Leaving No One Behind: Promoting Literacy in Nigeria through Inclusive Library and Information Services

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Abstract: Literacy is undeniably the catalyst as well as the anchor of any nation's development hence, a strong correlation between the literacy level and the socio-economic status of any nation. Regrettably, illiteracy rate in Nigeria is alarmingly high, based on the revelation of the Federal Minister of education in 2017 that nearly 65 to 75 million Nigerians are Illiterate. The Library is a veritable instrument for literacy crusade, being an information and educational resource eminently and conspicuously positioned to promote literacy through inclusive library and information services. This paper dwells on the relevance of the library in literacy promotion in Nigeria. It also spotlights the roles of the library in promoting literacy. The paper irradiates some challenges libraries and library professionals face with regards to literacy promotion as well as proposing ways forward.

Keywords: Literacy; Illiteracy; Literacy Campaigns; Public Library; Sustainable Development; UNESCO.

Introduction

Literacy is the mainstay of any nation's development hence, any nation that fails to prioritize literacy is doomed to fail. "Literacy affects labour quality and flexibility, employment, training opportunities, income from work and wider participation in civic society" (Musingafi and Chiwanza, 2012).

Furthermore, UNESCO (2016) revealed that "the World Literacy Forum estimates the cost of illiteracy to the world economy as 1.2 trillion dollars." Murphy (2006) notes that "Illiteracy is essentially a personal tragedy … It is a failure of the individual (usually through no fault of his own) to achieve his full potential and to escape the confining prison of ignorance and poverty" (Murphy, 2006). According to Graff (2008), experts have acknowledged the significance of literacy in individual and societal development. This explains why it is given prominence in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development. To this end, UNESCO has duly set September 8 of every year aside as International Literacy Day.

Illiteracy poses a serious threat to the overall development of any society, hence is considered a serious socio-economic problem. This is because illiteracy, according to UNESCO (2017) "accompanies poverty, low life expectancy, political oppression, and underdevelopment." Unarguably, those who are literate and educated have the tendency to participate actively in the activities that support and promote the sustainable development of their communities. On this note, UNESCO and other concerned international organizations and agencies have launched aggressive literacy campaigns aimed at raising literacy rates across the globe. However, report of recent literacy survey in Nigeria revealed that preponderance of Nigerian citizenry is illiterate. This development calls for drastic measures. In the prevailing circumstance, libraries which are eminently and conspicuously positioned to champion the course of literacy promotion should rise to the challenge by adopting more inclusive strategies and a broader vision to promote literacy in Nigeria.

Literacy conceptualized

The term 'literacy' has been conceptualized by many schools of thought. It is "the state or condition of being literate" (New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, 2010). UNESCO (1993) defined a literate person as "someone who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his/her everyday life." Learning which is necessary for an individual to attain a certain level of literacy is endless; otherwise, a relapse may occur. Therefore "literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society" (UNESCO, 1993). On the words of Graff (2008), "literacy is commonly considered the ability to read and write at a designated level of proficiency." According to UNESCO (1993), illiteracy/literacy are in many occasions used to explain issues relating to:

- Traditional mass literacy
- Functional literacy;
- Semi-literacy (those who leave school after a short time);
- Instrumental illiteracy (adults who have never attended schools);
- Linguistic illiteracy (immigrants not literate in the host country language);
- New literates (those who have just obtained a reading skill);

- Information illiteracy, which is a recent concept describing those unable to use the information offered in a technological society.

In this modern society, basic literacy is considered inadequate for an individual to function effectively and efficiently, hence, the need to attain a high level of literacy referred to as 'functional literacy'. Taking this into consideration, while the term 'literacy' is discussed, its functional consequence, applicability, or impact is considered as well. In view of this, Murphy (2006) declared:

> *... the single most important consideration in defining literacy is its functional significance. The ability merely to read and write at low levels of proficiency does not qualify a person effectively to meet the practical needs of daily life. Within increasing complexity of modern societies, the individual must be able to read simple instructions, write a legible letter, and engage intelligently in contractual relationships. This level of competence is referred to as functional literacy and the failure to achieve it is functional illiteracy (p.775).*

Functional literacy, according to UNESCO (1993) suggests the literacy level an individual should attain so as to operate effectively in a complex industrialized society.

