

## DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE SCHOOL COUNSELLING PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

ABDULRASHID GARBA, Ph.D.

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### Abstract

*The key to success in every human endeavour is proper planning to meet set targets so that activities pursuant to the set objectives will be orderly and systematic. Effectiveness of school counselling is to a large extent determined by how well the counselling programme is developed. Counselling is a tailor made programme. This means that a programme from one society is not readily transferable and/or implementable in another society. This paper therefore, articulates how counsellors in Nigerian schools can develop both traditional and comprehensive school counselling programmes to meet their specific peculiarities in terms of needs, aspirations and so on.*

### Introduction

A school counsellor in Nigeria is a member of a relatively growing and honourable profession. Counselling as a profession (including the informal traditional setting) spans countless areas of professional helping and service. Today, counsellors are expected to work in settings that include mental health centres, family agencies, prisons, hospitals, funeral homes, crisis centres, employment agencies, and schools, to name a few, (Ajayi, 2003). Throughout its history, the school counselling profession has searched for an identity and role among the helping professions. Today, in Nigeria, the questions - of why and what counsellors in schools are supposed to do - are as prominent as they were in UK and US, years ago. A school counsellor today faces the same questions: Why are you here? What are you supposed to do? Unlike counsellors who supposedly practice in prisons, hospitals, mental health centres, and other settings, services of a school counsellor span a broad programme of activities to assist several populations. This programme includes preventive services, developmental activities, and remedial interventions for students, parents, and teachers. The challenge of offering such a wide range of services to different populations renders the school counsellor unique in his practice of school counselling. Although a school counsellor is similar in skills and knowledge to other professional counsellors, he does not limit his role to a single service. Instead, he offers many services within the context of a comprehensive programme. This notion of a *programme* of services is a key element in school counselling. The

counsellor's ability to define and describe the school's *counselling programme* is a key to his survival and ultimate success.

### **The School Counselling Programme**

The most important steps in determining a school counselling programme, according to Garba, (2003), is the initial description and vivid definition. Although the range and diversity of the expectations illustrate the vital need for school counsellors, they can also threaten his effectiveness by pulling him in too many directions and spreading services across too broad an area. Choice of language is one element that can influence how well to describe a school counselling programme. A school counsellor has to explain the programme with a language that is consistent with one's profession and understood by students, parents, teachers, and others in the school community. Since we frequently adopt the language and terminology of our location, we have to identify ourselves according to labels and language learned either in our studies or in our school system. Preference of some practicing counsellors in the school system is to call themselves *school counsellors* and the services they provide are part of a *school counselling programme*. Some counsellors believe that the term *school counselling programme* is too restrictive because it confines services to remedial relationships. This, according to Allen (2001), is an unfortunate and narrow definition of professional counselling. Counselling relationships, especially in the school system, are for everyone, not only for people who have problems.

In developing a comprehensive school counselling programme especially in parts of Nigeria where Guidance and Counselling is still new, a language and vocabulary that describe accurately different roles and functions should be selected. In choosing such a language, these guidelines may be helpful:

- *Understand the language.* The terms you choose - counselling, guidance, personnel, or whatever - should have meaning to you. You should be clear about the words you use to describe yourself professionally and be able to defend the language you choose.
- *Educate the School Community.* Once you choose the language of your programme, teach it to the people you serve, that is the school community. Let students, parents, and teachers know what you mean by *counselling*, *group guidance*, *consulting*, and other terms. A language is useful only if the people with whom you communicate understand it, accept it, and use it themselves.
- *Use consistent language.* It is confusing to students and others when you use the language you adopt inconsistently. Consistency may be difficult at

first, particularly if you have decided to change to new terms. Stick with it, and correct yourself when you confuse the language. Your students, parents, and teachers will be as consistent as you are.

A counsellor should move slowly and as he introduces new terms and explains his rationale. By being considerate and winning teachers' trust and confidence, you will be more likely to have your ideas and suggestions accepted. Regardless of the language that you choose or how long it takes your school to adopt it, an important aspect of describing a programme of services is the leadership role you take in the process. Remember, you are not the programme, but your leadership ability is paramount to helping the school build a successful counselling programme.

To survive and flourish as a successful school counsellor, it is essential to identify and embrace the leadership role you have in the programme and the larger school community. School counselling in this age is not simply providing individual and group services to students. Rather, it is the orchestration of many services, some provided by you, the counsellor, and additional ones provided by other professionals, (Yakasai 2003). This orchestration requires leadership characteristics and skills to develop working relationships, identify goals and objectives, and create appropriate action to demonstrate that everyone is playing the same tune and in the correct key. The following are the two essential steps in developing your leadership roles as postulated by Dunlerk (2004)

- To assess your strengths in taking on this responsibility, you must provide satisfactory answer to the following question. What skills and knowledge do you already possess that will enable you to persuade people to create a comprehensive programme of services and commit their involvement in carrying out its objectives?
- Next is to determine what additional knowledge you need to be a successful leader in your school. How can you obtain this knowledge—through workshops, professional associations, or more graduate training?

