



## THE COMPLEMENTARY ROLES OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK IN THE EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE NIGERIAN CHILD

**Kelechi Kenneth Osayi**

*kk.osayi@unizik.edu.ng*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology,  
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka  
Anambra State

### **Abstract**

School Social Work is a tool that can be used to create a smoother learning process for children, especially in primary and post primary schools. However, due to various psychological, emotional and environmental challenges, children exhibit behavioural maladjustments that impede their educational development and create a 'clog' to the smooth running of the school system. This paper sets out to reiterate the complementary roles of school social work in the educational development of the Nigerian child. It utilized secondary data from relevant studies, statistical data, reports and case studies from field practitioners to assess and situate the efficacy of the roles of school social workers in the school setting. The paper utilized the School-Community-Pupil Relations Model to best analyze the philosophy behind the practice of school social work. Conclusions were drawn based on the evidences of global best practices in the practice of social work within the school setting. The paper indicated that school social work serves the needs of the children whose potentialities to learn are thwarted by challenging conditions by striving to render these conditions suitable for the children's academic wellbeing. The paper showed that school social workers are knowledgeable about human development and the emergent personality types, as well as human needs arising from the interplay among different individual personality make-ups and environmental conditions. It emphasizes the professional skills in providing services to meet these needs without undermining the dignity of those served. It therefore went further to advocate for policies promoting its adoption within the Nigerian schools.

### **Introduction**

We live in an ever-changing world, a world that has witnessed changes, both in its nature and form. These changes have seen to the monumental growth and development in many spheres of human endeavours, such as in science and technology, human organization and relationships (UNESCO, 2020). Their concomitant negative effects cannot be over emphasized as they are varied and far reaching especially in the areas of relationships between man and his social environment. These rapid changes bring with them numerous challenges which the society seems to be ill prepared to meet with.

The family seems to be the most affected. As the microcosm of the society, it has witnessed dramatic changes in its structure and form with the resultant effect of producing children who are confused about societal values and acceptable behavioural standards. The family structure is under strain, and its capacity to cope with these pressures is increasingly uncertain; it is evident that families require support and resources to navigate these complexities (United Nations, 2020). Children are more or less left at the mercy of other social institutions such as the school which are in turn bedeviled with their own peculiar problems. Social work emerged as one of the resources the society provides to help communities, families, groups and individuals meet their needs and facilitate their social functioning.



However, Nigeria's education sector faces numerous challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, with a pupil-to-teacher ratio of 1:45 in primary schools and 1:50 in secondary schools. (UNICEF Nigeria, 2020). World Bank, (2019) also asserted that in Nigeria, the student-teacher ratio is high, with an average of 50-100 students per teacher in many public schools. A survey by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (2018) revealed that the pupil-teacher ratio in public schools was 46:1 in primary schools and 51:1 in secondary schools, indicating overcrowding in classrooms. According to UNESCO, Nigeria has one of the highest out-of-school rates globally, with over 10 million children out of school, primarily due to socio-economic factors and insecurity in certain regions. These and more are the challenges facing Nigeria schools which are the recipients of the products of the already ill-fated conflict-ridden families. The school as primary agency for socialization is looked upon to help savage a failed family system, but how can quality education and reorientation be assured in Nigeria for all her children when access to schools is hindered by infrastructure deficiencies, teacher shortages, and widespread poverty, socio-economic disparities, widening gap in educational outcomes between urban and rural areas, persistent issues like security concerns in certain regions which disrupt access to education, particularly for girls? Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires holistic interventions, including the integration of school social work, to support the psychological, emotional, and environmental well-being of Nigerian children and enhance their educational development.

### **What is Social Work**

Social work is a profession that attempts to help people resolve and prevent problems in their social functioning, strengthen social relationships and enrich their ways of living. Social work according to 1959 Curriculum Study sponsored by Council on Social Work Education, seeks to enhance social functioning of individuals singly and in groups by activities focused upon their social relationships which constitute the interaction between man and his environment (Council on Social Work Education, 1959). It is a profession for those with a strong desire to help improve people's lives. Social workers assist people by helping them cope with issues in their everyday lives, deal with problems of relationships, and solve personal and family problems. They engage in the planning, development and implementation of social service programmes and policies required for meeting basic needs and supporting the development of capacities and abilities of individuals, communities and organizations. Some social workers help clients who face disabilities or life-threatening diseases or social problems. Social workers also assist families that have serious domestic conflicts, sometimes involving a child or spousal abuse. Some social workers conduct research and advocate for improved services. Many social workers specialize in serving a particular population or working in a specific setting (Ekpe and Mammah 1997).

