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## PROFESSIONAL COUNSELLING IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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### Abstract

*Professional counselling in Nigerian secondary schools was recognised officially by the Federal Government through the National Policy on Education. However, it has experienced a lot of apathy on the part of school principals and administrators. This paper provided a concise account of professional counselling in Nigerian secondary school system with its status, problems and prospects. Prominent among the concerns of this profession in Nigerian school system are: the due recognition of its relevance in the education system, the need for its legal coverage (code of conduct) and the training of members on modern techniques and skills that are technologically-based in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is predicated on the premise that effective professional counselling is dependent on knowledge and skills capable of assisting an individual to overcome negative attitude towards personal growth.*

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### Introduction

Professional counselling in the Nigerian secondary school system is closely associated with career guidance initiated by a group of Catholic nuns in the late 1950s at Oke-Ado in Ibadan, Oyo State. It was principally a career preference initiative for the final year students of their school that year. This has grown into counselling activities with the passage of time in Nigeria. However, the formal counselling activities in the Nigerian secondary school system can be traced to 1977 when the Federal Government introduced it in the Unity Schools (Federal Government Colleges) through the directives of the Ministry of Education. This was further strengthened by the National Policy on Education (FRN, 1981 revised) when guidance and counselling were recognized as an important educational service in the school system. Prompted by this education document, different state governments established counselling units in their Ministries of Education. Consequently, counsellors were employed in the secondary school system. However, most schools were not provided with office facilities for counselling, a situation that forced counsellors to use any available space for counselling interaction. Thus, Akinade (2012) expressed with dismay that counsellors were attending or interacting with clients either in one corner of the staff room, under a tree or a place seemingly away from people, but such areas were never distraction-free. This initial disposition towards counselling undoubtedly negates the need for a degree of privacy for counselling to be effective.

However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, counsellors in Nigerian secondary schools are yet to be given their pride of place. Apathy abounds towards professional school counsellors as they are often assigned duties in their designated places of assignment, which are outside their professional training by the school principals/administrators. Yet, counsellors are needed to function in their professional capacity in secondary schools

than ever, because of the peculiar challenges of the students. At the moment, there is a gradual shift in parents' approaches to their children welfare (emotional wellbeing) arising from both parents' striving for economic, social and political relevance in Nigeria (Adebale, 2014). Schools together with counsellors in this situation play more direct parental roles than just serving in "loco parentis." parentis". Sequel to this, the relevance of professional counsellors should not be underestimated in Nigerian secondary schools. In the light of the above, this article explores, in a concise manner, the history of professional counselling in the Nigerian secondary school system, its problems and prospects.

### **Counselling in Nigerian Secondary Schools**

Counselling as an organized structure and profession in the Nigerian secondary school system can be traced to the early 1970s, prior to the formation of counselling Association of Nigeria (CAN) now (CASSON). Oladele (1992) explained that in the beginning of 1970 the Federal Ministry of Education established "a child guidance centre" in Lagos with different activities, and programmes meant to assist youth on vocation and other areas of life. Besides, other organizations like Young Men Christian Association (YMCA) that had no direct link with education were involved in activities that assisted the youth that hastened the establishment of professional counselling in Nigeria. However, toward the close of 1970s, through the directives of the Ministry of Education, Guidance and Counselling Services were recommended and established in all the Federal Government Colleges. The recommendation was that each of the Federal Government Colleges should have a counsellor on its staff and where there was no available trained counsellor, a career master/mistress should be appointed from the teaching staff to render counseling services. This was "in view of an apparent ignorance of many young people about career prospects, and in view of personality maladjustment among school children, career officers and counsellors should be appointed..." (FRN 2004, p.51). In furtherance, the Federal Government in her Third National Development Plan (1975-1980) as expressed by Unanka in Esere (2004) made a categorical statement on the relevance of counselling in secondary schools that:

It is further realized that for education to be complete, the beneficiaries must have a good sense of self-fulfillment. This particular feeling must go with the right choice of a career. Such choices are best identified at the secondary school stages of a student's education. The absence of career counselling in our educational and training systems in the past must be held responsible for the frustration observed among many of the nation's young men and women. To remedy the situation, career counselling will be institutionalized in all the nation's educational training systems... (p.30).

Thus, secondary school counselling was officially initiated in Nigeria with the intent, among others, to address students' career, personal and emotional concerns. With this, school counselling commenced in the Nigerian secondary school system as delineated in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 1981, 2004 and 2013 revised).

