

Counseling in Educational Institutions in Sub-Saharan African Countries: Is there Anything New? – Strategies for the 21 Century

John Charema

The growth and diversification of the counseling profession, the present political climate, the social and cultural tensions experienced throughout the world calls for new counseling strategies in the 21st century. From diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, it is important to consider the constructs of acculturation and this has a major impact on the success of any counseling situation. This paper explores issues relating to promoting, monitoring, maintaining and enhancing effective, safe and accessible multicultural counseling services in educational institutions. The paper tries to address; counseling developments in African countries in general, the impact of globalization on counseling in African countries, how counseling has been affected by family disintegration, multicultural counseling in African countries and suggested strategies for the 21st century.

Introduction

Despite the apparent need for change, and the assertions by various researchers that the counseling field is ready for change from its reliance from the traditional methodologies, counseling is still lagging behind. Dogan (2000) noted that counseling's body of knowledge, as displayed in major research journals, lacks methodological diversity. As the counseling area moves on from establishing the general efficacy of psychotherapy, and seeks to develop new paradigms of outcome research, methodological diversity for the 21st century appears to be essential. Young people in Sub-Saharan African countries continue to face new challenges, difficulties and harsh realities that have created new demands on the existing support services provided by the school and community agencies. Limited opportunities for employment and further training, lack of appropriate skills required both in the world of work and life in general have increased the demand for counseling. Further challenges the young people face in real life situations today include, social problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, gender-based injustices, teenage

pregnancy, poverty, HIV/AIDS, crime and violence. As the traditional social services and support systems continue to disintegrate or become ineffective there is need to involve new and appropriate strategies for the 21st century that can help young people to face the challenges created by the ever-changing environments and life situations.

Outcome research has not been conceptualized within the framework but instead has focused on the assessment of behavior change in the short-term, rather than assessing more long-term learning characterized by long-term growth and development (Seligman, 2001). Quantitatively assessing counseling outcomes using measures of short-term behavior change, such as symptom removal, may not reliably reflect the therapeutic learning that impacts most on client well being or the changes that are unique and specific to individual clients (McGuiness, Alfred, Cohen & Hunt, 2001). There is need to develop new and innovative methods that are consistent with conceptualizations about counseling and that reliably assess counseling outcomes. That is, counseling outcome measures

could assess what has been learnt from counseling rather than the general efficacy of counseling. In other words clients should be able to transfer what they have learnt to subsequent problem situations rather than returning to counseling each time a difficult situation arises. The goal for counseling in the 21st century should be the development of skills for life-long learning by assisting clients to learn how to cope with difficult situations that are encountered throughout the passage of life.

Challenges the Youth Face in Educational Institutions

In developing countries counseling has become increasingly sought out more than ever before, due to the shrinking economy, limited job opportunities, rapidly increasing poverty gap, serious levels of social and emotional distress, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, changes in patterns of work, increases in crime and suicide rates and a general distrust of politicians (Webb, 2000). It is unfortunate that young people are the soft targets of these rough and harsh conditions. Nystul (1999) identified nine problem areas that youth in educational institutions commonly face. These are: Low self esteem and eating disorders, depression and stress, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, physical and sexual abuse, divorced and or loss of parents, gang involvement, adolescent suicide and peer pressure.

Many young people are not taught life-skills and therefore are vulnerable and easy prey to some of the above. There is need to implement a program that covers behavior modification, gender sensitivity, social work and adolescent reproductive health. This is likely to complement the academic program, making the education of the young more holistic and enabling them to adapt better to their social and economic environment. School counseling programs promote school success through a focus on academic achievement, prevention and intervention activities that advocates for acceptable social, emotional and career development. The major issues confronting the young people in Educational Institutions in developing countries is much the same as those faced by other societies that attempt to implement foreign ideas and experiences. Apart from the basic cultural differences that exist, traditions, political ideologies, religion, the level of technological and economic development are present problems that are not easily surmountable.

In developing countries the practice has been that individuals with problems usually consult with family members and friends. Typically an individual takes problems to his/her family because of the strong family relationship. People are generally reluctant to open up their problems to outsiders unlike the practice in several developed countries (Soliman, 1991). However, due to modernization and globalization, we

can conclude that the traditional image of the "home" and "family" as cozy nest of love, security, togetherness and never-ending happiness has been severely battered (as have many of the nests' inhabitants) in the recent generations. The need for counselors who can effectively counsel outside the one to one relationship, who can work in this new dimension, ever since the family system has evolved, continue to increase. Yet, providing effective counseling assistance to youth in educational institutions in today's complex and stressful society is a challenging and often difficult task. This task is frequently made more complicated by advice from nonprofessionals, cultural traditions, and environmental pressures. The situation is made worse by lack of relevant research and literature in the area. Charema (2004) points out that the paucity of empirical evidence within this sector of the educational system is regrettable. This is particularly so in view of the additional potential vulnerability of its student body much of which is still in the stages of later adolescence. Furthermore, the economic hardships in developing countries have brought with them an imperative to use the increasingly stringent funding allocations to the best human and financial advantage in a way that is publicly accountable.

