LITERACY AND READING IN NIGERIA

VOLUME 8
NOS 1 & 2
1998/99
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PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND FAMILY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A RETHINK

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ABSTRACT
This Paper examines the role of Public Libraries in the promotion of family education. It discusses the components of good public library services and reviews the Nigerian situation. The paper concludes that efforts should be made to enhance the services of the public library towards the promotion of family education in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Education, it has always been said, is not a luxury. This common saying through all ages is not an exaggeration as far as family survival is concerned. Even in pre-literate societies and up till recent time, every member of the family needs a form of informal indoctrination for the purpose of self-actualization and full integration into the society.

However, education and the media of transference owe a lot to the present civil society. With the complexities of our time, it is no wonder that knowledge cannot be satisfactorily transferred through oral communication alone. It is in the light of the afore-mentioned that the role of public libraries could be better appreciated.
The public library in its primary function serves as both a civil agency and a mirror of the society. By virtue of these characteristics, it has a prominent place in the making of the family—the Nigerian family. In order to perform its role in family education well, what does it have to offer? What constitutes good performance? What actually obtains in the Nigerian situation? These, and others are the concern of this paper.

PUBLIC LIBRARY: DEFINITION AND ROLE IN FAMILY EDUCATION

Many attempts have been made at defining what a public library really is. For the purpose of comprehensiveness however, this paper has chosen a rather long definition which goes thus:

A collection of books and other forms of records, housed, organized and interpreted to meet the broad and varying needs of the people for information, recreation and inspiration. Further to this, the public library assembles, preserves and administers books and related educational materials in organized collections in order to promote through guidance and stimulation an enlightened citizenship and enriched personal lives....It serves the community as a general centre of reliable information and provides opportunity and encouragement for children, young people, men and women to educate themselves continually (Leigh, 1950).

The definition given above tends to have a sufficient panoramic view of what a public library is as well as stressing the utilitarian purpose(s) of its establishment.

It however, suffices to add that the public library has grown to be acknowledged as promoters of literacy and a centre for community information services (Francis and Foskett, 1993), hence its relevance in family education. It is a perpetrator of cultural heritage (Anyim, 1972); the family being the right unit to educate in this instance. The family remains the agent of socio-cultural transmission through all ages.

Furthermore, educational systems such as obtain in America stress the need to have agencies that foster character, personality, social responsibility as well as impart the skills of learning the heritage of knowledge and the rudiments of vocation. The agency should also be able to teach and transmit the essentials for a full life and responsible citizenry to its people (Lowell, 1948). The public library in its basic functions needs to meet all demands expressed above. This fact further buttresses its social function.

Lastly, it is necessary to add that a public library should be all things to all men in its services. It should therefore be greatly concerned with every aspect of family information needs because in doing this, it indirectly caters for the whole nation and its citizenry.
PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND FAMILY EDUCATION STRATEGIES

The relevant question at this juncture is how does the public library achieve all the purposes enumerated above. The following points among others are primary in its services to the family:

(a) Public Library Collection

A library is made up of a collection that is relevant to the needs of a reading group or groups in contents or organization (Lowell, 1948). A library is therefore first judged by its contents which are based on users’ needs. The library anticipates the users’ needs and bases its acquisition policy on these. The public library concerned with family education will stock inter alia materials relating to:

- Family histories, family relationships, courtship, marriage, sexual relationship, domestic responsibilities/role of members, child rearing/development, child adoption.

- Types of families e.g. patriarchy/matriarchy/polygamy, communication in families, extended family issues.

- Family size/family planning, family health, marriage laws/family conflicts/divorce, marital property.

- Materials relating to socio-political and economic integration e.g. materials on history of the nation/state/town/village as well as their political development e.g. suffrages and voting etc.

- Core materials/texts on child education from kindergarten-tertiary institution, career choice/guidance for the child, vocations, trade and professional opportunities.

- Others include materials on recreational and life-long education e.t.c.

(b) Access

Since public libraries are established for the community, and are usually funded by tax payers money and occasional endowments from citizens, access is usually free, and age is not a hindrance; this is the common practice in advanced countries, and has been adopted locally in Nigeria.
(c) Reference service.

