



Towards Effective School Social Work Practice in Nigeria: Context and Challenges

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Abstract

Based on a systematic desk review, this study explores the nature of contemporary school social work in Nigeria and how its effectiveness can be enhanced. It is premised on the belief that school social work is crucial for achieving the objectives of the educational sector. Education is regarded as essential for meeting developmental goals. The study reveals that while current social work practice in schools in Nigeria remains entrenched in traditional and conventional approaches, it faces significant obstacles. These include apathy from school administrators and a lack of awareness about the necessity of social work services in schools. Additionally, the limitations of social workers themselves and a scarcity of resources in Nigeria's public schools further impede effective practice. Despite these challenges, the study advocates for the integration of social work in schools and reaffirms its critical role in supporting educational objectives as a fundamental institution in society.

Keywords: School Social Work, Nigeria, Educational Development, Social Work Practice

1. Introduction

This paper examines the importance of school social work in Nigeria, motivated by the observation that social workers may not have been effective in achieving desired outcomes in schools. Despite the recognition of social work as a core area of practice, its effectiveness in the educational system, which serves as a cornerstone for development in Nigerian society, requires thorough examination.

Despite relatively small budget allocations for education over the last ten years, Nigeria recognizes the critical role of education in its development within the contemporary world. It is reasonable to expect that this recognition should prompt those involved in the sector to collaborate and strive to produce outcomes aligned with broader developmental goals.

The existing literature primarily focuses on the training of professional social workers (Daniel, 2007; Weiss et al, 2004) and the employment prospects in the field, largely within Western contexts (Ng, 2010; Lewis, 2018; Wermeling, 2013). However, there is a significant lack of studies on the experiences and context of school social work practice in developing countries like Nigeria. This paper aims to address this gap, underscoring the pivotal role of education and the indispensable nature of social work in national development efforts.

School social work practice in Nigeria, despite its long history, has not evolved significantly with developments in the discipline and has struggled to meet the needs of its target clients, including teachers and students. The practice has remained traditional and narrow in scope, limiting its effectiveness and relevance. In other words, school social work practice in Nigeria has followed a traditional albeit parochial route that has dogged its utility to the needs of the day. In this case, while school social work is widely practiced in the Nigerian context, it has not been able to respond to or meet the expectations of the stakeholders in the system. Equally worrisome is that fact that such practice has been mired in a context of conventionality and tradition that has made it neither transformative nor dynamic.

Apart from the U.S, there seems to be a general dearth of research in school social work or doing social work within the school setting (Isaksson and Sjostrom, 2017). The above entails that there is a great imperative for the investigation of the experience of social workers in the school setting, the institutional and structural constraints they confront and even the degree of relevance or aptness of existing social work models in comprehending the extant realities of school social work practice especially in developing societies of the world including Nigeria.

It is also important to emphasise the need for the emergence of social work with proven niche in school practice. As it stands now, there appears to be understanding that school social

work is an area that any social worker can easily delve into. The above thinking is a product of the prevailing air of belief that social work practice in Nigeria is bereft of specialization i.e., it is an omnibus system that allows any qualified social worker to find a niche anywhere. This is contrary to the situation in the developed societies of the world where school social work is a core specialization and practice area. Thus, there is need for a rethink among social workers on the need for professionalising school practice and regulating those who get involved in it and what they do.

Based on the above the study was guided by the following research questions: what is the nature of school social work in general? What is the relevance of school social work in Nigeria's schools? What are the specific challenges confronting school social work practice in Nigeria? What strategies can be employed in addressing the above challenges within Nigeria's public school context?

Therefore, the paper depending on the systematic desk review of the extant literature and the experience of the researcher as a field work supervisor of over ten years examines how social work school practice can be made effective and responsive to the needs of the stakeholders and the school system. Inclusive criteria of literature to be utilised would range from focus on themes like school social work, social work, students school needs, social work practice, theories of social work to school environment and functions of the school social worker. However, extreme dated literature i.e. those before 1995 would be excluded. This exclusion is justified by the fact that the paper targets materials that discuss contemporary issues concerned with school social work practice and or would provide insights that respond to the need to arrive at strategies towards improving the effectiveness of social work practice in schools in Nigeria.