Moreover, mathematical or numerical skill is considered an important skill a literate individual should possess. However, Murphy (2006) regretted that "almost all definitions of functional literacy have concentrated on the ability to read and write, ignoring another important aspect of mathematical ability". Possession of mathematical literacy provides an

individual with the knowledge of personal financial management and the ability to engage positively in business-oriented activities.

The value of literacy

Illiteracy constitutes a big mishap to an individual and a society at large. This is why Bakare (2015) stated that "people who are illiterate are far more likely to live in poverty, facing a lifetime marred by poor health and social vulnerability." Concerned about functional illiteracy, UNESCO (1993) lamented that it is a serious problem that needs urgent attention, otherwise it could adversely affect living conditions in the developed countries. Considering this, Youngman (2000) in Musingafi and Chiwanza (2012) warned: "for great majority of people, if life in modern society is to be lived to the full, they must be released from the bondage of illiteracy if they are to make their best contribution to their families, the communities and the nation." Popovic (2016) declared: "Literacy is an entrance to the world". Freire (n.d.) in Popovic (2016) argued that literacy is not just concerned about reading the word but principally, a basic right and a means of achieving other rights. According to Chisita (2011) in Musingafi and Chiwanza (2012), human development is unimaginable, and cannot be achieved in the absence of literacy.

In addition to its educational and socio- economic benefits, literacy has other critical importance among which is peace building. On this, Popovic (2016) contends: "… we cannot say that literacy brings peace but we can say that literacy allows critical thinking which can lead to different choices, choices other than extremism." Relating this to Nigeria

which has battled insurgency for over a decade, the present Governor of Kebbi State, Alhaji Atiku Bagudu in ("Illiteracy rate in Nigeria alarming", 2017) affirmed: "most of the security challenges the country faced were manifestations of the level of illiteracy in the country. "We have an army of people whose inability to read can be exploited by divisive elements in the country."

There is no gainsaying that those competencies as information literacy, Information and Communication Technologies literacy etc., which individuals need so as to function effectively and efficiently in the modern society stem from basic literacy. "Even though we live in information age when information and computer literacy are much more important than just good reading skill; our information literacy is based on the literacy skills that we have developed at our early age" (Nazarova, 2010).

The term 'promotion' means "advancement, furtherance, or encouragement" (New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, 2010). Library is conspicuously positioned to promote literacy, considering the important roles it plays in the cultivation of a healthy reading culture necessary for independent and lifelong learning. Libraries' literacy programmes have always been channeled towards encouraging people on how to read in order to become literate and be relevant in the societies they belong to.

Libraries and literacy promotion

Literacy is an ability acquired through learning, usually in educational setting. This confirms Graff (2008) declaration that "literacy is not an inborn human

characteristic, but rather an ability that is learned, most often in schools." Although schooling is very critical for literacy to flourish, it is not enough. It is unthinkable to achieve a modern and literate society without libraries, which according to IFLA (2015) "are uniquely situated to promote literacy". Library is therefore a veritable instrument for the promotion of inclusive literacy.

Public libraries play vital roles in giving the citizenry a chance to acquire literacy by providing access to information materials and services. By encouraging reading and promoting literacy through inclusive library and information services, public libraries contribute immensely to the development of individuals and the society at large. Considering the significant functions of libraries in cultivation of widespread literacy, the world's largest library organization – IFLA in support of the UNESCO's development agenda on literacy, has held several congresses focused on fostering literacy through public and school libraries, where they also proposed guidelines which provide helps in promoting library services to support literacy works. The Public Libraries Section of IFLA is therefore tasked with issues regarding libraries participation in literacy promotion globally.

