

## Protecting Children in Saudi Arabia: Preparing Trainee Social Workers

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### Abstract

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Child protection has gained more attention in Saudi Arabia since new laws were introduced in 2013 that made child abuse a criminal offence. Consequently there has been pressure placed on social services to prepare specialist social workers to deal with the challenge of protecting children. Social work trainees at three universities in Riyadh were surveyed to find out their perceptions on how well they were prepared for working in child protection. Their experiences in practice placements seem to have benefitted them in their understanding and application of theory, but many have not had the advantage of suitable placements. Whilst their confidence in dealing with child abuse appears to be high, there is no indication that they will have the same confidence in dealing with situations when they are not supported and need to make difficult decisions on their own. Relevant training that will motivate them and engage their interest needs to be negotiated with trainees, and may help to raise the quality of prospective social work trainees in the field of child protection..

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**Keywords:** social work; child abuse; training; practice placements

### 1. Introduction

Since the new laws were introduced in 2013, making child abuse a criminal offence, Saudi Arabian professional social workers have been under pressure to respond in new ways to child protection. The focus has been on how social workers can support these laws, which in many ways are contrary to traditional Saudi culture. This paper explores the challenges faced by the trainees and how they are being prepared for their future roles in child protection.

The study focuses on the city of Riyadh, which was selected for this paper it is the centre of all the government agencies with their administration offices. The main branches of social care agencies are in Riyadh and other parts of Saudi Arabia follow the main branches' policies and legislation. Three universities which deliver social work programmes were selected for this paper and the social work trainees came from these universities, again all located in Riyadh. These establishments were Imam Mohammed University, Princess Nora University and King Saud University. Also, perceptions of social work educators and child protection practitioners have taken into consideration in this paper.

### 2. Methodology

In this paper, the case study design involves an in-depth analysis of the social work trainees practice placements around child protection in order to demonstrate practices and professional interventions in use. Within the case study design, it also allows the perceptions of social work trainees, practitioners and educators to be heard and therefore provide a full exploration of the issues relating to the practice to respond the child abuse in Saudi Arabia, with a view to changing the context of the responses to child abuse in Saudi Arabia. Data has been collected through two methods for this paper.

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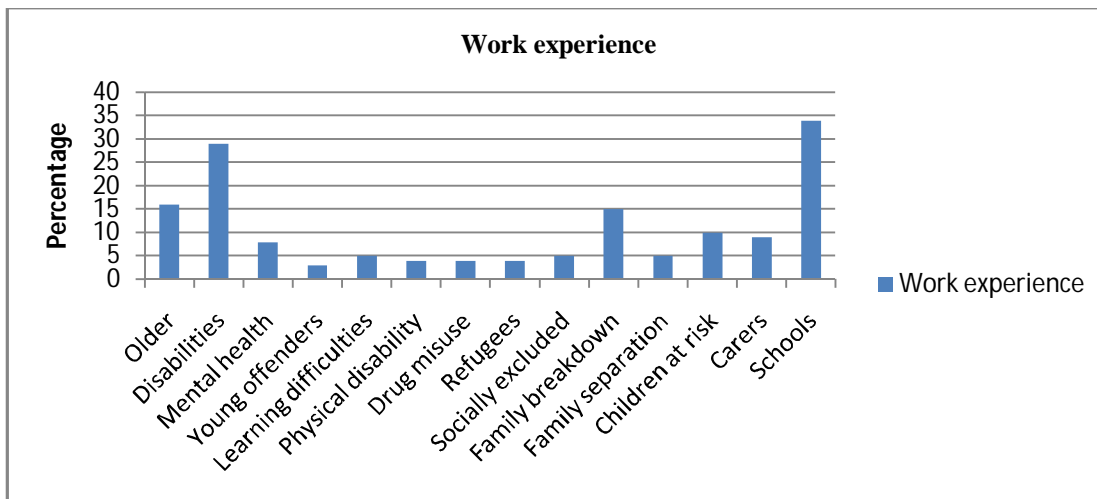
First, surveys, I found that the trainees were not always available, as many came to the university only to attend lectures, but felt that I would get a better response rate if I simplified the process as much as possible for them. Surveys were administered to participants with the help of the class presenter or sponsors who were the gatekeepers to the participants. These gatekeepers helped by handing out the questionnaires and then collecting the responses when they were ready. Also, via the gatekeepers, the surveys were sent as an attachment to the participants' emails with information sheet and consent form. This allowed for easier written responses from the respondents. From the response rate of the 362 surveys administered, 152 surveys were received from trainees, making a completion rate of 42%. Second method was interviews face to face with 10 educators and 39 child protection practitioners (social workers and psychologists).

