NOVEL APPROACH AND FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING THE ENDANGERED READING CULTURE IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

It is no longer news that reading habits and the culture of reading have dwindled so drastically in Nigeria. This is more pronounced in public primary and secondary schools. Many factors have been attributed to it, key among which are lack of functional libraries in primary and secondary schools, unavailability of librarians and information literacy specialists in schools, poverty level in the country, unavailability of conducive learning environment in schools, among others. However, it is a fact that this reading culture revolves around accessibility and utilization of information resources and learning materials. In other words, it is believed that availability and accessibility of information materials in functional and well-equipped libraries and learning resource centres to students in schools will address this abnormality. This paper therefore advocates for the adoption of a developed framework involving network of libraries and information centres, librarians and information practitioners, states and local governments, communities and schools in their locality across the federation for tackling the menace of unavailability of libraries resulting to poor reading culture in Nigeria. It is believed that this innovative approach alongside the sub-elements of its implementation would work strategically in addressing the endangered reading culture in the country.

Keywords

Reading Culture, Libraries and Information Centres, Librarians and Information Practitioners, Nigerian Schools

Introduction

The development of man involves acquisition of knowledge. One of the key avenues for knowledge acquisition is through reading. Reading makes a man. It is through reading that individuals in the society are informed, educated and enlightened. However, reading in Nigeria has been generally endangered by all inhabitants in the society. This cuts across pupils, students, young adults and even matured adults. Most worrisome of all is the case involving students in primary and secondary schools. This is because they represent the segment of the society that are expected to exploit information and knowledge resources at their disposal, apply critical thinking abilities, and creatively develop workable solutions to numerous challenges affecting humanity. But can this

young segment of the population be able to do this, if there is no avenue and structured means for developing their intellectual capacity via reading?

Meanwhile, poor reading culture is more visible in Nigerian public primary and secondary schools. Majority of the private primary and secondary schools that have some level of standard have functional libraries, and the services of library staff. Conversely, the situation in many public primary and secondary schools, especially in rural areas and even in some cities, leaves much to be desired (Fabunmi & Folorunso, 2010; Daily Independent, 2013). In other words, the state of infrastructure and resources that support and facilitate reading, have dilapidated so much that reading can no longer take place in these public schools. One may be tempted to ask if governments are really living up to their expectations and campaign promises. These infrastructure and resources are libraries and information centres, human resources (professional librarians and information literacy specialists), information and media resources (books, journals, newspapers, magazines, audio-visuals and instructional multimedia tools). They are the key to re-awakening of the interest of students and encouraging them on the part of reading for human development; however, they are hardly seen in our schools. Unfortunately, the bring-back-the-book initiative of former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan failed to realize its objectives because forerunners to its successful implementation, such as establishment of state-of-the-art libraries and engaging the services of reading/information literacy specialists, were neglected. Therefore, at conceptualization, the programme was bound to fail.

Recent developments have revealed that the reading culture among Nigerians, particularly the youth and students, has waned significantly (Onifade, 2012; Alakam, 2015). The rate of failure recorded by students in the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), National Examinations Council (NECO) and other examinations are clear indications to that. How then do we improve the reading culture? In addition, nowadays, the interest of most Nigerians in reading has dramatically diminished, as the people are now more interested in watching television and films or browsing the web, among other forms of entertainment. Students are carried away with Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, and other social media platforms that distracts them from reading for acquisition of knowledge. Be that as it may, the focus of this paper is on a prototype framework developed for the purpose of addressing the endangered reading culture in our public primary and secondary schools.

Concept of Reading Culture

Ordinarily, culture implies a way of life that is appropriate for an individual, a group of people or a society. Reading involves interpretation of words, sentences, and graphic messages as contained in published information materials. Reading can be for self development or as a means to passing examinations. Through reading, people learn about the past and amass adequate information to predict the future (Oji & Erubami, 2020). Reading culture therefore means a way of life that focuses on reading information materials for the acquisition of knowledge, either voluntarily or for specific reasons. Reading culture refers to the continuous habit of seeking knowledge, information or entertainment through written languages (Kojo, Agyekum & Arthur, 2018; Oji & Erubami, 2020). As a way of life among the citizens in a society, reading culture is a tool for enlightenment, peace and sustainable development of human resources that would be relevant in all sectors of the society (Igwe, 2011; Anidi & Aneke, 2017).

