

Teachers' Perceptions of Mental Health Issues among Secondary School Students: A Qualitative Inquiry

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i9/22993> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i9/22993

Published Date: 24 September 2024

Abstract

Teachers who are appointed in Malaysian secondary schools must have undergone various strict screening and selection processes by the Ministry of Education (MoE). However, the era of industrial revolution has hindered teachers from mastering various abilities at one time. For this reason, it is necessary for a teacher to deepen his or her knowledge related to mental health issues. Therefore, this research was carried out to explore teachers' perceptions of mental health issues among secondary school students, identify factors that lead to mental health issues among secondary school students and explore the actions taken by teachers when faced with students who have mental health issues. Thematic analysis was used to identify the resulting themes according to the objectives of the research through the results of semi-structured interviews that had been carried out. A total of nine research participants consisting of secondary school subject teachers voluntarily got involved. Based on the analyzed data of the research, there are six main themes that describe the perception of teachers, which are mental health issues that show a pattern of improvement, worrying, issues that are a reality, require serious attention and occur due to various factors. The resulting theme in the second objective, which is about the driving factor is family problems, self, social media, academic achievement as well as social relationships and friends. For the resulting themes guided by the third objective that focuses on the teacher's actions include referring to other professionals, providing support, giving students the opportunity to share the problems they face, contacting parents, helping in exploring interventions for students and using gentle and non-stressful methods to student. Despite that, there are also some themes obtained together with certain subthemes that give a meaning almost like the main theme. In conclusion, teachers still have limited knowledge on mental health issues among secondary school students.

Keywords: Mental Health, Perception, Secondary School, Teachers

Introduction

In 2022, world mental health statistics show an upward trend. Based on the World Health Organization (WHO) report, almost 1,000,000,000 people in the world are those who have various mental health issues (Kosmo, 2022). In addition, this figure shows an increasing pattern due to the Covid-19 pandemic attack on the world starting last year 2019. Many people in the world have faced pressure because of the various actions and restrictions that took place at that time. In addition to that, due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, the percentage of those experiencing mental health issues involving depression also increased up to twenty-five percent. Based on the results of an interview conducted by the local newspaper on the WHO's Head of Mental Health, Mark Van Ommeran, he stated that the mental health condition of the world's citizens can currently reach a very worrying ratio. Additionally for countries that have their own national conflicts (Kosmo 2022). In addition, based on the world's mental health statistics in 2022, most people involved with mental health issues are teenagers. The ratio of involvement reaches one in eight teenagers potentially facing mental health issues and then followed by children and the elderly (Husin, 2023).

In Malaysia, mental health issues are among the issues that require serious attention. This situation is caused by almost 424,000 of those who have mental health issues are children between the ages of 10 and 17 (Mokti, 2023). In addition, the National Security Council (2023), has also recorded an increase in the number of suicide cases, which is also seen through the five main conditions of having suicidal ideation, planning suicide, suicide attempt, experiencing depression and loneliness. A total of 33,523 students aged 13 to 17 admitted that they had the desire to plan suicide. The increase in the percentage and number of these high numbers shows that teenagers or students between 13 and 17 years old have a level of mental health that is not healthy. This situation will be more serious if there is no follow-up action from all parties.

Students or teenagers aged 13 to 17 are still categorized as children based on the definition under the Children's Act 2001 which outlines that a child is someone under the age of eighteen. Therefore, this situation shows that supervision is the responsibility of the parents as the main guardians of the students. However, parents will usually leave their children to the school, that is, to the teachers to take responsibility for educating and providing sufficient knowledge, in the hope that their child will succeed in becoming an excellent student without considering other aspects that a student needs. itself. The scenario has indirectly put pressure on the students, in addition when the parents themselves put estimates and expectations that the teenagers or the students themselves may not be able to achieve. Uncontrolled stress can lead to serious mental health conditions.

Research Background

Mental health can be classified as the way a person thinks, performs actions, how to face and control issues that arise, and interaction and communication with the environment (Yusoff, Nordin & Tengah, 2021). In addition, according to the World Health Organization (2024), mental health refers to the psychological well-being, whereby a person can live his role including controlling emotions and behavior in a good and satisfactory condition. However, there are some mental problems faced by a person that can be seen through the initial

physical symptoms experienced by them. For example, frequent sweating, sudden anxiety, declining health, uncontrolled emotions and so on. However, the state of mental health is usually affected due to certain factors that affect the individual indirectly. Among the closest factors are changes in the environment that cannot be controlled by a person, problematic social relationships, lack of exposure to knowledge about mental health as well as stigma and negative perceptions of society towards individuals who experience mental health issues (Talib & Abdullah, 2020). Usually, among the mental health problems that often occur include depression, delirium or general anxiety, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and sleep disorders.

