

Development of advocacy and action plan with decision makers of public secondary schools on libraries in Southern Nigeria

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Abstract:

One of the best ways to advance a course of action is by direct involvement of leadership and stakeholders. In this regard, an advocacy action was carried out, based on the low state of some school libraries in Akwa Ibom, Southern Nigeria. The target for the advocacy action was heads/principals of secondary schools when they assembled during their first official meeting with the new Chair of the State Secondary Education Board on March 2013, under the aegis of All Nigeria Confederation of Principals of Schools (ANCOPPS). The meeting recorded the largest turnout of principals from all over the state. The contact with the principals was designed to open up possibilities for the Library Association in the state to partner with and offer possible assistance towards the improvement of public school libraries. Following this, an enquiry session was conducted with each school principal to ascertain the status of their school library in terms of funding, staffing and planning issues. The outcome was revealing with portrayals of the current state of school libraries which were not significantly plausible, resulting in a proposed plan of action by related library authorities with attentive communiqué. On the whole the advocacy was worthwhile in terms of the possibilities of bringing about change, though follow up is required to ensure progressive line of action.

Keywords: Education, Funding, Libraries, Personnel, Planning, School principals

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1. Background

Southern Nigeria comprises geo-political zones of South-West, South-East and South–South where Akwa Ibom State is located. The Akwa Ibom State government in Southern Nigeria runs free and compulsory education system at primary and secondary school levels. In Nigeria, the school library system was inaugurated in the 1960s (Ogunsheye, 1998) to provide access to resources and foster academic advancement. The provision of school libraries is the concern of the Ministry of Education and its agencies/arms. Unlike the private school sector in which libraries are funded and equipped through sundry fees from students, about half of the public schools do not have school libraries, though they are acclaimed to be widely available. In the light of this situation, an advocacy initiative was undertaken by the lead author in 2013 to communicate with secondary school principals during their epoch making forum in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State under the aegis of All Nigeria Confederation of Principals of Secondary Schools (ANCOPSS) to encourage them to give priority towards the development of their school libraries on issues such as finance, staffing and planning variables.

ANCOPSS is an organization of principals of government-owned post-primary schools founded in January 3rd 1957 with chapters in all regions of Nigeria. The contact with them became an avenue to gather data important to help understand perspectives of the stakeholders to be influenced. As heads/CEOs of their institutions, principals are core decision makers on matters directly concerning their school and as such, wield a lot of influence. This necessitated their being first contact for the advocacy.

National Policy on Education (NPE): School structure and libraries

Secondary schools in Nigeria are either state government owned, federal or private. Most of them run standard and specialized curriculum (technical or vocational) as recommended by the Federal Ministry of Education. It is therefore not uncommon to find some schools designated as science colleges, technical schools, or commercial/vocational schools. English remains the language of communication for secondary schools.

The National Policy on Education (NPE), developed by the Federal Ministry of Education (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2004) states that education, being an instrument for national development, needs to be functional, practical, relevant and comprehensive. Accordingly, the educational system should be structured to develop the practice of self-learning, and school facilities should continue to be expanded and made accessible to afford the individual a more diversified choice (NPE, pp 6-9). From the foregoing, the school library, if well positioned, could offer benefits related to self learning and choice.

Basic education, according to NPE section 3, comprises six years of primary education and six years of secondary school comprising three-year junior secondary (JSS 1-3) and three-year senior (SSS 3-6). On completion of junior secondary school, the individual may wish to pause and venture into some employment/vocation, or combine work with study with prospect of resuming studies afterwards, though most parents particularly from Southern Nigeria where educational enrolment is high prefer their wards to move from junior to senior.

Core subjects such as English, mathematics, biology, integrated science (for junior category) social studies and the like are offered, along with pre-vocational electives e.g. arts and crafts, auto mechanics, metal work, shorthand, cloth and textile, or music which may become students' vocational choice.

