

Exploring Mental Health Issues among Primary School Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

Understanding the real of mental health issues suffered by school students is a good effort. Unfortunately, no study has been done until now. Therefore, the study aim is to explore mental health issues among primary school students. Purposive sampling technique was used in the study. A total of 73 participants from 4 countries of the Peninsula of Malaysia participated in this study. The sample selection criteria were primary school students and teachers, educational counselors, and administrators of the Institute of Teacher Education. The data was obtained online semi-structured through in-depth interview and focus group discussion with study participants during the Movement Control Order from 1st September to 30th November 2021. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, and six themes emerged: (1) lack of resilience, (2) disciplinary, (3) personal identity, (4) lack of attention from family, (5) constraints from poor family, and (6) stress during studying. To address the validity and reliability of the data, triangulation, member check, audit trail, and peer checking methods were utilized. The study is significant as it has contributed rich data regarding the field, which is crucial to formulate a greater approach to minimize the negative impact of mental health issues among the target group. Therefore, the present study is one of the important areas that should be focused on in primary schools.

Keywords: Mental Health, Primary School Students, Qualitative Study.

1. Introduction

Mental health is the level of psychological well-being or the absence of mental illness. It is the state of a person functioning at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioral adjustment. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health includes subjective well-being, considered self-efficacy, autonomy, competence, intergenerational dependence, and self-actualization of a person's intellectual and emotional potential (Conrad D et al, 2018). Primary school is also known as junior, grade, or elementary school. It is for children who are 4-11 years old. This age of stage is also known as early of adolescence who is in a time of changing in various domains including hormones and the body, social environment, and brain and the mind. In reality, adolescence confers vulnerability to mental health problems. Many mental illnesses, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance use disorders, and psychosis, first seem before the age of 24 years.

In recent times, there has been a lot of focus on mental health. In keeping with our country's content growth, mental health, issues, and disorders have become more prevalent with rising from year to year.

A significant increase in suicide and mental illness rates over the past decade has been attributed to poor mental health. Therefore, it is important for world including Malaysians to be aware of the importance of awareness of mental illness, the importance of maintaining a good level of mental health and identifying the symptoms of mental health problems that require intervention and treatment. It is estimated that 10–17% of children and young people aged 4–17 years meet criteria for a mental health condition, and half of mental health conditions begin by the age of 14 (Samji H et al, 2022) . In the short-term, children with mental health conditions have higher rates of school absenteeism (Badruzaman et al, 2006), resulting in poorer learning outcomes. Longer-term, poor childhood mental health has been associated with increased rates of unemployment, violence, substance misuse, suicide, poorer social functioning and a lower quality of life in adulthood. In a study found that nearly 40.4% of the youth group had a tendency to have psychological problems (New Strait Time, 2020) .

Statistics show that 2.3% of Malaysians aged 16 and above suffered from mental health problems. According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2019, almost half a million people in the country were found to experience symptoms of stress or depression (Samji H et al, 2022). The 2019 NHSM study also found that 424,000 children suffer from mental health problems (New Strait Time, 2020). The behavior problem of students and school students in this country is at an alarming level. The rise in crime rates and social problems involving school children and teenagers not only concerns parents and the community, but it also has an impact on the performance of teachers and schools (Liang L et al, 2020).

Children in primary school also encounter various major problems. Primary school children are found to face various behavioral problems, especially related to disciplinary violations, even involving severe problems such as low academic achievement, lack of motivation or laziness, not attending class, truancy, destructive behavior, persistent truancy, stealing, carrying, and distributing pornographic materials, experiencing physical and sexual abuse, smoking and marijuana addiction, as well as exposure to prostitution (Nor Liyana Mb et al, 2020) . Additionally, schools located in urban areas are faced with groups of primary school students who are more aggressive in nature. Some of them involve themselves in the activities of bullying other younger students. This activity is contagious and continues until the student enters secondary school.

Johari Talib et al (2017) in his study basically explained the need for parents and school management to pay attention to children with low achievement. This group of students also usually have various learning and behavioral problems. Most of these troubled children come from low-income families and their parents are unable to provide additional support to improve their children's academic achievement.