2. Material and Methods

The current study utilized secondary data sources in gathering information from extant literature on school social work. The review employed a thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), to explore key themes such as theories/models of school social work practice, the conceptualization and justification of school social work, engagement with the Nigerian school environment, and the primary challenges faced by school social workers in Nigeria.

Given the evolving nature of social work as a profession and the theoretical frameworks employed in the field, the review deliberately included both contemporary and historical documents. Specifically, materials published before 1999 were also considered to provide

historical context and trace the development of theoretical models over time. This comprehensive analysis of materials enabled the systematic synthesis of data that informed the results and discussions presented in the paper.

3. Theories/Models of School Social Work Practice

There are several theories or models of school social work practice in the literature. However, quite a lot of these have been mere elongation or adaptation of traditional social work approach in the interpretation and understanding of the school social work situation and needs. As a result, there has not been a committed attempt to come up with theories that are restrictively limited to the realities of the school system.

Be the above as it may, Alderson (1972) has stipulated four models of school social work practice. Among these models are the traditional – clinical model (which as one expects follows in the footsteps of traditional social work practice); the school change model (which suggests a practice oriented towards fostering and promoting change); the community school model; and the social interaction model of practice. However, in appreciation of the changing trends and social realities of contemporary society there has emerged the so-called post-modern models of school social work practice including the evidence-based practice (Raines, 2004; 2008). The expectations of the evidence-based approach can be seen as largely consistent with welfare system modernization. It in this sense, it seeks to capture the dynamics of an ever-changing social world in the school.

However, the models put forward by Alderson are often supplanted in the practice repertoire of social workers by the practice theories of social work put forward by Healy (2005). Healy put up typologies of fundamental social work theories for practice (Isaksson and Sjostrom, 2016). These include the task-centered approach (looks at individual problems and come up with short-time intervention bound on time limits); the systems theory approach (synonymous with the systems thinking in the social sciences and coheres on the person-in-the-environment approach; looks at social transactions and the relationship between the individual and the environment); strengths approach (seeks to enable the individual or client articulate and work towards self-help and better outcomes in the future); and the anti-oppressive approach (anchored on the professional recognising and accounting for multiple forms of oppression confronting the individual).

In view of the above typologies, the Nigerian school social work practice scenario approximates the task-centred and systems theory approaches. This is because of the short-time and quick intervention orientation in the system and the severe limitations imposed by structural

factors on social work practice in schools as well as the influence of the social environment in producing the individual and situations confronting her.

However, while the iteration of models and even theories is important, it is even more important to perceive the fact that universal models of social work practice are often misleading and can even be counterproductive. In other words, models and theories adopted in any study should be guided by the need to capture the peculiar social context under discussion or being examined. Thus, that one model works in a particular society does not in any way guarantee that it would work in the next or another society.

In addition, while theories and models are very fundamental to the general practice of social work, some authors argue that working or practising in schools give the social worker the opportunity not only to innovate but also overcome the strictures often imposed by theories and their prescriptions. Thus, the role of the school social worker as a sole professional and relatively an outsider in the school offers a potential for school social workers to go beyond established theories of social work practice (Isaksson and Sjostrom, 2017).

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Conceiving and Justifying School Social Work

School social work can be conceived as largely a support social service introduced mainly to strengthen the achievement of the social and developmental goals of education. While teachers are the main actors in the school system, they are often challenged by the need to provide and correct socialization failures resulting from the lapses of families as well as evolve mechanisms for dealing with general educational/instructional problems within the community or even within the individual or school child.

However, these teachers have neither all the time (given that the school interactions are usually for a period of 6 – 8 hours weekdays) nor trained adequately to cover all social and pedagogical inadequacies (often these teachers are parochial experts in particular disciplines or even subjects). In such a situation, social workers, guidance counsellors emerge as social professionals targeted at supporting the deficiencies in pedagogy and socialization lacuna within the schools.

