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STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING SOCIAL BREAKDOWN IN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

An attempt has been made in this paper to present a model on the process of social breakdown. The model, developed by Robinson (1978) describes the gradual process of breakdown in social functioning in relation to individuals, families and schools and pays particular attention to the parts various agents of social control play in the prevention of social breakdown. Strategies developed by experts which are directed at individuals, professionals and the government for the prevention of social breakdown are recommended. Thereafter, the strengths and limitations of the strategies are discussed and a conclusion is reached that urgent social work intervention in the schools will help a great deal in preventing social breakdown in schools.

INTRODUCTION

Generally, not all the children who attend school have been able to benefit maximally from school education. In fact the situation is getting worse with the introduction of free education at all levels. Whereas the purpose of school education is to make all the children who pass through it functional both during childhood and in their adult years. A visit to any prison or remand home reveals that many of the inmates in these institutions must have attended school. Statistics from a study carried out by Odekunle (1978) in Kano and Kaduna State show that the percentage of prison inmates who attended school is about 37% while figures of clients at Welfare Agencies also indicate that a very high percentage of their clients attended school.

Nigeria would celebrate her 40 years of independence this year, (2000) it is the belief of this writer that schools, having gone that long way should be able to assure the society that it would do its best to make sure that the objectives for

setting them up are met where all the children who come through pass out successfully at the end of their school years.

Nigeria can boast of many primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. In 1989/90 academic year, there were 34, 904 primary schools, 5,868 secondary schools, 120 colleges and polytechnics and 38 universities. There were also 300 vocational, technical and business schools. This is in addition to various special schools and numerous private institutions all over the country. The purpose of establishing so many schools is to make all children who pass through them functional, literate and responsible adults later in life. But it is disheartening to read negative reports by many scholars on the high incidence of malfunctioning among students, Allen-Meares *et al.* (1983) Bakare (1993), Meedles & Knapp (1994). More than half of the students in these schools can neither read nor write, Marcionis, (1995). More often than not, students are faced with certain problems associated with social breakdown which they cannot solve by themselves. Such problems include: teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, teenage drug and alcohol abuse, absenteeism, truancy, school failures and many more. The problems are prevalent in the public schools. In support of this view, Allen-Meares *et al.* (1983) explain that the persistence of poverty, with its attendant problems of inadequate housing, health-care and nutrition, limited early childhood experiences affect the quality of learning and the school's success in achieving its goals. Poverty and high unemployment in Nigeria are alarming which usually lead to growing social problems. Children of poverty status most often enter school less prepared than their counterparts in the working class parents group.

Perhaps that is why Obemeata (1995) concluded that the education system in Nigeria has become an unprofitable industry. Both the primary and secondary schools produce functional illiterates in large numbers every year a situation which unfortunately, negates the objectives of Nigeria's National Policy on Education, though Skidmore *et al.* (1991) believe that, individuals, especially children, are faced with problems they cannot solve by themselves. This explains why certain categories of children in school are not capable of functioning independently, the fact remains that the numbers of children who fall into the category have continued to rise at an alarming rate over the years. In support of this view Narramore (1966) pointed out that most schools meet the needs of good students and have not seriously considered their responsibility of meeting the needs of students who have below-average abilities, or who need extensive remedial instructions. Many schools do not also provide adequate guidance services to detect those students who are making insufficient progress.

Marries (1974) on the one hand believed that inability to function adequately for many students may mean disruption of life, a sense of loss and grief which culminate in despair and death. Robison (1978), on the other hand believed that crisis situations which temporarily results in breakdown can eventually result in innovation which will qualitatively improve the life of the victim. It is believed that many of the apparently unmanageable teenagers could be helped if appropriate assistance is provided at the right time. Social workers are therefore, encouraged to use their knowledge and skills to meet the children's needs. Failure to meet such need could be disastrous not only to the individuals concerned, but to the society as well.

SOCIAL FUNCTIONING DEFINED

It is necessary to delve a little bit into the area of social functioning before a discussion of social breakdown could be carefully articulated.

The 1959 Curriculum Study of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) offered the following definition of Social Work.

Social work seeks to enhance the social functioning of individuals, singly and in groups, by activities focused upon their social relationships which constitute the interaction between man and his environment. These activities can be grouped into three functions: restoration of impaired capacity, provision of individual and social resources, and prevention of dysfunction.

The major concern of this paper is the prevention of social breakdown in schools, hence the concept of social functioning in this paper will be limited to those activities performed by the school child. Consequently, social functioning here includes students ability to communicate and express themselves in English and in their first language, pass school and external examinations, attend school punctually and regularly, cooperate with parents, teachers and other adults in their communities, cope with crisis situations and adapt to changing environment. (Folaranmi, 1988).

