

EDUCATION 3

This MILLENNIUM - Innovations in Theory and Practice

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN LIBRARY

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Table of Contents

Preface		vii
Acknowledgements		ix
Part One	Theoretical Foundations	
Chapter 1	Ethics and the Teaching Profession – <i>J. A. Akinpelu</i>	2
2	The Roles of Faculties of Education in African Universities – <i>Michael Omolewa</i>	17
3	Philosophical Implications of Information and Misinformation in Teaching and Learning – <i>Oluremi Ayodele-Bamisaiye</i>	29
4	Making Nigerian Educational Curricula more Relevant – <i>Ayorinde Dada, C.O.O. Kolawole and Abam Arikpo</i>	40
5	Education for Character and Learning – <i>Kola Babarinde</i>	51
Part Two	Physical Education	
6	Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Models for Health (Science) Education in the Twenty-first Century – <i>James A. Ajala</i>	64
7	Nigerian Adolescents' Perception of Values in Competitive Sports – <i>Michael Adeniyi Ajayi</i>	86
8	Improvisation of Instructional Aids in Physical Education – <i>Andrew O. Fadoju</i>	94
9	Effect of Eight Weeks Aerobic Exercise Programme on Body Composition of Female Obese - Osteoarthritic Patients – <i>J.F. Babalola and T.O. Sangobiyi</i>	105
10	Nigerian Physical Education Practitioners' Preparation for Career Relevance in the New Millennium – <i>E. O. Morakinyo</i>	113
Part Three	Library, Resources and ICT in Education	
11	Prospects for Knowledge and Information Transfer Managers in Nigeria in the New Millennium – <i>F. Adetowun Ogunsheye</i>	124

12	Learning Resources Development and Utilisation in Schools – <i>D. Folorunsho Elaturoti, D. Bisi Omiyide</i>	144
13	Getting Involved: Decentralising National Education Information to Support Operational Level Use – <i>Rosaline Opeke</i>	155
14	Management Information Systems in Education – <i>Ayo Akinwumiju, Martins Fabunmi</i>	161
15	Providing Information Communication Technology (ICT) Environments for Teaching and Learning in the Nigerian Education System – <i>A. Abimbade, A. Aremu, G.O. Adedoja</i>	172
16	Records Management in Ogun State Public Primary Schools – <i>S.O. Popoola</i>	189

Part Four Science and Vocational Technical Education

17	Increasing Girls' Access to Technical and Vocational Education (VET) in Nigeria – <i>Remi S. Longe, S.O. Adedeji</i>	202
18	Improving Mathematics and Science Curricula at the Implementation Stage – <i>M. K. Akinsola, B.O. Ogunleye</i>	211
19	Innovations in Science Teaching for the New Millennium – <i>A.M. Olagunju, Francis A. Adesoji, T.O. Iroegbu, T.A. Ige</i>	219

Part Five Health Education

20	Coping with Stress in a Stressed Society – <i>C.O. Udoh</i>	234
21	Incorporating Dying and Death Education in the School Curriculum – <i>B.O. Ogundele</i>	249
22	Health Promoting Schools: Our Precious Need – <i>O.A. Moronkola</i>	258
23	Attitude of Nursing Mothers Towards Diarrhoea Management in Oboro Local Government Area of Imo State – <i>Francisca Chika Anyanwu, Ikechukwu Emmanuel Anyanwu</i>	267

24	The Use of Exercise in the Management of Asthma – <i>Ademola Abass</i>	275
Part Six Special Education		
25	Coping with the Challenge of Giftedness in the Classroom – <i>I.A. Nwazuo</i>	286
26	Early Childhood Education for Children with Mental Retardation – <i>J.T. Eni-Olorunda, J.O. Oyundoyin, G.B. Ojo</i>	300
27	Educating the Hearing - Impaired child within the Context of Universal Basic Education – <i>J. Abiola Ademokoya, Julie N. Onwuchekwa and A.M. Oyewumi</i>	317
28	Collaborative Strategies for Educating Children with Learning Disabilities – <i>J.A. Ikujuni, S.A. Kanu</i>	327
Part Seven Evaluation in Education		
29	Evaluation for Innovation in Teaching and Learning: A Typification of Psychotherapeutic Teaching – <i>J.O. Osiki, S.O. Salami</i>	340
30	An Evaluation of Nomadic Education in Oyo State of Nigeria – <i>I.O. Osokoya, B. O, Lawal</i>	352
31	A Multi-Causal Education of Academic Performance of Nigeria Learners: Issues and Implications for National Developments – <i>A. Oyesoji Aremu, B.O. Sokan</i>	365
32	Personnel Counselling for Productivity Improvement among Selected Managers in Nigerian Organisations – <i>Ayo Hammed</i>	376
Part Eight Universal Basic Education		
33	Realising Nigeria's Millennium Education Dream – The UBE – <i>Pai Obanya</i>	388
34	The Use of Indigenous Language in Promoting Permanent Literacy and Numeracy in the UBE Programme – <i>Olusegun Akinbote, Esther Oduolowu and Temitayo Ogunsanwo</i>	415