Promotion and sustenance of literacy is one of the significant functions of public libraries. Public libraries are educational and community resources which operate in heterogeneous or complex environment to provide educational, information and cultural materials in print and non-print media to people irrespective of their differences. It is established with the

central aim of educating and enlightening every member of the public or citizenry. In the United States of America, this role has earned the public library the name "people's university". Library is undeniably essential for the accomplishment of any community-wide literacy programme.

Exposing children to reading at early stages in life is one of the surest ways of nurturing literacy. This is one of the essential roles of libraries in literacy promotion. Storer (2015) acknowledged the significance of library in promotion of childhood literacy when he argued: "…while it's true that literacy typically begins with family, libraries have a vital role to play." This suggests that librarians should develop ways of getting children develop interest in reading at early stage so as to sharpen their literacy skills. Still on library's roles in promoting childhood literacy, Storer remarked:

> *There are several ways librarians can promote childhood literacy besides more interactive story time session, too. For instance, getting involved with Reach Out and Read programmes that work with state and local library systems can allow librarians to create book lists, coordinate environment more conducive to reading, work on joint grant applications to further literacy efforts and train volunteers to better promote childhood literacy in the community (p.2).*

Early Inculcation of reading habit in children and Childhood reading experience not only guarantee childhood literacy; it also enables children to adjust from their reading difficulties. "Public libraries in carrying out this role of education can identify reading problems of children at an early age and remedy them before they lead to frustration and school dropout" (Musingafi and Chiwanza, 2012).

Public libraries encourage non-literate adults to acquire literacy as well as follow up the literate ones so that they do not relapse to their former state. On this note, Kong (2011) commented: "library-based adult literacy programs are major contributors in the education of adult learners in urban and suburban communities … the public library is a little explored organization where adult literacy services are provided for free".

Foreigners or migrants are usually considered elements of an illiterate society due, to language barriers. Libraries therefore make provisions for them to adapt successfully to their host communities and contribute meaningfully to their socio-economic development by assisting them in learning the major, or official languages of their host communities. "Libraries create connections to local institutions and build English language skills for immigrants and non-native speakers" (Kong, 2011). Public libraries also extend literacy programme to adults who have are not adequately skilled in use of official languages such as English Language so as to accommodate learners from different cultural backgrounds.

IFLA (2003) suggests some guidelines to libraries and librarians on promotion of literacy. According to IFLA, the guidelines are prepared to guide librarians who believe in, and are willing to demonstrate the philosophy that libraries and literacy are inseparable. However, although library-based literacy promotion

crusade have the same target globally, approach could vary based on political, social, economic factors in a country, which might influence library-based literacy programmes positively or negatively. Based on the IFLA (2003) guidelines, librarians involved in literacy campaign, although activities of programmes may vary depending on home factors, should determine the following:

- Who is our audience?
- How do we start planning and developing community cooperation?
- Who are our potential partners?
- What materials are needed and how do we choose them?
- How do we train our staff?
- How do we promote our literacy program?
- How can we tell if we are successful?
- How do we keep our program going? (IFLA, 2003).

Nigerian libraries need to take on these guidelines for effective library-based literacy promotion in the Nation, in response to the prevailing worrying rate of illiteracy in Nigeria. Nigerian libraries need to be in strong collaboration with the existing literacy-promoting organizations like the National Commission for mass literacy, Adult and Non-formal Education, Agency for Mass Literacy, and others to provide comprehensive and all-inclusive library and information services to the needy population. Furthermore, attention should be focused on the disadvantaged groups and communities where literacy rate is reportedly low. The National Bureau of Statistics (2017) in Ajibola (2017) reported Nigeria's literacy index as of 2017. According to this report, "the states where majority of people can neither read nor write are those in the Northeast, Northwest, and North-central" (National Bureau of Statistics, 2017; in Ajibola, 2017).

