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My warmest regards.

O. E. Olajide, PhD

Editor-in-Chief

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SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND ITS CHALLENGES IN PUBLIC SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper explored social work practice in public senior secondary schools in Nigeria. Social work is a social institution with social intervention to encourage, enrich and increase the capacities of students to socially function in their communities. This paper used documentary approach in qualitative research methodology. Secondary data were obtained from review of journals, textbooks, and official publications were obtained to outline social work practice, and discuss challenges of school social practice before advocating school social work practice in public senior secondary schools in Nigeria. Challenges of lack of legislation; inadequate social work education, trained personnel, poor funding, remuneration, and professionalism; lack of clarity and awareness about social work and non-certification of practitioners should be remedied by government and other stakeholders to engender safe and ethical practice among social workers and create an enabling environment for students in public senior secondary schools in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Social Work Practice, School Social Work, Public Senior Secondary Schools in Nigeria,*

Introduction

Schools are social institutions that are designed to give students foundation for education, formative and shared social experiences in life. Education is a universal right of every child (Huxtable, 2013). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 stipulates that quality education means inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (United Nations, 2022). Schools provide formative experiences for students through education (Openshaw, 2008). Education in senior secondary schools in Nigeria prepares students for lifelong learning and equips them with skills for meaningful contribution to the society (UNICEF, 2021).

National Policy on Education (2014) allows public and private participation in ownership and management of secondary schools in Nigeria. Senior secondary schools are owned by government or private actors like religious organisations, community associations, for-profit organisations, non-profit organisations or individuals (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2014). Federal, state and local government own and manage public secondary schools across the country, although some privately-owned missionary schools have been returned to their original founder/owners by either federal or state government. There are 27,042 senior secondary schools in Nigeria as of 2019, and 9,589 of these are owned by publicly owned by government (Sasu, 2022).

Social work practice in public senior secondary schools provide students with help to overcome psychosocial, developmental and behavioural problems that affect learning in schools. School social workers interview students and their parents to assess problems and make necessary referrals for professional and community services within the relevant policies and laws in the school systems (Obashoro, 2016 in Ugboaga, 2016). They work closely with the class teachers and school administrators of the students and follow up with referral

agencies to ensure that services are provided, and the students exhibit improvements. The school social workers provide crisis intervention to students with social problems such as teen suicides, bullies, antisocial behaviours, drug and alcohol abuse, and school violence.

Access to social services and welfare for the psychosocial wellbeing of the Nigerian child is a prerequisite of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) as amended and the National Policy on Education (2014). These policies provide impetus for the provision of equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels of education for Nigerian students. Education involves the full development of the three domains of the child which are cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Although there is loss of confidence in public educational institutions (Ajayi, 2000 in Ehigiamusoe, 2012), Ogundare (2018) cited instances of growing confidence in Lagos public schools, and given that public senior secondary schools are faced with numerous challenges ranging from institutional, investment, infrastructural and instructional to environmental, family, parental and learners' problems, the numbers of enrolment of students in public secondary schools is 79% of total enrolment of 4.3 million students in senior secondary schools in 2017 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2019).

Literature has focused attention on issues of policies, investment, infrastructure and instructional facilities that are grossly inadequate and students' poor performance but not on the psychosocial wellbeing of the students (Ogundare, 2018). Students' academic achievement is influenced by psychophysiological factors such as self-concept, cognitive abilities, mental health, and environmental factors such as school, family, parental socio-economic status, peer influence, lack of access to basic needs and community barriers (Bulanda & Jalloh, 2017). Multidisciplinary teams of professionals including social workers have been integrated into the school settings to enable students overcome their psychosocial problems. This paper will explore social work practice in public senior secondary schools in Nigeria and its benefits to school community. This paper used documentary approach in qualitative research methodology and obtain secondary sources data from review of journals, textbooks, and official publications to outline social work practice and discuss

challenges of school social practice before advocating school social work practice in public senior secondary schools in Nigeria.

