Supporting Students and Teachers in Remote Education: School-based Mental Health Professionals' Role during Virtual Instruction

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Abstract

This article was authored to illustrate how school-based mental health professionals can provide pragmatic support to teachers and students in virtual environments. Although K12 education has had remote options for many years, the COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated issues that may occur with virtual learning. School-based mental health professionals can provide resources and interventions to assist students, teachers, and caregivers in navigating the academic difficulties that may occur in remote education. Additionally, these mental health professionals can assist in providing socio-emotional and behavioral support and interventions. By promoting and advocating for equity in education, school-based mental health professionals can help students meet their educational goals and prepare for the future. Implications for school-based mental health professions and future research areas are included.

Key words: remote education, virtual learning, social-emotional learning, pandemic

Due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), the 2020-2021 academic year witnessed a sweeping migration of schools to online learning. Aside from the increased morbidity and mortality that the COVID-19 pandemic brought upon vulnerable populations, the mitigation response of social distancing and safer at home placed great emotional, mental, and educational hardship on all in the community, especially at risk populations. Teachers were challenged to adjust to an instructional environment wherein the preponderance of their training and expertise did not readily translate (Affouneh et al., 2020). Alongside teachers, school-based mental health professionals were challenged to rearticulate how, as support personnel, they could positively contribute to student learning and emotional wellbeing during this unprecedented time. In a response to this change in educational programming, school-based mental health professionals needed to be knowledgeable about how virtual learning environments might impact student access to academic supports, student social skill development, and student ability to emotionally regulate.

Although the initial impact of COVID-19 has greatly subsided, the unknown future consequences of the Delta variant and the presence of parents and guardians who have elected to maintain virtual learning through districts who have implemented continued remote options demonstrate the need for educating teachers regarding the best practices for virtual education (New York Times, 2021). The purpose of this article is to illustrate how school-based mental health professionals can provide pragmatic support to teachers and students in a virtual environment during remote instruction.

School-Based Mental Health Professionals

School-based mental health professionals include school social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists. Though school mental health professionals have unique training, credentialing, and practice models, they share overlapping expertise (Ziomek-Daigle, 2016). All utilize knowledge of child and adolescent development to support students' success across the grade levels, provide crisis prevention and intervention, coordinate schoolwide practices, and offer consultation and professional development to teachers, administrators, and parents (Crothers et al., 2020). Historically, collaboration between school-based mental health professionals centered on educational plans and interventions for students with disabilities. More recently the ascent of multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), in addition to the call to address the needs of the whole child, have formalized and broadened their collaborative efforts (Ziomek-Daigle, 2016). Researchers have identified interprofessional collaboration as key to addressing students' behavioral and social-emotional learning needs, particularly as school-based mental health professionals encounter oversized caseloads, which in turn impairs their ability to provide high impact student support services (Crothers et al., 2020). Moreover, the direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic have further aggravated the mental health of school aged children and increased learning gaps (Phelps & Sperry, 2020). In this milieu it is imperative for school-based helpers to leverage their collective expertise to mitigate the consequences of an unprecedented disruption to their students' K-12 journey.

Challenges Associated with Remote Instruction

Students in remote learning environments may struggle with higher rates of stress due to a lack of enjoyment in the virtual space, limited opportunity for social interaction, and issues with technology and hardware (Dewaele et al., 2019; Penna and Stara, 2007; Rohman et al., 2020; Ssekakubo et al., 2011). School-based mental health professionals are well positioned to be a support to both teachers and students during this unconventional educational space and the resulting challenges. Throughout the decades school-based mental health professionals have consistently focused on an ecological perspective to coordinating efforts of schools, families, and communities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Clancy, 1995; Corbin, 2005; Frey & Dupper, 2005; NASW, 2012; Sabatino, 2009) to improve students' academic achievement and social, emotional, and behavioral skills by using a unique perspective of viewing the person in his or her environment (ASCA, 2019; NASW, 2012). While COVID-19 and the resulting move to temporary and long-term virtual education has been a new experience for many teachers and districts, leveraging the support of the local school-based helpers can be the key to maintaining effective outcomes for students. In the following sections, recommendations for best practices to address the academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of students will be provided. Additional descriptions and activities for each section can be located in the resources included in Table 1.

