

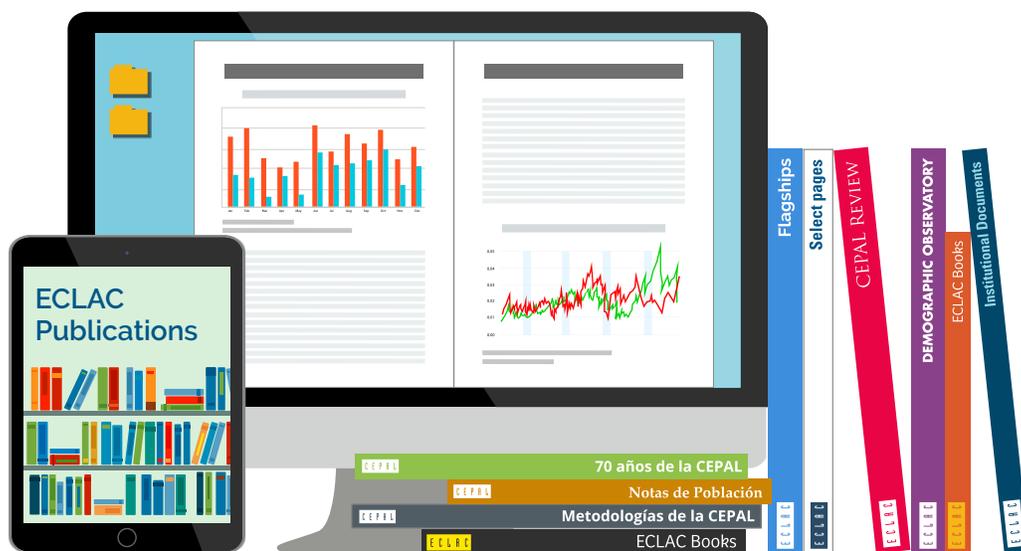
ECLAC SUBREGIONAL  
HEADQUARTERS  
FOR THE CARIBBEAN

# Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

Access, inclusion and  
psychosocial support

Malaka Parker  
Pablo Alfaro

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**ECLAC SUBREGIONAL  
HEADQUARTERS  
FOR THE CARIBBEAN**

# Education during the COVID-19 pandemic

Access, inclusion and psychosocial support

Malaka Parker  
Pablo Alfaro



This document has been prepared by Malaka Parker and Pablo Alfaro, consultants, under the supervision of Catarina Camarinhas, Social Affairs Officer, and edited by Francis Jones, Population Affairs Officer, all of the ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean. Technical advice and support for research and data collection were provided by Laurette Bristol, Programme Manager, Human Resource Development, CARICOM Secretariat; Faryal Khan, Programme Specialist for Education, UNESCO Cluster Office for the Caribbean; Martin Baptiste, Senior Operations Officer, Education, Caribbean Development Bank; Daniela Trucco, Social Affairs Officer, Social Development Division, ECLAC; and Candice Gonzales, Economic Affairs Assistant, ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean.

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United Nations publication  
ISSN: 1728-5445 (electronic version)  
ISSN: 1727-9917 (print version)  
LC/TS.2021/211  
LC/CAR/TS.2021/6  
Distribution: L  
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Printed at United Nations, Santiago  
S.21-01017

This publication should be cited as: M. Parker and P. Alfaro, "Education during the COVID-19 pandemic: access, inclusion and psychosocial support" *Studies and Perspectives series-ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean*, No. 104 (LC/TS.2021/211-LC/CAR/TS.2021/6), Santiago, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2022.

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## Introduction

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises the key role that education plays in empowering people with the knowledge and skills to work together towards sustainable economic and social development, the highest attainable standards of health and well-being, equality, human rights and global peace. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 is dedicated to the achievement of quality education, aiming to ensure inclusive and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Specifically, target 4.5 aims to eliminate disparities in “access to all levels of education for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations.”

COVID-19, however, threatens to reverse the progress made so far on SDG4 and other SDGs and risks harm to a generation of children. The pandemic has had a major impact on the education of Caribbean students, with the closure of education facilities from March 2020 onwards impacting nearly 12 million learners in 29 Caribbean countries.<sup>1</sup> School closures, interruption to classes and the cancellation or postponement of assessments and examinations have all had detrimental consequences for children’s academic development. The closures also undermine the role that schools play in supporting children’s social development, their physical and mental health and well-being, and as safe spaces protecting them against risks such as abuse, violence, teenage pregnancy and crime. Children from low income or unstable households are more likely to be affected by this separation from their peers and the supportive environment that school provides, further exacerbating educational disparities.

There is a critical need to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on students, both on their academic learning and the psychosocial effects. In particular, this must include students from the most

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<sup>1</sup> This estimate is based on enrolment figures from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and includes pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education enrolment for 29 Caribbean countries which are members and associate members of the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC): Anguilla, Aruba, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Cuba, Curaçao, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, Montserrat, Puerto Rico, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sint Maarten, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, and United States Virgin Islands.

vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as students with disabilities, migrant and refugee students, students from indigenous communities and other groups that already experienced difficulties in accessing education services appropriate to their needs prior to COVID-19. It is equally vital to address the impact of the pandemic on education professionals and to mitigate the risks to health and mental well-being that they face. Assessing these impacts and learning from the many innovations which have been employed in response to the pandemic are important steps towards implementing evidence-based strategies for post-COVID-19 recovery and resilience.

This analysis of the impact of remote learning is based on new and existing sources of data. The research team carried out a literature review; collected information from ministries of education (MoEs) through a questionnaire; organised focus groups with school principals and teachers, representatives of civil society organisations and other stakeholders; and interviewed representatives of organisations including parent-teacher associations and student councils. Information was gathered in order to evaluate the impacts of school closures on students, with a particular focus on the psychosocial dimensions of remote learning, access and barriers to education for children from vulnerable and marginalized groups. Information was gathered about the measures implemented by MoEs and schools, and the needs of students and their families. These activities were conducted from October to December 2020. The information was used to identify best practices, lessons learned and to shape recommendations on how to build resilience in the education system and a more inclusive and equitable post-pandemic education system.

This study synthesizes the main results and conclusions of the research. Chapter I provides more information on the research methods and data collection. Chapter II analyses the impact of COVID-19 on primary and secondary education in the Caribbean, including the mitigation measures and the measures for school reopening. Chapter III focuses on mental health and psychosocial impacts and response measures. Chapter IV addresses the needs of students with disabilities, migrant and refugee students and indigenous children and young persons, including the educational impact of COVID-19 and policies for marginalized students. Chapter V summarizes the main conclusions and policy recommendations, drawing attention to opportunities for innovation.

## **I. Research strategy, design and data collection methods**

### **A. Research strategy and design**

This research was conducted at a very dynamic time. While some Caribbean countries and territories had already reopened their schools, the COVID-19 pandemic was still active and national education systems were operating under very difficult conditions. This situation imposed several challenges for the study. Firstly, national education officials, school principals and teachers were still coping with this new reality, with little time available to engage in research activities. Secondly, the situation also prevented any opportunity to engage with the stakeholders in person. Thirdly, the information was urgently needed to inform future policies and programmes aimed to mitigate the adverse effects of COVID-19 on the education system, making it unfeasible in terms of time and cost to conduct more expansive fieldwork, such as including surveys for schools, families or students.

However, this context also opened new opportunities. Never has it been easier to communicate with actors from different contexts and locations. While videoconferencing tools have been around for many years, COVID-19 restrictions have dramatically increased their use in the education sector. The research strategy sought to take advantage of this, targeting a diverse set of actors in the education sector and using online questionnaires, focus groups and interviews to obtain perspectives from many countries and territories of the Caribbean in a short period of time. The information gathering strategy, including stakeholders, data collection tools and target informants, has been summarized in table 1. The three broad stakeholder groups were identified as MoEs, schools and other key informants. This last group included experts in special education, mental health, representatives of students, teachers or civil society organizations such as organizations of disabled persons or indigenous peoples. A combination of questionnaires, interviews and focus groups was used to collect information from these different groups.

**Table 1**  
**Information gathering strategy**

Stakeholders	Tool	Target	Contents / objectives
Ministries of Education	Questionnaire	29 countries and territories	COVID-19 educational impact and mitigation measures Educational policies for marginalized populations
	Data request	29 countries and territories	General educational data Educational policies for marginalized populations
	Interview	2 countries (Bahamas and Suriname)	COVID-19 educational impact and mitigation measures Pedagogical tools in use and curricula developed for attending the needs of marginalized populations Educational policies for marginalized populations
School principals and teachers	Focus group	3 countries (Bahamas, Belize, and Suriname)	Pedagogical tools and curricula developed for addressing the needs of marginalized populations Educational policies for marginalized populations COVID-19 educational impact and mitigation measures
	Questionnaire	Focus groups participants	Students' time-use during school closures Type of support received by the children and their families during school closures Student performance and well-being
Other key informants	Thematic interview	MoE leadership; guidance counsellors; subject teachers and associations; groups and community actors (11 interviews covering 5 countries)	The MHPSS dimension of remote education and MHPSS programmes and services
	Thematic focus groups	Representatives from organizations working with children with disabilities Representatives from organizations working with migrant children and indigenous children	Educational policies for marginalized populations COVID-19 educational impact and mitigation measures Support provided by the government and the schools

Source: Authors' compilation.

Given the challenges described above, it was not possible to collect information from all 29 Caribbean countries and territories.<sup>2</sup> The research was therefore based on select subsets of countries, and different parts of the study are based on data collected from different groups of countries. This partly reflects the availability of data and information but also the fact that countries were selected for inclusion according to characteristics such as national income, population size, the presence of migrants, refugees and indigenous communities, as well as the impact of COVID-19. Countries which differed according to these criteria were chosen in order to reflect the heterogeneity of the subregion.

The summary of the overall impact of COVID-19 on the education sector (chapter II) and the quantitative analysis of the impact of the crisis on marginalized groups (chapter IV) is based primarily on information from 10 countries. These were the 10 MoEs which were able to respond to the research team's questionnaire (see table 2). Chapter III of the report which addresses the psychosocial dimensions is based mainly on information collected from a slightly different group of nine countries, including a more detailed analysis carried out for a subset of five case study countries, selected to be broadly representative of the subregion. For the nine countries, documentation was collected on mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) policies and programmes, socio-cultural indicators, MoE COVID-19 related guidelines and decisions, and the role of education stakeholders and other actors in the delivery of MHPSS services. For the five case study countries, this information was used to carry out a more detailed analysis of psychosocial policy frameworks in the education sector and the mental health and emotional needs of students and other education stakeholders in the context of remote learning.

<sup>2</sup> See footnote 1, introduction.

**Table 2**  
Countries selected for study

Analysis of overall impact of COVID-19 and impact on marginalized groups (10 countries)	Analysis of the mental health and psychosocial dimension	
	Data Analysis (9 Countries)	Case Studies (5 Countries)
Anguilla	Antigua and Barbuda	Antigua and Barbuda
Belize	Barbados	Belize
Grenada	Belize	Jamaica
Guyana	Dominica	Saint Lucia
Martinique	Grenada	Trinidad and Tobago
Montserrat	Jamaica	
Saint Kitts and Nevis	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	Saint Lucia	
Suriname	Trinidad and Tobago	
Turks and Caicos Islands		

Source: Authors' compilation.

Three organizations joined ECLAC in this research effort. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat and the UNESCO Cluster Office for the Caribbean provided input to the assessment tools, shared relevant background documents, and supported the fieldwork by activating their focal points in multiple countries. In addition, the Caribbean Development Bank also supported the fieldwork by contacting local officials.

## B. Data collection methods

### 1. Questionnaires, data requests and interviews with MoEs

The questionnaire and the data request form were the main tools for collecting information from MoEs. Both tools aimed to collect information regarding: the countries' education systems and their inclusion and equality policies for vulnerable populations before COVID-19; the impact of COVID-19 on the education systems; the mitigation measures implemented; and their impact on the schools, the students and their families, especially for marginalized groups such as students with disabilities, students with migrant or refugee status, and students from indigenous populations (see table 3).

**Table 3**  
Questionnaire and data request form contents

Section	Area of analysis	Sub area
Base line	General information	General characteristics of schools; special policies for marginalized populations
COVID-19 impact on education	School closure	Duration of school closures
	Mitigation measures	Distance education strategies; government support for distance education; adaptations for marginalized populations
	Increase of learning gaps	Distance education coverage; access to distance learning
	Less access to education	Dropout rates
	Impact on mental health of students	Mental health policies; interventions targeted to vulnerable populations
	Potential child rights crisis	Domestic and sexual violence prevention
	Institutional consequences	Permanent closure of private schools
School reopening	Measures for reopening of schools; special considerations for marginalized populations	

Source: Authors' compilation.