Onifade (2012) posits that reading is a universal phenomenon and tradition, as there is practically no vocation across the world that does not require reading. Even in contemporary times, artisans and tradesmen ought to be able to read and write so as to enable them to function properly

in their day-to-day activities. In all educational systems the world over, reading is considered to be a dependent variable, as no educational endeavour could thrive without the reading culture. In a learning environment, the ability of a child to survive is anchored on reading, which requires some language skills, and pedagogues insist that a child's reading skills have to be developed and strengthened, as he or she moves up the education ladder.

Arguments and Studies on Promoting Reading Culture in Nigeria

There are various submissions and suggestions on promoting reading culture in Nigeria. Some of these recommendations were based on critical analysis of situations that promote reading, whereas the rest were findings from empirical studies. For instance, the analysis of Igwe (2011) provided strategies for promoting reading culture like giving priority attention to education for human capital development, establishing national and state commissions for libraries, integration of information literacy in the curriculum of all levels of education, creation of library periods in the timetable of primary and secondary schools, establishment of state-of-the-art publishing firms by state governments, establishment of family libraries, emergence of non-governmental organizations for promoting reading culture, role of media houses and the formulation and implementation of a viable national information policy. These strategies have significant contributions in advancing the course of reading culture in Nigeria, if implemented.

There are empirical studies related to reading culture in Nigeria. A study by Saka, Bitagi and Garba (2012), was to determine the promotion of reading culture among Nigerian children with special emphasis on primary schools. The study was to determine why, where, problems and strategies for promoting reading culture of primary school children. The research findings show that school children read mainly so as to pass examinations and to do assignments. Major problems affecting formation of reading culture include lack of library period in the school timetable and lack of library in homes. Teachers were of the view that regular assignment and book loan would promote reading culture, primary school children be given orientation 0n the role of reading in the overall development of mankind, and standard school libraries with well stocked reading materials should be provided in all primary schools (Saka, Bitagi & Garba, 2012).

According to Onifade (2012), series of campaign are carried out to encourage promotion of reading culture, such as holiday reading programme, which can be developed and sponsored by companies, and reading competitions that can be organised by corporate organizations and establishments for schools in their locations. There are also recommendations on the use of indigenous languages in the country's educational system and for the conduct of business and governance; the need for Nigerian homes to promote the resuscitation of the reading culture by encouraging children to read more at home and give less attention to watching television, among other time-consuming activities. Although there is growing consensus of opinion that concerted efforts should be directed at reviving the reading culture in Nigeria, as this will engender the country's development in pragmatic ways; analysts are, however, of the view that such efforts must necessarily involve strategies to instill library discipline among Nigerian students (Onifade, 2012). Anidi and Aneke (2017) are of the view that establishment of well-equipped libraries and reading centres with state-of-the-art facilities by the government and NGOs, engagement of parents, teachers, authors, publishers and curriculum designers have different allied roles to play in driving reading culture across the nation. In addition, book fairs, exhibitions and book talks to students are contributory factors to promoting reading culture (Jegbefume, Yaji & Dala, 2017). From another angle, Igwe, Ugwuogu and Okechukwu (2019) made a case for factoring community