### **The School Counselling Program and the School Counsellor**

The main purpose of a school counselling programme is to systematically help students, parents, and teachers develop positive experiences in learning and other school activities. A school counselling programme should ideally consist of a variety of services and activities, including individual and group counselling, parent and teacher consultation, group guidance, information services, referral assistance to other programs and services in the community, and student assessment. The school counsellor is responsible for developing, scheduling, and



evaluating services of the programme and is assisted by the school Guidance and Counselling Committee and the school principal. Primary services of the school counsellor provide direct assistance to students in the school. For this reason, a major portion of the counsellor's day consists of services for students.

The most important thing to consider is how to begin developing support for your ideas as a school leader. What will you need to do to win the confidence of your school administration? Which teachers, support staff, and other school personnel are likely to support the development of a comprehensive programme, and how will you secure their support? Here are some starter tips, as suggested by Cottle (1996) on how to create a viable, valuable and comprehensive school counselling programme as you put your plan into action:

- Know what you want to do and understand the literature and research to support your ideas.
- Identify school members, - administration, teachers, parents, staff, and others, -who will support you initially. Draw the confidence of your optimistic colleagues and people in the school administration in order to let them know your plans.
- Respect school traditions and culture. Even though you might want to work toward changing old ways of doing things, understand the emotional ties that some people may have to historical aspects of the school.
- Be inclusive. Although you might identify people who give early support to your ideas, be careful not to exclude other people in the process. People who might disagree with initial plans could have constructive ideas that when incorporated into the plan will help make it better.
- As a counsellor, one of your greatest strengths is your ability to listen fully to others without being judgmental. Use that skill in building support for the counselling program and for your leadership.
- Maintain a consistent stance. Turkey & Smith (1999) presented a professional counselling stance that consists of optimism, trust, respect, and intentionality.

Consider these characteristics and others that you believe will help maintain a dependable leadership posture in your school. By learning about yourself as a leader, gaining additional knowledge about the school and creating collaborative relationships in the school community, you are in a stronger position to maintain a wide vision of what the school counselling programme should be. This can assist you in focusing on the development of a comprehensive school counselling programme.

### **Focusing on a Comprehensive Program**

All school counsellors face the danger of being overwhelmed by the daily challenges brought by students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Sometimes, when school counsellors become overwhelmed, they lock themselves into a single mode of operation, (Brower 2003). In most cases, school counsellors, where they exist, choose what is most comfortable. As a result, they sometimes spend a major portion of their time in a single activity such as classroom guidance, individual counselling, or programme administration. Although these services are important, they do not, in and of themselves, establish a comprehensive school counselling programme. A school counselling programme consists of a number of activities and services. These activities and services aim at specific goals and objectives chosen as a result of careful examination and analysis of the needs of the school populations. The services you use and the goals you select do not happen by chance; they are part of a planned program of services. Hence, you want to move beyond routine reactions to situations and crises that emerge and become guided by a well-designed plan of counselling, consulting, and coordinating services. To summarize, Ajayi (2003) has categorized these ideas under one or more of the four components of a comprehensive program:

- Planning Component
- Organization Component
- Implementation Component
- Evaluation Component

The Planning Component consists of the following process:

- i. Assessing school's and students' needs,
- ii. Formulating a philosophy of school counselling that is consistent with the mission of the school,
- iii. Evaluating the current programme (if there is one), and
- iv. Establishing and prioritizing future programme goals.

The Organization Component entails the selection of specific objectives and programme strategies. This selection process includes the decision of who will provide which services. In this sense, the selected goals and objectives assign specific responsibilities to counsellors, teachers, and administrators, defining their roles in the school counselling programme.

The Implementation Component is the action phase of a comprehensive programme. It involves

- i. The delivery of services such as counselling, consulting, coordinating, referring, testing, and others

ii. All the personnel who have responsibility for educating students in the school: teachers, counsellors, media specialists, administrators, and others. The Evaluation Component is the phase in programme development that determines success, examines weaknesses, and allows you to recommend changes for the future. Programme evaluation component is essential to a comprehensive school counselling programme.

