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PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES TO CHILDREN IN RURAL AREAS

BY

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Abstract

Public library service to children in rural areas should have a prominent place in the line up of activities in the public library. This paper highlights children's need for the library which makes it necessary for libraries to be established for them wherever they are, even in rural communities. Two methods were identified in this paper as means of extending library services to children who live in rural areas and they are the mobile library and the branch or rural library. Though the mobile library is seen as a vital feature in rural library service, but the rural library is regarded as one of the agents of development in rural communities. It generates stores and disseminates information which is very crucial to the rural populace and engenders development. Library services that are offered to children in rural areas are in the form of literature (books) extension activities, audiovisual (AV) materials and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The paper concludes by stating that as library service to children is an important aspect of public librarianship, the government should support the public library by providing funds, mobile library vans, accommodation, and information materials etc for this essential service.

Keyword: PUBLIC LIBRARY, LIBRARY SERVICES, CHILDREN, RURAL AREAS

Public Library Services to Children in Rural Areas

Introduction

The public library is a library in the community that serves the generality of the public without any surcharge. Akanwa (2010) citing Emenalor defined the public library as a library that provides information resources, services and recreational outlets for the generality of the citizenry, namely, the young, the old, the literate and the non-literate. Aina (2004) also noted that while other types of libraries are meant for a specific group of users, the public library is not restricted to any group of users. It is expected to serve all kinds of people including young children, people with disabilities or even people who for one reason or the other are incapacitated. It means that the public library is a library for all, and that is why library services to children are placed under its care.

The idea of children's library services being taken care of by the public library is an age long phenomenon. Public libraries in other countries also practice it. Alabi (2013) visited six public libraries in the United States of America (USA) and observed that these libraries provide library services to children. Among these libraries are; The New York Public Library and Indianapolis – Marion County Public Library. The New York Public Library serves about 38,000 children by creating after school programmes for school children. Services offered include, free computer training, literacy programmes and virtual library services. Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library has the learning curve; an ALA award winning space with areas dedicated to babies, children and teens to enable them appreciate books using high technology in a very conducive environment. Some of the programmes offered include, teaching children how to use the mouse, lap top loans to children, playing with interactive cubes and summer reading programmes. The learning curve is the heart of this library, it is designed for the 21st century child.

In every public library, there is a space or section mapped out as the children's library. In this section of the library, children are served with library resources and programmes that correspond with their ages. Akanwa (2006) defined the children's library as that section of the public library that provides books, extension activities and other educational resources free of charge to all children within a certain age bracket. The public library not only provides library resources and services to children, but also library staff who supervise and guide them in their choice of books and programmes.

Children in urban areas are beneficiaries of the services of the public library, because these libraries are usually situated in urban cities. But it is not the same with children who live in the rural communities, who are sometimes denied this all important service, hence the need for this paper, which is geared to suggest ways of serving children in rural areas. Children in this paper refer to individuals of 3 years to 16 years (World Book Encyclopedia). A child that is below 3 years of age is an infant and cannot take part in any group activity, nor will she be able to use the library, while a child of 17 years can either make use of the model school library in the public library, and where there is none, can move straight into the adult library.

Children's Need for Libraries

It is appropriate here to find out if children actually need the library and for what purpose. Some may ask, "Why establish libraries for children?" "Do they need them after all?" But the truth is that children need the library for a lot of reasons. Their need for the library equals and sometimes even surpasses those of the adults. The recognition of children as human beings with the right to read and use the library, led to the establishment of their libraries. Through its collection, the children's library supports children's information needs and contributes to their intellectual, emotional, social, educational and language development. Children need the library for many cogent reasons which are specified below:

- 1. Provision of Information Materials:** The public library provides books and non-book materials to enrich the lives of children, give children unlimited opportunity for learning and keep them up-to-date on new social, economic and scientific developments. Of all the services provided for children by the public library, this is the most important. The child has the books to read for information and recreation and the audiovisual materials to view too. The following information material are expected to be found in the children's library: books, journals, magazines, Newspapers, films, filmstrips, video tapes, slides, computers, recording of all types, study kits, realia etc.
- 2. Knowledge Acquisition:**
 - a. It has been established by children's psychologists that children do not know the meaning of many words they speak. Sometimes they say things without knowing their meanings, and if this situation is not discouraged, it may lead to rote learning. This is a situation where children chant words without knowing their actual meaning. This was the order of the day before the intervention of scholars like Comenius, John

Locke and Jean Rousseau who brought a revolution in textbook writing. Cornenius believed that systematic instruction using both words and pictures would alleviate some of the meaningless verbalism practiced by teachers of his time (The world book encyclopedia, 1990). For the first time, young learners matched words with pictures which brought a lot of clarifications. Today all these materials are in the library to aid the young learner in the route of education. The use of the library will help the child to grow into a knowledgeable adult.

