

COUNSELLING NEEDS OF THE CHALLENGED CHILDREN: EXPERIENCE OF AUTISM AMONG COUNSELLING PERSONNEL IN ONITSHA EDUCATION ZONE, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

The study investigated the counselling needs of the challenged persons as observed by guidance counsellors in Public Secondary Schools and Special Education centres in Onitsha Education Zone. Three (3) research questions guided the study. The study was conducted using a descriptive research design. The entire population of 35 guidance counsellors and therapists in 32 Public Secondary Schools and 1 Special Education Centre in Onitsha Education Zone was used. Data was collected using a validated questionnaire that measured knowledge of autism and counselling needs of the challenged. Distribution of the questionnaire was done through direct delivery method. Descriptive statistics (percentages) were used to analyse the collected data. The research findings included the knowledge of autism among the counsellors and therapists, their counselling needs, such as: Awareness, understanding and identifying their problems and providing counselling interventions. Relevant conclusions and recommendations were made. Some of the recommendations were creation of more special education centres in the state, encouraging more charitable individuals to be involved in the management of such centres, and posting of more professional counsellors and therapists to schools to replace retired and transferred ones to make such centres functional and dynamic.

Keywords: Challenged, needs, autism, counselling interventions.

Introduction

School is rarely a favourable environment for autistic children and this might be a severe issue both during and after school. For many autistic children, education is significantly more difficult than any other job situation, for reasons that most people have never ever considered. According to Tawanda (2013), children with challenges include those who have mental retardation, hearing impairment (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairment (including blindness), emotional disturbance, orthopaedic impairment, Autism, traumatic brain injuries, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities such as slow learners and hysteria (.

The challenged children due to their unique features and endowment cannot be adequately and satisfactory benefit from the general education programme. This is because their physical and learning characteristics differ from the norm, of that of Children found in normal classroom, as such, they require an individualized learning programme of special education and related services to get full value from education.

One area of need for the challenged children is counselling. This is because the labels attached to disabilities by the members of the society who are without disability affect the challenged children emotionally, psychologically and socially. (Walz & Bleuer, 2014). Counselling is a developmental or inferring process that would help individual children with disabilities that experience barriers to learning to realize their optimum functionality. Egbochukwu and Audu (2010) observed that through Comprehensive guidance and counselling services, challenged children can grow and develop into physically, psychologically and socially healthy human

personalities who is assisted to confront his or her psychological problems through interaction with a well-informed person, usually a counsellor or psychologist. Tawanda (2013) added that application of counselling to the specific needs of challenged children can also be done through inclusive education to enhance their mental health, psychological/human development principles that address wellness, personal growth, career development and prevent more serious problems, such as self-harm and suicide. Counselling Challenged Children for effective learning, improved academic, adjustment and well-rounded personality should be the major duty of the school Guidance Counsellors.

One aspect of the challenged children which the counselling personnel seem not to have given adequate attention is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a life-long developmental disability characterised by difficulties in social interaction and social communication, and restricted and repetitive behaviour (Odunsi, Preece & Garner, 2017). Okon, Akinrinlola, and Ezekwe defined Autism as an infantile disorder that inhibits normal development in children; impairment exists in reciprocal social and communication skills, abnormal language development, which is characterized by unusual speech pattern.

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Okon, Akinrinlola and Ezekwe (2014) expressing concerns over Autism reported that many children with autism do not speak at all, those of them who do speak may speak in rhyme, have echolalia (repeating a person's word like an echo). Some autistic children can hardly stand on their feet, are slow, that some combined these with rigid repetitive behaviours. The disorder limits a normal life due to its severity in the individual leading to the disability that may require institutional care. Bhandari (2019) found that children with autism have cognitive impairment, trouble with communicating and understanding what other people think and feel. This makes it very hard for them to express themselves either with words or through gestures, facial expression and touch. A child with autism who is very sensitive may be greatly troubled, sometimes, even pained, by sounds, touches, smells, or sights that seem normal to others. They may have unusual responses to people, attachments to objects, resistance to change in their routines or aggressive or self-injurious behaviour (some display tantrum and "duck-walking"). Some of them may also develop seizures. In some cases, those seizures may not occur until adolescence (Bhandari, 2019). Cognitive impairment in autistic children also results in delay in development in other areas resulting in uneven skill development in communication and in social relationship. But some of them have accelerated development in other skills such as drawing, creating music, solving mathematical problems or memorizing facts. For this reason, they may test higher, perhaps even in the average or above-average range on non-verbal intelligent tests.

