GLOBAL OVERVIEW OF SCHOOL LIBRARY DEVELOPMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS OF THE SCHOOL CHILD

Professor Virginia W. Dike
Department of Library and Information Science,
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Abstract

The history of School Library development and the factors contributing to the growing significance of the School Library in the education system are discussed. The information literacy skills required by the school child for effective learning in the present Information Technology age are identified and discussed. Also the role of the School Library in facilitating the acquisition of these skills are highlighted.

The school library has been described as the heart of the school. It is the school learning resource centre, the laboratory of laboratories. What vital role does the school library play in education that it warrants such description?

First it must be noted that in spite of the claim that the library is the heart of the school, or laboratory of laboratories, school libraries are a relatively new concept. Few schools had libraries before the 20th century. Those early school libraries had two principal objectives, both of which are still important today: to provide materials to support the curriculum and to promote reading. But the school library was on the periphery rather than at the centre of education — it was far from being the heart of the school.

The school library concept gained momentum as the result of changing ideas about education. In the early years of the 20th century, the progressive education movement in the United States espoused ideas that stimulated the growth of school libraries in many countries of the world. However, widespread and systematic development of school libraries dates from the decades following World War II, especially the

1950s, 1960s and 1970s. This development coincided with a number of factors, including continuing evolution of ideas for educational reform.

The role and development of school libraries have always been inextricably tied to educational reform. Certain ideas in education have moved libraries from the periphery to the heart of the school and made them central to teaching and learning. What are these ideas?

The progressive education movement mentioned above advocated many ideas that enhanced the role of school libraries. In the early 1900s the educator John Dewey coined the famous phrase, "we learn what we do." This epitomizes key ideas emerging at the time, that learning is an active process which takes place through direct interaction with resources in the environment, through "hands-on learning" children need more that recitation and drill in the traditional teacher-directed classroom; they need opportunities to interact directly with resources and learn on their own in the art room, science laboratory, garden—and the library.

Progressive education also stressed the importance of motivation and relevance, asserting that children learn better when they are interested in what they are learning and can see its importance to their lives. Educators of the time stressed the need to consider the characteristics and needs of children in general and of individual children in developing appropriate content and methods. Education, they said, should be child-centred, or learner-centred. It should also be learner-directed, making room for individual initiative and participatory learning through group work. Such opportunities abound in the school library, where learners, individually or groups, interact with a variety of resources in solving learning tasks.

Later theorists, such as Piaget and Bruner, furthered our understanding of learning and the learning process. They confirmed that learning is an active process, requiring some response on the part of the learner. They found that people learn best in different ways—some through hearing, others through visual media. They also found many types of learning, from simple recall to problem solving, each requiring different

methods and materials. In place of the former stress on factual content, educational psychologists divided educational objectives into three domains—the cognitive (knowledge and concepts), affective (attitudes and values), and psycho-motor (skills and abilities), each requiring the appropriate methodology. The variety of learning resource centre—the school library. So too can learning opportunities be found, individually or in groups, through use of the library.

The philosophy outlined above is clearly articulated in Nigerian educational policy statements, such as the *National Policy on Education (Nigeria, 1998), Universal Basic Education Programme Implementation Guidelines (Nigeria, 2000), and Curriculum Modules (NPEC, 1989).* The objectives of the education envisaged in these documents can only be achieved with the resources of well-equipped school libraries.

There are a number of other reasons why worldwide school library development characterized the last half-century. The years following World War II were a period of expansion — for education as well as for school libraries. Many countries saw rapid increase in population, to the extent that it was feared a population explosion might outstrip national and world resources; at the same time greater numbers and a greater percentage of school age children were attending school. Nations had long considered population a vital national resource, and education a key tool for national development. Nations realized the need for an educated populace in order to hold their own in the world community. As a result there was expansion of educational opportunity. No longer was formal education seen as the prerogative of a small ruling elite or a civil service class. The greater number, and the inclusion of groups formerly denied access, necessitated adaptation of education to be more responsive, more tailored to a variety of needs. The same phenomenon can be seen in Nigeria, where education in the early years was for a chosen few that would man the civil service and serve the cause of evangelism. Needs and circumstances changed radically when universal basic education became the goal. In place of a small group of students, highly motivated and relatively homogeneous in

academic terms, schools now had everyone—all abilities, aspirations, inclinations, backgrounds thrown in together. The same education that might due for the former was woefully inadequate for the new dispensation. This brought pressure for educational change and reform, which in turn enhanced the importance of libraries in education.

