ROLE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN ADULT CONTINUING EDUCATION AND LIFE LONG LEARNING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
Considering the relevance and contribution of libraries in education at all levels, this paper looked at the role the public libraries play in adult continuing education and lifelong learning in Nigeria. It looked into the purpose and mission of the public libraries, the meaning of continuing education and lifelong learning, the services provided by the public libraries in support of lifelong learning and continuing education, facilities and resources available for such provisions. The issues affecting the maximum usage of the public libraries by the adult users, general problems that cause setback for these Nigerian public libraries were discussed and recommendations of some strategies to ensure better utilization of the public library services and reading resources by the adult learner were made.

A public library according to the International Federation of Library Association, IFLA (2001), is an organization established, supported and funded by the community, either through local, regional or national government or other community organizations. It provides access to knowledge, information and works of imagination through a range of resources and services which are equally available to all members of the community regardless of age, gender and educational qualifications.

Access to education has become the key issue in education. Hautecour (1997) made this clear when he remarked that among the greatest challenges facing education in Africa as a whole is ensuring that means of education are made available to every individual who must have it. Adult education as seen by Merrian and Brockrett (1997) has to do with activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perceptions define them as adults. In Nigeria, those designated to be adult learners are those who were not privileged to have primary education when they were supposed to while everybody in academic environment including the very learned ones indulge in continued education. The public library is a key access point for community-based education for life-long and adult learners. As Van Fleet (2007) puts it, libraries being community based and locally supported, link independent learners, materials, programmes, and other community agencies and provide a common touchstone for all segments of the population.

In 1965, Paul Lengrand, the then Acting Director of the UNESCO institution for education, proposed the concept of “life-long continuing education.” He stated “if a man can and should continue learning, training and improving his professional qualifications, developing his intellectual, emotional and moral relationships as well as to the community at large, and if adult education is to provide adequate facilities to help him achieve these aims, then educational thinking and processes must undergo a radical transformation”. Library services are of paramount importance to the success of the goals of adult literacy education as was noted by Onohwakpor (2005). In the life-long continuing education, public libraries play significantly important roles to promote learning activities and the community being served by the public library should be made aware of the library facilities, resources and services to aid their successful education.

The Public Library Mission: Support for Adult Continuing Education and Life-Long Learning
The primary purposes of the public library according to the International Federation of Library Association, IFLA (2001), are to provide resources and services in a variety of media to meet the needs of individuals and groups for education, information and personal development including recreation and leisure. Supporting both individual and self conducted education at all levels is a major role to be played by the public library (IFLA; 1994). The public library has been popularly called the people’s University. It serves every individual learner at any age to learn at his or her own pace and convenience. This is a unique feature of the public library – access for all; unlike most other types of libraries that have specific population or user community to serve. As IFLA (2001) asserted,
learning does not end with the completion of formal education but is, for most people, a life-long activity. In an increasingly complex society, people will need to acquire new skills at various stages of their lives. The public library has an important role in assisting this process.

The public libraries provide materials in the appropriate media to support formal and informal learning processes. All age groups must find materials relevant to their needs. Collections and services of the public library include all types of appropriate media and modern technologies as well as traditional materials (Manifesto). In Nigerian communities, these adult learners make use of venues like church premises, community halls and sometimes available school environments in the evenings for their educational activities and contacts. Both the learners and the teachers rely mainly on the public library that is always open for all even on weekends to provide for their research information and other related needs.

The public libraries in Nigeria should realize all these and readily provide for the needs of these life-long learners just like is obtainable in some advanced countries.

- In Barcelona Province, Spain, some library services give support to adult learners and distant learning students (IFLA 2001).
- South Dublin County Library Service, Ireland, provides self-learning facilities for adults, including computer-based learning and audio-and video-based language-learning materials. The aim is to provide a neutral and supportive environment in which individuals can learn at their own pace.
- Two libraries in Oklahoma, USA, sponsor discussion groups for new adult readers with grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Public libraries offer a variety of access points and educational opportunities. The public library is the only major educational institution with a mission and tradition of providing learning opportunities throughout the entire human lifespan. It is the most widely available institution that freely provides continuing education. Supported by a multidisciplinary approach to life-long learning, this mandate provides an opportunity for continuity, integration and choice (Van Fleet, 1990). The integrational focus of the public library according to Van Fleet (2007) fosters a sense of belonging to the community. Older adults are not isolated. They may choose the learning approach with which they are most comfortable.

The underlining purpose and objective of establishing public libraries which are established as State library boards is amongst other things, to foster and enhance literacy and life-long education in the community they serve. The question is, in what ways can the public libraries provide the needed support for life-long and adult continuing education and to what extent do the adult learners in our society utilize the services and resources of the public library.

**Public Library Services Provided for the Adult and Life-Long Learners**

The public library supports life-long learning, working with schools and other educational institutions to help students of all ages with their formal education. This the public library can achieve by providing a range of services.

