

GOVT TO TACKLE STRESS IN SCHOOLS

By Jacky Achan

At first, it was the silence that worried the teacher most. Her student, who was once lively in class and quick to answer questions, had slowly withdrawn into silence. She stopped participating in lessons, kept to herself during break time and often looked anxious and distracted. Instead of dismissing it as teenage mood swings or indiscipline, as many would have, the teacher sensed something deeper was wrong and chose to pay attention. She began reaching out quietly and consistently, speaking to the girl with patience and kindness and giving her space to talk without fear of judgment.

With time, the student finally opened up about the problems she was facing at home and the anxiety she carried with her into the classroom each day. Slowly, through reassurance, listening and practical coping support, the girl regained confidence in class, reconnected with friends and rediscovered the lively child she used to be.

Their story reflects a growing, but often hidden reality and crisis unfolding inside Ugandan schools where many

learners silently battle with stress, emotional pressure, anxiety and difficult home situations while teachers, often with little training or support themselves, do what they can to help children cope and protect their mental wellbeing, as well as ensure their mental health is sound.

As part of the effort to improve mental health care in Ugandan schools, the Ministry of Education and Sports has launched an initiative where materials designed to offer mental health and psychosocial support to learners will be distributed.

Dr Hafisa Kasule, the technical officer for non-communicable diseases, including mental health, at the World Health Organisation (WHO) office in Uganda, said the materials will help teachers identify early signs of distress, provide age-appropriate tools for students to understand and manage their emotions.

Kasule made the remarks during the launch of the materials in Kampala on Thursday. She said the new materials are designed to make mental health and psychosocial support accessible.

"They will help teachers

UNESCO BOSS SPEAKS

The UNESCO regional director for Eastern Africa and representative to Uganda, Louise Haxthausen described mental health among young people and teachers as a growing global concern.

"Today, an estimated 10% to 20% of young people experience mental health challenges while nearly one in seven in sub-Saharan Africa face significant psychological difficulties," she said.

"At the same time, teachers, the frontline educators, are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, anxiety and burnout, which directly impacts the quality of education."

Haxthausen said education cannot be truly inclusive or transformative if learners are not safe, healthy and supported.



Education ministry officials and other stakeholders launching the materials recently

identify early signs of distress, provide age-appropriate tools for students to understand and manage their emotions, and foster positive, inclusive schooling environments."

She said the materials will reduce stigma and encourage open conversations about mental health. The newly developed materials include learner guides, booklets, charts and mental health messages designed to promote emotional resilience, stress management, healing, listening and psychosocial support in schools.

Saidi Nsamba, the National Co-ordinator for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support at the Ministry of Education, said the intervention followed repeated concerns from students who reported feeling overwhelmed, emotionally drained and unable to cope with growing academic and social pressures.

According to Nsamba, the goal is to popularise the use of mental well-being and psychosocial support materials among stakeholders to build resilient school communities and improve learning outcomes.

He noted that supportive reference materials can help reduce stress, depression and suicidal thoughts while improving academic performance and reducing school dropout rates.

Yvonne Laruni, a Programmes Officer at Raising Voices, who was part of the team that developed the materials, said with an estimated 22.9% of children in Uganda affected by mental health conditions and fewer than one in 10% receiving proper care, schools need safe spaces where learners can openly discuss mental health challenges without fear of judgment.

Laruni said learners in schools such as Kyasa Secondary School in Wakiso district have already started participating in conversations aimed at ending stigma surrounding mental health.

Juliet Muzoora, the Commissioner for Government Secondary Education, described the launch of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support materials as another milestone during Mental Health Awareness Month.

"It marks another milestone as we commemorate the Mental Awareness Month of May with the launch of a set of support materials," she said.

She said the ministry created the Department of Guidance and Counselling and conducted orientation for selected educational managers, teacher trainers, teachers and peer champions across 37 districts.