Original Research Article

The Role of Libraries in the Creation of Literate Environments in African Countries

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Abstract

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Libraries are service points dedicated to providing free and equitable access to information for all, be it in written, electronic or audiovisual. Libraries are the custodians of these various information media. they also process information with appropriate tools, organize and store them, for easy retrieval when needed. Literacy and literate environment were not only defined and explained in the paper but their roles and benefits in the development especially in poor countries of the world were well exemplified. The importance of libraries and its various challenges in creating literate environment were also discussed. Making libraries an essential part of policy framework for educational sector with adequate funding can play a meaningful role in creating a literate environment were among the suggestions and recommendation emphasized in the paper.

Keywords: Literacy, Literate environment, Functionally literate, Underdeveloped, Functional literate

INTRODUCTION

In the present global information society, non-literate people are at a permanent disadvantage; unsure of their right, unable to fulfill their potential and unable to play a full part in society and they are also disempowered. Illiteracy is generally understood to mean inability to read and write, conversely restricts one's horizon in communication. Illiteracy usually associates with the existence of other societal ills such as nutritional, health, agricultural, and population problems. It is also a state of bondage whether a person is rich, poor, young, noble or lowly. If life in modern age is to be lived to the full, great majority of people must released from the bondage of illiteracy if they are to make their best contribution to their families, communities and their nations (IFLA, 2011). The uneducated, the poor and the underdeveloped must be mobilized to build a society that is self sufficient because the ability of the individual to contribute to the growth and development must be mobilized to build a society that is self sufficient because the ability of the individual to contribute to the growth and development of a particular society lies in his/her ability to read and write. Chista

(2011) affirms that there is immense potential in human capital development but this can only be realized through promoting and sustaining high literate to enable everyone irrespective of race, creed, gender or other factors to participate fully in the conventional social-economic activities of the country. UNESCO (2004) defined illiteracy as the ability to identify, understands, interpreted, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying context. It also involves a continue learning in enabling individual to achieve their goal to develop their community and wider society. Literacy thus refers to the ability to read for knowledge and write coherently and think critically about the word. Once you learn how to read, you will forever be free. Nzeneri (2010) asserts that apart from affirming that literacy means ability to read, write, communicate, literate adult is a person who can read and understand simple written and computed statements involved in everyday life. UNESCO (2008) noted that literacy is not just the simple reading of words or set of associated symbols and sounds, but an act of

Table 1. List of African Countries by Literate Rate below 50%

Countries	Literacy Rate %
South Sudan	27.0
Afghanistan	28.1
Burkina Faso	28.7
Niger	28.7
Mali	33.4
Chad	35.4
Somalia	37.8
Ethiopia	39.0
Guinea	41.0
Benin	42.4
Sierra Leone	43.3
Haiti	48.7

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2013

Table 2. List of Developed Countries by Literate Rate

Countries	Literate Rates %
Argentina	98.1
Brazil	92.6
Bulgaria	98.4
Greece	97.7
Hungary	99.1
Italy	99.2
Malaysia	94.6
Mexico	94.4
Paraguay	95.6
Spain	98.1

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics 2013

critical understanding of the situation in the world. It is not an end itself, but a means of extending individual efforts toward education, involving interdisciplinary responses to his/her problems. Literacy also leads to education which results to empowerment with acquisition of the essential knowledge and skills capable of making individuals engage in activities they require for effective functioning in self, group and community improvement. A person is functional literate when he can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community, also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development. UNESCO (2006) refers to literacy as a context behind continuum of reading, writing and numeracy skills, acquired and developed through processes of learning and application in schools and other settings appropriate to youth and adults.

Table 1 above shows the list of African Countries by literate rate that is below 50% with south Sudan ranks the lowest of them all, with a literacy rate of 27%, followed by Afghanistan at 28.1%, Burkina Faso at 28.7, Niger at 28.7%, Mali at 33.4%, Chad at 35.4%, Somalia at 38.7%, Ethiopia at 39.0%, Guinea at 41.0%, Benin at 42.4%, Sierra Leone 43.3% and Haiti at $8.7%.

Table 2 above shows the list of developed Countries with high literacy rate above 90%. Argentina 98.1, Brazil 92.6%, Bulgaria 98.4%, Greece 97.7%, Hungary 99.1%. Italy 99.2%, Malaysia 94.6%, Mexico 94.4%, Paraguay 95.6% and Spain 98.1%.

