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THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK IN MENTAL HEALTH AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS

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Abstract

Social workers have an important role in the field of mental health, and social work programs have a responsibility to prepare students for practice in the field. However, it seems that various societies, groups and individuals have questioned the role of social workers in mental health. An increasing number of students entering university are identifying themselves as having mental health issues and those with higher levels of cumulative trauma tend to have more difficulty adjusting personally and emotionally to the transition, and abuse is linked to an increased probability of dropping out of colleges as well as to increased rates of depression and suicide. This paper examines the role of social workers in mental health and academic performance of students. Social workers have a key role in helping community participation and engagement, alongside other primary healthcare workers in delivering mental health support. It is recommended that activities such as case scenarios and role plays be used to prepare the student first, and that students be given the opportunity to practice these skills in actual practice settings as well. School authorities should not wait or watch till a student academic performance degrade totally before he or she is handed to a social worker with mental health experience. Periodic sessions should be organized by school authorities to gauge student mental stability from time to time to avoid any epidemic of mental breakdown which in turn affects their academic performance.

Introduction

Students in higher institutions of learning are usually faced with challenges including identity crises, inability to adapt to the new environment of school, accommodation challenges, and pressure from home, friends and peers. They are also confronted with the decisions that borders on their sexual life and how to prepare for and access future prospects and opportunities (WHO, 2019; World Youth Report, 2003; National School Climate Council, 2007). These challenges often result to them being susceptible to mental health challenges (Dachew, Azale&Berhe, 2015; Rodgers &Tennison, 2009; Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein, & Hefner, 2007; Benton, Robertson, Tseng, Newton & Benton, 2003).

Amawuli and Prosper (2018) and Karl, Limpopo, Supa (2013) similarly found that mental illness is pervasive among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Mental health challenge, such as anxiety when it is severe, results in some students having challenges in their academic pursuit. Such students experience mood swings, mind going blank, shakes and others before and during examination. The end result of education is academic performance. It refers to the degree to which a student has realized his or her educational goals. According to Heather and April (2009) a student can experience anxiety due to stress which can negatively affect learning and memory thereby resulting in poor academic performance. Hence, it is imperative for professionals to play significant roles in the mental health and academic performance of students.

The Social Work as a profession is traditionally aimed at helping individuals and groups to resolve problems and empower them to find solutions to life's challenges. There are various areas of specializations and practice which social work profession which give diverse contexts at which the social worker can function. These specializations include Medical/Health Social Work, Social Welfare, Industrial Social Work, Community Social Work, etc. The settings within which the social workers can function are as varied as they are diverse and one of such is in the educational sector especially in the higher institution of learning.

Social workers have a crucial part to play in improving the mental health of students. Their exposure to advanced relationship-based skills, and their focus on personalisation and recovery, can support clients to make positive, self-directed change (Allen, 2014). However, the relevance of social work in the mental health and academic performance of undergraduates have not been well looked into and addressed. There is dearth of research on it and this could be as

a result of factors including lack of or inadequate knowledge, awareness, and recognition of the professions well as the benefits that could be derived from social work services amongst others.

This paper aims at reflecting on the role of social worker in mental health and academic performance of students. This is geared towards showing the relevance of social worker in achieving success in the nation's educational sector. The paper is organised into sub-headings of brief literature review while attempting to connect the place of social work in the mental health and academic performance of students

Academic Performance

Academic performance refers to the term that describes the outcome of a student's effort in an examination. It is an important phase of student's life because it is one of the rationales for getting a formal education. Student's academic performance is influenced by the state of his or her mental health amongst others (Eysenck and Derkshen, 2009). Oppapers (:2011) opined that student's academic performance is measured by the standing rates of grades of students in every subject and students have their own attitude towards learning and achieving a high level of academic performance. In order for a student to succeed he needs to be armed with strategies and techniques that will supplement his desire to reach his goals. One way is to have an efficient and adaptive study habit free of mental health challenge(s).

