

**Repositioning Public and School Libraries for Quality
Primary and Post-Primary Education in Niger State
in the 21st Century**

by

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Abstract

The article gives a brief historical background of the development of public library service in Niger State. The present state of the state library headquarters, named after Abubakar Imam was assessed. The importance of public and school library services to the upliftment of education in the state was highlighted while the expectations of these types of libraries in Niger state in the 21st century was also discussed. For effective performance, some recommendations were made. Among these, include adequate financial support and the establishment of books and other educational materials depot at the State Library Headquarters for centralized acquisition and equitable distribution of educational materials among branch and school Libraries.

Introduction

In the whole of Northern Nigeria, Niger State happened to be one of the very few states that benefited from functional public library service from colonial era. This, it did by the establishment of a good and purposeful library at Bida in the early 60s.

Even with the creation of North-Western State, a state now divided into four states including Niger, Bida library was only politically second to that of Sokoto which served as state

library headquarters. Yet, it must be argued that even the building which housed the North-Western State library headquarters in Sokoto was not as big and functional as that of Bida before the creation of Niger State in 1976.

In view of the above development, one has good reasons to rejoice that with the creation of Niger State, the new state had a good foundation from which to take-off, as far as library service is concerned. After all, more than ninety percent (90%) of the professional and paraprofessional staff in Sokoto were from Niger state. Unfortunately however, when the new state took-off in Minna in 1976, there was hardly any reasonable space from which to, begin effective library services. It was also unthinkable that the library should start operation from Bida where there exist functional buildings for that purpose. The only option was to stay in Minna being the state capital.

From inception therefore, only two office rooms were continually allocated to the library from its initial base at Bosso down to Paiko and Muazu Muhammadu Roads which served as the state's temporary secretariats. That is to say that even when the two temporary secretariats were designed and built, the public library was not in focus. However, as a result of the pressure mounted by librarians then, the library was later allocated a classroom block along Bosso Road, It must therefore, be emphasized that it was a big disappointment that the state that had benefited from public library service since early sixties could not boast of a purposeful public library building at the state capital up till late 80's.

In 1985, this pathetic situation led to the coming together of all librarians within the state to strategise on the way forward for the development of Niger state public library service. It was unanimously resolved that a chapter of the Nigerian Library Association be formed to tackle the problem.

When the association came on board, its EXCO members, sometimes in 1986 paid a courtesy visit to the then Military Governor, Col. David Mark purposely to intimate him with the lackadaisical attitude of the State Government towards library development in the state and the need to establish a State Library Board. David Mark enthusiastically responded that "you have won and we will soon inaugurate that board." He directed that the library which was housed in a block of classroom be moved from its present place to the defunct State House of Assembly along Bosso Road and that it should inherit all the books and materials acquired by the House. He then promised to look into the issue of the board and a benefiting library complex for the state without further delay (Bitagi, 1989). Even though Mark did not stay long enough in Niger State to see to the realization of this dream, his initial action was the first positive move ever made by a state Governor or Administrator to improve the lot of public library service in Niger state. After all, the ideas of the committee he established to provide input to that effect formed the nucleus for the inauguration of the library board, design and building of the present state library Headquarters named after Abubakar Imam, in Minna and was commissioned in 1991.

In a similar dimension, the libraries in post-primary institutions in Niger state and services offered by them could be adjudged to be fair up till early and middle 80s. From then, school libraries began to disappear and decline in services to both the teachers and students. It is however, necessary to mention that school libraries were not manned by librarians which may have contributed to their easy disintegration. Meanwhile, at the primary school level, libraries in the actual sense of the word were and are still largely non-existent in the state.

The impact which the state public, primary and post-primary school libraries have had and are supposed to have on the reading and information seeking habits of the citizens of the state, especially the youths, at this time of free primary and secondary education in the state is the focus of this write-up.

Current State of Abubakar Imam Library (AIL)

From inception, it looked as if the focus of the state Government was to erect a building just to satisfy the yearning or mounting pressures by Librarians. There was no consideration for the quality of building to be put in place. It is agonizing to observe that AIL complex which was commissioned in less than two decades ago is in a high level of dilapidation. Though this author is not an Engineer by profession, he can say with all certainty that the building housing the State Library Headquarters is structurally defective. All the walls are cracked, roof leaking and thereby permeating rain water to drip into the library. Given the present state of that building therefore, it could be assumed that if due attention is not given it may in the very near future collapse. When this happens, it may have disastrous effect on the state Government, staff and users. Then, Niger state will make history as the first state where a purposefully designed public library has collapsed in Nigeria.

