

Accessibility and Suitability of Public Library Services among the Agencies of Government to Users of Information in Nigeria: A Case Study of Bauchi State Library Board

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ABSTRACT

Public libraries are established to serve the educational, informational and recreational needs of user community without discrimination. This study adopted a descriptive survey as its research design. The purpose was to evaluate accessibility and suitability of public library services in Bauchi, with special reference to the state library board. It tries to find out why users fail to utilize the libraries regularly, and if they use the libraries at all, what reasons do they have for using the libraries. Random sampling technique was employed to select 100 respondents from the library. Findings revealed that majority of the library users are students followed by teachers, while small proportion of the users are civil servants and other member of the public. Finally, it was recommended among other things that capacity building program should be introduced for librarians to enable them update their knowledge of library promotion for effective utilization; children's library resources should also be improved.

INTRODUCTION

A public library sometimes called "the people's university" is established and financed by the government (Anyanwu, 2001). It is the only library that is open to everybody irrespective of age, sex or religion. To justify its existence, the Michigan Survey Research Center, U.S. Social Science Research Council enlisted the functions of the public library (Totterdall, 1959) as: (i) facilitating formal and informal set of education of all people in the Community, (ii) meeting the information needs of the people of the community, (iii) encouraging good recreation and contracture use of leisure time, and (iv) enriching or further developing the subject on which individuals are undertaking formal study. Others include: (i) supporting the educational and cultural activity of group and organizations in the locality; (ii) providing materials on local history of the community for research and other purpose, (iii) making the availability of materials to new literate, and (iv) maintaining dynamic references and information service.

Public libraries are resources for scholars, a centre of information, an aid for students, a means of self-education and a centre of amusement (Daniel, 2005). It is a major agency of enlightenment for adults, providing also for children the recorded experiences of others which will help them to grow to adulthood (Aguolu, 1983). Okonkwo (2004) stresses one of the secret ways of equipping learners, who comprises pupils and students is to have a well equipped and functional libraries in the community. The objective functions and operations of a public library however, have no meaning outside the community it serves. The usefulness of any public library depends on its ability to serve the community

as a general centre of reliable information and to provide opportunity and encouragement for people of all ages to educate themselves continuously (Opara, 2008). Public libraries in any place they are, exist for the sake of freedom of thought, but a striking feature of all under-developed nations is the paucity of libraries (Nwokocha, 1998), these of course, include Bauchi State. With the introduction of the new policy on education in 1987, at no time in the history of Nigeria has the need to establish and equip libraries been felt more than this time (Opara, 2008). Ologunleko (2001) posits that public libraries may be said to be libraries established and funded with tax payers money for the free and unrestricted provision of materials to members of the public for study purposes and for vocational, cultural and recreational use. Opara (2005) points out that the intellectual life of any given community revolves around its library, public library, the absence of which will spell doom both educationally, socially, culturally and other wise for the community. The current trend in educational system is now geared towards day schools as against boarding. With the circumstances, public libraries have to be developed to cope with the large influx of day students that are faced with various constraints at home such as lack of reading materials, poor electricity facilities, noise, overcrowding and other insanitary conditions. Such environments do not encourage reading, and a good public library system becomes very essential. Bauchi State Library Board was established to perform such duties as establishing, equipping, managing and maintaining the public libraries in the State. Mchombu (1992) has reported that the libraries have received as much priority as other essential services like hospital and schools. He further stated that at independence there was hope that libraries in Nigeria would help to spread information and advance the pace of development in any part of the country.