- b. Knowledge acquisition should be gradual and systematic and that is what the library will help the child to achieve. Learning starts from simple or narrow concepts to broader and more complex concepts. An individual that is not introduced to the library when he is very young may end up a haphazard learner. This situation is very rampant in Nigeria today. Some young people can speak English and their dialects reasonably well, but cannot write them. They can also use their phones and even the computer to access information via the Internet but because they are not knowledgeable, some of them cannot even identify their information needs. They end up accessing the wrong form of information that may be detrimental to them. This problem is also affecting their education pattern and that is why there are many cases of examination misconduct in the universities. This set of young people is referred to as “street wise youngsters” or “abnormal learners”.
3. **Development of reading skills:** The ability to read is the most important dividend of education. Through extension services like book talks, reading competitions and story hours, the children’s librarian and staff of the children’s library help the children to inculcate into themselves the habit of reading. Reading is a useful skill that helps the child in his lifelong pursuit of education and it is in the public library that this seed is planted and nurtured in children.
4. **Cultural Knowledge:** Through the use of the resources in their library, children get to know about their culture, traditions and norms. They are exposed to some values in their society and the history of their origin. Akanwa (2013) citing Curie specifically pointed out that “the library is indeed the cultural centre of a child. Here, there should be available records of the best of man’s creation and thoughts from all historic periods. There should be contributions and development in music, arts, literature and ideas he has held about himself; in his concept of the universe, in his beliefs about religion and the mortality of man”.

5. **Teaching the use of library:** The use of library or user education is a method of getting library users acquainted with the library and its resources. There is no way a child can enjoy the library without being formally introduced to its resources. The children's librarian is expected to intimate children with what the library can offer them, how to make use of the library and library discipline. The use of the library is a useful programme at all levels of library utilization.
6. **Inculcation of the skills of "Acquiry":** Resources in the children's library can help the child to learn the skills of acquiry. Such skills are concerned with how to find information, where to find information and how to use such information. It also includes skills on how to be discerning and critical of knowledge and information emanating from various sources. It is believed that these skills are essential to the education process and to the inculcation of the spirit of inquiry, which is central to education (Ogunsheye, 1987). Information resources in the library like, encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks, fiction books, audiovisuals and ICT resources will help a child to acquire this skill.
7. **Introduction of ICT skills:** This should be one of the major functions of the public library to children, as they need ICT skills to be able to function properly in the modern society. They should be encouraged to acquire this skill at very tender ages, so that they will not develop phobia for this new technology. The children's library should organize programmes, such as, technology training classes, where they teach issues such as computer fundamentals, operating systems, e-reader, searching the Internet etc (Alabi, 2013). These programmes will help the child to get a good grasp of the new technology and use it to solve their information problems.

Library Services to Children in Rural Areas

Library services to children in rural areas is a very important aspect of librarianship, as more than half of the population of children who need library services live in rural areas (Emenator, 1990). Rural areas are those places that are not in the main city lines and are sometimes characterized by poverty, illiteracy, lack of functional schools, pipe borne water, electricity, good roads etc. In his paper, Odewale (1986) identified the characteristics of rural areas as:

- i. areas with low level of literacy;
- ii. limited educational and economic opportunities;
- iii. strong cultural, tribal and religious adherences; and

iv. absence of large business and commercial institutions.

Government sometimes does not make conscious effort to develop these areas. In effect, the people that live within rural communities are denied many social amenities. Because of this problem, many of them migrate to urban cities as a solution to their problem, which is not true. The most vital need of the rural populace is information which will help them to know their needs and how to satisfy them. Adewale (2001) in support of this view stated that the rural people must be well acquainted with relevant information, which can propel them into making the right judgments and taking the right decisions that affect their lives and existence. Aboyade (1987), a scholar who is highly interested in rural information and libraries, added to this by stating that “the provision of this information should be through the library, which has been a major factor because of its potential for giving new knowledge, raising of consciousness, strengthening links and achieving the integration of disparate social groups. It is an important means of mobilizing people *for* socio-political and economic development and empowerment.

