The Development of School Libraries in Ghana

A. A. ALEMNA*

INTRODUCTION

Libraries occupy an important position in the learning and teaching programmes of any educational system. "To become educationally effective and significant however, the school library programme must be planned and developed as an integral component of the overall educational design."1 The same serious thought and ingenuity required for shaping an academic programme of excellence must be employed in designing and structuring the school library programme.

Not enough has been done in research on school library facilities and services in Ghana. Perhaps people do not appreciate its usefulness or people are apathetic about what goes on in the schools provided their children and wards are able to pass their examinations. But a serious reflection on the issue of the importance of school libraries in the educational programme may lead to more considerations being given to the need for changes and improvement in the library facilities, if the library is to play its rôle to direct involvement in the learning and teaching process.

HISTORY

In Ghana, provision of books for children started almost as soon as that for adults. With the establishment of the Ghana Library Board in 1950, immediate steps were taken to provide materials for school children. It is not a mistake, therefore, to know that about 60% of the registered readers of the Ghana Library Board is made up of children. It must, of course, be remembered that there is still a large percentage of illiteracy in the country, and that is mainly amongst adults, so that the figure is not really surprising.

* Lecturer, Department of Library Studies, University of Maiduguri, Nigeria.

Accra: Library Board.
The success of the children’s section in the public libraries prompted the Ministry of Education to empower the Ghana Library Board to make library books accessible to school children. The first type of library for schools was therefore, the mobile library system whereby the books were sent in book vans from the capital of Ghana to the rural areas for use by school children. The service was to operate over the whole country and would cover all approved middle and secondary schools. Books were issued on the basis of one per child, but where the enrolment was less than one hundred, the number would be increased. The books deposited were for out-of-school reading, and pupils were encouraged to borrow them and taken them home. Responsibility for the safe custody was placed on the schools. The Library Board felt the need for children to realize that reading was not something to be left behind once they left the school, but was an activity that could be enjoyed to the full in the home as well.

This service was however, beset with numerous problems. In a country with so wide a terrain and inaccessible areas, transportation became a serious problem. It was thus not surprising that, up to 1959, the school library service of the Ghana Library Board had not covered all the regions in the country. The major problem, however, was the availability of the required number and types of books for the schools. The selection of books was normally done by the staff and children, and what often happened was that the popular books were in short supply. In a country with very few publishing houses, this meant that the books had to be imported from other countries, and this involved a lot of time and money.

It can, however, be said that the initial attempt was a success, since it achieved the basic aim of getting the children to read recreational books so as to widen their educational background.

Present Situation

Attempts have been made in recent times to find out how school libraries are run in Ghana. For example, the Ghana Library Board conducted a survey on school and college libraries in the Accra-Tema metropolitan area in 1963. This survey revealed sky-high differences in the school libraries that were covered, both in bookstock and in organization and administration. The report of this survey formed the basis of a memorandum sent by the Ghana Library Board to the Educational Review Committee of 1966. This committee recommended the setting up of a school libraries division in the Ministry of Education to take charge of providing library services to the schools.

Further to this, a committee made up of officials from the Ministry of
Education, the Ghana Library Board and the British Council, was set up to establish the true picture of schools and colleges libraries and make recommendations. The findings of this committee led to an annual grant of £500.00 each to be made to the schools, for improving their libraries. There was another survey in 1967 by the Ghana Library Board, covering all schools and colleges in the country. This survey recommended among other things, that school and college libraries should obtain their books and other library materials directly from the Ghana Library Board. It was also recommended that there should be a closer relationship between the School Libraries Division of the Ghana Library Board, and the various schools and colleges.

In 1974, another survey was carried out on the resources of school and college libraries in Ghana. This also recommended, among other things, the general improvement of school and college libraries in Ghana, and the training of more staff to take charge of the libraries.

Unfortunately, the results of these surveys have not been enough to get the school libraries out of the poor conditions in which they found themselves in the past. At present, school libraries in Ghana are not functioning to take their proper places in the learning and teaching programme. There is a need for regular examination of school libraries with a view to keeping them up to date with the changing functions of a school library.