Essentially, school counselling is meant to attend to students' educational, vocational and personal social issues. This involves the task of gathering meaningful information on students through interviews, tests and even observations. Besides, counsellors in

the school system are meant to employ some diagnostic tools, interpret data to arrive at certain conclusions about the type of problem and probable means to assist the students in resolving the issues. In this regard, Etim and Gilean (2013) succinctly expressed that counselling focuses on the complete development of the individual student through series of services designed to maximize school learning, stimulate career development and respond to the personal and social concerns that may inhibit students' growth. More so, counselling involves strategizing, consulting and co-ordinating, as counsellors play key roles in rendering educational services. This implies that school-based counselling is multifaceted in nature. Thus, Omoniyi (2016) succinctly expressed that the development of counselling in Nigeria is for various reasons, which include the growing need of youths, the repeated changes in the education system (6-5-2-4, 6-3-3-4, and 9-3-4), the unrest in tertiary institutions and the changes in home and family life.

Professionally, school counsellors provide technical assistance to school teachers, administrators and parents on some issues that hinder their effectiveness in enhancing students' adjustment to school environment. They advance the personal development of students by identifying resources useful to students' development, utilization and effective change in behaviour. This leads to positive change in students' disposition. Sequel to this, Ugwoke, Eseadi, Ugwuanyi and Ikechukwu-Ilomuanya (2015) emphasized that the purpose of school counselling should include impacting specific skills and learning opportunities in a proactive manner and ensuring all students achieved school success through academic career, personal/social and global perspective experiences.

### **Status and Problems of Counselling in Nigerian Secondary Schools**

There appears to be an increasing awareness of counselling and counsellors' activities in the secondary school system in Nigeria. However, the rising awareness is not yet given much-deserved attention as recommended in the National Policy on Education (NPE). This is predicated on the lack of enthusiasm for the full implementation of counselling in schools. Counselling has rather been received with suspicion and as noted by Akinade (2012), with 'a wait and see' attitude. As explained below, the present status of counselling in Nigerian secondary school attests- to these facts:

#### **Attitude of school principals/heads toward counsellors**

In Nigeria, counsellors that are employed in the secondary schools are faced with the problem of acceptance by institutional heads, principals and influential members of staff. The attitude of these institutional heads towards school counsellors and counselling undermined the importance of school counselling in the Nigerian education system even in the 21st century. Counsellors employed and deployed are often redeployed by school principals to the classroom as teachers, substituting them for classroom teachers. In some cases, they are relieved of teaching assignment and are given the responsibilities of administrative or clerical officers. This assertion finds the research evidence of Brown (2011) "on issues and challenges facing counsellors in Nigerian school setting". The study adopted descriptive approach, with a sample size of 300 participants (150 males and 150 females respectively), drawn from 6 states (Akwa Ibom, Lagos, Kano, Bauchi, Anambra and Edo states) across the country. The results revealed that 240 (80%) of the respondents assent to school principals'

unsupportive attitude towards counsellors deployed to secondary schools, 212 (71%) agreed to the un-cooperative attitude of school heads and other personnel as a major challenge faced by school counselors in Nigeria. Similarly, Okeke (2006) “on problems hindering effective implementation of guidance and counselling in Ebonyi state,” with a total sample size of 58 professional and non-professional counsellors in secondary schools, using descriptive statistics, the result revealed that 41 (70%) of the respondents assent to the poor attitude of school principals towards counsellors in schools. Thus, Abraham and Brown (2011) confirmed the assertion that counsellors posted to schools are often assigned duties by principals according to their school needs; some are asked to teach full time, some to perform the role of career master and mistress, and some to function as clerk or cashier officers. Such assignments run contrary to the purpose of the school counselling programme which Fezler (2011) explained as providing the rationale for stakeholders (school administrators, parents/guardians and school counsellors) to engage in conversations about expectations for students' academic success and the role of counselling programmes in enhancing students' learning.

### **Exclusion of counselling in the school timetable**

Although the National Policy on Education has expressed the relevance and need for guidance and counselling in the education system, it is not being given its due recognition in the secondary school system in Nigeria today. This is attested to by the nonchalant attitude of government, parents, school authorities and teachers towards the effective functioning of counsellors in Nigerian secondary schools. For instance, most school principals and heads have failed to recognize and accommodate counselling programmes/activities in their normal school time table. Brown (2011) with a sample size of 300, drawn from 6 different states across Nigeria, on issues facing counsellors in Nigeria, revealed that 205 (68%) of the respondents expressed government lukewarm attitude towards counselling programmes, 198 (66%) agreed to parents inadequate knowledge about counsellors and their programmes, 227 (76%) assent to the inappropriate recognition of counselling as a discipline by school heads and principals, hence the non-inclusion of counselling in the school timetable as expressed by 200 (67%) of the studied sample. Similarly, Okeke (2006) with a sample of 58 professional and non-professional counsellors had 38 (65%) expressed wrong conception and poor attitude of parents as major hindrance to the effective implementation of guidance and counselling in secondary schools. Similarly, 48 (82%) of the respondents expressed their worries of poor government attitude in policy execution as a major problem faced by counsellors in Nigeria. Hence Okeke (2006) asserts that people who matter in government always keep talking about the benefits of guidance and counselling services in school but do not make possible substantial practical support for the kind of guidance and counselling services required. Such attitude would not help the students to recognize the importance of counselling in the school as it discourages positive disposition of students towards it. These remain some of the major obstacles towards the prospect of school counselling in the Nigerian secondary school system.