In addition, interviews with representatives from the Bahamas and Suriname MoEs were carried out to deepen the research team's understanding of specific qualitative elements which were difficult to capture through the questionnaire and the data request form. These interviews addressed the special

policies (pedagogical and curricular) that the MoEs have implemented for marginalized students, both before the pandemic, as well as in response to it. Furthermore, the interviews were also a good opportunity to learn additional details regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the education system and the main policies developed by the government to support schools, teachers and students. The Bahamas and Suriname were chosen due to the presence in these countries of large population groups of interest for this research, namely children with migrant or refugee status and indigenous populations.

## 2. Focus groups with school principals and teachers

The research team also held focus group sessions with principals and teachers, aiming to gather information about schools, their teachers, students and families, including learning needs, support provided to students, performance and well-being.

Although this by no means constituted a representative sample, these focus group sessions allowed the research team to better understand the reality of different schools, their similarities and common challenges. At the same time, these sessions provided additional background information to identify needs, possible gaps and to characterize government support.

The focus groups were targeted to three Caribbean countries: Bahamas, Belize and Suriname. The participants were school principals and teachers working in different contexts, such as in low, medium and high socio-economic status schools, in order to gather a diversity of experiences.

## 3. Interviews and focus groups with other key informants

The research team also gathered information through interviews and focus groups with other key informants, particularly education specialists and representatives of students, parents and teachers. Interviews were carried out with specialists in health and family life education (HFLE), special needs education and guidance counselling and with representatives of disabled persons and indigenous peoples. Time constraints and other ethical considerations precluded individual level engagements with students and parents, but to ensure that the perspectives and concerns of these groups were captured, interviews were conducted with representatives of a student council and a parent-teacher association. The interviewees described their perceptions, experiences and provided information drawing on their engagement with colleagues and other stakeholders.

**Table 4**  
**Focus group sessions with key stakeholders**

Focus group session	Organization represented	Country
People with disabilities	Trinidad & Tobago Association for Differently Abled Persons (TNT ADAP)	Trinidad and Tobago
	PlayAble Caribbean	Trinidad and Tobago
	National Centre for Persons with Disabilities	Trinidad and Tobago
	Aidaneed Foundation	Trinidad and Tobago
	Ministry of Education	Trinidad and Tobago
	School of Education, University of West Indies	Jamaica
	Ipsium technologies	Trinidad and Tobago
Migrant, refugee, and indigenous populations	Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association	Trinidad and Tobago
	Computers for Guyana	Guyana
	Living Water Community	Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados
	Association of Indigenous Leaders	Suriname

Source: Authors' compilation.

In addition to these interviews, online focus group discussions were organized, firstly, with representatives of civil society organizations and other stakeholders working with persons with disabilities and, secondly, with organizations working with migrants and refugees. These sessions helped the research team to better understand the impact of COVID-19 and measures designed to mitigate its impact on access to education for students from these population subgroups.

The sessions focused on participants' experiences and observations of the education system in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the new challenges being faced, the government support provided to students, and the types of support provided by civil society organizations. The groups also considered what else needs to be done in order to ensure an inclusive and equitable education for all. The full list of organizations represented in these two focus group sessions appears in table 4.



## II. The impact of COVID-19 on primary and secondary education

### A. Overall effect of school closures and main challenges

All of the countries and territories in the Caribbean have experienced at least some level of school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly all countries closed schools in March 2020 (see figure 1). Although more than half reopened their schools in September 2020, some of those countries subsequently had to close schools again, either partially or fully. As of May 2021, the situation across the Caribbean remains mixed with schools closed in some countries, either partially or fully, and open in others.

The extended closures forced schools to implement remote learning in an effort to maintain continuity of education for their students. Survey responses from MoEs showed that a wide range of remote learning strategies were implemented, particularly digital strategies (see table 5). The most commonly used strategy has been synchronous online classes and the online delivery of learning materials and assignments to students, which was reported by 9 out of 10 responding MoEs, followed by the direct delivery of learning materials to students, used in 8 out of 10 countries. Online platforms have also been used to deliver recorded video or audio lessons (in 7 countries).

Given the extensive use of digital strategies for remote education, the main challenge has been the students' low level of access to the internet and to digital devices at home, as reported by key stakeholders, representatives from the MoEs and schools. The issue is particularly severe for students belonging to marginalized groups such as migrants, refugees and indigenous peoples who are more likely to live in rural areas or have lower socioeconomic status.

According to school principals and teachers, at the time of selecting which remote education strategies would be implemented, a key factor considered was whether their students had access to the internet and to digital devices at home, or not. Those schools with a lower proportion of students having access to an internet connection and digital devices chose the physical delivery of learning materials as

their main strategy, which was usually complemented with asynchronous remote education methods, such as the use of WhatsApp and phone calls. As pointed out by a school teacher from Belize:

“There is a percentage of our students who don't have access to the internet. There's a larger portion of them who will have access to the internet but mainly on their smartphones; they don't have a computer or they don't have a tablet to access, so it's only mobile data (...) So, our school maintains communication with our parents mainly through regular text messages and the use of WhatsApp chat groups (classroom groups). We engage them with printed packages on a weekly basis for the parents (...) they explain different small projects that the students will work on and do presentations on. They do 30 second to 60 second video clips of themselves presenting their work, and then they WhatsApp those videos back to the teachers.”

**Figure 1**  
**Closure and reopening of Caribbean schools due to COVID-19 restrictions**



Source: Adapted from “LACRO COVID-19 Education Response: Update 23 Status of School’s Reopening”, UNICEF, 2021.

On the other hand, where access to the internet was deemed sufficient, schools took more elaborate digital approaches, such as synchronous online classes, also combined with the physical delivery of learning materials. As reported by a school teacher from the Bahamas:

“We are currently schooling face-to-face, but during the time the school was closed, the teachers at our school contacted the students via Zoom, WhatsApp, email, and also the school developed learning packages for parents that were given directly to them.”

The use of different remote learning strategies may reflect differences between school communities, particularly in terms of the level of internet access. From the focus groups conducted with school principals and teachers from the Bahamas and Suriname, the research team found that most of the Bahamian participants reported that their schools had delivered some kind of synchronous virtual

learning, while none of the Surinamese participants did. Instead, the latter implemented other strategies, such as the physical delivery of learning materials and the use of asynchronous online strategies (WhatsApp), since access to the internet and digital devices was more restricted.

**Table 5**  
Remote education strategies adopted and estimated percentage of students using each of them regularly (where available)

Country or territory	Synchronous online classes (live virtual classes)	Asynchronous online classes (recorded video/audio lessons)	Online delivery of learning materials and assignments	Use of online platforms to organize learning materials and assignments	Direct delivery of learning materials and assignments	Face-to-face classes for selected groups of students
Belize	●	●	●	○	●	○
Grenada	● (37%)	○	○	○	○	○
Guyana	○	○	● (46%)	○	● (28%)	● (26%)
Martinique	●	●	●	●	●	●
Montserrat	●	●	●	●	● (100%)	●
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	●	●	●	●	●	○
St Kitts and Nevis	●	○	●	●	○	○
Suriname	●	●	●	●	●	○
The Bahamas	● (71%)	● (51%)	● (61%)	● (70%)	● (46%)	● (36%)
Turks and Caicos Islands	● (90%)	● (90%)	● (90%)	● (90%)	● (90%)	● (70%)
Total	9	7	9	7	8	5

● strategy adopted ○ strategy not adopted

Source: ECLAC on the basis of information provided by ministries of education in the fourth quarter of 2020.

Unfortunately, the implementation of remote learning strategies has led the teachers to feel increasingly overwhelmed, as reported by representatives from MoEs and schools. The teachers have faced a double challenge: many of them have not felt comfortable using digital devices, while at the same time, they have been forced to rethink their teaching methodologies in this new context. Thus, it is key to provide adequate support to the teachers, for instance, by implementing the “team teaching” practice, pairing teachers to jointly teach online classes, sharing responsibilities and mutually developing their capacities, as explained by a school teacher from the Bahamas:

“Some persons have a phobia towards using the computer, and some persons, because of what we are going through now, thought that they had to be forced to learn in order to carry on their duties, but still, they are not comfortable with it. So, where we have team teaching going on, that has been working very well, because it allows the individuals who are not comfortable on their own to observe and help in the class in other ways. But, when they have to present on their own, it’s a challenge for quite a number of them.”

Besides the aforementioned factors, remote learning strategies have also caused an increase in teachers' workloads, also contributing to the feeling of being overwhelmed. That was the case for a school in Belize, where the students received printed packages every week. Each week, the teachers prepared the packages for the next week and reviewed the previous week's packages which had been returned by the students for teachers to provide them with feedback and support. This intense turnaround was challenging, particularly for those teachers who have had to assume additional care responsibilities of their own.

## B. Mitigation measures against the educational impact of COVID-19

The survey responses provided by MoEs indicated that they had been active in implementing measures to mitigate the educational impact of COVID-19. All countries implemented at least one of the listed measures, with seven of them implementing three or more measures, as shown in table 6.

The most frequent mitigation measure implemented to support remote learning was the distribution of digital devices, implemented by nine out of ten countries and territories, directly addressing this fundamental barrier to remote learning.

In contrast, the least implemented mitigation measure among the listed options was the provision of internet connectivity at home. This is unfortunate since digital remote learning strategies were widely used during the school closures, but the research team found that many families could not afford an internet connection at home. Schools serving communities with low access to the internet and fewer digital devices reported the use of WhatsApp as a substitute means to send materials and videos, complemented with the physical delivery of learning materials. In this context, internet connectivity emerges as a key requirement to facilitate and sustain remote education, even more than digital devices, since many families would at least have access to a smart phone.

**Table 6**  
Government policies to support remote education in schools

Country or territory	Distribution of digital devices	Internet connectivity at home	Online platforms to access learning materials	TV or radio educational programs	Other
Belize	●	○	●	●	Videos on socio-emotional needs
Grenada	●	○	○	●	Remote learning guides for teachers, parents and students; Math program
Guyana	○	○	○	●	Distribution of printed materials to indigenous groups
Martinique	●	●	●	●	
Montserrat	●	○	○	○	
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	●	●	●	●	
St Kitts and Nevis	●	●	●	NR	Framework for continuity of learning and expectation of distance education
Suriname	●	○	●	●	
The Bahamas	●	●	●	●	Development of learning packages for all levels to complement distance learning
Turks and Caicos Islands	●	●	●	○	Development of e-learning guidelines
Total	9	5	7	7	

● policy adopted ○ policy not adopted NR no response

Source: ECLAC on the basis of information provided by ministries of education in the fourth quarter of 2020.

Key stakeholders, principals and teachers were not always aware of the support policies implemented nationally. The mitigation measure most widely recognized by professionals in the field was the implementation of educational TV and radio programming, which was mentioned by school principals and teachers in the three countries where the research team conducted focus groups (Bahamas, Belize, and Suriname). In contrast, other mitigation measures implemented by the governments may not be spread widely enough across the country, or may not be visible for the schools, since they were not always mentioned by the stakeholders or the school teachers that were interviewed. Policies aimed at the delivery of digital devices and the provision of internet connectivity were

mentioned by school teachers from the Bahamas, but not by those from Suriname or Belize. Stakeholders did, however, report actions undertaken by civil society organizations.

Other mitigation measures mentioned by professionals in the field include government support for internet connectivity at the school (in Suriname and the Bahamas); and financial support for printing learning materials (in Belize).

In the Bahamas, one specific measure to support remote learning reported by representatives from the MoE and schools was the implementation of an online platform (Learning Management System). This platform facilitates online teaching and was built on the lessons learned from previous use of remote education which had been employed in order to reach distant islands and to provide remote education in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian. This platform received a positive evaluation both from the MoE and schools as a useful tool to support remote teaching. Its implementation has included training opportunities for teachers, and emerges as an example of innovation for the region, as reported by a school teacher:

“The introduction of the newest platform, which is the LMS, the learning management system, made it a little bit more standardized in terms of a platform for all, so we're able to provide education for more of the students than we were able to, prior to October. So we had about 53 per cent of the children whom we weren't connecting with. And that was via WhatsApp, calling parents and sending out little video tutorials, sending out emails, that kind of thing. But it was not as effective as now, where we have about 70 per cent or more of the students participating consistently through the LMS platform.”

Unfortunately, school closures and confinement measures may also lead to negative unintended consequences, such as an increased risk of domestic violence or abuse directed to children, specifically to girls. In three out of ten countries, specific measures were adopted or reinforced to increase awareness and/or provide training for education professionals, so that they could identify children at risk (of domestic violence, sexual abuse, child labour etc.) while learning from home, as shown in table 7.

