

COVID-19 AND THE CHALLENGE OF INFORMATION DELIVERY BY SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

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Abstract

Purpose: The study focused on the role of school librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology/Approach: The study adopted contextual analysis that involved the review of relevant literatures ranging from textbooks, journals and online sources. It discussed the concept of COVID-19 pandemic, roles of school librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilities school librarians require to perform their roles and challenges facing school libraries.

Findings: The paper found out various roles that school librarians can perform to enhance teaching and learning in pandemics. These include - embarking on enlightenment campaigns for good hygiene, social distancing and self-isolations through social networking sites and assisting students in their online classes by providing required information for their teachers and linking them to free teaching and learning sites as provided by Google and Microsoft.

Implication: School principals and librarians should initiate other sources of raising funds for school libraries to support meagre government grants for schools so as to enhance performance and services delivery to students and teachers especially in lockdowns as a result of pandemics. The provision of adequate ICT infrastructures required for any library to function effectively in this era of COVID-19 pandemic is important in addition to recruiting well-trained staff for efficient and effective management of school libraries.

Originality/Value: This paper is original and has not been published in any journal before. Its originality lies in its ability to conclude that as long as school libraries are still facing various challenges especially in this time of COVID-19 pandemic, essential role of school librarians in online teaching and learning process will continue to be jeopardized.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, School Libraries, School Librarians, School Library Facilities.

Paper Type: Conceptual

Introduction

Schools play a vital role in developing and supporting students as they grow and learn. These students spend much of their days within the school environment thus, it is important that they have a safe place to learn and play. A healthy and safe physical school environment promotes learning by ensuring the health and safety of students. As school brings different people from different families together, there is greater risk of exposure to diseases and virus within the school settings. Such diseases like diarrhea, vector-borne diseases, respiratory diseases of which COVID-19 is one of them can spread fast in school environments.

COVID-19 also known as coronavirus is a novel virus linked to the same family of viruses like,

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold. World Health Organization (2020) declared the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) to be a pandemic on 12th March, 2020. The symptoms include fever, sneezing, dry cough and shortness of breath. Test is required to confirm any infected person because the symptoms are similar to common cold. The situation led to the temporary closure of most schools across the world to reduce its spread while teaching and learning continued online. Thus, there is need for school libraries.

School libraries play an important role in teaching and learning process. Shonhe (2019) avers that a school library is vital to the

learning and teaching activities of any school as it acts as an information hub and an innovation center. With the closure of schools during this COVID-19 pandemic, school libraries are not only depositories of information but transformation hub where information are created and used for teaching and learning activities electronically. Therefore, the school librarian is seen as having an important role to play in the knowledge environment during this COVID-19 pandemic.

The school librarian's role has changed and expanded since the closure of schools caused by the ravaging coronavirus. Ali and Gatiti (2020) affirm that librarians have a definite role to play regarding the safety measures to be adopted to minimize the risk of exposure to Covid-19-like infections. The school librarian has to play a far more strategic role in the knowledge environment by creating awareness of preventive measures through online public health education, assisting students in their online classes, providing support to teaching staff and maintaining access to electronic resources during this pandemic. To perform these roles effectively, the school librarians need some facilities to be in place.

Facilities needed by the school librarians require more than the old technologies or print materials to function effectively during this pandemic because COVID-19 pandemic have altered the method of teaching and learning thus, providing school librarians with new challenges, new tools and new ways of working in the knowledge environment. School librarians need to be empowered with facilities such as computers and mobile devices with reliable internet connection, CD-ROMs, scanners, social networks, current electronic resources and steady power supply to perform their roles effectively. Unfortunately, school librarians might find it difficult to have access to these facilities due to some challenges.