When existing facilities and services of school libraries in Ghana are observed, it would appear that they are just mere collections of materials in space with very little equipment for students to use. The general idea could be viewed in the following light:

1. **Accommodation.** A survey of school libraries in Ghana will show that very few schools have special blocks or buildings for libraries. Most of the schools have single rooms often attached to the classrooms that are used as school libraries. The furniture is the same as that used in the classrooms. It is made up of wooden chairs and tables. “There are few schools that use metal chairs and shelves.”

2. **Stocks of books and other materials.** In most schools, the bookstock is seriously inadequate. Books are often outdated and worn-out so that they have very little use for the students. The case of periodicals is even worse, since popular magazines cannot be found in some libraries. There are quite a number of schools that are not able even to provide copies of national newspapers in their libraries. There is very little use of

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1 £1 = £6.00 (approx.).
audiovisuals in school libraries in Ghana. In the few schools where these audiovisuals are available, they are often gifts from international organizations. Whenever there is a breakdown of any of the components, replacement is a big problem.

3. Acquisition and processing of books. School libraries in Ghana get most of their supply of library materials through the Ghana Library Board. Subject-tutors are mainly responsible for the selection of books to be sent to the Ghana Library Board for acquisition. The Library Board also takes charge of the accessioning, cataloguing and classification of all library materials that they acquire for schools. The Dewey Decimal Classification Scheme is used for all the schools.

4. Finance. Money for school libraries comes from different sources. There is a basic amount of C200–C500 per annum given to the schools, based on the number of students. The rest of the money for libraries depend on each individual school's ability to arrange for outside funds. Some schools are heavily subsidized by students' contributions, donations from the United States Information Service, Canada Overseas Book Centre, and the British Council. Some of the donations are in cash, while most come in the form of books and visual aids.

5. Library staff. There are very few schools in Ghana with trained professional school librarians. Most schools have untrained teacher-librarians who work as full-time teachers in their various fields, and part-time librarians. All the schools make use of library clerks and student-assistants in the libraries.

6. Relationship with the public library. The schools have a close relationship with the public libraries, since they get their books from the Ghana Library Board, which is the sole controller of all public libraries in Ghana. The Ghana Library Board also operates the "Book-Box" system whereby books are sent in boxes on loan to schools in the rural areas for a period of time, and are returned to the Library Board for reallocation to other schools. These books are often the popular texts that are not available in numerous copies.

From this analysis, it can be seen that the school library system in Ghana is not well developed. But this is not a situation common only to Ghana. Unlike the United States, Britain or any other developed countries, where school libraries are backed by legislative acts, school libraries in most developing countries have no statistics, dates, laws or regulations. C. C. Aguolu, writing with reference to Nigeria, observed that "a well-rounded education in primary and secondary schools has been handicapped by the inadequacy or absence of good library services

1 Ibid., Ghana Library Board, p. 12.
to support the instructional programs of the schools, to broaden the intellectual horizons of the students, and to inculcate in them a lasting desire to read not only for utilitarian purposes but also for enjoyment and leisure”. He goes on to say that the school library service is the most neglected of all library services in Nigeria. There is neither school library legislation in most of the states, nor state agencies within their Ministries of Education with supervisory powers over all school libraries to ensure their adequacy. Consequently, the school library service has been haphazard and poor.

In support of Dr Aguolu’s observation, S. O. Olanlokun says that “in the primary schools, there are few schools with anything called libraries”. 1

The need for a well-planned school library service for Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. It must be noted that only four out of the nineteen states in Nigeria can boast of any average school library service. In most of the states (especially those in the former Northern Region) there are no signs of any libraries in the schools. A. Olasun emphasizes “the fact that to achieve the quality of education at all levels as put forward in the National Policy on Education, something radical and urgent needs to be done to change the present examination-oriented reading. School librarianship for teachers at all levels is of vital importance.” 2

Writing with reference to Barbados, St Hill 3 says that “formal library provision at the primary school level could with some justification be considered as non-existent”. However, in the case of the older secondary school library service this has been a long tradition of schools. This is quite encouraging, since the Ministry of Education has been enlisting the support of the public library in setting up library training programmes for the assistants. He however attributes this progress to the fact that there is an integrated nationwide public library system, whose resources are freely available to every person.