Broadly speaking, the school social worker serves those children whose social emotional problems interfere with their use of school experience to the maximum of their ability. This does not include all the children who show some symptoms of difficulty in school from time to time but only those children in whom the degree of the symptom indicate a need for help. Some of the

symptoms according to the proceedings of the Workshop on School Social Work in Illinois (1956) are:

School achievement below ability level, problem of attendance illness without physical cause excessive fears, anxieties and crying, shyness, withdrawn behaviour and over-dependency extreme restlessness, **aggressive** and hostile behaviour, conflict with authority, difficulty with other children.

The ability of the child to cope with school activities in spite of the presence of any of these problems of obstacles to learning means that the child is able to interact with his/her environment and adapt accordingly. The council of Social Work Education made it clear when it said that the ability of people to cope with life's problems and tasks.. eliminate or lessen the negative consequences of stress usually results from the interaction between people and their environments. Social functioning is therefore enhanced when individuals feel basically satisfied with themselves their roles in life and their relationships with others.

THE PROCESS OF SOCIAL BREAKDOWN

Failures of Social functioning are taken to be acts or omissions of performance which in themselves constitute a failure to live up to the expectations of society and or those of the self. The failures might be delinquent acts or neglect of duty. Society makes all kinds of definitions as to what constitutes social breakdown, even though they vary considerably from group to group. In Nigeria, acts that may portray social breakdown are those acts that will require the control or intervention of the criminal justice system. For example: delinquent behaviour such as stealing, teenage drug abuse, run-away children and etc. A model on the process of Social breakdown developed by Robinson (1978) is presented below:

TABLE 1: Model of the process of social breakdown

STAGE	INDIVIDUAL	FAMILY	SCHOOL
At risk	Dawning recognition by subject Other Primary Socialisation agents 'alert'. All rights and powers retained.	Dawning recognition by some subjects. No definitions made agents. Other primary All rights and powers retained.	Dawning recognition by social institution. No definitions made. Socialisation All rights and powers retained.

Primary	Primary socialization agents active. Definitions made within the system. Prescriptions made within the system. Power of subject constrained.	Primary socialization agents active. Definitions made within the system Prescriptions made within the system. Some powers constrained.	Definitions made higher up the system. Prescriptions made within the system. Some powers constrained.
Secondary	Primary and secondary socialization agents active. Definitions made within the outside the system. Power of subject limited.	Primary and secondary socialization agents active. Definitions made within the outside the system. Power limited.	Primary and resocialisation agents active. Definitions made within and outside the system. Powers limited.
Tertiary	All relevant systems active. Definitions made within the legal system. Prescriptions made within the legal system. Prescriptions involve 'custodial' care. Power of subject seriously curtailed.	All relevant systems active. Some definitions made within the legal system. Prescriptions involve custodial care for some members. Power seriously curtailed.	All relevant systems active. Definitions made within the Politico-legal system. Prescriptions involve major restructuring. Power seriously curtailed.

Source: Robinson, Margaret: (1978), Schools and Social Work London. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

The model describes four stages which are not clear cut and with no obvious boundaries between them.

Stage 1 – At risk of Social breakdown: This is the first stage of the continuum of social breakdown and the one which is most difficult to recognize.

Pringle (1974) lists the following group of children as being particularly vulnerable and at risk.

- i) Socially and culturally underprivileged children.
- ii) Families where personal relationships suffer from some degree of impairment or where there is some emotional neglect.
- iii) Families where there is serious or irreversible physical or mental illness or disabling handicap.

- iv) The child who has one parent only (whether because of illegitimacy, separation, divorce or death);
- v) Families affected by sudden and disrupting crises.

Holman (1970) takes a sociological view in his description of **families at risk** who, he recommends should be given priority. He describes the **places** where such families live as twilight zones: His description of the places are:

- i) geographically located in between the business center and the **outer rings** of cities.
- ii) having a relatively high number of immigrants;
- iii) home conditions characterized by overcrowdy and lack of amenities.
- iv) higher than average **proportion** of unskilled and semi-skilled workers;
- v) higher than average **proportion** of families receiving state benefits;
- vi) higher than average proportion of large families;
- vii) lack of play space and facilities.
- viii) poorer health than is found in the population as a whole;
- ix) high incidence of child deprivation and delinquency;
- x) some evidence that the areas have the worst social services.

