

“A Study on Awareness of Child Mental Health Problems among Teachers in South Canara District, Karnataka”

(An executive summary of the final report of work done on the Minor Research Project of Ms Deena D’Souza, Department of Social Work, Vide sanction letter No. MRP(H)-0179/12-13/KAMA002/UGC-SWRO, Dated 23 September 2013)

Introduction: Child mental health problems have become focal point in every society. The children spend considerable part of their day in schools. It has been noticed that students share some of their problems with teachers easily than their parents. Hence the teachers are the right persons to identify and handle mental health difficulties at their level. To assess the level of teachers’ awareness regarding child mental health problems, the researcher has under taken a study on awareness of child mental health problems among teachers.

Methodology: The aim of the current study is to explore teachers’ awareness on child mental health problems. The universe of the study comprises of South Canara district, Karnataka. The primary school teachers were the respondents of the study. A sample of 100 was covered in the study using the systematic random sampling method.

Finding: The study revealed that out of 100 respondents 87 were female and the rest were male teachers. It represents the gender wise employment situation in primary schools. Women outnumber men in the teaching profession because it seems that women plan for their future in teaching line either on completion of SSLC or PUC and men seem to have different aspiration. Seventy of them were of the age group of 31-40 years. The teachers below the age of 30 and above the age found to be very low. The study reveals that educational qualification of the 95 respondents was TCH (Teachers Certificate of Higher course). Only 5% of the teachers had gone for higher education starting from Graduation B.Ed and Post Graduation B.Ed.

In the semi structured interview schedule researcher presented list of 31 child behaviours which concern the mental health of the child. Almost every child behaviour listed in the table is considered as a problem by more than 50% of the total respondents. But problems like epilepsy, mental retardation, talking to self and laughing by one self, which are with prominent symptoms, are identified as problems by a vast majority of respondents which constitute 97%, 94%, 90% of teachers respectively. Also 80% of respondents felt hearing and seeing things that aren’t there is a problem. It depicts that majority of the teachers are aware of false perceptions without sensory stimulations. However, truanting from school and restlessness are identified as problems only by 57% of respondents.

The research also indicates that the 80% of the teachers considered thumb sucking as problem. There is a consensus among researchers that it is an innocuous habit, and contrary to the general belief. It is not harmful psychologically or otherwise. And 64% consider nail biting as problem. Nail biting is generally considered a tension reducing activity with no special association with psychopathological disorder and these can be stopped by behavioural techniques.

Many children find it difficult to give attention to their studies. There are many reasons for poor attention span among children, including a lack of motivation to do well, problems at home or with peers, poor work habits or study skills, emotional and behaviour problems, learning disabilities (such as dyslexia), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, mental retardation or below average intelligence and other medical problems, including anxiety. In the study it is clearly indicated that 84% of the teachers felt poor concentration span as a problem and emphasis need to be given to the child in order to overcome the problem. Fidgety is typical symptom of hyperactivity and 70% teachers agreed squirmy or fidgety as a problem. Repeating of certain acts over and over (repeatedly making sure all school supplies are in book bag, for example) is sign of obsessive compulsive disorder. In the current study 87 % teachers could understand the behaviour of repetitive action as a problem.

The teachers' responses to the question, "what would you think is the type of problem in these childhood behaviours?" were that, they perceived that the child problems such as squirmy and fidgety (57%), Destroying belongings of others (57%), Fighting with other children (57%), absent from school for a trivial reason (63%), often telling lies (63%) as habit/ behaviour. And the perception of teachers about the type of the problem with regard to epilepsy study shows that the teachers (55%) perceived it as physical problem. The research study also reveals that 73% of the teachers opined nail biting as habit, but there were 27% teachers could identify it as mental problem. In teachers' perception about a certain child behaviour, that is, hearing and seeing the things that aren't there, a large majority of respondents constituting 91% opine that the behaviour is a part of mental problem. They also opined following behaviours are symptoms of mental problems, such as, behaviours like Afraid of new things or situation (77%), Fears certain animal/ place/situation(77%), Repeats certain acts over and over (74%). The research also indicates that teachers failed to identify the stuttering or stammering as mental problem, and only 3.5% teachers agreed that this type of behaviour as mental problem.