As a matter of urgency, outreach services should be well-supported in troubled areas like the North-East Nigeria, where access to library services might have been undoubtedly marred by the ongoing insurgency, and where need for library services may not be ranked among peoples' immediate needs due to prevailing circumstances. North-East Nigeria has experienced sustained Boko Haram Insurgency which has crippled their educational and socio-economic activities, and created millions of Internally Displaced Persons who have little or no access to library services. Unfortunately, the National Bureau of Statistics (2017) in Ajibola (2017) reported Yobe State, a State in the North-East Nigeria as having the lowest literacy level (7.23%) in Nigeria. This is worrisome! In the light of this, in the course of executing library-based literacy programme, this recent report on Nigeria's literacy index should serve as a guide to libraries as to the areas to be given special attention.

Challenges libraries face with regards to literacy promotion

Previous studies show that libraries encounter myriad of challenges in literacy promotion crusade. Some of these challenges are:

1. **Fiscal constraints**
   One major issue on which many other problems depend is fiscal constraint. Nigeria is yet to recover from a serious economic difficulty. While in recession, governments

are unable to meet their financial obligations to the ministries or agencies which depend on them for funding. This invariably leads to budget cuts. Unfortunately for the library, it is a service-based institution, and not revenue-generating one. During serious economic conflicts such as this, libraries compete unfavorably with revenue-yielding institutions for the limited monetary allocations from governments. This grossly affects inclusive library services for literacy promotion. In view of this, Kong (2011) lamented: "… libraries have been able to continue to provide library services, including literacy services to adult learners and their families for free. Due to extensive budget cuts, these programme gains are being threatened" (Kong, 2011).

2. **High cost of library resources and services**
   Nigerian has, for the past years experienced series of currency devaluation which has always placed the exchange rates on the high sides. This invariably leads to high cost, and subsequent scarcity or shortage of books and other reading materials, commonly described as "book famine". The general consequence of economic-related challenges is the adoption of fee-based library services for cost recovery. This sometimes discourages patronage, especially in developing countries where need for library services seem not to be ranked among the essential or immediate needs. This constitutes a challenge to library-based literacy programmes because "there is an evident connection between lack of

books and illiteracy" (UNESCO, 1993).

3. **Financial misappropriation**
   David Cameron, the immediate past Prime Minister of the United Kingdom once described Nigeria as "fantastically corrupt" even though he was, under pressure, made to retract this statement. Although Nigerians vehemently criticized Cameron for this statement, it is a common knowledge that Nigeria is seriously infested with corruption. At the time public libraries lament on poor funding, finances earmarked for equipping public libraries are in most cases misappropriated by those at the helms of library management. Sometimes, resources not acquired are falsely claimed to be acquired and the money is diverted. Commonly, library heads with questionable character do inflate costs of library resources in connivance with suppliers and divert the excesses. This unhealthy practice starves the library with materials and services needed for successful library-based literacy programmes.

4. **Dearth of trained and committed staff**
   The library personnel who should participate in library-based literacy promotion crusade are required to possess necessary trainings. IFLA (2015) noted that such trainings could be obtained through "pre-professional education, in-service training or as continuing education". Moreover, IFLA suggested three types of training for effective execution of literacy programme. These include: "training for staff working with the public, training for library staff

managers of literacy projects, and training for literacy tutors and persons providing services" (IFLA, 2015). Unfortunately, these trainings seem to be lacked in the curricular Nigerian library schools. Also, in-service training and continuing education for library-based literacy prorammes appear to be nonexistent in Nigerian public libraries' policies. Moreover, working in library generally requires commitment and sacrifice. Librarians, most often fall short of these expectations. Thus, poor raining and the lethargic attitudes of librarians constitute challenges to successful library-based literacy programme.

5. **Absence of relevant information materials or resources**
   Materials used for library-based literacy programme must be tailored to the needs of the selected populace. In most cases however, the appropriate materials are either lacking or insufficient, resulting in providing the populace with irrelevant materials. Use of materials haphazardly selected might discourage the inhabitants of a selected locality from participating in literacy programmes, especially when materials do not meet their needs.