Further analysis of UNESCO statistics details that of the 774 million illiterate adult recorded in 2013, two third of these, or about 493million are women who are unable or have difficulties in reading text messages, filling out forms and reading their Doctor's prescription. Furthermore, there are 123 million people between 15 and 24 years of age who cannot read or write. Of these illiterate youths, 76 million are women and 54 million of them are based only in nine Countries: India, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt and Burkina Faso. Many of these African Countries who have who have been reported as having very low literate rates are also among the poorest in the world. A huge majority of the people living in these countries are barely able to eat three square meals per day let alone worry about going to school or learning how to read and write. In Sub-Saharan African, the impact of poverty is deeply felt; only few people live above the poverty line. About 80% of Africans live under the hazardous conditions. The per capital income of an

average Nigeria, "the giant of Africa" with its abundance resources is two dollars. This is in no measure, affects the reading habits of Nigeria. Many are too poor to send their children to school. They also lack money to buy books and pay school fees (Aina, 2011).

Benefits of literacy

The rationale for recognizing literacy as a right is the set of benefits it confers on individual, families, communities and nations. Indeed, it is widely reckoned that in modern societies, literacy skills are fundamental to informed decision-making, personal development, active and passive participation in global and social communities (UNESCO, 2006). Goody and Watt (1987) as captured in Musingafi and Chiwanze (2012) argued that writing helped to radically alter trade, commerce, economic sector and human interaction. Literacy affects labour quality and flexibility, employment, training opportunities, income from work and wider participation in civic society. Literacy is critical since it empowers people to advance their interest and resist exploitation (Kamal and Zunaid 2006). Being literate adds value to a person's life and also literacy can be instrumental in the pursuits of development at personal, family and community levels, as well as at macro-levels of nations, regions and the world (Downs, 2007). According to Vuving (2009) lack of literacy is strongly correlated with poverty, that is, both in an economic sense and in broader sense of deprivation of capabilities. Literacy strengthens the capabilities of individual, families and communities to access health, educational, political, economical, cultural opportunities and services, e.g. the literacy of women and girls is of crucial importance to the issue of gender inequality (SoeKoe, 2014). Literacy is at the core of education and helps people understand decontextualized information and language, verbal as well as written (Otto, 2013). Eldred (2008) noted that literacy links to particular job skills that contribute to development of critical thinking and problem solving.

The Creation of Literate Environment

What is a literate environment?

A literate environment is the availability of written, printed and visual in learners' surroundings, enabling them to make use of their basic reading and written skills, or the prevalence of literacy in households and communities, enhancing the prospect of successful literacy acquisition by learners (UNESCO, 2007: 393; 2008; 411). The basic purpose of education should always be to develop among the learners a lifelong learning that gives inner and intrinsic rewards to self satisfaction and fulfillment. But in order to develop a literate and learned individual, there is

need to create sustainable literate environment for that individual because a learned person is a product of literate environment (UNESCO, 2011). Dynamic and stimulating literate environments at home, in the class room, in the work place and in the community are essential to literacy acquisition, development and lifelong use. Creating a rich literate environment according to Chhetri and Baker (2005) is more than just the availability and accessibility of books and materials but it is a creation of social, political and cultural milieu that values and nurtures all forms and functions of illiteracy. It involves having people embrace behaviour and making them realize that individuals, families, communities, local governments and other sectors of society have a role to play within the literate environment system. But in many countries of the world especially in Africa, there is a serious lack of reading materials and hence a lack of reading dynamics and stimulating culture. According to UNESCO: Basic as cited in (KrolaK, 2005) development of literate societies in the developing world cannot be attained solely by providing quality learning materials to schools. If people are to stay literate, they must have access to a wide variety of written materials and continue the habit of reading in the adult lives. Singh (2003) concluded that if literacy is not placed within a functional framework of relevance and if newly acquired literacy skills are not constantly used and improved, there is a real danger that those who have acquired literacy skills will relapse into illiteracy and the huge investment in school education and literacy classes will be wasted.

The Role of Library in Creating Literate Environment

Historical background

Krolak (2005) reported that as a result of comprehensive, country-wide network of libraries in literate societies is a relatively recent phenomenon dating from the nineteenth century. Historically, public libraries have a strong tradition in Anglo-American societies. The United Kingdom passed the first library law in 1850. Libraries were first introduced in the North- America colonies with the aim of educating the settlers in the new world. Early discussion clubs, modeling themselves on English benevolent societies, developed small book collections for their members' use. Religious denominations also contributed to the public libraries. As early as the 1890s, the public library in the United States responded to the and literacy needs of a large influx of immigrants, providing English and citizenship classes in many urban libraries. At the beginning of the twentieth century, libraries were part of an awakening consciousness that saw education as an instrument for social change. After Word war ll, main stream libraries gradually started to extend their services to community groups, and by the 1960s, a special focus was set on role reaching