Therefore, as a teacher, it is reasonable to know about mental health issues that occur among students or teenagers. This is because teachers are among the vital stakeholders in any particular educational system. This scenario is due to parents' expectation that teachers will assume parental roles and responsibilities in the school setting. Based on previous research conducted in China, it was found that most teachers stated that there is an increase in cases of mental health issues among students. There is also a statement that states that every teacher has the potential to encounter students with mental health issues in every class they attend. In addition, based on the research, it was found that classroom teachers or classroom teachers in China have been appointed according to certain criteria including the need to receive initial training to improve the ability of these classroom teachers in managing the classroom (Yao et al., 2021). This situation also goes hand in hand with teachers in Malaysia. The various criteria that have been outlined by the ministry in ensuring that the appointment of teachers into the school sector is not just to fill teacher vacancies, but rather to meet all the needs that can help complete all the needs of students. However, there has not been any detailed research conducted to explore teachers' perceptions of mental health issues among students, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Therefore, this research will focus on the professional perception of teachers regarding mental health issues involving secondary school students. The following are the objectives set for the research:

- a. exploring teachers' perceptions of mental health issues among secondary school students
- b. identifying factors that lead to mental health issues among secondary school students
- c. exploring the actions taken by teachers when faced with students who have mental health issues

The findings of this research work are meant to derive the baseline data pertaining to mental health among secondary school students in the national education system, from the teachers' perspective.

Methodology

This is a qualitative research work using the semi-structured interview as data collection method. An interview protocol to obtain a more in-depth explanation from the research participants, consists of 10 items developed according to research objectives.

This research was conducted on subject teachers who teach students aged 13 to 17 years, especially around several states in Peninsular Malaysia. The selection of the subject teachers as participants is due to the fact that they are the closest individuals to students. In addition, subject teachers may have their own views and experiences on mental health issues among their students.

A total of nine secondary school subject teachers were purposively selected as participants in this research. All the nine teachers who were selected as the participants met the specific characteristics as follow:

- a. possess teaching experience of more than three years in secondary school
- b. are a subject teacher in secondary school
- c. have understanding on mental health
- d. have experience dealing with students who have mental health issues
- e. possess at least undergraduate degree

The purposive sampling method is used in order to obtain the appropriate data and input in line with the objectives that have been set in the implementation of this research.

Data collection through the interview session is carried out on research participants who have met the criteria or characteristics that have been set. Interview sessions were conducted from May to June 2024. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 60 minutes and were conducted by the researcher himself. The entire interview was conducted in Malay. Before the interview is carried out, the research participants will first complete personal information that includes name, age, gender, state of duty, years of service, subjects taught at school and level of education on the online form sent to the research participants in advance. The interview was then followed by obtaining informed consent from the research participants. In addition, the researcher also informed the research participants that the information resulting from the interview session will be bound by the ethics of confidentiality and not all of it will be disclosed to the public in detail and will only be limited to sharing answers to the research questions. In addition, research participants are also informed that they have the right and are allowed to withdraw from being research participants without having to accept any risk. Interviews were conducted using the WhatsApp application or phone calls according to the needs and preferences of the research participants. This method is used due to the remote location of the research participants, and it is only easy to be contacted through current technology facilities. All interview results will be recorded, noted and transcribed before the data analysis process is carried out.

The data collected from the interview sessions that have been conducted are analyzed using thematic methods. The thematic method is responsible for producing themes and subthemes from the text or interview results obtained. Thematic analysis will produce themes and subthemes that give meaning to the research being carried out. Usually, the themes and subthemes produced from the thematic analysis carried out are based on the objectives or research questions available in the research being carried out. For this research, the thematic analysis carried out is aimed at the objective of the research to produce themes and subthemes. The analysis carried out is by using audio recordings and notes that have been transcribed into a clear written form. The transcripts produced are separated according to the

identity of the research participants involved. Based on Braun and Clarke (2013) have the opinion that this thematic analysis has its own procedure that can be used in conducting an analysis of the research data obtained. The following are some of the steps or procedures stated that begin with self-adjustment to the data obtained, the creation of the initial code, the search for themes based on the objectives of the research, the review of the resulting themes, the formation of the actual theme of the research and writing begins based on the themes produced. Based on the implementation steps stated, this situation explains that it can help in every data obtained from the results of the interview is authentic and can be used. In addition, this research also uses Nvivo14 software to help in the production of themes and sub-themes based on the objectives of the research by using the interview transcripts of each research participant produced. NVivo software is used for qualitative studies. In addition, NVivo helps researchers to evaluate and translate social phenomena that occur in qualitative research that is carried out. NVivo software also gives researchers the opportunity to manage, analyze, give a clear picture and identify data patterns obtained in interview sessions more carefully (NVivo, 2024).