NPE section 11 sub-section E and F on Educational/Library Services, stipulates that 'the library is the heart of the education enterprise' and constitutes one of the most important educational services. The policy states further that schools shall provide functional libraries in accordance with prescribed standards. They shall also provide training for librarians and library assistants for this service.

Quality education is dependent on factors such as planning, good administration, funding, quality control and supervision. NPE section 12, sub section 103 also stipulates that these duties shall be the responsibility of the state education ministry or its Local Education Authority (LEA) to ensure quality control of instructional and other educational services (by extension, library system) and provide adequate and balanced support for educational services.

The extent and avenue whereby these policies are implemented with regard to the school library system is an aspect which this paper seeks to address. At present, government agencies and groups concerned with the development of the school library system in Nigeria are the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), World Bank, State Universal Basic Education Commission/Board (UBEC/SUBEB), Ministries of Education- Federal and State, State Public Library Boards, Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN), Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC), State Secondary Education Board and Nigerian School Library Association (NSLA), a chapter of Nigerian Library Association.

Rationale for school library advocacy and case studies

The school library, like any other organized library system, exists as collection of recorded knowledge in print and non print format, and is intended for access and use by members of the school. The school library is a place for learners to find information, resources, services, and instruction. Alegbeleye (2008) posits that the school library is source of information where literacy is enhanced and reading competence improved by individual readers.

A review of studies, however, on library related issues found that there is little or no documentation of previous advocacy with school principals en mass. From the only research repository of post-graduate works on education and library science, University of Uyo, 268 works were reviewed based on the locality, being mostly local government areas (LGAs) in Akwa Ibom state. The research works were dated from 1995 to 2010. The studies were on: school management, principals' leadership style, teacher's characteristics and their effectiveness, instructional media, students' performance, demographic variables and others.

From series of over 20 articles also reviewed from the official journal of the Nigerian School Library Association from 2006 onwards, major topics treated covering zones in Southern Nigeria were on: reading skill development, school library use, basic education, school media programme, information literacy, library resources/services, education stake holders, pioneer children resource centers, digital school library, budgeting, quality assurance, and management. None of the studies treated school principals/advocacy except for Nnadozie

(2006) on library services from six schools in South-West, which mentioned informal discussions with principals to enable the study carried out in designated schools.

The Universal Basic Education Commission (2007) monitoring report on school library projects highlighted case studies covering nearly all zones in Southern Nigeria. It documents that in Akwa Ibom State, 91 school libraries were constructed with 31 being functional (Edeghere, 2009). This report, though quite insightful, only covers primary schools.

Selected papers, written to mark the Nigerian Library Association's 40-year existence in 2002, discussed school library services sparsely, and the schools or regions were not identified distinctively, though recommendations were proffered to train teacher-librarians.

Finally, prior discussion with ANCOPSS Secretary confirmed there had been no advocacy-related contact by librarians with school principals collectively. Knowing that bureaucratic processes can delay project implementation over time, the lead author initiated the advocacy action by exploring the actual state of school libraries with core decision makers (the principals) in order to raise their awareness of school libraries.

2. Action Plan and Activity

Advocacy approach

Advocacy is an endeavour, a set of targeted actions to promote and support a cause (Centre for Population and Environmental Development-CPED, 2009). The contact established with ANCOPSS in essence was simple communication to enable some considerations about school library situation and to promote reflections about how these libraries could help to actualize educational goals through meaningful interventions. Ethical principles on opinion gathering and reporting were considered to eliminate unwarranted consequences. In this regard, an informal audience was granted by core members of ANCOPSS executive through their state secretary to clarify intended purpose of the advocacy along other issues. Following this, an enquiry form to be administered to the principals was examined by their leaders too.

The advocacy plan and subsequent contact were in congruence with Robert Cialdini's Universal Principles for Advocacy Success (Cialdini, 2007):

Reciprocity and Liking

Building relationships made the contact with entire school principals at their Annual General Meeting a lot easier because their State Secretary had in previous years established goodwill and rapport with the main author at various social and formal circles. Being known by the appointed Chair of the State Secondary Education Board (SSEB) was additional advantage.