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Experiences in Placements

The social work students were asked for their perceptions on their training programme. There were indications that the more popular part of the programme was the work experience where they were sent on placements. These placements were not necessarily related to child protection, but were more broadly associated with general social work. Practice placements are an essential component of social work education as they can help to prepare students for social work practice (Clapton, 2012). In participating in a work placement, students are given the opportunity of applying the knowledge they have received in their university academic courses. The range of placements experienced by students from all three universities in Riyadh is illustrated in Figure 1, and some of the students had more than one placement.

**Figure 1: What sort of practice placements have you experienced already?**



The largest number of trainees (34%) had practical placements in schools. Schools may be selected because they are more readily accessible, due to location and number. It is notable; however, that substantial numbers of trainees are in placements dealing with disabilities. The Ministry of Social Affairs provides special provision for children with disabilities, having established day care centres for the disabled (Al-Munshi, 2011). These centres are, therefore, more likely to be accessible for placements as they, like schools, are located in a number of different areas. It has also been determined that some children subjected to abuse may have suffered physical disabilities (Al-Thagafi, 2013), therefore they are beneficial placements for trainee social workers, who can then see the result of domestic violence. However, disabilities may still be a source of shame in Saudi families (Al-Gain and Al-Abdulwahab, 2002), and the full extent of the number of disabled children in Saudi Arabia is unknown (Al-Jadid, 2013). The number of placements dealing with disabilities is therefore interesting, given the cultural background, as it promotes understanding of this section of society.

Since drug abuse and related addiction is one of the significant social problems affecting both child and adult victims, it was important to investigate whether the Saudi Arabia’s social work students were gaining experiences in this area. This study found that only 4% of social work students in the sample were in placements dealing with people with addictions (alcohol/ drugs/ other substance abuse).

As there is evidence that drug abuse is a serious social problem in Saudi Arabia (Arab News, 2015), this is a small number of trainees to have been exposed to experience in this field. Because drug abuse has been identified as one of the main causes of domestic violence, it is highly relevant to child protection. It has been linked with aggressive and criminal behaviour, as shown by Dawe et al. (2008), therefore it is likely that such behaviour overflows into the domestic arena. Galvani et al. (2011) argue that the issue of domestic violence and drug abuse is also not well taught in the UK, and students who have placements in this area have found it very useful.

Other areas where practical placements took place were with refugees (4%), socially excluded individuals (5%), families experiencing or at risk of breakdown (15%), children that require separation from families (5%), people (children) at risk of abuse and neglect (10%), and carers (9%). These data above show that the social work students had experience with a number of social problems and related clients and may indicate that they are in a position to more easily identify the relationship between child protection and other social issues.

Trainees were asked if they had been involved in child protection cases in their practice placements. However, the findings indicated that 85% of the trainees have not been involved in child protection cases in their practical placements, with just 15% of them having been involved in areas dealing with child protection. This indicates that more efforts could be made in trying to give these trainees specialising in child protection some experience in their field placements. Those who did have these kinds of placements were able to experience a wide range of issues. There were therefore key themes emerging from the experiences students had in their placements relating to child protection. Examples the trainees gave of forms of abuse that they faced were in the table as follows:

Physical Abuse	Emotional Abuse	Sexual Abuse
A child of 7 years being subjected to violence from her father through use of an iron.	Depression and Suicide.	A child abused by her brothers inside the family home
A father abusing his child by beatings and suffocation.	Emotional abuse because of the divorce.	Sexual abuse on a child
Abuse through burning a child.		
Physical abuse from her brothers		
Took a child away from her family as she was disabled and had been abused by her parents.		

Trainees described how they intervened by reporting to someone senior in the workplace, by taking children away from their family home or school, or by making the family aware that such behaviour was not acceptable in Saudi society. They were also involved in prevention strategies:

- Distributed letters to students in elementary school about the child helpline to help them protect themselves.
- Presented a programme on child sexual abuse at a secondary school.

