



Research Article:

Guidance and counselling for child and community development in Zimbabwe: Schools in focus

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Abstract

The wellbeing of children and their contributions to the current and future societies are increasingly being prioritised at various levels internationally. Despite challenges and in some cases, failure to convert development policy and governance blueprints into practice, comprehensive child development remains pivotal for sustaining societies. While this thrust can be achieved through various ways, this paper is restricted to guidance and counselling. Using a school in Masvingo urban as a case study and applying explorative research, the paper shows that school guidance and counselling is being recognised by the majority of the participants as central to the wellbeing and development of the child, and in producing multiplier effects to families and communities. However, several challenges are militating against the effectiveness of school guidance and counselling. These include the perception of guidance and counselling services as secondary, inadequate school resources, lack of specialist knowledge and skills by some school teachers, and low support from stakeholders. Accordingly, the paper recommends the development of obligatory guidance and counselling framework, policy and legislation, school counsellor training, adequate resourcing and multi-stakeholder networking and collaboration in order to enhance school guidance and counselling.

Keywords: *child wellbeing, guidance and counselling, multi-stakeholder networking, resources, schools, Zimbabwe*

1. Introduction

Guidance and counselling are crucial for child and community development in Zimbabwe and broadly, at global level. Guidance and counselling are applicable to all aspects of human life including the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, and in all stages of development from infancy to old age (Dhal 2017). The main objective is to help individuals to utilise their basic potentialities to the maximum for adequate adjustment in the environment (Thompson 2020). Schools are a pivotal institution worldwide, and they fulfill both manifest and latent functions (Giddens 2013). Despite being marginalised in scholarship or being subsumed under adults in development interventions, children and broadly, young people are a vital group whose wellbeing is fundamental to current and future development globally (see Bastien and



Holmarsdottir 2020, UNICEF 2009, Yates et al 2010). In addition, drawing from sociology, children belong to families, households and communities (Sharma 2013). Accordingly, child wellbeing through guidance and counselling, or other interventions will have implications on other social institutions. In this context, school guidance and counselling is therefore important in child and community development.

Using schools in Masvingo in Zimbabwe, this paper advances the central view that focusing on child wellbeing through guidance and counselling is important in three ways. Firstly, guidance and counselling ensure the wellbeing and functionality of children. Secondly, 'healthy' children and youth are an unparalleled force in securing the future of society. Thirdly, child wellbeing is consistent with national, regional and international frameworks for good governance and sustainable development. This dimension has led to the emphasis on child-sensitive policy at national, continental, and global levels (see selected policies and frameworks of various countries, the African Union and United Nations). Scholars and renowned institutions focused on child-sensitive policies (Watkins and Quattri 2020, UNICEF and World Bank 2016, United Nations 1989). In this context, this paper seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts for enhancing the wellbeing of children through guidance and counselling particularly in a school system, and its spillover effects on families, households, and the community. In the next section, the core concepts underlying the paper - guidance and counselling – are highlighted to establish a basis for discussion.

Guidance and counselling in schools and beyond

Guidance and counselling are topical in contemporary societies and may be used in various ways. There is general convergence among scholars and practitioners on the importance of guidance and counselling (Wrenn 2012). However, the significance of these in schools is often overlooked. Through guidance and counselling, the student can understand herself/himself; make the most of her/his capacities, interests and other qualities; adjust herself/himself satisfactory to the varied situations within his total environment; and develop the ability to make her/his own unique contribution to society to the fullest possible extent (Dhal 2017). The essence of guidance and counselling is increasing in the modern world due to various factors including escalating socioeconomic and political problems and opportunities, demands and tensions, change and uncertainty, distress and complexities, innovation and technological development, multiculturalism, varied abilities and aptitudes, multiplicity of interests and so forth. In this regard, school guidance and counselling are pivotal in addressing the various problems and opportunities of life (Uzoeshi 2002).

According to Jones (1970) in UNESCO (2000), the purpose of guidance has been to assist the individual through counsel to make wide choices, adjustments and interpretations in connection with critical situations in her/his life in such a way as to ensure continual growth in ability for self-direction. Furthermore, guidance is also described as counselling service to assist the individual in achieving self-direction, and educational, vocational and personal adjustment, and to take positive steps in light of new orientations. In schools, guidance is



helping the pupils or students to adjust to their present situation and to plan their future in line with their interests, abilities and social needs. Guidance services are meant for all pupils at all stages. Guidance can be offered to students from entrance into school and should continue throughout their school life. In addition, guidance services may continue even after the pupil or student exits school. The main aim and purpose of guidance in schools is to help the child to understand herself/himself, his/her needs and his/her environments, and to tap potential for growth and achievement. The current understanding of guidance places much emphasis on the individual and her/his all-round development as a person rather than her/his intellectual or vocational training alone. The individual (in this case a school child) is also considered as a part of a wider group (Dhal 2017).