School Social Work Practice and Professionals

School is a part of the ecosystem where students are trained for community development and social change. In the school, they learn and build capacity to function effectively in their physiological, psychological, social, institutional and judicial environments. Students have the right to survive, grow, develop and participate in the wellbeing in an enabling and a safe environment (UNICEF, 2022a). Students fulfil their individual aspiration within the framework of their society through education (Olaleye & Olusa, 2021). The National Policy on Education reiterated the place of the school system in the formative phase of students. The school is an educational institution where the services of school social workers help the students maximize their use of school experience (Ayangunna, 2013). A critical review of the philosophy of the national policy on education and school social work practice show that both share the same purpose of helping students to achieve their potentials and contribute to human capital development in the society. Folaranmi (2013) said that the school and social workers share the same values.

School social work is a specialised area of practice in social work professional service (School Social Work Association of America, 2022). Bulanda & Jalloh (2017) cited Frey, Alvarez, Dupper, Sabatino, Lindsey, Raines, & Norris (2013) who propositioned school social work model and highlighted the functions of school social workers to include:

- (i.) the provision of evidence-based educational, behavioural and mental health services,
- (ii.) promotion of school climate and culture conducive for learning, and
- (iii.) optimisation of access to school-based and community-based resources.

School social work commenced in United States when cities like Boston, Hartford and New York added social work services to the

public schools' curriculum in 1906 (Ayangunna, 2013). It started out as child advocacy programme with focus on helping students with problems to gain capacity to solve them and grew to become social welfare service that supports learning in the school. The domain of school social work started in Nigeria when social work started formally (Irele, 2019) and social workers are involved in school social work practice at micro, mezzo and macro levels.

School social work practice involving working with students in the school, home and community to help them achieve psychosocial balance for academic performance. The domains of school social work involve individual counseling and group therapy, classroom support, consultation with teachers, parents and administrators and promotion of positive behaviour, academic progression and mental health of students. School social work service is construed as the process of helping students to acquire social skills to cope with challenges they face in their community. This community can be their classroom, school premises and extend to their homes, neighbourhood and places where they interact with other people in the society. Young people suffer abuses and are exposed to vices in their community and these can hamper their academic success. Social workers work through the school administration, teachers, parents and members of the community to promote policies and practices that help students and other stakeholders identify social problems that confront students and work together to find culturally acceptable ways to eliminate them while offering social support services to vulnerable students in the school.

Social workers work in the school settings help create a balance in the student's individual needs and school's expectations and promote healthy relationship among all stakeholders in the school community including parents, teachers, administrators, social welfare professionals and government agencies' workers (Obeten, Onyenemerem & Mbah, 2020). School social workers are involved in counseling and helping to address social problems among students in public senior secondary schools (Ugbodaga, 2016). Social workers should possess competencies to discharge services to students and other key stakeholders in the school social work value chain.

School workers who will practice in school social work as generalists are expected to have acquired a minimum qualification of bachelor of Social Work from National Universities Commission accredited universities in Nigeria (Kirst-Ashman, 2013; National Universities Commission, 2014). Canatselis & Willis (2012) listed the roles of school social workers to include counselling, casework (case management), group work, community organisation, advocacy and raising awareness of social issues and role modelling. The school social worker should work with an average of two hundred and fifty (250) students and perform social work services using a framework model built on home-school-community linkages, education rights and advocacy or ethical guidelines and education policy for evidence-based educational, behavioural and mental health services, promotion of a school climate and culture conducive for learning and process that maximizes access to school-based and community-based resources (Kelly, Frey, Thompson, Klemp, Alvarez & Berzin, 2015; Knox, Gherardi & Stoner, 2020).