Results

A total of nine teachers from various states and have more than three years of service have participated as research participants in the research conducted. Three of the research participants were male and six of them were female. The research participants involved are teachers currently serving in secondary schools in several states located in Peninsular Malaysia including Johor, Negeri Sembilan, Selangor, Perak, Penang and Terengganu. They are between 30 and 49 years old. In addition, the research participants involved have educational levels ranging from bachelor's degree to Doctor of Philosophy. The research participants also consisted of teachers who taught the subjects of Bahasa Melayu, English, Sejarah and Biology in their respective schools. A more detailed demographic data of research participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic data of research participants.

Participant Code	Gender	Age (Year)	Years of Service	Level of Education	Subject	State of Service
R1	Male	49	24	PhD	English	Selangor
R2	Male	31	7	Degree	Bahasa Melayu	Penang
R3	Male	31	6	Degree	Sejarah	Johor
R4	Female	43	20	Degree	Biology	Selangor
R5	Female	33	7	Degree	Sejarah	Penang
R6	Female	31	5	Masters	Bahasa Melayu	N. Sembilan
R7	Female	30	4	Degree	Bahasa Melayu	Terengganu
R8	Female	30	3	Degree	English	Perak
R9	Female	31	3	Degree	Bahasa Melayu	Penang

Based on the thematic analysis method conducted on the research participants obtained from the results of the interviews conducted with the research participants, the themes produced

are based on the objectives of the research. There are specific themes and sub-themes for each research objective.

Objective 1: Explore Teachers' Perceptions of Mental Health Issues among Secondary School Students

For the first objective, which is to explore teachers' perceptions of mental health issues among secondary school students, there are six main themes, namely, (1) show a pattern of increase, (2) are worrying, (3) are reality issues, (4) require serious attention, (5) are caused by various factors, and (6) do not require serious attention.

(1) Mental health issues among secondary school students show a pattern of increase

The agreement on this is shared by R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6 and R7. This situation is due to each of the participants of this research feeling that the number of students who are involved with mental health issues in their school especially is increasingly showing a level of concern. In addition to that, the state of cases or mental health issues that occur among secondary school students have also indirectly affected various aspects including academics and student behavior. R6 emphasized in his statement that it is necessary for any action to be taken to control or curb the increase in mental health issues that occur. The statements of these participants are as follow:

"...it cannot be denied that for two years ago...mental health among students is increasing." (R1)

"...looking at the scope of students, we can see that every year this problem I think is increasing." (R2)

"In my opinion this issue needs to be taken into account by all parties, because I see this issue is increasing especially among secondary school students." (R3)

"In my view, the issue of mental health among secondary school students is a very important topic and is becoming more and more prevalent these days." (R4)

"In my view, the perception of mental health issues among secondary school students today, haa...is increasing..." (R5)

"So, I think, we cannot take this issue for granted, and we need to take a more systematic approach to face this issue." (R6)

"...mental problems among secondary school students are increasing now..." (R7)

(2) Mental health issues among secondary school students are worrying

The issue of mental health among secondary school students is an increasingly worrying is a concern of R9. She believes that it is due to the that such students are often not identified at an early stage, they do not even show strange behavior and allow follow up actions to be taken against the student in question, but it can only be identified more clearly when the student has shown uncontrollable actions such as the desire to commit suicide, self-harm and so on, as she stated:

"For me, the mental health issue does exist in secondary school, and it is becoming more and more worrying." (R9)

(3) Mental health issues among secondary school students are real issues

Next, R2 stated that mental health issues are real issues. This situation is caused by several students and teachers at the school feeling that the issue is an issue that is deliberately publicized so that everyone has self-awareness. Meanwhile, the issue of mental health is an issue that is being worried and feared by every citizen of the world, due to the implications that will be borne if an individual is faced with a mental health issue, as indicated:

"He opens things that are fantasy, things that reality happens." (R2)

(4) Mental health issues among secondary school students require serious attention

In addition, R4 also stated that it is necessary for mental health issues to be given serious attention, especially to secondary school students. Attention to this issue is not only aimed at teachers but requires the involvement of various parties to play their respective roles in identifying, controlling, and preventing this mental health issue from continuing among secondary school students:

"So, this issue actually needs to be given serious attention by all parties, not only teachers but by all walks of life." (R4)

(5) Mental health issues among secondary school students are caused by various factors

Next, the fifth theme of the first objective is mental health issues that occur due to various factors. R5 and R7 state that the diversity of these factors and influences has indirectly led to an increase in mental health issues among secondary school students. The factors mentioned are not only focused on parties such as schools, but there are students who are affected by factors based on their own microenvironment, including themselves.

