Enhancing Literacy Through Public Libraries in Nigeria: Roles, Strategies, and Challenges

[1]Amina Abubakar Ado
E-mail: aminaadoiman@gmail.com
+2349037220130
&

[2]Dr. Hauwa Sani Ahmad
E-mail: hsahmad.lis@buk.edu.ng
Phone no: +2348033498274

[1]Department of Library and Information Science, Faculty of Education Northwest University Kano, Kano State.

[2]Department of Library and Information Science, Faculty of Education Bayero University Kano, Kano State.

Abstract

Literacy is a vital tool for accessing and utilizing information to make informed decisions and solve problems. This paper examines the role of public libraries in promoting and enhancing literacy in Nigeria. It highlights key contributions such as creating a welcoming learning environment, offering free access to information, identifying user needs and providing appropriate solutions, addressing community issues through information services, and supplying relevant reading materials for all age groups and literacy levels. The study adopts a desk research approach, relying on a review of existing literature, policy documents, and relevant reports to analyze the functions, strategies, and challenges of public libraries in literacy promotion. It also explores how public libraries can sustain literacy development in the digital era and contribute to national development through information literacy. The paper concludes with recommendations on how public libraries can further support efforts to improve literacy rates in Nigeria

CONCEPT OF LITERACY

Literacy has been defined as the intellectual process of gaining meaning from a critical interpretation of a written or printed text. It is the ability of individuals to acquire and possess skills necessary to interpret both written and printed texts and symbols, and be able to pass this meaning from one person to the other (Kress, 2018). Over the past decades, the nature and scope of literacy has expanded. Various researches have shown that literacy has undergone constant re-definition – from acquisition of skills in reading, writing and basic numeracy to the acquisition of skills in task performance, social practices, and critical reflection. As a result, the international community understanding of literacy has evolved from viewing it as the simple acquisition of basic cognitive skills to recognizing it as a lifelong continuum of learning including reading, writing, numeracy, and digital competencies that foster personal empowerment, social awareness, and social economic development (UNESCO, 2025). Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling an individual to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in the community and wider

society. Nevertheless, the role of libraries in promoting this learning to enable an individual achieve his or her goals has been found wanting, especially in the developing countries. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated population of 213.4 million people (World Bank, 2021). Based on the Nigeria Literacy Survey conducted between 2010 and 2021, the national literacy rate stands at 77.6%, while 31% of the population remains illiterate. This relatively high literacy rate indicates that a significant portion of the population possesses basic reading and writing skills. Public libraries as community service organization exist to provide and give access and services in order to meet the various information needs of the people of the community for free, irrespective of their race, nationality, age, gender, religion, language, mental and physical, economic and employment status, and educational attainment. According to Uwa (2014), the objectives of public library include; assembling, preserving and administering books and related educational materials in n organized format. Other key objectives of public libraries include promoting the exchange of ideas, fostering informed and responsible citizenship, and enhancing the

personal lives of individuals within the community. They aim to serve as dependable sources of information, offer recreational opportunities through literature, music, the arts, and internet access, and support the educational, civic, and cultural efforts of various groups and organizations. Public libraries also strive to stay engaged with the community by identifying its evolving needs and developing relevant programs and services. Furthermore, they collaborate with other organizations, agencies, and institutions to deliver services that address those community needs. In Nigeria, public libraries are playing a great role in ensuring members of their community have unrestricted access to resources to learn and study independently. In most cases, public libraries acquire resources that relate to local interests to keep their history and heritage for posterity. Public libraries play an important role in the acquisition and development of lifelong learning skills which is information literacy. The role of public libraries is enormous with high impact especially directly to their local communities in which they reside. In most developing nations like Nigeria, public libraries are militated by a lot of factors with poor funding and inadequate infrastructure topping the chart. The challenges faced by public libraries have limited its ability of

fulfilling its objectives to the peak. Information literacy is a set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning, Association of college & research libraries (ACRL), 2016. Traditionally, information literacy is the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze and use information. An encompassing definition of information literacy was given by Suskie (2009) as follows;