Authority and Social Proof

The period of the advocacy activity was when the newly appointed first female Chair of the State Secondary Education Board came into office. On the meeting day she remarked and charged principals to encourage reading clubs and libraries "to engage students' minds meaningfully". This heightened responses from participants when approached to partake in the research/enquiry. More so, the State Chairman of ANCOPSS on same day stated openly in his remarks that "in reality, most secondary schools (in Akwa Ibom State) don't have libraries".

Consistency/Commitment and Scarcity

From related remarks made in lieu of the awareness raised on school libraries during the meeting and having realised the need for commitment to advance the growth of their school libraries, principals showed interest and willingness to embrace further line of action as they received the enquiry forms which further raised consciousness as to what is expected of them and their libraries. More so, the awareness that the lead author who initiated the advocacy, is an educationist like them helped to gain their support and response.

The enquiry was a planned part of the advocacy to elicit immediate feedback on the present situation based on issues raised. This was necessary, based on the understanding that it may not be possible to have massive turnout at state level thereafter, except for smaller numbers of principals which meet at chapter levels at various dates and time.

Method

The research plan and process commenced in the first week of February through March 2013, barely a month after the newly-constituted board members of the State Secondary Education Board (SSEB) assumed office. The contact with All Nigeria Confederation of Principals of Secondary Schools (ANCOPSS) served dual purpose of advocacy and eliciting data using enquiry form which addressed funding, staffing and planning factors. Their membership stands at 315 while 280 were estimated to be in attendance during the period of this contact. The meeting therefore witnessed massive turnout by members, being their first official meeting with the newly appointed Board Chair of Secondary schools. The participants were contacted and spoken to by the lead author in groups and individually (for those who were busy handling some duties and others who were not prompt at the meeting) with the purpose of intimating them on the relevance of library before distributing enquiry forms one-to-one to those willing to participate. On the whole 98 enquiry forms were distributed while 87 completed forms were analysed and presented as findings. Names of schools were not required to encourage honest responses. Female principals mostly declined, not wanting to be 'bothered' while others declined on grounds that their school is yet to have a library. The exercise occurred from 10a.m morning to 5.00pm evening to enable participants' response at their convenience and to avoid interrupting their business session.

Projected outcome

A communiqué from this paper's report is intended to be tendered before the SSEB Chair who was in attendance for required intervention, and to Nigerian Library Association (NLA) whose previous official is the co-author. Unexpectedly, the extended industrial crisis by university academics in Nigeria three months after the advocacy was detrimental to further line of action. However, it is intended that a formal joint action committee for distributed contact to the principals and the schools they represent will be carried out once more with the planned effort of NLA members residing at various areas in the state. In other words, librarians at various local areas will bear the responsibility of liaising with stakeholders of school for possible development plan and action while efforts will also be made towards intensifying training for designated library staff at various schools to ensure some level of professionalism. Such training activity had previously been conducted by NLA in the recent past with another slated to hold in June 2014 during the library week in Akwa Ibom state; related issues would furthermore be addressed there. A one-page report on the initiative was forwarded to national headquarters of NLA in last quarter of 2013. Based on this report, a visit to secondary school libraries by Librarians' Registration Council of Nigeria (LRCN) was formally scheduled to commence in April 2014 as expressed in their bulletin. Though a report

of the outcome is yet to be published as the process may be ongoing, it is however encouraging that attention is being paid at national level to the state of school libraries generally in Nigeria.

3. Results and Discussion

The staff responsible for the school libraries under study were mostly holders of secondary school certificate 39 (46%) followed by 20 (24%) who have a degree qualification (Fig. 1). This means that most of those involved in school library services are not qualified or are non professionals. Ogunniyi and Jato (2010) noted that in most Nigerian school libraries, professionally qualified library staff or even para-professionals are scarce.