### **School Social Work**

In the contemporary times, the school environment has come to assume a more prominent role in the development of a total child. It seems to have become the second home of a child. In Nigeria, majority of the children of the working-class parents living in urban and semi-urban areas spend more hours in school than at home. School therefore becomes an indispensable tool for the psychological, emotional, social, and educational development of a child. Challenges which have their roots either in the family, in the children themselves or within the school system most often disrupt and impede the learning process of children. This has given rise to frustrations manifested in numerous maladjusted behaviours among school children. School Social Work is therefore a specialized area of practice within the broad field of social work profession which brings unique knowledge and skills to the school system and the student support service team. They are instrumental in furthering the purpose of the schools, to provide



a stable setting for teaching, learning, and for the attainment of competence and confidence. School social workers are expected to apply their professional training in schools in order to support students' success through specialized programs that strengthen the home-school-community partnership and address barriers to student's learning. School social workers serve as catalysts in promoting student wellbeing and successful completion of school.

The need to help school children enhance their leaning and coping ability in schools has been recognized in the advanced countries for almost a century ago owing to perceived difficulties and challenges encountered by school children both at home, and in school. School social work has an extensive history, dating back to 1906-07, when it was established in New York, Boston, Chicago and New Haven **to** meet the social service needs of children and to improve **communication** between the home and school (Farley, Smith & Boyle, 2003). It grew amidst several challenges and reforms. School social workers also grew significantly in numbers and the focus of the service changed in response to important influences of the times. A focus on school attendance in the early 1900's showed the need for professionals who understood the influences of living conditions, socioeconomic status, poor health, family and community on academic performance, behavior, and attendance at school (Shaffer, 2006). The foremost responsibility of the school social worker at that time was home-school-community liaison. Although school social work has evolved considerably with the dynamic changes of society, school social workers function as change-agents more so than ever before. School social workers today continue to serve as the vital link between home, school and community.

In our contemporary times, school social work is at the core of learning and has become an effective tool in achieving effective learning among school children in most European and American schools. School social work is, as of date, a strange concept in the Nigeria educational system. It is yet to be recognized and accepted and until then, Nigeria schools will continue to miss one of the most effective tools for achieving an all-round educational development of a child.

Authors have maintained that the goal of education is to produce not mere scholars but a 'whole' man, an ideal house holder, who could make the family and the society healthy (Ekpe and Mammah, 1997). These authors claim that modern educators believe that teaching in school is not measured by the quality of knowledge imparted by the school to the child but by the total growth of the child. Unless proper attention is paid to the healthy development of his *personality*, mere knowledge of the school subjects will not help the students develop into a successful man. Therefore, schools that take up the responsibility of educating the child have to consider not only the subject matter of learning and the intelligence of the child but also his emotions. It is the *total child* that learns and so the child has to be understood as a 'whole' (Ceka. 2016).

To support the above claims and to keep children safe from all sorts of abuse, the United States Declaration on the Right of Children came into being to enforce among others the right of the child to quality education to the extent as to enhance his full development as well as produce a well-adjusted contributing member of the society. In the western countries, these rights are vigorously pursued; almost every child has access to basic education. The extent to which family, emotional and other social factors permit the maximization of the benefits that school system offers children for their qualitative educational development raises the question of what kind of help could be sought. In most less advanced countries, these rights are recognized only



in paper while attention is focused on the most pressing social issues such as poverty, hunger, corruption, disease, etc.

It is worthy of note however, to state that the school social worker is different from a school counselor. Most people often confuse the two. The school counselor usually works with the student on a short-term basis, helping them with vocational/career choices based on their performances in different school subjects. Most times, students go to seek the services of the school counselor for this sort of advice. School Social worker tends to be more intensive in his services to children. He works with the school children longer and focuses on almost every aspect of their life. In helping the child maximize the benefits that the school system presents, the school social worker focuses on the family structure and condition and utilizes community resources to make unfavourable conditions suitable for learning to occur.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Traditional Model**

School social work is structured around a range of ever-expanding practice models. Among these as described by Alderson, are the School Change Model whose major focus was the dysfunctional conditions of the school; the Community School Model which urged school social workers to employ community organization methods; and the Social Interaction Model which de-emphasized a specific methodology and required the worker to intervene with the systems interacting with the target system. While many school social workers use an approach that draws on components from all of these, the traditional model, focusing on working with students with social and emotional difficulties and their parents, continues to predominate. In the clinical model, school social workers work primarily through casework methods supplemented by group methods with students and family members. In contemporary practice, a greater emphasis is placed on evidence based and promising intervention methods (Raines, 2008).