In the recent past, Imo State Government has endeavoured to extend some essential services/amenities to these areas. For example, many rural roads have been tarred, very beautiful schools are being established, health centres and many primary schools are renovated. In the same vein, the government has encouraged the Imo State Central Library to establish rural libraries in the State. So far, 10 rural libraries have been established at Ofekata Orodo, Abo Mbaise, Obowo, Afra, Umuelemai (Mbano) Isu, Nkwerre, Umuhuokabia, Orlu, and Okigwe (Mbagwu & Nwachukwu, 2005). It is still argued that they are very few, considering the fact that Imo State has a total of 27 local government areas. Each local government area should at least have one rural library to satisfy the information needs of the rural community.

As has been observed from this paper so far that the library is very essential in the psychological, social and emotional development of the child, then the question is, how can children who live in these rural communities receive library services? Library services to children in rural areas can be achieved through two methods, which are:

- a. The mobile library service, and
- b. The branch/rural libraries

Mobile Library Service

The mobile library is one of the main avenues through which the public library provides library services to children who live in rural areas. Mobile libraries are vehicles that can be used to take library resources from the main or central library to clients that live far

away from the library. The Library Association Record (1960) gave the definition of the mobile library as “a vehicle devised, equipped and operated to provide as far as reasonably practicable, a service comparable to part-time branch library. Eastwood (1991) gave an improved definition of the mobile library as “a road vehicle especially equipped and furnished to provide a professional library service direct to the people.

Though the mobile library service is a recent phenomenon in Nigeria, it started very early in the United States of America (USA). Mobile library service dates back to the history of public libraries, when in 1904, Titcombs, librarian of the Washington Free Library with a hired horse and concord wagon fulfilled her dreams of sending books to rural residents of Maryland. In the same vein Titcombs writes: “Before we rest content, every home in the country must be the recipient of its benefits. To this end, we need more branches, home libraries for clusters of homes remote from the central library, close relation with schools and more particularly work with children”. So it can be conveniently said that Titcombs was one of the foremost advocates of reaching the rural people with information materials that will help them with their information needs.

Mobile library service is a very interesting service. People are always excited whenever the mobile library van comes to their locality. They troop out to get served with the materials in the van. Children usually look forward to this service because it is not the common thing they see everyday. Brown (1967) rightly captured this excitement in her book, Bookmobiles and bookmobile services, where she notes that bringing books and people together by means of a mobile library is the most dramatic of all commonly used types of library service. Although mobile libraries cannot provide services equal to those provided by modern branch libraries, when properly used, they are indispensable adjuncts to library services.

In the bid to serve children in the rural areas with the mobile library, the staff of the children’s library stock the mobile library with books, journals, magazines and comics. Some audio visual materials may also be included, such as, films, maps, slides, projectors, tv monitors, DVDs and computers (laptops). When they get to these locations which maybe the village square or at times the village hall, children are made to line up to be served with these library resources. Children are also advised to register with the public library through the mobile library service. This enables them to borrow books from the mobile library for home use. Usually the children are given a period of two weeks to read and return the books. At the expiration of the period they go back to these locations to retrieve the books and allow them to borrow more books. Children are usually allowed to borrow two books at a time.

Sometimes to make sure that these children comply with library rules and regulations, the mobile library staff may engage the services and co-operation of a responsible member of the community, especially a teacher, who will help them to reach these children and may also collect back their materials when the loan is due.

Apart from the lending service, the staff of the mobile library also offer reference services to the users. Children are inquisitive and any encounter they have with adults must end up in asking questions. Therefore, the staff of the library will arm themselves with materials that will help them to answer their questions. These materials are, dictionaries, encyclopedia, year books, books of how, when and why, and computer programmes. Information experts have discovered that computer programmes like Encarta can aid librarians to answer children's reference questions.

The mobile library staff may occasionally organize programmes for children. They usually advertise these programmes so that children know about them. They may even use posters/fliers to make sure that information about these programmes reach children. Interesting activities that capture the interest of children are often chosen or else they stop attending such programmes. For example, in the 1980s, the Imo Central Library used to organize library extension services for children at Orlu and Mbanda branch libraries with the mobile library. They usually pack all the requirements for these programmes in the mobile library and move to their point of service. On getting there, they put the children into groups, according to their age levels and administer on them programmes that interest them. During these special occasions, the staff of the library usually entertain children with activities like story telling, debates, brief instruction on the benefits of library use, recitations, reading of poems and film shows. Children used to look forward to these events. For some years now, this service has not been offered to children who live in rural areas because the mobile library has gone moribund.