The years following World War II also brought a growing movement for democracy and self-determination. The needs of a free and democratic society are very different from those of an imposed order, be it colonial or dictatorial. The powers-that-be have always been suspicious of education and attempted to limit or control its impact on the masses. Rulers may see the need for widespread education for national development, but try to make it a narrow "functional" education that will teach workers the necessary skills without opening their minds to new thoughts. They often fail, as in the case of colonial Nigeria, where the students turned around to challenge British colonialism, but with democracy there is positive need for thinking citizens. The goals of education therefore change, and with them, the methods. It now becomes important to "raise a generation of people who can think for themselves," in the words of the National Policy on Education.

Independence was a strong related factor in Africa, where many nations, including Nigeria, shook off colonial rule in the early 1960s. Independence brought both democracy and new needs and priorities. The inherited system of education was re-examined in light of the new situation and found wanting. A new philosophy was developed and articulated in the National Policy on Education, one that would required the resources of a school library.

The years following World War II were also a period of economic expansion and relative prosperity in many countries. The economic good times made it possible to fund the expansion of education and provide school library resources to support teaching and learning. Publishing flourished, increasing the availability of books for school libraries. It was also a period of technological advancement that brought new types of resources to schools and libraries—audio cassettes,

television, video, computers. A number of governments poured money into education, developing and equipping school libraries as an essential educational service.

Technological advance is related to another development with far-reaching implications. The development of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) vastly increased the availability of information and the speed of its dissemination. We have entered the Information Age and the world has become a global village. Information is increasingly important as a personal and national resource. It is not having population or natural resources or industrial development that counts so much as having information. And increasingly, one can not take advantage of this information unless one had the skills for utilizing it. Kuhlthau (1995) has called the process of 'learning from information' the "key concept for the school library media centre in the information age school." In an era of knowledge explosion and information glut, one needs to be able to handle information; to locate, select, evaluate and use information; in other words, one needs information literacy.

One also needs to learn to use information effectively because our information needs and circumstances keep changing. Gone are the days when a set body of knowledge can be learned in school, and then kept and applied throughout life. Learning theory, as well as personal experience, tells us that we forget much of what we learn, especially when it is not put to regular use. But even if we did remember everything, it might not be of much use to us. The world keeps changing, and at a rapid pace. Information acquired in school may be outdated or negated by later information. Our needs also keep changing as we meet new situations, new challenges. Therefore, we have to be able to recognize when we have a problem to be solved and to locate, evaluate, and apply information in solving that problem. Moreover, these are skills we will need to apply again and again, hence the need for lifelong education.

Impact on Information Literacy Skills and the Schoolchild.

If the process of learning from information is the key concept of the information age school library, how do we foster this

5

process? First of all, one cannot learn from information without having information sources, and the greatest concentration of a variety of information sources is found in a library. Another word for these information sources is learning resources, which again are found in the learning resource centre, the library. Through interaction with these information sources, or learning resources, students can develop information literacy skills.

Information literacy may sound a bit new or strange to some, but its merely an extension of older, quite familiar concepts. Information literacy skills are 'learning skills', as the phrase 'learning from information' points out. They have also been called 'library skills,' the skills one needs to use the library and its resources. A librarian might call them 'user education'. A teacher might call some of them 'study skills'. With the rising emphasis on the concept of information, the terminology changed to 'information skills,' 'information-handling skills,' and finally 'information literacy.'

What, then is information literacy? Doyle (1994) has defined it as "the ability to access, evaluate, and use information from a variety of sources." According to the American Library Association (1989):

> To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use effectively the information needed....Ultimately information literate people are those who have learned how to learn.

This links up closely to the objectives of the National Policy on Education (life-long and self-directed learning) and Universal Basic Education Programme, which aims to "lay the foundation for life-long learning through the inculcation of appropriate learning to learn, self-awareness, citizenship and life skills" (Nigeria, 2000).

Information literacy is an umbrella term encompassing a range of skills. These can be considered under several categories:

1. literacy skills;
2. libray use skills;
3. thinking skills.

6

Literacy skills

Literacy originally referred to the ability to read and write; it was the ability to derive meaning from the written word. Often, as in the National Policy on Education objectives for primary education, it has been linked to numeracy, the equivalent ability for mathematics and communication skills, such as listening and speaking. Later, the ability to derive meaning, or 'read,' was extended to other media, giving concepts like visual literacy, or the ability to 'read' pictures, maps and charts.