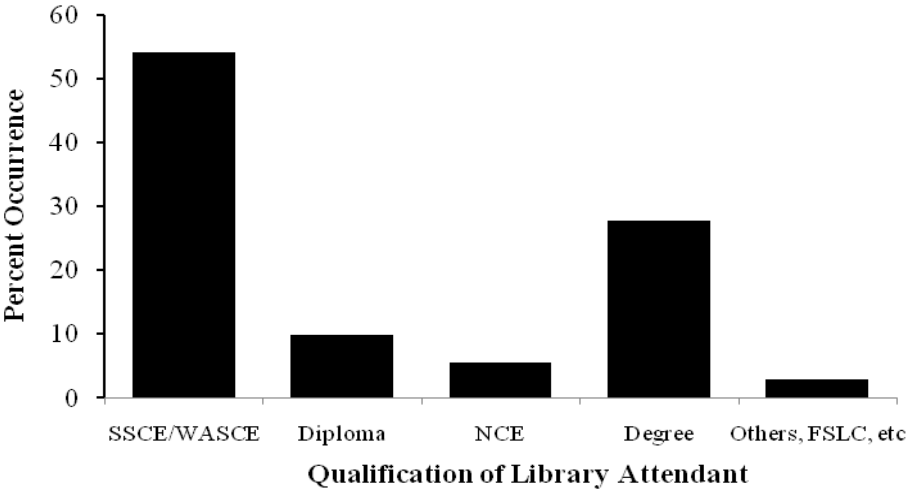


Fig 1: Qualification of school library staff

On staff attending any library related seminar/workshop, this study gathered from respondents (school principals) that 58 (75%) of staff attached to school libraries have not attended any such training, (Fig. 2). In a situation where unqualified staff handles school library services, training opportunities are very much needed.

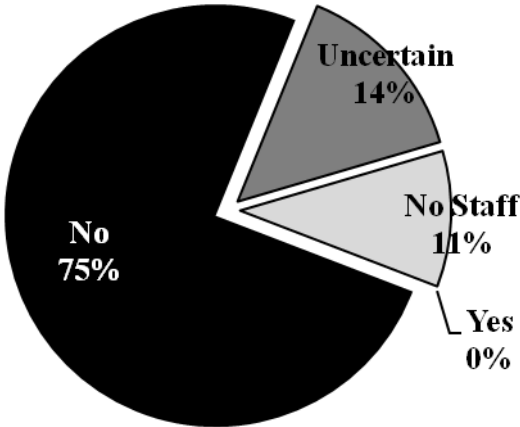


Fig. 2 Attendance at Library Seminars/Workshops

Figure 3 indicates that school libraries exist in 56% of secondary schools.

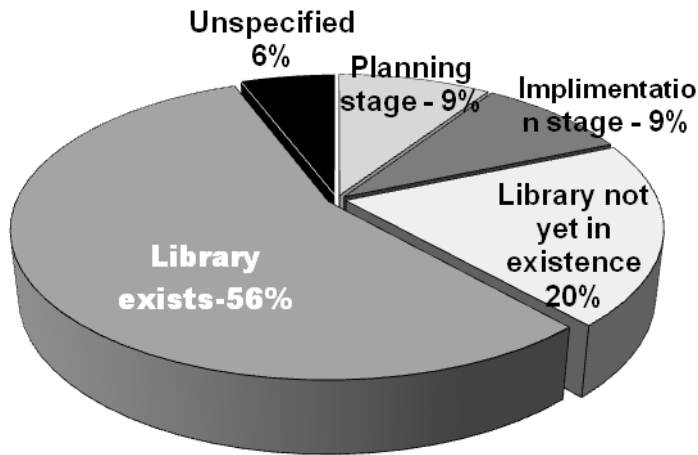


Fig. 3: Development stage of library

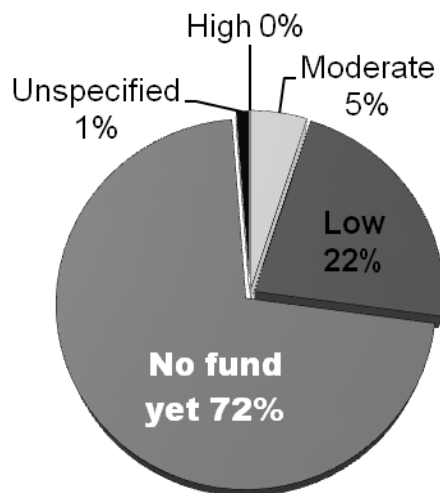


Fig. 4: Fund allocation for school library development

Findings above reveal that library funding for majority of secondary schools is really low. (Fig. 4).