The problem of street children has become a big problem and leads to mental health problems. The task of guiding these street children to become a disciplined and educated person cannot be left to one party alone. Parents, teachers, schools, welfare organizations, leaders in a community, the community itself need to join hands to give solid cooperation to overcome this problem (Jalanan et al., 2017) .

Munirah binti Ahmad Kamil (2013) in her study stated that over the past few years, the country has recorded an increase in the crime rate among students. At the same time, the problem of disciplinary misconduct among students continues to increase. Statistics from the Malaysian Ministry of Education

shows that a total of 72,557 secondary school students were involved in various disciplinary offenses in 2010 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2010). Among the cases of misconduct that are often committed include crime (17,595 cases), truancy (19,545 cases), impolite behavior (18,346 cases), cleanliness (21,384 cases), lack of respect for time (17,808 cases), obscenity (3,031 cases), vandalism (5,212 cases) and delinquency (8,563 cases). These statistics described incidents of disciplinary misconduct that occurred in schools and serve as proofs of the existence of risky students that need to be addressed by all school members. These statistics can also indirectly challenge the credibility of guidance and counseling teachers as well as their ability to provide effective interventions can be questioned. In relation to that the guidance and counseling services managed by guidance and counseling teachers at schools can no longer be reactive but need to be proactive, preventive, and comprehensive in managing counseling interventions for students at risk.

A systematic review of resilience-enhancing, found that resilience programming among students, including low levels of trust, emotional intelligence, coping behavior, emotional adjustment, and problem-solving are very important (Fenwick-Smith A et al, 2018). Another study investigated primary school teachers' knowledge of, and capacity to identify resilience in 92 primary school children in far North Queensland. The study found that teachers had a moderate level of knowledge of resilience and were able to identify resilience in their students, but there was room for improvement in their ability to identify resilience in students who were not displaying obvious signs of resilience (Fenwick-Smith A et al, 2018).

One study report that misbehavior is an obvious problem of discipline in elementary school children, and it arises at school more than at home. Teachers should be aware of how they may effectively deal with this type of discipline problem (Alsubaie MA, 2015). Another study conducted in Kenya found that discipline is widely acknowledged to be essential for creating a positive school climate conducive to sound academic performance. It is a basic requirement for successful teaching and learning in schools and a subject of concern for teachers (Simba No et al, 2016). A study found that personal identity is an important aspect of children's development, and it is closely related to their social identity (Barsuka O V et al, 2016). A lack of attention can negatively impact an infant's attachment to their caregiver, which is a fundamental task of early childhood development (Morris et al, 2012).

Although many study on mental health issues have been conducted in Malaysia, to date, no data are available to demonstrate the domains covered in mental health issues conducted for Malaysian primary school. The aim of the present study is therefore to investigate the domains covered in the mental health issues presented in Malaysian primary school. The following research question was therefore developed: What domains are covered in mental health issues and what are the contributing factors of mental health issue in Malaysian primary school. Malaysian public medical schools?

2. Methods

This study uses a completely qualitative approach. The study participants consisted of school teachers, school pupils, trainee teachers, counselor and administrators of teacher training institute. Semi-structured in-depth interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were used to the desired collect data. After the interviews were conducted, all data was analyzed using thematic analysis and carried out

manually to answer the research questions. Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Universiti Sains Malaysia Human Research Ethics Committee (USM/JEPeM/21090612)

Data Collection Process

Online in-depth interview and FGD were utilized for the data collection. The usage of online interview is to make it align with the movement control order (MCO) enforcement. The data collection process took place in the duration of three months from 1st September to 30th November 2021. These kinds of approaches have its strengths: 1) It can collect the data deeper compared to the other approaches. 2) These techniques are useful in exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think in such a way, and 3). These techniques also help the researcher who wants to explore participants' views and experiences using a series of open-ended questions (Grishan T, 2009). Based on these strengths, in-depth interview and FGD were utilized in the present study as it is able to achieve the research objective which is to explore the mental health issues from authorize participants' perspective.

