

Perception of School Nurses in Saudi Arabia

Dr. Hala Mohammed Yasin¹, Dr. Pilar Isla Pera², Dr. Alaa Mujallad*¹, Dr. Carmen López Matheu²

¹ University of Jeddah | KSA

² University of Barcelona | Spain

Received:
15/03/2023

Revised:
26/03/2023

Accepted:
24/05/2023

Published:
30/09/2023

Abstract: In Saudi Arabia, the school nurse exists only in private schools. The aim of this qualitative study is to identify the factors that hinder the implantation of a school nurse figure in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia through exploring the perspectives of 21 participants including directors, teachers, and parents about the school nurses, and find out what they think about the role of the nurse in a school environment using in-depth individual interviews method. The findings confirmed the need for school nurse in both private and public schools in Saudi Arabia. All the information considers that the school nurse has a positive impact on students, teachers, and families. The problems that hinder the inclusion of the school nurse in public schools are structural.

Keywords: Nursing, school nurse, Saudi Arabia.

العوامل التي تعوق تطبيق الممرضة المدرسية في جدة، المملكة العربية السعودية

الدكتورة / هلا محمد ياسين¹، الدكتورة / بيلا إيزلا بيلا²، الدكتورة / الاء فؤاد مجلد*¹، الدكتور / كارمن لوبيز ماثيو²

¹ جامعة جدة | المملكة العربية السعودية

² جامعة برشلونة | إسبانيا

المستخلص: بعد المنزل، تعد المدارس ثاني أهم بيئة يتطور فيها الأطفال حياتهم. توجد أدلة كثيرة توضح أن صحة الطالب مرتبطة ارتباطاً مباشراً بقدرته على التعلم وأن دور ممرضة المدرسة بالتالي جزء لا يتجزأ من الربط بين الرعاية الصحية والتعليم. في المملكة العربية السعودية توجد ممرضة المدرسة فقط في المدارس الخاصة كسياسة من وزارة التربية والتعليم. الهدف من هذه الدراسة الاستقرائية النوعية هو تحديد العوامل التي تعيق غرس الممرضة المدرسة في جدة بالمملكة العربية السعودية من خلال استكشاف وجهات نظر ٢١ مشاركاً من بينهم مديرات، ومعلمات، وأولياء الأمور، وممرضات المدارس حول ممرضات المدارس. ومعرفة مفهومهم لدور الممرضة في البيئة المدرسية باستخدام طريقة المقابلات الفردية المتعمقة. أكدت النتائج الحاجة إلى ممرضة المدرسة في كل من المدارس الخاصة والعامة في المملكة العربية السعودية. يعتبر جميع المشاركين أن ممرضة المدرسة لها تأثير إيجابي على الطلاب والمعلمات والأسر. المشاكل التي تعيق دمج ممرضة المدرسة في المدارس العامة هي مشاكل هيكلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تمريض، صحة مدرسية، صحة عامة، التمريض المدرسي، ممرضة مدرسة، المملكة العربية السعودية

* Corresponding author:
a_mujallid@yahoo.com

Citation: Yasin, H. M., Pera, P. I., Mujallad, A., & Matheu, C. L. (2023). Perception of School Nurses in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of medical and pharmaceutical sciences*, 7(3), 23 – 28. <https://doi.org/10.26389/AJSRP.A150323>

2023 © AISRP • Arab Institute of Sciences & Research Publishing (AISRP), Palestine, All Rights Reserved.

• Open Access



This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC) [license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Introduction

Health and education are correlated based on evidence, and health has a strong impact on educational attainment and academic performance (Suhrcke Suhrcke M, de Paz Nieves C, 2011). In fact, the National Association of School Nurses (NASN, 2016) strongly advocates that a student's health is directly related to their ability to learn. In addition, the NASN (2016) maintains that it is the school nurse who can link health care and education, and it describes how the school nurse can bridge health care and education for example by having a positive impact on the degree of student's attendance in class.

In Saudi Arabia, no statutory government policies exist for employing school nurse in public schools but there are policies obligating private schools to employ school nurses. One relevant study focusing on this field was by Helal and Al Hudaifi in 2015 which aimed to highlight the parents' perceptions of the role of the school nurse. Results indicated that most schools did not have a school nurse, with only 6% of participants indicating their child's school had a nurse.

Previous studies have exposed a clear gap in evidence, and the need for further research in this area, specifically a need to explore the benefits of, the requirement for and barriers to employment of a full-time school nurse in schools within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The results could then be used in order to advocate for nursing practice to be embedded within educational settings, hence enhancing and supporting the acute and long-term health of children and young people in schools within the Kingdom.

The main goal of this study is to identify the factors that hinder the implantation of a school nurse figure in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. To achieve this goal specific objectives were focused on exploring the perceptions of the nurses that work in private schools regarding the advantages and disadvantages of their functions in that environment, exploring the perceptions of directors, teachers and parents about the role and the need of a school nurse and, to identify the opinions of managers about the need to include school nurses in education centers.