The school principals indicated that most of the funding for libraries comes from the state government. (Fig. 5). Hamzat (2002), Dike (2005), and Saka and Bitagi (2010) indicated that inadequate funding by the government is a major deterrent to effective school library operation.

Figure 6 shows that of the various possible sponsors for school libraries, individuals were most benevolent (17%). All other categories indicate little or entirely no support.

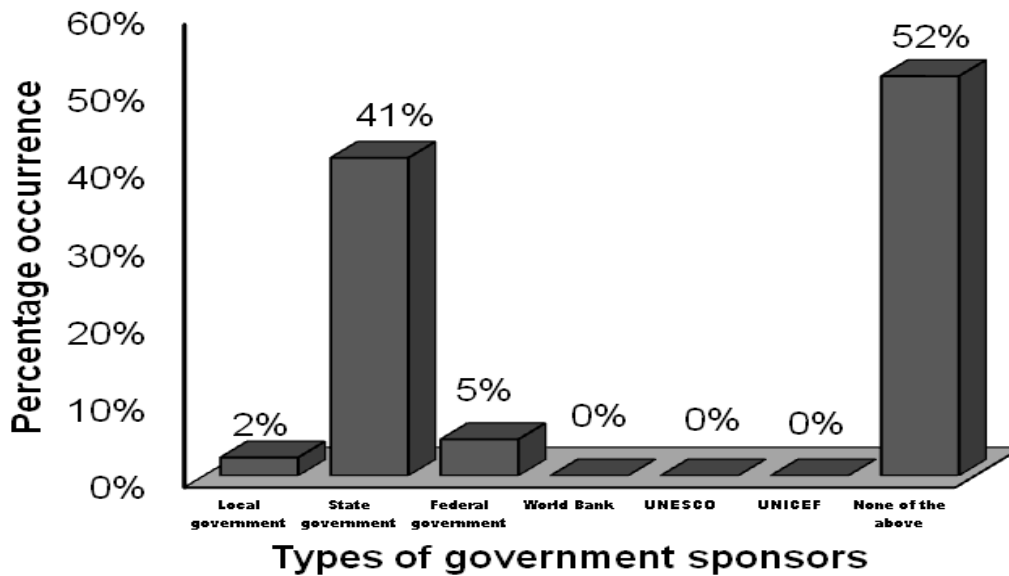


Fig. 5: Government sponsors for school library development

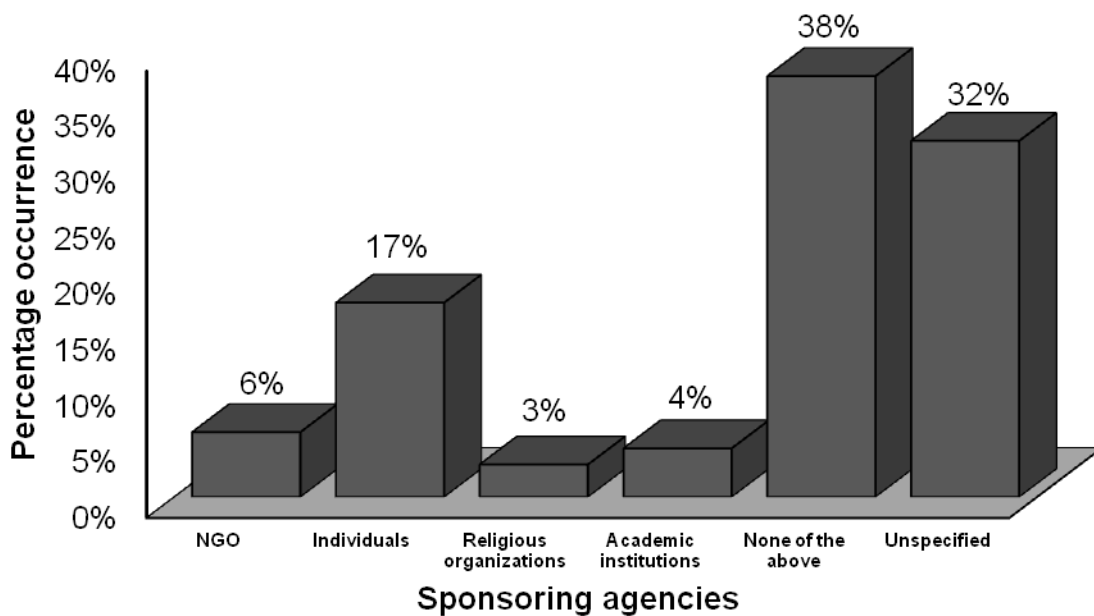


Fig. 6: Other sponsors of school library development

4. Recommendations: Towards Re-envisioning and Re-positioning

Personnel remain the most vital element in any organization, from the school principal who functions as the CEO of the school to members of staff including the school library personnel designated to manage and provide access to books and other resources to aid student learning. Olajojo and Idada (2007) suggest that school heads should locate themselves in the centre of the school library activity as they determine the fate of not only the school library resource center, but also of the librarian. The school librarian, on the other hand, needs to keep up with

the multi-disciplinary and contemporary role of the school library media specialist. A workable policy on library collection and development should be stipulated and reviewed periodically.

In a communiqué issued at the 56th annual national congress in April 2013, ANCOPSS reiterated that principals are critical stakeholders in the provision of quality education in Nigeria and therefore urged the government to involve them in policy formulation and implementation. ANCOPSS recommended also that the government establish a National Secondary Education Commission, construct classrooms and/or renovate existing structures and ensure that educational matters are well funded and not politicized. However, ANCOPSS was silent on the issue of libraries, perhaps because at national level, issues directly affecting school principals are a major concern while stipulated agenda for the national AGM had to be strictly adhered to, which still calls for the need for advocacy at that level.

