Perspective of Teachers on the Mental Health of Students: A Mental Health Literacy Survey

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Abstract
Improving mental health literacy in teachers can help in early identification of mental health problems in children and adolescents and facilitate help-seeking behaviour. Objective: A mental health literacy survey was undertaken in a school located in Bijnor district, Uttar Pradesh to assess baseline knowledge and beliefs about mental health issues in teachers. Method: A questionnaire based on Mental Health Literacy and Capacity Survey For Educators was administered in 39 teachers in an English medium school in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh. Results: Impulse control difficulties, family and stress related issues, anger issues and bullying were the most common problems that teachers faced with the students in three-months preceding the survey. The four commonest measures teachers used to deal with the problems included meeting with the parents (82%), talking with the students to understand the problem and offering support (75%), changing their style of interaction with the student (75%) and reaching out to the administration of the school for support (33%). Increased training opportunities and promotion of collaborative problem solving techniques were some of the measures suggested by teachers to improve mental health literacy. Additional measures such as encouraging students to participate in extracurricular activities were suggested to support the mental health needs of the students better. Conclusion: Mental health literacy evaluation in teachers and structured programmes to improve mental health literacy can help teachers in supporting the mental health needs of students.

INTRODUCTION
A systematic review of mental health studies in India shows a high prevalence of mental health problems in school-going children and adolescents. An early recognition of problems and provision of care can result in better mental health outcomes in this population. Available evidence suggests that a range of interventions effectively promote mental well-being and reduce key risk factors for mental illness in children. Improving mental health literacy of educators can be one such important measure. Students spend a large part of their daily time in school. Their understanding of various mental health issues can be directly impacted by teachers’ knowledge, which in turn influences help-seeking behaviors. This makes teachers important stakeholders in identifying mental health problems.
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and facilitating help seeking by students and their parents.

Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) certified schools are mandated to conduct regular in-service training programmes for the teachers under the National Curriculum Framework of Teacher Education and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009. Although this might have resulted in a better understanding of some concepts of mental health among teachers, there remains a huge gap between the expected and existing mental health literacy rates of teachers as suggested by the limited number of studies mainly conducted in cities. In a study conducted in Puducherry, 72.9% of teachers showed an overall personal stigma and about 65.7% suggested perceived stigma towards mental health. In the same study, 61% of respondents voted that the problem in the vignette case (depression) was not a real medical illness, and many (73%) held that the problem described was a sign of weakness and that the individual should be avoided (64.5%).

Mental health literacy measures can address stigma related to mental illness and promote help-seeking in students guided by well-informed teachers. A baseline understanding of knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders in teachers can help in designing intervention programs to upskill them in identifying mental health problems. Furthermore, it can provide guidance regarding how best to incorporate this important area in teacher’s training program curriculum and use teachers in implementing mental health promotion programs for students in the schools. With this background, a mental health literacy survey was undertaken in a school located in Bijnor district (one of 75 districts in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state in India) to understand the perspective of teachers about mental health problems in students.

Methods

For the survey, a questionnaire based on Mental Health Literacy and Capacity Survey For Educators was administered in 39 teachers in an English medium school in Bijnor after taking the required clearances from the concerned authorities and informed consent from the participants. Just over a quarter (n = 10) of respondents were primary school teachers whereas the rest were engaged in teaching secondary school students. There were over 1000 students enrolled in the school at the time of survey. The students lived in nearby villages surrounding the school. The survey was administered in English. Some open-ended questions were answered in Hindi and later translated into English for analysis. The survey included 40 questions, with many items requiring five point Likert-scale responses, and three open-ended response questions exploring thoughts of teachers on mental health problems in children and adolescents, their understanding of teachers’ role in mental health needs of children and the measures and mental health care models that might work in supporting the teachers in their endeavour to support the students better. We used Braun and Clarke approach of thematic analysis to identify subthemes from the transcripts of the answers. Subthemes with a common reference point were grouped together to derive themes.

Results

Majority (53%) of the teachers reported dealing with impulse control and family related issues in students in three months preceding the survey. One-third faced problems related to stress, anger issues and bullying in students. The four commonest measures teachers used to deal with the problems included meeting with the parents (82%), talking with the students to understand the problem and offering support (75%), changing their style of interaction with the student (75%) and reaching out to the administration of the school for support (33%) (Table 1).