According to Eysenck and Derkshen (2009), the effect of anxiety on academic performance is not always obvious and research sponsored by the ESRC (2012), argued that there may be hidden costs. According to the research, individuals who are anxious find it difficult to avoid distractions and thus spend more time in turning their attention from one task to the other than their counterparts who are not or less anxious. They further explained that difficulty in controlling attention is the main problem of students who are struggling with anxiety. Hence, there should be training techniques that will be tailored at enhancing student's attention and control the student's ability to ignore distractions. These trainings will go a long way in helping students battling with anxiety to achieve their academic potential.

Eysenck and Derkshen (2009), also explained that that anxious student usually perform at a comparable level to those ones who are not anxious but only do so at a greater cost in terms of effort or perhaps long term stress. This means that it is imperative that social workers or teachers focus not only on whether a student's academic performance seems to be satisfactory but also on how much

effort the student had to put in to achieve that level of success. Students who are suffering from anxiety may be trying desperately hard just to keep pace with academic demands and this could be at great psychological cost.

Students' Mental Health

The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI, 2016) found that one in every four people will be affected by a mental illness within a given year and one in 17 will be diagnosed with a serious illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Mental illness can have a major impact on those diagnosed, as well as family, friends, and other close acquaintances. According to NAMI (2016), mental illness is the third most common cause of hospitalization for both children and adults. It can lead to school dropout, suicide, and homelessness. Over one-third of students are dropouts and it is the 10th leading cause of suicide (NAMI, 2016). This shows how prominent mental illness is within society.

Depressive symptomatology is alarmingly high among college students. For example, the American College Health Association (2001) has found that about three out of four students reported having felt "overwhelmed" in the prior year. Whereas, almost one in four reported feeling so depressed that they could not function well. Furr et al., (2001) reported that 53% of their sample experienced some form of depression during college, with 90% of these students reporting having thought of committing suicide after entering college and 10% reporting having attempted suicide while in college.

An increasing number of students entering university are identifying themselves as having mental health issues (Gallagher, 2014; McKean, 2008) and those with higher levels of cumulative trauma tend to have more difficulty adjusting personally and emotionally to the transition (Banyard & Cantor, 2004), and abuse is linked to an increased probability of dropping out of college (Duncan, 2000), as well as to increased rates of depression (Turner & Butler, 2003) and suicide (Bridgeland, et al., 2001). A 2011 American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II survey of more than 34,000 students enrolled at 32 Canadian universities found that just under 20% had been diagnosed or treated by a professional in the past 12 months for one or more mental health conditions, most commonly for anxiety and depression (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2014). The same survey administered to students in the U.S.A. found a similar trend (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2014). These results are in line with research on the prevalence of mental illness among 18-25-year old in Canada and the U.S.A., the

predominant age group of university students, which suggests that between 20 and 25% of this population, is experiencing mental illness (Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, 2015; Smetanin, et al., 2011).

Relationship between Mental Health and Students' Academic Performance

The effect of the mental stability of a student on his/her academic performance cannot be overemphasized. Approximately 50% of college students reported symptoms of poor mental health and various depressive disorders, and these same set of students reported more academic challenges which can traced back to ill- mental health , unplanned and unsafe sex, alcohol overdose, and report more alcohol -related problems (Backels& Wheeler, 2001; Weitzman, 2004). It can lead to school dropout, suicide, and homelessness. Over one-third of students are dropouts and it is the 10th leading cause of suicide (NAMI, 2016). This shows how prominent mental illness is within society.

Among 98 secondary students age 12to16 in Spain, cross-sectional depression scores were inversely correlated with lower grades in nearly every subject area assessed, as well as grade average, but anxiety scores were not. When both anxiety and depression were included in a regression analysis for grade average, higher depression scores remained associated with lower grades, but higher anxiety scores were significantly associated with higher grades (Fernandez-Castillo & Rojas, 2009). In US-American adolescents aged 12 to 18 years presenting to community health clinics, presence of mental health problems (anxiety and depression scores 2SD above the sample mean or endorsing suicidal/self-harm ideation or attempts) was predicted by lower grades after controlling for gender, age, ethnicity, and drug and alcohol use (Burnett-Zeigler et al., 2012). In most Africa settings, the scale of many of the social problems means that individual work is rarely practical. But huge gains in mental health and well-being can be achieved through work at the community level.