School social workers should have professional competencies and counseling skills to enable him practise in the school settings. Competencies are combination of multidimensional abilities of the individual school social worker to carry out tasks and assignments related to real-life situations within professional practice (Blomeke, Gustafsson & Shavelson, 2015). Kirst-Ashman (2013) defined competencies as measurable behaviours in social work practice that are premised on current working knowledge, skills, values, and conduct in line with social work' conduct of ethics for safe and ethical practice. Council on Social Work Education (2008) in Kirst-Ashman (2013) surmised that graduates of social work are required to demonstrate ten competencies which show that social workers in the school setting can:

- (i.) identify and conduct self as professional social worker,
- (ii.) apply ethical principles of social work to guide professional practice,
- (iii.) use critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments,
- (iv.) engage diversity and difference in practice,

- (v.) promote human rights and socio-economic justice,
- (vi.) engage in both research-informed practice and practice-informed research,
- (vii.) apply knowledge of human behaviour and social environment in practice,
- (viii.) use policy advocacy to promote and deliver social work services for psychosocial wellbeing,
- (ix.) practice social work within the contextual framework of clients, and
- (x.) engage, assess, intervene and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities in professional practice.

School social workers work within (not independent of) an organisation structure under supervision in the school system. An understanding of the hierarchy, power structure, line of authority and channel of communication will help school social workers to effectively discharge their tasks and responsibilities which involves casework, inter-agency consultation, social work administration, advocacy and report-writing in the school. Irrespective of the organisational structure in place in the school, the school social worker is not an academic staff and will report to the head of administration in the school. School social workers assume wide range of roles in the discharge of their duties, and these include serving as counselor, case manager, educator (not classroom teacher), broker, mediator, mobiliser, negotiator, facilitator and advocate (Ayangunna, 2013; Folaranmi, 2013; Kirst-Ashman, 2013).

In school social work practice, school social workers work directly with students and parents using casework individually and as groups. They also have relationship with teachers and school team. They provide services to other members of staff within the school community who many require the social work services. They work with agencies and perform administrative tasks such as report writing, and policy advocacy. As diverse as these functions are, school social workers are involved in generalist practice which has its foundation in counseling and problem-solving in the clients' socio-cultural environment. Students have personal, relationship, academic, and social problems, and these problems affect their

performance and conducts (Amadi, 2014). Some students are vulnerable, bullied and suffer esteem problems.

School social workers help them to deal with these problems. They use planned-change process which entails the development and implementation of a strategy for changing identified pattern of behaviour or circumstances to improve individual student's (client) psychosocial wellbeing and functioning in their communities. Planned-change process has a six-step procedure in generalist social work practice. These steps are described as engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation and termination. In direct practice, the school social workers are involved in counseling students to help students with learning difficult, psychosocial problems and recovery from traumatic experiences; home visitations for therapy-related reasons to assess; investigate or discuss students' situations with their parents and observe the students in their natural habitats; and group work for remedial, reciprocal and social goals within the school system (Openshaw, 2008).

School social workers collaborate and relate with students, parents and other stakeholders in the school settings. They relate with other social welfare and education services in the school social work ecosystem including administrators, principals, teachers, psychologists, therapists, guidance counselors, school nurses, special education experts and workers from ministry of education. These professionals have diverse expertise that complement the work of school social workers in a multidisciplinary spectrum. Collaboration, communication, inter-agency meeting and referral services with these professionals make school social workers carry out their services effectively in the school. School social workers also work with the teachers and parents who interface with the students in the classrooms and at home. Sometimes, they may need to interview members of the communities like the clergies of the religious affiliations and youth leaders in the neighbourhood. While working with the parents, school social workers can also expand their casework interview to members of extended families of students/clients depending on their relationships with them and perceived role in the assessment phase.

A critical aspect of school social work practice is the environment where the counseling and interview occur during individual social casework. The school social worker needs an office space that guarantees the privacy and confidentiality of the student/client during sessions. School social workers need to earn the trust and confidence to the student/client to enhance free flow of information during interview. This process is tedious, but the school social worker has to depend on own professional skills and competencies to encourage the student/client to talk without coercion. A social casework cannot hold in the staff common room or a secret place that can compromise the social worker-client relationship in social work service. The school social worker must work with understanding of the school policies and procedures to help students with problems associated with learning, relationship and physiological development.