Method

Study design

To explore and understand the perceptions that key stakeholders have regarding the school nurse, including the need for schools to employ a nurse and the barriers preventing this a qualitative phenomenological approach was used. The study involved semi-structured interviews lasting around 40 minutes with school directors, teachers, parents and nurses, using open questions from a predesigned interview schedule. Due to logistical problems, not all participants could meet for face-to-face interviews, therefore recorded telephone interviews were conducted in such cases.

Setting

The study was carried out in one private school and two public girls' schools in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. All the schools involved provided children with primary education, as this is the stage where healthcare needs are higher as compared to other levels, and also because at this stage girls and boys are taught together in one class during the first 3 years. From the fourth year onwards, they study separately.

Participants from the private schools except parents were interviewed in the school itself. While those from the public school were carried out in a mutually agreed public meeting place for policy barriers with the aim of interviewing both parents together including parents from the private schools. However, ultimately only the mother of the children agreed to be interviewed.

Sampling

The participants were purposively selected according to their roles and position within the school. In those schools employing a nurse, participants were chosen based on their extent of interaction with the school nurse so that a rich data set could be collated regarding opinions of the school nurse.

To address the study aims, the samples included perspectives exploration of:

- 3 directors: all women, two who work in a school with a school nurse and one in a school without a school nurse. Directors have a wide vision of the school environment and of the problems encountered.
- 6 teachers: all women, three of them worked in schools with a school nurse and three worked in a school without a school nurse. Teachers are close to the students and are aware of their educational and health needs.
- 2 female nurses: both worked as school nurses. Nurses are knowledgeable about the health problems of children, absenteeism rate due to illnesses, and the care children need to prevent illness leading to missing school.
- 10 female parents: five of the parents had children in a school with a school nurse and five in schools without a school nurse. Parents are the link between school and home and their perceptions regarding the educational needs and care needs of their children are important.

After the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) A letter was sent to the school directors requesting authorization for their participation in the study. Once the researcher received authorization back, the directors forwarded the invitation letter to teachers and parents. All interested participants were sent a letter, explaining the study, and inviting them to participate. A sample was then conveniently selected from the respondents willing to participate, based on their availability to attend interviews after reading the information form regarding the study and signing the consent.

A semi-structured interview was carried out by the main female researcher with each participant for forty-five minutes. The aim of the interview was to understand participants' perspectives regarding the topic of school nurses, and the extent to which they agreed with employing a school nurse by schools.

Field notes and other data were also recorded by the researcher during the interviews. These included the characteristics of each participant, ad-hoc recordings of incidents that happened during the interview, recording observation of non-verbal communication and any other aspect that was considered relevant, such as memos relating to the researcher's perceptions and feelings, thus the study continued until analysis indicated that saturation of the data had been achieved. The recording was transcribed verbatim and verified by the researcher by double - checking the transcript with the participants.

Analysis of the data began by reading the field notes and the transcription of each interview over and over, to achieve an initial understanding of the phenomenon under study. Subsequently, data segmentation was performed. For this the researcher analyzed each transcript by dividing the text into units of meaning, which consisted of marking words or phrases that have a common meaning and codifying them, whilst indicating the interview to which they corresponded. The fragments of each interview were then separated and those of similar significance were combined to condense their meaning and form categories that emerged from the data. To achieve consistency of the data procedures can be used, like triangulation, input and agreement regarding the themes arising based on analysis by the main investigator and ratification by thesis directors.

Finally, a review and comparison were made between the categories found and an attempt was made to find the relationship between them. As a result of this process, the meta-categories or thematic nuclei were identified.

Statistical analysis

Results and discussion

There were three main themes and six sub-categories that emerged from the interviews with various units of meaning as shown in the table. The table also shows the frequency of the units of meaning; these figures represent the number of participants who identify each unit of meaning on at least one occasion (Table 1)

Through the use of a qualitative research approach, and thematic analysis of the interviews of stakeholders, the study has succeeded in providing data - rich findings, which were analyzed and interpreted to successfully address the four research questions, as summarized below.

1. Directors', teachers' and parents' perceptions of the need for and importance of school nurses:

All participants acknowledged the importance of the role of school nurses. They considered nurse intervention valuable, especially when caring for children with life -threatening conditions and chronic diseases such as asthma, diabetes, or epilepsy. It is thus not surprising that parents of children with these conditions felt especially reassured that the school nurse was taking on their role as caregivers when their children were at school.

Indeed, in those schools without a school nurse, the overwhelming support by the teachers and directors for the inclusion of a school nurse as a member of the school team appeared to largely arise from the undue pressure they felt because of their roles as health care providers. Teachers and directors felt unprepared to deal with complex health issues, also they believed that the quality of their primary function as an educator was being affected.