"...because now there may be many ha...influences that cause an increase in mental health issues among students." (R5)

"... mental problems among secondary school students are increasing now due to several factors." (R7)

(6) Mental health issues among secondary school students do not require serious attention

On the contrary, R8 felt that the issue of mental health among secondary school students is an issue that does not require serious attention. This is because, the implementation of programs and activities that are often carried out in his school have brought results and awareness in each student regarding the mental health issue that is being talked about by the world. Because of this, the client does not see the very important and serious need for this mental health issue, but instead needs to emphasize other issues that have more long-term implications for the student himself.

"... I think this mental health issue is not significant in my school because there are many spiritual sessions, sessions conducted by counselors, so for me personally, it is not a serious issue that teachers need to look at or focus on." (R8)

Objective 2: Identify Factors that Lead to Mental Health Issues among Secondary School Students

Next, for the second objective of this research, there are five main themes obtained because of the content analysis carried out on the data obtained. One of the themes is the factor of family problems which also produces two sub-themes under it which consist of the sub-theme of parents and the economic status of the family. In addition, the second theme produced from the second objective is the self-factor which is included with six subthemes consisting of refusal to seek help, activity patterns, romantic relationships, social status, self-comparison and not wanting to express problems. The next theme for this objective is the social media factor, the academic achievement factor and the social relationship factor with friends.

(1) Family Problems

R1, R3, R4, R5, R7, R9 state that the factor of family problems is a factor that leads to mental health issues among secondary school students. This family problem is also linked to family issues involving relationship issues among family members, family status or background and the atmosphere of the family environment itself. R1 also explained that family problems can arise from each of the family members themselves, including parents who experience problems in terms of divorce, having illegitimate children, adopted children and so on. In addition, R5 also stated that this factor of family problems can be a significant factor, because students feel that it is a problem that is very difficult for students to share with others around them, due to their anxiety that they will be evaluated and punished by others with problems that faced. So, this situation has indirectly put pressure on the students continuously. Their statements are as follow:

"Among the ha... factors that cause mental health issues among students, the first is ha... broken home." (R1)

"...maybe family problems, problems at school, academic problems, but they don't like to get help." (R3)

"Factors that contribute to mental health problems among secondary school students, such as academic pressure, social challenges, the influence of social media, and also family pressure." (R4)

"Secondly, one of the factors is the family, maybe the family has certain problems, so these teenagers can't talk about the situation, which makes them depressed and experience prolonged stress." (R5)

"...often the factors are caused by family factors, the problems of a broken family background, which are divided and the financial problems that occur among the students themselves." (R7)

"...external factors, the influence of peers, the influence of the mass media, and perhaps within the family itself, ha...causes a student to experience mental health problems." (R9)

(a) Parents

In addition, the sub-theme brought to the main theme of family problems is parents. R2 and R6 state that parents are the closest group or individual who puts pressure and estimates of achievement and expectations based on their wishes,

but not on the abilities and interests and abilities of their students or children. In addition, parents are also said to pay less attention and focus to their children due to the constraints of responsibility in managing work, thus causing acts of neglect to occur without realizing it:

"...a student is ha... too much pressured by mom and dad to be what mom and dad want instead of what the student wants." (R2)

"...the most important thing is probably the lack of focus and attention of the parents to the children." (R6)

(b) Family Economic Status

In addition, the economic status of the family is also the focus of the teachers, and they feel that it is a factor that drives mental health issues among secondary school students. This situation is supported and explained by R2 and R7 in the interviews conducted. The economic status of this family does not count whether a student is from a rich or poor family that receives more implications, rather both status conditions have their own effects on students:

"... even a rich family can cause the student stress." (R2)

"... often the factors are caused by family factors, the problems of a broken family background, which are divided and the financial problems that occur among the students themselves." (R7)

(2) Self-Factors

R2 and R6, on the other hand, state the personal factor as a factor that leads to mental health issues among secondary school students. This situation is because everyone is believed to have a personality and the right to make any actions and decisions against themselves. Because of this, R2 and R6 feel that self is a factor that cannot be ruled out as a contributor to mental health issues that occur among secondary school students.

