

SCHOOL-BASED FAMILY COUNSELING: A NEW PARADIGM

Ofordile, Christopher (Rev. Fr.)

Lecturer, Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Phone #: +234-806-3790553, E-mail: chrisofordile@yahoo.com

Abstract

This article has to do with the mental and physical health of students and advocates a new model that is more effective than what we have at present in taking care of the students. This model is called School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC). The meaning of SBFC is explained and the author examines the related literatures from Alfred Adler's point of view to school counseling, school psychology and social services to buttress his claim. Three quarters of the literature reviewed showed that incorporating Family Counseling and School Counseling will go a long way to alleviate student's personal problems, teacher-student problems, parent-student problems, student-peer problems, teacher-parent-student problems and even parent-grandparent-student problems. This does not mean that there are not many obstacles on the way to accomplish this goal, for example man-power training, costs, acceptance in the schools and parents presence on site (School).

Introduction

Nigeria does not have school counseling in primary schools and only a skeletal counseling in post primary levels. There is the very urgent need to introduce School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) in nursery, primary, and tertiary levels of education. There is still more of this need in the nursery and primary levels, since emotional problems usually rear up at those stages of development, and the sooner they are tackled the saner the society we shall have. The guidance and counselors are at present inadequate in number to deal with the

problems of children in post primary schools. Yet, the traditional school counseling model is inadequate in dealing with children who are failing at school because of family problems.

School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) is a new approach to helping children succeed at school, and to overcome personal and interpersonal problems. It is an integrated approach, which combines school counseling with family counseling in a broad systems approach. In its classic form, it is conducted on site at the school, and the school-based family counselor is identified as a staff of the school. This is in contrast to the traditional school counseling model, in which the counselor is not trained in family counseling, and the traditional family therapy model, in which the counselor is not trained to work in school system. The school-based family counselor is trained to work with children in the context of family, school, peer and community systems theoretical orientations.

The specific skills required of school-based family counselor (SBFC) include:

- 1) counseling/remedial: child counseling, family counseling, group counseling, marital counseling, parents counseling and consultation, teacher/principal consultation, client assessment, children's support groups, parent support groups and mediation between family and school;
- 2) counseling preventive: academic and career counseling, classroom guidance groups and classroom discipline workshops, parent effectiveness workshops, community intervention; and
- 3) administrative: maintaining client files/case notes, participating as school team member, acting as a liaison between child and family, school, community agencies (case manager function, child abuse reporting, referring clients for specialized treatments participating in programme evaluation and research on the effectiveness of SBFC.

Gerrard (1990), observed that over 85% of the children referred by teachers, parents, or self-referred had significant problems at home. The family problems included marital discord, parents divorcing,

substance abuse, parental neglect, older siblings involved in gangs, sexual and physical abuse, single-parents overwhelmed by economic and emotional problems, spouse abuse and chaotic families with little or no parental control. School counselors who typically have no training in family counseling are not equipped to intervene effectively in these family problems.

Furthermore, school-based family counseling minimizes triangulation (in which two family members form a coalition against a third family member who is often the family scapegoat or “identified patient”) because the school-based family counseling is not seen as a “third party” but rather is viewed as part of the school system. Because the school-based family counselor is the school counselor, he/she is viewed as an advocate for the school and the child.

The focus of counseling is on working with parents and families to help their children succeed in school. Going to school to consult with the school counselor on how to help one’s child succeed in school is something that many parents are willing to accept nowadays (especially if the counselor emphasizes that he/she needs the parents’ help). This normalizes the counseling and reframes it in a way that destigmatizes coming for counseling. As the school-based family counselor works with parents and family to help the child, trust is built which permits the counselor to eventually work on other family issues affecting the child.

Summarily, School-Based Family Counseling has two components thus: there is integration of school counseling and family counseling models in a broad based systems meta-model that is used to conceptualize the child’s problems in the context of his/her interpersonal networks: family, peer group, classroom, school (teacher, head-teacher/principal, other students) and community.

When a child is referred to School-Based Family Counselors, the child’s problem may involve one or all of these interpersonal networks. Irrespective of the level of interpersonal network affected, however, the school based family counselor will relate positively with the child’s family in order to reinforce positive change within the child.

Literature Review

The review of literature is divided into four parts:

- 1) The First School-based Counselor;
- 2) School counseling/School psychology literature advocating as emphasis;
- 3) Family therapy literature advocating a school emphasis, and
- 4) Social work and Special education literature.