**Table 7**  
**Specific measures adopted or reinforced to increase awareness and/or provide training for education professionals, aimed to identify children at risk in the context of remote learning**

Country or territory	Yes	No	Measure adopted or reinforced
Belize	○	●	
Grenada	●	○	Guidelines for teachers and other educational professionals
Guyana	○	●	
Martinique	●	○	Awareness campaign
Montserrat	○	●	
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	●	○	Guidelines for teachers and other educational professionals Reinforcement of referral systems
St Kitts and Nevis	○	●	
Suriname	NR	NR	
The Bahamas	NR	NR	
Turks and Caicos Islands	○	●	

● measure adopted ○ measure not adopted NR no response

Source: ECLAC on the basis of information provided by ministries of education in the fourth quarter of 2020.

In some contexts, teachers face harsh realities which make it difficult to sustain student participation. Some students in Suriname and Belize still do not have electricity or access to the internet, and units within the MoEs lack the resources to provide the support that would be needed to make a success of remote learning in these circumstances. Some families from lower socioeconomic groups are extremely vulnerable. As reported by a representative from a civil society organization that works with migrants and refugees in Barbados:

“The connectivity started to suffer because of the economic priorities of families. Wi-Fi was no longer a necessity that they were able to pay for. In some families where there were economic problems, some children aged 15–16 and upwards started to work and shift their focus away from school.”

In some cases, the children stopped attending remote learning sessions in order to work. As pointed out by a school teacher from Suriname:

“Some of the kids have to help their parents to bring in money so they don't stay at home to look after their schoolwork. So, they have to go out in the streets to help their parents to bring in money.”

On the other hand, the case of the Bahamas illustrates how a package of proactive measures to support the introduction of remote education can increase student participation. By combining the delivery of digital devices, internet connectivity at home, and the provision of an online teaching platform, these measures have helped to overcome the challenges initially experienced by the student population. A school teacher reported that:

“When I go over the statistics as it relates to students participating virtually, when school first shut down in March, the percentages were very low, it was down to 23 per cent. Now we are up to 60 per cent and what contributed to that was the fact that the Ministry and other civic organizations would have given us devices to give to our kids. (...) as a school we've hosted many parents' sessions, where we walked parents through how to use the LMS and finally walked them through how to get on the computer, how to sign into certain things that they needed to do in order to assist their child. And our percentage increased tremendously, because we brought parents on board, we get them to know that, hey, this is new to all of us, teachers themselves are learning.”

### **C. School reopening measures and their implementation**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, there has been school reopening in many countries (partial or complete) and then some subsequent re-closures (again, partial or complete). Where partial reopening was favoured, face-to-face classes were generally prioritized for certain year groups, particularly examination classes. In the Bahamas, the adoption of a policy for the reopening of schools allowed for the situation to be assessed at the local level, taking into consideration the virus' spread. Some schools have fully reopened for face-to-face teaching, some are offering hybrid education models (combining both face-to-face and remote education), whilst some are relying mainly on remote education.

Reopening is a more complex challenge for more crowded schools. The availability of teachers and space can limit the extent to which classes can be split into smaller groups resulting in a heavy burden on teachers, as reported by a school principal from the Bahamas:

“The challenges that we face are the shortage of teachers and janitors (...) we reduced our class sizes to avoid crowded classes and so that also forced us to now utilize every available space on campus. We had to create classrooms and so our cafeteria became a classroom in order for us to have those three feet space for all of our students. Our teacher's timetables

are pretty heavy, so they have increased teaching periods. (...) we encourage our janitors as much as possible to go in and sanitize after each class, it's kind of difficult, the reality is it is difficult, it doesn't always happen. But as much as possible, we encourage it."

Another challenge is to develop trusting relationships with the school communities and the staff in order to build credibility for a safe return to face-to-face instruction. This trust is particularly important when there are repeated school closures and reopenings, as many countries have experienced. Families sometimes decide to keep children out of school in order to avoid health risks, as reported by a school principal from the Bahamas:

"Some parents bought a home schooling kit and they said, we will see you maybe January or when things die down a bit. But there are two opposing thoughts in this time. One is, 'please get our kids back into the classroom', and the second is 'Oh, no way, you really can't expect my child to come back to the classroom.' So, we've had to deal with both."

A range of risk-reducing strategies were implemented to ensure the safe return of students and staff, as shown in table 8. All MoEs reported the implementation of hygiene measures, such as frequent hand washing, temperature control at entry, and education about the pandemic which has been highlighted as a key strategy not only to deal with risks in the short term, but also to consolidate learnings and behaviours in the medium and long term. The mandatory use of masks, social distancing, changes to school schedules and circulation were also implemented in most countries.

**Table 8**  
**Risk-reducing strategies for school reopening**

Country or territory	Class size reduction	Social distancing	Hygiene measures (frequent hand washing, temperature control at entry)	Circulation changes (staggered start and finish times, staggered break and lunch times)	Schedule changes (differentiated days or time of attendance for smaller groups)	Mandatory school mask	Transport arrangement	Education about the pandemic
Belize	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●
Grenada	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●
Guyana	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●
Martinique	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Montserrat	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	●
St Kitts and Nevis	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Suriname	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
The Bahamas	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Turks and Caicos Islands	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Total	7	9	10	8	8	9	6	10

● strategy adopted ○ strategy not adopted

Source: ECLAC on the basis of information provided by ministries of education in the fourth quarter of 2020.

In the case of special education schools, their small size can make reopening relatively more straightforward compared to regular schools. Since special education schools serve small groups, there is less need to make special arrangements or to implement shifts, the main challenge being to keep the premises sanitized and clean, as reported by a representative from the MoE in Suriname. A school teacher there declared that going back to face-to-face education was seen as a solution that allowed them to better reach and support the students in their learning, since distance education posed many obstacles that had been difficult to overcome.

### III. The psychosocial impacts of school closures

Since March 2020, educational institutions have been navigating the complex and emergent realities of the pandemic, transitioning quickly to e-learning and blended learning<sup>3</sup> modalities in an effort to mitigate the impact of the crisis on children's education. Efforts to adjust to such a complex situation have demanded completely new approaches to the delivery of education. Parents and caregivers have had to school their children at home for extended periods of time while teachers are pushed to transition rapidly to new and untested pedagogical modalities and methods. This new reality has created stress, anxiety and frustration among educators, parents and students (UNESCO, 2020c).

The pandemic calls into sharp focus the need for education services which give students the 'soft skills' to deal with exceptional circumstances, to protect themselves from associated risks to their health and well-being, and to provide them with additional support should they need it. These include Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS),<sup>4</sup> Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)<sup>5</sup> and Health and Family Life Education (HFLE). MHPSS, SEL and HFLE can help students through difficult experiences, putting them in a better position to learn and participate in the full range of educational opportunities (INEE, 2018). It is therefore essential that these components of education are not marginalized by an exclusive focus on the academic component and that there are mechanisms for the remote delivery of MHPSS, SEL and HFLE.

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<sup>3</sup> Blended learning models involve part-time study in school combined with some learning at home. Physical distancing protocols are observed by reducing class sizes and placing desks so as to maintain a prescribed distance between students. Blended learning may therefore see students attending face-to-face classes on rotation throughout the week. Online learning is utilized on the days that students are not physically present in the classroom.

<sup>4</sup> The term "Mental Health and Psychosocial Support" (MHPSS) is commonly used in the literature to describe any type of local or outside support that aims to protect or promote psychosocial well-being and/or prevent or treat mental disorders for people in crisis situations (IASC, 2007). The term refers to the dynamic relationship between psychological aspects of one's experience (thoughts, emotions, and behaviours) and to the wider social experience (relationships, family and community networks, social values, and cultural practices) (INEE, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> SEL helps children and adults acquire and use the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Social and emotional skills are also referred to as soft skills, 21st century skills or life skills (USAID, 2018).

## A. Effects of school closures on mental health and well-being

The COVID-19 crisis has undermined the role that schools play in structuring children's lives through the routine of attending classes and engaging with peers and teachers in a safe environment. This includes facilitating access to certain basic needs like food and healthcare services and identifying threats to students. As children have been kept away from schools for an extended period and learning has been relocated to the home, safe spaces have been closed and the limited access of education professionals to children and youth increases the risk of poor learning outcomes and could increase the risk of neglect, deprivation, abuse and maladaptive psychosocial outcomes. With the diminished role of face-to-face education, the governments of the region, through their MoEs, have been moving to respond to emerging mental health and psychosocial support needs, including through the provision of MHPSS to students, their parents or caregivers and teachers.

Parents and caregivers across five case study countries<sup>6</sup> expressed frustrations due to the immediate and sharp increase in childcare requirements and parallel changes in work circumstances, while having to also provide academic direction and supervision to their children. In some homes, parents provided this support to multiple children of varying ages and with various needs. Some parents also faced job losses or were forced to adjust to working from home which heightened stress levels. Parents and caregivers also grappled with the risks associated with accessing basic necessities outside of the home while some families became food insecure due to unemployment. In all nine countries studied,<sup>7</sup> there was a sharp increase in requests for support for basic household items and food, indicating the negative impact of the pandemic on the nutritional health of households.

Many teachers also struggled with the transition to an online system, lacking the technical capacity, resources and support to transfer seamlessly to the new online modalities and e-learning pedagogies. Educators complained of the competing responsibilities of caring for and schooling their own children during lockdowns while having to respond to the new demands. Further, in some countries, tensions emerged between the MoE and teachers' unions concerning the new, mandatory, working requirements and concerns over the erosion of workers' rights and inclusive approaches to decision making.

In all of this, children were having to rapidly adjust to enforced isolation and the removal of safe spaces and their social networks. Remote learning became a challenge for some, with new demands for self-management and self-study. Students who did not have access to e-learning were immediately placed at a disadvantage with no access to schooling and even more time on their hands. Across these five countries, as was the case elsewhere, children and young people were at risk of suffering anxiety, stress, depression, confusion and other maladaptive psychosocial impacts of the crisis conditions.

The likelihood of psychological harm occurring to children in this pandemic is also heightened by the already high prevalence of violent disciplining in these Caribbean countries, with around 70 per cent of 2 to 14 year olds in Trinidad and Tobago, Saint Lucia and Barbados considered at risk of violent disciplining, according to data from UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys.<sup>8</sup> These studies identified living arrangements as a critical factor determining the likelihood of violent disciplining with children in households headed by a single mother reported to be at greater risk for violent disciplining.

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<sup>6</sup> Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Jamaica, Saint Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago (see table 2).

<sup>7</sup> Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago (see table 2).

<sup>8</sup> Based on estimates from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) for Trinidad and Tobago, 2011; Saint Lucia, 2012; and Barbados, 2012. In Barbados and Saint Lucia, the prevalence of violent disciplining was lower among children living with both parents and was recorded at under 40 per cent, while those living with just a mother were more likely to experience violent disciplining (over 40 per cent) compared to 10 per cent for children living with just their father.

In all five case study countries in 2017, women dominated household headship and were the lowest earners, most likely to be found in informal and seasonal sector work and most vulnerable to poverty.<sup>9</sup>

In the case of Jamaica, a higher than usual number of child sex abuse cases were reported since COVID-19 restrictions began in March 2020. During the period March to April 2020, over 700 victims made reports to the Ministry of Justice's Victim Services Division (Jamaica Observer, 2020), with 16 per cent of the reported cases being among children 12-17 years old.<sup>10</sup> The Division is concerned by these numbers, alerting the public that sexual crimes against children were rivalling those against adults.

## **B. Challenges associated with e-learning**

This section summarises the main difficulties experienced in the delivery of MHPSS services during the pandemic, based on information collected from the selected countries (see table 2).

### **1. Mainstreaming of MHPSS in e-learning curricula**

General counsellors and HFLE teachers highlighted the ongoing tensions within some educational systems which fail to prioritize and scale up the SEL and psychosocial components of education. This status quo produces chronic shortages of guidance counsellors and HFLE instructors across the system. HFLE tends to be treated as a dispensable subject that is one of the first to be dropped or suspended when issues related to staffing or scheduling arise. The pressures and challenges associated with the pandemic have further marginalized HFLE instruction effectively removing it from timetables in some cases.<sup>11</sup>

### **2. Access to remote learning**

A lack of digital devices and internet connectivity are key challenges in delivering MHPSS in the remote learning environment. Those most at risk and often most in need of support are therefore less likely to have access to these modes of delivery and in this way the e-learning modality itself is a barrier to reaching vulnerable and marginalized students. Without the necessary devices and connectivity, these students can become invisible. By severely limiting the contact time previously available to educators to make observations regarding students' dispositions, attitudes and levels of engagement, MHPSS in the context of remote learning requires a different approach.