information centres in rural development programmes of Nigeria which is expected to, among others, contribute in addressing poor reading culture ravaging the society. The analysis of literature by Otache (2020) revealed that lack of well-equipped libraries and low patronage of school libraries are part of the possible causes of poor reading culture in Nigeria. Thus, these imply that different strategies and approaches are required, but the key to developing reading habits, which will later become culture, should involve priority attention to library development issues in schools.
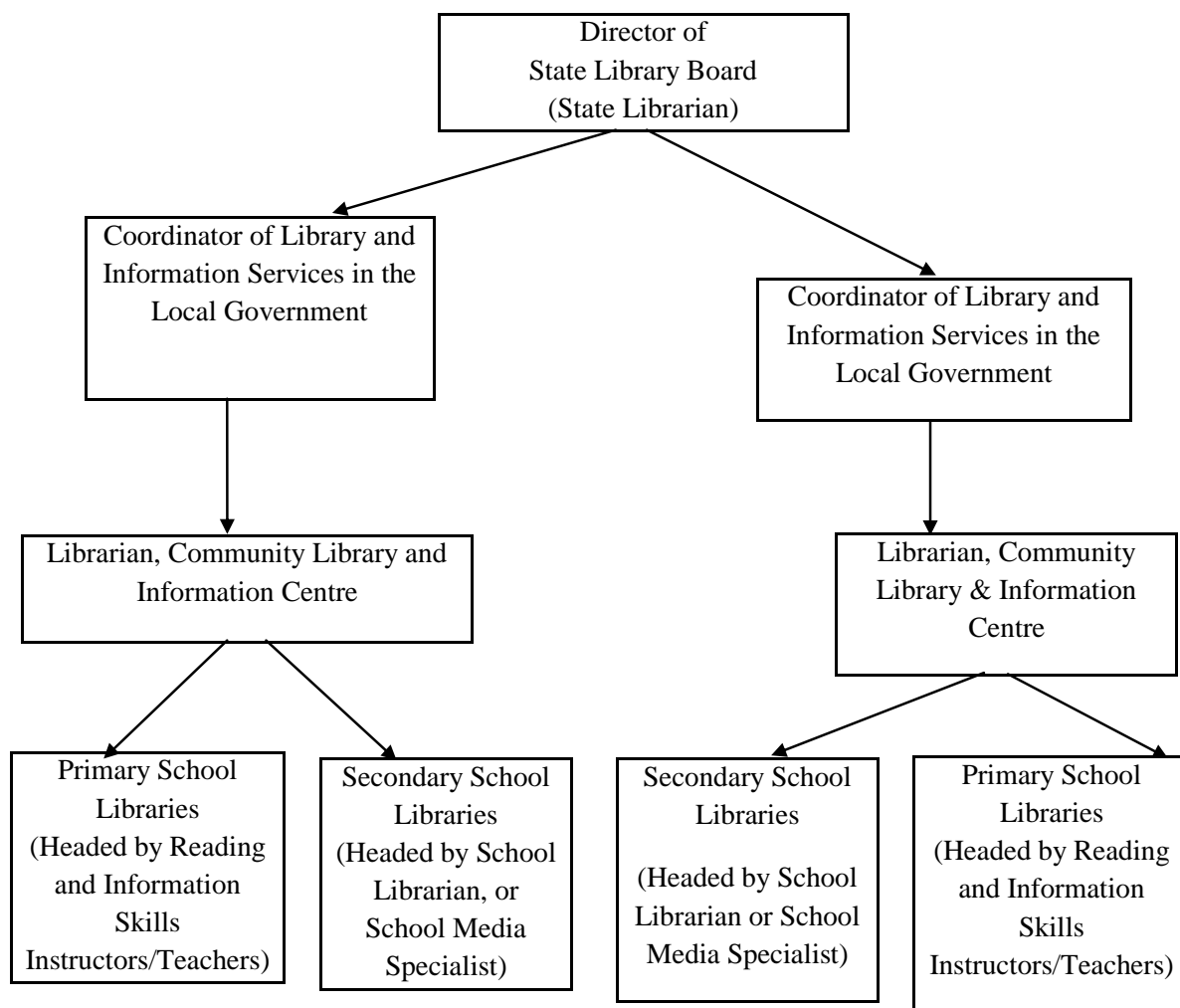
The Novel Approach/Framework for Endangered Reading Culture in Schools

This novel approach cum framework was developed based on the fact that libraries are central to the development of reading culture in the society. In other words, it is widely believed that libraries are essential instruments for promoting reading culture due to libraries' mission of enabling unlimited access to information resources to all in the society. Not only that, this prototype framework is in line with laws of library services for users, which are libraries and information resources are for use, every information resource its user, every user his/her information resource, save the time of the library and information resource user, as well as the libraries and information resource centres are growing organisms. Thus, libraries have different roles to play in developing reading culture of students in the society (Aina, Ogungbeni, Adigun & Ogundipe, 2011). Libraries serve as recreational centres; they provide creative development to the children and local young adults by providing recreational reading books for their personality development and spiritual growth in their leisure time. Most of public primary and secondary schools in the country do not have structures designated as school libraries since library development has taken a back stage or not even visible on the priority list of government (Daily Independent, 2013). The need for this framework, if considered and implemented by states, is believed will re-direct what used to be an endangered system of poor reading culture for the good of the society.

Meanwhile, the development of this prototype framework is premised on the fact that availability and accessibility of information materials, coupled with services of trained information professionals are the basic factors for improving the reading culture of students. The structure of the framework concerns states of the federation, which is a sort of partnership between public libraries owned by states and school libraries. The feasibility of this partnership working is possible because the public libraries (state library board at the capital, the branches at local governments and the community libraries in various communities), the secondary and primary schools, and their various school libraries are all funded by the state government.