### **School-Community-Pupil Relations Model:**

This work adopts the School-Community-Pupil Relations Model, first articulated by Lela Costin, and which seems to be the most comprehensive. The School-Community-Pupil Relations Model is a framework used in school social work to enhance the educational experience and well-being of students by fostering strong relationships among schools, communities, and pupils. This model focuses on the interconnectedness of these three entities and emphasizes the importance of collaboration to address students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Here's a breakdown of the model and its relevance to school social work:

**Educational Environment:** Schools provide the primary environment for academic instruction and social development. They establish the curriculum, policies, and practices that shape students' educational experiences.

**Staff and Administration:** Teachers, administrators, and support staff play crucial roles in implementing educational programs, managing student behavior, and creating a positive school climate.

**Community:** Communities offer various resources, such as health services, recreational programs, and after-school activities, which can support students' overall well-being.

**Family Engagement:** Involving families in the educational process is vital for student success. Schools can collaborate with families to support learning and address any challenges students may face.

**Individual Needs and Strengths:** Each student has unique needs, strengths, and backgrounds that must be considered in their education. Understanding these individual differences helps tailor support and interventions.



**Voice and Participation:** Encouraging student participation in decision-making processes can enhance their sense of agency and engagement in their education.

In this model, school social workers serve as mediators, negotiators, consultants, and advocates for students and school personnel. They also set up informal groups for students, teachers, and other school personnel. This model also encompasses the evaluation by the school social worker of characteristics of students, the school, and community conditions that may affect the availability and quality of educational opportunities for target groups.

Despite the challenges of resource limitations, communication barriers and cultural competence, integrating school, community, and pupil resources, this model provides comprehensive support that addresses multiple aspects of students' lives. It helps to improve collaboration among stakeholders and build strong relationships among schools, communities, and pupils which can positively impact students' overall well-being.

While there is no single proponent or a specific date marking the inception of the School-Community-Pupil Relations Model, it is the result of an ongoing evolution of thought in education and social work, emphasizing the interconnectedness of various stakeholders.

### **The Role of School Social Work in the Educational Development of a Child**

**Who is a Child?** There is no clear-cut definition of who a child is since different countries and laws set different age brackets within which one is considered a child. However, the concept 'child' gives a general notion a young person of either sex (male or female) at any age less than maturity but more commonly one between the infancy and youth. A child is one who is considered to be immature in judgment and discretion. Within the school system, children are mostly found in nursery, primary and post primary schools. They are those social groups that are considered incapable of independent thought and are largely dependent and influenced by the world of the adults.

In the traditional African societies, children are regarded as precious gifts from God. This is the same with Nigeria where children are taken to mean the most treasured 'objects' and constitute the focal point of the family. Great anticipation is given to their arrival, and when they actually arrive, they are welcomed with joyful ceremonies. Effort is made to meet their basic needs even before they are born. Among the Igbos, bearing and rearing children is culturally fundamental. Parents would naturally want the best for their children and so all available resources are mobilized to give the child the best. The child starts his early education under the tutelage of the parents and other family members. Through the process of socialization, the child learns the norms and values of the society before he progresses into learning of basic skills, (usually those of their parents) which will prepare them for adult life. In our contemporary society, rapid global changes have led to changes in many spheres of human social life including the family structure and roles. The child is consequently torn away from the family bond into a formal school system at a tender age and is left at the mercy of the teachers and other pupils who exert influence in his life. The child is also left to contend with other challenges that present themselves in the school. This is because, while teachers are pre-occupied with the teaching functions, parents themselves are also occupied with their occupations and jobs that keep them away from home more than half of the day. The school therefore becomes the platform for both educational development and character formation of the child since a combination of these produce a total man, hence the need for school social work.

The school system is made up of different groups which include school children, class room teachers, school personnel, school administrators, family and the community. All these groups





make up the school system, and for the child to benefit maximally, the school social worker must be able to tailor his services to suit these different groups. When these groups are in harmony, the child passes through the school system with maximum benefits.

### **Social Work Services to the School Children**

**1. Information;** Social workers can provide actual and authentic information to children on important and sensitive issues such as sex education, information about scholarship funds, information about school rules and regulations, useful instructional materials, their rights and privileges as school children and other information that he may deem necessary. Let's take for instance sex education which is sensitive but very important to children at a certain stage in their developmental process, but is unfortunately, rarely discussed even between parents and their adolescent children at home. This is essentially because of its socio-cultural and religious interpretations which over the years have come under serious criticisms due to their destructive influences rather than the perceived protection of teenage children from exposure to sex related discourses. These socio-cultural and religious barriers to sex education seem to have contributed more than any other factor to uninformed sexual practices and indulgencies by teenage children and even young adults. This most often results in unwanted pregnancies, abortions, sexually transmitted diseases, dropping out of school, running away from home etc.