Branch/Rural Library

The rural library is a public library located in a rural community that provides the inhabitants of the locality with the services that are provided by the public library. They have all the characteristics of the public library, but they may be smaller and their clients fewer than those in the urban setting. Through these libraries, the rural people are served with information resources that they need. According to Harrod (2000), a rural library is a library basically set up to benefit all classes of people who live in the rural areas. Mbagwu and Nwachukwu (2008) proffered a definition of the rural public library that brought a new

dimension to this subject, which is, that “the rural library is a branch of a public library, which has the same roles, functions and services like its master, the main difference being the location and characteristics of the area where it is located. This means that the characteristics of the individuals that make up the rural area where the library is situated must be taken into consideration before information materials are sent to them. The importance of these rural libraries cannot be overemphasized because they are regarded as a factor in the development of rural areas as providers of information. The libraries should therefore assist in the collection, organization and dissemination of information and should form part of the communities innovative capacity. Its collections are important in their settings because they act as agents of enlightenment and cohesion. They also serve as the meeting point of the rural dwellers.

In Imo State, these libraries are situated at Mbanda, Orodo, Afara, Umuhu Okabia, Abo Mbaise, Nkwerre and Orlu. All these libraries have children’s sections and children’s library staff. Some of these children’s sections are manned by higher library officers while some others have library assistants as their managers. In a case like this, the rural librarian doubles as the children’s librarian and guides the library assistants on the services to offer to children. The jobs of these children’s librarians are challenging and tasking more than those of their counterparts in the urban areas. The children that use the central library at Owerri come from enlightened homes and their parents in most cases persuade them to visit the library. This is not the case of the children in the rural areas. Many of them come from illiterate homes and their parents will prefer that they join them in farm work or do petty trading for them than visit the library.

For these children to use the library, the librarian has to attract or entice them to its services. She can use handbills, posters, and fliers, where she will indicate the programmes of the children’s library that they will enjoy. She can also make personal visits to schools, churches and village meetings to make announcements of the schedule of activities they want to offer to children. She can also use the mass media, like radio and the television. This service is preferred to the mobile library service because it offers numerous services which may not be possible with the mobile library and also it has reading room provision which the mobile library lacks.

Rural public libraries offer children a variety of library services. These services according to Akanwa (2010) are in the form of literature (books), extension activities (programmes), audiovisual (av) resources and Information Communication Technology (ICT).

Books are very important to children and therefore the public library in all its settings should provide quality literature to children, because according to McColvin (1970), “books open magic windows on the world for children everywhere”. Literatures in the children’s library are categorized under fiction and non-fiction. Under fiction are the following genres – folklores, fairytales, adventure books, romance books, story books etc. The non-fiction books are classified under the following headings, textbooks, reference books, biographies, picture books, poems etc. These books should be provided to children in these rural libraries so that they will inculcate in the children the habit of reading through using them. On the importance of reading to a child, Seymour and Layne (1979) suggest that, reading books, really curling up and silently digging through a real book, is the best teaching machine, kit or workbook invented to teach children to read. Reading is the most important skill a child can learn.

Extension activities in the children’s library can be referred to as, extension work, extension activities or children’s programmes. Much is expected of the public library that serves children than the mere introduction of effective literature to them. Since a lot of children are not in the ready habit of reading, the children’s librarian has to add the task of enticing the children to books. These programmes are not directly connected with books, but can be used to entice children to books. These programmes are grouped in two broad areas – weekend and holiday programmes.

Weekend programmes are the activities that children participate in on Saturdays. These programmes are usually short and snappy and do not require much time to plan them. They are – story hour, reading of poems, recitations, jig saw puzzle, identifying colours and numbers, display of models etc. Holiday programmes are those that require much planning and which take longer time to organize. These programmes are; drama, reading competition, quiz competition, booktalks, puppet making, crafts display, display and exhibition. These programmes will attract the rural children to the library and while in the library they will be involved with other activities that will make them permanent users of the library.

Audiovisuals are information resources that are used in conjunction with books and normal instruction to aid the library user in knowledge acquisition. Audiovisual materials are classified according to the senses involved in using the materials. Visual materials are non-book materials that appeal to the sense of seeing. Examples of visual materials are display boards, filmstrips, models and mockups, over head transparencies, slides and realia. Audio materials are those that appeal to the sense of hearing and they include, all sorts of recordings, radio talks, audiotapes, compact disc etc. Audiovisual or multi-sensory materials are those resources that appeal to the senses of seeing, hearing and feeling. Examples are

films and video tapes, filmstrips with sound tract, television and computer. Children users of the rural libraries need these services because it has already been observed in this paper that children sometimes speak what they do not know their meanings. This is worse in rural areas where they do not even have good schools to themselves. The library will solve this problem by using audiovisual materials to clarify some issues for them. The librarian in the rural library should be an expert in handling audiovisual materials, and using them in instruction.