Autism spectrum Disorder (ASD) has another related common disorder which is called Asperger Syndrome (AS). Children with this type of disorder do not have problem with language development, in fact, they tend to score in the average or above average range in intelligent tests, but, they have the same social problem and limited scope of interest as children with autistic disorder.

Another disorder is pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). It is also known as atypical autism. The other type of disorder is Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD). Children here develop normally for at least two years and then lose some or most of their common and social skills. Bhandari (2019), Smith, Segal and Human (2013) found that Childhood Disintegrative Disorder is rare and its existence as a separate condition is a matter of debate among many mental health professionals.

Furthermore, Rett Syndrome is a rare gene mutation affecting the brain related to ASD but the cause is genetic. Bakare, Ebigbo, Agomo and Menkiti in Okon, Akinrinlola and Ezekwe (2014)

and Bhandari (2019), in their studies on knowledge of autism found that Rett syndrome is found mostly in girls. Girl –child with this type of disorder starts developing normally initially but then begin to lose losing their communication and social skills (1-4 years). Children with Rett syndrome are cognitively impaired.

There is no known cause for autism, but it generally accepted that it is caused by abnormality in the brain structure and function. Some researchers like Ruparelia, Abubakar, Badoe, Bakare, Visser, chugani, Donald, Wilmschurst, Shih, Skuse and Newton (2016) and Bhandari (2019) stated that autism can run in families, that there are risk factors that having immediate family member with autism can increase the chance of having a child with autism. Again, that advanced age of mother or father increases the chance of an autistic child too. When a pregnant woman is exposed to certain drugs or chemicals, use of alcohol, maternal metabolic conditions such as diabetes and obesity, and the use of anti-seizure drugs during pregnancy, can lead to giving birth to autism. In some cases, autism has been directed to untreated phenylketonuria called (PKU), an inborn metabolic disorder caused by the absence of an enzyme, and rubella (German measles).

Symptoms of autism typically appear during the first three years of life, some children show signs from birth, while others seem to develop normally first, only to slip Suddenly into symptoms, when they are 18 to 36 months old. Some autistic children do not show symptoms of a common disorder until demands of the environment exceed their capability (Bhandari, 2019).

The prevalence rate of autism in Nigeria is uncertain due to very limited attendance of autistic children or children with development disorders at clinics. ASD was first identified in Nigeria in the 1970s (Nigerian Autistic Society, 2014). Franz, Chambers, Vonlsenburg, De-varies (2017), and Lagunju, Bella-Awusah, and Omigbodun (2014) reported a prevalence rate of 2.3%, with five times more prevalent in boys than girls, while Chinawa, Manyika, Aniwada, Chinawa, Obu, Odetunde, Nwokocha, and Ibekwe (2016) also found a prevalence rate of 2.9% among school children in south east Nigeria. Preece, Odunsi and Garner (2017) reported low awareness among nurses. For instance, 27% of Nigerian Nurses according to his study believed that ASD have a supernatural cause such as cursed ancestral spirits or the action of the devil. Late identification of this group of autism can happen after 8 years of age. Okon, et al in his study on Autism found that ASD now affecting one in 88 children, and one in 54 boys. That the severity of ASD varies widely, from mild to severe. Late identification of autism has resulted in most sufferers of this disorder ending up in the streets as insane people both in the urban and rural areas because they are not diagnosed early, and also added to the fact that regular schools rejected them. Children with autism that are found in public secondary schools are usually identified by their parents or Guardians as the disorder starts unfolding. Okon, et al (2014) stated that world Autistic Day was instituted as an annual programme to sensitize the world on this disorder, its manifestation and how to offer supportive cares to them.

Counselling needs of children with childhood autism are varied. Walz and Bleuer (2014) listed the needs to include, awareness, understanding them and giving them a sense of belonging and adjustment in the society, providing them with reading materials, speech and language therapy, daily reading skills, identification screen, and assessment, placement, evaluation services, counselling services and a host of others. Smith, Segal and Hutman (2013), also suggested that parents should provide hope and be open about the situation of their children. They should see about job placement of the autistic children and fight against sexual abuse of the female autistic child. Hope is provided through visitation to the counsellor, and show of empathy. There is

need also for parents to be open about the situation of their children. There should be a follow-up when these children are placed in work places. Counsellor should do a follow-up, and also protect them from sexual abuse.