Many school children out of mere ignorance of school rules and regulation continue to fall victim to constant punishment. It is therefore important for them to be knowledgeable and constantly be reminded of the rules and regulations guiding the school environment as this will help them to be disciplined and focused in the school activities. There is need also for children to be well informed about their rights and privileges as this will make them 'cry out' when they are being abused. It will help as well to raise their security consciousness especially in this era of kidnapping. Nigerian children are so handicapped in these areas that they seem to take the excesses and abuses of the adults/teachers as part of the measures instituted by the adult world to make them better human beings. All these information can readily be made available to school children by a school social worker who is trained to know why, when and how to make the children imbibe all these without difficulty.

- 2. Emotional and Moral Support;** An emotionally unbalanced child is capable of displaying various forms of dangerous maladjusted behaviours. In western societies, records have shown situations of sporadic shootings in schools that killed several children and left many injured. They could be tempted to commit suicide, play truancy, become bullies, join gangs, start abusing drugs or simply drop out of school. In Nigerian schools, such extreme cases are not rampant, but gang/cult, drug abuse, school dropout and truancy related cases are rampant. School social workers are trained to detect and work with children who have emotional problems. Such children most times come from unstable homes. School social workers offer emotional support through developing a relationship based on trust and mutual understanding. Such bond will create in the children a feeling of self-worth, self-confidence and belongingness. This enhances the child's interest in learning.
- 3. Teaching of skills;** This is an important area that the school often neglects. School social workers can teach children basic reading skills, basic behavioural etiquette such as eating habits, manner of walking, greeting etc. skills about social relationships (in secondary schools) especially with the opposite sex.
- 4. Group work;** Group work method is a major strategy that social workers use to reach out and address the problem of school children with special needs or impairment. In using this method, the worker brings together children with similar problems and interacts with them on a group basis. The advantage is to let a child know that he/she is not the only person facing that kind of problem and that there is nothing extra-ordinary about the problem that



will make him/her feel ashamed or inferior. He urges them to discuss freely about their challenges and afterwards devises an innovative way of helping them compete favourably with others. Group work is effective with children that have speech impediments (stammerers), children that abuse substance, those with low learning abilities, children from poor home and those that are physically challenged.

5. **Services to Children from Different Backgrounds;** In a country like Nigeria with different ethnic groups, tribes, languages, mannerisms, values and other ways of doing things, and where children with different backgrounds congregate, school social worker usually arrange for instant language classes and organize cultural orientation classes to equip children with the basic values and ways of life of the different groups in the school. It will help create a social bond among the children and make them have a sense of belonging and brotherhood which will altogether create an atmosphere of learning.
6. **Services to Children with Maladaptive Behaviours;** Maladaptive behaviours are behaviours that the society frowns upon and those engaging in them are either avoided or punished. Some children come into the school with these sorts of behaviours, for instance, bullying, telling lies, stealing, fighting, sexual assault or other forms of deviant behaviours. The school social workers use behaviour modification model to correct such maladaptive tendencies. This is with the aim of making a child not to be a threat to the learning environment and also to help him to build a healthy personality that will be more responsive to the school system, the family and the society at large.
7. **Services to Children with Special Needs;** Every child is entitled to quality education no matter his/her physical or psychological impairment. Social workers most often focus on school children with special needs. It is believed in Nigeria that school has nothing to offer mentally and physically challenged children, but most of these children can compete favorably with others and attain the highest educational level possible in a normal school when given the necessary support. Whereas others can develop their full potential, in a special school and become less burden to their families and the society at large. The social worker help by liaising with the school authority and the family to send such a child to a special school, such as special school for children with language and speech requirements, special school for children with special or developmental disabilities and special school for children with traumatic brain injuries. School social workers serve to link parents with these schools and also serve as an advocate for this group of children in helping to reach out to individuals and institutions that can provide learning materials and other equipment that will help create a conducive atmosphere for learning.

### **Services to the Families**

Every child comes from a home whether a biological or a foster home. Therefore, the condition of the homes children come from highly influence their behaviors and interactions within the school system. Social workers in schools must have the need to visit the homes of school children due to the following reasons;

1. To reinforce the parent's interest and concern in their children's school work and do urge them to develop a realistic perception of their child's ability and other aspects of their/her behaviour.
2. To clarify problem that may be affecting the performance of a child in the school especially when the problems have their roots in the home.
3. To suggest to parents, parenting skills and techniques that they may adopt in their homes for the benefit of the child.