It was also evident that the perception was that public schools had a greater need for a school nurse than private schools, for socio-economic as well as health reasons. Public schools have a great number of students attending from poorer backgrounds, who may suffer from poverty- related health issues. Conceivably, such students with ongoing health issues would be kept away from school when there is no school nurse, as the parents would be fearful for their child's safety. These findings add weight to the need for the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Education (MOE) to re-evaluate their stance on introducing school nurses into Saudi schools as a matter of urgency.

2. Directors', teachers' and parents' perceptions of the roles of school nurses.

All participants identified first aid and dealing with students' health related emergencies, accidents or illnesses and medicines administrator as the main functions of school nurses. It was also significant that participants from schools with school nurses readily identified school health educators as an important aspect of the school nurse's role. It was also notable that the most important role in relation to health screening identified by participants was a physical examination to check for head lice, followed by checking for fever, with development issues of hearing, sight or growth and infection control being considered of lesser importance.

A further significant finding was that participants cited first aid of staff as an important aspect of the nurse's role.

3. Perceptions of parents, teachers, directors and nurses working in schools regarding the advantages and disadvantages of employing a nurse.

School nurses themselves were passionate about the importance of their roles and highlighted many reasons relating to advantages of employing a nurse in Saudi schools. Teachers, parents and directors likewise identified several advantages, of employing a school nurse with the analysis producing several emergent themes namely safety of children, enhanced clinical decision making, reduced pressure on teachers/health administrators and reduced absenteeism. It was, however, clear that the nurses felt such compromises were offset by other benefits such as the life-style advantages of working hours conducive to family life and positive aspects of the experience of their role.

No disadvantages of having a school nurse were mentioned by the nurses themselves, although there was disappointment evident over the fact that they felt they were not permitted by the school administration staff to have the same level of responsibility for health as they would have in a hospital setting as well as the good salary. It may be argued that this limiting of their role would adversely affect their job satisfaction, job prospects and financial rewards. Regarding their low salary, the MOE is supporting the private school with 25% of the school nurse salary but not all private schools adhere to this, they just give them 25% as a whole salary.

One major disadvantage of having a school nurse namely recruitment of qualified nurses, particularly Saudi-born ones who accept such low salaries to work as a school nurse although they do not have the Saudi professional license, because this job title was not listed as specialty in the Saudi Commission for Health Specialties that showed nurses as unprofessional.

4. Perceptions of parents, teachers, directors and nurses working in schools regarding factors that favor or hinder the employment of a school nurse.

The main theme "employing school nurses" identified two facilitators of employing school nurses namely cultural awareness/language and working hours, whilst several barriers to employing school nurses emerged namely socioeconomic differences between public and private schools, funding, salary and limited role/prospects.

The inherent socio-cultural and religious values and attitudes of Saudis mean that hospital nursing is generally perceived as an inappropriate profession for Saudi girls because of the mixed environment in hospitals and the twelve hours of day and night shifts that keep nurses away from their homes. For example, the mixed gender environment in which female nurses have to work and the unsuitable working hours go against Islamic values and Saudi customs (Gashash, 2016). By being employed as a school nurse in girls' schools and working school hours, these barriers are overcome.

However, there is an urgent need for the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Education (MOE) to consider how to overcome the four issues identified in this study as barriers to employing school nurses. Arguably, three of these: socioeconomic differences between public and private schools where private schools must have school nurses but the public ones no, funding and salary are in control of the government, whilst the limited role and prospects are under the direct control of the schools themselves. However, in private schools, although the government dictates that these schools should allocate funds to employ a school nurse, not all private schools adhere to this directive. Moreover, it is the MOH that decides whether to provide the funding to employ a school nurse in public schools. Currently, no public schools have a school nurse. This is disappointing given the fact that this study and previously published literature suggest that public schools have an even greater need for a school nurse than private schools. Public schools have a great number of students suffering from poverty related health issues and reduced attendance hence they are at heightened risk of suboptimal education and limited academic achievement. Clearly the MOH and MOE should act appropriately on this information and strive to raise the money to adequately fund the salaries to attract high quality school nurses into employment in all public schools, whilst conforming to the Saudization policies.