There are certain problems and challenges faced by the autistic children as observed by Must, Philip, Curtin and Bandini (2015). They are behavioural challenge, environmental challenge, Employment problem, Personal barrier, family expectations, communication/ social issues. Walz and Bleuer (2014) also explained that autistic children can face problem of depression, understanding social issues/social relationship, and loss of Counsellor Therapist through transfer or retirement. They can also suffer from mood disorder, phobia, emotional regulation and aggressive behaviour.

Statement of Problem

Researchers have shown that there is increase in rate of children with autism in the country. Again, there seem to be poor knowledge and awareness of this disorder even among the professionals. This has resulted in many gaps in understanding regarding autism in mainstream classrooms in our secondary schools, causing children with this illness to be segregated from the rest of the class. Furthermore, teachers have difficulty educating them with other pupils in the class who do not have disabilities. They require sufficient training from specialists who can assess their needs and assist them by providing counselling services.

Although research has been conducted to investigate the causes, prevalence, and treatment of autism in children, these studies have primarily been conducted in the Western world, and little has been done to address the challenge and experience of autism among Nigerian schoolchildren. This study attempted to fill a gap in the literature. With an increase in the number of cases of autism and the need to understand this illness, as well as government and parental concerns about how to help children with autism, the role of counsellors and therapists in offering counselling therapies thus is the subject of this study.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to find out the existence of autism and their counselling needs as observed by counsellors and therapists in Onitsha Education Zone. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Identify the extent of knowledge of autism among guidance counsellors/therapists in Onitsha Education Zone.
2. Identify the problems that make counselling necessary for children with autism, as observed by counsellors and therapists.
3. Find out areas of counselling needs that counsellors and therapists can be of help to children with autism.

Research Questions

Three research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. To what extent do guidance counsellors possess the knowledge of autism among school children in Onitsha Education Zone?
2. What are the problems that make counselling necessary for children with autism, as observed by counsellors and therapists?
3. What are the areas of counselling needs that counsellors and therapists can be of help to children with autism?

Method

The research was a descriptive case study. The design was used because the researcher gathered information from the guidance counsellors and the staff who worked closely with autistic children, using questionnaire to describe the variables as they are.

Sample and sampling technique

There was no sample due to few counsellors, so census sampling involving the whole counsellors was done and the entire population of 35 guidance counsellors were used.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used in collecting data for the study was a structured and validated questionnaire titled Counselling Needs for Challenged Children Questionnaire (CNCCQ). The questionnaire consisted of demographic information and 20 items divided into two sections A and B. Section A consisted of 4 items on the knowledge of childhood autism among health workers (by Bakare, Ebigbo Agomoh & Menkiti, 2008), was modified and used for counselling personnel by Okon, et al (2014) was adapted for the study.

Section B consisted of 16 items on the needs of the challenged children with autism and counselling interventions being investigated. The 16 items on the questionnaire (section B) were derived from the reviewed literature and discussions with Principals, Counsellors/Proprietor of Peace Therapeutic Special School, Onitsha. Thirty-five copies of questionnaires were administered, and collected directly from the respondents to avoid losses. The responses to the 16 questionnaire items were designed on a 5 point rating scale of: not at all important 0; slightly important 1; important 2; fairly important 3, and very important 4. Split half reliability was conducted using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMCC) (r). A reliability correlation coefficient of r. 0.76 was obtained.

Method of Data Analysis

The percentage method of data analysis was used to analyse the information gathered. The needs for counselling were weighted in percentages.

Results

Data collected were analysed and presented in tables as follows:

Research question 1

To what extent do guidance counsellors possess the knowledge of autism among school children in Onitsha Education Zone?

Table 1: Percentage scores of respondents indicating the extent of Guidance counsellor's knowledge of autism

Response	Frequency	Percentage
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Yes	20%	57%
No	10%	29%
Don't know	5%	14%
Total	35%	100%

Table 1 revealed that, 20 (57%) respondents have heard of autism, 10 (29%) have not, while (five) 5 (14%) have no knowledge of autism. Majority of counsellors responded that they have knowledge of autism.

Research question 2

What are the problems that make counselling necessary for children with autism, as observed by counsellors and therapists?

Table 2: Percentage scores of respondents indicating the problems that make counselling necessary for children with autism

S/ N	Problems of children with Autism	Level of importance		Level of importance (not at all important)		Total
		Score	Percentage	Score	Percentage	Percentage
1	Social / communication issues.	35	100%	-	-	100
2	Loss of therapist through transfer	31	88.6%	4	11.4%	100
3	Employment	32	91.4%	3	8.6%	100
4	Behavioural(depression)	19	54.3%	16	45%	100
5	Sexual abuse	15	43%	20	57%	100
6	Marriage	20	57%	15	43%	100
7	Better life	15%	43%	20	57%	100

Table 2 indicated that the problems of children with autism are: Social/ communication, 100% employment, 91.4%, behavioural; 54.3%, loss of therapist through transfer; 88.6%, (57%) and better life in the society (57%).