Elaturoti (2010) noted that ‘with the present situation in school library development, the expected collaboration in programme implementation is not noticeable, hence the need for stakeholders in school library development to have an interactive session to deliberate...for maximum result.’ In Nigeria, the status of librarianship often has been challenged as to whether it is a profession or simply a vocation (Philip, 2007). Such notions require appropriate redress, and a review of implementable policies that enhance visibility of the library/librarian’s role is needed.

5. Conclusion

The advocacy’s aim was to sensitize decision makers of secondary schools (principals) about the need for efficient management of school libraries, being an integral part of the school system. The findings of the enquiry describe the ‘minuses’ in school library situation in Southern Nigeria, suggesting the school library system needs a general overhauling in line with the goals of the National Policy on Education (NPE) and the issue of school library funding must not be overlooked.

Elaturoti (2011) posits that, though libraries exist in some Nigerian schools, there has been no legislation enacted to enforce the provision of school libraries, in compliance with the National Policy on Education (NPE). The advocacy action described in this paper could be extended by ANCOPSS, library associations, practitioners and other stakeholders into a campaign to establish and improve school libraries in public secondary schools. The possibility of raising non-governmental funds for school libraries could also be explored by the school heads, school library staff and the Parents’ Forum. The forum connects parents to schools of their children in a meeting, usually held once a term, to deliberate and to offer recommendations and support on issues such as development, finance, and welfare.

In view of the experience encountered prior to and during the advocacy, we personally learned that establishing rapport with leaders of any contact group becomes a doorway to initiating line of action and engenders trust and co-operation, more so when there is assurance that the course of action to be taken speaks about progress rather than personal gains. The entire activity became a lesson that with passion, will and courage, initiating an endeavour is possible while it serves as bridge for future action.

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