It has been the case that the problems encountered by students (whether bred in the school or with origins in the family and social environment of the children) affect the effectiveness of pedagogy and more crucially affect the academic development of the school children. So, social work came into the school to support pedagogy, strengthen the abilities of teachers to perform their roles, improve the social functioning of the school children within and

beyond the school and ultimately facilitate the achievement of the goals of schooling or education in the society.

Ideally, the school social worker is someone who through years of training is versed in the corpus of knowledge defining social work. The person is thus aware of the theories and models of intervention and practice in the discipline and has been found worthy of being described as a social worker by virtue of both training and experience. In addition, the school social worker should normally claim a specialization in the school practice of social work (however, the reality is that so many people currently practising social work in schools are neither professional social workers nor people versed in the critical corpus of knowledge that define the field; this is not limited to Nigeria or even the developing parts of the world only) acquired through both training and experience. The above equips the social worker to achieve performance of the required duties in the approved ways and within the bounds of the ethics of the discipline.

Therefore, social workers are imperative in the goal of improving the effectiveness of the school system. In other words, social workers as school support staff should work in concert with teachers and school administrators in improving school experience, enabling conduciveness of the school environment, and contributing to the overall effectiveness and achievement of the goals of the system. A well-resourced institution with efficient social workers and good teachers and where there is cooperation and productive synergy is much more likely to achieve the overarching goals of education in the society than otherwise.

In simple terms and in most settings globally, the school social worker is a professional expected to inter alia mediate in conflicts and divergence of viewpoints between students, their teachers, and parents. Expectedly, the social worker engages all parties in the bid to apprehend a thorough view of the situation, problem or issues in contention. The identification of a problem involves the social worker rendering the needed assistance (which can be to any or more of the parties and not only students). However, the request for assistance or help from the social worker can emanate from the student/pupil, parents, the teachers/school administrators, or even other support professionals working in the school like guidance counsellors and even institutions typically external to the school like families, child welfare/social welfare agencies etc.

Social workers also work with groups in schools as part of their social support functions. Often the desire to work with groups result from realization that decisions are often made and implemented as a group function. Therefore, as part of the efforts to avert or prevent bad decisions or implementation protocols that are injurious, social workers engage with groups in

the school and beyond. Such functions may include organising parents' groups, observing children in group settings, supporting problem solving initiatives in student communities, conducting sociometric surveys in classrooms, sensitization, skill improvement, community development schemes etc. (Csok and Pusztai, 2022).

4.2 Engaging the Nigerian School Environment

There is no gainsaying the fact that it is detrimental to practice school social work as if things have remained always the same. In this sense, social work practice in schools (and elsewhere) need to fathom the fact that social and economic situations keep changing. In fact, it has been observed that the notion of the family has changed internationally over the past few decades in the sense that the number of families living under risk has increased and even traditional forms of parenting has become weakened (Rice and Tan, 2017). Even in a developing context like that of Nigeria, the family has changed drastically over the years and economic pressures have affected negatively on the ability of the family to provide ideal and traditional parenting functions. Families are in most cases vulnerable and unstable. In such a situation, the children arrive in schools bearing different and often challenging baggage for both the teachers and social workers.

In other words, one may conceive the traditional family especially in urban areas as experiencing what can be labelled a functional crisis with regards to performing its conventional functions especially to the children. Thus, the traditional and conventional family model is in retreat and creates a lacuna that challenges the creative and innovative capabilities of those concerned with administering and managing schools including social workers.

It has been observed that as a result of the 'crisis' of the traditional family, children often enter the community (school) as largely non-compliant and exhibiting such traits as aggression, non-compliance with rules of interaction, hyperactivity and attention deficiency among others (Csok and Pusztai, 2022). There is no doubt that such children are literally a handful and task the capability of those involved in the school system as well as generate difficulties with doing things as before. In other words, these children apart from challenging school agents and even undermining resources equally call attention to the need for new approaches. In such a situation, school social workers would be deficient and largely ineffective when they approach their practice from a business-as-usual mentality.