Challenges facing school libraries which may hinder them from meeting the information needs of students at this period include; poor funding, inadequate ICT infrastructures, inadequate qualified staff, inadequate information resources, erratic power supply and

poor communication network. Shonhe (2019) observed that lack of computers and internet connection, insufficient budget, outdated and insufficient books, uncatalogued books, lack of electricity and smaller school library buildings are challenges facing school libraries in developing countries. Some researchers have already anticipated the emerging role of school librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic and some challenges these librarians will face if not properly mitigated. It is based on this premise that this paper examines the role of school librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 is a worldwide pandemic caused by a new strain of virus. It was first identified in Wuhan, China in December, 2019. Ogolodom, Mbaba, Alazigha, Erundu, Egbe, Golden, Ugwuanyi, Achi and Eke (2020) stated that the current outbreak of Coronavirus disease, tagged COVID 19 (Coronavirus disease 2019) was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, an emerging business hub and the capital city of Hubei Province in central China. The emergence of the virus was first reported in Lagos, Nigeria on February 27, 2020 through an infected Italian citizen who works in Nigeria and returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos, Nigeria on the 25th of February, 2020 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, 2020).

The virus can be transmitted through direct contact with airborne droplets of an infected person via breathing, coughing and sneezing. Individuals can also contact this virus through touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and then touching their faces. Olapegbe, Ayandele, Kolawole, Oguntayo, Gandi, Dangiwa, Ottu and Iorfa (2020) asserted that COVID-19, from the family of Coronavirus, is a contagious respiratory illness transmitted through the sensory organs (eyes, nose, and mouth) via droplets from coughs and sneezes, close contact with infected person and contaminated surfaces. The common signs of infections include fever, coughing, sneezing, breathing difficulties and in severe cases, pneumonia, multiple organ failure and death. Some infected persons however, are carriers of the virus with no symptoms while others may experience only

a mild illness and recover easily (Sauer, 2020). Scientists and medical experts are still learning about how COVID-19 affects people and no authentic vaccine is available for treating the virus.

Precautionary measures are being taken to slow the spread of this virus. Such measures include; wearing of face masks, regular hand washing, using of hand sanitizers, self-isolation and social distancing. Makinde, Nwogu, Ajaja and Alagbe (2020) revealed that Nigerians are engaging in regular hand washing, using of hand sanitizer, practicing social distancing, self-isolation, avoiding going to work, school and crowded areas to curtail the spread of the virus. The pandemic has also resulted in extraordinary situations where global economies have been shut down using lockdown procedures to prevent the spread of the virus (Samanta, 2020).

The Role of School Librarians during the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 pandemic has affected educational systems worldwide leading to closure of schools so as to curtail the widespread of the virus. However, the closure of schools prompted online teaching and learning processes which invariably demands the online services of the school library. The role of school librarians in the provision of the services in the face of the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic cannot be over-emphasized. Works of authors like, Lance and Hofschire (2012), Paton-Ash and Wilmot (2015) and Hutchinson (2017) show that there are various roles of school librarians however, the following are considered as roles of school librarians during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Creating Awareness of Preventive Measures through Online Public Health Education:

To prevent further spread of the virus, the school librarians can embark on enlightenment campaigns for good hygiene, social distancing and self-isolation through their social networking pages like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and Telegram. They can collaborate with teachers to enlighten the students on personal hygiene, signs and symptoms of the virus, respiratory etiquette recommendations, and strategies needed to

protect against COVID-19. No wonder Brug, Aro and Richardus as cited in Olapegbe, Ayandele, Kolawole et al (2020) affirmed that individuals may need to be informed about the potential risks of infections in order to adopt the right precautionary measures. Similarly, Ali and Gatiti (2020) maintained that libraries as a social institution are responsible for ensuring public health awareness and provision of up-to-date health information to students during this pandemic. The school librarian can also collaborate with teachers to plan and implement information literacy programmes on public health education. To avoid misleading information on public health education, school librarians can engage in evaluating, packaging, storing and disseminating reliable information during the critical situation of COVID-19 pandemic. This will help to reduce fake information concerning COVID-19 and pass the right information needed to curtail further spread of the virus.