• Recognize the need for information

• Identify what information is needed

• Find that information

• Evaluate information critically or relevance and credibility

• Use information to solve a problem or answer a question

• Use information legally and ethically

The paper was aimed at providing the roles of public libraries in creating and enhancing literacy by creating a friendly environment, including providing free access to information, identifying user needs and communication solution, providing

information on community issues, providing relevant and attractive reading materials for all ages and literacy levels. The approaches that public libraries employ to sustain and promote literacy development and how to promote literacy in an information technology era towards the development of the community. The roles of libraries as the agent of information literacy to promote sustainable development and the challenges associated with libraries in literacy development. This paper concluded by making suggestion on how libraries can contributes toward promotion of Literacy.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative desk research approach. It relies on the review and analysis of existing literature, including journal articles, policy documents, institutional reports, and online resources related to public libraries and literacy development in Nigeria. The data were synthesized to identify key roles, strategies, and challenges of public libraries in promoting literacy. This method enabled a comprehensive understanding of the subject based on documented evidence and expert perspectives.

ROLES OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN CREATING LITERACY-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENTS

All over the world libraries are dedicated to providing free and equitable access to information for all, be it in written, electronic or audiovisual form. They play a key role in creating literate environments and promoting literacy by offering relevant and attractive reading material for all ages and all Educational levels and by offering adult and family literacy classes. They embrace the social responsibility to offer services that bridge social, political and economic barriers, and traditionally make a special effort to extend their services to marginalized people. Libraries assist in finding, using and interpreting appropriate information that opens up opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, informed citizenship, recreation, creative imagination, individual research, critical thinking, and ultimately, empowerment in an increasingly complex world. Libraries assist in finding, using, and interpreting appropriate information which opens up opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, recreation, creative imagination, individual research, and ultimately empowerment in an increasingly complex world. By providing equitable access to information for all, libraries encourage critical citizenship in a global

democratic society. Libraries play an important role in bridging the digital and information divide by providing free access to information and communication technologies, including internet, and by offering digital literacy training that promotes equitable participation in society (IFLA,2022). They are also central to the acquisition, maintenance, and ongoing development of literacy skills through initiative such as early childhood reading programs, adult literacy classes, and community-based learning activities (OECD, 2021) As they provide materials and services to all reading levels and age groups, they are perfect locations for offering literacy classes. Furthermore, they are often friendly and inviting places, they might have additional working and meeting spaces and they are often located centrally in the community. They are also ideal places to break the cycle of non- and semi-literate families by offering family literacy and inter-generational activities. By using the library with their children, parents and care-givers are setting a good example and help to establish motivation for reading and a pattern for lifelong learning.

Today the role of libraries and professional librarians is changing worldwide. They are no longer passive keepers and preservers of books; rather, they have evolved to become facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities with an emphasis on service, identifying user needs and communicating solutions. Modern libraries are unfolding the community's learning potentials by providing information on community issues, such as health, employment, continuing education and local history. This equitable access to information is essential to enable educated and informed citizens to participate in a democratic global community. Libraries are also custodians of the local and national culture by storing popular and academic knowledge and material for current and future generations. Public libraries play the most important role worldwide in helping to bridge the information gap by providing free access to information and communication technologies, particularly the Internet. They build bridges between individuals at the local level and the global level of knowledge. In industrialized countries, access to modern information technology is currently one of the most attractive library services. For example, in the United Kingdom, public libraries secured government funding in the middle of the 1990s for computers in every library as part of the "People's Network Project" (Stiftung, 2004), a project that

assures that no one needs to be excluded from the information revolution. Compared to providing access to ICTs and the Internet in other public spaces such as post offices, libraries have the educational role of assisting users in finding information online. Modern librarians are facilitators of information and lifelong learning opportunities with an emphasis on service, identifying user needs and communicating solutions. They are unfolding the community´s learning potential by providing relevant materials and information on community issues. For various reasons, libraries are the perfect place to provide adult literacy classes. They have ideally easy access to all the resources needed to run an adult literacy programme, including printed and audio books, magazines for all reading levels, videos and newspapers. Most of them can provide space for students and tutors. They are usually centrally located and accessible by public transport. Libraries are friendly and hospitable places, ideally with service oriented opening hours and approachable staff. Adults with low literacy levels often have bad memories of schools and a negative attitude towards formal education. They can be invited to the library to enjoy non-reading activities, such as lectures, movies or discussion groups to facilitate their first step back into learning.