Interestingly, there are suggestions nowadays that parents these days are evidently ill-equipped to deal with the challenges their children pose. As a matter of fact, it has been reported that the experience of those who work in public educational institutions show that in several cases, parents lack both the educational skills and communication tools and even exhibit lack

of efforts to tackle conflict among themselves constructively (Ayalon and Flascher, 2004; Veinberg, 2015) in ways that do not affect the children. Even though the above authors were making specific reference to the situation in diverse settings, there is apparently no denying the fact that parents these days often find themselves at their wits end trying to understand their children. Often, it seems that parents are from a different (probably extinct) world from their children.

School social workers, contrary to popular perception in Nigeria, are not only concerned with matters involving the schoolchildren and school authorities but should equally be concerned with issues/disagreements/divergence between parents and teachers. Such issues or divergence between these two sets of adults has the tendency of affecting the children. Therefore, intervening or mediating in such situations by the social workers ultimately helps with the positive school experience of the children. Social workers with appropriate skills and experience can effectively mediate the difference between the teachers and parents in ways that can be considered fruitful to all concerned especially the children.

An area of practice that the contribution of the social worker should be obvious is in helping parents and teachers cope with cases of children with attention deficiency and those that are hyperactive. While such children deserve special attention and conscious approach both at home and school, they should not be isolated as ‘problem’ or ‘afflicted’ children. It is often the case that both parents and teachers are confronted by difficulties in understanding and responding to the special needs of such children. Situations abound especially in Nigeria where the cases of such children are poorly understood within the school system and result in unnecessary conflict between teachers and parents with each party consigning blames to the other. Parents with such children often confront the dilemma of understanding such children and conveying their experiences to teachers as a way of helping to improve the school experience of such children. However, the dilemma faced by the parents can be helped by social workers who ideally should mediate in conflicts between parents and teachers (Mo and Chan, 2022) especially in the challenges arising from such children.

An often-overlooked aspect of school social work practice even in Nigeria is the fact that society expects schools to perform socialization functions (Csok and Pusztai, 2022). There is nothing novel about this idea since even classical sociology apprehends the school as a critical agency of socialization (Igbo and Anugwom, 2020). However, a cursory observation of the situation in schools in Nigeria (particularly secondary schools) would reveal a poor performance of this socialization role and the complicity of the schools in so many cases in the erosion of the moral foundations established by the family. In fact, many parents in Nigeria are

eager to point to the schools as the sources of the undermining of the moral foundations established by the family.

While the above may be easily invoked even in cases where parents are guilty of dereliction of duties, there is no doubt that the school is a veritable source of influence with different impacts on the children. In such a situation, social workers are faced with the challenge of presenting and acting in ways that positively influence the moral foundations of the children in schools. Presentation which deals with both the physical appearance (dressing; make-up; hair styles) and the carriage of the social workers within the school environment seem very important. While the issues of presentation and even carriage may amount to little value in developed societies, the reverse is the case in Nigeria where the ways one dresses, hair styles, make-up and carriage send clear messages to others. In such a situation, the school social worker who works in a context peopled with influenceable children should be overtly conscious of not dressing and acting in ways that send the wrong messages to the children.

It is instructive to note (in appreciating the seriousness of the above issue in today's Nigeria) that in so many religious and educational institutions in Nigeria that there are warnings boldly exhibited about dressing – classic example here is the bold message, “IMPROPER DRESSING IS NOT ALLOWED HERE”. Even some of these institutions especially religious ones go the extra length to specify what constitutes improper dressing sometimes in pictorial illustrations. In the above situation, school social workers may find themselves made to avoid fashion fads and appearances that may be construed as improper. The above applies to both male and female social workers and is especially related to younger professionals who may be now challenged to find a balance between their fashion desires and the social norms of their work environments.