35	The Roles of Audiology and Speech Pathology in the Universal Basic Education Programme – <i>Moji Oyebola, Kola Abiodun</i>	425
36	The Relevance of Universal Basic Education to Visually Impaired Persons in Nigeria in the new Millennium – <i>M.S. Eniola, J.O. Olukotun</i>	436
37	Access to Education, Distance Education and the Use of Modern Technology for Universal Basic Education – <i>Deborah Egunyomi</i>	452
38	The School Library Media Centre in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme – <i>D. Folorunso Elaturoti, H. Kikelomo Kolade</i>	464
39	The UBE: A Reiteration of Equity? – <i>Abiodun Okediran</i>	473
Part Nine	Adult Education, and Social Work	
40	Primordial Culture and Sustainable Community Development – <i>I. Adekeye Abiona</i>	484
41	Bereavement and Social Work Intervention in Nigeria – <i>J.O. Ojesina</i>	494
42	School Social Work in Nigeria: Providing Support for Students in Difficult Circumstances – <i>Olufunmilayo O. Folaranmi</i>	503
43	Socio-Psychological Theories for Social Work Practice – <i>J.K. Mojinyinola, T.G. Adegoke</i>	520
44	Media Techniques in Adult Education and Community Development – <i>Anjuwon J. Akinwande</i>	531
Part Ten	Education and Sustainable National Development	
45	Challenges for Sustainable Educational Development of the Nigerian Child – <i>Ajibola Falaye</i>	544
46	Career Counselling for National Development – <i>D.A. Adeyemo</i>	558
47	Creativity and Innovation in Education – <i>Julius Olarinde Akinboye</i>	578
48	Creativity and Knowledge Innovation in Education for Sustainable National Development – <i>Julius Olarinde Akinboye</i>	633
	Index	667

Chapter Forty-Two

School Social Work in Nigeria: Providing Support for Students in Difficult Circumstances

Olufunmilayo O. Folaranmi

Abstract

In this chapter, the author described some of the problems in Nigerian schools in Nigeria as being enormous ranging from general indiscipline to gross immorality, violence and eventual dropping out and or failing out of school. She therefore proposed that social work services should be introduced in all the levels of education in Nigerian schools to enable the pupils/students, their parents and communities concerned help and empower themselves to resolve these mounting social problems.

One can trace the origin of school social work in the United States of America to individual initiatives in response to the high rate of juvenile delinquency in the schools during 1906 – 1907. But since the inception of formal education in Nigeria in 1837 – 1900, experts in the field of education and child psychology have not been able to respond adequately and positively to the lingering problems threatening the success of students individually and collectively. This author recommends that school

social work should fill the gap after a careful exposition of the goals, purpose, values and philosophy of the social work profession.

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Trouble in the school is often the first sign of trouble in the child's social and emotional life. Thus, a school social work programme is part of a good preventive mental health programme.

A visit to any school in Nigeria today, whether primary, secondary or tertiary shows that there is an increasing rate of lawlessness, violence, indiscipline, failure and so on among students more than there was a couple of decades back. In other words, many more students get into the problem of dysfunction in the schools now. More often than not, the influence of such troubled students on the social functioning of the other students is significant. That is why Dave (1975) opines that 2% of a school population can disrupt the whole school. In the same vein, Skidmore, Tharckeray and Farley (1991) also support Dave's assertion that it is difficult to teach when students are disruptive and that violent behaviour creates an atmosphere that makes it difficult for others to learn or for teachers to teach. Hence, the duty and responsibility of school social workers to help students who exhibit any symptom of emotional maladjustment is very crucial.