Teaching and Learning in Online Settings

Research conducted prior to the pandemic outlines the additional supports, beyond academic instruction, to ensure students' success in the context of remote schooling. Of note, researchers have indicated that successful instruction is contingent upon modifying learning activities to address the exigencies of virtual settings, accommodating differences in their students' learning styles, and reconceptualizing behavior management practices, as well as the need for their students as "technology consumers" to be digitally literate (Parkes et al., 2014). Similarly, other researchers have emphasized the need to support teachers in virtual classroom engagement and classroom management techniques (Milliken, 2019), as well as best practices in screening, assessment, and evaluation within a virtual framework (Kebritchi et al., 2017). School-based mental health professionals can bolster student and teacher adjustment through an emphasis on effective programs aimed at support beyond the curriculum and virtual classroom setting (Affouneh et al., 2020).

This shift from traditional educational practices to more remote learning impacts student outcomes (Baytiyeh, 2018; Song et al., 2004).

Virtual schooling is challenging for students who are accustomed to a traditional school setting as they must adjust to not having a teacher standing in front of them for immediate feedback (Littlefield, 2018). Learning styles of individual students must be taken into consideration when determining the needs of each student. Technically, an individual's learning style refers to the preferential way in which the student absorbs, processes, comprehends, and retains information (Cerbin, 2011). School-based mental health professionals are trained in effective assessment techniques (ASCA, 2019; Clark, 1998; Frantz et al., 2017; Harrison & Harrison, 2009; Milner et al., 2020; NASW, 2012) and can assist educators with identifying the best practices for learners who are struggling in the virtual space. Assessment processes can be beneficial in supporting students' needs within a virtual classroom framework. Through learning style assessments and the use of functional behavior assessments, school-based helpers can work with teachers to develop effective student support plans that will benefit the students' needs through function-based approaches that are adapted to the virtual platform (Vasquez et al., 2017). With the findings of these assessments, educators can respond to individual students' needs more efficiently within the virtual classroom environment.

Digital Literacy

Simply tackling new technology and attending school outside of a traditional classroom can be frustrating. Assisting students and care providers with technology and digital literacy is an important component of ensuring effective academic outcomes in the online school environment. The National Education Association (NEA; 2014) indicates that technology is constantly emerging around us and should be an expected component of every student's learning experience. Twenty-first century skills are embedded in most current K-12 curriculums; however, some students may still struggle with digital literacy in the virtual environment. Digital literacy refers to an individual's ability to find, evaluate, and compose clear information through writing and other media on various digital platforms (Buckingham, 2010). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting temporary and ongoing virtual education, the need for assisting students, and even teachers, with expanding digital literacy skills has become more evident than ever before (Favale et al., 2020). Many nontraditional technology consumers that struggle with digital literacy will fall into the category of "digital immigrant" (Prensky, 2001). Although digital immigrants are not as fluent in technological practices, with the guidance of support systems, digital supports, training, and effective coaching, even non-traditional technology consumers can be successful within an online educational program or with using technology (Parkes et al., 2014). After screening to determine levels of digital literacy, school-based mental health professionals can connect technology consumers to supports and coaching programs that focus on reviewing the use of technology in education, which are proven effective strategies to enhance the student's educational journey (Song et al., 2004).

Though students frequently possess more technological knowledge and skills than their caregivers, they still require support to understand and utilize effective and appropriate skills to navigate online learning platforms and the online world in general. Minecraft for Education has developed an online training and game-based program to teach digital citizenship and literacy to children ages 6-13. This intervention can be embedded into the class by the teacher, or it can be implemented by school-based helpers via small group instruction for identified students who are struggling in the online classroom. The Digital Citizenship Minecraft module includes a teacher lesson plan, script, activities, and step-by-step process. The activity aims to assist students with defining and demonstrating responsible digital citizenship within a digital environment (see Table 1).