High-school years are crucial in the adjustment of students as they represent the transition from the comparatively sheltered life of the primary school to the freedom and responsibility of either tertiary education or employment. This transition presents students with problems of an educational, vocational, social and personal nature. Among these include the impact of mass media, peer pressure, the sexual revolution, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, student unrest, HIV/AIDS and the breakdown of the extended family system

The Goals of Counseling in Educational Institutions

Counseling is a process of helping people by assisting them in making decisions and changing behavior (Chan, Berven, & Thomas, 2004). School counselors work with all students, school staff, families and members of the community as an integral part of the education program. Hackney & Cormier, (2000) point out that different countries, the world over, developed and developing are now employing counseling to assist people to cope with problems brought about by the social and economic changes in the world in which we live. In spite of all efforts, counseling is still a new phenomenon in most developing countries and there is lack of information, knowledge and understanding of counseling among ordinary people (Howard, 2000). More and more authorities point to informal sources of support, such as the extended family, friends, church groups, neighbors and social clubs as effective in counseling (Hackney & Cormier, 2000; Mpofu,

1999; Webb, 1998; Charema, 2004). Unfortunately, these informal supports once so prevalent in the society are fast disappearing (McGuinness et al., 2001) largely because of the demographic changes such as the increase in single-parent families, divorce, migration such that families are no longer knit together and are less able today to rely on informal social networks for support. The philosophy of counseling and its systems and practices, should reflect the beliefs about human nature, human relationships and human change and development, which underpin the practice of counseling (Webb, 1998). While the goal of counseling is the same, each region and country has its own unique historical background, political system and economic conditions, therefore, any counseling model being appropriated in the society will naturally be affected by these main factors.

Initially, school guidance was perceived as vocational in nature (Herr, 1996). As a result, it was designed primarily to provide students in secondary schools or institutions of higher learning with occupational or job information with a focus on career guidance. However, the focus of school guidance has changed over the years and it now incorporates educational, social and personal guidance (Gysbers, Heppner & Johnston, 1998). Accordingly counselors in learning institutions are dealing with more diverse psychosocial problems with respect to concerns and needs of students. Nystul (1999) argues that the aims and objectives of the 21st century guidance and counseling programs in educational institutions should be addressed in the context that students are unique individuals with their own worth, with different cultural backgrounds, and different belief systems and values. The author summarizes his central argument by pointing out that it is important to employ multicultural counseling in learning institutions to address the needs of all students considering their different cultural backgrounds, respecting their values and belief systems. When students are equipped with skills rooted in their belief systems, it helps them to make relevant informed decisions in their educational careers, vocational and personal social decisions, which they face in a complex and changing world. In addition students are also helped to cope with personal crisis in their lives.

Counseling Strategies for the 21st Century

Guidance and counseling in the 21st century should be viewed as a corporate program through which students are helped with their normal physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Learning institutions should prepare a comprehensive guidance and counseling program that is interwoven in the total curriculum to provide for the unique personal, social and educational needs of students. Traditional philosophies of counseling seem at odds with the present social and

political climate (Webb, 1998) and yet, paradoxically, counseling has become increasingly sought out and the number of counselors has grown concomitantly. For decades, African countries have always employed counselors in educational institutions who trained in foreign countries, imported western ideologies and methods of counseling divorced from the (normal) traditional practice (Seligman, 2001). This has left gaps in addressing students' needs. As the world grows smaller and cultures begin to merge, as communication leaps over frontiers with migration of nationalities on the increase through out the world, both students and counselors face a big challenge of cultural conflicts. Geographically constructed boundaries mean less, therefore, counselors need to consider more profound issues to the extent which, their practices embrace cultural groups and individuals beyond the arenas of one nation. This can be addressed by employing the use of aunts, uncles, church leaders, traditional healers and community elders. A study carried out by Charema (2004) indicates that people of different cultural backgrounds and belief systems preferred to get counseling from either, church leaders, aunts and uncles, traditional healers, hospital personnel or professional counselors. While the science of school counseling complements the art of counseling by offering the objective scientific dimension to the counseling process. Counseling practice through e-mail, the internet and sophisticated telephone systems does not address fully the needs of certain cultures (Soliman, 1991).