### **3. Human resources constraints**

The successful implementation of technology based MHPSS and SEL requires a significant investment of time. Educators are already operating under great stress and pressure and may also be emotionally unable to deliver this type of support to others in the prevailing circumstances. Capacity building training, self-learning or peer-to-peer learning, preparing e-lessons and applying e-learning pedagogical approaches has placed added time and psychosocial demands on many educators. Systems that were plagued by staff shortages have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic.

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<sup>9</sup> Based on data from the following reports: A Situation Analysis of Children in Antigua and Barbuda (UNICEF, 2017d); Saint Lucia Poverty Assessment Report 2005/06 (Kairi Consultants Ltd., 2008); Jamaica Survey of Living Conditions (JSLC) 2017 (Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 2019); Analysis of the Survey of Living Conditions, Trinidad and Tobago (Kairi Consultants Ltd., 2007); Children in Belize, UNICEF Making Belize Fit for Children (UNICEF, 2019b).

<sup>10</sup> For the month of April, children under 11 years of age accounted for 45 sexual cases reported to the division, while children 12 to 17 years of age accounted for 114 cases. Those over 18 accounted for 186 cases. Overall, 291 females and 88 males fell victim.

<sup>11</sup> Online class timetabling was described by interviewees who participated in the study as having a heavily academic focus. Due to the fact that many HFLE teachers also teach another subject area, many have opted to drop HFLE from online instruction and devote scarce time and resources to their substantive subject. The educational culture has not been predisposed to include the explicit teaching of SEL and, as a consequence, SEL is treated as optional. Within this context, real barriers exist for the delivery of MHPSS services.

The chronic shortage of general counsellors has constrained the extent to which MHPSS can be diversified and scaled to appropriately respond to the crisis.

#### **4. Placing learning in the home**

The entire concept of learning from home through e-learning or blended learning requires parents or caregivers to give teaching instructions or provide increased academic supervision as well as psychosocial support. Teachers are trained over many years in pedagogical techniques, subject matter content and student management techniques and may specialize in subject areas. In contrast, parents have not been exposed to this type of capacity building training and preparation and must provide support across all subjects.

#### **5. Teachers are parents too**

General counsellors must be in the right frame of mind to support the emotional and mental health of others. Teachers are also grappling with the steep learning curve and capacity building requirements to deliver e-learning. Additionally, the new and increased demands on their time coupled with reduced contact time with students, presented new challenges for student engagement and interaction, particularly bearing in mind the nature of psychosocial interventions. E-learning separates educators from the school where they can focus exclusively on their students and where their engagement with students is the very context through which observations are made, or relationships fostered, in order to make behavioural and cognitive observations and trigger necessary interventions for that student.

#### **6. Reduced privacy may mean reduced reporting and engagement**

With school closures, MHPSS can no longer be provided in a confidential and safe environment making it more difficult to meet the psychosocial needs of children and young people. On a remote device there is no control over who may be sitting in the background or beside the student, listening or intimidating them, potentially exposing the child to greater risks. As homes are not safe spaces for many children, students may not be comfortable or safe to initiate or seek assistance from a counsellor when engaging online and at home. Educators also relayed that the impersonal nature of the device makes e-counselling itself strained. Educators also report a hesitance on the part of students to engage general counsellors via this medium, with some students consistently opting out of sessions.

#### **7. The need for multipronged approaches requires more resources**

Given challenges encountered with online access, particularly by the most vulnerable and marginalized, a multipronged system of outreach is needed. The provision of helplines, WhatsApp, TV and radio, e-counselling, and other multimedia-based interventions have become necessary modes of communication and outreach to raise awareness and provide information related to MHPSS. The need to prioritize provision of MHPSS for vulnerable groups also necessitates structural adjustments and a critical mass of practitioners or volunteers for consistent and sustainable outreach programmes. Resources are needed for mobile phones, laptops or desktops, manpower to support e-counselling, mobile counselling, hotline operators and the provision of community-based psychosocial support.

#### **8. Difficulty keeping students engaged online**

Educators reported the challenge of keeping students engaged online and the reduced control that some teachers exercised in the e-learning environment. Capacity building for teachers in e-learning pedagogy was highlighted as an immediate need. Online learning requires a cultural and mental shift for both teachers and students and the COVID-19 pandemic, with its attendant stress and anxiety, may not present the healthiest psychological environment in which to make this transition. Fatigue among students, teachers and parents has emerged as a challenge to effective and sustainable e-learning, home schooling and blended learning. In the absence of strengthened remote learning accountability

frameworks, it is likely that students with less ability to cope with the changes or manage stress at home will switch off and become out of reach online.

## 9. Collecting quality data

Weak and underdeveloped data collection protocols characterized many existing MHPSS and SEL activities. Educators reported that the e-learning environment presents an even greater challenge to confirm and record who was exposed to what material or who benefitted from what SEL or psychosocial oriented sessions. Data collection in the context of e-learning requires standardization and new or supplemental monitoring and evaluation frameworks. This may also highlight the need for technological training for teachers and for the use of an enhanced curricula and assessments to assist in capturing students' knowledge and grasp of principles associated with mental health, psychosocial well-being and SEL.

## C. MHPSS systems and frameworks

MHPSS and SEL interventions have largely been incorporated within Health and Family Life Education (HFLE)<sup>12</sup> and facilitated through guidance counsellors (GC) and through the provision of extracurricular activities within schools. The introduction of MHPSS in schools has also been supported by a number of United Nations agencies who have provided various types of technical support and guidance to MoEs. The extent to which MHPSS is mainstreamed into education systems as a preparedness activity, a response mechanism or is integrated into standard operations, differs across the five case studies (Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Jamaica, Saint Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago).

All five countries incorporated HFLE and general counselling into the secondary school curriculum. In some countries, including Trinidad and Tobago and Saint Lucia, general counsellors were also assigned at the primary school level. Trinidad and Tobago have a more systematized psychosocial support framework, with developed structures and services established prior to the pandemic. This was facilitated primarily through its Student Support Services Division. The Division has a mandate to deliver "a comprehensive and well-coordinated array of psychosocial support services which includes specialized services for children with moderate and severe special educational needs, behavioural issues, clinical issues and career guidance." The MoE also has an Inclusive Education Policy which formed the basis for initiatives as well as a draft Special Education Policy. This MHPSS framework provided fertile ground from which educators could pivot, plan and respond to the crisis.

Jamaica operates a network of service offerings dispersed across several divisions and departments within its MoE and through the Office of the Prime Minister. The MoE has promoted MHPSS over the years and has implemented past and ongoing initiatives aimed at mainstreaming MHPSS throughout the system.<sup>13</sup> There is currently a Guidance Counselling Policy, which was launched in 2018 (JIS, 2018b), and the Ministry has reported that it has developed a "System of Care" under the School-wide Positive Behaviour Interventions and Support Framework (SWPBIS), supported by UNICEF (Tortello, 2015), to help children who are at risk for, or are experiencing, emotional and behavioural

<sup>12</sup> HFLE is taught as a part of the curriculum in a number of Caribbean countries and seeks to promote an understanding of the principles that underlie personal and social well-being and foster the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that make for healthy family life. The programme is also delivered to enhance the ability of students to practice responsible decision-making about social and sexual behaviour (UNICEF, 2009b).

<sup>13</sup> In 2014, the Jamaica Ministry of Education, supported by UNICEF, began implementing key components of the School-wide Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) framework in a 3-year pilot project in 56 primary and secondary level schools nationwide. UNICEF supported the Ministry of Education's Guidance and Counselling Unit's procurement of screening tools, provided training packages (including video-based learning materials) to further equip teachers with techniques and assisted in the development of an ongoing monitoring and evaluation system for SWPBIS within the MoE (Tortello, 2015).

challenges. There are established Regional Student Support Teams (SST) who develop intervention plans and collaborate with general counsellors or teachers for implementation, management, evaluations and referrals of students.

In other countries including Antigua and Barbuda, Belize and Saint Lucia where MHPSS is less institutionalized, there was no identified national policy, framework or school-wide protocol driving the identification, intervention and management approaches directing MHPSS prior to the pandemic. MHPSS implementation was therefore piecemeal and lacking standardization. Programmes like the "Return to Happiness Program (RHP)" (United Nations OCHA, 2015) which was launched in Saint Lucia with the support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in 2010 after the devastation of Hurricane Thomas, provided a framework within which MHPSS and SEL were deployed in schools specifically after a disaster. In Antigua and Barbuda, the MoE, in collaboration with the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) following the devastating impact of Hurricane Maria in 2018, formulated a psychosocial curricula "Coping with Natural Disasters," but this is a first draft and has not been integrated into the system.

In Antigua and Barbuda, the Ministry is currently exploring the development of "a protocol document" and common tools for directing, assessing and reporting on psychosocial support needs, responses and referrals. In Saint Lucia, where guidance counselling is implemented through a system of district counsellors and supervisors, the MoE has been shaping a practice and protocol document for counselling within schools.

#### **D. The role of MHPSS professionals in shaping the COVID-19 response**

It is important to conduct assessments at the onset of a crisis to determine what psychosocial and SEL interventions would serve the affected children and youth most effectively (INEE, 2018). During the period March to June 2020, MoEs across all nine countries moved assiduously to mitigate educational impacts and bridge the digital divide by providing hardware like electronic devices to facilitate participation in e-learning. General counsellors in the majority of countries played a reduced and supporting role in shaping the responses deployed during this period.

In all nine countries studied, MoEs issued initial guidelines for the period March to April 2020. These guidelines predominantly consisted of instructions related to the new e-learning realities. During the initial response period, psychosocial interventions consisted of individual-level student engagements. General counsellors and HFLE teachers assisted in identifying vulnerable students to ensure that these students had access to devices, as well as to social protection support services. In this context, by ensuring students had access to education and meals, the counsellors and other teachers worked to relieve deprivation, anxiety and frustration for both parents and students.

Across all nine countries, guidelines were progressively updated as the situation unfolded. During the period August to October 2020, guidelines were issued addressing the reopening of schools, home schooling, e-learning, and blended learning options. These guidelines differed across the countries, with some countries like Belize, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica maintaining a remote learning and home schooling approach to education. In Saint Lucia, the reopening of schools in September using a blended learning modality was discontinued following an increase of COVID-19 cases and community spread. In Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Barbados and Grenada a blended learning approach was adopted.

As the new modalities became established, MoEs were able to give more attention to the MHPSS dimension of their COVID-19 response and countries like Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica that already benefited from a pre-existing policy framework were able to introduce more comprehensive and structured MHPSS.

In other countries, there was a more piecemeal approach with school principals having a greater degree of flexibility in making decisions about e-learning timetables, and departmental level decisions being made concerning the delivery of the HFLE curricula and guidance counselling services. In these countries, general counsellors and HFLE teachers reported minimal involvement in the design and implementation of national responses, guidelines or procedures for students and staff. There was no existing architecture through which protocols for early detection, support and intervention were managed and accountability mechanisms were weak with no system of standardized reporting, referral and/or monitoring and evaluation of impacts and responses.

There were efforts made to convert some existing psychosocial programmes like the “Return to Happiness Program” as a contingency response in the initial stages of the crisis. It was not always easy to adapt existing programmes to meet the special challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 mitigation protocols were sometimes incompatible with the existing psychosocial response frameworks of existing programmes which were reliant on face-to-face student engagement and peer-to-peer learning. General counsellors and HFLE teachers reported, however, that they remained engaged in discussions with administrators at every level (ministry, district, school, class and individual) and helped to build awareness about the importance of the psychosocial dimensions in the context of the pandemic.

## **E. MHPSS services: A multifaceted emergency response**

In the face of visible and perceived psychosocial needs, the nine countries studied (see chapter I) deployed a multifaceted response to the provision of MHPSS. Responses were multi-levelled being implemented at national, school, class and/or individual levels.

All countries delivered some degree of psychosocial support to the various key stakeholder groups (students, parents and teachers). Countries provided various types of MHPSS for students and each country delivered at least one student responsive MHPSS intervention in addition to parent and teacher MHPSS capacity building interventions. The nature of these services differed across countries with only four of the nine countries having established Student Service Support Divisions/Departments through which their respective psychosocial plans and programmes were coordinated. Similarly, four of the nine countries reported implementing a COVID-19 psychosocial plan to direct and manage its response.

### **1. MHPSS COVID-19 emergency response plans**

Seven of the nine countries were without a national level, education based MHPSS framework from which to deploy a clear, coordinated and sustained response to the pandemic. In these countries national level responses unfolded progressively as the crisis deepened.

In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, the Student Support Services Division rolled out a psychosocial plan which placed students into three main categories based on the severity of their academic, social and emotional needs. Services ranged from developmental assessments to offering e-counselling. Psycho-education sessions were incorporated into the daily virtual class schedules and were administered both synchronously and asynchronously. Three service delivery units focused on the three key areas of guidance counselling, social work and special education.