Almost all respondents were somewhat to very aware of the risk factors, and causes for mental health issues in students. A vast majority (90%) knew about the range of mental health issues in school going adolescents. More than half of the respondents (59%) were somewhat aware and a quarter very aware of the types of help available for the students in school, (Table 1) 43% had limited knowledge about the local community services for mental health issues in students, whereas...
Table 1: Domain based mental health competence (among teachers) in percentage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge (somewhat to very aware)</th>
<th>Range of mental health problems (%)</th>
<th>Help available in school (%)</th>
<th>Help available in the community (%)</th>
<th>Steps to access community resources (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Risk factors and causes (%)</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measures to help students (%)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking with parents (%)</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
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<td>95</td>
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<td>85</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Themes and subthemes related to mental health issues in students, role of teachers, and additional measures

Mental health issues in children and adolescents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes</th>
<th>Dysfunctional and nuclear families</th>
<th>Parenting issues</th>
<th>Peer influences</th>
<th>Social media and technology</th>
<th>Biological factors</th>
<th>Loss of traditional practices such as prayer and meditation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helpful measures</td>
<td>Improve communication between parents and children</td>
<td>Positive school environment</td>
<td>Inculcate moral values</td>
<td>Not to overhype or pay too much attention to the issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Role of teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manage classroom/school environment</th>
<th>Keeping school environment positive</th>
<th>Conducting extracurricular activities</th>
<th>Conducting group interactions regarding mental health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facilitate help seeking</td>
<td>By communicating with student</td>
<td>By communicating with parents</td>
<td>By communicating with parents and students together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role in understanding causes of problems</td>
<td>Facilitate counseling for students</td>
<td>Facilitate school observation of behaviours</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overarching role in assessment, diagnosis and management of problems</td>
<td>Role as a counsellor</td>
<td>Psychological assessment</td>
<td>Teaching yoga and meditation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Increased training opportunities</th>
<th>Workshops and seminars</th>
<th>Revision of teacher training curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased support from school</td>
<td>Provide specialist consultations</td>
<td>Constitute mental health care committee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Another 43% were thoroughly aware of the available resources outside of school. Interestingly, a quarter reported not knowing anything related to the steps necessary to access these supports in the community and another quarter were very aware of the steps required. 43% respondents felt that they were somewhat aware of the steps required to access the supports (Table 1).

Approximately 90% of teachers felt very comfortable talking with the students about the problems, whereas a greater percentage (95%) felt comfortable talking with the parents about it. 85% felt very comfortable in providing support to the students for mental health issues and 77% felt they could access school resources very easily in their endeavor to support the students (Table 1).

Most teachers felt the need for better training as regards to mental health issues in teachers training programs. Around 87% felt that there should be peer support programs and mentoring for teachers to deal with the mental health needs adequately. Many (62%) felt that there should be more workshops in the school on mental health and access to specialized mental health consultations within the school. Around 59% felt that there should be more support in the school for teachers to deal with such problems. (Table 1)

Anger management (85%) was considered to be the most important issue to address for improving overall academic achievements. Management of anxiety (79%), depression (77%), impulse control (77%), and bullying (74%) were other important issues that were identified by teachers for improving overall academic performance of students.

The themes identified from analysis of the open ended question on mental health issues in children and adolescents are listed in Table 2. The broad themes included causality of problems and helpful measures with multiple subthemes under each. The most predominant subthemes as regards to the causality of mental health issues were dysfunctional families; and lack of communication between parents and children. Helpful measures included subthemes of creating a positive school environment and inculcating moral values.

Four broad themes were identified related to the role of teachers in facilitating mental health of students (Table 2). Other than the role in managing the school and classroom environment and facilitating help seeking by those in need, a predominant theme that emerged was regarding the overarching role of teachers in managing overall mental health as well as health in students (sometimes as a counsellor and in conducting mental health assessments). Four important themes for mental health models and measures to help teachers in supporting the students better included increased training opportunities for teachers through workshops and seminars; collaborative and shared problem solving activities with parents, teachers, and mental health professionals; increasing extracurricular activities for students, including of students responsibilities to the students; and increased support from school by providing resources such as specialist consultations, and forming mental health care committee.