Data Analysis

To analyses the data, the researcher has planned and managed the data in three steps which are data management, understanding and analyzing the data. Analysis on the interview data has started once the first interview was carried out. Each interview was recorded. The obtained data from the audio recording was transcribed in verbatim. The completed interview transcription was sent to the participants to be reviewed. Each transcription is given a code. For instance, the code FGD3/TT/12/9/2021, IDI/EC/23/1/2022, and IDI/PRT/24/1/2022- FGD3 means third Focus Group Discussion, TT refers to training teacher and 12/9/2021 refers to the date of interview conducted which was on 12th September 2021. IDI means in-depth interview, EC refers to educational counsellor and 23/1/2022 refers to the date of interview conducted which was 23th January 2022. IDI means in-depth interview, PRT refers to the primary school teacher and 23/1/2022 refers to the date of interview conducted which was 23th January 2022. A qualitative approach analysis entails identifying themes and constructing ideas as they emerge in an attempt to reduce the data into codes or categories (Braun V et al, 2014). Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic approach (Braun V et al, 2014). Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data that involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (or "themes") within the data. It was chosen due to its flexibility, ability to handle large data sets, inductive development of code, and ability to answer research questions.

Validity and Reliability

Validity in the qualitative research was obtained from the triangulation, awareness to the researcher bias and review by the participants. In this research, researcher had used in-depth and FGD from different background of participants as sources of the data. This triangulation technique has made the data more valid and reliable. To minimize the bias, researcher has asked three colleagues to review and verify the obtained themes. Researcher has asked the participants to scrutinize the raw data and asks for comments for its accuracy. Besides, participants are required to give comments on the themes and categories accuracy and suitability by using enough evidence whether it is realistic or not. All the

given responses and comments were included in the final report. This will increase the research credibility.

Reliability refers to how far a research can be repeated. Based on the qualitative research, reliability can be obtained by using audit trail, and peer checking. To ensure data reliability, the researcher has used audit trail method. Audit trail is conducted by asking individual outside the research to check the narrative or research report to determine its credibility. In this context, researcher has asked a reader to check the report and all documents which are related to the data collection activity for verification. The researcher has reported clearly in the audit trail concerning a few aspects such as the reason why this research was carried out which is as a result of having inquiry and in-depth interest towards the need of mentoring. Finished grouped data has been referred to the specialist panels for reviewing and verification.

3. Result

The objectives of the study were to explore mental health issues among primary school students. The findings were (1) lack of resilience, (2) disciplinary issues, (3) personal identity, (4) lack of attention from family, (5) constraints from poor families, and (6) stress during studying. There were 73 participants involved in the study. It includes in-depth and FGD with training teachers, primary school students, teaching training institute educational counsellor, teacher institute training administrator and primary school counsellor.

Profile of participants of the study

A total of participants involved in the study. The majority of participants were female (80%) and male (20%). In terms of job experience, the majority of them have more than ten years of service (60%), and the rest are below ten years. Half (50%) were school counsellors, three (30%) were educational administrators, and two (20%) were specialists in Psychiatry (Table 2).

(1) Lack of Resilience

The issue of lack of resilience is emerged from the interview. This can be seen as stated by the study participants as follows.

“Therefore, I feel that primary school students have resilience, but it is somewhat low as they are quite new to social group life. FGD3/TT/12/9/2021

“Primary school students also experience early stages of mental health problems. This is all due to a lack of resilience and endurance to face difficulties in life. (IDI/EC / 25/1/2022)

“In the context of my school, the resilience of my students is at a 50-50 level. This means that some students have resilience, while others have weak resilience. (IDI/PRT// 17/1/2022)

2. Disciplinary problems.

Among the factors that lead to undisciplined behavior is the student's own careless attitude. They have an attitude that does not care or is not afraid of the actions taken. Sometimes, students who cause disciplinary problems crave attention only from their teachers. This is because they do not receive enough attention at home, so they want attention from their teachers at school.(IDI/EC / 24/1/2022)

However, there are also negative factors. For example, if a student has family problems, they will rebel or disturb their friends at school. Sometimes, it is not only the counseling teacher who can identify student problems through counseling sessions, academic teachers can also identify problematic students and pay attention to them. If students receive the attention they deserve, they will change towards the positive. (IDI/PRT/ 27/1/2022)