Counsellors delivered what was described as a “comprehensive” Guidance and Counselling Programme, mandating that each student of each class level must benefit from at least one interactive session with the guidance officer/counsellor within every eight-day cycle. Individual and group counselling and ongoing consultations and support with parents, principals and teachers were also prescribed in the guiding framework. The unit also provided e-parent education sessions.

The School Social Work Unit was also given a framework with measurable deliverables. The Trinidad and Tobago MoE provided direct, individualized and therapeutic interventions for students with diagnosed disabilities and those identified with special educational needs. The Ministry records as one of its deliverables the need to “maintain and deliver the objectives outlined in each student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP),” making the response for children with disabilities more personalized in nature.

By October 2020, three of the nine countries without a pre-COVID MHPSS framework including Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Grenada had moved to develop psychosocial plans within which to launch their MHPSS COVID-19 emergency response. These plans proposed multileveled and multifaceted approaches which included the deployment of helplines, training and webinars for teachers and parents, individualized and group counselling as well as the issuance of psychosocial guidelines and self-help tips among other resiliency building initiatives. In Jamaica, subnational plans were also implemented with the MoE mandating that each school also develop its own psychosocial response plan.

## 2. Mental health support helplines

Four of the nine countries offered helplines as a part of their psychosocial response. Jamaica, Dominica, Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines deployed MoE operated helpline/hotlines to provide general tele-counselling services to education stakeholders.

The Jamaica MoE deployed a well-networked tele-counselling service in collaboration with the Child Guidance Clinic and supported by UNICEF (JIS, 2020). Thirty-six psychosocial helplines were also made available for parents exclusively, across all seven regions, through its National Parenting Support Commission (a division of the MoE) in collaboration with UNICEF and the Victoria Mutual Foundation and Fight for Peace.<sup>14</sup> Barbados provided two helplines while Saint Vincent and the Grenadines deployed three helplines.

Psychosocial helplines in Trinidad and Tobago are provided by the NGO ChildLine<sup>15</sup> which runs the National Student Hotline service on behalf of the MoE and with the collaboration of the Office of the Prime Minister, Gender and Child Affairs. The helpline provides 24-hour access to trained counsellors for children and young persons (up to age 25).

There was no national helpline which provided dual or other language support or which supported assistive or amplified speech for children with disabilities in any country.

## 3. Radio/television/social media outreach

With all countries on lock down, MoEs communicated predominantly using press releases, social media and radio or TV. Contact and engagement was therefore mostly one-way in the early stages of the crisis, with ministries providing updates and related information to the public. All countries engaged in outreach to communities, students, parents and teachers utilizing multimedia approaches to the dissemination of critical information and sensitization messages related to psychosocial support.

In Belize, UNICEF produced and broadcast messages for parents and caregivers to build their capacities to provide psychosocial support to children at home. UNICEF also partnered with the Belize

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<sup>14</sup> There were two helplines per parish, with the exception of Kingston, Saint James, Saint Ann, Saint Catherine and Clarendon, which have been given additional helplines. These parishes have recorded higher numbers of COVID-19 cases (Ministry of Education, Youth and Information, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> ChildLine is an NGO dedicated to the welfare and protection of all children and young persons in Trinidad and Tobago. One of the main services is a 24 hrs/365 day telephone helpline service available to children and young persons who are in need of assistance. ChildLine is the official service provider of the national student hotline.

MoE to produce and air the TV and radio programme "In It Together." The programme was led by children for children, promoting participation in education while offering help to relieve stress.

UNICEF in collaboration with USAID and PAHO also worked with the MoEs across 12 countries, including Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago to deliver a 10-minute weekly programme themed "COVID-19: Supporting our Children,"<sup>16</sup> which took the form of a six-part radio series. The interactive show was targeted at parents, guardians and caregivers of preschool to primary aged children focusing on protection and psychosocial health of children. The Barbados MoE, in collaboration with UNICEF, issued a series of short videos giving advice to parents using social media as the platform to promote these messages.

MoEs in Trinidad and Tobago and Antigua and Barbuda shared daily mental health tips via Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media platforms while other countries including Saint Lucia, Jamaica and Belize posted tips through various platforms.

Belize, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica issued workbooks for children via their Facebook pages as positive mental health activities during the lockdown. One activity and workbook issued by the Belize MoE was titled "The Importance of Mental Health and Wellness - Activity Sheet and your very own 'My Mental Health Weekly Schedule.'" The Jamaica MoE also launched a live virtual programme on all social media platforms hosted by students of primary and secondary schools called "Back to School Sensitization Sessions" discussing distance/remote learning, routines for student success and motivating yourself.

Ministry-led public engagements throughout the countries were generally simulcasted for maximum reach. All other information promoting webinars, MHPSS contact information, promotion of MHPSS shows and other interventions were consistently shared using multimedia.

However, there were no ongoing radio or TV series with an exclusive MHPSS focus in any of the nine countries. MoE Trinidad and Tobago through its ongoing live online programme called "MoE Conversations" hosted various panel discussions on psychosocial health and well-being.

#### **4. E-counselling services**

Trinidad and Tobago was the only country which offered formal e-counselling services through its MoE. Consistent and dedicated e-counselling support was offered through the Student Support Services Division of the MoE as part of its student level intervention. The division also provided e-sessions for parents and families and launched virtual support groups for students and parents. These sessions addressed issues such as mental health, grief and loss, emotional intelligence, social media and parenting in education.

Grenada, Dominica, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines also benefited from free online mental health and psychosocial support services via a mental health and psychosocial portal established to deliver support for frontline workers and caregivers in the Eastern Caribbean. This service is funded by USAID and organized by UNICEF, PAHO and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) (UNICEF, 2020c).

Other non-formal interventions were reported by general counsellors and teachers across all nine countries who have been utilizing WhatsApp, Instagram and other modes of communication to provide one-on-one psychosocial support to students.

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<sup>16</sup> Topics included: 'Can social media use get out of control?' 'The parent's dilemma'; 'Your child and You- What I can do now that the day care is closed'; 'Child Protection and COVID-19'; 'Should I be concerned about child abuse, including Stigma'; 'When your child misbehaves - positive discipline at home and the implications for the mental health of children' UNICEF (2020d).

## 5. Teacher MHPSS and psychosocial capacity building

All countries issued guidelines or printable pamphlets or booklets for teachers on addressing their psychosocial health and that of their students. Countries engaged teachers via Zoom or Facebook live sessions to facilitate teacher sensitization and awareness building regarding psychosocial support services. All MoEs offered at least one or a series of virtual MHPSS capacity building exercises. These sessions were not mandatory and were generally not delivered as part of a broader ongoing teacher development plan. The nature of these engagements which were facilitated online, makes it difficult to ascertain which teachers were exposed to what sessions.

In Antigua and Barbuda, the Guidance Counselling Division delivered three sessions targeting guidance counsellors, covering topics which included: "Roses and Thorns: Identifying Unique Stressors," and "Consider the Ant: Coping with Change." The initiative had low uptake and participation rates with an average of 60 of the 180 persons registered participating. The Ministry in collaboration with Network Services, Inc. and the OECS also partnered to deliver teacher focused sessions entitled "Managing My Wellbeing in an Uncertain Environment: Responding to Change and Stress." This intervention allowed participants to vent and process their feelings while providing tools to manage stress and anxiety. The six-day programme organized as part of the Educator's Summer Institute in preparation for school in September 2020 was prematurely aborted after two days due to low uptake by educators.

The Belize MoE Continuous Professional Development (CPD) plans for teachers incorporated COVID-19 related issues into its course offerings to strengthen teacher MHPSS response capacity. These courses, whose content also include pedagogical and technical training, had 3,000 teachers registered for participation. The psychosocial related content included topics like "Thriving in uncertain times: Making your well-being a priority."

In Trinidad and Tobago, the MoE leveraged its Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), a work-based programme designed to assist in the identification and resolution of productivity problems associated with employees whose personal or other concerns adversely affect their job performance.<sup>17</sup> The Ministry also issued a "Resource Packet" for teachers, "Promoting Health and Wellness in Education," and held a "Principals Leadership Webinar Series" entitled "Leading for Change."

Various stakeholders attached to the MoEs across the countries also hosted several outreach events for teachers including the Jamaica Association of Guidance Counselling in Education who hosted "Reach Out Zoom Sessions for Counsellors," and Zoom talk shows discussing mental health related matters. The Belize School Counsellor Association (BSCA)<sup>18</sup> also conducted a series of virtual trainings via Zoom under the theme "Helping Students Navigate a Changing World." These sessions focused on four themes: "The Person of the Counsellor," "Planning for a New Normal," "School Counselling During COVID-19," and a Working Session on "Determining Effectiveness & Making Adjustments." The President of the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA) also issued "Guidelines to Members Working from Home During the Covid-19 Period."

## 6. Parental MHPSS and psychosocial capacity building

All nine countries issued e-guidelines to parents and shared parental tips and coping strategies to help parents and caregivers manage their mental health and well-being during the period. This was

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<sup>17</sup> The service is provided by Elder Associates Limited on contract. Some of the areas supported by the EAP include Confidential Personal Assistance, Anger Management, Critical Incident Stress Management, Domestic Violence, Financial Management, Grief/Loss, Marital/Relationship Issues, Mental Health, Personal Crisis/Trauma, Stress Management, Substance Abuse Issues, Suicide Intervention.

<sup>18</sup> The Belize School Counsellor Association established in 2012 represent, support, and develop professional school counsellors in Belize.

facilitated primarily through school level and class level interventions, with WhatsApp groups and social media networks being used to share information with both students and their parents.

MoEs across all countries organized virtual meetings or workshops via Facebook live and Zoom to engage parents. The MoE in Antigua and Barbuda developed a “COVID-19 Guidance for Children and Families.” This document was also translated into Spanish and was shared electronically both locally and regionally through the Education Development Unit of the OECS Commission. The Ministry also hosted a content packed series called “Parenting 101,” conducting three sessions in June and one session in September. The average participation rate for these sessions was 45 persons via Zoom and 1,000 on Facebook live. Educators across a number of countries identified broad uptake and maximization of these sessions by parents and caregivers as an ongoing challenge.

In Jamaica, a parenting session organized by the MoE and the National Parent-Teacher Association of Jamaica with a capacity for 1,000 participants was oversubscribed. In Trinidad and Tobago, ChildLine through the Office of the Prime Minister, offered a number of free one-day webinars covering topics like “Improving Parent-Child Communications During the COVID-19 Pandemic” and “Mental Health and Self Care Awareness.” ChildLine subsequently launched a MyChildApp. The MoE also hosted a free virtual family workshop. Other innovative approaches included the dissemination of a video for parents by the Saint Lucia MoE and the implementation of a parental survey by the Antigua and Barbuda MoE in an effort to gather data to inform its response to the crisis.

## **7. Student MHPSS and psychosocial capacity building**

Student interventions were largely managed at a school level through the provision of psychosocial and SEL training and coaching via e-learning platforms. All countries issued awareness raising material about psychosocial health, coping mechanisms, reporting guidelines and outreach contact information to students. Face-to-face counselling sessions were commenced in those countries which instituted blended learning modalities in September or October 2020.

In Trinidad and Tobago, a mental health workbook for children was launched while the Counselling Unit hosted a seminar entitled “Moving on Up” for Grade 6 students who did not have the opportunity to complete their final year of primary school. The three-part webinar averaged about 40-75 per cent participation rates. Secondary schools throughout the countries also reported providing Grade 6 students with specialized psychosocial support in preparation for their exams. In Saint Lucia, the National Students Council collaborated with the Ministry of Youth Development to deliver a webinar entitled 758YouthConnect themed “Transitioning from the classroom to my living room” via Zoom and on Facebook Live.

Participants across all study countries reported class level engagements with students to support their psychosocial health and well-being. This was facilitated through class exercises, group counselling and individualized interventions and one-on-one sessions.

The Government of Antigua and Barbuda partnered with GCSCORED (a non-profit Christian organization in South Bend Indiana) who offered 5 scholarships including the workbooks and other camp materials for students between 8–13 years of age to participate in a virtual psychoeducational summer camp. The two-week camp offered daily sessions for the children and 4 sessions for parents.

## **8. Provision of support for basic needs**

All nine MoEs assisted economically vulnerable students through their school feeding programmes. These initiatives are managed as school level interventions and involve the distribution of daily meals and food hampers. MoEs have also specially targeted these communities for the provision of electronic devices and internet connectivity to increase access to education for vulnerable students.