"Perhaps among them is that we can say that about the problem the main factor is the individual's or the student's own pressure." (R2)

"The third may be caused by a disturbance in the student himself." (R6)

(a) Refusing to Get Help

Next, the refusal to get help is a factor or subtheme under the self-factor. R2 and R3 state that it is the student himself that leads to the choice not to be helped by the teacher or counselor and the people around him. In fact, students feel they can manage the problems they face on their own, without getting any help and guidance from others. In addition, the situation is more worrying when students feel that the issues and problems faced are not important and do not need to be resolved. Meanwhile, some issues faced by students can affect other aspects of life.

"In addition, it is the individual's own factor that does not want to resolve the pressure." (R2)

"...maybe family problems, problems at school, academic problems, but they really don't like to get help." (R3)

(b) Activity Patterns

R3 and R8 state that activity patterns are among the sub-themes of personal factors that lead to mental health issues among secondary school students. The speed of technology has limited the interaction of students especially with their environment, at the same time changing the selection pattern of activities that become their daily routine. R3 stated that a few of most students in his school prefer to do activities that are individual and do not have encouragement for healthier social interactions. Because of this, he concluded that the activities carried out were not interpersonal in concept. In addition, R8 stated that his students have a controlled activity pattern and do not have access to the outside world, considering that all his students are dormitory residents, and their activities are bound by the rules provided by the dormitory.

"The second factor, in my opinion, is because nowadays students prefer to do solitary activities and have no interpersonal concept." (R3)

"First, they cannot have direct access to the outside world." (R8)

(c) Romantic Relationship

R1 states romantic relationships as a sub-theme of individual factors that lead to mental health issues among secondary school students. This situation gives indirect implications when students are not able to manage relationships well, so that issues of fights, jealousy and so on arise. R1 also mentioned that this scenario can lead to behavior towards serious mental health issues.

"Love issues can also cause the mental health of students to be effected." (R1)

(d) Social Status

In addition, R6 explained that social status is a matter that is the focus and attention of students at this time. He also explained that this social status explains the social status of a student in his achievements on social media. The more a student can stand out with certain achievements in social media such as achieving the status of an influential individual, then the higher they are seen by their group. For this reason, R6 also feels that the struggle to achieve social status is an indirect implication of the rapid improvement of technology in this country.

"Both of us cannot deny that the development of social media is too fast now, causing the student's self-confidence to decrease due to wanting to pursue the social status that exists in social media now."

(R6)

(e) Self-Comparison

R8 explains that in his school the self-comparison factor often drives mental health issues among secondary school students. The self-comparison scenario that occurs, is usually caused by the private brand of equipment that is used among the students themselves, so that they feel that it is necessary for them to acquire the same equipment, even though the student realizes that he is not capable.

*"I think the factor that causes these boys or teenagers to experience mental problems is that they like to compare themselves with others."
(R8)*

(f) Don't Want to Express the Problem

R3 stated that the condition or attitude of students who do not want to express problems is one of the factors that lead to mental health issues among secondary school students. This situation occurs because students feel that each of the individuals around them have a skewed view and a negative stigma towards sharing the problems faced. In addition, trauma and trust issues also cause students to choose not to express the problems they face to anyone.

*"They don't like to express themselves and they like to be alone, and this causes them to just keep the problems they face to the point that it bothers them mentally."
(R3)*

(3) Social Media

Next, the social media factor is an influence that drives mental health issues among secondary school students. R1, R4, R5, R6 and R9 have the same view on this factor. The distribution of information that is not identified as the main source and its validity is one of the influences that causes students to receive wrong information, as well as creating a sense of anxiety in themselves if the issue is related to the student. In addition to that, social media is not only limited to the issue of false information, but also encourages the issue of cyber bullying by students' followers on their respective social media, by leaving obscene comments, degrading and so on that indirectly cause harassment the student's own mental health.

*"Social media itself causes students' mental health to be affected."
(R1)*

*"The same is true with the influence of social media that we see is very significant right now, where ha...students are easily influenced without knowing or obtaining authentic sources about an issue."
(R4)*

*"...due to media influence."
(R5)*

*"Both of us cannot deny that the development of social media is too fast now, causing the student's self-confidence to decrease due to wanting to pursue the social status that exists in social media now."
(R6)*

*"External factors, the influence of peers, the influence of social media, and perhaps within the family itself, caused a student to experience mental health problems."
(R9)*

(4) Academic Achievement

R3, R4 and R7 state that the academic achievement factor is a driver of mental health issues among secondary school students. This situation is caused by secondary academic demands among students. It includes the aspect of excellent achievement targets by parents and teachers at school. In addition to that, students are also burdened by the pile of assignments given by the teacher, the tests that are carried out and the issue of competition with other students in achieving excellent results. This scenario indirectly puts pressure on students.

However, R7 feels that the issue of academic achievement is not too influencing, if a student has effective social support.