Based on my observation, there are students who have negative mental health, although not all students. I can see that there are students who do not respect teachers and rebel in school because they feel pressured to be in school. Sometimes, they become individuals with negative mental health as a result of their free association with friends. Parents do not monitor them closely, so students take advantage of the opportunity to do what they want. (IDI/PRT/ 26/1/2022)

3) Student's identity

"Usually, primary school students find it difficult to control their emotions, which is how people perceive them. For example, students see the strengths of others and belittle themselves, or are called insecure. Students also feel that they are not good enough and have low self-esteem due to their shortcomings." (FGD5/TT/12/9/2021)

Among primary school students, there is a negative mindset where students constantly criticize themselves, such as feeling that they are not good enough. Students also always feel lacking and compare themselves to others. (IDI/EC / 19/1/2022)

"Students today are not like before. In other words, students are no longer active, growing, and independent like students before. Pupils of the last 10 years are synonymous with being strong and active in school. But today's students are more quiet, passive, and not strong in terms of their style. Actually this gives a negative and bad effect to their identity where students' lives are now too pampered and too controlled with such a strong life." (IDI/PRT/ 25/1/2022)

4) Have no attention and lack of family love

In my opinion, the reason for this problem is that children are not monitored enough by parents who are busy working, especially those who leave early in the morning and come home late at night. They are not supervised enough when reviewing lessons, which makes them lazier because they do not understand what they are learning. Additionally, in this era, there are parents who wash their hands of their responsibilities once they have given their children smartphones because they consider smartphones to be a convenience for their children. However, over time, students begin to use them less effectively. (FGD4/TT/11/2/2022)

For example, parents guide children to fold clothes until they succeed. The second is that parents need to instill confidence in their students so that they believe in themselves. Parents need to encourage them to complete tasks. The third is the relationship where parents need to help children build positive relationships with others. For example, parents encourage children to play and share with friends. The fourth is positive character development such as the application of moral values. The fifth is contribution where parents need to cultivate a voluntary nature in helping others. The sixth is coping skills in dealing with situations. For example, parents remind children nicely what to do if they are in

the same situation in the future. Finally, the ability to control where children can control themselves and emotions in unexpected situations. (SC4/23/2/2022)

"When faced with family problems coupled with lack of inner strength and identity, coupled with friends and social media will worsen the children's mental health. But on the other hand, if the family relationship is good, the relationship is strong, close, parents can always exchange stories, then it helps a family to have good mental health." (IDI/PRT/ 17/1/2022)

5) Constraint from poor family

I always read about the constraints faced by students in remote learning due to poverty, such as the inability to prepare data and have a phone. As a result, these students feel worried because they cannot complete the school work given to them. This situation has been going on for almost 2 years. It is really unfortunate for them. However, can we not help everyone? I represent IPG to jointly open a fund to be distributed to those in need (SC1/26/2/2022)

Yes, at first, it happens at home. And when they go out, they are exposed to peer influence. This happens a lot. The saddest cases for me are always cases of incest with their father or brother. Because most of them live in flats, in one room, many of them live with about 10 to 12 people. I myself went to the house, and it was very cramped, and incest was common. They become stressed with their brothers and it leads to this. Religious education does not exist in their hearts. It's gone. Islam is only in name. If we go to their house and tell them about this, parents will only say that this is a common occurrence. It is indeed terrible due to the high standard of living, living in flats, and having many siblings. For almost 5 years as a discipline teacher, it has become my habit to see cases like this. (IDI/PRT/23/1/2022)

6) Stress

Depression causes school children to become inactive, withdrawn, isolated, and unsociable. They may feel that what they are going through needs to be kept to themselves and not shared with others. If depression is left untreated, it can be dangerous. This should not happen, and appropriate steps need to be taken. One of them is a series of periodic motivational programs. The counseling department is often reminded to make programs periodically and not just one-off so that we are always close to the students. (ADM/22/2/2022)

"Children's mental health is now also said to have been compromised because children are now easily exposed to influences that can disturb their emotions." (IDI/EC / 25/1/2022)

"During the Covid 19 pandemic, I found that, the spirit and culture of students to learn became a big challenge even when in school, the students were excellent students. Students were stressed because they had to study outside the norm.(IDI/EC / 26/1/2022)