The First School-Based Counselor

The earliest example of SBFC is that of Alfred Adler (Rosenberg, 1971). Adler (1920) frequently conducted family counseling interviews in school halls before an audience of teachers, mental health workers, and parents. This approach was consistent with his philosophy that a child should not be treated in isolation and that those involved with children would learn in an audience-demonstration format. We see here the elements both of a systems theory and an emphasis on prevention (through education). It could be argued that the first family counseling was conducted by Adler and that it was school-based family counseling. Other Adlerians, especially Dreikers (1958, 1965, 1968) have emphasized both school and home intervention.

School counseling/School psychology literature advocating a family emphasis

The value of a family systems approach when working with a child on school problem has been attested to by a great number of practitioners of school counseling and school psychologists (Basel, 1989, Braden and Sherrard, 1987; Bundy and Gumaer 1984; Capuzzi and 1984, Johnston and Zemitzsch, 1988; Fine & Gardner 1991; Ford 1986; Peeks 1989, 1993; Wilcox & Comas 1987; Carson, 1987).

Friesen (1979), calls for school counselors to embrace family counseling. Friesen was himself an early practitioner of SBFC and developed an outreach SBFC program in a school district through university-school partnerships. He recommends four basic approaches that SBFC could use for working with families thus: family life education, family enrichment, family consultation, and marital and family counseling.

Fine and Gardner (1991), contend that having a development and family systems orientation is more important for elementary school counselor than a specific set of techniques. Ford (1986), argues that because of the growing problems experienced by families and declining parent involvement in schools, learning about family counseling is a necessary next step in the professional development of school counselors, teachers, head-teachers and principals. Carlson and Sincavage (1987), made a survey of 110 members of the National Association of School psychologists and reported that family variables were seen as highly relevant to children's school problems.

Johnson and Zemitzsch (1988), describe the dangers of school intervention programmes that focus exclusively on the individual student and ignore student's other subsystems (family, peer, community, school). They advocate a family systems approach that addresses all these subsystems and suggest that school psychologists should begin using family counseling instead of referring students to outside agencies. Goodman & Kjonaas (1984), conducted SBFC pilot studies and concluded that school counselors with proper training can do family counseling.

The school counseling/psychology literature also contains articles describing the value of a family approach in dealing with a wide variety of specific student situations: disruptive student (Williams, 1988); gifted students (Zuccone & Amerikaner, 1986; Colangelo, 1988); step families (Medler, 1985, Poppen and White, 1984); learning disabled students (Perosa & Perosa, 1981); drinking violation (Ford, 1986); academic difficulties (Stone & Peeks, 1986); depression (Stark, Brookman & Frazier, 1990); alienated students, developmentally immature students and parental abuse and neglect (Griggs & Gale, 1977).

Family counseling approaches used by school counselors and school psychologists include: divorce counseling with children (Bundy & Gurmaer, 1984; Prokop, 1990); parent conferences (Conrad, 1989) and conjoint family counseling (Albaum, 1990; Fine & Gardner, 1991). Some of the family counseling approaches used by school counselors and some school psychologists are eclectic systems therapy.

Sloan (1986), carried out a randomized control group study of the effectiveness of group counseling of elementary age children in combination with brief telephone consultation with parents, and found no significant differences between treatment and control groups on self-esteem or behavioral dependent measures. A weakness of the study was that traditional family counseling and parent consultation were not used and on-limited telephone contact with parents was made on a relatively short (12 weeks) period. Although both treatment and control groups showed significant improvement from pre-test to post-test, there was evidence of contamination in that three of the nine control group teachers sought consultation for problem students during the study.

Furthermore, Albaum (1990), and Stone & Peeks (1986), describe six main benefits of SBFC for schools:

- 1) improved academic functioning of students receiving SBFC;
- 2) lessening of students' emotional and behavioral problems;
- 3) decreased classroom disruption of other students;
- 4) improved functioning of the students at home;
- 5) improved relationships between schools and families with children having school problems;
- 6) cost effectiveness.

Some of these literatures reveal several problems associated with the implementation of SBFC. Wendt and Zake (1984), discuss the advantages of training school psychologists in family dynamics and family therapy, but point out that family systems approach is complex and requires extensive course work. This has important implications for in-serving training and university curricula. Furthermore, Golden (1983), suggests that family therapy is too complex for school counselors, although school counselors can make brief interventions with functional families.

Although, literature reviewed above contradicts Golden's (1983), position, Golden's article indicates the importance of adequate training in family therapy for school counselors. Others contend that practicing family therapy in schools involves complex ethical issues than those encountered in private practice (Alessi, 1989). Such ethical

issues include competence, responsibility, and welfare of consumers. Holt (1989), mentions some of the obstacles on the way to the school psychologist using family counseling thus:

- 1) the school psychologist's competence to do family counseling;
- 2) resistance to using family counseling;
- 3) the absence of research in SBFC;
- 4) difficulties in identifying the client system;
- 5) the complexity of system dynamics.