Stage II Primary Social Breakdown: At this stage, it is clear that something is wrong with the child or the family and affecting the child. There is open recognition between the school, and either the child or the child in the family, that a problematic situation exists, whether or not each accepts the perceptions of the other as to what it actually is. It is at this stage that prescriptions are made within the same system to alleviate, mitigate or correct the situation.

Children who have behaviour problems tend to be seen as "bad" by the school system. This is because their behaviour makes it difficult for teachers to carry out their tasks while children who are isolated and withdrawn may hardly be noticed because they made fewer demands on the teacher and are less disruptive in class. On the other hand, children whose behaviour is seen as bizarre, and especially those whose parents are known to suffer from psychiatric disorders are often seen as "mad" At this stage, social work system is not usually involved.

Stage III Secondary Social Breakdown: When a subject is described as experiencing secondary social breakdown, both primary and secondary socialization agents are actively involved. In the model presented in Table 1, secondary socialization agents are taken to be social workers. One of the key factors of this stage of breakdown is that the definition is made outside the school system. With regard to school children, this means that they are expected to be

referred to the social work system and it is this act of referral which indicates that the stage of secondary social breakdown has been reached.

Stage IV Tertiary Social Breakdown: Tertiary social breakdown can be said to have occurred when the stage of social breakdown has been reached. The defining agents explain that corrective action is mandatory to restore the possibility of social functioning. At this time, the definition includes three systems, one of which is likely to have the power to make definitions with legally backed sanctions.

Another important feature of tertiary breakdown is that the subject's self-image is usually radically redefined as part of the process. While in primary and secondary social breakdown, the subjects' self-image is usually radically redefined as part of the process. While in primary and secondary social breakdown, the subjects' self-esteem may suffer to a varying degree, when tertiary social breakdown is defined, there is no escaping from the accompanying sense of failure, whether this is acknowledged or not. For school children, tertiary social breakdown is reached when a child is compulsorily required to spend more time away from home in some form of custodial care than he or she spends at home. One reason for that may be that the home or family may no longer be functioning in such a way as to provide him/her with the care and control that are needed.

THE STRATEGIES

The following strategies are offered: They are provided by Pringle (1974), Odejide (1999) and Obeneata (1995). In spite of the fact that not all care-giving professions agree to the causes underlying 'Pringle's categorization of children at risk (Stage 1), most of them would probably agree as to the vulnerability of such children and yet the same professions could hardly be said to be 'alert' in their concern for such children. Certainly, with regard to cooperative effort in working together across the boundaries of their own care-giving systems, Pringle (1974) argues that they are more concerned with preserving their own professional principles than with the needs of children. She urges the professions to be more "alert" to the needs of children.

Education Priority Areas (many of them situated in the twilight zones described by Holman (1970) in stage 1 as discussed earlier should receive urgent support and attention in order to combat the vicious downward spiral of poverty and deprivation. More resources, buildings, new and additional equipment, extra more – skilled teachers and so on should be given to these areas, over and above the national average.

Obemeara (1995) lists the following measures by which the education industry could be made more profitable: which this author believes to be yet another strategy:

They are:

- i) enhanced learning environment;
- ii) improve the physical structures of the schools;
- iii) provide instructional materials.
- iv) increase instructional time.
- v) improve the learning capacities of pupils;
- vi) improve quantity and quality of teachers;
- vii) examine the role of language in education;
- viii) improve management of schools;
- ix) increase funding of education.
- x) our leaders should demonstrate a real political resolve to reverse the unprofitableness of education industry in Nigeria.

Odejide (1999) recommends a core-set of life skills that are at the heart of skills based initiative for the promotion of the health and well being of children and adolescents. They are, to this author believed to be yet another strategy. These include:

1. **Decision making:** ability to deal constructively with decisions concerning one's life
2. **Problem solving:** ability to deal constructively with problems.
3. **Creative thinking:** ability to explore available alternatives and various consequences of one's actions and non-actions.
4. **Critical thinking:** ability to analyse information and experiences in an objective way. Helps individuals recognize and assess the factors that influence attitudes and behaviour, e.g. values, peer pressure and the media.
5. **Effective communication:** being able to express opinions and desires, needs and fears. Being able to ask for advice and help in time of need.
6. **Interpersonal relationships skills:** help to relate in positive ways with the people one interacts with e.g. friends, relatives, ending relationships in a constructive way.
7. **Self-awareness:** recognition of ourselves, of our character, of our strengths and weaknesses, desires and dislikes.
8. **Empathy:** ability to imagine what life is like for another person, even in a situation that we may not be familiar with.