"When this pandemic occurs, students' resilience levels deteriorating causing their motivation to decrease as well. I also read the news from the media that shows data that there are a large number of students facing stress during learning period because they can't meet their teachers face to face and they can't meet their friends as well. This shows that the level of resilience of primary school students is very low during this pandemic season. So, I think that the level of student resilience before the pandemic is better than during the pandemic." (FGD3/TT/8/2/2022)

4. Discussion

The present study aimed is to explore mental health issues that exist among the Malaysian primary school students. The result are (1) lack of resilience, (2) disciplinary issues, (3) personal identity, (4) lack of attention from family, (5) constraints from poor families, and (6) stress during studying. Lack of resilience is among of the major issues faced by the Malaysian primary school students. This finding is consistent with a study found that primary school students need a special programme to promote positive mental health in school including emotional intelligence, coping behavior, emotional adjustment, problem-solving, and resilience activities itself (Fenwick-Smith A, 2018). This is also supporting a study in North Queensland whereby participants of the study demand the knowledge and skill on how to improve resilience (Alsubaie MA, 2015).

Disciplinary has also emerged from the data analysis. It has supported a previous study found that that misbehavior is an obvious problem of discipline in elementary school children, and it arises at school more than at home (Alsubaie MA, 2015). This fact also aligned with another study conducted in Kenya found that discipline is widely acknowledged to be essential for creating a positive school climate conducive to sound academic performance. It is a basic requirement for successful teaching and learning in schools and a subject of concern for teachers (Simba NO et al, 2016). Personal identity in the context of primary school students refers to how students identify themselves outside of social identifiers. It is important for students to reflect on their personal identities as it can help them create connections with others and understand the relationships and dissonances between their personal and social identities. This statement is aligned with a study found that personal identity formation is an important aspect of children's (Barsuka O V et al, 2016 & Gomis Chorro E et al, 2017).

A lack of attention from family can have negative effects on children's development. Infants who do not receive enough attention from their parents may have difficulty forming a secure attachment to their caregiver, which is a fundamental task of early childhood development. Teenagers also need attention from their parents, as a lack of attention can lead to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Children who do not receive enough affection and attention from their parents may have difficulty handling their feelings in a healthy way. The emergence of this point is supporting a previous study on the important of attention from family. One of the studies shown that positive attention from family members is important for child development and school readiness. Research suggests that positive attention, such as responding to children in a way that demonstrates warmth and interest, instills a message of trust and security (Morris et al, 2012).

Constraints from poor families refer to the limitations and challenges that low-income families face due to their financial situation. These constraints can affect various aspects of their lives, including their ability to access quality childcare. This finding has supported a study found that poor family will affect the quality of life especially for children and adolescent (Chaudry A et al, 2012). Stress during studying is a common experience for many students. Stress is a natural feeling designed to help you cope in challenging situations, and in small amounts, it can be good because it pushes you to work hard and do your best, such as during exams. This finding supports a study found that stress is a normal for children and adolescent (Itten T, 2011).

The study had several strengths, including the use of in-depth interviews to collect comprehensive and accurate data, the selection of participants from four countries to provide rich data, and the application of an accurate approach to ensure the validity of the obtained data. However, this study also had limitations. Since it is a qualitative study, the findings cannot be generalized to other populations. Non face-to-face interviews, such as online, do not allow for the capture of non-verbal cues, such as body language and facial expressions, which can be important in understanding the interviewee's emotions and behaviors. To overcome these limitations, it is suggested to involve participants from almost all countries in Malaysia to make the potential data more accurate and comprehensive. A quantitative study is recommended to confirm the qualitative data of this study. Lastly, face-to-face interviews can be applied as a data collection process, and the obtained data can be compared with the present study.

5. Conclusion

As a result of interviews with study participants, the researcher found that various mental health issues and factors that contribute to the exist problem among primary school students. This issue needs to be dealt with an ultimate inspiration and solid cooperation between school administrator, teachers, and parents because primary school students are still immature. They are gems that need to be polished to make them excel academically and personally. They are also a coating for the occurrence of various sectors of life. All parties and authorities play an important role in ensuring the emotional and mental well-being of primary school students because these school students are the nation's jewels one day. This study hoped will benefit parents, teachers, academics and students that probably can be used as a reference in managing mental health issues in Malaysia.

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