6. **Problem of partnership**
   For a successful library-based literacy programme, libraries are expected to be in close partnership with educational, cultural, religious, and community-based organizations and institutions that are engaged with education and literacy promotion. However, such partnership, if at all exist in Nigeria, seems to be rather weak.

7. **Poor state of Nigerian public libraries**
   Public library in Nigeria is one of the institutions that suffer serious neglect from the governments. Most public libraries in Nigeria are currently in deplorable conditions due to governments' inattentiveness on issues relating to library development. A case in point is a report by Banjo (2018) on the pitiable state of many public libraries in Lagos State, which he described as "archaic, dusty and empty". If this is obtainable in Lagos State which has been a centre of civilization for centuries, we can imagine what the situation would be in other states of the federation. Another point of reference is a report on the deplorable state of the National Library of Nigeria by Ngelale and Sanya (2017) captioned "Nigeria's National Library: Intellectual Sanctuary in Ruins." Unfortunately, the National Library of Nigeria is the role model of other libraries in the nation. Summarily, the sorry state of Nigerian public libraries adversely affects library-based literacy promotion.

Recommendations

Possible solutions to the challenges libraries encounter with regard to library-based literacy promotion include:

1. **Availability and accessibility of books and reading materials**
   Books and other materials needed by public libraries for literacy promotion should be provided and made accessible to users. According to Irunegbo et al. (2013), "if people are to stay literate, they must have access to a variety of

written documents and continue the habit of reading in their adult lives." On this note, "Bring Back the Book (BBB)" campaign launched by Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan on December 20, 2010 was aimed at reviving reading culture and improving literacy by delivering books to the doorsteps of the needy. Such initiative should be sustained at all cost. Also, Nigerian libraries should utilize such opportunities offered by concerned foundations such as Books for Africa, Book Aid International, Sir Emeka Offor Foundation, etc. which provide succor.

2. **Encouraging early literacy by providing necessary reading materials and services** Libraries, especially public and school libraries are in position to assist children to achieve early literacy. Daines (2014) noted: "library staff and services – particularly by public and school libraries - can make a huge impact to increase the number of children who read, increase levels of engagement and build literacy skills." Haggen (2017.) in Chikelu (2017, p. A43) stressed: "children need access to a large variety of books: fiction develops a child's love of stories, empathy for others, and strength of character, while nonfiction allows them to explore the world and learn about others". Libraries should therefore encourage and promote increased access to children's literature at home and provide easy-to-implement solutions for families on literacy issues. This is important because "early literacy helps to 'immunize' children against illiteracy" (Neary, 2014).

3. **Cooperation with other literacy-promoting organizations**
Libraries can effectively combat illiteracy when they cooperate with other concerned stakeholders. "There are many groups who provide different types of cultural, information and literacy services to the community. Working together, library staff and these groups will be more likely to succeed in their community" (IFLA, 2015). Similarly, UNESCO (1993) suggested that libraries need to collaborate with schools and adult education, study organizations, local groups and societies; mass media such as local radio stations, local press and television. Partnership with concerned public and private organizations will attract book donations, infrastructure, and other assistance needed for literacy promotion. "For libraries to have a meaningful impact in this effort, educators, social workers and librarians themselves must understand the various roles each play, and work together in a partnership to help improve literacy levels" (UNESCO (1993).

4. **Cultivation and promotion of reading culture**
Reading is the surest and safest escape route from illiteracy and poverty. The library should engage in programmes aimed at inculcating reading habit into the masses. Also, the library needs to launch an aggressive campaign against youth's obsession with movies, social media, sports, fashion, entertainments, music, etc. which pose serious threat to their literacy and education. Moreover, an illiterate individual

cannot use the library effectively, hence the need for libraries to fight illiteracy from the root. On this note UNESCO (1993) warned: "public libraries … must be ever vigilant that their use is as barrier-free as possible. Since illiteracy is a major barrier to such use, librarians must do their part to help eliminate this stigma."