Students in public senior secondary schools face myriads of social problems that the social workers can help address. Okoye (2013) has argued that the use of school principals and other professionals for solving these social problems in schools is counterproductive and advocated that social workers should be engaged to work with students and other stakeholders to do the work they are professionally trained to carry out. In helping students achieve academic success, school social workers act as a crucial link between school, home, and community. School social workers work with special needs students, students with learning difficulties and at-risk students who are often marginalized in terms of attention in learning within the school systems (Openshaw, 2008). They spend time helping students with emotional or behavioural disorders, and students who have been abused or traumatised from negative and hurting experiences from home or community. Their responsibilities include forming school discipline policies, mental health intervention, crisis management, and supporting pupils and their families.

Challenges of School Social Work Practice

The Federal Ministry of Social Development, Youth and Sports have been promoting social work as academic discipline and professional practice since 1975. Beginning from 1976, few universities are now

offering graduate courses to produce social workers. Literature shows that social work remains a marginalized profession in the Nigerian education system (Huxtable, 2013; Okoye, 2013; Irele, 2019) and social work practice faces numerous challenges. Some of these challenges have been identified and discussed as follows:

- **Legislation.** There is no reference to social work practice in the National Policy on Education 2014 (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2014). The Social Protection Policy 2016 referenced social welfare and child protection which involves the provision of health services, psychosocial support and counseling to survivors of violence against persons, child labour, child abuse, child rape and human trafficking but there was no mechanism like social work profession and practice to institutionalise and implement this initiative (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2016). The Social Work Profession bill has been with the national assembly since 2018. Without an appropriate legislation for social work practice, it will be difficult to fully implement the Child Right Act 2003 and social welfare component of Social Protection Policy 2016. According to UNICEF (2022b) only 23 out of 36 states and Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja have promulgated the Acts.
- **Social Work Education.** Social work education is the process of professionalising social work through the application of scientific knowledge to social work practice to enhance the skills of social workers in human relations and problem solving. There is dearth of on-the-job training, and continuing education training for practicing school social workers who are overstretched on the job, and do not have time for self-development. Some schools do not have the funds or budgetary allocations to send their school social workers for continuing education or supervisory training.
- **Trained Personnel.** There are 200 social workers (Ugbodaga, 2016) among 229,980 students (2017 Annual Public School Census in Ogundare, (2018) in 322 public schools in

Lagos State (Ogundare, 2018). There is a social worker-student ratio of 1:1,149 in public senior secondary school in Lagos State. Kelly, Frey, Thompson, Klemp, Alvarez, & Berzin (2016) suggested a ratio of 1:250 for school social worker to students in the school settings. Udeani (2019) said that escalation of social problems in the society without corresponding increase in number of qualified social workers calls for urgent demands for the need for trained social workers in Nigeria. Many of those practicing as school social workers in are either undertrained or professionals from other human services seconded to stand in and play the role of school social workers.

- **Funding.** Social welfare agencies are underfunded. Budgetary allocations for recruitment of school social workers and resources of offices with full complements of resources to work within the school settings are limited. Schools do not have allocations to procure resources, working tools and transportation for school social workers for their work or home visitation, and this constraint hampers the effectiveness of the school social workers.
- **Remuneration.** Like teachers, social workers are poorly remunerated when compared to their counterparts in other sectors or economies across the globe. Most school social workers continue to do their works because of their orientations towards social justice and ethical values to ensure their clients achieve psychosocial wellbeing. School social workers remain least motivated because of poor salaries.
- **Professionalism.** Okoye (2013) stated that because untrained and unqualified personnel manage cases in most social welfare agencies, students on field practicum in social welfare agencies report high rates of unethical practices because of law of requisite social work skills and competencies. Unprofessionalism erodes confidentiality, and trust in client-social worker relationship.
- **Awareness.** in Schools and Communities. Lack of clarity about school social work roles and confusion with other human

services agencies and disciplines have been responsible for under utilisation and low awareness of school social work.

