Mental health impacts and psychosocial support services in a COVID 19 environment

Presenter: Juanita Brathwaite-Wharton
Senior Psychologist
Student Support Services
Ministry of Education, Technological and Vocational Training
Barbados
More consultations were done on request, for students who had challenges operating in the online environment or navigating the hybrid approach to learning. The inconsistencies of the latter negatively impacted academic outcomes for many.

Referrals from schools for students with behavioural challenges decreased, (possibly because of the smaller numbers of students being at school together) but referrals from parents for the same increased.

Increase of referrals for students with Anxiety and Depression concerns and by extension more cases were noted of parents with the same.

Suicidal threat referrals increased as did referrals to The Assessment Unit and admissions to the THRIVE Center (Children’s Wing of the Psychiatric Hospital).

Students experiencing social challenges increased as a result of parent’s job losses, reduced income etc. This is impacting ability to cope significantly for a large number of families.
1. Vulnerable students register

- **Check in system** implemented using telephone, email, WhatsApp, Google, Zoom...
- **Home visits** where critical needs are determined
- **Nutritional assistance** through private donors and partnership with Living Waters Charity
- **Referrals to the Adopt a family Programme and PEEA**
- First to receive technological assistance: laptops, tablets, SIM cards for Wi-Fi access and paper packages. Contact made with electric and internet providers re: disconnected devices
- **School Attendance advocacy and support**

**Social Welfare Assistance**

**Needs assessments**

**Food Vouchers were distributed** through collaboration with Constituency assistants and donations from SLCT
2. Coping Skills: Dissemination of Information and Support Sessions

**Students**
- MRD TV
- Radio stations
- Government Information Systems (GIS): print media and CBC
- UNICEF jingles and infomercials “Bounce Back”
- METVT website and Facebook page
- Sandy Lane Primary School counsellors Instagram and Facebook pages
- Counsellor Sessions for primary school students (individual and group) using Google classroom
- HFLE (Secondary)

**Parents**
- MRD TV
- Radio stations
- Government Information Systems (GIS): print media and CBC
- UNICEF jingles and infomercials
- METVT website and Facebook page
- Sandy Lane Primary School counsellors Instagram and Facebook pages
- Counsellor sessions on request with primary school counsellors
- Special schools facilitated sessions for parents of special needs students
- Parents referred to parent education sessions done by NCSA on Facebook live
- Plans in place for a Parent Academy programme

**Teachers**
- Partnership with UNICEF and Network Services to provide support sessions
- Special sessions for school administrators and Class 4 teachers
- Return to happiness sessions in conjunction with UNICEF
- Governments EAP programme
- Mental Health support offered through SS
3. Adjustments to the standardized referral and response systems during shut-down period

Revised Operational Procedures and protocols to work in a hybrid environment based on ASCA/NASP standards

COVID response framework was put in place so the referrals could be done electronically

Worked well in the primary schools as referrals were done with ease and there was a faster and more efficient response system put in place

Parents could refer directly rather than go through the school
4. Hotlines

• Several hotlines were set up including for persons wishing to access counselling, needing parenting support, requesting assessments, needing access to devices etc.
• The Child Care Board also has a hotline to report abuse
• FMH/SLCT/BASW hotline for children also is another resource
5. Staff

Increases

Increased staffing in SSS by more than 100% (additional social workers, Special needs Learning Support Coordinators and soon School Counsellors)
6. Assessment Services

Officers and consultants to the SS programme continue conducting assessments during shut down periods, using online modalities.

Once protocols allowed psychological testing continued incorporating all the necessary protocols e.g. sanitation, sneeze guards, etc.
7. Online Counselling

- Student Services offered online counselling services through the Sandy Lane Charitable Trust Primary School Counselling Programme and the outsourcing programme on an ongoing basis throughout the pandemic.
- Professionals utilize various media depending on the services user’s comfort and accessibility: G-Suite, Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp calling, etc.
- Training was facilitated prior on implementing effective online counselling whilst employing all the necessary ethical standards.
8. Interagency Collaborations to provide meaningful interventions

- Online Inter-agency referral system implemented
- Consultation is done using online mediums and the telephone rather than face to face
- Collaborative home visits are done in critical cases, even during national shutdown
- Case conferencing has increased. They are facilitated using Microsoft teams and Google Meets
9. Continuous Professional Development

1. Trauma Response Training and Using a Trauma Informed Approach in the classroom
   - Counsellors, Social Workers, Educators

2. Facilitating Social and Emotional Learning in a COVID Environment
   - Counsellors, Social Workers

3. Crisis Response: Suicide, Bereavement, Sexual Abuse Protocols in the online environment
   - Social Workers, School Attendance, Safety Officers
10. Mental Health and Wellness Committee

• An expert committee was established by the cabinet of Barbados in May 2021 to devise a comprehensive mental health plan for the school community, given the events of the last year.

• The committee is reviewing and making recommendations to policy makers with regards to mental health needs of the ministry’s constituents and initiatives that would impact those needs positively.