Apart from teaching literacy, the library has to focus its collection development on the needs of its neo-literate users.

The absolute key to making a library a successful literate environment is the librarian's ability to collect and make accessible relevant and appropriate materials and to make the library a welcoming and interesting place to visit regularly. Merely providing a collection of well- organized reading and literacy materials will reach only those community members who are already interested in using the library. Finally, libraries assist in finding, using, and interpreting appropriate information which opens up opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, recreation, creative imagination, individual research, and ultimately empowerment in an increasingly complex world. By providing equitable access to information for all, libraries encourage critical citizenship in a global democratic society, thereby playing a major critical role in overall national development

STRATEGIES TOWARD PROMOTING LITERACY IN INFORMATION

Evidence-based studies revealed that the library is a hub of developmental activities since it engages its users in activities that turn them into critical thinkers, problem solvers,

independent information seekers and lifelong learners. Furthermore, public libraries in Nigeria enhance user's literacy both traditional and digital by offering programs such as mobile libraries, digital literacy workshop, and community outreach initiatives that bring computers and internet access to underserved areas (Adeleke, 2020; Adeyeye, 2024). Despite their vital role, the profession if librarianship in Nigeria continues to suffer from low public recognition and appreciation compared to field like medicine, law and engineering, a challenge compounded by insufficient visibility and professional engagement (Ebhonu, 2024). Librarianship in the 70s and 80s was seen as an idle profession meant for "low-grade candidates". Some have argued that librarians are no longer needed in the 21st century with advancement in ICT and use of the Internet

•Acquisition of relevant information materials

The library has a duty to search for relevant and up-to-date information materials published within and outside a country, acquire and store them for the benefit of its users. Such information may be in any format, for example, CD-ROMs, book, visual, audio, audio-visual, etc. Collection of such information materials for the benefit of the library users can be done through outright acquisition such as subscription and purchase. Other sources of acquisition are interlibrary loan, donation, gift and exchange. The library also subscribes to e-books, e-journals and e-databases to increase access to external information resources and enhance literacy level of its users. To enhance the standard of education, most libraries in Nigeria subscribes to electronic databases such as EBSCO, E-library, Lexis Nexis, Science Direct, DOAJ, HINARI and AJOL among others to augment the print materials. This would help users to access current research that will impact their research and learning experiences and thereby improve their skill and knowledge.

•Supporting the library users

The library should provide relevant information materials and disseminate them to its users. Quality access to information sources and services by the library users would engender acquisition of relevant skill and knowledge for national development. Public library manifesto emphasizes that public libraries should proactively inform and engage their communities about the value of library services, ensuring they remain visible, relevant, and trusted sources of

knowledge and civic connection (IFLA & UNESCO, 2022)

•Promotion of literacy programme

Educating the users in the library should be a major objective of the public libraries in Nigeria. Public libraries can be utilized to distribute literacy materials to the rural communities that will help the people to be more functional in their occupations. In addition, there is need for cooperation between the library, information professionals and educators as a requirement for establishing integrated information literacy programmes. Furthermore, the library should use information and communication technology (ICT) in providing information in Nigeria thereby creating awareness for the people to become ICT literate. Training the library users in the use of ICT tools would improve their skill in using ICT facilities. Such training will enhance effective utilization of the Internet and electronic information resources.

•Access to information

According to Agbo and Onyekweodiri (2014) information is a vital tool in all forms of human endeavour. The library is a focal point for accessing relevant information that can enhance the development of a nation. Provision of equitable access to information

materials is a major role of the library. In this era where the use of ICT tools is crucial in learning, libraries in Nigeria should play a role in ICT literacy and function as a medium where ICT skills can be acquired. IFLA confirmed that technology is gradually transforming the lives of library users who have been largely excluded from using traditional library materials, for example the visually impaired.