Students' Academic Needs

In addition to promoting digital literacy, school-based mental health professionals can assist teachers through supporting the use of evidence-based classroom activities that enhance student outcomes. School-based helpers are often trained in theory and techniques that can translate well to a virtual setting. One method, Active Student Response (ASR), can greatly assist the teacher with gauging students' academic needs. ASR techniques are grounded in the field of behaviorism and operate by increasing opportunities for reinforcement during class time, typically in the form of instructor praise once a response is provided (Twyman & Heward, 2016). ASR techniques are strategies used to elicit observable responses from students in a classroom and to determine the level of understanding students have following a lecture or direct instruction. ASR can be easily embedded into the virtual classroom by using polling systems, responses in the chat box, the reaction icons in the online classroom, and a simple thumbs up or thumbs down response from the students in the class. Additionally, Minecraft for Education has a creative program called *Inspiration Island* that is a game-based interactive group lesson that includes a lesson plan aimed at supporting learner's ability to problem solve, work collaboratively with others, and become more aware of how their own behaviors impact others (see Table 1).

Students' Behavioral Needs and Classroom Management

Behavioral needs and concerns of students do not disappear just because the brick-and-mortar schoolhouse is no longer the avenue for services. Some educators believe that the virtual learning environment assists teachers in the management of distractions which often occur in traditional classrooms (talking out, out of seat, roaming, physical aggression, etc.) (Baytiyeah, 2018; Ronfeldt et al., 2013); however, the virtual classroom presents many of the same struggles with less ability for the teacher or support staff to intervene in an effective manner (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) techniques delineate the importance of developing rules and expectations to ensure successful outcomes for students in the classroom (Rosanbaulm & Murray, 2017). School-based mental health professionals can support teachers in developing effective PBIS techniques adapted for the virtual platform. Rules and expectations should be displayed and reviewed each day in the beginning of the class as a prompt and reminder. Teachers can use the screen share in their online platform to display the classroom rules visually as they verbally review them in the beginning of each class (Saxena, 2020). Additionally, in times of uncertainty, children need consistency and predictability. Providing predictability assists in grounding the student and regulating their nervous system because they know what to expect (Rosanbaulm & Murray, 2017). School-based mental health professionals can support teachers in developing predictability in their classrooms through simple classroom management techniques. Consistency in the virtual classroom setting can be obtained by keeping a daily agenda/schedule and using a similar schedule daily. Starting each class by sharing the class schedule, agenda, and planned activities helps maintain stability in the classroom (Saxena, 2020).

Social-emotional Learning

Social-emotional development of learners is a current and relevant topic in education, but the concept of addressing these needs in a virtual platform has yet to be researched or discussed (McBrien et al., 2009). Learning at home may impact students' socialization in general because they spend less time interacting in person with peers (Baytiyeah, 2018). Also, not going to school may increase students' depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation (Allison & Attisha, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting online instruction, many students expressed a desire to return to a traditional school setting where there would be constant in-person interaction with other students and with teachers, but some parents elected to continue utilizing remote instruction, even once schools returned to in-person options (Levin & Kim, 2020). Furthermore, some students find the amount of time required to be in front of a computer overwhelming which can be linked to lower psychological wellbeing (Babic et al., 2017). Many reports of "Zoom exhaustion" and virtual overload have been reported since the beginning of the pandemic (Nadler, 2020). Students who experience technology exhaustion report the following symptoms: easily distracted and off task due to environmental stimuli, difficulty staying focused and attending to needed information, extreme fatigue, eye dryness, decreased interaction, difficulty sleeping at night, and decreased class participation (Chandra, 2020). Due to this increased challenge in sustaining healthy social interaction for online learners, school-based mental health professionals can be creative and offer support to the student and family to ensure that the social-emotional development of youth continues within the virtual platform (Katzman & Stanton, 2020).

The rapid pivot to online schooling presented educators with a steep learning curve and corresponding need for timely and relevant professional development. School-based mental health professionals can provide indirect services to students through providing educators with professional development on best practices in adapting to social-emotional and developmental learning needs of students in virtual teaching. Areas of professional development can include the use of virtual breaks, as well as kinesthetic and mindfulness activities.

In virtual settings frequent breaks are a useful strategy for promoting student engagement, yet some learners will need more breaks than others. Working with the students to develop a cue, prompt, or break card procedure for requesting more time "off screen" assists by increasing student communication skills, autonomy, and the feeling of being in control of their educational environment. It is important to know what times of day, classes, or content the student might ask for more breaks. School-based mental health professionals can assist with data collection, functional based assessments, and the development of an effective break card procedure. Break card procedures in the virtual world can be as simple as the student holding up a red card as a prompt to show the teacher that they are requesting a break (Babin et al., 2016).