From the above observations, it would not amount to an overstatement that if Abubakar Imam, a veteran journalist, lover and author of books is alive today, he would have described this library complex as a sham and regret that his name is ever used in a building meant to house valuable information resources designed and built without putting into consideration the quality and purpose it is to serve.

Relevance of Public Libraries to Educational Development in the State

The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1991) defines education as instruction or training by which people (generally young) learn to develop and use their mental, moral and physical powers. This definition suggests that for any nation or state to achieve social, cultural, economic, scientific and technological development, provision of education, especially to its young citizens must be a priority. On the other hand, the public library as its name connotes is that which provides information resources and services free to the general citizens of the area where it is located. This is irrespective of the user's race, religion, status, political affiliation, background, age and qualification etc.

In view of the above analysis, and since "every Nigerian child shall have a right to equal educational opportunities" (National Policy on Education (NPE) 2004), the primary and secondary school education embarked upon by the present administration in Niger state is in the right direction. However, it must be mentioned without any reservation that for Niger state to achieve its holistic intentions about these levels of education, public library resources provision and services thereon, must be extended to all nooks and crannies of the state.

The importance of public library service in the attainment of qualitative, reliable and meaningful primary and secondary education in Niger state cannot be over emphasized. In this regard, Fayose (1989) opined that libraries, in particular, public libraries, are the natural resource for (all students) and those seeking information and knowledge for self-improvement and other purposes since according to her, Lenin referred to public libraries as the people's university. She further observed that the onus of getting information down to the grassroots lies with public libraries more than any other institution. In fact, the basic aim and objective of any public library

is premised on the dire need to provide information based resources and services to meet developmental needs of the masses of any given society. The information needs of masses may vary from individual to individual and also from community to community. Generally however, the information needs of citizens of Niger state may centre on issues of social, political, religious, economic, scientific, technological and educational which is the theme of this paper. It is to be observed also, that the information needs of a people may be determined by their experience, level of education and awareness in the chosen area of interest. It is the realization of these needs that the Northern Regional Government considered and cited a public library branch at Bida probably to serve the diverse information needs of the then entire Niger province.

From the forgone, when compared with some other public libraries in Nigeria and the North in particular, Niger state public library service has not fared at all. While Kaduna, a neighbouring state is boasting of a beautiful and equipped library building as headquarters with branches all over the state, ours is an eye sore without any serious branch and is ill equipped. Even the inherited Bida branch has been bastardized, allowed to decay, for lack of renovation, non-acquisition of current information resources and sub-standard staff to man it. It is regrettable, that a state with 25 local government areas cannot boast of even three functional branch libraries, one in each of its political zones. It follows that even though Ugboma (1998) affirmed that today in Nigeria, branch libraries of the national library and **STATE PUBLIC LIBRARIES** (emphasis mine) are found all over the country bringing services to the grassroots, the reverse is the case in Niger state as far as state public library service is concerned. It could be safe therefore, to argue that the public library service in Niger state has only contributed minimally to the development of education in the state.

The Relevance of School Libraries to Educational Development

Primary and secondary schools are in no doubt the foundation which the entire educational system is built upon. The National Policy on Education (2004) emphasized that the primary school, in particular, is the key to the success or failure of the whole system. It is therefore, for this indisputable fact that free primary and post-primary education by Niger State Government is a necessity going by the non-challant attitude of parents to enrol their children in to schools. The scheme is therefore, laudable and courageous, since it is expected not only to encourage enrolment in to schools but also constitute some amount of relief to the parents.

Under free education dispensation however, it is expected that teachers have no legal right whatsoever to collect fees of any form from parents as far as the education of their children is concerned. Even the textbooks children require to read, when not provided for under the scheme could only be recommended by the teachers but they have no right to enforce their acquisition if they have to avoid a situation of being accused of extorting money from parents. It is note-worthy however, that teachers used to arrange with publishers for the supply of necessary textbooks to schools which were sold to students through the medium of school authorities at subsidized rate. Meanwhile, one is of the hope that the state Government would match its free education policy with the supply of free, adequate and relevant textbooks in school libraries. Whether primary and post-primary institutions in Niger state have functional libraries at present or not is yet another issue for discussion. However, Bitagi and Garba (2008) did observe that you cannot separate the library from education as they are like identical twin brothers. In a related development, Ajibero (1992) opined that the library and education have, existed side

by side for such a long time that we often take that symbiotic relationship for granted. That is to say that you cannot have good and reliable educational system without the support of an equally well equipped library resources and services. In another direction, it is to equally say that you cannot separate the library from the school if the products there from are to be well educated and reliable.