State Governments will develop a partnership scheme with their library boards at their capitals, the branches at local governments and the community libraries in various communities, school libraries in secondary and primary schools, within the state. This involves a network of library system, in which state governments are expected to develop that will work collectively for the delivery of information resources and library services to students in all the public secondary and primary schools. See the diagramme 1.

Diagramme I: Network of Library System in States of the Federation

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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
                    │     Director of     │
                    │ State Library Board │
                    │  (State Librarian)  │
                    └─────────────────────┘
                       ╱               ╲
                      ╱                 ╲
  ┌──────────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
  │ Coordinator of Library and│   │ Coordinator of Library and│
  │ Information Services in the│   │ Information Services in the│
  │     Local Government       │   │     Local Government       │
  └──────────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────────┘
              │                               │
              ▼                               ▼
  ┌──────────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
  │ Librarian, Community      │   │ Librarian, Community      │
  │ Library and Information   │   │ Library & Information     │
  │ Centre                    │   │ Centre                    │
  └──────────────────────────┘   └──────────────────────────┘
        ╱            ╲                 ╱            ╲
  ┌───────────┐ ┌───────────┐   ┌───────────┐ ┌───────────┐
  │ Primary   │ │ Secondary │   │ Secondary │ │ Primary   │
  │ School    │ │ School    │   │ School    │ │ School    │
  │ Libraries │ │ Libraries │   │ Libraries │ │ Libraries │
  │(Headed by │ │(Headed by │   │(Headed by │ │(Headed by │
  │ Reading   │ │ School    │   │ School    │ │ Reading   │
  │ and Info. │ │ Librarian,│   │ Librarian │ │ and Info. │
  │ Skills    │ │ or School │   │ or School │ │ Skills    │
  │ Instruc./ │ │ Media     │   │ Media     │ │ Instruc./ │
  │ Teachers) │ │ Specialist)│  │ Specialist)│ │ Teachers) │
  └───────────┘ └───────────┘   └───────────┘ └───────────┘
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Source: Developed by the Authors.

According to the Diagramme I, it shows that there should be a network of library system in a state, in which there will be state library boards (which is existing presently) headed by director or state librarian, all local governments are expected to have coordinators of library and information services, all communities (may be autonomous communities or combination of some autonomous communities under political wards, depending on the size and number of schools in the area) should have librarian in charge of community libraries and information centres. Then, in the various communities, primary schools should have libraries headed by reading/information literacy specialists, and secondary schools should have libraries headed by school librarians (also known as school library media specialists). It is expected that director of a state library board should work collaboratively with coordinators of library and information services in the local governments; then coordinators of library and information services in local governments should work hand in hand with community librarians to ensure that mission of this objective is achieved. In addition, community librarians should act as liaison officers to ensure that primary and secondary school libraries and their staff in the various communities are doing the needful in line with such a unique programme.

The same way, the state government will acquire information and media resources that will be distributed in all these school libraries. Various communities will also be challenged to see the community libraries, primary and secondary school libraries in their localities as their own democracy dividends, which they should also support by donating relevant books and other information and learning resources to support their mission.

Developing the library system in various states of the federation is the responsibility of state governments, and should be supported by federal government. It should be noted that coordinators of library and information services at local governments and secondary school librarians (or school library media specialists) should be professional librarians (with minimum of a degree or at least Higher National Diploma in Library and Information Science). Reading/ Information literacy specialist could be mixture of Higher National Diploma holders in library and information science and mass communication, but with knowledge/certificates in education as well as degree holders in English language education, but with knowledge of library services.