Once the request is acknowledged, the teacher can message the student (through the chat box) to first thank them for asking for a break, and then to let the student know if they can take a break and for how long. If the student is offered a break after the request, the teacher must ensure that it is for a finite amount of time (no more than 2 minutes). The teacher can place this student in an individual "break out room" for the allotted time so that the student is automatically brought back to class when the timer ends. When the student returns within the time allotted, the teacher can message the student thanking them for returning. This will give them some sense of control over the environment, but the break is still guided by the teacher.

If a teacher is struggling with an identified student or classroom with disruptive behaviors, then they may need to seek additional support. School-based mental health professionals can gather data on the times of day in which the student may need more support and conduct observations during the time of day that the student is most likely to struggle. In terms of direct support, school-based mental health professionals can utilize a "break out" session during the class to address a student's specific skill deficit. Empirically supported strategies include promoting self-regulation, reviewing and role-playing classroom expectations, and preparing the student to move back into the virtual classroom with peers. While these interventions are empirically supported, they would not be deployed as a punitive measure and can be faded out slowly over time by utilizing a self-monitoring system attached to a reinforcement procedure (Dadds & Tully, 2019).

School-based helpers can provide supports on evidence-based and applicable social-emotional programming that can be embedded into the daily virtual classroom through break activities. Teaching educators effective kinesthetic activities and movement tips will benefit the students and break up the monotony of the academic virtual day. Movement activities can be as simple as stretching together, doing yoga poses, or performing more advanced game-like movement activities (Lindt & Miller, 2017). Supporting students in learning skills to regulate their emotions and combat virtual exhaustion can be provided with guidance by the teacher and school-based mental health professional through mindfulness and meditation practices (Parker et al., 2014). School-based mental health professionals can facilitate grounding activities, guided meditations, progressive muscle relaxation, and guided imagery exercises into the classroom; provide instruction and technique scripts that teachers can use within their classrooms; or even pre-record mindful videos that can be played in the classroom during break times. Embedding mindfulness moments throughout the day can assist students and teachers with staying grounded, focused, and regulated (Lindt & Miller, 2017).

Social skill development of students during times of crisis is an integral part of virtual educational programming. Setting specific times throughout the day to embed these social skills curriculum and activities will greatly benefit the learner. It may also help if the school-based mental health professionals can have a dedicated time during the day to engage with the learners utilizing an evidence-based social skills intervention to ensure that these connections are still made in the virtual environment. Teachers can support social skill development through structured social interventions during break sessions throughout the day or even offer a group-based activity aimed at enhancing social skills interaction within the virtual world.

Mental Health Support

Emergent research indicates that students' mental health needs are more acute than ever (Phelps & Sperry, 2020) and underlines the need for ongoing support services (Salerno, 2016; Schulte-Körne, 2016), especially during the changed educational landscape. Addressing students' mental health needs is often a secondary concern in educational settings, yet schools who decide not to include these supports as part of their programming may increase student risk for further life disruptions (Baytiyeah, 2018). All school-based mental health professionals are trained in brief counseling techniques and can decrease the negative impact of COVID-19 by utilizing a tele-health framework to implement group and individual counseling (ASCA, n. d.; IFSW, 2020). For those students whose mental health needs exceed the limits of brief interventions, it is imperative that mechanisms to connect students with more intensive mental health supports are available in virtual settings and teachers are knowledgeable of how to link students to care services. To address barriers to mental health services, school-based helpers can leverage their training in advocacy, ethical codes, and position statements that outline their direct service roles during remote education (ASCA, n. d., NASW, 2012) and advocate for time with students in need of brief therapy and/or make referrals for those students requiring more intensive mental health services.

Table 1: List of Resources for Supporting Students in Virtual Education.