The ability to read, or traditional literacy, is a crucial skill for information retrieval, since books remain vital sources of information. Even computer sources require reading for much of the information they contain. Without literacy people are severely limited in the information they can access, since so much of it comes in written forms. This perhaps explains the priority given to literacy in Nigerian educational policy and the recurrence of reading promotion campaigns. Primary schools throughout the world have traditionally focused on the 3Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic, or literacy and numeracy) because these subjects were seen as basis to formal education—literacy skills are also an essential component of information literacy.

Unfortunately, many children lack the basic reading skills to get information from books. They leave primary school or secondary school without becoming functionally literate. There are several reasons for this sad situation, but the development of well-equipped school libraries is one sure step to overcoming the problem. It has been demonstrated by the research (Krashen, 1993) that we learn to read by reading! It is not through drill and practice but by free voluntary reading that children become readers. For this they need access to books— plenty of books, pleasurable books that interest them. The school library provides just such a collection. Beginning at the earliest level, school libraries support emergent literacy through pleasurable experiences with books and reading—by providing picture story books, illustrated information books and magazines, poetry and folklore, etc., which can be shared

in storyhour and storytelling sessions. School libraries can also support emergent literacy with toys, puzzles and games. For instance, matching and memory games and puzzles develop their-reading skills, while dramatic play develops spoken language skills. As children learn to read print for themselves, they need plenty of materials (again, interesting and pleasurable materials) to practice their developing reading skills. One UNESCO study has posited that a beginning reader needs at least 800 pages of supplementary reading materials to move from primary to independent reading (Knuth, 1998). These are simple, enjoyable stories and information books to be read for pleasure, so that the child both improves reading skills and develops a strong positive attitude toward reading.

The contribution of the school library to developing literacy skills as an aspect of information literacy continues into secondary school. Towards the end of primary school or in secondary school, there is another breakthrough in the journey to becoming a reader. This, according to Carlsen (quoted in Dike, 1993), is when the child becomes so absorbed in the story that he/she forgets the technique of reading and is carried away by the content; such a child is well on the way to becoming a voluntary and lifelong reader. Children of secondary school age find other gains in reading. They begin to see the broad uses of reading for both information and pleasure, for utilitarian purposes and self-realization. The different types of reading materials offered by the school library help them learn to adapt their reading style to the type of material and their purpose, whether, for instance, it is a textbook, novel, magazine, or reference work. The school library also provides opportunities for developing advanced reading skills, such as skimming, scanning, reading for gist and reading critically.

This brings us to the second group of information literacy skills.

Library use skills

Aside from literacy skills, learners need skills in locating and retrieving information from books and other materials.

They also need to learn how to select, record, organize and present information form a variety of sources. These include the traditional topics in user education or library lessons— the part of a book, the structure of reference tools, the organization of the collection, the use of catalogues and indexes, note-taking and compiling references into a bibliography. The same types of skills can be applied to newer information sources like computers and the Internet. Computer literacy involves knowing how to locate and access information from digital sources and present information in new ways, such as a power point presentation. The skills can also be applied to information sources outside the library (Dike and Amucheazi, 2003). For instance, children can learn to locate human sources of information within the community, on say the topic of occupations or transportation, develop a list of interview questions to retrieve relevant information from them, and learn ways of recording and organizing the information for presentation. Likewise, children can learn to obtain information by careful observation of birds, domestic animals, trees, markets, etc. The materials produced in this way can be brought back to the school library as new resources for building up the collection.

The school library provides not only varied resources for learning, but also a conducive environment. The library setting encourages self-directed learning, as students conduct independent searches for information utilizing available resources or survey other possible sources. The library environment fosters cooperation and group work, as students work together on projects. Students need many opportunities for developing these library use skills if they are to avoid thoughtless copying of information from any available book.

And this brings us to the third component of information literacy known as:—

Critical thinking skills
Critical thinking is both an essential aspect of information literacy and an acknowledged objective of Nigerian education. According to the National Policy on Education, Nigerian

education aims at "laying a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking" at primary school level, and "raising a generation of people who can think for themselves" at secondary school level (Nigeria, 1998, p. 11, 13, 17). The Notes for using the Primary School Curriculum Modules of 1989 exhort teachers to "provoke pupils to think for themselves" (Nigeria, 1989, p. xiii).

Looking at the definitions of information literacy, one can see that thinking is involved at every stage of the process. Critical thinking skills are needed for deciding what information is needed and for what purpose, for evaluating information for reliability and relevance, for fitting the pieces together and drawing conclusions, and for applying the information to solve a problem. One useful plan for solving problems that brings out these thinking skills is Marland's (1981) series of questions, which include:

> What do I need to do?
> Where could I go?
> How do I get the information?
> Which resources shall I use?
> What should I make a record of?
> Have I got the information I need?
> How should I present it?
> What have I achieved?, etc.