Allen Meares (1983), Bakare (1993), Meedles and Knapp (1994) assert that the incidence of malfunctioning among students has been consistently persistent. Obemeata (1995) in support of this assertion also observed that the education system in Nigeria has become an unprofitable industry since both the primary and secondary schools produce "functional illiterates" in large numbers thus negating the goals of Nigeria's National Policy on Education. It is very sad to report here that incidents of gangsterism, hooliganism and terrorism occur periodically in all institutions in Nigeria. Both the electronic and print media report such incidents regularly.

Purpose and Principles of Social Work Practice

All the other professions like teaching, medicine, engineering and so on are easier to define than the profession of social work. However, some authors have made attempts to define social work. Schwartz (1961) defines social work as "mediating the process through which the individual and the society reach out for each other through a mutual need for self-fulfillment."

This mediating model rests on the assumption that the interest of the individual and the interests of society are essentially the same but that in a complex and changing society, the individual's desire to belong as a full and productive member, and the society's ability to integrate and enrich its people are sometimes blocked. Social work intervention is directed towards these blockages and towards freeing the individual's impetus towards health, growth belonging and the organized efforts of society to integrate its parts into a productive and dynamic whole.

In another vein, the Commission on social work practice of the National Association of Social Workers published a working definition (1958) that defined social work practice as a constellation of value, purpose, sanction, knowledge and method and it identified three purposes of social work thus:

1. To assist individuals and groups to identify and resolve or minimize problems arising out of dis-equilibrium between themselves and the environment
2. To identify potential areas of dis-equilibrium between individuals or groups and the environment in order to prevent the occurrence of dis-equilibrium.
3. To seek out, identify and strengthen the maximum potential in individuals, groups and communities.

Boehm (1958) in his own contribution defines social work as a profession which seeks to enhance the social functioning of individuals, singularly and in groups, by activities focused upon their social relationships, which constitute interactions between individuals and their environments. These activities can be grouped into three functions, restoration of impaired capacity, and provision of individual and social resources and preventions of social dysfunction.

In spite of the fact that there are so many definitions of social work, one general viewpoint which is obvious is that social work is concerned with helping and empowering individuals, families, groups and communities to resolve problems that affect their well-being on an individual or collective basis. Social workers believe in the intrinsic worth and dignity of human beings. They are committed to the values of acceptance, self-determination and respect for individuality. They are also dedicated to the welfare of individuals and the achievement of social justice for all. They believe in the obligation of all people individually and collectively to contribute to the provision of resources, services and opportunities for the overall benefit of humanity.

Social workers practice in a variety of settings which include the following: child welfare, family welfare, general and mental health, schools, corrections and the court, community development, industry, homes for the elderly and disabled and many more.

In this paper, our discussion will focus mainly on the roles and responsibilities of school social workers. Social workers are enabled to deal with a range of human problems without necessarily obtaining specialized professional credentials for every area of practice.

Development of School Social Work

School social work began in the United States of America through the efforts of private agencies and civil organizations during the period of social reform in the early twentieth century. Precisely it was first established in the schools in Boston, Hartford and New York in 1906-07 through individual/initiatives and financial support from the Commonwealth Fund. Originating as part of a programme to combat juvenile delinquency, the Commonwealth Fund helped to establish school social work programmes in thirty schools throughout the country. Early emphasis was on getting information on the family background of children, usually children from ethnic groups whose unfamiliarity with American folkways was complicating the lives of the second generation. The concern was also with children who came to school hungry or in poor condition or were obviously incapable of doing the assigned work. Much of the need for the programme stemmed from the introduction of compulsory education which means that the school must be prepared to adapt itself to a wide range of intellectual abilities, vocational interest, cultural backgrounds and degrees of maturity. This diversity makes the individualized study of children essential if each child is to be served appropriately. At the same time that this demand is placed on the school, its facilities are being overtaxed by large enrolments and shortage of teachers. School social work went through rapid expansion in the 1920s when the rate of juvenile delinquency rose astronomically as a result of the fall out from the First World War. Then, school social workers were called upon to provide preventive work in the field of juvenile delinquency. Later, school social work increased its efforts to develop and define its own methods of social casework in the schools, hence they began to turn more attention to work with the individual maladjusted child at school, in addition to their traditional work with others on behalf of the child – at home, in school and in the community.