Moreover, more difficulties, however, associated with family school interventions include: school personnel; resisting a wider systems focus that includes the family and community; the need for school counselors to do evening work (to accommodate parents); and ethical dilemmas arising from viewing the teacher as a client as opposed to a consultee.

Family therapy literature advocating school emphasis

There is an upsurge in awareness among family therapists that family systems theory implies not only working with the other members of a child's family, but also working with all the subsystems of which a child is part. Ron, Rosenberg, Melnick and Pesses (1990), observe that often family therapy alone is insufficient because the child is caught between the dysfunctional interaction at home and school. Inter-systems intervention is required in such cases. McGuire, Manghi and Tolan (1989), recommend that family therapist conceptualize school behaviour problems as part of a home-school system problem. McGuire and Lyons (1985), describe a community agency based programme to which 17 families were referred by schools because of an underachieving child. After treatment, 83% of the children in these families had improved in grades and classroom behaviour.

Additionally, Wetchler (1986), describes a macro-systemic model of family therapy treatment of school problems in which the school and family are viewed as the locus of the problem and treatment. This consists of the therapist working with the child in each subsystem separately first, and then rejoining the two subsystems in a more functional relationship.

Guerin and Katz (1984) describe five types of problems common to the family with a child experiencing school problems: emotional vulnerability in the family, conflict with a parent, conflict with a teacher or principal, an enmeshed relationship with a teacher that promotes peer resentment, and parent-teacher conflict. Moreover, there are five types of triangles that can be involved in a child's school-related problems: parent-parent-child; parent-sibling-child; sibling-sibling-child; parent-child-teacher; and grandparent-parent-child.

Family therapy approaches used to intervene in school systems include: strategic family therapy; Behavioral (social learning) family therapy, structural family therapy (Wetchler, 1986).

Some of the difficulties in implementing a family systems therapy approach in schools are: a lack of parental cooperation and disparities between home and school behavior. It is equally pertinent to note that the family therapy literature on family-school intervention emphasizes the value of intervening in both family and school in order to help children with difficulties at school.

Social work and special education literature

Long (1988) describes the importance of understanding the families of latch-key children in order for schools personnel to help those families. Dawson and McHugh (1987) describe case studies of students whose problems are exacerbated by teacher-parent communication difficulties and give examples of how teachers can make home visits as part of a family systems approach to changing students' behavior. In the District of Columbia Public Schools (1981), 16 students participating in the Youth in Psychoeducational Services (YIPS) programme reviewed family counseling in addition to a academic and behavioral treatment: 58% showed marked improvement on a behavior rating check list, 93% improved in reading achievement, 86% improved in spelling and 71% improved in reading.

Existing SBFC

Gerrard (2008) reported that Faculty and Staff in the center for child and family development have just completed the 10th year of a

successful school-based family counseling programme that is a University-School partnership. A survey of SBFC trainees/interns in San Francisco in 1990 suggested that 80% of clients there was a significant improvement in the presenting problem. A similar survey in San Francisco in 1995 showed the following improvement rates for clients: Classroom behavior (82%); grades (71%), at-home behavior (48%), and self-esteem (79%) (Gerrard & Perry, 1995). That a 48% improvement occurred at-home behavior was significant in view of the fact that parents were generally seen for only one to three sessions. Clearly, more rigorous research is needed to determine the efficacy of SBFC as compared to traditional school counseling. In Gerrard's (2008: 2) words:

In concluding 10 years of SBFC, we have found that this type of counseling is difficult but very rewarding. We are reaching families that normally do not come to community mental centers. The majority of families seen are low income and minority. About a third of the families have a history of conflict with the school and the school-based family counselors are trained to mediate and resolve this conflict so that the child is no longer triangulated between parent and/or between parent and principal.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The traditional school counseling model is inadequate in dealing with children who are failing at school because of family problems. Yet, Nigeria does not have school counseling in primary schools and only skeletal traditional counseling in post primary schools. This paper explains the School-Based Family Counseling (SBFC) model and contrasts it with the traditional counseling model, advocating for urgent introduction of the SBFC in nursery, primary, and tertiary levels of education.

Since, the SBFC is a new approach to helping children succeed at school, overcome personal and interpersonal problems; an integrated approach, which combines school counseling with family counseling in a broad systems approach; conducted on site at the school, and the school-based family counselor is identified as a staff of the school, it is

strongly recommended that the SBFC should be urgently introduced at all levels of the education system, especially the post-secondary levels.

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