Public libraries, like other types of libraries, provide reference services to users. A common phenomenon however identified with the institution is the organization of talks/seminars/workshops. Such programmes should be further strengthened on family education.

(d) Resource oriented services

Literature has also revealed that public libraries provide recreation, literacy programmes, mobile library service (including service to specialized groups) promotion of library culture/reading habits and exhibitions.

(e) Provision of skilled staff

Like in any other library, the availability of an adequate crop of professional staff is essential. The library needs professional librarians. Also needed are services of staff in the areas of social psychology and education among others. The combination of all these experts services will provide worthwhile services in family education.

(f) Provision of adequate library facilities other than books

Public libraries like other types of libraries need to be well equipped to meet the needs of their users, especially in the present age of high information technology. The materials needed range from adequate building standards and facilities - (including those that take care of the needs of the physically handicapped or disabled) to modern library materials such as shelves, sophisticated audio-visual materials and computers.

(g) Adequate funding

The public library needs adequate funding to be able to meet the needs of its users. The funding of public libraries is essentially the responsibility of the government. Literature has also shed some light on the fact that this practice became common in the 19th century, and that it also required a legislation for local authorities to be committed to this cause (Francis and Foskett, 1993).

THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

So far, this paper has attempted to define public libraries and its relevance to family education in general. It however, aims at drawing a line between the ‘vision situation’ i.e. expectations and the ‘real situation’ of public libraries in present day Nigeria.

It is sad to mention that the situation of public libraries in Nigeria is obviously below the international standards in many respects. On the other hand, there has not been much
To this end, this paper will itemize some of the factors militating against public libraries in the promotion of family education in particular, and other services in general.

(a) **Lack of vision of what public library is**

The Nigerian society has not really had a firm grasp and understanding of what a public library is. This syndrome is evidenced by the fact that not much of uniform standards have been evolved in public library practice in the nation. Also, up till the recent past, no legislation has backed the library practice up. The Nigerian Librarians Registration Act was only promulgated and passed into law as decree No.12, in 1995 (NLA Newsletter,1995).

With the promulgation of the decree, the Nigerian Library Association should use this facility to create standards for the Nigerian Public Library operations as well as the librarianship profession in general.

(b) **Funding**

The poor facilities and services obtained in public libraries stem from the fact that they are inadequately funded. Continuous recommendations need to be made to the governments at different levels to come to the aid of these libraries.

(c) **Staffing problem**

It is also an obvious fact that not all public libraries in Nigeria are manned by professional librarians. This paper is also informed by the discussion at the 35th National Conference/Annual General Meeting of the Nigerian Library Association held in Kaduna between 5th - 9th May, 1997. This is also an area the government as well as the Association have to look into.

(d) **Poor library culture/reading habits**

Surveys have indicated that library culture and reading habits are very poor among Nigerians (Nnaji, 1986). The challenge to create library consciousness among family members and the Nigerian populace should be taken up by librarians, teachers and the family. In fact, this paper recommends the inclusion of library education in the school curriculum right from the primary level. Public enlightenment also needs to be strengthened in this respect.
(e) Poor local publishing

Generally, local publishing has been very poor. This is a factor that cuts across all areas of knowledge. Libraries depend mostly on foreign imports. Incidentally, the lack of adequate funding of libraries is compounded with high foreign rates. Local researchers, educators and publishers need to be encouraged to look inwards and save our libraries from book drought.

(f) The effect of brain drain

The standard of living and people's earning capabilities continue to fall day in day out in Nigeria. This has resulted in a puzzling rate of brain drain in Nigeria as the Nigerian labour force, especially the university teachers, move out to seek 'greener pastures' in foreign lands. The situation has a boomerang effect on the Nigerian educational system as well as library service in general. The time to redeem this situation is now.

CONCLUSION

Informal education is not sufficient for family survival in Nigeria. We need to exploit and develop all available resources that will augur well for the family. We need a healthy society, and the health of the society is determined by the health of the individual family. To prosper this cause, the public library is a tool to be used. On all the premises stated above, we need a re-think. Everything must be done to make the Nigerian public library give out all of its resources which should also be adequately utilized by an informed populace for the health and survival of the nation.

REFERENCES