Relevance of Social Work in Student's Mental Health and Academic Performance

Biological, developmental and psychological factors in the history of an individual as well as social and economic factors, affect mental health (Wilson et al., 2008). In many other countries, questions and controversial issues arise when the social work profession in mental health is examined. Are social workers adequately trained to intervene diagnostically? Is there any need for a social worker to know or use a diagnostic model? Are social workers recognized as mental health team members? What is the scope of practice for social workers in the mental health discipline? The answers to these questions

system; Facilitating interaction, and modifying and building new relationships between people and society's resource systems; Establishing initial linkages between people and resource systems (Dinitto and McNeece, 1990; Sands, 1991; Starnino, 2009).

School social workers also influence the institutional factors that affect students. They train school staff and help structure programs to meet students' emotional needs, operating in an interdisciplinary context with school psychologists, counselors, nurses and other support personnel. At faculty meetings, social workers are a leading voice to articulate ways the school can programmatically aid students.

School social workers assess students' mental health, behavioral patterns, emotional well-being and academic performance holistically, encouraging them to change what is under their control while also advising students' family and social networks about ways to modify their own behavior to most effectively serve the students. Appreciating the interconnectedness of school, home and community, social workers chart a plan of prevention and intervention to support students in all aspects of their lives.

The job of a school social worker is to identify that a student is distressed and needs treatment. The basic act of naming and diagnosing conditions can provide tremendous relief to students and families, who may be suffering from circumstances they accepted as normal and permanent. School social workers are important professionals who help student development, particularly for students who are facing social and academic challenges. They assist students and families of students who are referred to them due to problems like frequent absences, bullying, significant drops in academic performance, mental health issues and aggressive behaviour.

Social workers impact students' at all educational levels. They help students and families access the kind of help they need. They also the student to develop social and emotional skills which will could go a long way in helping them to overcome their mental health challenges. They are important professionals who help in students' development, particularly for students who are facing social challenges and academic delays. They are concerned with contributing to the well-being of the students by helping them to develop and enhance their inbuilt skills and ability to surmount their challenges. They assist students and their families in solving problems like frequent absences, bullying, significant drops in academic performance, mental health issues and aggressive behaviour.

Conclusion

Social work does exactly what it says on the tin. It operates at the boundary between the individual and the social environment. In their daily practice, therefore, social workers see the impact of living conditions, inadequate housing, low incomes and crime ridden neighbourhoods on the physical and mental health of the people with whom they are working.

Social workers are often front line responders for individuals with mental illness. Social work professionals are mostly competent in their knowledge of mental health following a social work degree. In addition, social work professionals are mostly confident in their abilities after gaining some practice experience. Regular assessment of students mental health in comparison to the academic performance by a social worker who understands how all the conglomerate of factors in the environment affect students' academic performance should be encouraged.

Recommendations

1. Many social workers recommended having exposure to mental illness before exiting school in order to feel prepared. Although case scenarios and role play activities in class can be helpful for students, they may need more preparation for dealing with more intense practice situations. Allowing students to shadow professionals, sit in with clients' intakes or therapy sessions, gain real-life experience assisting those with mental illness, interview mental health professionals, or intern at a mental health facility would allow them the exposure necessary to feel confident. It is recommended that activities such as case scenarios and role plays be used to prepare the student first, but that students be given the opportunity to practice these skills in actual practice settings as well.
2. Policy is another area that could be improved upon in the preparation of social workers. Required mental health course work, special training sessions, and specific competency areas can be required by Council on Social Work Education in order for social work programs to be accredited. In addition, although social workers must pass a licensure test before becoming licensed as a social worker, states have differing requirements for course work. Not all states require a mental health, psychopathology, or diagnosis related course prior to licensure, yet each of these.
3. School authorities should not wait or watch till a student academic performance degrade totally before he or she is handed to a social

worker with mental health experience. Period sessions should be organized by school authorities to gauge student mental stability from time to time to avoid any epidemic of mental breakdown which in-turn affects their academic performance.

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