A number of non-governmental organizations collaborated with MoEs across the countries to support school feeding programmes for vulnerable children and their families. In Belize, UNICEF has provided funding for 1,000 nutrition hampers and hygiene kits to be distributed to the families of children who have been beneficiaries of the MoEs School Feeding Program. UNICEF partnered with the Ministry to reach over 30,000 students, from pre-school to secondary school, with free printed lessons to support children during school closures. UNICEF also worked with the Ministry of Education in Saint Lucia to distribute psychosocial care packages to economically disadvantaged children which included activity books, toys and other play-oriented items. The countries also led various mobilization campaigns targeting the private sector to assist in the delivery of electronic devices as well as food and hygiene supplies.

## **9. Responding to children with disabilities**

Guidelines issued for the management of e-learning and the reopening of schools did not generally contain specialized information for children with disabilities and their families. Similarly, there was no MHPSS information and services targeted or tailored to students with disabilities. Trinidad and Tobago was the only country that provided a specialized framework for the provision of psychosocial support to this vulnerable group. Trinidad and Tobago also targeted both children with special educational needs and special education teachers for the receipt of electronic devices during its distribution campaigns. Through the Student Support Services Division, children with special educational needs are also given individual plans to facilitate their learning and psychosocial needs.

In Dominica, back to school guidelines were issued which included protocols for access to the school compound, including special provisions for persons with disability. In general, there was insufficient attention to inclusion and accessibility challenges associated with the e-learning platforms and the psychosocial support needs of children with disabilities, which resulted in unequal access to education and MHPSS support.

## **10. Responding to migrants and refugees**

In Trinidad and Tobago, the Student Support Services Division provided no guidelines or protocols or articulated policy to respond to the needs of other vulnerable groups like migrants and refugees, although the country has a migrant population of 23,400 (UNICEF, 2020b). Notwithstanding the gap, by July 2020 the country reported that 2,735 girls and boys had received psychosocial support, including access to Child Friendly Schools (CFS),<sup>19</sup> and migrant children had benefitted from inter-sectoral programming interventions. One thousand five hundred children are reported to have benefitted from programmes to enhance their personal safety and over 100 national actors have been trained in providing psychosocial support services to migrant children and their families. During the period under analysis, about 9,000 migrants have been reached with messages on how to access and use child protection services and 400 people in host communities attended dialogues and workshops designed to prevent xenophobia.

Additionally, Trinidad and Tobago also provided mobile counselling services to migrants and host communities in rural areas through partnership with ChildLine and others, as well as counselling services to children and caregivers needing emotional support and guidance on life saving skills and protective practices.

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<sup>19</sup> A model of schools promoted by UNICEF during the past decade to promote quality education for every boy and girl and used to pull together a comprehensive range of interventions in quality education (UNICEF, 2009a).

## **F. E-learning, innovation and opportunity**

### **1. Crisis breeds collaboration**

The need for strengthened communication, consultation and engagement with education stakeholders and their representative organizations was raised as a shared concern across the five case study countries for the psychological impact assessment. In light of the challenge presented by the pandemic, there is a need for collaboration and inclusion of parents in education delivery in new and consequential ways. The opportunity to create and institutionalize information expressways and partnership frameworks between MoEs, parents and other stakeholders should now be maximized. Further, ministries have been supported by the corporate sector which has provided assistance in securing devices, connectivity, food and other basic needs. Such a network, if kept engaged can provide ongoing support to ministries and assist in delivering support to vulnerable and marginalized communities.

### **2. Convenience and access**

Connecting online for classes, counselling sessions or workshops with students, parents and other stakeholders has been made more convenient for many students and their families and has the potential to increase parent participation in psychosocial and SEL capacity building and in counselling sessions. Educators have also mentioned the advantage of being able to engage with entire families or households and the inherent value in interacting with other household members who would not ordinarily be reached. Attendance while in the comfort of your home can be private, convenient and assist parents who care for younger children who cannot be left unattended.

### **3. Emergence of innovative e-learning modalities, platforms and applications**

Many online learning platforms are offering free access to their services. This has benefitted the education system. Innovative platforms efficiently automate the creation of tailor-made content and provide a one-stop-shop for students and teachers. There are also useful features for teacher and student performance, data gathering and reporting. Students, including children with disabilities, can gain access to active learning environments that present a wealth of resources and provide the ability for personalized learning and innovative assessment tools. These can improve and increase student performance and enhance their preparation for the increasingly digital world of work.



## **IV. Impact of school closures on students from vulnerable groups**

Besides the general challenges associated with remote learning such as internet connectivity, lack of digital devices, and the overburdening of teachers, there are other challenges that are specific to students with disabilities, students of migrant or refugee status and students from indigenous populations.

### **A. Students with disabilities**

#### **1. Impact of school closures**

Remote learning has not properly catered to the needs of students with disabilities, as reported by key stakeholders. The online learning materials provided by MoEs have not always been accessible for students with disabilities, for instance students who are blind or have a visual impairment, or hearing-impaired students. Both live and recorded online classes have made it very difficult for the teachers to engage individually with students, restricting their ability to understand their specific needs and adapt their teaching accordingly. For example, it is particularly challenging to engage students that are difficult to reach, such as children with autism spectrum disorder.

#### **2. Institutional arrangements and policies**

Countries and territories in the Caribbean subregion have developed a variety of strategies for the inclusion of students with disabilities in their educational systems, as shown in table 9. The majority of countries used a mixed approach to the education of children with disabilities combining special education schools with special education units in mainstream schools and regular classes in mainstream schools.

Along the same lines, seven of ten countries and territories surveyed reported having legislation in place addressing the needs of students with disabilities. This includes the creation of less restrictive and more enabling environments for children with special needs (Saint Kitts and

Nevis); school inclusion schemes at primary and secondary level (Martinique); and appropriate instructional and medical services, schools, programmes and curriculum (Bahamas), among others. However, the scope of these pieces of legislation varies. In one country, legislation was currently being discussed by the National Assembly.

**Table 9**  
**Students with disabilities enrolment in the education system**

Country or territory	Students with disabilities are mainly enrolled in mainstream schools where programs are adapted to address the needs of individual students	There are separate facilities for general students and students with disabilities. For example, there are mainstream schools that attend to the general population of students and special schools that attend to students with disabilities	There are a variety of alternatives to enrol students with disabilities, such as special education schools, special education units in mainstream schools, separate classrooms in mainstream schools, or regular classes in mainstream schools, among others
Belize	○	○	●
Grenada	○	○	●
Guyana	○	○	●
Martinique	○	○	●
Montserrat	●	○	○
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	○	●	○
St Kitts and Nevis	○	●	○
Suriname	○	●	○
The Bahamas	○	○	●
Turks and Caicos Islands	○	○	●

● strategy adopted ○ strategy not adopted

Source: ECLAC on the basis of information provided by ministries of education in the fourth quarter of 2020.

In the Bahamas, there are a variety of structures to ensure access to education for students with disabilities. Children with special needs can enrol in mainstream schools. In some of these schools, they join the mainstream class and for part of the day they receive specialized instruction separately. In other schools, they join a separate classroom. There are also special education schools for those students with learning disabilities that are not able to be accommodated in mainstream schools. According to representatives from the MoE, in the future it would be ideal to accommodate all the students in the same schools although this is not possible at present.

The Surinamese education system offers specific arrangements for regular and special education students. Students with mental or physical disabilities are expected to enrol in special education schools. While it is also possible for students with disabilities to enrol in mainstream schools, if authorized by the principal, few of these schools have specific support for them. In special education schools, students join a common track until they are 15 years old. Beyond the age of 15, they are assigned to one of three special education tracks, depending on the nature and severity of their disability, the aim being to provide them with the skills to enter the labour market once they graduate.

### 3. Challenges in the implementation of inclusive education

All of the countries and territories surveyed reported having institutional structures to address the educational needs of students with disabilities and most of them declared that there were legal guarantees to ensure non-discrimination and the creation of a more inclusive school system.

However, there are a number of children and young people with disabilities that are not able to access education in the Caribbean subregion. Representatives from non-governmental organizations reported that many students with disabilities have not had access to education, especially in rural areas. They declared that access to an education for all students with disabilities was an immediate priority, and also that education systems must foster inclusivity and not separation.

Representatives of civil society organizations and MoEs reported that many children and young people with disabilities are forced to enter schools not fully adapted to their needs. Schools may be inadequate in respect of infrastructure and accessibility, curriculum design, and/or the specialized educational support that they offer.

There is a gap between the individual and collective capacities that would be required to fully implement the legislative guarantees versus the capacities that are actually available in the system. For instance, some countries reported lacking the required number of properly trained special education teachers. The Bahamas has addressed this challenge by bringing special education teachers from Cuba in recent years, while at the same time creating incentives and scholarship programmes to motivate local teachers to further develop their skills in special education. In Suriname, the MoE has partially addressed this gap by providing those teachers without special education training with general guidelines regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities, including orientation on instruction. According to school principals from Suriname, while some schools have access to child psychologists and special education teachers, many districts serving populations of low socioeconomic status cannot count on these professionals, challenging individual schools to design their own strategies to support their students with disabilities.

#### 4. Policies for a safe reopening

Based on the survey responses, there were relatively few explicit accommodations or risk-reducing measures for students with disabilities in school reopening strategies. Four MoEs referred to some kind of adaptation, as shown in table 10. Adaptations for students with disabilities are important both in respect of their education and because persons with disabilities are recognised to face higher risks from COVID-19.

**Table 10**  
**Risk-reducing strategies and adaptations for students with disabilities**

Country or territory	Risk-reducing strategy / adaptation
Martinique	Health protocols provide for accommodations for disabled pupils: limiting the mixing of pupils, education adapted to barrier gestures, security through reinforced support from the medico-social services, adaptation of timetables.
St Kitts and Nevis	A shift system was implemented (3 groups per day) to reduce the number of students interacting, along with desk placement to ensure physical distance.
The Bahamas	Although classes are small, and physical distancing can be facilitated, consideration is being given to the hybrid model of learning to further decrease class size.
Turks and Caicos Islands	The general guidelines for the reopening of schools will be applied to all students, however, specific arrangements will be implemented to cater to students with disabilities these include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Easier access to washing facilities on the school's compound. Additional washing facilities will be placed on the school's campus.</li> <li>2. Special arrangement for meals. Meals will be delivered to the classrooms.</li> <li>3. Provision of gloves, masks and other protective materials.</li> <li>4. Rescheduling of timetables to facilitate more support for students with disabilities.</li> <li>5. Using alternatives to print, such as audio or other formats in instruction, as well as pictures, flexible scheduling and deadlines, and assistive technology.</li> <li>6. Modification of the curriculum to include more project-based learning.</li> <li>7. More effort will be made to design IEPs for children with disabilities. These IEPs will be designed with the intention of providing therapy for students who may have been traumatized by the closure of school due to COVID-19.</li> </ol>

Source: ECLAC on the basis of information provided by ministries of education in the fourth quarter of 2020.

## B. Students of migrant or refugee status

### 1. Impact of school closures

Some students who are migrants or refugees already faced difficulties in accessing education and COVID-19 has further complicated their situation. Some migrant families happened to be abroad when borders were closed and they were unable to come back to their schools. A school principal from Belize reported that some Guatemalan students from his school that were abroad visiting their home country, were not able to re-enter Belize and were forced to enrol in Guatemalan schools.

The economic crisis has particularly impacted migrant families, worsening their already precarious economic situation and affecting their ability to support and invest in the education of their children. In particular, migrant and refugee families are less likely to be able to afford internet access and digital devices. The pandemic has also given rise to xenophobia with migrants being blamed for spreading the virus while some students of migrant or refugee status faced cyberbullying rooted in xenophobia.

### 2. Institutional arrangements and policies

The inclusion of students of migrant or refugee status also emerges as a challenge. Among the ten countries and territories surveyed, six reported the arrival of students who do not speak the country's official language(s) within their educational systems, as shown in table 11.

**Table 11**  
Policies for students with migrant or refugee status

Country or territory	Is the arrival of students with migrant/refugee status who do not speak the country's official language(s) a relevant challenge for your educational system?	Policies in place to ensure access to students				
		Assessment of initial language skills of the students	Follow up test to monitor language progression	Language support programs in schools	Providing opportunities for students to learn in their mother tongue	Language training for teachers
Belize	●	○	○	○	○	○
Grenada	○	○	○	○	○	○
Guyana	●	○	○	●	●	●
Martinique	NR	○	○	○	○	○
Montserrat	●	○	○	●	●	○
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	○	○	○	○	○	○
St Kitts and Nevis	●	●	●	○	○	○
Suriname	NR	○	○	○	○	○
The Bahamas	●	○	○	●	○	●
Turks and Caicos Islands	●	●	○	○	○	●

● policy adopted ○ policy not adopted NR no response

Source: ECLAC on the basis of information provided by ministries of education in the fourth quarter of 2020.

