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Commentary: The Challenges and Future Directions of School Based Counselling in Nigeria

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges of school-based counselling and its future direction in Nigeria. In this endeavour, the author discusses the following possible challenges militating against the smooth running of effective school-based counselling services to include inadequate counselling materials and work tools, deployment of school counsellors to perform non-counselling duties, insufficient training of professional counsellors, lack of clarification of the role of school counsellors, school principals' low collaboration with school counsellors amongst others. The paper also focused on ways and means of improving school-based counselling services to include enactment of proper policy intervention, putting in place a functional school inspectorate division, improving counselling facilities and equipment in schools, encouragement of regular counsellors attendance at workshops, seminars and conferences (i.e., training and retraining of school counsellors) for self-capacity building amongst others.

Keywords: challenges, school-based counselling and effective learning.

Introduction

Since the period of political independence in 1960 frantic effort have been made to improve the quality of education in Nigeria. The national policies on education were revised and the educational system reviewed in terms of structure and curriculum. In the same vein, a constant feature of the efforts that have been made to improve the quality of Nigerian education is the emphasis on the institutionalization of counselling services at all levels. The reason for ensuring that counselling services are well entrenched in Nigerian's education, is not farfetched because it is viewed as a helping intervention program that is a veritable instrument for boosting of learners' capacity to achieve their goals for being in school.

The counsellor is a provider of services which are personal-social, vocational, and academic. It is also well known that the reality of counselling services in Nigeria education has not matched expectations. Ngwakwe (2016) noted that more learning problems arise as more students go to school. She stated that the increase in the

students' population has witnessed a rise in the incidence of juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, sex offences, students' unrest and violence. Researches, observations and experiences of school practitioners and scholars show that many schools do not have counsellors and where there are counsellors, the environment for carrying out their duties is less than empowering (Nwamuo & Ugwembulam, 2011; Ojeme, 2011). School principals use counsellors to do non-counselling services. Some are made to teach, while others are required to carry our administrative functions. Usually, basic materials and resources for school counselling services may not be available.

In the same vein, the schools do not provide adequate time for counsellors to meet with students to assist with their personal-social, vocational, and academic issues. It is conceivable in this situation that the goals for placing counselling services as an integral part of the school support programme are not functioning optimally and effectively. Based on the acknowledged role and relevance of counselling however, it is also indisputable that for real progress to be made in Nigerian Education, counsellors must have their role properly entrenched and facilitated. This is also more relevant given the turmoil within the larger society. Parents are unable to fully discharge their functions to their children and consequently, children come to school unprepared to learn. Since students' problems are not addressed at home, they bring them to the school. The counsellor is supposed to intervene, stabilizing the child by providing counselling services. Regrettably, these professionals are not fully in a position to carry out this function not because of unpreparedness but because of environmental challenges within the school.

With this background in mind, it is obvious that the counsellor's role in the Nigerian school system needs to be revisited. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of counsellors in the school, the characteristics of an effective counsellor, the challenges they face, and the way forward to ensure a more robust counselling services intervention in Nigerian's education.

The Role of the Counsellors

The statutory entrenchment of guidance counsellors in the schools is not a luxury but a necessity (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). This is because of their

relevance to ensuring quality education in schools. Professionally, counselling is seen as a helping occupation that intervenes to help students understand themselves more to enhance their learning and to make better occupational choices. Students are assisted by the counsellors to understand current career opportunities in the society as well as emerging career opportunities. School counsellors also assist students to identify their potentials, abilities and interest and match these attributes with available career opportunities to facilitate their effective adjustment in their choice of career.

Furthermore, counsellors are useful in assisting parents with developmental issues such as helping them to solve their emotional and personal-social problems. Among other functions, Counselling Association of Nigeria (2003) highlighted the following major roles of Nigerian school counsellors:

- Counselling students with educational, vocational and personal-social concerns
- Orientation of new students.
- Information collection and dissemination
- Referral services
- Placement and follow-up services
- Parents' help

Counselling

Counsellors are to individually support students, forming an inter-personal relationship. They should assist the students to prevent and resolve their educational problems in schools. For example, students are often faced with the problem of making suitable educational choices. Some of these concerns result from parental pressures and rigidity. Some parents make educational plans for their children, despite the lack of knowledge of the current educational world. It is the role of the counsellors to assist students to make proper decisions especially in their choice of school subjects, having considered their abilities and interest. This would no doubt help prevent frustration, maladjustment and any possible dropout while in school.