Discussion

Promoting mental health literacy in teachers can lead to a significant breakthrough in achieving better mental health for children and adolescents. As evident from the current study, most of the teachers were aware of the range of mental health issues that students face. Furthermore, they could comfortably talk to the parents and students about the issues. However, almost all of them reported an unmet training need in this area, and a huge majority advocated for ongoing peer support and mentoring programs. Although there are mandatory training programmes and workshops occurring for the teachers at present, it might be worthwhile assessing the impact of such programs and revising the structure of these workshops to make it a better fit for the teachers’ needs.

The teachers were less aware of mental health resources in the school and lesser outside the school.
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(i.e., in the community) to still support them. This is an important finding as teachers have a role in helping the students access appropriate mental health support services by providing them and their parents with the information required to do so. In addition, they play a complementary role in supporting the mental health needs of the students by participating in the treatment plan designed by the healthcare providers. Schools can help teachers build an ongoing professional relationships with local care providers. This could be the way forward in making teachers more aware about community resources and more confident about providing information to the students and parents. More importantly, it will help in achieving a comprehensive, multifaceted care delivery model for the mental health needs of the students. The interactions may help the teachers become more aware about early signs of internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression. In the current study, teachers considered these problems to be more important in their impact on academic performance than bullying and other externalizing behaviours such as impulse control. However, they did not report any experience of it in three months preceding the survey. This may be due to signs of internalizing disorders not being recognized or picked up by the teachers. Evidence suggests that teachers are more likely to miss internalizing disorders in school settings despite high prevalence rates.

Some of the themes identified about factors affecting students’ mental health are well aligned with the research findings. Research has shown that parents spending time with children can be protective against mental health issues. Similarly, evidence suggests that loss of traditional lifestyles is associated with increased mental health problems in Indian adolescents. A couple of responses about not paying attention to mental health issues (and considering them to be attention-seeking behaviours) as well as a focus on the dysfunctionality of family unit as being responsible for mental health concerns, were worrisome. Improving teachers’ mental health literacy can play a part in making them aware of the research-based risk factors for mental health problems in children and adolescents, and evidence-based measures to help them. It will help in reducing stigma and discriminatory behaviour towards those who are experiencing difficulties.

Teachers’ role in managing the class and school environment and facilitating help seeking by students is understandable. Schools are expected to have a caring and friendly learning environment using a “whole-school approach” that the teachers can drive. There is evidence to suggest that a nurturing school environment where the students feel supported, share warm relationships with teachers and peers, feel a sense of belonging, and participate actively in school climate, can lower rates of depressive symptoms, experiences of bullying, and perpetration of violence. It is important that the mental health education is promoted among all teachers and students to reduce the stigma towards those who require help resulting in an inclusive school environment.

The broad role a few teachers outlined for themselves, including counselling, formal psychological assessments and teaching yoga and meditation, was of concern as these areas are beyond the expertise of teachers. The role of supporting student mental health needs by the teachers in entirety without sufficient time and training would not be feasible. However, teachers could be upskilled during their professional training to use mental health promotion measures in their natural teaching context. Under National Adolescent Health Programme, it is mandatory for schools to have a counsellor to support the mental health needs of adolescents. Additional measures suggested by the teachers such as shared problem solving activities and support measures by school are in keeping with various models under trial worldwide. Other ways to support the teachers include contracting mental health professionals from an outside agency to visit and work within a school, or having a mental health professional employed in the school health centre. Similarly, there is some evidence for measures such as participation in extracurricular activities as an intervention to address disruptive behavioural problems in adolescents.

The use of a standardized survey instrument and the execution of the survey with an excellent response rate were the strengths of the study. However, more mental health literacy surveys are needed to replicate the findings in different contexts.
CONCLUSION

Teachers can support the mental health needs of the students better if they have sufficient skills in recognizing mental health difficulties. Furthermore, they need adequate knowledge about the appropriate steps to help the students in classroom activities and to facilitate access to mental health services outside the school. The current study identified teachers’ perspectives about mental health, challenges they experience while trying to support the students and various measures that can help them in this endeavor. Mental health literacy evaluation in teachers can help in designing structured programs to improve their literacy in this area.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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REFERENCES