Research question 3

What are the areas of counselling needs that counsellors can be of help to children with autism?

Table 3: Percentage scores of respondents indicating how counsellor can be of help to children with autism

Table 3 above showed various ways on how counsellors can be of help to children with autism.

S/N	Counselling interventions	Level of importance		Level of importance (Not at all important).		
		Score	%	Score	%	%
8	Meeting with family	33	94.3%	2	5.7%	100
9	Meeting with the client	34	97.1%	1	2.9%	100
10	Inclusive Education	30	85.7%	5	14.3%	100
11	Understanding their level of disabilities	29	82.9%	6	17.1%	100
12	Improve on self esteem	31	88.6%	4	11.4%	100
13	Developing independence	33	94.3%	2	5.7%	100
14	Improve on healthy habit and cleanliness	26	74.3%	9	25.7%	100
15	Developing healthy relationship between children and counsellors	28	80%	7	20%	100
16	Counselling with parents.	30	85%	5	14.3%	100

The higher the percentage, the more important the ways in which counsellors and therapists can be of help to the children with autism.

Discussions

Table one revealed that counsellors have knowledge of autism. Most counsellors were aware through on-going advocacy for mainstreaming and through awareness campaign. The finding of the study does not agree with that of Okey-Martins Nkwolo (2015) which said that most counsellors had poor knowledge of childhood autism. Although they were aware of the disorder, more awareness is still needed as it was revealed that only a few of the counsellor knew about it through awareness campaign. The counsellors are next in line, after parents in assisting the challenged; therefore their involvement is crucial as they remain pivotal in the progress of the children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Few counsellors indicated that children with autism can be educated in mainstream schools, although they responded that none can be found in their schools, except in two special schools in the zone.

Table 2 revealed the problems of children with autism as: Depression, loss of counselling by constant transfer in the school system, lack of employment due to disability, psychosis, sexual abuse, not finding life time companion after graduation from school. These problem agree with the findings of Fraudian (2010), Ogbebor (2009), problems of children with autism are varied, ranging from understanding them and assisting them to have a sense of belonging and better life in the society. Similarly, Martins Mahan and Lovullo (2009) and Edgar (2015) maintained that attention should be focused on current problems and behaviours of children with autism and in using classical and operant conditioning through reward and association, remove or modify such behaviours.

Table 3 also revealed how counsellors can intervene and be of help to the children with autism, the following findings were made, counsellors meeting with the family, having counselling sessions with them, offering them training skills for a better tomorrow, understanding their disabilities, improve on self-esteem and develop independence/self-help. Others include improving on healthy habit and cleanliness, developing good relationship with the therapist or counsellors and making sure that parents stop isolating them. These findings agree with Edgar (2015) who identified ways of helping challenged children through counselling, that it deals with wellness personal growth and good relationship. The finding is in line with that of Azavedo in Ogbebor (2015), that they should be helped to acquire some skills to meet their

needs. Glasser in Uba (2009) observed that children with autism should be made to face the reality of this life, and be made to change their emotional thinking, in order to fulfil their needs.

Implications of the Study

Since children with autism are in schools, the counsellors/therapists should observe and identified them and take care of their needs by application of counselling theories and techniques. The counsellors should be aware of the problems that make counselling necessary for children with autism and try their best to help them.

The counsellors should try to acquire more skill in techniques of counselling, on the level of importance of the problems that confront these children and map out how to help lessen their problems.

Conclusions

The study has revealed that all the children are not the same; some are challenged, while others are said to be normal. The challenged (for instance, children with autism) need special attention and treatment in order to get along with their peers, and cope with their studies. Counsellors need to be aware of their needs and offer necessary counselling interventions.

Counsellors will constantly assess the needs of these children to ascertain ways in which the needs constitute problems to them and intervene through counselling. The counsellors/therapist should apply appropriate counselling theories and their techniques/methods in handling the problems of children living with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in order to lessen their problems.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following recommendations are made.

1. More special education centre should be created by the government and professional counsellors posted to give them inclusive education.
2. Awareness level of the counsellors should be increased to lessen the problem of these children. This should be done through constant workshops and seminars.
3. Counsellors should come up with intervention programmes for parents and teachers to manage children with autism at homes and in school environment.

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