The experiences that the trainees were getting from their placements allowed them to have more understanding of how the theories could be applied. They also allowed them to see the many diverse situations that are involved in child protection (Department for children, schools and families, 2009). From the limited evidence in the survey, these trainee students showed reasonable competence and confidence with what they were doing. There are no expectations that they should be fully confident at this stage of their training. In addition, there are indications that such a wide variety of experiences presented to them should have added to their confidence levels.

The placements that trainees have experienced show a wide range of practices but, if trainees are to work within the child protection field, then they need to have the opportunity of understanding the work that is being carried out within child protection. It may be interesting for them to gain some understanding of other fields, such as working with older people, but this is not going to give them an opportunity for applying any knowledge they have of child protection issues. Instead it prepares the trainees for a much wider social work role and this seems to be evident of the whole training programme delivered in the universities. Training involves the coverage of a very broad spectrum of social work, and is not limited to specialist areas.

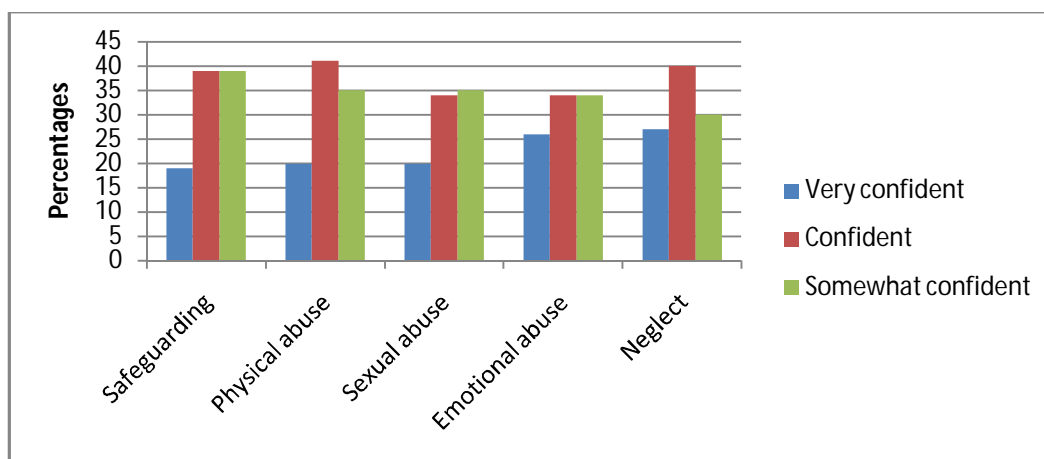
The quality of placements is important for raising standards in social work education (TCSW, 2014). In the UK the Social Work Task Force recommends that all social work students should experience high quality placements and that these are properly supervised and assessed (TCSW, 2014). The UK social work education is expected to prepare students so they can practice with competence (Lefevre, 2015) and this includes learning skills such as developing relationships.

This is an area, which can be developed by learning to relate to others while in practice placements. Placements are important for being able to see the reality of what has been learnt in class. Wilson and Kelly (2010) argue that it is essential for the academic programmes and practice placements to be integrated if social work trainees are to be prepared for working in the field. Additionally, this may also attract more trainees to child protection and provide more attention and research for the whole field of child protection in Saudi Arabia.

### 3.2 Dealing with Child Abuse

The trainees were asked to evaluate their levels of confidence in identifying specific child protection risk areas by indicating whether they were very confident, confident or somewhat confident (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: How confident do you feel about identifying child abuse?**



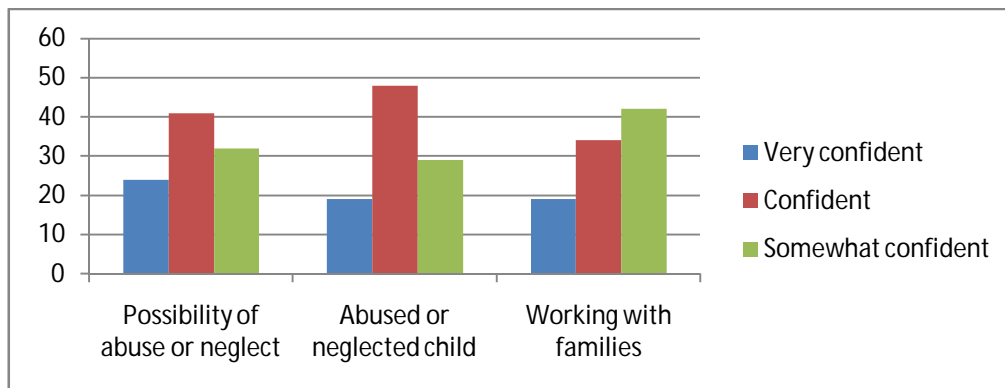
This may not give an accurate rating of their level of confidence in dealing with child abuse, as much depends on the attributes of the students themselves. For example, some may have more self-confidence than others and this may be reflected in their responses.