5. **Libraries should encourage family learning and reading**
   Libraries should create platforms to educate parents on the need to create time for reading and studying with their children and keep the exercise sustained as their children grow up. Children's practice of reading and studying together with their parents creates a lasting impact in children's educational life. In view of this, Neary (2014) cautioned: "literacy begins at home - there are number of simple things parents can do with their children to help them get ready to read but parents can't do it all alone, and that's where community services, especially libraries, come in." Family learning and reading encourages interaction between children and their parents and this facilitates family literacy. Besides this, it enables parents to understand or identify how best their children can learn.

6. **Adoption of 'talk, sing, read, write, play' strategies**
   This is an aspect of library outreach programme for families organized by Carroll County Public Library, Maryland, USA. This could serve as a model to public libraries in supporting parents cultivates and inculcate good reading habit in their children. Nigerian public libraries should adopt such programme to help parents prepare their children for lifelong literacy.

7. **Outreach services**
   Libraries outreach services is one of the reliable means of extending library services to the disadvantaged groups and communities who have little or no access to library services. One major benefit of outreach service is that it brings people close to the library. Daines (2014) noted: "it is important that libraries shout about their work in promoting literacy". Reaching out directly to people through informal discussion groups enables librarians to know which services people expect from libraries based on their needs. Stoltz (n.d.) in Neary (2014) noted "… if libraries can listen and respond to families, it is helping us do our best work." Outreach services such as book mobiles need to be strengthened to help close the literacy gap existing between the urban and the rural dwellers. This should also be centered on the disadvantaged groups and communities like people living in slums, physically challenged, the internally-displaced persons (IDPs), the confined, rural dwellers, etc.

8. **Development of school libraries**
   Priority should be given to the development of school libraries as these play important roles in early literacy. Librarians and library organizations should therefore strongly advocate for development of school libraries because children have their first reading experiences in these libraries.

9. **Encouraging home/family libraries for children**

Literacy as earlier noted "begins from the home." Enabling environment where literacy could thrive should be created for children at home. Haggen (2017) in Chikelu (2017) emphasized need for families to increase access to children's books, and siting libraries at home thereby encouraging their children to become lifelong readers. "When kids have a large library, they are more likely to be frequent readers who read books for fun five-seven days a week" (Haggen, 2017; in Chikelu, 2017).

10. **Adequate training for library personnel involved in literacy programme**

For effective literacy-based literacy promotion, there is need for training. Librarians who will participate in library-based literacy crusade need training in such areas as identifying the target audience, planning and development of community cooperation, knowing materials needed and how to choose them, evaluation of the programmes, among others. These areas of training are doubtfully covered in the curricular of Nigerian library schools. Generally, there is need for teaching and study of issues relating to libraries and literacy promotion in Library and Information Science schools.

Conclusion

The rate of illiteracy in the country is still alarming despite heavy investments in education. This is confirmed by the Federal Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu in ("Illiteracy Rate in Nigeria Alarming", 2017) who lamented that "the country had about 65 million to 75 million illiterates." By adopting inclusive library and information services in literacy promotion; whereby every Nigerian, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, social and economic status, educational attainment, religious background, and residence is provided with the opportunity to acquire basic and functional literacy, Nigerian libraries can help to drastically reduce illiteracy rate in our Nation. Insurgency and other security challenges Nigeria currently grapples with are clear manifestations of the country's low literacy rate. This is because illiterate elements in the society are vulnerable to be used as ready-made instruments for destruction and socio-economic destabilization. Given that a large number of Nigerians are reported to be illiterate calls for drastic measures. Libraries should rise to this development by embarking on inclusive library and information services for literacy promotion. This, if successfully launched will make an impressive impact on Nigeria's literacy rate.

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