Social workers working with families use group work to bring together parents of children having similar problems to share ideas and experiences that may be of interest to one another.



School social workers provide assistance to improve the social and psychological functioning of children and their families and to maximize the well-being of families and the academic functioning of children.

### **Services to the School Personnel;**

A child can only learn in school if conditions are favourable. The school personnel such as the classroom teacher, Headmaster or Principal, School Driver, Cleaner, Gateman, Gardener, Cook, Hostel Master, Bursar, School Counselor, Doctor etc, have pivotal roles to play in a child's learning process. In working with the school personnel, social workers engage in the following:

1. Provide information to the school personnel about issues going on within the community and how these can influence or affect the children.
2. Provide information to personnel about children with special needs and other behavioural problems so that they will know how to deal with them.
3. Consult teachers and the school system about deficiencies in the curriculum
4. Consult with the school administrators on issues or policies that may be detrimental to the students learning.
5. Help the school authority to maintain a cordial relationship with the host community.
6. Help the personnel especially the teachers in undertaking staff development programmes. This will help them to be better equipped to handle issues relating to students educational development.

### **Services to the Host Community;**

The social worker helps to make the community become more involved in issues affecting the school. This is with the notion that when the school is good the community feels the impact since it is mostly their children that are affected. The worker ensures constant interaction between the school and the community through parent-teacher association where they share in their problems as well as in their successes. The community can be made to see the need to establish recreational centers such as parks, fields for games and other sport activities to keep school children busy during holidays and to prevent them from engaging in anti social behaviours. The worker can get community members to institute special prizes and scholarships for the children to encourage them to work harder to excel. The glory will go to the community. The school worker can help organize or attract programmes or workshops to the community such as HIV/AIDS awareness campaign, family planning etc. which will be beneficial both to school children and the entire community. School social workers could also influence the organization and establishment of skill acquisition training centers and small-scale businesses which could help community members to be self-employed. If the community is peaceful and are doing well in business, it will reflect on the school in terms of good behaviour, prompt payment of school fees as well as optimum learning condition. In this vein, the parent-teacher association as currently in place in Nigerian schools has not been fully explored because of the absence of this professional touch.

The new generation private schools that dot every nook and cranny of Nigeria society seem to be worse off in the area of having a comprehensive programme for the overall development of the child. Beautiful and qualitative as their educational programme may be, it lacks the fundamental instrument that cannot be compromised with; recreational activities. Due to limited spaces which these schools occupy, provision of fields for games becomes impossible. Children therefore do not have enough space to play football and run around during recreation time. However, it is the mission of school social work, according to North Carolina School





Social Workers Association, to provide services that enhance and promote the educational, emotional, and social needs of students and families. This will help them use the resources available to them to achieve their full potentials within their homes, school, and the community. Parents should be made to understand the importance of this and be persuaded to join hands with the school authority to address this all-important lacuna.

In summary, the role of school social work in the educational development of the Nigerian child is that of bringing services to bear on the problems of school children, coordinating those services to get the best results and intervening directly by addressing the elements of the system that produce the problem or contributing to it. It has the expertise to help children adapt to school environment and develop their full potentials. Peculiar as the challenges in the Nigeria educational system are, effort should be made by the available social workers to create awareness for the need of social work services in the society in general and in the schools in particular. Administrators and proprietors of public and private schools are aware of how schools in the advanced societies are run and the resources they employ to give their future generation quality education; they should make a sincere effort to key into this global trend in order to take our educational sector to another level. The following specific recommendations will be of immense benefit:

- Development of a comprehensive national policy that outlines the roles and responsibilities of school social workers, sets standards for practice, and ensures the integration of social work services in all schools.
- Establishment of certification and training programs specifically for school social workers to ensure they are well-equipped to handle the unique challenges of the school environment.
- Promoting the creation of multidisciplinary teams in schools, including social workers, counselors, psychologists, and educators, to address the holistic needs of students.
- Encouraging collaborative practices between school social workers and teachers to identify and support students who may be facing academic, social, or emotional challenges.
- Establishing partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations to provide additional support services such as healthcare, nutrition, and after-school programs.
- Developing educational programs for parents to help them understand and support their children's academic and emotional needs.
- Strengthening parent-teacher associations (PTAs) to facilitate better communication and collaboration between schools and families.
- Creating targeted programs to support vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities, children affected by conflict, and children from low-income families.
- Conducting public awareness campaigns to highlight the role and importance of school social work in promoting student well-being and academic success.

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