However, the comments received from trainees indicate that there was a reasonable amount of confidence in their abilities to deal with child protection issues, although their experience with these issues may be fairly limited. Their confidence in identifying child abuse/safeguarding issues indicated that 19% were very confident, 39% confident, and 39% somewhat confident. The findings on their confidence in identifying physical abuse against children indicated that 20% were very confident, 41% confident, and 35% somewhat confident, similar to the findings on identifying sexual abuse against children, where 20% were very confident, 34% confident, and 35% somewhat confident. These were not the same students indicating they were very confident about identifying physical and sexual abuse, but interestingly a higher percentage was very confident (26%) on identifying emotional abuse against children, with 34% confident and 34% somewhat confident.

Identifying neglect of children also showed that the majority of trainees were confident in their ability to do this, with 27% very confident, 40% confident and 30% somewhat confident.

Investigating how confident they felt about any action to be taken if they were worried that a child may be experiencing abuse or neglect, indicated that 24% felt very confident, 41% confident and 32% somewhat confident (see Figure 3).

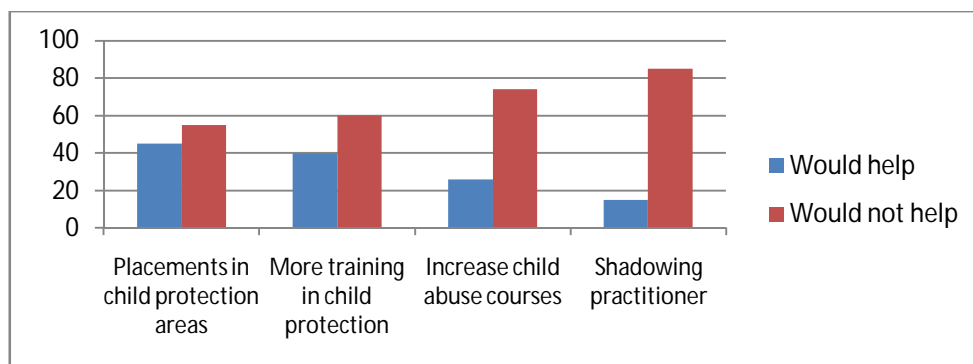
**Figure 3: Confidence at taking action**



Ascertaining the confidence levels of working with children who have experienced abuse or neglect showed that 19% were ve confident, 48% confident and 29% somewhat confident. Investigation on working with families where it is suspected that a child has/is experiencing abuse or neglect indicated that 19% were very confident, 34% confident and 42% somewhat confident.

The findings on confidence levels indicate that between a fifth and a quarter of the social work students were highly confident in the practical skills they had attained through practical placements. There was more confidence from trainees who believed they were now able to cope with dealing with children who had been abused or neglected. However, there was slightly less confidence if trainees had to work with families where there was a suspicion of child abuse. This may indicate a reluctance to get involved from a cultural aspect, as Saudi families are traditionally private, and some may feel uncomfortable at making decisions related to families.

**Figure 4: What do you think will help you to build your confidence?**



When social work students asked about what they thought would help them to build their confidence to protect children in the future, a large number of respondents (45%) indicated that intensifying the practice placement in child protection area would help, whereas more than half (55%) did not think it would help them to build their confidence (See Figure 4). This may be because they were unsure exactly what would be involved for trainees in a placement in child protection.

In addition, 40% mentioned that they needed to obtain training in child protection procedures to build their confidence, while 60% did not feel that would help. Some social work students (26%) felt that there was a need to increase child protection and child abuse courses; whereas 74% felt it would not assist them to build their confidence. Shadowing a child protection practitioner was the lowest need of the respondents (15%), while most of them (85%) felt that it would not help. However 31% did feel that all the above actions would be helpful in building their confidence. Yet overall, the students found it difficult to identify exactly what would help them.