Effective school counselling programmes are not guided merely by the intuitions, preferences, and desires of counsellors and teachers. Rather, they are based on the assessed needs of students and measured outcomes of the services provided. The four phases of a comprehensive school counselling programme discussed earlier, illustrate that to be successful you must move beyond traditional approaches to guidance and counselling programmes. Examples of the differences between traditional and comprehensive approaches have been outlined by Brower (2003).

**Table 1: Comparison of Traditional and Comprehensive Programmes**

Traditional Program	Comprehensive Program
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Predominantly one-on-one activities</li> <li>• Informational and administrative</li> <li>• Reactive to situations</li> <li>• Clerical orientation</li> <li>• Counsellor dominated</li> <li>• Minimum use of group work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balanced program of services</li> <li>• Preventive, developmental, remedial in nature</li> <li>• Proactive in planning and goal-setting</li> <li>• Direct service orientation</li> <li>• High level of teacher involvement</li> <li>• Extensive use of group services</li> </ul>

\* In Brower (2003)

### Advocating for All Students

Schools, in most cases, reflect the populations they serve. Typical primary or secondary school consists of students who bring a range of hopes, challenges, and needs to school each day. School counsellors who wish to design a comprehensive counselling programme of services must endeavour to understand their roles in advocating for all students, not only those who show promise but also those who struggle to fit in the school. One way that school counsellors can advocate for all students is by observing and listening to the 'culture' of the school. At times, schools pass policies or develop programmes that, though well

intended, might discriminate against certain groups or individual students. When you see this happening in your school, it is imperative that you take action. Point out to the principal and teachers what you have observed or what you have heard, and help them understand the implications for all students in the school. For example, a secondary school might start a programme for students to bring their parents for a party together with the teachers, and each parent is expected to bring along food of some sort. The counsellor should be quick to point out that not all of the students in the school may have parents who can afford bringing extra food to the school in the name of a party. Some students may not have willing parents or the parents may away in military or other national or personal service. Such students may feel discriminated against. By advocating for all students, a school counsellor is in a way demonstrating the democratic principles upon which our educational and political systems are now taking roots. This professional stance is another way that a counsellor can win support from school principal, teachers, and parents. Their support, in turn, allows the school counsellor to describe and define the scope and limits of his/her roles within a comprehensive school counselling programme.

School counsellors who wish to develop a comprehensive school counselling programme of services must rely more on the input and participation from the entire school staff. For this reason, the first step in establishing a school counselling programme is to seek input and win cooperation from teaching colleagues.

### **Seeking Input and Winning Support of Colleagues**

Developing a comprehensive school counselling programme does not belong to one person and is not the sole responsibility of the school counsellor. Therefore, include as many people as possible in major decisions about school counselling programme. By seeking input from a wide audience, you are more likely to win support for the direction you take. When you make programme decisions in isolation, out of reach of your teaching colleagues, the programme may lack support from the school community. As a school counsellor, you want the support of your colleagues. You may not win the total support of all, but you do want the majority of teachers to believe that the services you provide and the part of the programme for which they are responsible are important to the education of all students. This is what is meant by winning their support.

The first person to include in this decision-making process is the school principal. You may want to assess how the principal views the programme. When starting a new counselling programme, a school counsellor must first determine what expectations the principal has for this new addition to the school. In any



case, a school counsellor should schedule a time at the beginning of the year to meet with the school principal and gather insights and expectations about his roles in the school. The principal will be able to educate you about funding limits, space restrictions, and other realities that may have an impact on the placement and furnishings of the counselling centre. When focusing on facilities of the counselling centre, it is wise to emphasize their impact on the programme and on students, parents, and teachers.

Winning support from your principal is the first step toward including your colleagues in planning and implementing a school counselling programme. A Guidance and Counselling Committee is an excellent vehicle through which to gain their cooperation. After discussing the idea of a committee with your principal, you will want to select members. This selection might come from recommendations of the principal. The persons selected for this committee should advocate a strong counselling programme, believe that the programme is the responsibility of all staff members, and be willing to attend committee meetings during the year. During the year, the Guidance and Counselling committee should be able to guide the school counsellor and the teachers to plan events and activities to focus on school wide guidance, parent involvement, student development, and school climate. As these activities are implemented, the involvement of your students, parents, and teachers will be essential. This is another illustration of how the school counselling programme belongs to everyone. Letting everyone share ownership in the counselling programme gives you support that is vital to function as a school counsellor in a comprehensive programme of services. Such support enables you to define clearly the expanded services of the programme.