**Acquisition and Organization of Reading Materials**

The public library is perhaps most widely recognized for collecting educational materials on a wide variety of subjects, written for different levels, for diverse clientele. Different specific topics within given areas are represented in the collection. In the words of Sauve (1993), the public libraries play a significant role in supporting the process of independent learning of the adults by, amongst other things, selecting relevant and useful reading materials; organizing them in some order so that the learners can find materials they need without wasting time.

The acquisition and cataloguing sections of the public library see to the selection, acquisition and classification of library materials. The materials are classified into subject areas by the cataloguers and catalogued to ease their location from the open shelf. The popular classification
scheme used by the public libraries- the Dewey Decimal classification divides the human knowledge into ten broad classes with further sub-classes using numbers (000-900 represents the main classes).

For instance;

500-Natural sciences & Mathematics
510-General principles
511.2- Mathematical systems and so on.

Public Services (for the Adults)

The public services division in the public library is said to be the heart of the public library service. The department deals or interfaces with the users and their requests directly. As Ezeani (2004) puts it, workers in this department are the first library workers that the users come in contact with in the library and they provide lending and reference information services.

Lending Services

The lending section of the public library provides reading materials that can be consulted in the library as well as borrowed out to registered users. That is why Wikipedia (2008) called the public library a lending library that allows users to take books and other materials off the premises.

Reference and Information Services

The reference/Nigerian section as it is popularly called, of the public libraries houses useful materials to support education and research. These are called reference works. A reference work has been described to be a compendium of information usually of a specific type compiled in a book; (Wikipedia). Such works as maps, dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, handbooks/manuals, journals and other periodicals like newspapers and magazines are all reference works.

The Nigerian section is a sub-section of the reference section that houses and provides books and other research materials written about Nigeria and Nigerians. This section houses materials like biographies of people, government laws and policies, newspapers, journals and magazines e.t.c.

The expanded services in reference section according to Ezeani (2005) include career information services, counseling services and internet services. Internet services are crucial in carrying out effective reference and research services to the adult learners. The reference librarians according to Van Fleet (2007) interpret questions, provide information to individual patrons and offer guidance in the use of library and its resources.

Programming

Programming is another service through which the public library supports and provides for the needs of life-long adult learners. Programmes, Liroff and Van Fleet, (1992) asserted, are often the focus of interagency cooperation where they are organized and sponsored by government ministries, institutions, university scholars in conjunction with public libraries. Such programmes like lectures cover a variety of topics and have different purposes and expectations. For certain programmes, libraries may draw from a wide spectrum of speakers representing community agencies, organizations, and businesses. Libraries can provide meeting rooms and facilities for programmes sponsored by some organizations or may act as sponsors. The Enugu State Library, for instance, in collaboration with Ministry of Education which it is under, has hosted programmes like conferences/seminars/workshops, book readings e.t.c. which was meant to attracted stakeholders in the publishing industry, students, adult learners and so on.

Outreach

Outreach involves planning services for individuals who may not be able to take advantage of in-library services or who have not traditionally done so. Typically, these services are provided to people who are institutionalized or home-bound. It may also take the form of deposit collections to the institution, delivery service of materials. The popular mobile library services make it possible for the library materials to get at wider population in the community so that they can benefit from the rich
stock of public library resources and services although most of the public libraries in Nigeria no longer carry out outreach services due to lack of fund and poor state of the libraries.

**Resources and Facilities to Enhance Public Library Support for Continuing and Life-Long Learners**

For effective provision of its services in support of adult/continuing education, the public library has certain facilities to enable it satisfy its adult population and life-long learners. Smith (1997) asserted, that the public libraries used to be places where one had to be quiet; today, they are full of children learning to love books, business people, trawling for commercial information and grannies surfing the internet. Facilities and resources that facilitate the services public libraries render to enhance adult continuing education and life-long learning range from conducive reading space and environment to those actual reading materials that provide information for the users’ quests.

**Reading Space/Environment**

This is a basic facility to be provided by any library. Standard reading rooms/halls with adequate ventilation and lighting provision; reading tables and chairs are provided for users to create a conducive and comfortable atmosphere for reading and research. IFL A/UNESCO (2001) recognized the importance role that library buildings play in public library service provision. For this, they are designed to reflect the functions of the library service; accessible to all users and sufficiently flexible to accommodate new and changing services.

**Internet Facilities**

The contribution of internet and its wide range of current information to today’s research cannot be overemphasized. The internet brings information about uncountable researches and write-ups all over the world together and to the doorsteps of researchers. Anyakoha (2005) put it that with internet, adult learners are no longer restricted to libraries within their vicinity. The existence of what is called virtual library is brought to lime light.

Some Nigerian public libraries, though few, do provide internet services for their users and have an internet services section within their libraries as well as a learning resource centre outside the library. All these are meant to aid adult learners and other users in research. Services provided by the internet section are E-mail services, browsing for information in so many fields of knowledge, on-line registrations for local and international examinations and retrieval of results of such examinations.