Between 1930 and 1960, school social work shifted its effort in goals and activities and increased interest in work with the individual child to help him/her make the best use of the existing school environment while considerable effort was devoted to the refinement of method and techniques. In 1960, in response to urgent social problems affecting large numbers of school children and youths, school social work literature began to urge a transition to new goals and methods of work and to reflect a new awareness of the school as a social system and a greater readiness of the professions of education and social work to collaborate.

The social group work method was used more frequently together with demonstrations of new approaches to work with the community. Essentially, school social work is an application of social work principles and methods to the major purposes of the school. This purpose is to provide a setting for teaching and learning in which children can prepare themselves for the world they now live in and the world they will face in the future.

Objectives of School Social Work

The objectives of school social work relate primarily to the school's educational functions. In Nigeria the National Policy on Education (1998) states the objectives of education clearly in Section 1; No 5:

1. the inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
2. the inculcation of the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society;
3. the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around; and
4. the acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competences both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his society.

Hence, each school whether primary, secondary or tertiary builds its curriculum in a way to meet the objectives as stated in the national policy. (See Section 2 No. 10, Section 3 No. 14, Section 4 Nos. 17 & 18 and Section 5 No 32) for the specific objectives of pre-primary, primary, secondary and higher education respectively. All these are the objectives of school social work since it works to enable the child/student make the most use of his/her educational opportunities.

Generally speaking school social work centers on helping pupils/students attain a sense of competence, a readiness for continued learning and an ability to adapt to change.

The Future of School Social Work in Nigeria

Globalisation as we are all aware has become a new requirement in the training of social workers. Hence there is need to conform with international practices in our standard of social work practice. In most parts of the developed countries, it is a well-known fact that school social workers constitute part of the school personnel. For instance, the School Social Work Association of America is a professional organization of school social workers working in private and public schools throughout the United States of America. So also the New Brunswick Association of social workers in Canada has its members working in schools. It is therefore in strict compliance with this challenge that the goal of our year 2002 seminar in the department of social work in Ibadan is to "raise the awareness of all major stakeholders in education to the mounting social problems in the schools... with a view to applying social work intervention skills and techniques to reduce or eliminate them". As seasoned social workers, our work involves mediation, counselling, and advocacy on behalf of our clients. We also engage in the development and evaluation of social planning which is very important to ensuring high quality services for the public.

In view of the above, this author believes very strongly that there cannot be any other time than now for social workers to be placed in Nigerian schools if one considers the mirage of social problems plaguing the school system. The stage is well set. Reports from the eastern part of the country indicate that there are already school social work services in the secondary schools. Efforts are being made to prepare a proposal to the Federal Ministry of Education, Abuja on the issue so that school social work in Nigeria can become a Federal Government initiative.

Another critical issue, which requires urgent attention, is the fact that most of the professional social workers on the field in government agencies do not have the appropriate qualifications to handle their duties and responsibilities well. As our department now turns out professional Masters Degree holders in Social Work, some concerted effort need to be made by appropriate ministries to try to harness the educational experiences of professionally trained personnel to fill some of the existing vacant positions. Many observers fail to see the impact of social welfare services on the people in our communities and in Nigeria as a whole; because of inadequacy of trained personnel occupying strategic positions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In view of the mounting social problems in the schools, we cannot afford to continue to recommend solutions to the government; we on our part should come up with solutions. One solution already identified is the posting of social workers to the schools. Private and public school educators should provide a variety of services to school children in difficult circumstances. Some of these include individual interviews by guidance counsellors, teachers and other specialized personnel. School social workers need to join this team as they collaborate with school or community personnel to visit pupils' homes and neighbourhood. The important message here is that there are many students in the schools who cannot make the best use of their educational opportunities as a result of a social problems. There is no figure yet to substantiate that assertion but results of external examinations like SSCE show yearly the urgent need for social work services in the school system.

One recommendation, which can serve as a short-term solution, is to organize workshops/seminars for principals and vice principals of secondary schools, headmasters and headmistresses of primary schools where school-related social problems would be discussed and social work intervention techniques explained. This effort will in no small measure raise the awareness level of the administrative school personnel to the services offered by social workers. As heads of schools, incidents of deviant behaviour among students are first reported to them. Hence if they are aware of school social work services, they will be able to make appropriate referrals.

Also, as an interim measure, short-training programmes (STP) could be organized for serving guidance counsellors in the secondary schools on the practice of basic school social work services. The principles of coordination, collaboration, cooperation and consultation (4C's) in social work encourage teamwork with other school personnel and therefore should be meaningfully exploited.

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