Under the study larger portion of the respondents (65.7%) considered that health factor is the cause for the problems and mannerism in children. But only 25% and 4% of respondents felt that factors in child and family causing problem respectively. The 42% respondents felt factors in child, family and school

are causing the problem of truancy from school, and only 18% of respondents said that factors in school are causing the problem of truancy. In the study teachers found that factors in child as the cause for mental health problem, for the Problems like Frequently biting nails or fingers (63%), and 54% teachers opined factors in child as a cause for fear of certain animal/place/situation. Hearing and seeing things that aren't there is one of the symptoms of psychosis. Though 55% of respondents felt health factor, the 45% of respondents felt factors in child is cause for the problem.

With regard to the teachers' knowledge on methods of handling such child behaviours, the data shows that, generally teachers opine that paying special attention to the child can be a method for handling most of the problems except to a child who is fussy. The children having poor concentration span require special attention in improving the concentration power which is supported by 92% of teachers, because such children need special practice for paying attention, memorising and learning in a simple way. Respondents also agree that children with severe mental health concerns, like, hearing and seeing things that aren't there, extreme fear, mental retardation, stealing etc should be given special attention. Most of the teachers agree that any of the child behaviours listed in the table should not be neglected. However, 11% say that children who are disobedient often should be neglected, another 6% say that the children who often complain of aches and pains should also be neglected. It is also a matter of concern that 3% of teachers say that stammering in children should be neglected. The very fact that teachers' agreeing that 'neglecting is not a right method to handle children with mental health concern' shows that teachers' knowledge on how they perceive the problem is satisfactory.

Today, punishment is not considered as effective method in deterring inappropriate behaviour among children. It is more so in children having mental health problems. Large majority of the respondents of the present study also have understood this fact. Therefore, for most of the child behaviours that are listed in table, punishment is not considered as handling technique. Teachers have also recognised that children with certain behaviours should be treated as other normal children, like children having restlessness, destroying others' belongings, worried, absentees etc. But, 31% of teachers agree that such methods will be useful for children with tendency to do things on their own, 11%, 9% and 7% respondents opine that treating these children like other normal children will be best method in dealing with children who repeat certain acts over and over again, with speech difficulty and also epilepsy respectively.

The next important method of handling children with mental health problems identified by the teachers is advising. 77% teachers felt that advising is the method of dealing the behaviours like cruelty to

animals and fussy and over particular child, and 67% opined that fighting with other children can be tackled through proper advice.

In order to meet the objective of finding out, which of these problems, according to them, needed professional help, the researcher has further explored teachers' knowledge on which of the child behaviours require professional help. According to the respondents family intervention is the mode of treatment for problems like frequent disobedience (by 80% of respondents), absent from school for trivial reason (by 73%), refusing to come to school (70%), stealing things on one or more occasions (57%), destroying others' belongings (by 45% of respondents), and fighting with other children (by 43% of respondents). The study reveals the teachers' failure to understand the contribution of mental health professional in dealing with mental health problems.

Behaviour like thumb sucking is understood as problem and that gets solved as the children grow up as noted by 46% of teachers. In fact, thumb sucking is a normal behaviour that tends to stop by the age of four or five, but, if it continues and becomes excessive then it may lead to mental health problems and indicates to the need of the role of mental health professional. The finding reveals that only by 34% of the teachers felt for the need of the role of a professional. With regard to mental retardation 36% of the respondents felt that the problem can be managed by administering drugs, about 35% opined that it does not subside and only 19% of the teachers felt the need for the role of mental health professionals in assisting child in reaching his or her full potential in terms of education, social and life skills.

The behaviour of destroying others' belongings is a conduct disorder. To tackle this behaviour the child and his family must receive early and comprehensive treatment. In the study only 26% respondents felt of the need for the role of mental health professionals but 45% of the teachers say family intervention can solve the problems. But, in fact, such problems need to be assessed by a professional.

The data is also significant as none of the respondents agreed that traditional healer can handle any of the problem specified; they do not agree that the behaviour problems are incurable. As teachers are given one or the other solution to choose from, the result of "Don't Know" is Zero. Generally, all the child behaviour listed in the table require treatment by mental health professionals, which many of the teachers failed to understand, and, therefore, they have suggested family intervention and drugs, or they believe that behaviours will subside on its own as the child grows up.

The research findings indicate that teachers have limited awareness of child mental health problems. Very few teachers are aware of the role of mental health professionals in dealing with mental health difficulties. There is a need to enhance awareness among the teachers with regard to mental health

problems of children. The study more concretely underscores the awareness required for teachers in order to get better orientation towards the aspects of child development, mental hygiene, identifying, preventing and curing mental health problems among children, and motivating them to seek professional help whenever it is needed.