"...maybe family problems, problems at school, academic problems, but they don't like to get help." (R3)

"Perhaps high academic demands, haa...interspersed with various types of assignments, tests and even competition to get excellent results can cause stress to students." (R4)

"Educational or academic factors are actually very less, if there is support from family and friends." (R7)

(5) Social Relationship with Friends

R2, R4 and R9 explain that the factor of social relationships with friends is a driver of mental health issues among secondary school students. Social relationships are said to be among the contributors to mental health issues due to a student's need for moral support, not only from family and teachers, but even from their closest friends. However, if a student ever faces conflict in existing social relationships including not being accepted by friends, being left out, and being bullied, the student will experience difficulties in building effective and better social relationships with other friends. Therefore, students will have more potential to experience mental health issues, the effects of past experiences or events.

"Friends factor, ok where an individual is not accepted in his friends." (R2)

"As for the social challenges, some may be involved with bullying or excessive pressure and have difficulty managing those social relationships." (R4)

"External factors, the influence of peers, the influence of the mass media, and perhaps within the family itself, caused a student to experience mental health problems." (R9)

Objective 3: Explore the Actions taken by Teachers when dealing with Students who have Mental Health Issues

For the third objective, there are six main themes produced from the thematic analysis carried out. These include referring to other professionals, providing support, giving students the opportunity to share their problems, contacting parents, helping in exploring interventions for students and using gentle and non-stressful methods for students. However, there are subthemes within some of the themes that are published according to the appropriate theme categories.

(1) Refer to Other Professionals

R4 states that one of the actions taken when dealing with students with mental health issues is to refer to other professionals. R4 explained that the decision will be made after finding that the issue is beyond his ability and control. Normally at his school, he would first inform the administrator of the issue before taking action to refer the student to another party.

"...refer to a professional expert if the matter is warranted." (R4)

(a) *Counselor*

R1, R2, R5, R6, R8 and R9 explained that the action taken by them when faced with a student with mental health issues is to refer the student to the school counselor. This action is thought to be appropriate, because counselors are among the individuals who have knowledge, skills and expertise in managing students with mental health issues more effectively. However, R8 stated that he will also participate in counseling sessions conducted by counselors with students who are facing mental health issues to find out the cause of the issue, and at the same time help students in finding a solution to the issue at hand.

"haa...send students to meet with the school counselor, so they can solve their problems." (R1)

"...referring to a person or teacher who has knowledge about this issue, that is a counseling teacher." (R2)

"If I see that the issue is more likely, more serious, I will refer this matter to the counselor." (R5)

"First of all, I will refer to the teacher counselors, because the teacher counselors understand better, because that is their field of work." (R6)

"...perhaps we can do a face-to-face session, one to one, and we can call a counselor as well, to know whether or not this student has mental health problems." (R8)

"If the problem worries me, I will continue to ask students to meet with counselling, the counseling department, the counseling teacher." (R9)

(b) *Teacher*

R1 and R6 stated that the action they take in dealing with students with mental health issues is to refer students to teachers chosen by students to share the problems faced. This situation is considered rational because it involves the issue of the student's own trust in the teacher. A few students at his school do not want to meet with counselors due to a low level of trust in counselors. Because of this, students choose to share with teachers they are close to and trust. In addition, R6 stated that he would get opinions and views from other fellow teachers about the issues he faced, to avoid making mistakes in taking action.

"But if the students do not want to see the school counselor, we also suggest them to share their problems with the teacher of their choice." (R1)

"I will also refer to other teacher friends." (R6)

(c) *Hospital Professionals*

R5 stated that hospital professionals are among the places that will be chosen to refer students who have mental health issues. However, this situation only happens if the student's situation is uncontrolled.

"So, if it looks worse, we will refer to the hospital." (R5)

(2) *Provide Support*

R4 explained that the action that will be taken when dealing with students who have mental health issues is to provide support. This action includes building a friendly relationship with the student. A friendly and effective relationship that is successfully formed provides an opportunity to create a sense of trust in the students towards the teacher. At the same time, giving space and opportunity to students to share the problems or issues they are facing.

"Teachers can build a friendly relationship or create trust so that the student can share and support." (R4)

(a) *Give Advice to Students*

R2 and R5 stated that giving advice to students is one of the actions that will be taken when dealing with students who have mental health issues. The advice delivered is not only focused specifically on students with mental health issues but is more general for all students. Besides that, the advice given is not only aimed at individual face-to-face methods, but also diversifying delivery methods including teaching and learning sessions in the classroom.