**Photocopying Facilities**

Photocopying facility is crucial for the public library to enhance better services to its users. Some other electronic facilities and audio-visual materials are used in the public libraries for special programmes and activities such as children’s programmes and conference/workshops; such gadgets as television, video players, CD players, and projectors e.t.c.

**Resources**

To fulfill its roles satisfactorily, the public library cannot do without adequate material and human resources; not just when it is established but also on a continuous basis, to enable it to sustain and develop services that meet the needs of the local community (IFLA, 2001). The public library provides materials in all formats, updated regularly to meet the educational needs of its adult learners.

The material resources could be in book format; ranging from textbooks to journals, newspapers and other periodicals/serial publications. The reading resources could also be in other formats like CD-ROMs and other forms of audio-visual materials. Special materials for special groups are also available in public libraries; for instance, brail books for the visually impaired. These reading materials are in turn classified and arranged as has been seen above, with necessary provisions (the catalogue) made to ease their location and usage by the users.
Human Resources

Human resources of the public library are the library workers that make the library services and materials available to the library users. Johnson (1994) and Youngman (1999) ascertained that good quality staff are vital parts of an efficient and effective library service. The satisfaction of the users of a public library depends not only on its material resources but also on the quality and competencies of its human resources (staff). The Ohio Libraries Staffing Task force Report (2002) made it clear that the future and survival of public libraries still rest with its most valuable resource; the staff.

Adult Learners and Public Libraries: Issues and Problems Affecting Maximum Usage in Nigeria

Looking at the public libraries in our context, it has been discovered that most of their users are young students. Only few older adults make use of the library ordinarily. This is due to poor reading culture amongst Nigerians. They lack the awareness of the contributions the public library resources and services can make to their educational career and endeavours; what they stand to gain. Most of them involved in one educational (school) programme or the other do rush to the librarians just to seek help to find solutions to assignments given to them. They do not fully reap from the wealth of knowledge embedded in the research and information materials in the libraries. Reading and research must not be for egalitarian purposes only.

The Current Trend

A survey of some of the public libraries and their users showed that inadequate reading materials have been a common complaint from the users of these libraries. This inadequacy usually is both in number or quantity of materials available for use in the library and quality of the available reading and research materials. In many of the public libraries, discarded books from advanced countries donated by individuals and groups of people living in these countries, form major part of the collection.

Furthermore, readers or users of any library do not go to a library just to find reading materials. There are those who come to do their own work or read their own materials. They go to the library because they know that is a conducive environment for reading. Another common complaint from the users of these public libraries is lack of adequate reading space. Encouraging adult learners in the use of the library requires comfortable reading environment.

Due to inadequate financial provisions, most Nigerian public libraries do no longer extend their services to people outside the library, like in the good old days of mobile library and enough provisions are not made for the disabled users of the library. Lack of fund has also hindered the acquisition and use of Information Communication Technology and other electronic facilities like the Internet in most Nigerian public libraries. This has also made training of the staff to acquire contemporary information skills almost impossible. All these cause setback for public libraries in serving their users.

From the discussion so far, it can be seen that the public library being a local centre for information (Achebe 2005), is indispensable in providing for adult/continuing education and life-long learning. Looking at what is obtainable in most of the public libraries in our Nigerian society; their headquarters are mainly situated in the cities while their branches are located in the rural areas – up to one or two in each local government. The facilities and resources discussed above have to be provided adequately for both the urban and rural dwellers so that distance will not be a barrier to accessing the library just like was clearly remarked by Mcharazo (2000).

Implications for the Libraries and the Library Staff

One of the most important resources in satisfying requirements and needs in a library is the staff; (Mcharazo, 2000). It is not enough to acquire the necessary materials required by the users. An important process of organizing, and making available the required information or materials must be performed by the library staff. The specific manner in which these goals are fulfilled will vary
according to community need and demand. The library workers are in the position to educate the adult
learners on the effective use of library. It then requires that the public librarians should be well trained
and grounded in information searching, retrieval, storage and dissemination in both electronic and
traditional methods.

Conclusion

The public library is an indispensable institution in enhancing adult continuing education and
lifelong learning. Though certain constraints like ignorance on part of the learners and inadequate
provisions, lack of needed fund, infrastructure and skills on part of the public library hinder the extent
of usage of the library by these learners in Nigerian public libraries, creating awareness and adequate
maintenance of the public library through funding for instance will help take continuing education and
lifelong learning in our society to the next level.

Recommendations

To ensure effective support for continuing education and life-long learning,

1. The public libraries should create awareness amongst the adult learners on the use and relevance
of the library in life-long learning and continuing education. This they can do through user
education and liaising with other educators and institutions.

2. Funding has to be adequate to make all necessary facilities and resources available in sufficient
quantities so serve the diverse users both within and outside the library. Both the government,
individuals, non-governmental organizations, and other “friends” of the library should show

3. The branch libraries which are located at other areas mainly the rural areas should be maintained
in terms of resources and facilities so that distance will not be a barrier to those living in the rural
areas.

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