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March 2007

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Usoro, Ima M.P. and Usanga, Eboro E., "The Role of Nigerian Primary School Libraries in Literacy and Lifelong Learning" (2007). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 113.

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The Role of Nigerian Primary School Libraries in Literacy and Lifelong Learning

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Introduction

Education plays an important role in the well-being of any nation that wants to sustain its prominence in the global scene. It is broadly viewed as a lifelong process spanning the years from infancy to adulthood. Education not only liberates, it is a vital tool for empowerment that allows meaningful contributions to society (Balogun 1999). As a result, each nation has a policy on education which provides guidance on the type and quality of education that citizens should acquire. The bedrock of education is the pre-primary and primary levels. This stage of development is crucial for the development of future adult citizens and workers. Just as a child cannot stand up and walk from birth, so one cannot develop without primary education. It is the foundation upon which the rest of our educational system is built.

To underscore the value of basic education, the Federal Government of Nigeria on September 30, 1999 launched the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, which is aimed at promoting literacy in Nigeria. The blueprint for UBE defines it as the foundation for sustainable lifelong learning that provides reading, writing, and numeracy skills. It makes provision for a wide variety of formal and informal activities and programmes designed to enable learners to acquire functional literacy. Moreover, it is meant to prepare the children for the future, with the ability to think rationally and to solve problems creatively, to manage and retrieve information, in addition to communicating effectively. It is also designed to instill lifelong learning as a habit, since lifelong learning is the organizing principle for education. The mission of education for children and youth is the development of skills for self-directed enquiry rather than the mere inculcation of subject matter. This can only be achieved through a well-equipped library and users must be educated on how to retrieve and use the available library resources to meet their information needs. This paper draws attention to the role of the school library in literacy and lifelong learning.

Aims of the School Library

The specific objectives of school libraries are to:

- participate effectively in school programmes as it strives to meet the needs of pupils, teachers, parents and other community members;
- provide boys and girls with the library materials and services most appropriate and most meaningful in their growth and development as individuals;
- stimulate and guide pupils in all phases of their reading so that they may find increasing enjoyment and satisfaction and may grow in critical judgment and appreciation;
- provide an opportunity through library experience for boys and girls to develop helpful interests, to make satisfactory personal adjustments, and to acquire desirable social attitudes;
- help children and young people to become skillful and discriminating users of libraries and of printed and audio-visual materials;
- introduce people to the community library as early as possible and cooperate with those libraries in their effort to encourage continuing education and cultural growth;
- work with teachers in the selection and use of all types of library materials which will contribute to the teaching program;
- participate with teachers and administrators in programmes for continuing professional and cultural growth of the school staff;
- cooperate with other libraries and community leaders in planning and developing an overall library programme for the community.

In the primary school context, it is not enough to build and stock a school library. The information resources must be made accessible to children, who must be educated and encouraged to use the resources effectively for lifelong education. Primary school children must develop a reading habit that will encourage literacy and lifelong education. Devices such as open access, special sequences of books in prominent places to attract children, placing books within convenient reach of children will encourage use for lifelong education.

School Libraries and Primary Education

Libraries are as important for children as education itself. Library services implies both availability and accessibility of library facilities and services to the user and the willingness and ability of readers to use the facilities and services. Information is power and access to information is indispensable to individual advancement as well as corporate educational development. Children need the library for effective learning for lifelong education, in consonance with the National Policy on education (1993), which states that, "the aim of basic education is to equip individual with such knowledge, skill, and attitude that will enable them to:

- live meaningful and fulfilling lives
- contribute to the development of the society.
- derive maximum social economic and cultural benefits from the society and
- discharge their civil obligation.

Stressing the role the library plays in the environment of learning, Travaline (1997) maintains that today's library is like a big playground waiting to be explored and the librarian the best playmate: one who makes the playground worthwhile. Herbert (1997) agrees, saying that children's literacy develops and emerges as they explore and participate in a literacy-rich environment. At the center of such an environment are books and other resources with contents that are familiar and appealing to children. Despite changes to the educational system, changes which have also occurred in developing countries, the central importance of the library and its learning resources have not diminished. These resources facilitate the acquisition of physical and intellectual skills necessary to assisting the

individual to develop literacy for lifelong education as useful member of his community and also to acquire an objective view of the local and external environments (Ekpenyong 1990). The Education for All (EFA) framework on action for meeting basic learning needs (1990) argued that there is a need to recognize libraries as invaluable information resources which must work in partnership with school and community workers. Obanya (2002) explains that library curriculum should be part of basic education. He added that this will ensure the following:

- developing interest in print and photographic materials, through (a) being read to (b) enacting scenes depicting what was heard (c) retelling the stories heard in one's own words and (d) undertaking out-of-class assignments related to what was read in class.
- extensive reading habits development in the middle years, through systematic exposure to a variety of carefully graded reading materials.
- intensive reading habits development in the final years, through (a) systematic exercises in reading for detail (b) exposure to technical vocabulary in a variety of areas (c) explorations with graphs, tables and other forms of graphic materials and (d) systematic training in the use of dictionaries, atlases, thesauri, and encyclopaedia.
- self-collection training in collecting, storing retrieval of whatever teaching-learning materials one can find at all levels of primary and secondary education.

In some parts of Nigeria, most children (especially those from rural areas or economically disadvantaged backgrounds) first meet books and reading materials in school, and have limited access to them in the home and in the community. The school library encourages its users to fully accept the responsibility for education and development. School libraries should give individualized service, making sure that every library user gets information that meets his or her particular need. It should also serve as a laboratory for its users to practice the skills of using indexes, abstracts, bibliographies, and catalogues. Other tasks for the teacher librarian include

- Inviting authors and subject specialists for lecture and informal talks.
- Organizing educative recreational film shows and radio book talks. Children and youths will be directed toward continuous and lifelong learning.
- Display of books and posters to reflect current events, fellow students' creative works, and children in other parts of the world. These types of activities will create awareness and curiosity.
- Friends of the library club: The activities of these clubs include reading together with children and helping them prepare library guides, simple teaching aids, and reading competition. Excursions to other schools and libraries are also beneficial.
- School library magazines: Articles for the magazine should be from the school children, to help develop writing skills.
- Other activities include story hours, book talks, and the like. These activities, when well planned, provide much scope for advising and guiding children in their reading and for developing the habit of lifelong learning.

Conclusion

Without librarians these

goals cannot be achieved. A competent, effective, and trained library staff is the key to a good library service. A trained and highly knowledgeable teacher librarian can coordinate activities in the school library. In addition, he or she will be able to select and produce materials, and become acquainted with the resources of the school library to educate teachers and students. Governments must encourage the establishment of libraries in nursery and primary schools.

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