From the above expositions, the question to ask is how prepared is Niger State Government for free education of its young citizens at primary and post primary levels without the supply of necessary textbooks in school libraries?. This question becomes imperative because currently, the free education seems to be limited to free school fees only. At this juncture, it must be observed, with all seriousness that what parents contend with in buying textbooks from primary through secondary school is several times more than what they used to pay as school fees, NECO and WAEC registration combined. The State Government effort must however, be commended as half bread is better than none. Meanwhile, to alleviate the sufferings of parents in this direction, the state government needs to provide the basic textbooks and other current information resources, enough to cover the curricula of the various schools. These should then be organized usefully, preserved and disseminated to teachers, pupils and students by the school library when need arises.

The school library could therefore be likened to a corner stone which does not only beautify but also fortify the building. In their view, Ayeni and Oyebanji (1998) saw a school library as a strategic arm of its parent institution. These authors further asserted that the major aim of the school library is to organize collections of all human efforts either in print or non-print form, that are relevant to the educational development of the children. Onadiran and Onadiran (1980) in Ayeni and

Oyebanji (1998) also observed that the importance of the school library is not in doubt. They went on to quote the authors as having said that both librarians and educationists regard the school library as the heart of the school and the apex on which the intellectual life of the school rests. To them therefore, what is in doubt is the level of funding that is made available to the school libraries.

The school library services when not adequately provided could lead to a negative effect on the overall performance of children. This may be why several students fail to make required number of credit in their final examinations; thus, attributing the massive failure of students in various examinations to insufficient provision of library services in schools.

Brewer (1946) in Adigun and Oyelude (2003) affirmed that the failure of our schools and colleges, in the past to teach the practical fundamentals of reading as a long culture has been a curse to our civilization and development. It is therefore of utmost importance to add that the trend of non-challant attitudes towards inculcating reading habit in our children may continue indefinitely if there is no conscious, concerted and deliberate effort made to provide pertinent, relevant and related books and other reading materials in school libraries in Niger State. Infact, to give a holistic background of imbibing reading habit and culture to students, the state should also give room for the provision^s of fringe collection in school libraries. Through this, children are not only given the opportunity to read intensively in an area of interest but also extensively in other related areas to give them a basis to fit in well in all weather. This is why Adigun and Oyelude (2003) further pointed out that there is the view that those who cannot turn to books to fill their spare time will in times turn to pursuits which are not desirable. Nowadays, this assertion cannot be far from the truth as the behaviour of some of our school children is concerned.

in the form of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) such as computers and related electronic gadgets. The need for automation or computerization of the library according to Bitagi (2000) is as a result of repetitiveness and slowness associated with library practices in addition to the inadequacy of the quality and quantity of services rendered. He further opined that library automation facilitate, in a faster way/the performance of traditional functions of the library such as acquisitions, technical services, serials control, circulation, networking, Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI), compilation of bibliographies, abstracting and indexing services, and accession list etc, In a similar dimension, Madu (2004) 'further elucidated that library automation provides interconnectivity. According to him the implication of this is that a library can easily access the collection of other libraries. This is to say that when the public and school libraries in Niger State are automated, the resultant effect is that all libraries will be linked with and their collections accessible to each other any time, any day. This system will also facilitate the balancing or library collections within the state because what is available to one library would be available to all other libraries.

Finally, when the library system is automated, it would form the basis for which library users, especially the youths will begin a formal or informal training on computer literacy which in the future would be a necessary requirement for any type of job, The schools on their part should introduce a compulsory subject on ICT since a child that is used to its operations has several advantages over his/her peers in knowledge acquisition and utilization.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it could be concluded that despite the fact that Niger State started benefiting from public

library services since early sixties, not much effort has been made to improve the condition of libraries and services that are far from in line with present day expectations. The primary and post-primary school libraries have also been left uncared for. Thus there seems to be total neglect of library services in Niger state.

Recommendations

In view of the above analysis, the following recommendations are made:

1. Niger State government should commit more financial resources for the renovation of ALL, procurement of information base resources either in print or non-print form to satisfy the yearnings of its information seeking populace, especially the youth.
2. A branch of the state library in all the 25 Local Government Areas (LGAs) of the state should be established.
3. Functional libraries should be designed, built and equipped in all the primary and post-primary institutions in the state.
4. There is the need to employ more committed librarians and other categories of library staff to provide effective service at both public and school libraries.
5. Free education at primary and post-primary institutions should be total. Facilities such as required textbooks and Information and Communication Technology should be provided free to schools in addition to the present free school fees.
6. The state government should, as a matter of policy and priority establish a book and school materials depot at the State Library Headquarters in Minna where books and other educational materials meant for primary and

post-primary institutions will be centrally acquired, processed and equitably distributed to schools and branch libraries by the board.

7. Finally, a consortium of public and school libraries should be established in the state linking the facilities of one library with the other through information technology services.

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