ICTs are very essential in the children's library, but it is disheartening to know that public libraries in Nigeria have not included ICT in their programme of service. Akanwa (2010) citing Uzoigwe noted that libraries of the developed world have long embraced ICT in the provision of services to their patrons, but Nigerian libraries especially public libraries are still at the take-off stage. Children in the rural areas should be taught how to use ICT facilities from when they are very young, because this knowledge will help them to enjoy internet services when they grow older. Public libraries should endeavour to provide ICT to children in rural areas because it will help them to serve the children better by providing them with current information and new trends in children's library work.

Routine library services in rural libraries are, reference service, lending service, referral service, reservation service etc. Occasionally, the children's librarian may organize library tours for them. These tours are usually to the central library, where they join the other children in weekend or holiday programmes. They always look forward to these visits.

Problems Associated with Rural Library Services

Public libraries in Nigeria are facing a lot of problems and this has affected the way they discharge their duties. Their services were more effective in the past than now. For example, in the 1980s, the Imo State Public Library with the support of the State Government opened many rural public libraries in Imo State. These libraries are no longer maintained and there is no plan of establishing new ones. They lack all types of library resources and their buildings are now dilapidated. Library staff are only sent to these libraries as a punitive measure.

The following are some of the pressing problems that have hindered effective public library services in rural areas.

Inadequate Funding: Inadequate or total lack of funding is seriously affecting the activities of the public library in Nigeria. The government does not fund the public library adequately. This has caused a lot of problems for them. They are losing their staff on daily bases, and

moreover they cannot acquire necessary facilities for extension services. Nwachukwu (2006) rightly put it that “the problem of funding is crippling the services of the public library”.

Non-provision of Vehicles: Many public libraries in Nigeria now find it very difficult to carry out mobile library services because all their mobile library vans are in a state of disrepair. They do not have the money to acquire new ones or even repair the old ones. This service has come to a stand still because they cannot afford it anymore.

Insufficient Personnel: For the past 6-10 years public libraries in Nigeria have experienced brain drain, and this has affected their services adversely. Because of the poor condition of public libraries, their staff leave on daily basis to join greener pastures. Recently they lacked staff to man their rural libraries in whatever remained of them. Some of these rural libraries are no longer offering library services to children because they lack the staff to perform the required duties.

Inadequate Information Materials: Although some Nigerian public libraries have reading materials, most of them do not have current information. Akanwa and Akanaga (2013) observed that Imo State public library has not acquired children’s books for more than 20 years as their capital budget has not been released to them all these years. They only depend on donations from foreign bodies. There was also a total lack of ICT services in the children’s library. If this is the case with the central library, the situation is certainly worse in the rural areas.

Inadequate Accommodation: These rural libraries are usually housed in very small buildings and sometimes, it becomes impossible to carve out an area for children’s library services. These rural public libraries only provide children’s library services occasionally and that was what the mobile library was doing for them before it became moribund.

Lack of Community Analysis: One of the problems associated with this service is that there is no serious attempt made by the staff of the central library to study the rural children before information materials are sent to them. They end up sending resources that these children do not need. Rural children ignore these materials because they do not arouse their interest.

Conclusion

The public library educates, enlightens and entertains children in every locality. It is seen as an agency that provides information resources and services to individuals from early childhood until old age. That is why it is important for the government to establish libraries in rural communities so that children in these areas will benefit from their services. The following conclusions can be drawn from this paper;

- i. that children need library services like adults and in some cases their needs even surpasses those of the adults;
- ii. that library services can be extended to children who live in rural areas through the use of the mobile library and the branch or rural library;
- iii. that although the mobile library provides library services to children in rural areas, its services cannot be compared with that of the branch public library, which collects, stores and disseminate information and also has reading room provision;
- iv. that these public libraries provide services such as, literature (books) extension activities (programmes) and ICT services;
- v. that many problems are also hindering the public library services to children who live in rural areas e.g. funding, lack of vehicles, bad roads, inadequate accommodation etc.

As is has been shown that the introduction of quality library services to children in rural areas is imperative for the attainment of an enlightened citizenry, it becomes pertinent that the government should aid the central library to establish, equip and maintain such libraries. This will enable the rural children to do their school work, satisfy their information needs and learn to read for life.

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