

Counselling Practice in Early Child Care Development and Education: The Roles and Implications to Teachers and Counsellors in Nigeria

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Abstract

The introduction of counselling at the Early Child Care Development and Education level is a late comer in the educational arena in Nigeria. However, the Federal Ministry of Education took a bold step to make sure that within the education sector, counselling is introduced at all levels, hence they developed the National Policy on Counselling. This document spells out the purpose and objectives of counselling from nursery school to tertiary levels of education and more. This paper therefore looked at the purpose and objectives of counselling at the earliest stage of formal education in Nigeria, highlighting them and tried to x-ray what the roles of teachers and counsellors should be if the purpose and objectives of counselling at that level of education are to be achieved.

Key words: Counselling in early child care development, Counselling, Counsellors and teachers

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INTRODUCTION

Early Child Care Development and Education is a late comer into the formal education system in Nigeria. Before

it's arrival, Nigeria was practicing the 6-3-3-4 system of education (Federal Ministry of Education, 1981). The 6-3-3-4 system of education translates to 6 years of primary education, 3 years of junior secondary school education, 3 years of senior secondary school education, and 4 years of tertiary/university education. This system is survived by the current system that accommodates Early Child Care Development and Education. The present Nigerian educational system, according to the Federal Ministry of Education (2014: vii) is structured into:

EARLY CHILD CARE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN AGED 0 TO 4 YEARS

Basic education for learners aged 5 to 15 years of age. It comprises one to six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education

Post basic education of three years in senior secondary school and technical education for learners aged above 15years, and, Tertiary education provided by colleges of education, mono-technics, polytechnics and universities. In Nigeria, Early Child Care Development and Education (ECCDE) is the care, protection, stimulation and learning promoted in children from age 0 to 4 years in a Creche or nursery school. (Federal Ministry of Education ,2014:7) Additionally, the Federal Ministry of Education (2018) sees Early Child Care Development and Education as the education given to children in a formal setting before transition into primary school. This definition relates to children in nursery and kindergarten classes or schools who are aged 0 to 4 years. It excludes children who are aged 0 to 4 years, who are not in any formal educational setting but are being reared up at home as may be found in many remote villages in Nigeria, or even those who are above the age of 4 but are in that level of education. This group of children are now few as there are many private nursery schools in rural and remote areas in Nigeria run by churches

and private individuals. These churches and privately owned nursery schools are expectedly approved and supervised by government. The status quo is that some are approved while some are not. Besides, some of them don't have facilities for running such educational institutions. Those who use church halls try to demarcate the church halls to carve out classes by screening off one classroom from the other. The noise level in such halls are at times very deafening. They don't usually have space for play things for children in such a facility. It is of a grave concern that such early child care education facilities don't have the play things that should characterize such levels of educational institutions. In the absence of formal Early Child Care Development and Education centers, children aged 0 to 4 years are usually taken care of by their mothers who carry them on their backs to the farm, market or stay at home as they perform their household chores. At best, parents get the services of one of the older siblings to the child or secure the services as an untrained child minder to take care of such children and consequently denying them their own formal education, which in this case is a form of child abuse.

The 0 to 4 years age cohort is when a child is supposed to be in the nursery school. This period is very important in a child's development. The 0 to 4 years age cohort is the most critical and impressionistic stage in a child development (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018). At this age of child care development and education, special teachers are required to handle them. Among these special teachers required for this level of education are early child care educators and counsellors trained specifically to handle children at this stage of their development. Such counsellors will serve in a variety of ways; he or she should have a high dosage of knowledge in child psychology. This will facilitate the counsellor's job at the early child care development education level. This is especially so as the counselling services at this level have to be monitored to focus on prevention and the ameliorating or possibly the treatment of emerging behaviour disorders, disruptive behaviours and maladaptive behaviours, (Federal Ministry of Education, 2008:7). The counsellors are expected to do these by offering instructions, information, early diagnosis and therapeutic assistance to the child and his or her family, (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018).