Orientation of New Students

The school counsellor is also charged with the task of orientating new students in order to familiarize them with the school environment and the school curriculum.

Information Collection and Dissemination

School counsellors collect and disseminate vital information to students and parents on school subjects and courses, opportunities for further studies, as well as careers and career training opportunities within the locality.

Referral Services

Due to limited time, skill and role expectations for

counsellors, referral to other human service professionals and agencies becomes a necessary job duty. This referral action is usually dependent on the agreement of the student or his parents.

Placement and Follow-up Services

Counsellors assume some responsibilities for placement of students, and also plan with teachers and the administrator for the grouping and scheduling of the students. Also, counsellors follow-up on the placement of students to monitor their progress.

Parents' Help

School counsellors collaborate with parents in many ways to address and prevent emotional problems of parents which also affect the functioning of their children. Counsellors organize meetings with parents, in which they share educational information of students which are relevant for parents' knowledge. These professionals also provide parents with information about the progress of the school and the community. Anagbogu (2008) asserted that parents are not all-knowing in the upbringing of their children. Thus, school counsellors play an important role to assist parents. They are specially trained to assess the specific needs of each student and to plan an appropriate educational guidance programme.

The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013) recognized the role of the school counsellor as vital to the actualization of the national educational objectives, such as to prepare children for useful, productive and happier living. The importance of counselling is viewed by Odeniyi and Olubukola (2014) as a solution to human challenges, not only in the school system but also throughout the globe.

The Characteristics of an Effective Counsellor

There is no universal blueprint as to what constitutes the characteristics of an effective counsellor in Nigeria. However, authorities like Denga (1986), Hough (1996; see Table 1 for additional characteristics), and Oladele (2000) listed the following qualities:

Empathy

Counsellors must be able to listen, understand the feelings of clients and to perceive the world as clients see it.

Rapport

Counsellors must be able to establish rapport with their clients in order to allow for "ventilation." They must have a good sense of humour to help with rapport-building.

Confidentiality

Counsellors must be able to keep secret any

information from their clients by not sharing clients' information outside the boundaries of the counselling relationship.

Genuineness

Counsellors must be sincere and natural. They must present their real selves during the counselling session and must be genuinely committed to helping clients.

Intellectual Competence

Counsellors must be professionally educated and not "trained." They should possess a thorough knowledge of human behaviour. They ought to learn specialized procedures of counselling and be imaginative.

Acceptance

Counsellors have preconditions for accepting clients into the counselling relationship. They communicate feeling of total acceptance for the clients at all times.

Understanding

Counsellors need to have a patient understanding of their clients and avoid showing signs of boredom.

Sensitivity

Counsellors must have the capacity to be aware of what is happening in the counselling process. They are socially sensitive or socially active. To be effective in rendering counselling services, it will be very helpful for the counsellors to be sensitive to issues such as drug abuse, exam malpractice, sexual harassment and other deviant behaviour patterns that may be associated with the students.

Flexibility

Counsellors should demonstrate flexibility in their interventions strategies and must be adaptable to alternative solutions to problems.

Challenges of School Based Counsellors

Despite the Federal Government's recognition of the relevance of counselling services in schools, there are still many issues that negatively impact the effective implementation of guidance and counselling services in Nigerian schools. Scholars in the field of guidance and counselling, have a consensus opinion that challenges include but not limited to the following issues.

- Lack of proper counselling facilities and equipment in the school system. Ojeme (2011) and Nwamuo and Ugwembulam (2011) demonstrated that counsellors' needs are not being met satisfactorily for counsellors to effectively discharge their duties. Aishatu and Luka (2016) opined that effective counselling cannot take place in the schools even where

there are professional counsellors, except needed counselling materials and tools are provided.