Counselling is a personal face-to-face relationship between two people, in which the counsellor, by means of relationships and her/his special competencies, provides a learning situation in which the counsellee is helped to know herself/himself and her/his present and possible future situations so that she/he can make use of her/his characteristics and potentialities in a way that is both satisfying to herself/himself and beneficial to society, and also can learn how to solve further problems and meet future needs (Rogers 2012). School guidance is the overall framework of personal services within the school, but school guidance is only one particular service. The two words - guidance and counselling - generally take on different meanings. In relation to schools, the former refers to helping students' whole-person development. It is that area of the school's provision that is specifically directed towards helping pupils to realise their full potential in preparing for adult and working life, while the latter is frequently targeted at helping students with problems. Guidance work is preventive and developmental in nature whereas counselling is more of supportive, remedial work (Zimbabwe School Psychological Services 2006). The global trend seems to have moved from a casework and remedial approach to a preventive, developmental approach in providing guidance and counselling (Mutie and Ndambuki 2000, Schmidt 2006, Nwachukwu 2007). The aims of guidance and counselling service in schools is to assist the students to fulfil their basic physiological needs, understanding themselves and developing associations with peers, balancing between permissiveness and controls in the school setting, realising successful achievement, and providing opportunities to gain independence (Egbo 2013, Heyden 2011). The purpose of guidance and counselling therefore provides emphasis and strength to educational programmes. Overall, guidance and counselling are an indispensable services to school children.

Research methodology

The diverse themes of research methods in the social sciences are explored in scholarly literature (see Neuman 2003, Nardi 2006, Creswell and Plano-Clark 2017). Accordingly, this section merely highlights pertinent aspects of preparing for fieldwork, sampling, data collection and analysis. Preparing for fieldwork included assessing key institutions and individuals to be targeted; seeking approval from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary



Education, the headmaster and education-oriented non-governmental organisations; assessing the resource requirements of the study; and preparing a budget. The sample was made up of 50 secondary school pupils (23 boys and 27 girls), 14 secondary school teachers (nine males and five females), 10 parents/guardians, one specialist counsellor, and two NGOs.

Data collection was executed using mainly qualitative methods (key informant interviews, in-depth interviews and observations), complemented by questionnaires. The collection of data adhered to ethical standards of social science research (see Nardi 2006) including informed consent, avoidance of harm and fair reporting. Thematic and discourse analyses were applied to qualitative data while basic descriptive statistical methods were used to analyse quantitative data.

Discussion

Focus on guidance and counselling in schools, and its significance can be explored through various thematic areas. However, this section is based on three themes: the state, significance and spillover effect of school guidance and counselling; support received from various stakeholders; and lacunae and areas that should be improved if school guidance and counselling is to have enhanced impact on child and community development.

The significance, state and spillover benefits of school guidance and counselling

The majority of the participants understood guidance and counselling, the importance to pupils/students of these services, and supported their provision in schools (and other spheres including churches and workplaces). This is an acknowledgement that guidance and counselling are important to school children and have broader application beyond schools. Consistent with Giddens' (2013) argument that schools are fundamental institutions in every society, a cross-section of the participants reiterated that schools are an important arena for guidance so that students understand both opportunities and constraints, are focused on positive goals, and are helped to unleash their potential. Similarly, there was wide consensus that students experience various problems that justify the need for counselling in schools. For example, the students emphasised the importance of counselling in behaviour change (12), problem solving (4), reducing distress (4), decision making (5), avoiding drug abuse (11) and managing peer pressure (15). However, problems were raised on the state of guidance and counselling including limited availability, inadequacy of time allocated to these essential services, lack of specialist skills by some school counsellors and low support by various stakeholders.

Schools and surrounding communities were understood as open systems that interact in both positive and negative aspects. The implication is that problems in any one of these have effect on the other. This also applies to positive change. All the participants reiterated that the benefits of school guidance and counselling will have multiplier effects on families and other institutions in the community where the students belong. For example, if a student



is appropriately guided by a school counsellor in terms of career path and succeeds in life, the benefits are not restricted to the student but may also improve the economic wellbeing of the family and community. Correspondingly, the effectiveness of school counselling guarantees the child's understanding of and capability to address problems at school, home and in the community. The effectiveness of home interventions in ensuring child wellbeing also influence the child's relations and performance at school. The need for complementary approaches between the school and families or households was emphasised on the understanding that schools and other social institutions are interdependent on various aspects and particularly on guidance and counselling, and child wellbeing. Child development and wellbeing therefore require collective effort. This systematic thinking is also applied by renowned social scientists (see Ritzer 2012; Henslin 2001). A recurring view is that school guidance and counselling are central to child development and have high chances of spilling over and influencing family and community development. However, the importance of other factors was acknowledged.