marginalized groups. In the following years, library plays an important role in the national literacy campaigns, for example in Thailand. Library as an important cultural institution in providing a physical learning space for all ages for developing and sustaining literacy skills (Howard, 2013). They can be in form of stand-alone buildings, set up within schools, located in community centers or provide their services with mobile libraries. Libraries provide their users with a welcome literate environment with a collection of diverse literacy materials which can stimulate individual or group learning. They are the ideal place for literacy activities (UNESCO, Bangok, 2011) and are considered as a trusted and welcoming place for cultivating a love of reading and promoting self-directed and content-rich learning (Howard, 2013). The success factors of libraries as literate environment include making the library a welcoming and interesting place to visit regularly, providing relevant reading materials of good qualities and developing a collection that is responsive to the needs of the community and the users' choice (UNESCO Bangok, 2011; Asseling & Doiron, 2013). Moreover, offering innovation and interesting literacy activities , connecting programs and services with the collection, relevant training for libraries, as well as effective collaboration of with stakeholders and the community were also crucial factors for making libraries a successful literate environment (Doiron & Asselin, 2011; Easton, 2014). Libraries play an important role in the acquisition, maintenance and development of literacy skills. They achieve this through offering access to reading materials that are relevant, stimulating, and enjoyable or useful practical information that can be used to facilitate development, whether for seeking employment, understanding rights, learning a skill, checking a fact or gaining health information can also be got from libraries. Libraries and their staff have resources and expertise to help people find and use information. Access to information can ultimately help people to understand, enjoy and contribute to their communities in meaningful ways. A literate community is the foundation on which libraries were built, and it is in this spirit that libraries continue to provide the resources, facilities and activities that support learning for all ages. Libraries are also custodians of the national culture by storing popular and academic knowledge and material for current and future generations. Opoku-Mensah (2016) illustrated unique heritage of Mali. He explained further that in 2013, armed group invaded and occupied northern Mali and Timbuktu, a famous city for its cultural heritage and its vast amount of public and private libraries with invaluable documentary heritage. Some volunteers smuggled these cultural heritage manuscripts during the invasion and occupation of Northern Mali and Timbuktu into safety to Bamako with the help of international support. The manuscripts have since been kept in the library of Bamako and are undergoing restoration and digitization work. She went father to explain that public libraries play

pioneering role as development agents by practicing what they preach in African countries. An example of an inspiring library initiative that has lent itself in promoting some sustainable development goal is the Street Library Ghana (SLG). This is a volunteer-driven, social enterprise aimed at promoting better life opportunities for children and youth in vulnerable community by addressing literacy and education issues. SLG offers a cost effective, less intimidating and welcoming library concept in rural communities to reach vulnerable and under-served children by providing them with rich mobile libraries, minimal library outreaches and activities such as storytelling, Symposium, Drama, Library Club, Talk Debate, Book Exhibition, Book Fair etc. Most academic libraries in Nigeria play the most important role in helping to bridge the information gap by providing access to information and technologies, particularly the internet. They have established themselves as integral part of a national education and information strategy based on library laws and appropriate funding. They offer free access to information, are highly service-oriented, and constantly improve their service through co-operation and networking. Libraries, increasingly in co-operation with other community organizations, offer a varying amount of activities including author readings, creative writing, classes, introduction to information and communication technologies and the internet, reading groups, exhibitions, summer reading programs, study support, discussion groups and art classes such as drama, poetry and songs. Rankin and Brock (2012) referred to public libraries "measurable and substantial contribution to local economies" which helps bridging social divides.

Library-Based Adult Literacy programs in Nigeria

Adult literacy can be categorized as someone of fifteen years and above who is responsible for himself and others, and probably missed the opportunity of attending formal school due to financial problem or other factors, had gone to school but dropped out after spending one, two or three years. Public libraries in Nigeria has continue to play an important role in adult education programme in sustaining the diverse forms of expression, such as acquire process, organize and preserve materials, which depict the way of life and experiences from others (Akparabore, 2011). He further stated that through public libraries, the adult illiterate and neo-literate can develop the skill in computer usage in search for collection, indexing and abstracting services and whatever is done to improve the quality of adult education is done to improve the nation. Ohanado and Kehinde (2015) stressed that public libraries are the perfect places to provide adult literacy classes, they can also train personnel in carrying out different adult literacy educational programs in the community, through workshops, seminars, and conference on different

subject areas of the literacy programmes so that they can become better at their various fields. Onohwakpor (2013) concluded that library services are paramount importance to the success of the goals of the adult literacy education. Adult educators should incorporate library services into adult education programmes to complete the process of helping adults become literate and sustain the literacy.

Challenges of Creating a Literate Environment in African Countries

Krolack (2005) identified the following challenges in creating a literate environment:

Local Publishers

In countries where struggle for daily survival, it is beyond their purchasing power to afford reading materials. One practical solution and useful tool for promoting literate communities, despite a lack of local publishing capacity, are local newspapers in indigenous languages. These can be provided by libraries, NGO or community centers.