- Deployment of counsellors to perform non-counselling roles. School authorities are known to use counsellors for non-counselling services. Nwamuo and Ugwembulam (2011) pointed out that school principals' administration is a hindrance to the effective implementation of guidance programmes. School principals preferred school counsellors to carry out non-counselling duties such as teaching, registration and scheduling of all new students and other routine administrative work at the detriment of their core counselling roles. The continuous deployment of school counsellors to non-counselling duties detracts from full complementary contributions of counsellors to the education of the child in the school system. This practice brings about low job satisfaction, professional frustration and abuse or misuse of school counsellors.
- High ratio of students to counsellors. There is ample evidence that many schools do not have guidance counsellors and where they are available, it is usually not more than one or two in a large school (Nwamuo & Ugwembulam, 2011; Ojeme, 2011). The insufficient availability of competent and professional counsellors in schools gives rise to teachers doing layperson's job of counselling students. In this circumstance, it is obvious that students are the losers.
- Insufficient training of professional counsellors themselves. The curriculum for the training of counsellors in higher education is not of sufficient depth and scope to effectively provide learning experiences and knowledge to prepare counsellors for service. Ngwakwe (2016) noted that Nigerian counsellors seem to be inadequately trained to handle issues that cut across educational, vocational and personal social problems.
- Limited counselling period on the school timetable. Over domination of the school curriculum space by academic work and other extra-curricular activities diminishes the time for students to interface with school counsellors.
- Lack of clarification of the role of school counsellors. Some school counsellors have had unpleasant experiences because of this lack of counsellors' role clarification. Idowu (2004) noted that some school principals do not seem to properly understand the roles of counsellors while vice principals perceive them as rivals. In the same vein, Orameh (2014) observed that

school counselling in Nigeria, appears to be immersed in controversy regarding the roles of school counsellors in the school system.

- School principals' low collaboration with school counsellors. Studies related to the challenges of effective implementation of comprehensive school guidance and counselling programme and on critical incidents facilitating secondary school guidance counsellor-principal relationship in Edo and Delta States, have shown that some school principals are known to marginalize the school counsellors (Nwamuo & Ugwegbulam, 2011; Ojeme, 2011, 2015). This has posed a big challenge to the school counsellors as the enabling support for school counsellor by the school principal, could influence to a large extent the effectiveness of the school counsellor.
- Low level of continuing education for the school counsellors and occupational incentives by school management to enhance counsellors' job performance and satisfaction.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that challenges are numerous and difficult to overcome. These areas need to be urgently addressed as learners need to be properly assisted as they develop into responsible adults, namely to be useful to themselves, their families and society at large.

Way-Forward Policy Recommendations

This paper has attempted to analyse the role of the school counsellors in Nigerian education and associated challenges. The purpose of this section of this paper is to provide an overview of the way forward for the improvement of counselling services in Nigeria's school system as follows:

1. Supportive policy enactment

The first thing to be done is to enact an effective operational policy framework to guide in a consistent and sustainable way the work of counsellors in Nigerian schools. This would enable all stakeholders in the school system to clearly understand their roles and responsibilities. Having done this, the school inspectorate division must effectively discharge their job by ensuring that schools are implementing the policy provisions guiding the role of counsellors and issue appropriate sanctions for noncompliance.

2. Improving counselling facilities and equipment in schools

It is well known that Nigerian Schools do not have appropriate counselling facilities and equipment. The following are recommended:

- A spacious and well-ventilated office space for the counsellors
- Video and playback systems for clinical demonstrations of selected episodes of child

maladjustments and behaviour modification therapies

- Audio tapes for recording counselling sessions and interventions
- Pictorial illustrations, diagrammes and reading materials that can be useful in the counselling process

3. Professionalization of counselling services in schools

Government and school management should desist from the practice of deploying untrained teachers to perform counselling functions in schools and in the same vein counsellors should not be deployed to teaching roles.