Among the students who were aware that they needed to build confidence, there was recognition of the need for more knowledge, especially in the form of specialised and intensive training courses related to child protection issues. Many of the students from University C wanted to learn more about methods and policies for dealing with abused children. A number of the University A students asked for skills training in coping with emergencies, more support from social institutions and commented that they needed to read more, and learn how to be more patient. There were similar comments from the students at University B.

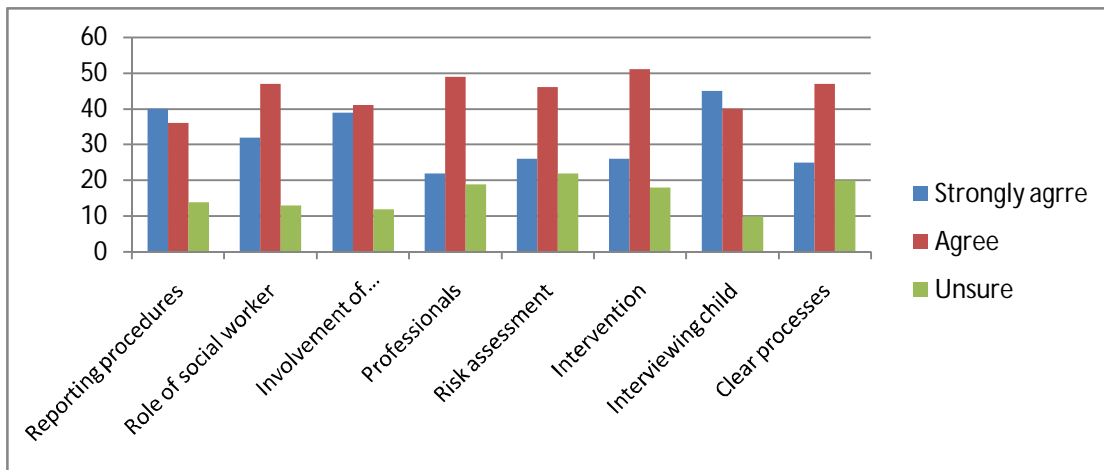
It was surprising that so many trainees felt that increasing training and placements would not help build confidence. This indicates that their levels of confidence are already good enough not to need any extra development, or alternatively that they do not fully understand the complexities that may arise when dealing with child protection issues. They may feel confident enough at this stage to deal with the challenges they believe they may face, but they may not recognise their own limited experience. In addition, they have had support from practitioners during their training and this may not always be available in the future when they are faced with challenges they must deal with on their own.

### 3.3 Confidence in the Child Protection Systems

An important aspect of effective delivery of social work services on child protection is the understanding of jurisdictional issues and child protection work (Department for Education, 2014). It is for this reason this study surveyed the trainees on the extent of their understanding of the legal framework of child protection in Saudi Arabia. Students were asked if they had sufficient materials, resources and training about child protection work in Saudi Arabia. More than half of the respondents did not believe, or were unsure, they had enough information about child protection work in the Saudi Arabia. This could of course be a reflection of the levels of confidence of the trainees, and this may indicate their concerns about being confronted with a situation for which they felt they might not be prepared in future.

The level of confidence of social work students partly depends on their views on certain social factors. In this regard, this study was involved in determining their levels of agreement and disagreement on some of these factors (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Trainees’ perceptions of social work and child protection systems in Saudi Arabia**



Trainees were asked when thinking about social work and child protection in Riyadh, to what extent did they agree with each of the following: reporting procedures; role of social worker; involvement of professionals; role of professionals; risk assessment; intervention; interviewing children; and clear process. The existing clarity of reporting procedures for child protection was strongly supported by 40% and a further 36% agreed that these were clear. A total of 47% agreed on the clarity of the social worker's role in child protection, with a further 32% in strong agreement. However, 13% were unsure, and this is a substantial number given that they are social work trainees. Following their training sessions on the role they have to play, it indicates that a number have concerns about the child protection aspect. This may be because the 2013 law is still relatively new, but these are the social workers who will need to apply this law in the future, therefore their role should be absolutely clear in their minds.

Regarding the importance of involvement of professionals from other disciplines in child protection work, Munro (2011) suggests that individuals and organisations need to work together to provide safeguards and protections for children. This means that child protection becomes a shared responsibility, as involving other professional's means information can be shared (Stalker and McArthur, 2012). However, although 80% of the sample either agreed or strongly agreed that other professionals should be involved in child protection work, 12% stated that they were unsure. In addition to this, respondents were asked about the clarity of the role of professionals in other disciplines in child protection work, and here only 71% agreed or strongly agreed, with 19% being unsure about this (see Figure 5).