However, unlike the case of Barbados, Ghana and Nigeria seem to be faced with the same problems of lack of recognition of the role of school libraries by many officials and education authorities. But one would have expected that with the better economic conditions prevailing in Nigeria, school library services should have been better organized in Nigeria than they are in Ghana. Unfortunately, this is not the situation. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is the vast extent of the country as well as the enormous population of Nigeria.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

There is an urgent need for improvement in the school library situation in Ghana in particular, and Africa in general. First, there must be a change in the location of school libraries within the classroom blocks with the same furniture and equipment as the classroom. It is desirable to avoid what may be called "classroom atmosphere" in the library. Aside from being a place for serious work, a library should often be a step ahead of classrooms in interest and needs. If our conception of children is that they need structure but also freedom, a modicum of physical spontaneity, a sense of responsibility, and trust in themselves, then we should build libraries and media centres to conform to that idea of the universe and to achieve those ends.

Another aspect of school libraries in Ghana that needs improvement is the provision of instructional materials in the library. If writers could be encouraged to publish more books for children, this will cut down the amount of money used in the importation of books for school libraries. It is advised that the government adopts a stricter control of headmasters since instances have been known when funds for library purposes have been used to meet other non-library needs of the schools.

The success of a school library depends to a very great extent upon the man in charge—the librarian. "This post," says the School Library Association Leaflet No.1, "should be regarded as one of the most important in the School; and on a successful appointment depends much of the effective work of the library in the school."¹ Lack of good library staffing is one of the major problems in a developing country. Although similar problems exist to some extent in some developed countries, the exigency of placing a sufficient number of teachers in the classroom in developing countries, tends to obscure the need for proper staff in the school libraries.

Most of school libraries in Africa are staffed by full-time teachers. Running the school library is simply regarded as another extracurricular duty. A few of the more liberal headmasters give a slightly lighter teaching load to these teachers. The result of inadequate staffing and consequent lack of supervision in libraries, is that libraries commonly remain locked a large part of the time; or alternatively, books are kept in glass-fronted cases.

There are many problems to be overcome before staffing of school libraries becomes adequate. One of these is training. Few countries in Africa have training facilities for librarians. In Nigeria, opportunities for training professional librarians exist in four out of the fifteen universities. In Ghana, only one out of the three universities has a programme for

professional librarians. Even in the countries where these courses exist, they are out of reach of the would-be librarians now engaged in school library work.

The situation could be solved if the government of Ghana would provide special scholarships to teachers interested in school librarianship to pursue the training. More refresher courses should be conducted for interested teachers as well as for library clerks in basic library skills. Another remedy to this problem is to enable tutor-librarians to devote more time for library work. This could be done if their teaching loads could be reduced considerably.

Although there appears to be a good working relationship between schools and public libraries, there should be more visits to schools by public librarians to give advice on some library problems. Tutor-librarians should also feel free to contact public libraries for help in such areas as selection and ordering of library materials.

**Conclusion**

This paper is an attempt to give a brief description of school library development in Ghana. Although the problems discussed are based mainly on the Ghanaian situation, most of them are applicable to countries not only in Africa, but in the developing world in general. It is now time for these countries to leave the old ideas about school libraries and accept more progressive ones. In composing a school environment, care must be taken to provide “mind space” for each participant to become a thinking, feeling, intending human being interacting with others as well as with the non-human elements of the environment. Only when a person feels “at home” in the environment, does he or she exploit it purposefully to make meaning in a world of ever-expanding possibilities.

“Not until educational planners and administrators, and the teaching profession as a whole, are convinced that school libraries are a necessity not just a luxury, can we feel confident about the future.”¹ No child who has not learnt to make the best use of books is truly educated; nor will the child in the twentieth century, make the most of his life for himself or his dependents.