PURPOSE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

In Nigeria, the purpose of Early Child Care Development and Education according to National Policy on Education (2018), include the following:

A. To affect a smooth transition from home to school

A child is born into a family, reared up there by the parents and other family members for a few years before attending

a nursery school. Moving from the home to school may be an unpleasant exercise or task for some children going into the nursery and kindergarten levels of education. This may probably be because the child from birth starts getting used to parents and siblings, and, sending him or her to a nursery school is like disconnecting him or her from the environment and persons he or she is already used to. Some of them cry a lot even in their new school uniform when being taken to school. They tend to resist going to school like when an African she goat is being dragged by a female to the market for sales or a he goat is being dragged to the market by a male to the market for sale. This at times results in the refusal by the child to go to school and the effects on the child could be damaging and negative as regards schooling and education of the child. A hatred for school and schooling may likely develop in some of those children. In this wise therefore, it is suggested that in bringing such children to school, the counsellor or teacher should make sure that the exhibition of resistant behaviour which tend to suggest that they are tending towards being school refusers with some growing school phobic tendencies is attended to. In this circumstance, the teachers and counselors should start soothing such children to agree to get into classes. This will include petting them by calling them sweet names and physically cleaning their tears with clean serviettes and holding their hands while maintaining empathic eye contact, stooping down beside them and asking them what the issues are while taking such children into their classes and letting them see other non-crying fellow children.

B. Another purpose of Early Child Care Development and Education in Nigeria is to prepare the child for primary school level of education

This purpose recognizes the progressive nature of educational levels. This purpose if achieved will make learners' transition from nursery and kindergarten levels of education into primary school level smooth and easy. Nursery and kindergarten levels of education are different from the primary level of education in terms methods of teaching and learning, duration of each school day as well as contents/subjects taught. This objective can be achieved by letting them know the subjects they will be taught each day at the beginning of a school day. This can be done by writing the subjects on the board and each subject/activity that has been carried out is ticked before their eyes. They can see the count down and appreciate it if done in a participatory way. This method may sustain their interest in class activities. In addition, the duration of each lesson is longer in the primary school classes and time to dismiss on each school day is also longer at the primary school level although their starting time for school activities tend to be the same. These changes and differences need a counsellor to give orientation to nursery/kindergarten pupils before they get into primary school. Even in the

primary schools there should be counsellors to welcome pupils into the school on arrival at the school gate, put an eye on them and further facilitate their adjustments in the new environment by giving attention to their physical as well as psychological needs. The Counsellor should not be the only person to do this, the class teacher should be given periodic orientation on how to attend to children in nursery and kindergarten classes as a top-up to the general theoretical counselling course they had while in the university undergoing teacher education courses.

C. To provide adequate care, supervision and security for the child while their parents are away to work

In traditional rural Nigerian communities, parents mostly engage in farming, trading and some other services to earn money to fend for their families. In view of this, parents want where to keep their children aged below five years of age so that they can pursue their economic activities. In this wise, if parents mix caring for their children aged 0 to 5 years and at the same time engage in economic activities to fend for the family, one out of the two activities may suffer and maybe with grave consequences. Sending the child into nursery/kindergarten school will provide the care, security and supervision the child's parent could have provided the child while they were at work. By sending the child to the nursery/kindergarten school prepares such a child for smooth transition into primary school.

D. To inculcate morals, norms and values

In Nigeria schools, morals, norms and values are inculcated into children to build upon the ones their parents had initiated and taught them. At times they come into conflict depending on values inculcated already by parents at home. The child learns how to say "good morning" in their native languages from home and learn how to add "Sir" and "Ma" at the nursery/kindergarten school levels. Furthermore, they are taught how to respect elders; not to steal; to be truthful etc., Traditionally they are taught how to receive things with the right hand and not with the left hand as with their culture, and also not to call their seniors by their first names but to add appropriate prefixes like Mr, Mrs, Dr, Professor, "ndaa"-meaning uncle, "dadaa"-for aunty, etc, to names of persons.

E. To inculcate in the child the spirit of inquiry and creativity through the exploration of natural environment like music and use of toys etc.

The nursery/kindergarten educational levels pursue this purpose through hands on, storytelling and school subjects like mathematics, sciences, folklores, plays, etc. It is the teacher that will teach these subjects in assignments play way methods or stories. The children may be asked to find out from their mothers what can be done in the process of cooking were much salt was added mistakenly into a

source of soup that is being prepared and give a feed back to the class. If they come back and say that it involves peeling of yam and allowing it to be cooked in the source and then removed. This could act as a simple way of introducing the concept of osmosis to a child.