Furthermore, when asked about the clarity of criteria to guide assessment of risk when child abuse is alleged or suspected, 26% indicated that they strongly agreed with this, whereas 46% agreed. But some 22% were unsure, as Figure 5 shows. Their views on the clarity of criteria to guide the type of intervention, when there is risk of significant harm to a child, indicated that most of them (26%) strongly agreed and more than half (51%) agreed, although a substantial 18% were unsure. Their views on the importance of interviewing the child concerned in person, when there are concerns about possible child abuse, indicated that most of them (45%) strongly agreed and another 40% agreed, with just 10% unsure. Yet their views on the clarity of processes and policies for interviewing children who may have experienced abuse indicated that, although many (25%) strongly agreed that these were clear, with 47% agreeing, a significant 20% were unsure.

The findings related to their perceptions on social work processes suggest that there are areas that these social work students feel should be improved. However, it is important that a structured and strategic approach is taken to developing confidence, knowledge and skills in trainees in order for them to develop and be able to deal effectively with child protection issues (Martin et al., 2014).

### 3.3 Training

The social worker's role in childcare is to nurture, teach, and take care of children. Saudi Arabia does not have much respect for the status of social workers and the limited scope available means that lower level entrants tend to be involved, who are neither trained nor qualified for taking care of the children (Al Eissa and Almuneef, 2010), whereas the UK training programmes suggest that a social worker trainee should be both trained and qualified, as the trainee has to ensure that the children are safe and well cared for. Therefore, it is recommended that qualified personnel are recruited for this job or they are trained according to requirements before exposing them to childcare (Clarke, 2001). More postgraduate training may be required to both maintain and increase professional competencies (Cardona et al., 2016).

Moreover, for achieving the best results from social workers it is important that they are given proper training and courses such as training on safeguarding children and reinforcing necessary skills and knowledge to identify, respond to signs and symptoms of children experiencing abuse (Munro, 2011). It has been shown through this study that trainees often avoid such training programmes, as many do not attend classes and there are no implications, if they do not attend. However, the UK training programs recommend that they must be motivated to be part of such programmes so that they are able to respond efficiently to all possible concerns and dangers (Clarke, 2001). By holding child abuse prevention programmes, these social work trainees can be further trained (Krinsky, 2007). Furthermore, it is also recommended that the social worker trainees include the principles of integrity, honesty, empathy, and respect, showing fairness and courage by being part of the team in protecting children.

It appears that social work trainees in Saudi Arabia may need to be more motivated and engaged to make them want to attend as many relevant training courses as possible. Students' views on what they believe would be relevant and useful in their training programmes is therefore recommended. These could be facilitated through focus groups to promote discussion. Cleak et al (2016) found that reflection on practice was less valued by students, yet this is considered to be fundamental to developing professional skills. It would therefore be beneficial to educators to understand what areas would motivate students, but also involve the students more in their own professional development.

According to Spencer et al. (2014), in the UK the Frontline programme has been successful in attracting high achievers to social work by offering a two year graduate leadership programme. Graduates are paid while being trained in leadership and social work skills, they spend one year on the job training, and they can achieve qualified social worker status as well as a Master's degree in Social Work. Such a programme introduced to Saudi Arabia would ensure that the right level of applicants were attracted into social work, and would also allow specialist child protection training to take place during a longer period of practice placements.

Professional social work students are required to recognise the risk indicators of different forms of harm to children, including sexual, emotional and physical. This requires the workers to be equipped with knowledge in these different areas that can enable them to understand the impact of cumulative harm, especially the harmful practices that are considered social or cultural norm (Featherstone et al., 2014). Considering the fact that a significant proportion of social work students expressed that they believed these factors were not well addressed, the issues of child protection is a great concern in Saudi Arabia. It would have been useful if the social work students could explain the concept of adequate parenting based on cultural, political, and social dimensions.

Traditional customs are entrenched in a society, and it is often difficult to break away from these. The traditional belief, for example, that the Saudi family is a law unto itself has an impact on the way society views child protection. Included in that society are the social workers themselves, who may sometimes have a reluctance to involve themselves in what they still consider to be a private matter. It is consequently likely to be a long-term process for ensuring that traditional cultural beliefs are moderated, and that child abuse is not acceptable in a modern society. Awareness programmes can support this process, and these may need to be applied to the trainee social workers as well as to the general public.