As a result of this, coupled with resources availability at that time, there was reasonable growth of libraries in Africa as pointed out by Neil (1991), Havard and Mchornbu (1987) who say that despite competition with other obvious and pressing concerns, legislations were enacted soon after independence in the country committing government to free public library services. Unfortunately, the services that were developed, failed to meet the expectations and match the information needs of Africa and its people let alone a country like Nigeria and Bauchi State in particular. Apathy, grudge and charitable indulgence are the ubiquitous reactions of Africa's government and its people towards libraries and librarianship. Opara (2005) also indicated that public libraries are veritable instrument for both formal and informal education; they exist for the total development of the individual and the society at large. He further stated that being popularly known as the "common man's university" the public library has the traditional role of acquiring books and making them available to patrons without regards to citizenship, age, educational level or social status. Antwi (1989) reveals that the resources of Bauchi Metropolis public library were meager in terms of literature collection, equipment, furniture and manpower. Contrary to its collection development policy, the library did not stock non-book materials. He concluded that lack of a library board established by law basically accounted for the lopsided development of library services in Bauchi State. Hence, the purposes for which this study is conducted are:

- (i) To investigate the extent to which members of the public in Bauchi State have expressed or unexpressed needs of citizenship information;
- (ii) To explore their preferred routes to the acquisition of such information;
- (iii) To investigate both suitability and accessibility of the public library among other agencies of government for the users seeking information.

METHOD

Descriptive survey was adopted for this study. The population of the study in all the users of public library in Bauchi Metropolis, comprising pupils, students, teachers and civil servants. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. One hundred copies (100) of the questionnaire were distributed to randomly selected users in the library. The questionnaire was chosen because it seemed the most economical involving less time and effort in its administration. Users were provided with questions on accessibility and suitability of public library services as compared to private libraries in Bauchi metropolis. The questionnaire was structured to receive information on the categories of users and the frequency of library use, how staff interact with users, the relevance of the collection to users and the effectiveness of the services offered by the library. The respondents were also requested to document the problems they encountered while using the library and provide suggestions to improve the library system/services. In all 95 out of 100 copies of the questionnaires were filled and returned, representing a response rate of 95%. The data obtained were subjected to statistical analysis with the application of frequency count and simple percentage. The results of the analysis were presented using tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4 presents category of users from the minimal to the maximal level. With the new educational system, the trend is now towards day schools as against boarding schools. In the circumstance, public libraries have to be developed to cope with the yearning need of information resources by the students, since most of the students are faced with various constraints at home such as lack of reading materials, poor electricity facilities, noise, overcrowding and other insanitary conditions. The table identifies the rate of secondary school students who patronize the libraries compared to other users.

This study revealed that large percentage of users of the public libraries in Bauchi metropolis are students. This pattern is not exclusive to Bauchi alone, as it is common in most developing countries where literacy rates are higher among the younger age groups than the adults. Writing with specific reference to Nigeria, Bengue (1979) observes that in urban public libraries, an overflow of young people occupies every available horizontal place. A large percentage of the users use the library mainly to read their class notes and textbooks. This is not surprising, as it has already been indicated elsewhere by the readers that they either do not find the materials they need, or even when they are found, they are often outdated. This may be one of the reasons why Bauchi State Library Board has recently made it mandatory that users of its reading room must be members of the lending library. This is to discourage the use of reference room as reading room.

Among the reasons given for not using the library regularly, location had the least percentage. This shows that the public libraries are generally well located. A considerable number of users (majority) indicates that they go to the library also to prove the point that the library was centrally located. Also an impressive number of users indicated that the size of the library was too small, they further suggested that there should be a wide extension to the building. Based on the findings, almost all public libraries in the country are faced with the problems of space due to the increasing number of day schools which lead to large number of users. In relation to the inadequacy of reading rooms, the poor state of facilities in Bauchi public library, it has been observed that the public library still has a number of out model editions of both reference materials and textbooks on their shelves. A simple search at the Bauchi State Library Board revealed that some of the reference materials are dated as far back as 1947-1978, at a time when much later editions are in the market. It was also found that only few of the libraries have functioning photocopying machines. When confronted with the importance of such a service in our libraries, then it is not surprising that a large number of users indicated that they do not use the library regularly because of inadequate facilities. Despite the poor facilities in the libraries, a considerable number of users indicated that the staff are providing adequate services. This is against expectations, since adequate services depend considerably on good facilities.