Diagramme II:
Network of Library System in Imo State, using Ahiazu Mbaise and Ihitte-Uboma Local Government Areas as example
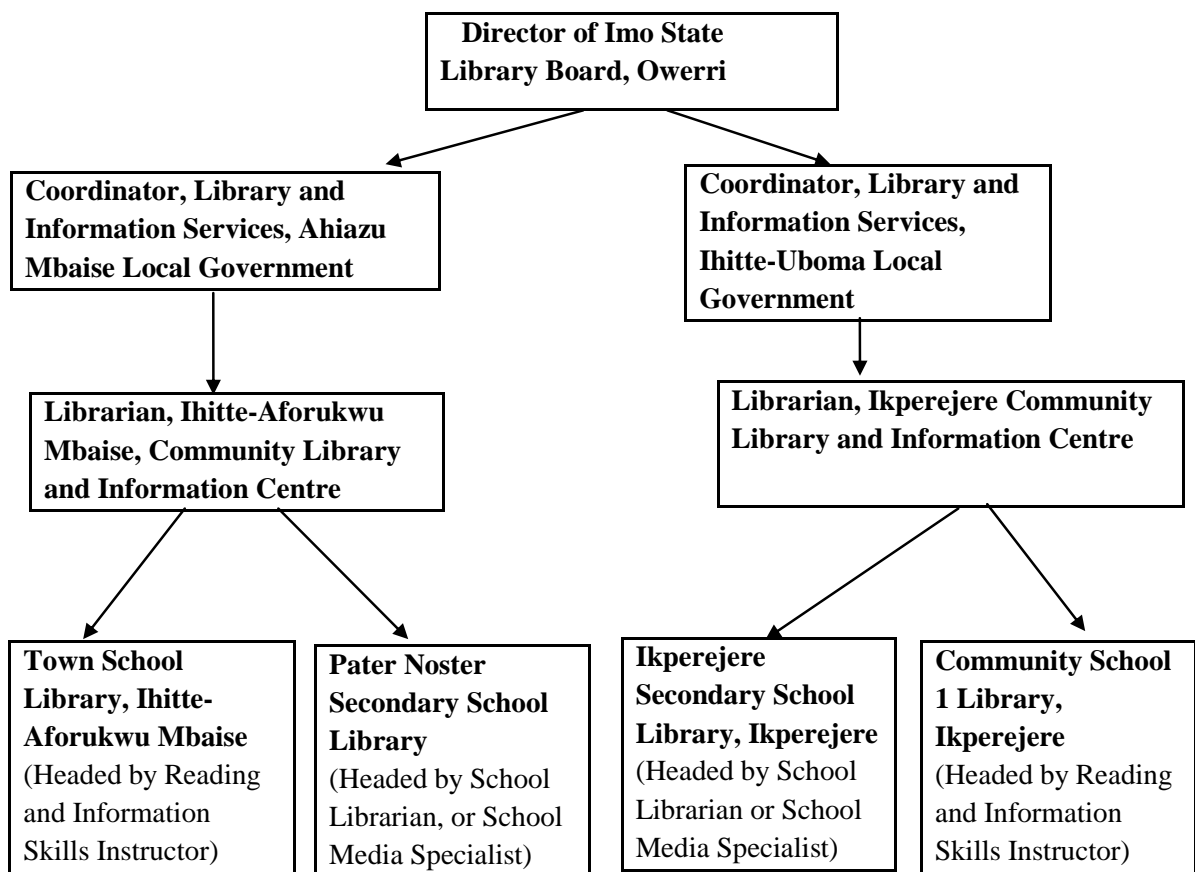
Source; Authors' Illustration

In Diagramme II, it shows a network of library system that flows from state library board to local government and the communities. By the right hand side, it is from the director of Imo state library board, to coordinator of library and information services in Ihitte-Uboma Local Government, to librarian in charge of Ikperejere community library and information centre, and then to librarian of Ikperejere Secondary School Library and reading/information literacy specialist in Community School 1, Ikperejere. By the left hand side, it is from director of Imo state library board, to coordinator of library and information services in Ahiazu-Mbaise local government, to community librarian in Ihitte-Aforukwu community library and information centre, and then to librarian of Pater Noster Secondary School Library and Town School Ihitte-Aforukwu Library.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The prototype framework appears interesting but challenging in implementation. It has implications such as funding challenges and generation of employment opportunities. Funding such a programme could be a challenge because it involves development of infrastructures, employment and remunerations for coordinators, librarians and reading/information literacy specialists, as well as procurement of information and media resources for implementation.

No doubt, reading culture in Nigeria has dwindled so much that it requires a different dimension to tackle in the country. States have strategic roles to play in order to eliminate or if possible eradicate this menace in the society. This can be achieving by adopting the prototype framework as described in this work. In order words, states that are sincere in drastically reducing or eliminating poor reading habits and culture of pupils and students in their schools should adopt this framework, implement it, evaluate and report its success. The challenges of funding this idea can be addressed by budgeting for it and then ensure from adequate funding of the education sector. The various communities can come up with the ideas of community self-help efforts programme, explore goodwill opportunities from philanthropists and even NGOs that are interested in reading culture development in the country.

Federal and state governments can also consider information literacy education as subject to be integrated in primary and secondary education. Parents are also encouraged to establish functional mini-libraries in their homes to complement community and school libraries, as well as buy information materials like books as gifts to their children. Above all, government should be sincere and more committed in their development efforts, and improve the society where present children that would be future leaders will be fulfilled with the capacity to read and imbibe reading as a culture.

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