TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF AND RESPONSES TO STUDENTS’ WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN THEIR CLASSROOM

Eminely Soberanis
California State University, Long Beach
May 2014
Introduction

- Teachers play a significant role in identifying children with mental health problems thus, it is crucial for teachers at the elementary-school level to be informed of common child mental disorders in order to have the knowledge and understanding on this problem in efforts to provide a therapeutic environment for students (Gowers, Thomas, & Deeley, 2004; Kos, Richdale, & Jackson, 2004; Lauria-Horner, Kutcher, & Brooks, 2004).

- The purpose of this quantitative study was to explore elementary school teachers’ perceptions of and responses to students’ with mental illness in their classroom.

- The research addressed the following questions:
  1. What are teachers’ attitudes regarding mental illness in children?
  2. Do teachers perceive they have the knowledge and skills needed to work effectively with students in their classroom who have a mental illness?
  3. How frequently are teachers referring students to mental health services?
  4. Why are teachers referring students to mental health services (e.g., behavior problems, academic performance, peer relationship problems, family issues, etc.)?
  5. Do years of teaching experience contribute to teachers’ understanding of student mental health needs?
  6. How can a school social worker or mental health professional be of assistance to teachers in regards to mental illness and mental health services?
Social Work Relevance

- School social workers are employed in the school setting in efforts to help students thrive academically and work with teachers to better meet the needs of students as well as address any concerns regarding mental illness (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013; Scheyett & Diehl, 2004).

- School social workers recognize that each student is valued regardless of any unique characteristics and if teachers are not aware of children’s mental disorders, school social workers can provide consultation, professional development, and educational awareness.

- Social workers at the school setting also provide teachers with evidence-based knowledge, skills, and information on how to appropriately intervene and make referrals when a student displays symptoms of a mental illness (Koller & Bertel, 2006).
Cross-Cultural Relevance

- The Latino population is not likely to receive mental health services due to the culture-based stigma associated with mental illness and with receiving these services (Leal, 2005).

- Asian and African American families address mental illness differently and are also reluctant to seek mental health services (Loya, Reddy, & Hinshaw, 2010; Ward, Wiltshire, Detry, & Brown, 2013).

- Given that mental illness affects many ethnic groups, mental health services are essential in today’s culturally diverse school settings. How individuals view themselves influences their coping skills and affects their decision-making processes (Gampetro et al., 2012).

- It is important for school social workers to work with teachers, students and their families in efforts to improve and promote the benefits of mental health services in schools.
Methods

- This study utilized a mixed methods exploratory design to investigate teachers’ perceptions of and responses to students’ with mental illness in their classroom.
- With permission and written consent from school principals at two different public schools, surveys were distributed to teachers during a staff meeting.
- The study used a convenience sample of 43 teachers. All participants were over the age of 23 years old and employed at a California public school as a credentialed elementary school teacher.
- The researcher developed all parts of the instrument specifically for this study.
- The first part of the instrument asked about the participants’ experience in working with students with mental illness and referring students to mental health services.
- The second part of the instrument asked about the participants’ view on students with mental illness, their interest in receiving training about mental illness and mental health services as well as their interest in collaborating with a school social worker or mental health professional in efforts to inquire about appropriate interventions needed to work with students who have a mental illness.
Methods (continued)

- The third part of the instrument was an open-ended question, asking participants to respond to “How can a school social worker or mental health professional be of assistance to you in regards to mental illness and mental health services in schools?”

- Three scales were developed to measure teachers’ knowledge and perceptions of mental illness and mental health services in school.

- The software program used to analyze the data was the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 21).

- Frequencies and descriptive statistics were used on all variables in order to describe the sample and answer research questions. Bivariate correlations were used as well as Chi square analysis to answer the research questions related to teacher perception of mental illness and mental health services.

- Content analysis was used to examine the final qualitative responses to the open-ended question and responses were analyzed and coded by the researcher to identify common themes.
Results

Q1: The results of the PPMC that compared teachers’ attitudes with years of teaching experience was not significant ($r (n = 43) = -.16, p = .31$). Second, the results of the PPMC that compared teachers attitudes with teachers’ knowledge on mental illness and mental health services revealed it was not significant ($r (43) = .23, p = .43$). The results from the PPMC that compared teachers’ attitudes and their interest in training on mental illness was not significant ($r (43) = .26, p = .10$).

Q2: Approximately 60% of the respondents reported they perceived themselves to have a greater than average knowledge and skills to work with students with mental health problems.

Q3: The majority of teachers in the study reported they referred at least sometimes (81%, $n = 35$) however, 19% ($n = 8$) of the respondents have never referred a student to mental health services.

Q4: The fourth research question addressed why teachers were referring students to mental health services. For behavior problems, 88% ($n = 38$) of teachers referred students, 72% ($n = 31$) referred students to mental health services because of peer relationship problems. Moreover, 65% ($n = 28$) of teachers have made a referral due to student having family issues, 44% ($n = 19$) of teachers have made a referral to students who have been diagnosed with a mental illness but is not receiving treatment. Lastly, 33% ($n = 14$) referred students due to academic performance.
Results (continued)

Q5: The results of the Pearson’s correlation was \( r (n = 43) = .18, p = .24 \) indicating that years of experience was not significantly associated with knowledge of mental health needs.

Q6: Forty-nine percent \( (n = 22) \) of teachers responded to the open-ended question and seven themes were identified in the analysis.

1. Having a social worker or mental health professional on the school site.
2. Being available full-time.
3. Provide training and professional development on child mental health.
4. Consultation with a mental health professional to discuss interventions and best practices.
5. Providing counseling services to students.
6. Provide advice and guidance to teachers.
7. Meet with parents to discuss their child’s mental health problems.
Discussion

- Results that examined teachers’ attitudes about students with mental illness overall indicated positive attitudes and differences were not statistically significant.

- More than half of the teachers reported they perceived themselves to have a greater than average knowledge and skills to work with students with mental health problems.

- The majority of teachers in the study have referred a student to mental health services and this was seen most often with teachers who had a Bachelor’s degree, as their highest degree level completed.

- The most frequent reason to why teachers referred a student to mental health services was due to behavior problems, followed by poor peer relationships, family issues, student being diagnosed with a mental illness but is not receiving treatment and lastly, academic performance was a concern.

- Years of teaching experience and how it contributed to their understanding of student mental health needs was not significantly associated.

- Almost half of the teachers responded to the question that asked how a school social worker or another mental health professional could be of assistance to them in regards to working with students with mental health needs.