- **Certification for Social Work Practice.** There is no professional body recognised by the law in Nigeria today to license social work practitioners. There are Nigerian Association of Social Workers (NASoW) affiliated to International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and Institute of Social Work of Nigeria (ISOWN), but these professional bodies are not chartered by law, and cannot issue accreditation for social work education or certification for social work practice. Membership eligibility of NASoW is open to holders of relevant degrees, diplomas and certificates who have completed training in social work approved by the institutions. Membership/graduate conversion programme eligibility for ISOWN is open to holders of degree in Psychology, Sociology, Nursing, Adult Education, Community Development, Agricultural Extension, Social Work/Development, Guidance and Counselling, among others.

Advocacy for School Social Work Practice

The school system has faced new challenges and is changing as the world continues to evolve after COVID-19 pandemic. Students, teachers and parents face new learning and social problems and require adaptable skills in problem-solving to navigate these problems with the assistance of school social workers (Huxtable, 2013). Social workers will be required to help to reduce complex social problems in Nigeria (Irele, 2019). Social work is a social institution because it is a social intervention which encourages, enriches and increases the capabilities of individuals, families and groups to socially function in their communities (Udeani, 2019). Students in public senior secondary schools face myriads of social problems that the social workers can help address. The role of social workers is to facilitate community involvement in the schools and advocate for student success, as part of an interdisciplinary team (Niamhom, Srisuantang, & Tanpichai, 2018).

School social work promotes social justice and problem solving for students. School social workers can use their knowledge, skills and values to help students improve their lives and cope with the demands

of the school system (Openshaw, 2008). Okoye (2013) has argued that the use of school principals and other professionals for solving these social problems in schools is counterproductive and advocated that social workers should be engaged to work with students and other stakeholders to do the work they are professionally trained to carry out. Government should institutionalise social work practice in public secondary schools in Nigeria by:

- Working with relevant government agencies through the Federal Ministry of Education and States' Ministries of Education, and their development partners to ensure that government fully enforce human rights as a tool for social welfare administration in Nigeria. The recognition of human rights is important to social work intervention and pursuance of social justice in a complex society like Nigeria. They should also collaborate with their supervisory agencies to lobby for the fully domestication of the Child's Rights Act in Nigeria.
- Universities and training institutions should increase their duration for field practicum to schools to minimum of three months and maximum of six months to create a buffer for lack of social work professionals in schools. Graduates of social work from accredited universities should be consider for employment in schools as generalist school social workers.
- The social work bill in the national assembly should be passed to give the social work profession a legal footing for practice in Nigeria. This will enhance its visibility, and promote professionalism in practice because the professional bodies will be able to license practitioners in the field of social work in Nigeria.
- School social workers should have an enabling environment to work with clients in the school system. They should be provided with needed resources and office spaces to work in a way that promote their professionalism. They should be well remunerated and motivated through continuing education and on-the-job training to retain them on the job.

Conclusion

Education in Senior Secondary Schools in Nigeria prepares students

for lifelong learning and equips them with requisite skills to meaningfully contribute to their society. Schools where the education take place can give students positive or negative experiences which can make or mar them in life. Students struggle to cope with the demands of learning and life. Access to school social work in public senior secondary schools as a specialised area of practice in social work profession provides evidence-based educational, behaviour and mental health services to students, gives them right school climate for learning and community-based resources for psychosocial functioning of students, parents, teachers and others in their community. The principal and other professionals in the school system cannot help students solve their social problems in school.

Social work is a social institution that encourages, enriches and increases the capacities of students as individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities to socially function in the society. Social workers are generalists who perform services with the right competencies and play a wide range of roles for counselling, casework, group work, community work, advocacy and raising awareness of social issues and role modelling. The challenges of lack of legislation; inadequate social work education, trained personnel, funding, remuneration, and professionalism; lack of clarity and awareness about social work and non-certification of practitioners should be remedied by government to promote safe and ethical practice among social workers and create an enabling environment for students in public senior secondary schools in Nigeria.

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