

Editorials

Counseling in Schools

The Gambia

Counseling in schools has been high on the agenda for the Department of State for Education (DoSE) in the Gambia, supported by policies relating to developing nations, specifically the Gambia and more widely across Sub-Saharan Africa. Funding has been made available for several projects over a number of years resulting in the development of the Guidance and Counseling Unit, part of the Department of State for Education in the Gambia. Projects include child abuse reduction schemes, HIV, Aids and sexual health education and counseling, along with the use of counseling to support the greater inclusion of girls in education. Projects have been funded by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Save the Children, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Education for All (EFA, (World Conference on Education for All, supported by UN). The Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has an active Gambian 'Chapter' and it is supported enthusiastically by the Gambian Department of State for Education. One of the aims of counseling within state schools in the Gambia is to help female students to address emotional and psychological issues in order to increase their inclusion, retention and performance in school. Statistics show that female students are less likely to continue their education due to poverty, long-held negative attitudes to women's intellectual capabilities, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, insensitive school environments, examination failure and traditional division of labor (UNESCO, 2003; ADEA, 2003; FAWE, 2002).

The UK

The growing interest in counseling in schools in the UK is driven by an increasing awareness of the role that schools can play in helping to promote emotional health and well-being for children and young people and by addressing mental health issues, including psychological and behavioral problems. This is particularly important in terms of the heavy pressure that other children's services are under and the long waiting lists often found in social services, educational psychology, special education and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Research and literature on school counseling in the UK indicates its value in relieving emotional and psychological distress (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008; Pattison et al, 2007; Cooper, 2006, Harrison, Pattison, 2004; Jenkins, Polat, 2004; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2004). The backdrop to counseling in the UK is the concept of 'evidence-based practice', derived from the scientific values of medicine and professions allied to medicine, for example, psychology.

The Nature of Counseling in Schools

Research findings from the Gambia (Pattison, Corr, in press) indicate that counseling in the Gambia is approached pragmatically in relation to the school environment, resources of time and energy, the nature of the child's problem, the level of distress and long term implications in relation to health, education and emotional/social factors. School counselors adopt a child-centered relationship approach, which may include visits to parents, work with the police, social services, and help children to access financial support, give advice and guidance and monitor behavior and attendance. School counselling in the

Gambia contrasts with the definition of counseling provided by one of the major professional counseling bodies in the UK: the British Association for Counseling and Psychotherapy BACP (2007). This definition clarifies what counselors actually do, for example: listening attentively and patiently, perceiving difficulties from the individual's point of view; helping people to see things more clearly, possibly from a different perspective; reducing confusion and facilitating choice and change. This focus on the individual may be experienced as alien to those from different cultural backgrounds where collectivism may be the traditional cultural approach (Pattison, 2003). When adopting western approaches counselors help children and young people to explore aspects of life and feelings; examine behaviour and difficult situations; help the child or young person to initiate change and explore options. Advice giving, guiding and providing direction are not usually components of western approaches to therapeutic counselling.

Globally the diverse nature of counseling is more apparent, with counseling encompassing many different activities. For example, Malindzisa *et al.*, (2001) equates academic advice in distance learning with counseling. Nolte (2001) describes counseling as guiding, enabling, facilitating, planning, organizing, motivating, educating and training the client in self-help skills. Naidoo and Sehoto (2002) point out that another term for counseling in many African countries may be healing. Counseling in developed nations has its roots in western theological, anthropological, psychiatric and psychological literature/theory. On the other hand, a vast knowledge base exists in oral form in African and other cultures (Naidoo and Sehoto, 2002). Moodley and West (2005) make a case for integrating traditional healing into contemporary practice in order to address some of the issues and debates around multi-cultural counseling. International perspectives on what constitutes counseling, including advice and guidance may therefore be expected to be incorporated as part of the counseling process (Naidoo and Sehoto, 2002; Nolte, 2001; Trivasse, 2002; Pattison, 2003). This seems nearer to the Gambian approach.

Counseling as an intervention to improve the emotional health and well being of children and young people in the child's major social environment, the school, is useful, accessible and appropriate for a range of problems and issues in both the UK and the Gambian contexts. However, the evidence base for effectiveness is minimal, particularly for humanistic, person-centre, experiential therapies. This is currently being addressed through a pilot randomized controlled trial (Cooper, Rowland, Pattison, Cromarty, McArthur, in progress).

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