Action	Resources
Training Teachers on Virtual Education Best Practices	Teachers can also access free training for educators by professionals at google https://teachercenter.withgoogle.com/first-day-trainings/welcome-to-google-slides and Microsoft Teams https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/education/products/teams
Teaching Digital Literacy to Students	For more information about this lesson plan visit: https://education.minecraft.net/lessons/digital-citizenship-2
Developing Rules and Expectations in the Virtual World	For more about setting up effective classroom rules and expectations visit this site: https://www.pbisworld.com/tier-1/review-pbis-expectations-and-rules/
Developing Agendas and Predictability in the Classroom	For more ideas on how to develop a consistent and predictable classroom you can visit https://www.pbis.org/topics/classroom-pbis
Multimodal Learning	For more information about multimodal learning https://www.prodigygame.com/main-en/blog/multimodal-learning
Developing Break Card Procedures for the Online Environment	For more information about setting up a break card procedure click this link https://ed-psych.utah.edu/school-psych/_documents/Break-Cards-How-to-Use-Them.pdf
Movement Activities in the Virtual Classroom	For some simple examples of movement-based break activities check out this website: https://blog.reallygoodstuff.com/getting-the-wiggles-out-3-movement-activities-you-cant-live-without/
Evidence Based Social Skills Programs	For a list of supportive and evidence-based social skills curriculum click this link: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Intervention/763
Virtual Social Skills Group Activities	For more information about this Minecraft program for educators visit https://education.minecraft.net/lessons/digital-citizenship-2
Mindfulness and Meditation	To find helpful examples of guided meditations: https://www.innerhealthstudio.com/meditation-scripts.html ; for progressive muscle relaxation: https://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/TF-%20CBT/pages/4%20Emotion%20Regulation%20Skills/Client%20Handouts/Relaxation/Relaxation%20Script%20for%20Younger%20Children.pdf ; and for sample guided imagery: https://mindfulnessexercises.com/meditation-scripts-for-kids/
Grounding Activities	Here are a few grounding activities that are easily embedded into the classroom within a few simple steps and in under 10 minutes: https://www.healthline.com/health/grounding-techniques#physical-techniques

Conclusion

During remote learning, the need for students to maintain access to essential educational, behavioral, social-emotional, and mental health services continues, and may intensify. This necessity was highlighted in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic due to the research and findings that infectious disease outbreaks or catastrophic events (e.g., tornado, earthquake) often cause widespread disruption to academic access (Di Pietro, 2017); however, school-based mental health professionals have training and expertise in supporting students during crisis, for both manmade and natural disasters (Heath & Sheen, 2005; Knox & Roberts, 2005; Werner, 2014). Even before the struggles of a pandemic, access to effective behavioral and mental health service delivery was a complex problem and one that many practitioners have been attempting to overcome for some time (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2016) in that there are often more consumers in need of services than there are practitioners who can serve them (Saxena, et al., 2007) and a lack of effective pre-service training (Koller & Bertel, 2006). Additionally, there is evidence that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had profound psychological and social effects on the community at large (Sher, 2020; Wang, et al., 2019) which may persist for months and years to come. Social isolation, anxiety, chronic stress, and economic difficulties may lead to the development or exacerbation of depression, anxiety, substance use, and other psychiatric disorders in vulnerable populations, such as underserved students (Qui et al., 2020).

School-based mental health professionals have historically supported classroom instruction through consultation and building students' non-cognitive skills that undergird successful school outcomes. These professionals can continue to serve in this role by adapting their skill set to a virtual setting, engaging in advocacy efforts to ensure students receive continued access to school mental health services, and providing teachers with consultation and professional development, in addition to offering direct behavioral and mental health support during instructional time. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a unique set of instructional challenges that has required educators to reconsider best practices in teaching and learning. The long-standing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are unknown; however, there are indications that some changes due to the pandemic will continue long-term. Therefore, many districts have announced that they will continue to provide a virtual option for 2021-2022 (Thompson, 2021). During remote instruction, both ongoing and during times of crisis, school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers can advocate for their services by providing data-driven evidence for the effectiveness of their programs. Through creative delivery of comprehensive programing, school-based mental health professionals can ensure that all students' needs are met.

The short and long-term effects of vast numbers of K12 students receiving online instruction, both during times of crisis such as pandemics or disasters and by choice, is a novel area for educational researchers. Future research can focus on how to deliver equitable academic instruction, socio-emotional support, behavioral services, and mental-health support to all students, regardless of the method of instruction. Implementing the supports outlined in this article, along with monitoring students' progress through formal and informal assessments, can help to further examine evidence-based best practices for working with students during remote learning.

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