### **Determining and Defining Essential Services**

Many functions of school counsellors are defined and described in counselling literature and research. As mentioned earlier, school counselling is a broad professional practice that includes preventive services, developmental activities, and remedial interventions. As such, counselling in schools encompasses a wide variety of activities and services. An important characteristic of a comprehensive school counselling programme is the awareness people have about your role as a counsellor. To be successful, you need to educate students, parents, and teachers about the programme. One way to help others learn about your role as a school counsellor is to list your functions, with a brief description of each. This can be announced during PTA meetings, or be published in a news letter (if any). But the first step is to identify for yourself what it is you do. The following list will help identify and describe the services of a comprehensive



school counselling programme. Depending on your audience - students, parents, or teachers - you may need to adjust the language and edit the list accordingly.

- **Individual Counselling**

School counsellors provide individual sessions for students to assist with a variety of educational and personal concerns. The primary purpose of these sessions is to help students explore their concerns, make appropriate plans of action, and be successful in following through with their plans.

- **Group Counselling**

In some instances, students help each other by working in groups with leadership from a counsellor. Group counselling allows students to share ideas about specific issues such as problem solving, career choices, educational planning, and peer relationships, as well as helping them use these ideas to resolve their concerns. Group sessions usually involve small groups of students, who are led by a counsellor and meet once or twice a week for a specific number of sessions.

- **Group Guidance**

This provides an opportunity for school counsellors to meet with different groups of students in order to help them learn specific information about themselves and their development. These instructional groups are commonly referred to as group guidance. Ideally, teachers also lead these types of activities in their classrooms. Guidance groups can be small or large, and usually the guidance topic is related to one or more goals and objectives in a guidance curriculum. Whether a counsellor or a teacher leads them, guidance groups are instructional in nature and focus on topics such as self-concept development, study skills, friendship, health habits, career information, and good citizenship.

- **Guidance Curriculum**

Schools should ideally design learning goals and instructional strategies to assist students with personal, social, career, and educational development and write these goals and strategies into the school curriculum. The intent is to have these goals and objectives incorporated into daily instruction by classroom teachers. School counsellors assist with this curriculum by planning its integration with teachers, providing resources and materials, and presenting some activities with teachers in the classroom.

- **Student Appraisal**

Counsellors help students, parents, and teachers by gathering information about student 's abilities, behaviours, and achievement so they can help make appropriate decisions about educational placement and instruction. In helping with these decisions, counsellors use tests, inventories, observations, interviews, and other procedures to gather information.

- **Referral**

School counsellors serve as referral agents to help students and their families receive assistance from other programmes and services in the school system and from agencies outside the school. Counsellors must work closely with teachers and administrators in these referral processes.

- **Consultation**

Helping children develop to their fullest potential is best accomplished when people work together. For this reason, counsellors should consult with teachers and parents to plan appropriate services for every child. These consultations typically focus on the needs of the individual child, but sometimes counsellors lead group consultations for teachers and parents to focus on specific issues and topics.

- **Coordination**

The school counselling programme should include a wide range of services and activities that require coordination for smooth administration and for which the counsellor assumes primary responsibility. In some instances, student helpers, parent volunteers, and teachers can be of assistance.

### **Communicating Your Role**

As mentioned earlier, having a detailed description of services is just the first step in defining what you do in the school. More important are the processes you use and actions you make to communicate your role with students, parents, teachers, administrators, and the community. There are a couple of essential points that might help a school counsellor to create and communicate his/her role that is professionally satisfying and rewarding. Here are three starter ideas, as suggested by Turkey and Smith (1999).

- Use existing avenues of communication such as staff and PTA meetings, assemblies, or other gatherings in the school. You must see to it that you are placed on the agenda each time in order to have an opportunity to tell

something about what the school counselling programme is supposed to accomplish.

- Commandeer a bulletin board. Sometimes counsellors shy away from being responsible for bulletin boards in the school, and this reluctance may be understandable as managing bulletin boards can be a fulltime job which can take counsellors away from their primary responsibility. Nevertheless, having control of at least one bulletin board can be an excellent way to communicate what you and the school counselling programme are doing in the school.
- Launch the school counselling programme into cyberspace. In this rapidly changing world of advanced technology, it is essential that the school counselling programme be visible on all school communications, including the Internet.

These three ideas only scratch the surface of ways to communicate your role in a comprehensive school counselling program. What is most important is the effort you make to communicate the role as you understand it so that you take professional command of who you are and what you do in the school.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper efforts have been made to explain the different ways a school counsellor can describe and define a school counselling programme. The paper takes the position that planning, organizing implementing and evaluating a programme of services are key to the survival of a school counsellor as a professional. To be successful in this endeavour, the school counsellor must seek input from others and share ownership of the programme. The next step is to determine the responsibilities that various players – school administrators, teachers, counsellors and parents – have in order to make a comprehensive school counselling programme a reality and a success.

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