

ABSTRACT

Adolescent emotional and psychological problems have attracted global attention during past few decades. It has been revealed that one in five adolescents in Sri Lanka is suffering from mental health problems. This multi-factorial problem, correlates with genetic, socio-demographic, individual and environmental characteristics. Adolescence is mostly spent in school and it is considered an important factor that facilitates emotional and psychological well-being of adolescents.

Research into mental health problems among adolescent has been identified as a timely need and this study focused on the subject within a rural setting which has not been studied earlier. The present study was carried out among schooling adolescents aged 12-14 year in Polonnaruwa District.

The study consisted of three components. As the first component, a descriptive cross sectional study was carried out to describe the emotional and psychological problems of the adolescents using the self-reported Sinhala version of SDQ. To determine the correlates of emotional and psychological problems, an analytical cross sectional study was conducted. The study component three consisted of, a descriptive cross sectional study to describe the physical and the psycho-social environment of 23 schools selected for the first component and a qualitative study to identify the strengths and difficulties encountered by school staff in promoting the psycho-social environment.

For the first two components of the study, 1901 adolescents aged 12-14 years studying in Grade 7, 8 and 9 classes with 1568 mothers/female caregivers participated. The response rate was 97% for adolescents and 82.5% for mothers/female caregivers. Multi-stage cluster sampling with probability proportionate to size of the population was used to identify study participants. The study sample was selected to represent all three educational zones of the District. Altogether 78 clusters were studied and the cluster size was 20. For the analytical cross sectional study, 126 'cases' and 252 'controls' were selected from the study component one.

Present study revealed that, 6.6% (95% CI 5.5-7.8) of adolescents were having emotional and psychological problems and 9.5% (95% CI 8.3-10.9) were having borderline symptoms. Among the adolescents peer problems were prevalent in 13.1% while

emotional (4.6%), conduct (4.8%) and hyperactivity (4.4%) problems accounted for somewhat equal proportions. A statistically significant difference was found between mean total difficulty scores of males and females ($p < 0.001$). Except for emotional sub scale ($p > 0.05$) all the other subscale mean values were significantly higher among males compared to females ($p < 0.05$). Only peer problem subscale, revealed a statistically significant difference with the age of the adolescents ($p < 0.001$).

In bivariate analysis, 16 categorical variables were found to be significant correlates of emotional and psychological problems of adolescents. Being bullied ($r = .40$, $p < 0.001$), being a victim ($r = .48$, $p < 0.001$) and average term test marks showed significant correlation with emotional and psychological problems.

In multivariate analysis, alcohol consumption of father/male caregiver (AOR=2.93, 95% CI 1.50-5.71), presence of academic pressure (AOR=3.35, 95% CI 1.20-9.37), none to help with difficulties at school (AOR=2.38, 95% CI 1.01-5.63), poor perception on body appearance (AOR=3.27, 95% CI 1.04-10.29), being bullied (AOR=1.33, 95% CI 1.18-1.49) and being a victim (AOR=1.13, 95% CI 1.01-1.27) were found to be significant correlates of, emotional and psychological problems.

Non-availability of physical and human resources was not identified as a problem in schools studied. However, as identified by PSEP, in more than 20% of schools there were psycho-social environmental concerns. "Prevention of bullying, harassment and discrimination", "forbidding physical punishment and violence" and "valuing development of creative activities" were the main quality areas identified as those that needed prompt attention. Qualitative study came out with several strengths and difficulties encountered in promoting school psycho-social environment.

As the study revealed, the emotional and psychological problem is an emerging issue that needs attention. Most easily correctible areas were found in school environment. Effective, well targeted interventions by Ministry of Education and Ministry of Health should focus on improving mental health of adolescents and psycho-social environment of schools through school based programmes.

Key words – Adolescents, emotional and psychological problem, correlates, psycho-social environment