For the 21st century, school counseling should be organized from a life-span perspective. Developmental school counseling represents a shift from remediation and crisis intervention to learning and development (Hershenson & Liesener, 2003). It is important for school counselors to work closely with the community consulting parents, teachers, lecturers and other members of staff in order to provide sound services to the student body. Bearing in mind cultural differences, it is important for counselors to be sensitive to individual differences and embrace diversity as an opportunity to expand educational horizons. Studies carried out by Levers & Maki (1995) and Mpofu (2006) involving Botswana, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe on rehabilitation counseling, indicate that the vast majority of the indigenous Africans use both traditional and modern counseling services. In the study the majority of the African population preferred to seek counseling help primarily from traditional healers and faith-based organizations before they consulted modern counselors (Mpofu, 2000; Mpofu & Harley, 2002). In view of these findings it is imperative that the 21st century should consider employing multicultural counseling in order to provide an effective service to educational institutions.

Developments encouraging social aspects of counseling include required rural internships and attachments for pre-service counselor professionals. This

would allow community input from traditional healers, community elders, church leaders, aunts and uncles in order to equip a counselor with both traditional and modern skills in order to allow for multi-cultural counseling. The accessibility of counseling services in several of the sub-Saharan African educational institutions is enhanced through the use of school counselors. Most of these acquired modern counseling skills through their formal teacher-training courses not adequate enough to provide effective counseling and with very little if at all, to do with multicultural counseling (Webb, 2000).

The 21st century should see African countries South of the Sahara move away from wholesale imported western methods of counseling which in some cases do not work in certain cultural contexts. For example in the western way of counseling a client is expected to look the counselor in the face, which is contrary to most African cultures where one is not expected to look an adult in the face.

Most of the problems students face can be addressed more comprehensively through multi-cultural counseling. Some students have low self-esteem. This can be addressed by helping students value themselves, and feel a sense of control over their environment. Members of the extended family and or community elders could be used to instill and enhance self-belief and confidence. Counseling strategies could include consultation, individual and group counseling, to promote traditional values and beliefs. Self-control interventions could be used to help students master their own behaviours. In the African tradition the aunts and elders or members of the extended family would take one through the stages of mastery (Mpofu, 2002) unlike today where the extended family is almost non-existent. If school counselors could be equipped with both traditional and modern methods of counseling, the 21st century would witness a new era of counseling.

The main problem with students in the middle school (Mpofu, 1999) is identity formation. Counseling can help such students gain a clear understanding of who they are as individuals, clarify their values and self-awareness. High school and college students were found to have the problem of intimacy (Green, 1999; Weinrach & Thomas, 1998). Counseling could promote social interest and interpersonal effectiveness. Individual, group and family counseling could be employed to promote social interest and compassion for others. Aunts and uncles would provide teen counseling which in the African culture involves how to relate to members of the opposite sex, when and how courtship should take place. Career counseling could be related to the world of work so that students study relevant courses that address the needs of the industry. With the use of multi-cultural counseling, students would not try and imitate foreign cultural practices

thereby losing their identity in terms of values and cultural beliefs.

Conclusion

The counseling profession must address cultural differences, consider potential employment saturation, sustain advocacy roles, reconcile client demands and enhance professional standards. Career counseling (Hershenson & Liesener, 2003) is a central element of the services offered by counselors to people in institutions of learning. The importance of work cannot be overemphasized. Work is a central element in human life that is connected with both economic and psychological well being. People in developing countries have significantly higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than those in developed countries. With technological advancement, the work place is changing everyday (Gowing, Kraft & Quick, 1998). Therefore counseling strategies must evolve in order to more adequately represent the current reality. Most career development theories are based on the assumption that people have the opportunity for choice (Osipow & Littlejohn, 1995). Yet in developing countries, people live in abject poverty, with lack of educational opportunities, where such opportunities are available, jobs are not available and therefore the question of choice does not arise. From diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, it is important to consider the constructs of acculturation and this has a major impact on the success of any counseling situation. Multicultural counseling has had a positive effect in making counselors more introspective about how their values and cultural blind-spots may have a negative impact on clients from cultural backgrounds different from theirs. If all the above factors can be knitted and interwoven, it is possible to connect with our clients with better counseling strategies in the 21st century.

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Biography

John Charema, Ph.D., is a Director of Education at Mophato Education Centre in Botswana. He holds a master's degree in Special Needs Education, a Diploma and Ph.D. in Counseling. He has several publications in Special Needs Education and Counseling. Dr. Charema can be contacted at charemajohn@yahoo.com.

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