"The only thing I can do is advise." (R2)

"I will advise from our point of view as teachers as usual we will advise, we give motivation." (R5)

(b) *Cultivate Motivation in Students*

R2 and R5 also choose the act of fostering motivation in students as one of the ways or methods used in dealing with students who have mental health issues. R2 explained that the cultivation of this motivation is more towards continuous application to students. This action is seen as important because motivation is not only able to help students who have mental health issues but is able to increase the morale of all students.

"...not letting it mean I will keep going to motivate him." (R2)

"I will advise from our point of view as teachers as usual we will advise, we give motivation." (R5)

(c) *Be Sensitive and Considerate of Students*

R3 and R4 state that teachers need to be sensitive and concerned when dealing with students who have mental health issues. This attitude is a necessity for teachers especially to identify the students' current conditions and conditions, especially matters involving their mental health. Both participants of this research agreed that by creating a sensitive and caring attitude, early symptoms of mental health issues such as changes in student behavior can generally be identified earlier and can be contained immediately before they become more serious. In addition, this attitude can be a savior to negative actions that are potentially committed by students who have mental health issues.

"My initiative is to deal with students who have mental health issues, first of all, as a teacher there needs to be a caring attitude." (R3)

"Teachers may need to be more sensitive to early signs, perhaps in terms of the student's behavior." (R4)

(3) Give Students the Opportunity to Share Their Problems

R2, R3, R7, R8 and R9 state that the actions taken when dealing with students who have mental health issues is to give students the opportunity to share the problems they face. This action at the same time gives the teacher an opportunity to understand the issues faced by the students. The attitude of accepting the presence of students to share the problems faced will provide an opportunity for students to be helped more effectively. In addition, this action provides opportunities and space for students to share the problems that occur. This scenario indirectly helps the students in building a positive mindset, as well as forming the perception that they are not alone in facing the problems they are going through, rather their voices are heard by the teachers and counselors at school.

"The step I use is to dive into the student first. We dive first and we try to understand that we are in the same place." (R2)

"Confront and meet the student in person and try to understand the problems faced." (R3)

"...we will bring these students to meet and hold a meet-and-greet session." (R7)

"As a teacher, I need to sit with the counselor and also sit with the problematic students to understand the heart of the person, what exactly are they bearing? And what exactly are they thinking." (R8)

"Usually, I will meet and ask the problems faced." (R9)

(4) Contact Parents

R1 and R6 stated that the action that will be taken in dealing with students who have mental health issues is to contact the parents of the student concerned. This action is only taken if the issue that arises is caused by a problem from home and there is no action from the school to help the student. The main purpose of contacting students' parents is to help each other in solving problems or issues that have arisen that have affected the mental well-being of students.

"Suppose ha... their problems originate from home, we will also try to solve their problems by contacting their parents, and together try to solve their problems." (R1)

"But if they say there is no action or even ha... no action from the school, maybe I will refer directly to the student's parents." (R6)

(5) Assist in Exploring Interventions for Students

R7 states that the action taken in dealing with students who have mental health issues is to help in exploring appropriate interventions for those students. This action is to give students an opportunity to think of ideas or solutions that can be done to reduce or solve the problems faced together with the teacher.

"...identify the solution as well and make that solution a solution to the problem. We will not let the student or give or put the blame solely on the student." (R7)

(6) Use a Gentle and Non-Stressful Way for Students

R8 explained that using a gentle way and not putting pressure on students is an action taken in dealing with students who have mental health issues. This action is focused on understanding the student's own emotions. R8 feels that students who have problems do not like to be scolded, scolded and pressured. Hence, this action is considered rational in helping and approaching students with mental health issues.

"So, for me, whatever initiatives I use as a teacher, I will use initiatives gently." (R8)

Discussion

The implementation of this research has shown that teachers' perception of mental health issues among secondary school students is increasing and worrying. This situation is proven by the support of eight out of nine research participants. However, one of the research participants saw that mental health issues among secondary school students, especially students in his school, do not need to be taken seriously. This scenario is due to the effectiveness of activities that are often carried out by the school's counseling unit to deal with mental health issues. Although the majority stated the situation, however, the exposure to teachers at school is still at a minimum level so that they also have a less clear understanding of mental health issues that are often talked about nowadays (Yamkee et al., 2023; Klai & Bahrin, 2021). This situation causes teachers to place the role of providing follow-up action to students who have mental health issues as the responsibility of school counselors. While teachers have a closer relationship with students than teacher counselors at school (Yao et al., 2021).