There are mainly two types of social work practice in schools. These are: inclusion of the social worker as an integral part of the staff of the school i.e. they become members of a multidisciplinary team in the school or institution. In other words, the social workers are employed fully as members of staff of the school. This model, which is often viewed as the most effective and goal oriented is the case in such developed nations as the U.S, Sweden, Finland etc.

On the other hand, there is the type in which social work services are primarily externalised. In this case, social work services are provided to schools through the agency of NGOs or such social work services are channelled through social welfare agencies or similar state institutions. In this situation, social workers are not employed as part of the school staff but are employed as social welfare or NGO staff and are seconded to schools. Often these social

workers come on designated days or maintain hours within which they are available in the schools.

This second type is that which is utilised in Nigeria where social workers are not employed by the education ministry but rather by the social welfare ministry at the state level and are seconded to work in schools for some days of the school week. Without doubt, the first typology is more effective, but it is also more costly since the full salaries of the social workers are now borne by the school system or education authorities. But even beyond the above is that in Nigeria there is a prevailing dearth of social workers in schools even to provide one or two days in school week service.

Thus, a good number of schools operate without social workers ever. Apart from the obvious non-prioritization of the need of social workers in schools is the more daunting challenge that social welfare ministries and agencies do not have enough trained social workers. As a result, some of those who perform social work functions in schools or other settings are neither trained social workers nor those with good knowledge of the ideal social work practice regiment. In such a situation even, the services offered may be grossly inadequate or unreflective of what should have been. Despite a noted infancy of the social work profession in Nigeria, there is no gainsaying the need to prioritise school social work and professionalise the discipline in clearly discernible and enforceable ways.

4.3 Core Challenges to School Social Work Practice in Nigeria

It is important to understand that apart from probably ingrained incapacities of the average social worker operating in schools in Nigeria, there is the more fundamental issues of the context and organization under which the practice occurs. As Abbot (1988) aptly stated, professional work is always conditioned by the organization in which it is performed or practiced. There may be the temptation, in view of the above, to argue that Nigerian schools are not yet ripe for social work practice.

But such a position would seem not only defeatist (especially in the sense of the social worker agreeing to her irrelevance in the society and confirming the wrong perception of a good number of uninformed Nigerians) but crucially incognisant of the dynamic nature and evolving challenges facing the educational sector in Nigeria. However, while the above is undoubted, the social worker in Nigerian school setting confront a myriad of problems ranging from been seen as the intrusive outsider to the lack of awareness of the school administrators for social work practice and even the limited effectiveness of existing models and theories in guiding such practice.

One area of challenge which has undermined the capacity of parents to provide the ideal functions to their children is the influence of the internet and computing skills of the children. The technology gap in the above sense between the children and their parents apart from creating social distance even where there is physical proximity also weakens the ability of parents to supervise and monitor the activities of their children. While some parents especially the educated ones have adopted measures that allow them to monitor the internet activities of their children others especially the less educated and poor are left in the lurch and surrender to the inevitability of the online influences upon their children.

However, both sets of children interact and meet in schools and thereby there is permeation and mingling of influences that generate or create a generation of school children who are much more internet savvy and aware and ahead of those who are supposed to provide guidance and direction even within the school environment. Apart from the problems the above poses for the teachers, school social workers are often confronted with dealing with situations and young ones that are internet wiser and more advanced than them. In such situations where the children are generally more internet adept than their guardians and even social workers, a disconnect arise in the ability to achieve a truly comprehensive and thorough-going view of things from which to act or recommend solutions especially for the inexperienced professionals.

There is hardly any gainsaying the fact that majority of school administrators in Nigeria are largely unaware of the need for social workers in schools. As a matter of fact, cursory observation and the first-hand experience of the researcher puts the figure of school administrators unaware of the need for social workers at over 70%. In this situation, the school social worker rather than face the core mandate of school practice expends time and energy to constantly justify and even legitimate her position to the administrators and head teachers. Given the above, the professional neither enjoys the full cooperation of the school administrators in most cases nor gets the support resources with which to function. As a matter of fact, social workers often gain respect and justification of their relevance in schools through the positive outcomes of their interventions. Even student social workers who are sent on fieldwork orientation in schools regularly face the snobbishness and non-challant attitudes of school administrators and even teachers.