ROLES OF LIBRARIES AS AGENTS OF INFORMATION LITERACY

The need for information literacy has been advanced from the acquisition of skills that enables users to locate and use information to include the empowerment and enhancement of personal and societal development. It is important to note that libraries are not only repositories of knowledge serve as catalysts for national development. It opens up minds and inspires people to see vision because the mind is the center point where progress originates. Libraries are responsible for nourishing the mind. Libraries are also germane in educational development of a nation. This is done through their services and programmes, introducing children to the habit and joy of reading and aiding scholars and researchers in contributing their quota to societal development. Students are supported

with the aid of books and other relevant information resources to perform well in their academic work while teachers and lecturers get teaching aids from libraries to prepare useful lesson notes that will help them pass useful knowledge to their students (Agbo & Onyekweodiri, 2014). Public libraries have been established with the aim of supporting adult literacy as a way of championing the provision of relevant information materials to different communities as well as helping in the establishment of an informed society. This has enabled users who were originally deprived of information to know how to read and write. Most importantly, having access to a wide range of information that has to do with their societal issues, they have been able to make decisive decisions to improve their socio-economic growth (Achitabwino, 2007). It is equally incontrovertible that libraries have the greatest impact on agricultural development of a nation. Libraries provide relevant information on agricultural improvement to all agricultural officers, extension workers, researchers, peasant farmers, policy makers, etc. on new methods of improving livestock and better farming practices that will meet the increasing need of the population. Libraries make such information available and also provide opportunities for improving the

declining food security of a country (Agbo & Onyekweodiri, 2014). Libraries important role in the dissemination of health information and the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Academic libraries are saddled with the provision of information on health in different formats to medical health workers, students, patients and researchers in medical schools, teaching hospitals and health institutions. Citizens needs information and access to health information on drug addicts, sexually transmitted diseases (STD), HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, maternal health services etc. The impact of this on health sector will be a low rate of health challenges in the country, improved health conditions of patients as well as healthy life styles among citizens.

CHALLENGES OF INFORMATION LITERACY IN NIGERIA

Inadequate funding:

Effective and efficient service delivery by public libraries and its smooth operations depend on the adequacy of fund. Unfortunately, the dwindling funding of public libraries in Nigeria is one of the many factors hindering the information sector. It is one thing to establish a public library and another thing is the provision of adequate funding for the support and sustainability of its activities. This implies that proper funding

is required if sustainable development goal in Nigeria must be achieved. Government should include and increase her budgetary allocation with regards to public libraries. Because of little or no funding from the Government, it is needful that public libraries should go beyond government dependency and embark on collaborating and partnering with good spirited individuals, NGOs, private organizations, literary groups etc. for financial support, sponsorship, donations and even seek international grants in order to promote access to quality information and services for socio economic and sustainable development. Danuta asserted that finance is a major resource for organizational effectiveness and without it nothing meaningful will be achieved. It should be borne in mind right from the onset that computerization of library operations like acquisition and circulation control is an expensive venture, and a time consuming process. Ebiwolate noted that the problem of funding is the major constraint of ICT application in public libraries. According to them, the problem of funding is more than just acquiring the hard and software but updating and maintenance are very crucial in order to sustain it. Unavailability of local communication expert.

Lack of ICT and other infrastructural facilities:

These libraries lack infrastructures like steady power supply, internet facilities and even adequate number of computers to support automation. Most of the libraries agreed to have installed Internet facility in the past but none of them is functional presently. This has been due to lack of finance to sustain and maintain these facilities. Ebiwolate lamented on lack of ICT as one of the major problems facing Nigerian public libraries. This is primarily caused by inadequate funding of these public libraries.

Inadequate number of professionals and lack of skills and training:

