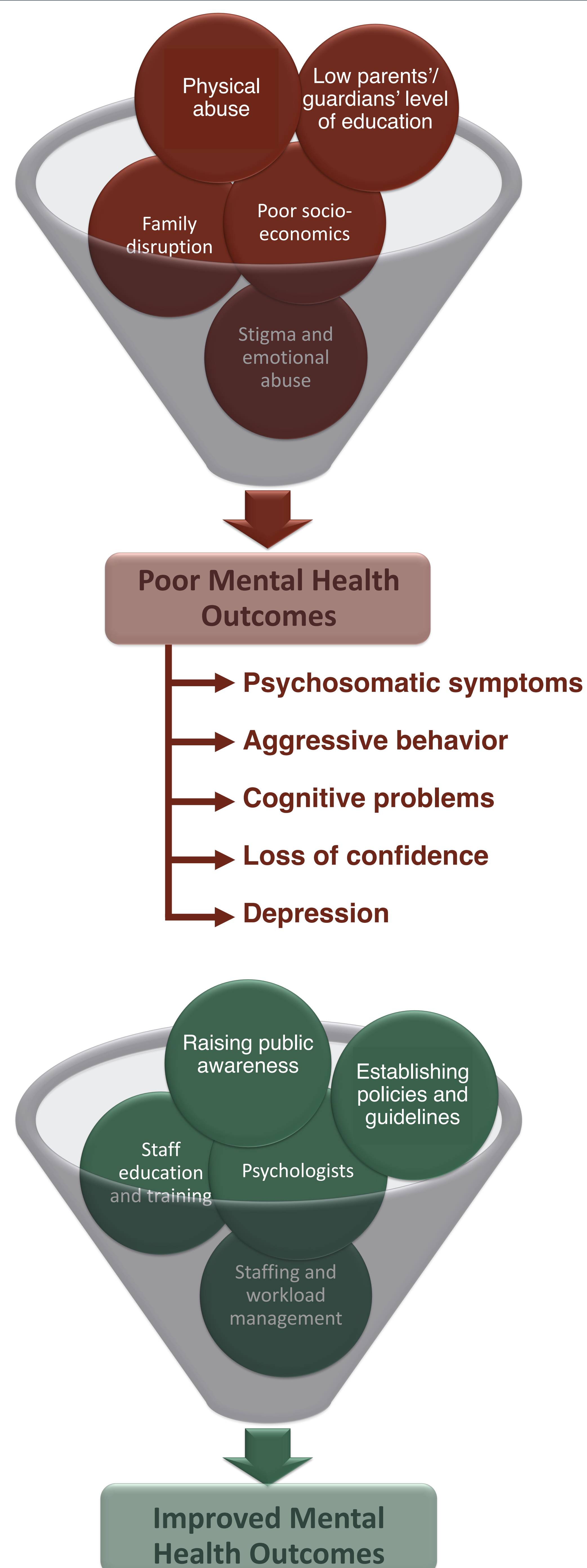
Mental health problems and disorders in childhood are highly prevalent in Saudi Arabia. The implications of mental health problems during childhood can be debilitating and long-lasting. Our study aims at providing a better understanding of the perceptions and responses of public elementary school staff to school children's mental health problems in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Methods

This is a cross-sectional qualitative study consisting of in-depth interviews with public school staff, comprising: Eight elementary school teachers, four social workers/student advisors, and four school principals. Study participants were chosen from schools within each of the four school districts of Jeddah - South, North, East, and Middle. MAXQDA software was used for data analysis after the interviews were transcribed and coded.

Results and Discussion

Family disruption, stigma and emotional abuse, physical abuse, poor socioeconomic status, low parents' level of education, and supernatural causes were found to be the most common perceived causes of student's mental health problems among the interviewed school staff. Those findings were also found in other studies in the literature. Family structure plays a significant role in mental health of both children and young adults. The existence of trauma and any psychiatry related history in a family leads to an escalated rate of hospitalization of children with mental issues (Behere, Basnet, & Campbell, 2017). Also, stigma is perceived as a significant barrier to students accessing school-based mental health programs (Gauvreau, 2012). Moreover, the use of corporal punishment against students is common and is linked to poor mental health and academic performance (Karen M. Devries, 2014). Family economy and parental level of education were significant predictors of mental health problems in children, with poor economy and low level of education predicting a high probability of a psychiatric disorder (Bøe T, 2011), (Sonogo et al., 2013). Unexplained physical signs (e.g., headache and stomachache), cognitive signs (e.g., distraction and confusion), loss of confidence, aggression towards others, and depression were perceived as signs and consequences of mental health problems. Strategies of school staff to improve students' mental health, the perceived obstacles to achieving better outcomes, and the recommended solutions to the challenges were documented in this study.



Recommendations and Public Health Implications

- There is a need for a well-structured, scientifically proven, evidence based training program for school staff on child psychology and school mental health problems. This should include detection and intervention strategies.
- School mental health policies need to be revised to give school staff the right to refer students who potentially are subject to physical or emotional abuse to the authorities without needing to involve parents or guardians.
- Policies, rules, and regulations regarding school staffing, in terms of staff to student ratio and required qualifications for hiring, need to be revised and then enforced. This also entails reviewing the process of task delegation to tackle the problem of delinquency among some school staff.
- There is a need for involving professional psychologists in the care of school children. Personnel with such expertise would help in tackling the problems of undertraining of school staff on students' mental health and function as a reference for complex cases.
- More efforts should be steered toward raising the awareness of the public, and specifically parents of school aged children, on the importance of early detection and intervention to improve the outcomes of mental illnesses in children. This also entails public education on mental health in general and more specifically school mental health to break the social stigma surrounding mental health problems.
- The Ministry of Health needs to publicize the goals and the objectives of the School Mental Health Programme among school staff. This will help to achieve more penetrance of the methods of the program and achieve better outcomes.

Conclusion

Management of mental health issues among students cannot be the responsibility of only the social workers or student counselors. It is a sensitive issue that requires cooperation among all the stakeholders. School staff, parents, and the society at large must change attitude to the issue and refuse from the culture of stigmatizing people living with mental health conditions.

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to Lea Matar, my Program Coordinator, Nebras Abu Al-Hamayel, Doctoral Student at John Hopkins University, Roaa Jumbi, MD, and Helen Baker Doctoral and Family Nurse Practitioner Student at Emory University for their advice on my thesis.