F. To develop a sense of cooperation and team spirit

Primarily, this propose recognizes that man is a social animal and tends to pursue it through cooperation. The nursery/kindergarten school levels of formal education pursue this objective to build upon the moonlight plays and games which the children were earlier exposed to in the Nigerian traditional society. Presently, the Early Child Care Development and Education seeks the pursuit of the above especially in the cities and to some extent in the villages for the nursery and kindergarten school children via electronic means that is characteristically independent and individualistic: consider a situation where a child plays electronic games alone. They learn solitary life and this can make living cooperatively in modern day society difficult as they may not be cooperating harmoniously with people in society. It can be predicted that they may not be cross fertilizing ideas and consequently society may be the loser if the trend continues.

G. To inculcate in the child good habits like good health habits

The home starts the achievement of this purpose by teaching the child to wash their hands, faces, clean their mouths, wash both hands before taking food to eat, In the school, they are taught to also wash hands after free play during their break periods. They are encouraged at the nursery/kindergarten educational level to eat their own food and drink their own water from their containers and keep it safe after use.

H. To teach nursery/kindergarten pupils the rudiments of numbers, letters, colors, shapes and forms through play activities including songs

For example, at that level of education they are taught parts of the body using songs like "head, shoulder, knees, and toes" and the functions of the different parts of the body.

OBJECTIVES OF COUNSELLING AT THE EARLY CHILD CARE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION LEVEL IN NIGERIA

Counselling, when it was first introduced in Nigeria focused on education and at the secondary school level. It is noteworthy and interesting that the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education is becoming visible and dynamic in introducing and establishing counselling at the other levels of education including Early Child Care Development

and Education level, secondary school level, primary education level, tertiary education level and community level. These are as reflected in the Federal Minister of Education's National Policy on Counselling (2018) and as in the implementation guideline (National Policy on Counselling guidelines, 2018).

Early Child Care Development and Education is that education prepared and given to children in a formal setting (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018) before they qualify for entry into primary school after the age of five. This level of education includes the crèche, nursery and kindergarten. They are multipurpose institutions and require specialized professional counsellors/teachers who will serve in a variety of ways in the schools (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018). The guidance and counselling programmes to be provided to pupils in this category should be monitored to focus on prevention of possible emergent behaviour disorders and treatments by offering instruction, information, early diagnoses and facilitative therapy to the pupils and families.

The objectives set out in the Federal Ministry of Education National Policy on Counselling are as follows.

Mandatory opening of Cumulative Record Folder (CRF) for newly admitted children in the Early Child Care Development and Education level and updating it as the child progresses in class by the use of Information Communication and Technology. It is a valuable instrument prepared, and used in school for recording, filling and using information essential for the guidance of learners who are in school (Ugwuegbulam, 2001). This folder should contain the biographic data of each child including anthropomorphic measurements of each child; academic and medical records (from hospitals as they concern the child), objective results of different assessments and judgments, be it formal or informal, held from time to time during the course of study of a learner (Ajoku, 2002). The data in the cumulative record folder should cover cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains using different appraisal instruments and techniques. In the past, cumulative record folders were printed in form of handbooks in situations where they are used. Its use has not been popular. This time the National Policy on Counselling (2018) is encouraging the introduction and use of Cumulative Record Folder in nursery, primary and secondary education levels. One distinguishing feature of this introduction is that it should be electronically carried out. This has some implications, it demands that the teacher or counsellor who will keep the Cumulative Record Folder has to be ICT compliant as well as up and doing. Given the scenario on ground, those to be charged with the responsibility of keeping the records on the learners should be characteristically honest, willing, interested, hardworking to keep the learners records accurate and up to date.

To assist the child to cope with initial trauma separation as he or she lives the comfort of his/her home

where his/her parents and siblings give home-made succour into the care of strangers (care givers) at school. The counsellor or teacher has some responsibilities to carry out to stem the possible negative effects that may result from the separation. They should come early to school and wait for the arrival of the pupils. They should try to meet with the parents or whoever is bringing the child to school, exchange pleasantries via friendly voice tone, welcoming facial expression and maybe thanking the parents for bringing the child to school with a promise that the child will be taken very good care of. They should ask of the child's name on the first day as the child comes to school. This is a show of concern and interest in the child. They should be able to call them by their names subsequently with a welcoming and friendly voice and facial expression. The rapport should be made potent.

To promote a fertile counselling climate where parents may be assisted to acquire effective and efficient parenting skills. To achieve this objective, it is suggested that counsellors/ teachers with good knowledge of parenting skills should invite parents and discuss parenting skills based on pupils observed behaviours. Parents could be invited and talked with in small groups or individually as may be dictated by pupil's challenges or behaviours.