Public libraries obviously do not have enough professionals as required and subsequently, there has been little or no training for the available workers towards acquiring the necessary skills in this regard. Adequate provisions are not made for the training of public librarians due to the lamented lack of fund. Even sponsorship to general professional workshops, seminars and conferences like that of Nigerian Library Association conferences and sessions cannot be afforded by most of the public libraries not to talk of special skill acquisition workshops that are likely to cost more. Looking at the status of Nigerian public libraries generally in

the area of ICT, Achebe discovered that most public libraries cannot afford some of the basic requirements of ICT for financial reasons. She stressed that most libraries depend on donations and donor agencies to acquire few computers and connect to the internet. In a nutshell, Achebe enumerated some factors that impinge on ICT applications in Nigerian public libraries as inadequate relevant ICT infrastructure particularly tele communications facilities and power supply; un-cooperative attitude of staff in the use of ICT; paucity of technical staff; problems of database conversion due to frequent changes in technology and lack of ICT policy amongst others. The government that has the sole responsibility of establishing and maintaining public libraries does not see libraries and their affairs as a priority in ensuring personal and community growth and development. Other challenges facing public library are lack of adequate staff, poor staff welfare, lack of functional ICT facilities, inadequate power supply, lack of personnel training and development

Epileptic Power Supply

Every service rendering organization in Nigeria like Public Libraries that want to succeed ought to have an alternative source of power. The power supply by the government is erratic and cannot be relied on. Most public libraries do not have an alternative source of power to make the place conducive for users and staff of the library. Mr. Olakanmi Adigun, the Director of Public Library Services in the Oyo State Library Board, said that financial constraints constituted the major challenge facing the library besides epileptic power supply hindering its effective running in the state (PM News, 2018).

Inadequate Information Communication Technological Tools

Most public libraries in Nigeria do not have computers that users can use, no printing facilities, no scanning/ laminating facilities, no internet access to mention but a few. Only a few public libraries have a functional electronic library section. The issue of inadequate funding has limited public libraries a great deal. Irrelevant Material It is not unusual to find rows of outdated textbooks on American or British politics or history, and books in foreign, often former colonial languages in local public libraries, or highly scientific books in a primary school library. Apart from the fact that many such books are culturally irrelevant, their use poses the danger of fostering a euro-centric bias. This can be reinforced by comparing high-quality, glossy books from Europe and

North America with low-cost local publications. As most libraries in poorer countries cannot afford to buy only appropriate books in the appropriate language, they rely on foreign book donations or simply do not have enough relevant titles in the local language. Despite criticism of imposing foreign books on developing countries "the demand for, and acute shortage of, books at all levels cannot be overestimated. Local publishing industries cannot currently meet all these needs ... In these circumstances there is a legitimate case for well managed donated book schemes, particularly when in the rich, industrialized world there is such a surplus of good books" (Makotsi, 2004).

RECOMMENDATION/ SUGGESTION

- If this material is for whatever reasons not available, the library can develop its own community newspaper, ask the course participants to write their own biography or publish a collection of student writings. These are valuable educational tools which encourage students to write, give them an audience for their products, enable them to gain confidence in their writing abilities and encourage organizational skills

- The challenge is to pro-actively reach out to the remaining part of the community, for example by visiting them with appropriate reading and literacy materials in their classrooms, families, workplace or other community locations. Another option is to organize creative and interesting programmes in the library, such as reading and writing competitions, book clubs, author readings, creative writing classes, summer reading programmes, study support, discussion groups, celebrations and festivities, exhibitions or storytelling sessions. Such programmes can also enable adults with low literacy levels, who might have negative memories of formal schooling, to take their first step back into learning (Krolak, 2005).

- In order to sustain education and increase the literacy level of library users, libraries in Nigeria should create awareness of available information resources in the library (both on the shelves within the library and on databases), and serve as an advocate of information literacy. It should support its users to access information easily. Supporting users

and providing opportunities for disabled people to have independent access to information has remained pivotal for the library.

- for the attainment of Sustainable Development Libraries play vital roles in enhancing societal progress. It is necessary for the 21st century librarian to ensure that information literacy skills are inculcated on user to facilitate the effective use and application of information to enhance personal and societal development

CONCUSION

Public libraries in Nigeria play a vital role in promoting high literacy rates, especially

among children who make up a significant portion of the population by providing engaging services like story hour, colorful reading materials, mobile outreach and community programs that foster early reading habits (Oji & Habibu, 2024). Public libraries are strategically positioned to expose children to both print and electronic resources as well as meaningful language opportunities that are critical for reading achievement, the following are some of the ways that can be used to promote high literacy rates in Nigeria, Storytelling sessions, Family reading, Provision of information and referral services, Private public sector partnerships, Publicity and outreach services.

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