Countries and territories reported having a variety of policies in place to ensure access to education for students of migrant or refugee status. From the six that acknowledged this issue as a challenge, three reported having language support programmes in schools, and three indicated that there was language training for teachers. Migration is a particularly important issue in the Bahamas.

About 10 per cent of their total population are of Haitian descent, according to key informants. This group has migrated over the last 30–40 years and comes speaking a different language (Haitian Creole). Their access to education is guaranteed by the Education Act and the Government has implemented programmes to teach English as a second language to facilitate their inclusion in mainstream education.

### 3. Challenges in the implementation of inclusive education

For children and young persons of migrant or refugee status, factors such as their legal status or their arrival at different points of the year can prevent them from being accepted into public education systems, sometimes forcing families to rely on home schooling or whatever school will accept them.

A second challenge, relevant for both groups, is the language of instruction. Many students from indigenous populations attend classes taught in the official language, which is different from the local language spoken by their communities. In some countries, it is mandated by legislation that education is delivered in the official language. The same issue can arise for students with migrant or refugee status who speak a different language.

The perspectives from school principals in the Bahamas and Belize reaffirm the significance of this challenge. School teachers from both countries reported having students of migrant status attending their schools, from Haiti (in the Bahamas) and Guatemala (in Belize), but they indicated there were insufficient policies or programmes in place to address the language barriers that these students face.

## C. Students from indigenous populations

### 1. Impact of school closures

There are five Caribbean countries where indigenous peoples constitute three per cent or more of the population (Belize, Guyana, Suriname, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and Dominica) (Jones, Camarinhas and Gény, 2019) and school closures have had a disproportionate impact on students from these communities. These groups often lack access to the internet, since many of them live in remote rural communities. Language barriers between teachers and families that do not speak the official (or the local) language can also be a problem for students from indigenous populations (and some students of migrant or refugee status). In the context of school closures, families are expected to play a key role in supporting their children's education but language barriers sometimes make this communication with families very difficult or impossible, negatively impacting educational outcomes.

The experiences reported by Surinamese principals and teachers are illustrative of this situation. Teachers frequently do not speak the same language as families, making communication very difficult. Consequently, it is difficult for families to get involved in school-related activities and support their children's education, which is fundamental in the context of school closures and remote learning. Some teachers reported the development of joint initiatives with local organizations and community members to facilitate communication with indigenous children and their families, as reported by a school teacher from Suriname:

"We have organizations to help the children (...) because the Dutch language is very difficult for some parents. We have indigenous students and it is very difficult to tell the parents what we mean, so we have to speak to some parents in English, and to some parents you have to speak Sranan Tongo (...). It's very difficult, and if you cannot communicate with the parents, it is very difficult to communicate with the children. So, other organizations are helping us."

## 2. Institutional arrangements and policies

Five countries reported having policies in place for students from indigenous populations. Two declared these kind of policies were not applicable to their situation, and three did not respond, as shown in table 12.

The range of policies adopted for indigenous students varies among the countries, the most common being the development of autonomous indigenous educational systems and the preparation of teachers for intercultural education, including specialization degrees. In Suriname, all students, independently of their ethnic or migration status, are taught in mainstream education, according to key informants.

## 3. Challenges in the implementation of inclusive education

Access to education remains a challenge for students from indigenous populations, according to key stakeholders. For indigenous children and young persons, it is difficult to access quality education due to the distance to the schools, since many of them live in remote rural communities. Also, many of them lack basic utilities, such as electricity, potable water, telephone and internet. Most of the mitigation policies enacted within the education sector were targeted towards the general school population or low-income students, and not specifically adapted or targeted to address the needs of marginalized groups, such as students from indigenous populations. Guyana was the country reporting the most significant efforts to tailor the education system to the needs to indigenous students.

**Table 12**  
**Policies for students from indigenous populations**

Country or territory	Bilingual Classes: teaching and learning in indigenous languages	Enrichment of national curriculum via cultural and linguistic content	Autonomous indigenous educational systems	Indigenous culture counsellors (teachers and representatives of indigenous communities working together)	Teacher preparation for intercultural education, and specialization degrees
Belize	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
Grenada	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Guyana	○	○	●	●	●
Martinique	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
Montserrat	○	○	●	●	○
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
St Kitts and Nevis	●	●	○	○	○
Suriname	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
The Bahamas	○	○	●	○	●
Turks and Caicos Islands	●	○	○	○	●

● policy adopted ○ policy not adopted NA not applicable NR no response

Source: ECLAC on the basis of information provided by ministries of education in the fourth quarter of 2020.

## V. Conclusions and recommendations

The COVID-19 emergency has severely tested Caribbean education systems. While Caribbean governments are well-aware of the need to be prepared for natural disasters, the scope and complexity of this crisis has been unprecedented, because of its sudden impact, the very limited time available to make preparations, and the extended period of time that it has lasted. Governments continue to manage the pandemic, with schools employing a mixture of face-to-face teaching, remote education, and hybrid strategies in accordance with national circumstances, while they seek to vaccinate their populations. Governments also need to plan for recovery, to consolidate the lessons learned, and to raise their levels of preparedness and resilience going forward. With this in mind, this final chapter of the report offers recommendations, many drawn from the good practices reported by those countries and territories that participated in this research, and which are intended to assist member States in addressing outstanding challenges and building more inclusive and equitable education systems in the context of a gradual reopening and recovery.

### A. Recommendations on remote learning

During this gradual reopening of schools, students, families and teachers need to make the most effective use of online remote learning tools when necessary, with some schools continuing to employ hybrid teaching models depending on national and local circumstances. In addition, efforts must be made to ensure the most vulnerable children and adolescents participate in education. It is important to consider the diverse needs of these different groups, and to incorporate responses and pedagogical approaches that are sensitive and adapted to their needs.

The following recommendations should be given priority in the short term:

#### 1. Strengthen programmes that support students' internet access at home

Based on this research, providing support for students' access to the internet at home is more relevant for remote education than the provision of digital devices, since many families have access to at least some kind of digital device (such as a smartphone), but cannot necessarily afford internet connectivity,

especially during an economic downturn. In fact, the most widely used remote education strategies were those of asynchronous provision, such as the online delivery of learning materials through WhatsApp and email, and the delivery of videos including recorded classes and teachers' feedback. Even in the context of school reopening, internet access at home will remain important, as those schools with infrastructure and staff constraints will continue with some kind of remote education as part of a hybrid model. However, the research team also found that few governments had programmes to ensure students have internet access at home. A recent analysis based on data from 11 Latin American countries found that the cost of mobile and fixed broadband services for households in the bottom income quintile were equivalent to 14 per cent and 12 per cent of their income, respectively; also, the estimated cost of connecting all households that do not have an internet connection was between 0.25 per cent and 4.5 per cent of monthly GDP (the cost being much higher for countries with more unconnected households).

## **2. Support families in the use of technology for remote learning**

Schools that were effective in increasing students' participation in remote learning activities reported active strategies of parental involvement, such as training sessions to teach families how to use the online platforms. In addition, families with digital skills are better prepared to protect their children from the increased risks associated with children's use of the internet.

## **3. Support teachers in adapting to the use of technology**

Governments and schools can support teachers in different ways. MoEs can offer professional development opportunities, addressing both the use of technology and teaching strategies in the context of remote education. For instance, the Bahamas MoE was able to reach a broad audience of teachers by offering remote education workshops. Schools are then in a better position to trial and implement feasible strategies. For instance, one school reported implementing a "team teaching" strategy, where two teachers collaborate to better manage online classes.

## **4. Support students in their remote learning**

Frequently monitoring student progress allows teachers to identify those that are having difficulties in specific areas and provide them with specific support. Formative assessment and self-assessment can help teachers to evaluate and modify remote learning activities. In addition, teachers can foster group activities among students, leveraging their capabilities to learn and work together.

In the medium term, the use of technology can be of great use to further remove barriers to quality education and access for marginalized populations.

## **5. Consider the longer-term role of technology as a tool to improve education for marginalized populations**

Remote education has proven to be a crucial tool in the response to the COVID-19 emergency, but could also be applicable following natural disasters, such as hurricanes. That was the case in the Bahamas, where a remote education programme was used in areas affected by Hurricane Dorian, before being deployed more widely in the COVID-19 pandemic. However, remote education can also be an alternative to provide specialised education, particularly in rural areas or small islands. For instance, the Bahamas remote education programme was originally motivated by the need to provide tuition in physics and advanced mathematics to students living in small islands of the archipelago.

## **6. Better equip teachers with ICT competencies in teachers' initial training and professional development**

In order to take advantage of remote education as a strategy to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, face future emergencies, and improve the quality of education, teachers must be equipped with the

necessary ICT competencies. While technology is not a solution by itself, teachers that are ready to use ICT in their practice can be more effective, provide better education, and further develop their students' ICT skills. The UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers is a set of standards that can guide MoEs and teacher training institutions on adapting and updating their professional development programmes and initial teacher training programmes.

## **B. Recommendations to improve MHPSS in education**

Despite growing evidence of the positive impacts of SEL, it remains an emerging field for Caribbean education systems and working knowledge, best practices, terminologies and standards are not yet fully developed (USAID, 2018).

Educators and other stakeholders who participated in the study identified the need to address a number of gaps in the system to allow for greater integration of psychosocial well-being and SEL into the changing education system. There was consensus among education stakeholders that while the area of MHPSS had been steadily advancing over the past 10–15 years, accelerated scale up and systematization were needed to build the institutional resilience and adaptative capacity of MHPSS.

### **1. Scale-up and prioritize the “life skills” component of HFLE**

The importance of the psychosocial dimension of e-learning requires the prioritization of HFLE, SEL and general counselling, and its inclusion in the curriculum should not be left to the discretion of schools and school districts, in post-disaster or emergency situations. An assessment of the suite of life skills needed in the prevailing crisis and post-pandemic reality to inform development of the HFLE curricula should be considered. This curricula should include material designed to promote tolerance and reduce racism, xenophobia and other discriminatory practices against vulnerable populations. The International Rescue Committee's “Healing Classrooms” toolkit funded by USAID (USAID, 2020) offers such an integrated approach to supporting child well-being during crises, seeking to provide SEL skills and promote healthy coping strategies.<sup>20</sup> The UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) has also developed SEL resources to support the response to COVID-19 (Duraiappah, Mercier and Chatterjee Singh, 2020). UNICEF has continued its partnership with MoEs in this area throughout the region, including through its promotion of the School-wide Positive Behaviour Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) frameworks piloted in Jamaica in 2014 (JIS, 2018a).

### **2. Conduct rapid needs assessments**

MHPSS interventions require a degree of speed and diagnostic accuracy to ensure responses are effective and sustainable. MoEs would benefit from the development of a rapid needs assessment framework that is available for deployment when needed. Such a tool would not only be applicable for emergencies but could be institutionalized for periodic data gathering to support ongoing improvement of MHPSS. UNICEF has also provided this type of assistance in crisis and emergency situations to inform responsive programming (UNICEF Nigeria, 2019a).

### **3. Incorporate guidance counselling into timetables as a curricular subject**

Many educators report an emphasis on career guidance as a priority focus for general counsellors with psychosocial based intervention regarded as a strictly remedial tool to address poor behaviour. However, if it is integrated into the timetable in a consistent and standardized way, general counselling has an important role to play in the holistic development of students and as a preventative, behaviour

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<sup>20</sup> In response to COVID-19, implementing partners have pivoted SEL programmes using remote learning modalities to build resilience for children, youth, and adults learning at home during the pandemic.

management and developmental tool. This is the idea which is promoted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Framework which focuses on establishing an integrated equitable ecosystem for students, inclusive of the household and broader community.<sup>21</sup> Accompanied by full instructional guides, such a framework is useful in developing awareness of the importance of SEL. This approach is currently being practiced in Trinidad and Tobago with weekly scheduled, timetabled general counselling sessions built into its framework for education delivery.

#### **4. Determine mental health protocols for cluster support interventions**

Designing clear psychosocial support protocols is particularly important in times of heightened fear, anxiety and uncertainty and there is a need for targeted, rapid response and ongoing psychosocial support to risk clusters when students, teachers or parents have been exposed to or have contracted COVID-19. Protocols surrounding school level response when a member of the school community has been exposed to the virus or is diagnosed with COVID-19 are currently unclear and underdeveloped. There should be a psychosocial response and management plan to support affected school officials, students and parents in these circumstances.

#### **5. Mainstream psychosocial sensitization in all outreach efforts**

While countries have conducted MHPSS specific outreach and engagements through e-platforms and other media, there is consistent ongoing programming related to improving educational access and providing academic learning. Ministries should seek to include psychosocial sensitization in all interventions with students including through the daily delivery of subjects via radio, TV or online. Promoting self-care and reminding students to seek help if they need it serves to raise awareness of the MHPSS dimension. Similarly, sessions with parents, teachers and communities should incorporate messages related to psychosocial well-being. This allows for the building of awareness, creating opportunities for discussion and for providing participants with information to access services.