One of the most important and difficult critical thinking skills is the ability to evaluate. Information research has shown that people are rather uncritical in their acceptance of information, that is, they are more likely to believe something than to disbelieve it (Fitzgerald, 1997). They are also easily swayed by superficial factors, like which information they receive first, the status of the person giving the information, and the amount of information given (the more the better). This is especially worrisome because the world is full of misinformation, both in spoken communication (e.g., rumour), the mass media print materials (like political propaganda and advertising), and the Internet. Added to the problem of misinformation is the sheer volume of information in the

10

modern world and the special problems of tracking down reliable information in a country like Nigeria.

To evaluate information, children must learn to ask questions, such as:

How do you know what you know? What is the evidence? Is it credible?
What viewpoint are you hearing, seeing, reading? Who is the author?
Where is he/she standing? What are his/her intentions?
How are things connected to each other? How does "it" fit in?
Where have you heard or seen this before?
What if...? Supposing that...? Can you imagine alternatives?
(Loertscher and Woolls, 1997)

The school library plays a valuable role in developing thinking skills because of the variety of materials and viewpoints it offers. When children have only one source of information, it is difficult to evaluate it critically (except by comparing the presentation to their personal experience). But when pupils and students are exposed to a variety of information sources in the school library and guided in the evaluation process by the librarian, they can begin on sift through and decide what information is more reliable, relevant, and suitable to their purpose. It should be emphasized that, as the NPE acknowledges, critical thinking is a process that should begin at the earliest level and proceed throughout the educational process.

Conclusion

We have seen in this brief exposition that school libraries and information literacy education go hand in hand. School libraries developed as the result of changing ideas in education—that education should be learner-centred and resource-based, that learning is an active and multi-faceted process, that learning how to learn is more important than memorizing a body of facts, that education is a lifelong

11

engagement. Other factors include the worldwide expansion of educational opportunity and objectives, the growing commitment to democracy, and the advent of the Information Age.

These developments have led to the concept of information literacy—the ability to access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources. School libraries are the heart of the school because they provide the resources and opportunities for developing information literate persons, individuals who have learned how to learn. School libraries promote the development of literacy, the development of the reading, language and communication skills needed to access information from a variety of sources. The resources of school libraries enable children to learn to locate, retrieve record, organize and present information to meet their needs and solve their problems. School libraries also provide the resources and environment for developing critical thinking skills, for provoking children to think and encouraging them to ask questions. By so doing, school libraries help "lay the foundation for life-long learning through the inculcation of appropriate learning to learn, self-awareness, citizenship and life skills" (Nigeria, 2000).

Let us, therefore, join hands to develop school libraries, so that we may raise a generation of information literate citizens, capable of realizing their full potential and contributing fully to their community and nation.

References

American Library Association (1989). Presidential Committee on Information Literacy: Final Report Chicago: ALA

Dike. V. W. (1993). *Library Resources in Education. Enugu:* ABIC.

Dike. V. W. & Amucheazi. O. N. (2003). Information Literacy Education in Nigeria: Breaking Down Barriers through Local Resources. In *IASL Reports, 2003. School Libraries Breaking Down Barriers.* 195-205.

Doyle, C. (1994). *Information Literacy in an Information Society: A Concept for the Information Age.* Syracuse, N. Y,: ERIC.

Fitzgerald, M. A. (1997). Critical Thinking: Tools for Internet Information Evaluation, In *Information Rich but Knowledge Poor?* Edited by Lightball and Haycock, 39-51.

Knuth. R. (1998). Building a Literature Environment: Using Oral-Based Reading Materials to Facilitate Literacy.' Paper presented at the 64th IFLA General Conference. Amsterdam. August 16-21.

Krashen. S. (1993). *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research.* Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited.

Kuhlthan. C. C. (1995). The Process of Learing from Information. *School Libraries Worldwide* 1(1), 1-12.

Loertscher. D. V. & Woolls, B. (1997). The Information Literacy Movement of the School Library Media Field: A Preliminary Summary of the Research. In *Information Rich but Knowlegde Poor?* Edited by Lightball and Laycock, 337-366.

Marland, M. (1981). *Information Skill in the Secondary Curriculum.* London: Methen.

Nigeria (1998). *National Policy on Education.* 3rd ed. Abuja: NERDC.

Nigeria (2000). *Implementation Guidelines for the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme.* Abuja: Federal Ministry of Education.

Nigeria (1989). National Primary Education Commission. *Primary School Cirriculum Modules.* Lagos: Evans for National Implementation Committee on National Policy on Education.