### **Lack of provision for counselling office and other facilities**

Most secondary schools in Nigeria appear not to have provision for office accommodation for counsellors. Okeke (2006) with a sample of 58 respondents

(professional and non professional counsellors) in secondary schools, using descriptive statistics, had 38 (65%) of the respondents expressed the lack of counselling facilities (provision of office and office facilities) as a major problem, while 50 (86%) of the respondents expressed lack of counselling tools and equipment as some of the major problems hindering the effective implementation of guidance and counselling programmes in Nigerian secondary schools. The few schools that attempt to allocate office would not allow any privacy which the counselling practice deserves. Hence, Mupouta (2012) and Omoniyi (2016) assert that office are either directly adjacent to the staff room or too exposed to non-clients' view such that students would not enjoy privacy and would not be disposed to interact with the counsellor there. Besides, the few that have offices, are without equipment necessary for effective counselling as revealed by Okeke (2006). More so, there is a dearth of appropriate psychological tests/inventories for use in Nigerian secondary schools. Such would not enhance the counsellee self-improvement and the quality of services rendered.

### **Poor funding of counselling programme and activities:**

Even though Government has made an official pronouncement on secondary school counselling in Nigeria, nothing concrete is evident showing government and its agencies' actual seriousness towards the functioning of counsellors in the Nigerian secondary school system. A good number of the secondary schools in Nigeria are without physical facilities such as counsellors' office, the required diagnostic instruments and conducive environment for counsellor/counsellee interactive session for counsellors to function. So, the Nigerian government appears to be paying lip service to this important educational service as the education sector suffers under funding in the country's annual budget at all levels with no attention given to school counselling. With poor funding and lack of finances, very little or none is earmarked for counselling purposes; yet adequate funding is needed for effective counselling in schools. For instance, fund is needed to organise activities like seminars, workshops, purchase of psychological tests, counselling facilities of current technology and furnishing the counsellors' office. Without Information Communication Technology compliant equipment and the knowledge for its application, little or nothing can really be achieved by counsellors in this 21st century. Hence, Yungungu and Mulinge (2013) explained that inadequate funding led to lack of facilities and resources as one of the hindrances of effective counselling in Nigerian Schools.

With these prevailing situations, it is difficult for counsellors and counselling in Nigerian secondary schools to achieve the blue-print objectives of the Federal Government as encapsulated in Omoniyi (2016) which includes among others:

1. to assist students to develop positive self- image.
2. to assist students to develop adequate time management skills and problem-solving skills
3. to equip students with skills of making appropriate satisfying choices and obtain smooth transition from one educational level to another.
4. to assist parents, teachers and school management to understand the needs and problems of each student
5. to encourage students to develop good interpersonal relationship.

The full realization of these objectives is difficult with the prevailing disposition and attitude towards counselling in Nigerian secondary school. Thus, Omoniyi (2016) expressed that secondary schools counselling need a meaningful, realistic, practical frame of reference if Nigeria were to attain the desired educational goals. It is obvious thus far that the Nigerian school management appears not to have a proper understanding or acceptance of the enormous importance of school counselling services.

### **Prospects of Counselling in Nigerian Secondary Schools**

Although a cursory assessment of the status of counselling in Nigerian secondary schools may suggest discouragement and lack of appropriate attention, it, however, remains an indispensable component of the education system. Like a mustard seed, the awareness and relevance of counsellors and counselling in the school system are increasing by the day. The few unity schools (Federal Government colleges) according to Aluede (2009) have functional school professional counsellors and counselling centres; most schools owned by state governments do not have similar provision and most private owned secondary schools are the same if not worse than the state government owned schools.

However, there is the prospect as the professional bodies, Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) and Association of Professional Counsellors in Nigeria (APROCON), are established in almost all the states of the Federation. Each state chapter organizes annual conference, seminars and symposia with emphasis on the relevance of counselling to the education sector among others. Thus, the participation of the different education stakeholders; Ministries of Education staff, school proprietors, principals and administrators at these different fora of CASSON and APROCON are informative as the relevance of school counselling and its related issues featured.

Besides, at the national level, the professional body (CASSON) is vigorously pursuing the legal status and recognition of professional counselling in Nigeria. Thus, CASSON has submitted a proposal to the National Assembly with the title "Counselling Practitioners Council of Nigeria" with the number SB 636 of 2018. This has been given due to attention as it has gone through the third reading in the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. When this successfully goes through the legislative arm of government, and it is signed into law the attitude of non-professionals will certainly change towards secondary school counselling. This could assist to reinvigorate the Certification and Licensed Board (CALB) initiated at 1998 CASSON conference that has appeared to have gone into moribund.