Conclusion

This research has shown how a school nurse is considered to be an important member of the school staff, playing a vital role in linking the two important areas of education and health. In this study, all participants believed that the school nurse should be present on a full-time basis in Saudi schools, not only the private schools but also in public ones where the result showed their greater need for school nurses. Indeed, this is a credible finding given the public health concerns of children, such as the rise in the number of children with asthma in developed and developing countries (Asher and Pearce, 2014), the high prevalence rates of asthma in Saudi children compared with non-Saudis (Hamam et al, 2015) and concerns over the abilities of teachers to deal with other life-threatening conditions like epilepsy and diabetes (Aloola et al, 2015). Of significance in this study's findings is that Saudi teachers feel that they were not well prepared for dealing with chronic health issues such as asthma, diabetes and epilepsy, also viewing this as not within the scope of their responsibilities but falling within the responsibilities of the school nurse. These findings must be taken into account by the Saudi government in a drive towards ensuring universal employment of nurses within Saudi schools. A second issue is the difficulties in recruiting quality nurses for these roles. This research has provided insight into the barriers to recruitment, which must be overcome to solve this problem by listing the school nurse as a profession in Saudi Commission for Health Specialties so they can have their license

to practice nursing, also be on the salary ladder of the government so they will be well paid. This information is invaluable in addressing the recruitment issues and allowing suitable remedial measures to be implemented in the future.

Limitation

All participants were women for cultural reasons, thereby limiting transferability to other settings. This means that the results of this study cannot be generalized to the wider whole Saudi school population. Conceivably, in boys’ schools, there could be a higher incidence of accidents and health issues (drug addictions, smoking, violence, etc.), and this warrants further research by male researchers.

A further limitation was participants were recruited from schools situated in good catchments where poverty is low. On the border of the city of Jeddah, there are schools in regions of lower economic status. Conceivably, these schools could have students with higher incidences of health problems and whose families have lower health awareness than in the present study. This warrants further research by recruiting participants from such schools.

Another possible limitation was the fact that, since the interviews were performed in English, mothers who did not speak English were unable to participate. This may have biased the sample towards including women who were of a higher level of education, excluding those of a lower education status. Additionally, since English was not the first language of the participants this may have limited their ability to express themselves.

References:

- Al Aloola, N. A., Saba, M., Nissen, L., Alowairdy, H. A., & Saini, B. (2015). Asthma education for primary school teachers in Saudi Arabia—A needs analysis. *Health Behavior and Policy Review*, 2(6), 470-484.
- Asher I and Pearce N (2014) Global burden of asthma among children. *Int J Tuberc Lung Dis*. 18(11): 1269-1278.
- Gashash, B. (2016). Islamic values, cultural customs and influences upon delivery of Acute and Critical Care nursing services to patients admitted to Saudi Arabian hospitals.
- Hamam, F., Eldalo, A., Albarraq, A., Khaleel, M., Kaabi, Y., Al Ghamdi, A., Al Harbi, A. (2015). The prevalence of asthma and its related risk factors among the children in taif area, kingdom of Saudi Arabia. *Prevalence*, 4(3), 179-184.
- Helal, H., Al Hudaifi, D., Bajoudah, M., & Almagrby, G. (2015). Role of the School Nurse as perceived by school children Parent in Jeddah. *International Journal of Innovation Education and Research*, 3(11), 101-109.
- National Association of School Nurses. (2016a). Position statement: The Role of the 21st Century School Nurse. National Association of School Nurses, Silver Spring, Maryland. from: <http://www.nasn.org/PolicyAdvocacy/PositionPapersandReports/NASNPositionStatementsFullView/tabid/462/smId/824/ArticleID/87/Default.aspx>
- Suhrcke M, de Paz Nieves C (2011). The impact of health and health behaviours on educational outcomes in high-income countries: a review of the evidence. Copenhagen, WHO Regional Office for Europe.

Index:

Table 1

Theme	Sub-categories <i>Definition</i>	Units of meaning
1 Role of the school nurse	1.1 Care provider <i>Provision of day-to-day healthcare of students and staff</i>	First aid and dealing with students’ health related emergencies, accidents or illness First aid and dealing with staff’s health related emergencies, accidents or illness Medicines administrator
	1.2 Health educator <i>Increasing health awareness of students, families and staff</i>	healthy lifestyles (food, stress) personal hygiene (hand washing, head lice) infectious diseases other health issues (menstruation, diabetes, teeth brushing, breast cancer) Family/whole school educator/communicator

Theme	Sub-categories <i>Definition</i>	Units of meaning
	1.3 Health screening <i>Interventions to identify or prevent potential health problems</i>	Physical examinations to check for fever or head lice or development (hearing, sight, growth) Infection control Family/whole school communicator
2 Advantages and/or disadvantages of having a school nurse	Benefits of having a school nurse <i>Positive aspects of employing school nurses</i>	Safety Clinical decision making Reduce pressure on teachers/health administrators Reduce absenteeism
	Disadvantages of having a school nurse <i>Negative aspects of employing school nurses</i>	Recruitment of qualified nurses
3 Employing school nurses	3.1 Facilitators of employment <i>Factors attracting nurses to the profession</i>	Cultural awareness/language Working hours
	3.2 Barriers to employment <i>Factors inhibiting nurses entering the profession</i>	Socioeconomic differences (public vs private) Funding Salary Limited role/prospects