9. Coping with emotions: involves recognizing emotions in ourselves and others, being aware of how emotions influence behaviour and being able to respond to emotions appropriately.
10. Coping with stress: recognizing the sources of stress in our lives, recognizing how this affects us and acting in ways that help to control our levels of stress.

Table 2: shows in clear terms the different actual life skills and lesson activities that can be taught at different levels and ages to promote psychosocial competence and to achieve health promotion and effective social functioning of individuals and institutions.

Table 2: Acquisition and Application of Life Skills

	Year 1 (Level 1)	Year 2 (Level 2)	Year 3 (Level 3)
Self-awareness	Learning about "me as a special person"	Self-control	My rights and responsibilities
Empathy	Understanding how people are alike and how we differ, and learning to appreciate the differences between people	Avoiding prejudice and discrimination of people who differ	Caring of people with AIDS
Interpersonal relationship skills	Learning to value relationships with friends and family	Forming new relationships and surviving loss of friendships	Seeking support and advice from others in a time of need
Communication	Basic verbal and non-verbal communication skills	Assertive communication in the face of peer pressure	Using assertiveness to resist pressure to do potentially health damaging activities (e.g. unprotected sex)
Critical thinking	Learning the basic processes in critical thinking	Making objective judgements about choices and risks	Resisting media influence on attitudes towards smoking and alcohol
Creative thinking	Developing capacities to think in creative ways	Generating new ideas about things that are taken for granted	Adapting to changing social circumstances

Decision making	Learning basic steps for decision making	Making difficult decisions	Decision making about important life plans
Problem solving	Basic steps for problem solving	Generating solutions to difficult problems or dilemmas	Conflict resolution
Coping with stress	Identifying sources of stress	Methods for coping in stressful situations	Coping in situations of adversity
Coping with emotions	Recognition of the expression of different emotions	Understanding how emotions affect the way we behave	Coping with emotional distress

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STRATEGIES

It may not be easy to identify the effects of each strategy because they are interrelated. Consequently, the success or failure of the strategies will be evaluated by examining the achievements of school children some years after leaving school. Those who fall into Pringle (1974) categorization of children at risk or Holman's (1970) group of children who live in twilight zones need priority attention.

In its totality, it will not be absolutely right to state that the various intervention strategies and programmes instituted by government and non-governmental agencies for the prevention of social breakdown in the schools have made significant impact. This is because of the uncontrollable student population in our schools who manifest varying degrees of social breakdown. Students defy school authorities. At all levels of education, students engage in all sort of malpractices. In fact Onyechere (1996) submits that examination malpractices rank as one of the most dangerous problems of any society, because it makes nonsense of educational systems. It plants the seeds of unethical values in the fertile minds of students. This is obviously one of the results of inability to function on the part of the students who then seek alternative means of achieving their aim of schooling i.e. pass examinations etc. Unfortunately, this method does not argue well for both students and society, as it has been found out that malpractice is rooted in malfunctioning. (Folaranmi, 1998). It is believed that when a candidate depends on malpractices to pass examinations, such a candidate is building the foundation for a life of immorality and crime.

In the area of human development generally, education in particular, the various strategies offered by Robinson (1974) Obemeata (1995), Odejide (1999) appear very solid and helpful as they are capable of sensitizing the public to the

benefits of social functioning. They are also capable of enabling the individual, government, and social welfare agencies to examine themselves to see if in actual fact they have been able to perform their duties and fulfill their obligations as they should.

CONCLUSION

This study has pointed out that in order to effectively prevent students' social breakdown, there is need for more intensive, properly streamlined and consciously planned educational and enlightenment programmes for the students at both primary and secondary schools.

From practical experience of what goes on in the schools as well as reports obtained at the Social Welfare Centre (Schools Division) in Iyaganku, those students who are experiencing social breakdown usually constitute a potent force of disruption in the school and in the society, Folaranmi (1998). This apparently confirms the findings by Dave (1975) that the disruptive elements in schools usually constitute about 2% of the school population. Such students are most of the times recruited by area boys and touts and thereby they continually add to the ever-increasing number of miscreants in the society.

The presence of students who are prone to breakdown in schools demonstrated that the existing strategies should be properly structured, and effectively implemented to be able to nip the problems in the bud.

I wish to state categorically that efforts at preventing social breakdown in schools rest not only on the shoulders of government as many may submit, but also on individuals, professionals and institutions concerned. Pringle (1974) addresses her call to the practitioners and professionals in the helping professions, while Obemeata (1995) addresses the government. Odejide (1999) believes that an awareness by the individual of the various indices of the breakdown and the ability to combat these indicators with life skills will help a great deal of both short-run and long-run prevention of social breakdown.

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