In addition, the school social worker is often perceived by the other staff of the school as intrusive outsiders who have come to cast aspersions on their work and assume the role of superiors. While there is hardly any evidence of the above, school staff generally feel that the mere presence of social workers directly or otherwise infer that they are not capable or that they have not being doing a good job of guiding and mentoring their students and pupils. In popular

culture language, social workers are seen as ‘over sabi’ (those who feel that they know too-much and are intellectually superior) people who have come to undermine the other people in the system.

Equally, worth mentioning is that school social work practice in Nigeria is severely under-resourced. In this sense, there is hardly any provision made to ensure that the social workers carry out their functions effectively. In many cases, the basics like an office space and even chair and desk are not made available. While the above situation can be linked to the general dearth of funds in public schools in Nigeria, even the private schools (that charge high fees from students are exempt from this malady. In addition, the problem of resources has often more to do with the lack of acceptance of these social workers by public school administrators than the mere dearth of resources.

But in the process of practising and helping wherever they can, these social workers often confront resistance from parents (since a lot of issues involving the students entail getting their families involved or sometimes these issues have roots in the family) who act on the basis of ignorance and the mistaken perception of social work intervention as indicating the failure of parenting. In addition, these parents often resist based on impatience and the unsupportive attitudes of the school administrators and teachers to intervention of the social workers.

On a different level, social workers in keeping to the axiom that the context conditions the practice often grapple with the inadequacy of existing social work models to the problems or challenges that confront them in these schools in Nigeria. While there is hardly any perfect fit between theory and reality (in all disciplines in the social and human sciences), the gap might often be so large that explanations are either tenuous or reflect the extensive adaptation of the theory to the situation. The above, however, does not confer credence to the assumption of sociology of professions that social work practice is organizational driven rather than rooted on a discipline (social work) specific knowledge base (Isaksson and Sjoström, 2017) but underlines the severity of the peculiar situation which confronts the school social worker in Nigeria. Perhaps, the case here reverberates with the overarching question of how theoretical knowledge or theories are applied in social work practice (Rosen, 1994; Healy, 2005; Blom and Moren, 2010; Payne, 2005 etc.). In view of the above, social workers practicing in schools in Nigeria are invariably called to be both creative and innovative.

5. Conclusion

Despite the noted challenges and limitations faced by social workers in the school context in Nigeria, there is no gainsaying the need to work towards improving and making this



practice effective. As has been observed in the case of Sweden, social work makes a unique contribution to the school system (Isaksson and Sjoström, 2017) and such contribution make for positive outcomes that reinforce the value of education to individual and national development. Specifically, school social work facilitates the ability of school teachers and administrators to meet their set goals and consummate the expectations of the school system within the broader national development agenda.

As the study carried out in Hungary by Csok and Pusztai (2022) clearly shows, parents and teachers need professional support in several areas and the social service system in the school can provide answers to these expectations. The above situation may be probably more intense in a developing society like Nigeria than Hungary given the different institutional support to the school systems in both places.

Despite the foregoing, it might be too early to do a proper theorization of school social work practice in Nigeria. However, we see it tending towards the externalization typology and the task-oriented approach which captures the short-time nature and instant interventions prevalent in the practice in Nigeria. Also, there is a significant element of the system approach since the influence or structural and environmental factors in producing and influencing the situations that social workers respond to, and the efficacy of interventions cannot be denied. In effect, social workers in Nigeria are neither part of the school system fully like is done in the United States not made to be available all-round the school time. There is also no good provision for social workers on demand. Apart from the lack of resources for this, school administrators are often at a loss on why they need social workers. Given the paucity of resources in the education sector in Nigeria, interventions are made to be short-timed and least consuming of resources.

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