Support by the various stakeholders

The effectiveness of school guidance and counselling is dependent on several factors (Mutie and Ndambuki 2000), including those that are internal and external to the school. The experiential issues were elaborated by the students, school administrator and teachers, expert counsellor (not based at the school) and representatives of NGOs. For example, these issues were topical in an interview with a school administrator:

At this school, we value guidance and counselling. We understand its importance to the psychological and social development of our students along with its influence on the families and communities where our students come from. We are doing our best to provide guidance and counselling but in a constrained environment particularly due to critically low support from other stakeholders especially pertaining to training of the teachers, financial resources and study material for both students and the teachers. Guidance and counselling are not a priority in the allocation of resources by our key providers because it is not an examinable subject. To date, NGOs have only erratically supplied counselling and guidance flyers. We will not achieve the desired goal without appropriate and sufficient support.

This excerpt provides important insights on limited availability of various forms of support by the stakeholders. Such a status quo militates against effective service provision to the students. Government schools are already operating with a constrained resource base in terms of fulfilling their direct mandate. Diverting the meagre resources to guidance and counselling is a major sacrifice which in most cases is impossible. Particularly during this time of macroeconomic woes and government limited capacity to fund public schools (see Tofa 2020), and COVID-19 (see Ministry of Health and Child Care, MoHCC 2021), stakeholder



networking and collaboration are most appropriate to enhance school guidance and counselling in particular and social provisioning and wellbeing in general.

Identified gaps and areas to be improved

Based on the views of the participants, numerous gaps and areas to be improved in school guidance and counselling emerged. Meaningful suggestions on how to enhance school guidance and counselling were also provided by the participants. The teachers, school administrator, specialist counsellor and representative of the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education explored the absence of substantive counsellors at public schools and the problems associated with the exclusion of guidance and counselling from the formally recognised/examinable subjects. School counsellors and students were concerned with non-allocation of time on the timetable for guidance and counselling, with teachers providing service during 'spare time'. Some counsellors brought to the fore the lack of specialist skills that are pivotal for effectiveness. The NGOs, school counsellors and administrators, education officers, parents and guardians recommended improved material and financial support, training of (more) teachers in guidance and counselling, provision of refresher courses, and sensitisation programmes to improve knowledge and reducing negative attitudes on guidance and counselling. For example, nine education officers and seven teachers indicated negative attitudes to guidance and counselling. Given that they have major influence on peers and the students, the negative attitudes they hold are a challenge to the provision of school guidance and counselling. In other contexts, missing aspects and areas to be improved in school guidance and counselling are acknowledged (see Dhal 2017, Nwachukwu 2007, Egbo 2013). Overall, the various gaps largely retard the provision of guidance and counselling in schools and are an obstacle to child and community development through these essential services. Addressing the gaps should therefore be a priority for the various stakeholders, led by the government.

Conclusion

The paper explored and suggested ways for advancing the significance of school guidance and counselling to the pupils, families and households, and communities. This is in a context where children and generally the young population guarantee the future of all countries. Children and their contributions to the current and future societies are increasingly being prioritised. This thrust is notable at national, continental and global levels notwithstanding the challenges experienced in turning development policy and governance blueprints into practice. Comprehensive child development is pivotal for sustaining societies. This goal can be achieved through various ways, but this paper is restricted to guidance and counselling.

Drawing evidence from a school in Masvingo urban, the paper brings to the fore several insights and recommendations. The importance of guidance and counselling is recognised by the majority of the participants, yet they reiterated the need for the subject to be examinable in attempts to improve positive perceptions on and its significance. While the



role of the school counsellors is vital, most lack specialist knowledge and skills. The stakeholders including the government through the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, non-governmental organisations and other civil society organisations are providing paltry support to the schools. This is in a context where schools have inadequate proper materials, time, finance, physical and curricular resources to implement effective guidance and counselling. Obligatory guidance and counselling framework, policy and legislation, a comprehensible mission statement, school counsellor training, adequate resourcing and certification requirements, a school national model, and multi-stakeholder networking and collaboration are core priorities for effective guidance and counselling. In addition, research focusing on school guidance and counselling, and child and community development should be ongoing.

Notes on contributor

Resina Banda (nee Moyo) is a practicing Counsellor, and Programme Leader in the Department of Counselling, Faculty of Applied Social Science at the Zimbabwe Open University. She has immense interest in improving the wellbeing of communities through guidance and counselling practice and scholarship especially having been raised in a poor family and community that were affected by various socioeconomic problems. She is a member of the Faculty of Applied Social Science Academic Board and Zimbabwe Alzheimer and Related Disorders Association (ZARDA).

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