#### **6. Adopt e-learning strategies that allow for socialization**

Reports of children opting out of e-classes or becoming disengaged should be addressed by training teachers and general counsellors in effective e-learning pedagogies including for group counselling sessions. Students should be given time to connect socially with each other before and after class and in breakout sessions to allow for collaborations during and outside of class periods. MoEs should ensure there is capacity building of educators so that they are able to fully explore the possibilities of e-learning for holistic education.

#### **7. Deploy community-based counsellors and support networks**

Integrated teams of school and community clinicians and volunteers focused on the social-emotional and behavioural needs of students have been proven to be effective in crisis situations. Community level interventions can include house checks and opportunities to engage entire families. UNICEF has consistently provided technical support to train and build a critical mass of teachers and volunteers in the provision of community-based psychosocial support (UNICEF, 2009b). Utilising psychosocial community-based support response strategies, the organization has assisted in many emergencies. It must be noted that the specific challenges presented by COVID-19 may require a refashioning of some community-based interventions.

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<sup>21</sup> CASEL's SEL framework fosters knowledge, skills, and attitudes across five areas of competence and multiple key settings. CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) can be taught and applied at various developmental stages from childhood to adulthood and across diverse cultural contexts (CASEL, 2020).

## **8. Implement sustained mental health and public awareness campaigns**

Messages surrounding MHPSS are optimised when they are sustained so as to resonate with students, teachers and parents. Outreach using digital media, radio and television for the dissemination of key messages should be strengthened to build awareness and individual and community resilience. Messages that foster tolerance, encourage mutual support and promote compassion among and between peoples assist in reducing tensions and teach individuals to manage their emotions. These messages should also include guidance about child safety, gender-based violence and protection against sexual exploitation and abuse. UNICEF's "In It Together" Facebook, radio and TV programme for children by children launched in Belize, discusses experiences of the crisis and is simulcasted on various media (UNICEF, 2020a). Considering the technological divide, promoting sensitization campaigns via TV and radio should remain central to any outreach effort so as to reach the most vulnerable (UNESCO, 2020b).

## **9. Maximize stakeholder relationships**

The challenges and responses presented by the pandemic have increased the participation of parents and other stakeholders in the education system. Maximization of these relationships through consultation, collaboration and partnership can help to build institutional resiliency and promote the efficient use of scarce resources. Inclusion of parents and other stakeholders in the design and implementation of programmes and initiatives will strengthen outreach efforts and maximize uptake of services.

## **10. Design indicator frameworks for identifying at risk students in the e-learning environment**

There is need for the development and implementation of school-wide proxy indicator frameworks which can be used by teachers for early identification of cognitive or behavioural issues among students, for example, absenteeism and participation patterns, and tools to monitor and gauge student drop out and disengagement from e-learning. Participants highlighted the role of truancy officers in the face-to-face education system. This is currently being practiced in Saint Lucia where a protocol has been developed to trigger interventions where students have missed a determined number of online classes or have failed to collect and return pre-prepared work from drop off and collection points. These protocols can be incorporated in remote learning plans as an additional tool to track the effectiveness of the different modalities and pedagogical approaches. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)<sup>22</sup> Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings (ISAC, 2007) provides a framework proposing activities, guidelines and protocols for monitoring and evaluation.

## **11. Recruit and train more general counsellors and psychotherapists**

There is a critical need to improve the current counsellor to student ratios and to proportionally place general counsellors in every school at primary and secondary level. Training and retraining should include case management strategies and referral mechanisms.

## **12. Policy development and systematization**

It is important to develop a comprehensive, interconnected psychosocial health and well-being framework and attendant structures for national level implementation. Core elements for the mainstreaming of SEL throughout education should include:

- (i) A single system of delivery.

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<sup>22</sup> The Inter-Agency Standing Committee is an inter-agency forum of UN and non-UN humanitarian partners.

- (ii) Vertical and horizontal integrated structures from classrooms to district level to deliver consistency.
- (iii) Evidenced based design and implementation of MHPSS and SEL practices at school and community level.
- (iv) Coordinated protocols for intervention: process driven identification, intervention, monitoring and evaluations.
- (v) Integrated referral and reporting mechanisms.

Such a networked and integrated psychosocial support system would be in line with the best practice recommended by The Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) to build resilient institutions that can effectively respond in times of crisis.

### **C. Recommendations for inclusion of marginalised groups**

There are still barriers to education for many children and young people from poor and rural households, for students with disabilities, with migrant or refugee status, and from indigenous populations. These barriers include: the lack of properly trained teachers, adequate infrastructure, curriculum design, and educational support for students with disabilities; the legal status requirement and the inflexibility in admission dates for students with migrant and refugee status; and the lack of important resources (such as electricity, potable water, telephone and internet), the long distances to the schools, and the language of instruction for some migrant or indigenous students. While many Caribbean countries and territories report legislation and policies in place which should guarantee the inclusion of these groups within the school system, in practice there is still much to do in order to fully address the educational needs of these children.

Many students with disabilities, students with migrant or refugee status, and students from indigenous populations have lacked access to internet connectivity, to digital devices, or to learning materials adapted to their needs, preventing them from fully participating in remote learning activities. While most of the governments have implemented a wide range of mitigation measures to support remote education, these measures have been broadly targeted to children and young people from low socioeconomic status, and few initiatives have been specifically adapted or targeted to the needs of students with disabilities, with migrant or refugee status, or students from indigenous populations. However, much can be learned from evaluating the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of these programmes.

Overall, some countries and territories seem to have suffered higher educational impacts due to COVID-19, while others seem to have been more resilient. Students from socially disadvantaged groups are likely to be more heavily impacted and may disengage from education with damaging consequences for themselves and for society as a whole. At the same time, governments from countries and territories with fewer resources are less able to quickly implement effective mitigation measures. It is, therefore, disadvantaged students from these countries that are in the worst position of all. However, all this should also motivate the exchange of good practice among countries, since education professionals, families and students have all learned valuable lessons from this experience and there is an opportunity to strengthen the region's resilience to emergencies. The following recommendations for fuller inclusion of marginalized groups are presented with this in mind.

#### **1. Make learning accessible to students from marginalized groups**

Students with disabilities should have continuous access to education. Remote learning materials, including online platforms and educational television should be accessible, for example through use of captioning.

There should be support and training available for teachers to help them deliver remote education and this should include education of students with disabilities.

There also needs to be increased flexibility regarding the enrolment of students with migrant or refugee status. Education systems should integrate students with migrant or refugee status at different points of the school year, independently of their legal status. This may be particularly relevant when previously closed borders reopen.

## **2. Maintain communication with students with disabilities and their families**

Schools which reported the successful engagement of students with disabilities engaged them individually through phone calls in order to monitor their situation and needs. Families should be involved in the education process and provided with guidance on how to support their children. Students' participation in remote education activities depends highly on the ability of their families to support them in these efforts. In turn, this requires that the families understand the process and tools.

## **3. Prioritize students with disabilities for face-to-face education**

In making decisions about face-to-face versus remote education, special consideration should be given to students with disabilities. If their needs are not being adequately met through remote education, schools could remain open for students with disabilities or they should be prioritised if schools are partially reopened. Special education schools and special education units within mainstream schools that work with small groups should also be prioritized for face-to-face teaching, since it is more feasible to organize the classroom with social distancing, which offers them a better opportunity to continue their education. At the same time, these educational benefits need to be balanced against the higher risk that COVID-19 may present to some students with disabilities.

## **4. Involve families from indigenous populations and with migrant or refugee status**

Unfortunately, language barriers may prevent families from understanding the information available online and may inhibit communication between teachers and families. Reach out to families in their own language with online learning materials and training sessions in order to increase students' participation.

## **5. Create personalised education plans**

Personalized education plans can greatly enhance the academic, mental health and psychosocial outlook of children with disabilities. Individualized approaches by specialist educators can assist in recreating the learning environment online and mitigating the loss face-to-face contact.

## **6. Use assistive technologies**

Governments, schools and other stakeholders should scale-up assistive technologies for learners with disabilities in their home to facilitate access to academic learning as well as to MHPSS. Some teachers engaged in this study reported the use of 3D printing and assistive text to speech software. Other technologies which students with disabilities may find useful include screen readers, talking book players, audio recorder and players and amplified telephones.

## **7. Offer specialized counselling services**

MoEs and teacher training institutions need to scale-up capacity building efforts to develop a critical mass of dedicated and assigned counsellors with specialized training in the support of children with disabilities. Persons with disabilities can also be trained to provide emotional support services.

Utilizing community leaders and existing community systems of governance or engagement in MHPSS is a strategic approach to building efficiencies. Indigenous communities in particular may have internal systems for addressing problems on an individual and community level which MoEs can

incorporate and utilize in their formal outreach to these communities. It could therefore be beneficial to map out existing community systems, through which MHPSS can be effectively implemented. Using community leaders and influencers to deliver key messages on mental health and psychosocial wellness issues can assist in the uptake of MHPSS.

Building capacity within vulnerable and marginalized communities fosters inclusivity and efficiency in delivery of services. Consideration should be given to incorporating these communities in the delivery of MHPSS by recruiting and training suitably qualified individuals.

MHPSS services should be available (and promoted) in multiple formats, through multiple channels of delivery and, if necessary, in multiple languages (World Bank, 2020).

## **8. Consider where interventions to address access to education link to the social safety net more generally**

Government agencies and non-government organizations providing services to migrant populations are encouraged to institutionalize the conduct of needs assessments and ongoing consultations within migrant, refugee or indigenous communities to facilitate and ensure the provision of culturally sensitive programmes that are responsive to circumstances and delivered in their language via communication channels that will reach them. Government and NGO stakeholders could benefit from the experience of UNICEF in conducting rapid needs assessments within vulnerable communities in the region and around the world (UNICEF, 2020f).

Governments and NGOs providing services to migrant populations should consider interventions which address multidimensional vulnerabilities including access to healthcare and social protection. A holistic approach to MHPSS is needed to deliver dignity and foster social inclusion, reducing anxieties, frustrations and hardship for families. UNICEF and other organizations have partnered with a number of MoEs and other government ministries, including in Belize and Saint Lucia, to provide cash grants, food packages, hygiene supplies, activity and play books, toys and other interventions to assist vulnerable families in the pandemic.

## **9. Ensure that data and statistics include students from marginalized groups**

Across the board, emphasis should be placed on ensuring that education data identifies students with disabilities, students with migrant or refugee status, and students from indigenous populations so that the situation of these vulnerable groups can be properly recorded in order to inform policy responses (World Bank, 2020).

## **D. Concluding remarks**

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the education landscape to such an extent that its impact on the sector (and the lessons learned in responding to the crisis) must be factored into education planning both for recovery and for the achievement of SDG 4 with its commitment to quality education for all. The loss of structure provided by schools, social networks, and safe spaces has affected all students. This fact in itself requires that MHPSS in education is implemented as a priority, particularly when confronting the persistent intersecting vulnerabilities of marginalized communities which are now amplified.

The countries engaged in this study have found creative ways to address MHPSS in education and the responses implemented by the various countries have signalled the agility and capacities of MoEs to adapt and transform education systems to meet the COVID-19 crisis and prepare for its post-pandemic realities. These responses have been driven by the nature and extent of this disruptive event, the demographics of those impacted, available resources, the capacities of the response teams, and the prevailing socio-cultural context of the countries. COVID-19 has indeed dictated the parameters of the

response, with mitigation protocols providing a rigid and contained space in which pre-emptive, remedial and sustained action can be taken.

The post-pandemic reality will require more robust integration mechanisms to address gaps in the psychosocial components of e-learning, particularly in any further emergency response. An integrated, multifaceted MHPSS framework, systemized delivery and the scaling up of many of the interventions already started by MoEs will create more resilient education systems after the crisis. The multimedia approach via TV and Radio, production of short interactive programming, videos, webinars, e-flyers and the provision of virtual counselling sessions, helplines, and parent and teacher capacity building interventions are working to build a culture of awareness of these issues. Ongoing efforts require MHPSS plans which meet strategic objectives and are supported by the capacities of general counsellors, HFLE teachers and other psychosocial professionals in education, to sustain and build on the rapid COVID-19 response of the countries.

Efforts to maintain continuity of education through the pandemic, especially for the most marginalized and vulnerable students, must now be combined with MHPSS and SEL delivery as both a COVID-19 response and a developmental component of standard education delivery. Integrating MHPSS in systemwide frameworks will build flexibility, capability and resiliency in education sector professionals, students, families and communities, and help to build the institutional and social resiliency that will be necessary to face the development challenges of the future.



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