Perhaps users considered 'services' to mean personal attention given to them by the library staff. Readers were also asked to indicate whether they are allowed to access the collections in the public libraries. Going by the results of the questionnaire, all the public libraries in the State, allow the users to browse at the materials. The allowance of browsing in libraries because of serendipity has been strongly advocated by many writers. Although the open access system has some disadvantages a library user should not be prevented from physical contact with library materials because of the possibility of picking up occasionally, materials that may later be of interest to him. This survey also showed that quite a substantial number of users go to the public libraries to read newspapers, so newspaper purchase should be enhanced. This may be true especially in the case of neoliterates who tend to concentrate on reading newspapers and magazines rather than books. Services to rural people also mean more use of library stall. The staff involved in this type of services should be dedicated to the task. Unfortunately, it has been observed that all the professional staff employed by the library board are left in the headquarters. While other public libraries outside the State capital are manned by non professional staff. This has greatly affected the image and services of public libraries in Bauchi State.

Table 1: The sample frame and the copies of questionnaire distributed

| S/N | Categories of users | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|---------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 | Pupils | - | - |
| 2 | Students | 20 | 20% |
| 3 | Teachers | 45 | 45% |
| 4 | Civil servants | 35 | 35% |
| Total | | 100 | 100% |

Source: Survey, 2011

Table 2: Resources of the Library

| Description | Statistics |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Year established | 1976 |
| Total collection | 29,026 |
| Seating capacity | 400 |
| No. of professional librarians | 10 |
| Other staff | 22 |

Source: Survey, 2011

Table 3: The present resources on ground

| Description | Statistics |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Total collection | 50,226 |
| Seating capacity | 605 |
| No. of professional librarians | 11 |
| Para-professional staff | 38 |
| Auxiliaries | 119 |

Source: Survey, 2011

Table 4: Categories of users

| Classification | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Civil servants | 07 | 7.4 |
| Secondary/primary school students | 70 | 73.7 |
| Teachers | 10 | 10.5 |
| Others | 8 | 8.4 |
| Total | 95 | 100 |

Source: Survey, 2011

Table 5: Reasons for using the library

| Purpose | Count | Response |
|------------|-------|----------|
| Reading | 30 | 31.5 |
| Research | 05 | 05.3 |
| Reference: | 20 | 21.11 |
| Studying | 40 | 42.11 |
| Total | 95 | 100 |

Source: Survey, 2011

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the history of public libraries in Africa, the Nigerian public library has been cited as a model (Erinle, 2001). It is therefore unfortunate that the public library system has deteriorated so much as a result of government lack of interest in library development. In order for public libraries to remain relevant and adequate to the current needs of the society, they must be prepared to adapt to changes and redefine their goals to meet them. A public library should be a dynamic institution in the societal development and mass culture of the people. Based on the findings, the following are recommended:

1. To supply the neo-literate with suitable reading materials. Newspapers and magazines subscriptions in Bauchi State public libraries should be maintained and possibly increase.

2. Also of immediate attention is the collection, storage and dissemination of oral literature in the public library. This aspect of the library is very much neglected in Bauchi public library despite the fact that it forms a very important function in traditional societies such as ours.
3. From the writer's observations, public libraries should be brought closer to the people. This requires the provision of more public libraries in Bauchi State. Care should however be taken to ensure that the materials are suitable to the background of the children.
4. Bauchi state library board should encourage reading culture by providing libraries in all the twenty (20) local government headquarters, groom more librarians and library officers, who could be employed and posted to man the various libraries. Since most of the users have been found to be students, it is recommended that large reading rooms should be built in all the local government headquarters to provide for those who are just studying for their examinations using their own text books.
5. Our public libraries must improve upon the facilities of the libraries. Attempts should be made by the public libraries to provide more materials for children and adolescents. Thus, given the educational function of the public library, it has a clear obligatory experience.
6. Public libraries in Nigeria should attract more people to existing library facilities. Unless the libraries receive substantial use, they do not fulfill their functions in the community. This includes information about the library, where it is, when it is open, who can use it, and what it provides. It is recommended that the government must as a matter of priority; provide more funds for the public libraries in order not betray its claim of the importance of libraries in Nigeria's development particularly in Bauchi State.
7. Concerted effort should be made to put in place well planned programme of continuing education for librarian working under the board in order to update their knowledge and acquire necessary skills to meeting the challenges of contemporary times.

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