Assisting Students in their Online Classes:

The closure of schools promoted online teaching process which necessitated online library services to assist students with their online classes, assignments and personal intellectual development. COVID-19 has transformed the world in so many ways, but for teacher librarians, it has offered them an amazing opportunity to show everyone not only what value they add, but also that students and teachers need school libraries (Oddone, 2020). School librarians with the help of teachers now provide and disseminate information to students to assist in online academic activities through their social networking pages and other means available. Ladan, Haruna and Madu (2020) confirmed that recently Information Technology (IT) and internet companies such as Google, Microsoft have provided free teaching and learning tools to support students and teachers learning at home. School librarians can also perform their roles using these tools to effectively serve the students who are on lockdown during this pandemic.

Providing Support to Teaching Staff:

This can be achieved by ensuring that the school library collection supports the school curriculum. The role of the school library and

information programmes and services according to Central Middle International School (CMIS) as cited in Funmilayo (2013:103) is to "... provide teachers with access to relevant curriculum information and professional development materials within and outside the school". The school librarian can go extra length to explore distance learning resources and other digital contents that can be used to encourage online teaching and learning activities.

Maintaining Access to Electronic Resources:

The school librarians are expected to play more leading role in providing and maintaining access to electronic information resources to enhance the dissemination of up-to-date and reliable information to students and teachers during this pandemic. They can provide and maintain access to a wide range of online e-books, e-magazines, e-encyclopedia, news sites and distance learning resources that can be used to encourage online teaching and learning activities and keep students and teachers abreast with latest developments especially on COVID-19 pandemic. According to the National Digital Library of India (2020) students affected by the COVID-19 lockdown can now access the National Digital Library of India free of charge. Educational materials ranging from primary to post-graduate levels are available for users. Some other libraries have also initiated online webinar and sessions to keep in touch with their users via Zoom, Skype, Google Classroom, etc. School librarians can adopt these approaches to provide and maintain access to electronic information resources to create an effective learning environment.

Facilities School Librarians Require for Performing their Roles

Since teaching and learning continued online despite the physical lockdown of schools, school librarians should forge ahead with services delivery through digital access using facilities like computers and other technologies with reliable internet connection, CD-ROMs, scanners, social networks, current electronic resources and steady power supply. The government, Ministry of Education, and administrators need to ensure that the school

librarians in rural and urban areas are equipped with IT related facilities and software to search, store, disseminate and utilize information so that the conversion of knowledge is facilitated and made a reality (Shafie, Yatim & Othman, 2012). Library staff are at equal risk of getting exposed to contagious disease like COVID-19 in a much similar but analogous manner like healthcare workers for both deal with people (Samanta, 2020). These facilities will enable school librarians perform their roles without coming in physical contact with users of the library thereby reducing the spread of the virus.

School libraries that have computers and mobile devices with reliable internet connection and steady power supply will not find it difficult to perform their roles effectively during this pandemic. With technology, digital access to the information resources of the school library can be provided throughout the school and beyond, 24/7 (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2015). Since there is a transition to distance learning and students are engaging in reading e-resources, school librarians with the help of computers and mobile devices with reliable internet connection and steady power supply can ensure that users of the library enjoy equity of access to electronic information resources and are provided with safe and effective learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Samanta (2020) emphasized that libraries are encouraging online participation through webinars and supporting with eagerness digital access to reading materials, books, periodicals and other library contents. Okike (2020) citing Tait, Martzoukou and Reid noted that the tools and resources used to supply required information and transform it into knowledge have changed, but the librarian's role has remained unchanged. In this regard, school librarians need computers and mobile devices with reliable internet connection, CD-ROMs, scanners, social networks, current electronic resources and steady power supply to strengthen acquisition, packaging, storing and dissemination of information to users of the library in this pandemic period.

Challenges Facing School Libraries

While the COVID-19 pandemic has forced school libraries to switch to online library services, they are still facing challenges. Among the challenges include; inadequate funding, inadequate ICT infrastructures, inadequate trained staff, inadequate information resources, erratic power supply and poor communication network. Funmilayo (2013) discovered that all the secondary schools studied were facing poor internet facilities, lack of audio visual materials, poor funding challenges, lack of qualified staff, power outage, irregular supply of materials, obsolete materials among others.