The existence of APROCON as a professional counselling body shows the growth of counselling profession in Nigeria. With its existence, counselling is diversifying professionally into different sectors of our national life as it is found in developed countries like United States of America and Britain. This could fast track the spread and recognition of counselling in the development of the human person in our country, Nigeria.

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## **Suggestions**

Confusion and dilemma appear to have surrounded the implementation of professional counselling in Nigerian secondary schools. In spite of the created awareness of the counselling profession, it has not been accorded the due acceptance and treatment from some stakeholders. If counselling must meaningfully contribute to the national development, it must be given its pride of place in our education system thus, the following must be considered;

### **Modern technological compliance training programme**

Most employed and functioning counsellors in Nigerian secondary schools were trained in the twenty century (last century). A good number of them are not skillful in the modern technological approaches to counselling. Such knowledge is necessary for effective counselling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for counsellors and counsellors in training. Therefore, there is need for a regular government-subsidized training workshop for counselors in schools on the application of modern technology to counselling. More so, the Universities that accreditation of the National Universities Commission (NUC) to offer training in guidance and counselling at both undergraduate and post graduate levels should review their curricula to include the modern technological approaches to counselling. This could make counselling more attractive as most secondary school students are already exposed to these modern technologies like e-counselling. Thus, the traditional face-to-face approach to counselling that requires an official office should be less emphasized.

### **Harmonization of training programmes**

The training programmes of all the universities with NUC accredited Guidance and Counselling Department need to be harmonized. Like has been done in other professions (Engineering, Medicine, Law, etc), the disparity in the curriculum should be minimal or eliminated. Thus, there is the need to create a uniform training programme and upgrade the quality of professionally trained counsellors in Nigerian Universities. Besides, the training programme should emphasize the practical application of the different theories of counselling. The curriculum of most Universities in Nigeria with accredited NUC Departments of Guidance and Counselling appears to place a premium on concepts and theoretical knowledge of counselling. As a helping profession like others, premium should be on the practical application of theoretical knowledge as well. The counselling practicum (field work) should not be less than one academic session for counsellors in training in any of the secondary schools within the state where the university is located. This will offer the students the opportunity to effectively apply the classroom knowledge of counselling theories in a practical life situation under the supervision of experienced trained professional counsellors.

### **Legal backing of school counselling**

The counselling profession in Nigeria needs the backing of the law. It is important to note that the Nigerian law either in form of decree enactment (during military rule) or the constitution (under democratic dispensation) has not given attention to professional counselling in Nigeria. Legal backing through legislation is imperative

for counselling to assume its proper status in Nigeria in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The code of conduct explains and regulates the activities of both the counsellors and the counselees. Its relevance should not be underestimated as Amakiri and Eremie (2017) explain that guidance and counselling profession cannot succeed very well without the formulation of ethical and moral code of practice backed up by law (legislation). Besides, with legislation supporting the existence and functionality of counselling in Nigerian secondary schools, school administrators will accord counsellors and the counselling profession the right attitude and treatment they deserve. Therefore, at the national level, the professional body (CASSON) should ensure the successful passage and sign into law the proposed bill; SB 636 of 2018 in order to raise the standard of professional counselling in Nigeria. Thus, upgrading CASSON from just been registered with Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) which does not offer a legal coverage, rather, it only gives recognition for members to function as an association or a group. Therefore, with the legal coverage through the proposed bill, the present apathy of school principals and administrators towards school counsellors will likely change.

Finally, since there is no legislation at the moment in Nigeria on this profession, it is strongly recommended that a Director of Professional Counselling Service should be appointed in each of the states in the Federation through the Ministry of Education. This should assist in the enlightenment of all stakeholders on the relevance of school counselling in the school system and compliance to professional assignment. Thus, this will help to address the apathy of some school administrators towards school counsellors and counselling in the secondary school system. More so, government should fund the education sector properly with the deserved funding allocation for counselling programme. This will assist to groom and enhance the efficiency of counselling in the education system in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria.

## **Conclusion**

Professional counselling in the Nigerian secondary school system appears to be welcome with mixed feelings. This is predicated on the fact that counselling services though recognized by the government in view of apparent ignorance on the part of students on career and personal social issues; some school administrators (principals) have designated school counsellors to classroom teachers and clerical officers. Yet, the counselling profession is the panacea to students' personal social, emotional, vocational and educational problems. The efficiency of the profession in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Nigeria is dependent on many factors; crucial among them is modern technology training compliance and a legal backing of the profession. Thus, the profession will be accorded its due recognition without any form of apathy from school administrators, principals and teachers.



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