There is a need for trainees to be equipped with adequate skills that can enable them to communicate clearly and effectively, using the best evidence strategies. Trainees also need professional knowledge and skills to understand the complex aspect of child support that involves engaging, motivating, and the respectful challenging of ethnical, cultural, and socio-economic issues affecting child protection. Although many felt they had the confidence to deal with issues such as interviewing abused children, they nevertheless need to develop these specialist skills.

The suggestions for further training show a large number of trainees indicating that they lacked training on child protection systems and children's rights. There appears to be an acknowledgement that these are both areas that can develop rapidly and need constant updating. Whilst the overall general training in social work appears to be acknowledged as satisfactory, the field of child protection does not seem to have enough focus. There also appears to be an imbalance between the theoretical knowledge acquired in training and the need for more training in practical skills. It is possible that this sample felt that general training programmes were more suited to acquisition of knowledge and that experience would help them gain more practical skills. This may be why 79% would prefer on the job training and academic learning as the mode of training delivery. However, it may also indicate that there are more entrenched cultural and complex issues involved, and that some of the trainees may not be entirely comfortable in dealing with child abuse.

Although 60% of trainees felt they had been well prepared to deal with child abuse, some of their comments indicated that this was only a very basic preparation. They wrote of having an awareness of children's rights, of reading many studies, and of knowing the indicators of violence. This is a good start, but may not prepare students for the realities of working in child protection. The 40% of trainees who were more cautious about their preparation suggested they still needed more skills in the field, and commented that dealing with children was a very sensitive issue, which they felt needed professional experience.



While there has been a focus on the perceptions of social worker trainees, the findings appear to indicate that the recruitment processes for these students are not always discerning enough. The universities have all commented on the strange behaviours of some of the trainees, suggesting that they may not be suited to a social work role. However, it may be that some of these trainees are service users themselves and can contribute greatly to the understanding of other users. Other educators have mentioned that the processes between school and university may need to be strengthened, and that there is a lower entry requirement for social workers than for other specialisations.

Currently there are no criteria in Saudi Arabia for selecting students for social work, which means that any student can choose this programme, regardless of their educational qualifications. This indicates that a more rigorous selection process may need to be set up in order to ensure that the social workers destined for a role in child protection are the right people for the job.

Given also that the preferences seemed to indicate that students were more satisfied with practical placements than theory driven knowledge, there may be support for the educators' concerns that the students did not have the academic abilities for the role. It is a very important role in Saudi society and yet the indications from these findings are that, from the students' perspective, their training programmes are not preparing them well for dealing with issues related to child protection. On the other hand, from the educators' perspective, the students are not attending classes and are not showing enough commitment to their future role in this field. Overall, the findings indicate that social work trainees are not being well prepared for working in a child protection role, and this is a matter of concern. Whether the students are not capable of fulfilling the role because of a lack of interest or ability, or whether the training programmes are not meeting their specific needs, the indications are that there is a significant deficiency in preparing trainees for a role in protecting children from abuse.

The different results from the three universities on the extent to which trainees felt they were prepared for a role in child protection has highlighted the quality of delivery of training. At University B, for example, there are more trainees expressing dissatisfaction with their modules, compared to the other universities. This may be a reflection on the teaching at B, as similar topics are being covered, and there is nothing to differentiate between trainees on these courses.

#### **4. Conclusion**

It has been shown that there is a positive relationship between students getting information and feeling confident in identifying child abuse issues, and trainees do feel that they are receiving adequate information through their university courses. From the trainees' perspective, they do not want more development of training programmes from a theoretical viewpoint, but they have made it clear that the application of this theory needs to be developed. This is further evidence that it is the placements where the focus should be in preparing trainees and developing their skills.

There have been few studies on social work and child abuse in Saudi Arabia, and this is an area that deserves more attention. It is difficult to get permissions to carry out such sensitive research. However, for reference of future researchers in this field, it is very important to keep everyone informed at an early stage and to give very clear indications of exactly what may be required during the process of data collection. It is also essential to ensure that all permissions are sought throughout every level of the hierarchical organisation, starting at government level and down through to the potential participants. The gatekeepers are significant in this process and time needs to be spent with them so that they know exactly what is involved and have a full understanding of the project and how they can support it.

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