The most widely experienced disappointment in school library environment is inadequate funding. Funds are very important for the management of school libraries. Most school libraries are not adequately funded invariably affecting school libraries and the educational system as a whole. Most school libraries cannot afford to replace their facilities, equipment and collections because of inadequate funding. Abayode as cited in Akanwa and Ukoha (2017) maintained that the problem of poor funding is crippling the services of school libraries because they need funds to acquire reading materials, furniture and equipment, and also organize library programmes. Thus it is clear that without adequate financial support, facilities, equipment and information resources cannot be acquired and qualified school librarians cannot be hired and trained.

Inadequate ICT infrastructure is another challenge facing school libraries in Nigeria. The absence of ICT infrastructures in our school libraries which cropped from inadequate financial support has affected the role of school librarians in this time of COVID-19 pandemic. School librarians are supposed to work collaboratively with classroom teachers to select broad learning resources using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to support online teaching and learning but this is not so in our present day school libraries. It is vital to have robust technological infrastructures within the education system but unfortunately the situation in most schools in developing countries is disheartening (Shonhe, 2019).

Inadequate qualified school librarian is another serious challenge facing school libraries. Akanwa and Ukoha (2017) opined that the inability of government to employ qualified librarians to head school libraries is also a major problem to the effective management of school libraries. The effectiveness of school libraries depends not only on their information resources and facilities but on the quality of its library personnel. School librarians must be conversant with working with the new technologies because the content of libraries is becoming more digital than ever. Unfortunately, school libraries in Nigeria are marred by the inadequacy of qualified and well- trained school librarians who are supposed to use these infrastructures to package, store and disseminate information to enhance easy access and retrieval.

The issue of impeding role of inadequate information resources on the effective use of school libraries cannot be ignored. School libraries are supposed to provide information resources for their teachers' and students' information needs however, because most of our schools are not adequately funded the libraries are stocked with inadequate information resources. Majority of the resources are often times not relevant to the school curriculum. This situation poses a great challenge to the growth of school library.

In developing countries especially Nigeria, there is erratic power supply. This situation hampers the use and access to ICT infrastructures and communication network in every organization, institution and establishments. The school library as an appendage of an educational institution needs regular power supply to use ICT facilities and other gadgets that require electricity to function.

Internet has become part of the facilities of school libraries in the developed countries whereas in the developing countries such as Nigeria, internet connectivity is not available in school libraries and where there is internet connectivity it is very poor and also costly to maintain. With poor internet connectivity, school libraries will definitely find it difficult to engage in online services.

Conclusion

The school librarian's role has changed and expanded since the closure of schools caused by the ravaging pandemic. It is seen that the role of school librarians in this period demands the creation of awareness of preventive measures through online public health education, assisting students in their online classes, providing support to teaching staff and maintaining access to electronic resources. To cope with the changing realities and uncertainties of human life, present facilities and resources of school libraries to support online teaching and learning have proved inadequate. As long as school libraries are still facing various challenges especially in this time of COVID-19 pandemic, essential role of school librarians in online teaching and learning process will continue to be jeopardized.

Recommendations

Based on the challenges, the following recommendations are made:

1. School principals and librarians should initiate other sources of raising funds for school libraries to support meagre government grants for schools so as to enhance performance and services delivery to students and teachers.
2. Efforts should be made by the Parent Teacher Associations in collaboration with school authorities to oversee the provision of adequate ICT infrastructures required for any library to function effectively in this era of COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Adequate qualified and well-trained staff should be employed by appropriate authorities concerned for efficient and effective management of school libraries.
4. There is need to provide adequate information resources in school libraries. Therefore government at all levels and private school owners should adequately stock school libraries with relevant information resources to cater for the interest of students and subjects taught in the school.
5. Government at all levels and private school owners should make provision for alternative means of power supply so that there will be regular power supply in the school libraries.
6. Improvement on internet connectivity in school libraries is very important. School management should connect with internet service providers that provide good and fast internet connection so as to boost internet services.

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