Home Front

Children have different reading needs at different stages of their lives, but they need access to enjoyable reading materials from very beginning. Parents have to be encouraged to read to their children while they are small, sing with them and play creative language games with them as part of their everyday life. Furthermore, parents have to be a good example by being active readers themselves.

Inadequate Professional Staff

Many libraries in poorer African countries than Nigeria are run by non-professional staff. It is assumed that any volunteer or teacher can manage a library. But the quality of a library services depends on the professional quality of its staff, and this in turn depends on the quality and relevance of the training that they have received. Running a library with unprofessional staff is like teaching without background. Oftentimes when library is established junior worker is promoted to become the librarian and as a result of lack of professional training on how to handle information, the library fails to make a recognizable impact. Another aspect of the problem is the low pay of librarians and the lack of training opportunities available in many countries. Linked to this is the issue of poor motivation leading to high staff turnover where, for example, librarians In public libraries are paid very low wages compare to university or private librarians.

Irrelevant materials

It is not unusual to find rows of outdated textbooks on American or politics or history, and books in foreign, often former colonial languages in the local public libraries, or highly scientific books in a primary school library. As most libraries in poorer countries cannot afford to buy only appropriate books in appropriate languages, they rely on book donations or simply do not have enough relevant titles on the local language.

Lack of Appropriate Training Opportunity

Appropriate training and continuing education is needed to address the rapid social and technological changes in modern libraries. Training must be made relevant to local conditions, outdated syllabi reflecting colonial values need to be replaced and training programs need to include knowledge in printed and non-printed formats. Modern library training must emphasize how to reach out to potential uses through internet connectivity and how to be at the centre of community development. Training should therefore include advocacy, public relations, and community mobilization.

Inappropriate Buildings

Books, computers and audio-visual materials are very sensitive and have to be protected from extreme weather conditions, be it rain and humidity or sun and heat. Ideally they need to be kept in a dry, temperate environment. In many countries this would require an air-conditioned environment. Another problem is the protection from theft. The building and library materials need to be protected by bars and proper doors. During office hours, ideally, a surveillance person, camera or appropriate equipment should prevent materials from being stolen. Protective measures are very cost-effective and unavoidable for most libraries.

Lack of Co-operation and National Information Policies

Lack of co-operation among agencies involved in library-related work weakens the system and creates unnecessary duplication or even competition. If publicly available resources are scarce, co-operation and resource sharing become a solution. Cooperation is also necessary between various information providers in a country, including governmental and non-governmental organizations, the medial, corporate companies and the publishing section. In a developing country with a week publishing sector, unpublished material is of great value to the public, especially if the material supports national

development. But due to the lack of training, many librarians do not know how to make such material accessible to the public.

International Support for Libraries

There is an urgent need for international support for libraries as many governments in poor countries simply cannot afford to establish effective library systems. Several government, charities and private groups in the developed world have established book donation programs. Probably the most professional and complex example of book donation agencies are Book Aid International (BAI) in the United Kingdom and the Canadian Organization for Development through Education (CODE). Both organizations can look back on more than 40 years of professional support in developing countries, mainly in Sub-Saharan African. They work in partnership with public library services and the local book trade through the donation of books and learning resources, which are culturally relevant and increasingly locally published. They furthermore provide training and building to maximize the effectiveness of their local partners. Many projects are with other overseas organizations along with those in local communities. The important role of International NGOs in providing access to reading materials to the general public, often in partnership with governments and other NGOs. This role is not merely restricted to initiating and financing projects but encompass day to day management (Hossian, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This paper shows the dynamic creativity and potential as well as the challenges for the involvement of libraries in creating literate environments for lifelong learning in Nigeria and African continents. It also shows that investing in books and libraries is at the earth of educational reform, literacy enhancement and sustaining literacy skills for life, leading subsequently to development and poverty reduction. If policy and decision makers recognize the value of literacy and libraries and the need to have a population that not only can read but will read, they must be willing to commit scarce resources towards the support of libraries. With sufficient investment and support, libraries will have a major positive impact on the achievement of Education for All and the millennium development goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Libraries should be an essential part of a long-term policy framework for the whole education sector, embracing literacy, information provision and lifelong learning in Nigeria and other African countries where the level of literate is low. Libraries should be supported by specific legislation and must be adequately financed by national and local government in Nigeria. Libraries in Sub-Saharan African and Nigeria should be based on a community needs analysis and constantly make their services relevant to community needs. Libraries in Nigeria and African countries in general have to offer a wide range of activities with a special focus on reaching out to marginalized groups.

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