To assist the child to develop and enhance his or her moral intelligence by inculcating social norms. This objective can be achieved if counsellors/teachers think out folklores that have moral lessons to teach. The folklore has to be told by the counsellors/teachers and at the end they draw out the morals of the story and relate it to the lives of the learners,

To use appropriate psychological assessment techniques to diagnose even the crudest approximation of traits that could lead to understandable behaviours, for example: bullying, stealing, examination malpractice etc, and personality defects like withdrawal tendencies, truancy, nail biting, thumb sucking, profound shyness and handle them in school. These psychological assessment tools should include valid and reliable ones if they are paper and pencil in nature like the "Goodenough -Harris Draw a person test". This test is a projective psychological test that is used to assess a person's personality, emotional functioning and self-concept (Iwuji, 1992). It is a culture free and culture fair test. By its nature it should be administered by somebody who is trained in its usage. The Counsellors/Teachers should be very familiar with psychological assessment instruments they intend to use in terms of administration, scoring and interpretation. Such instruments should be age appropriate and effectively used. In addition, the counsellors/teachers should possess high observational skills which can be improved with the use of checklists when observing pupils.

To discover special talents in the children and facilitate their specific developmental tasks and needs:

Primarily, this objective recognizes that the learners as young as they are, have talents that are likely to unfold

and should be identified early in life. Additionally, these learners need unsolicited assistance to help the talents prop up and be nurtured to fruition early in life. Where this is done, the child will not only be happy in later life but the country will benefit from such talents in future if and when harvested. In view of the above, all hands must be on deck. The counsellors and teachers should be very observant of the learners in the class, on the playground, place of dining etc. They should take note of their observations and record them objectively without labels, that is, not concluding what their observations are because they need to compare notes of the observations with that of their colleagues on the same child. Their observations should be recorded in the appropriate place in the cumulative record folder and kept safe for future reference and possibly used when counselling such a child in future while taking note of the trends and changes. Spectacular behaviours of such children could also be recorded in the anecdotal record for each child.

These objectives are laudable but not without implications, the ministries of education be it at the Federal or State levels should have a list of names of Early Child Care Development and Education Centers in the country state by state and local government area by local government area. This will help them to know the number of such centers in the country and where they are in terms of location, and by extension the population of pupils in those schools. The Ministries of Education should spell out the guidelines and requirements for establishing such centers and periodically supervise them appropriately to ensure that they are running such institutions according to rules and standards. Such centers should provide and make use of Cumulative Record Folders for their pupils because of the immense importance of the records. The Cumulative Record Folders should be kept up to date by the resident counselor or teacher charged with the responsibility of performing such function.

The counsellor/teacher should be trained professionally and skilled to anticipate possible traumatic separation anxiety and be properly equipped to handle such issues as they may arise.

The counselors and teachers in the Early Child Care Development and Education Centers should be knowledgeable in effective and efficient parenting and should be prepared, willing, and ready to assist parents in this direction. Additionally, the teachers or counselors working in any Early Child Care Development Center should be equipped with strategies of handling pupils' undesirable behaviours and personality defects with a view of nipping them at the board. The counsellors/teachers should have and put to use empirical observation skills be it the participant or non-participant observation methods/skills to be able to identify the talents of learners early in life and assist them into areas that are in consonance with their interests, aptitude, and abilities.

Additionally, there are responsibilities expected of teachers and counsellors working in Early Child Care Development Centers to perform (Federal Ministry of Education, 2018b). These responsibilities include but not restricted to the following:

A. Ensuring that every primary school including Early Child Care Development Centers are registered and connected to the community counselling center

This responsibility presupposes that there is or should be community counselling center. This registration should be done at the local government levels with Early Child Care Development Centers in each local government areas as well as state levels with relevant authorities at each State Universal Basic Education Board which controls education at the basic education level. The counsellors'/teachers' responsibilities at this level of education prescribed the connection of the registration of the pre-primary school to community counselling centers. It is regrettable that presently, counsellors and most teachers working at this level of education have not been trained either formally or informally. By extended implications, carrying out this counsellors'/teachers' responsibility successfully is a far cry and it's likely to impinge on the realization of one or more of the objectives of counselling at this level of education.

B. Monitor and manage children expressing severe separation anxiety

In the distant past and to some extent in some present-day remote place's children age 0 to 5 or 6 years are attached and reared up by their mothers and further socialized on a 24 hours basis by members of the nuclear or immediate extended families. Their parents are usually rural farmers with mothers being a 24 hours, seven days a week complete housewife. This account for Early Child Care Development and Education not being formally recognized as part of Nigeria education system until lately.