4. Training and retraining of counsellors

The professional training and education of counsellors should be overhauled to deepen their knowledge and technical skills of counselling. The scope of the curriculum for the training and education of counsellors should be expanded to enable the prospective counsellors know more about the depth of counselling process, applying knowledge from psychology, sociology, culture and history among others. Since knowledge is ever developing, it means that counsellors must continuously update their knowledge.

Furthermore, counsellors must be provided mandatory opportunities for in-service training and refresher courses for knowledge and skill development and improvement. This would ensure sustainability of high quality counselling services in schools.

5. School principals and counsellors collaboration

Principals' cooperation and support for the school counsellors should be encouraged. To improve their effectiveness, school counsellors should establish a positive and cordial collaborative working relationship with the school principals. Through collaboration, these educators are more likely to enhance student educational outcomes.

6. Scheduling counselling in the school timetable

Principals should modify the school time table to accommodate the guidance programme. Much time is required by school counsellors to effectively discharge their duties such as attending to the needs of students, teachers and parents and other counselling services.

7. Incentives for counsellors

Considering the relevance of school-based counselling for the success of Nigerian education, it is considered worthwhile that government should provide some occupational incentives for counselling services providers to enable them excel in the performance of their occupational roles. Incentives should be multi-dimensional. These might include providing:

- Counsellors with appropriate work tools (e.g., properly furnished counselling office, counselling books, audio visual tapes, video and

- playback system, computers amongst others)
- Pertinent in-service training and workshops
- Monetary or other financial incentives
- Honours and awards for excellent performance of roles. The incentives should be a means of motivating and recognizing quality work.

8. Professional association support

The Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON), which is the umbrella professional body, must interface with government, school management and other stakeholders to ensure that:

- Public policy is directed at promoting counselling in schools.
- Needed resources and counselling personnel are available in schools.
- Concerned authorities are faithful in fulfilling their obligations for effective school counselling services.

9. Ministry of education inspectorate division

The Inspectorate Division of the Ministry of Education must continuously ensure its mandatory supervisory, monitoring and evaluation functions so that lapses are detected and corrected in time before they do irredeemable damages to counselling services.

10. Continuous research

Continuous research must be conducted by scholars in the field of guidance and counselling, to ensure innovations which can contribute to the improvement of counselling services in Nigerian schools.

It is to be expected that if the steps or suggestions stated here are adopted and properly applied by school administrators and counsellors, more positive outcomes could be achieved from counselling services rendered in schools that could be of benefits to the Nigerian child in the school system. The school counsellors must recommit themselves to quality service delivery as they remain the main vessels for ensuring that the expectations of counselling services are fulfilled in schools.

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, a modest attempt was made to examine the role, relevance and constraints of counselling services in Nigerian schools. Furthermore, an outline of what needs to be done to move forward was provided. For effective counselling service to take place in the schools, it is recommended that all stakeholders must show more commitment and dedication in the discharge of their responsibilities. It is imperative to refocus counselling services and widen their scope to meet with the challenges posed by secondary school students for the good of the Nigerian child and society. I hope the insights and perspectives summarized in this article will help to improve the counselling services in Nigerian schools.

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Table 1

Summary of the Qualities of an Effective Counsellor (Hough, 1996)

-
- Basic self-esteem.
 - Interest in clients.
 - Competence in relation to counselling skills.
 - Understanding of counselling theory and the process of counselling.
 - Understanding of self.
 - Respect for cultural diversity, as well as respect for one's own culture.
 - Acceptance of people from different racial and religious group.
 - Respect for people with different sexual orientation.
 - Ability to take care of self.
 - Creativity and flexibility of thinking.
 - Sense of humour.
 - Enjoyment of life.
 - Ability to form and to sustain relationships.
 - Ability to experience and to communicate empathy.
 - Ability to deal with personal problems and to ask for help when necessary.
 - Capacity to learn from mistakes and to change when necessary.
 - A sense of balance about one's own importance in relation to others.
 - Varied cultural and artistic interests.
 - Non-judgmental attitude in relation to others; and
 - Demonstrate professional attitude towards his work
-