In addition, looking at the results of the research, it clearly shows that various factors lead to mental health issues among students. Among the most significant factors are family factors and personal factors. This can be explained by using ecological theory, that every human ecological circle will affect the individual himself indirectly. The closest ecological circle is known as a microsystem which consists of a group or an individual's immediate environment whether at home, at school or friends (Anuar, 2022). Because of this, every issue and problem that occurs in the circle of the microsystem can have an impact on the student or the individual himself. Furthermore, if the issue is not successfully resolved in a short period of time and it changes the behavior of individuals or students as a symbol of emotional expression or express the pressure they face. Despite that, other factors that are also stated in the results of the research cannot be ruled out at all, mainly due to the explained technology or social media factors. The advancement of technology today is no longer an undeniable influence that has implications for students' mental health. This scenario can happen without special control done by parents at home especially (National Security Council, 2023b). This is because students' obsession with technology leads to a change in the pattern of activities carried out by them. For example, students have the potential to do activities that do not cause them to be marginalized from socializing with their environment. This situation is also explained in the results of the research that has been conducted. This scenario should

be of concern to parents and even teachers because students who reduce activities in the form of external relationships can change their behavior patterns to become passive people.

Based on the factors mentioned, this situation requires a joint commitment not only to the teachers at school, but also to the parents at home. This cooperation is necessary to ensure that students get the appropriate rights in continuing their daily routine more prosperously. In addition to that, teachers in schools also need to be given more detailed exposure about mental health issues that are often universally discussed, so as not to place the entire burden on school counselors to manage all the issues that arise.

Next, look at the actions taken by the teachers. The results obtained cannot be blamed solely on the teachers, because they take action to refer to the school counselors when dealing with students who have mental health issues. This situation may be due to teachers not having extensive exposure to mental health issues and feeling that counselors are the most qualified to be consulted because their role in the school is to help students. Nevertheless, there is no denying that the issue of school counselors not having enough hands is still a conversation and discussion today. Furthermore, an increase in various serious cases involving school students. Setting the ratio of one counselor for 500 students is no longer rational. However, the reform that will be implemented with one counselor for 250 students is a reform and change that shows the ministry's concern with issues that are increasingly worrying in schools and involve secondary school students (Khalidi, 2023). Even so, it is reasonable for subject teachers to master basic counseling skills to help students who have issues and problems to manage their actions and decisions more effectively. Among the basic skills required include the skills of serving students, being an active listener, questioning, paraphrasing, reflecting and so on (Azhar, 2019). This mastery requirement is not only for use in the implementation of the session, but the teacher is able to first understand the issues faced by the students before handing them over to the counselor. In addition, basic knowledge or knowledge about identifying mental health issues also needs to be owned and mastered by teachers so that it is easy for teachers to become more sensitive to every symptom or change in behavior shown by students at school. In addition, it can also be used for your own benefit if your loved ones or your experience symptoms that lead to mental health issues.

Parental involvement in mental health issues faced by students as stated by two research participants can have both positive and negative effects. This is so because issues that cause stress to students may be caused by the actions and behavior of individuals at home and the effects are brought to school. This situation may make students feel uncomfortable if they feel that school is a safe place where they take refuge from family crises that happen at home. However, if this situation does not occur due to school factors, then it is appropriate for parents to also know about the issues faced by the student. Teachers or counselors do not just protect without any action, but instead need to discuss in producing appropriate interventions. Among them include the development of appropriate modules including the implementation of activities and approaches based on cognitive behavioral therapy which is seen as a theory that can help students themselves in changing perceptions and negative reactions towards themselves and those around them (Man et al., 2023). This

scenario is necessary because, for those who face mental health issues, most of them tend to think about negative things about themselves (Tiger Campus, 2023).

Conclusion

In a nutshell, this research was carried out to explore teachers' perceptions and actions towards mental health issues among students, as well as identify the factors that lead to the issue becoming more prevalent. This research also clearly shows that each of the research participants or teachers have their own perception of mental health issues. The perception obtained may be slightly different due to most of the research participants not having in-depth knowledge about mental health compared to other professionals such as counselors who are more focused on problems involving mental health issues. This research is the only research in Malaysia that looks at teachers' perceptions of mental health issues among secondary school students after the recent Covid-19 pandemic. However, the implementation of this research has its own limitations including in generalization aspects. This situation is due to the limited number of research participants and lack of involvement from teachers in every state and district in Malaysia. This is so because, despite being in the same country, the geographical difference in the placement of secondary school students and teachers is also one of the elements that play an important role in producing diverse answers through the teacher's own perception.

Thus, due to mental health issues among secondary school students this require special attention. Therefore, it is appropriate to carry out more detailed research involving various aspects of mental health issues. For future studies, the involvement of larger number of participants is necessary to obtain more in-depth results on an issue discussed. Additionally, the implementation of the research can also use a quantitative method only or by involving mixed methods approach in order to obtain more meaningful findings.

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