These days with the springing up of child care centers, children are taken to the schools/ centers and left in the care of the teachers and carers who may or may not have been exposed to the minimum training in counseling. The early detachment of the preschool children from their biological and physical environments and from the warmth and cuddling hands of their mothers and siblings leave them empty and lost in their new environments at least for the first few months of their stay in the school. Severe separation anxiety is very likely to be the consequence of the early detachment of such children from their parents and siblings. Shiel (2018) defined separation anxiety as a developmental stage during which a child experiences anxiety when separated from primary care givers. It could be viewed as a disorder in which a child becomes excessively anxious when

separated from parents. It's a type of anxiety provoked by the fact that one is not with people he/she is used to staying together with but stays with apparently new persons. The counselors/teachers working in Early Child Care Development and Education centers should be expecting the manifestation of severe separation anxiety in children in the early years. In addition, the counselors/teachers should not only observe for the manifestation of severe separation anxiety but also be equipped on how to facilitate such children's adjustment in school. One of the ways of doing this is by employing age appropriate and meaningful play way methods when teaching them or interacting with them.

C. Another responsibility of teachers/counselors working in an Early Child Care Development and Education center is the development of programmes that will guarantee transition of children into the basic education level (the primary school level)

This responsibility recognizes that the Early Child Care Development and Education ends at the age of 5 after which the child transits into primary school level after a brief one year stay at the kindergarten level. Transition from one level to the other again has its anxiety challenges. The child may want to remain in his/her previous class and refuse to go to the next class. The teacher/counsellor can assist such children by developing viable and interesting age appropriate orientation. This is important because new school subjects will be introduced in the class they are going into as well as changes in the expected activities and their consequent demands. Potent stories could be used to prepare transiting learners from Early Childhood Development and Education centers to primary schools; where this is done and it is effective, adjustment into the new learning level is likely to be stimulated and achieved and then the learners are likely to be happy in the new place.

D. The fourth and the last responsibility is that it is teachers/counsellors' responsibility in an Early Child Care Development and Education center to develop preventive counselling programmes

These are programmes that will nip observed maladjusted behaviours of children in the Early Childhood Care Development and Education centers at the bud. Children copy and develop different types of behaviours as they grow. Such behaviours are picked up from observing older siblings, adult television programmes, videos. The behaviours they pick up are likely to include bad ones that may have long lasting and damaging consequences later in life if not modified or changed. To this effect counsellors and teachers should work with parents on the effective parenting which is how best to raise responsible children with a feeling of adequacy and satisfaction as parents.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper x-rays the provisions of counselling at the crèche, nursery and kindergarten levels of education which is referred to as Early Child Care Development and Education. The provisions as reflected in the Nigeria's National Policy on Counselling (2018), and National Policy on Counselling Guidelines (2018) in terms of their purpose and objectives were highlighted and explained in the light of the roles of counsellors and teachers. It is noteworthy to acknowledge the effort of the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria in catching up with the introduction of guidance and counselling in Early Child Care Development and Education level of education after so many years of having introduced counselling at the secondary school level. This could be likened to identification of the fact that pupils in Early Child Care Development and Education centers are humans and may have challenges, and practicalizing human rights provisions especially as it concerns those aged 0 to 5years. With this scenario, counselling is building up from the foundation of the Nigerian educational system with a future of giving counselling a probable comprehensive and solid posture as it is now being introduced at all levels of education in Nigeria. Be that as it may, there is need to oxygenate its practice and functionality so that the purpose and objectives of counselling at that level of education can be achieved. For now, counsellors should be employed in Early Child Care Development and Education centers as a matter of official policy and possibly make it a condition for establishing such centers, while the existing ones should be charged to employ the services of trained and university certificated counsellors. They should be giving time frame to do this and supervision of such center should be carried out after a dateline to determine the degree of compliance with the directives.

At the main time, counsellor education in Nigeria should factor into the training of counsellors who will like to work at the ECCDE level. This could be a way to initiating the creation of area of specialization/divisions in counselling practice in Nigeria and the jettisoning of the "one size fits all" counsellor training programme currently being practiced in Nigeria. Furthermore, the counsellors and teachers who are at present in our schools to carry out these counselling roles should be equipped by training them through hands-on workshops during holidays at the local government levels. By these, the benefits of counselling at ECCDE would be harnessed, and the children and society would be the better for it.

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