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The History and Development of School Libraries in Sierra Leone

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The school library is perceived as an important aspect of Sierra Leone's educational system, but unfortunately the general school library situation in Sierra Leone is far from satisfactory. Many school libraries exhibit serious shortcomings, or are virtually nonexistent. There is no single aspect of Sierra Leone's national educational policy in more urgent need of development than the school library. Since the 1960s when Sierra Leone gained independence, efforts have been made to include the school library in the country's national policy on education and to take its provision and development in schools seriously. Against a background of increasing budget restrictions and ongoing civil strife, this article looks at the history and development of school libraries in Sierra Leone.

The Country of Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is bounded to the northwest and northeast by Liberia and to the southeast by the Atlantic ocean. It has an area of 27,975 square miles. The climate is hot and humid, with an average temperature of 27°C. The country is divided into three provinces, plus the western area where the capital city Freetown is located. These provinces are further divided into 12 districts. The principal peoples are the Mende, Temne, Fulamis, Limbas, Kissis, and Korankos. English is the official language, and Krio is the lingua franca.

Once a British colony, Sierra Leone attained independence on April 27, 1961 and republican status in the British Commonwealth in 1971. In spite of the country's potential resources, United Nations Development Reports have classified Sierra Leone as the poorest country among the world community of nations. The 1992 Population Crisis index places Sierra Leone in the category of "Extreme Human Suffering." A survey of the general welfare of the people of the country indicates a population of 4.3 million growing at 2.4% per year, an average life expectancy of 42, a high illiteracy rate, and poor medical and health facilities. Against the background of this dismal situation, one could easily understand why the development of libraries has not been a priority.

History of School Libraries in Sierra Leone

The state of a school library is always a reflection of the general educational setting in a country. The development of school libraries in Sierra Leone can be traced to the 1960s when educators realized that educational programs had little chance of succeeding without the support of good library resources

and services. New curricula, new subjects, and instructional methods demand vastly increased, broadened, and strengthened resources, and improved professional library services to pupils and teachers.

Unlike countries like the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and France, where school libraries are backed by legislative acts, school library development in Sierra Leone has no laws or regulations. It is left to individual schools and teachers to decide the form the library should take and what it should do. Over the years, more development in establishing libraries has taken place in secondary schools than in primary schools, save for a few private schools. In schools where libraries exist, there is no supervision of a professional expertise, and collections are a miscellany of donated stock with little regard for the special needs of the pupils and teachers.

The importance of school libraries has long been recognized in Sierra Leone. The greatest handicap to plans for increasing and improving them has been inadequate appropriation. In 1961, Sierra Leone participated in the UNESCO Conference of African States on the Development of Education in Africa, held in Addis Ababa. There, the need for library and distribution services was emphasized, and it was recommended that 4% of a country's education budget be spent on libraries. However, because of the low government revenues of African countries, the UNESCO Regional Seminar on the Development of Public Libraries in Africa, held in Enugu in 1962, recommended that 1 % of a country's education budget be spent on libraries.

In 1968, Sierra Leone participated in another UNESCO Conference on library and books, held in Accra. Delegates from 23 African countries plus observers from overseas (Europe and the US) participated. At that conference, all phases of the book problem in national development were discussed. The conference agreed that there should be coordination of library and book development programs. It was recognized that libraries were the key factor in book distribution and, although all libraries were important, that school libraries could provide the strong base required for ensuring the expansion of all types of education. School libraries could contribute to the improvement of the quality of education and the development of the personality of the child. It was emphasized that the reading habit needed to be fostered to ensure the success of advanced studies and the book development program, as well as continuing education.

During the mid-1960s, the International Development Agency Scheme built library structures in Sierra Leone and provided equipment to some schools, and the Ministry of Education gave a small grant to each secondary school in the country. This grant was discontinued in 1967 when the military took over the reins of government. Schools in close proximity to a public library were serviced by the bookmobile service, operated by the Sierra Leone Library Board.

In 1970, in order to implement the various conference recommendations, the Sierra Leone government requested the services of a UNESCO expert to investigate the Sierra Leone situation based on the following terms.

1. To assess the present needs for both text and nontext books at all levels.
2. On the basis of this assessment to draw up an integrated program for Sierra Leone covering all aspects of book development-planning, production, printing, distribution libraries, and buildings-for a five-year period.
3. To make a cost estimate for the program drawn up and to recommend nongovernmental and international sources of financial aid.
4. To make practical recommendations to the government in regard to the establishment of a Book Development Council in accordance with the proposals made by the Regional meeting of Book Development Experts, Accra, February 1968.

In response to this request, Mr. Philip Harris arrived in Sierra Leone on April 4, 1970, and in June of that year, he came up with a report that stressed the need for an integrated book development program in the country. He also recommended the local production of primary and secondary school texts to ensure their availability at low prices.

Other foreign assistance was obtained. For instance, the British Council (UK) introduced the Book Presentation Program for secondary schools, and the local British Council encouraged the appointment of para-professional staff as library assistants for the maintenance of these materials. Staff appointed to the library assistant positions participated in one of the University of Sierra Leone training courses offered at Fourah Bay College and at Njala University College. Some school principals gave the responsibility of running their school libraries to qualified teachers, and these teachers were required to attend the University of Sierra Leone library training courses. The training of these teacher-librarians was not solely dependent on inservice training programs. Both the Department of Education at Fourah Bay College and the Milton Margai Teachers College (now Milton Margai College of Education) offered and continue to offer optional library education programs for teachers in training. Graduates in the liberal arts, who form the majority of teachers in secondary schools, were advised to complete these library education courses. On completion, they were advised to continue their library education by attending the annual Library Science Residential School, designed as inservice training courses taught at Fourah Bay College.

What was to be the future of libraries in the country was again considered in 1973, when the University of Sierra Leone conducted a National Education Review. The review was concerned with all levels and types of education, at home and in the village as well as in formal school surroundings. Participants were drawn from all walks of life. The review was conducted by nine working groups; one of these examined the possibilities for the development of materials and media needed to support the national educational

program. The 1976 report, titled *All Our Future: Sierra Leone Educational Review*, gave a detailed survey of the then existing situation in the country, formulated aims and objectives and made recommendations, one of which was:

The Ministry of Education and The Institute of Education should be reorganized to provide an organizational and conceptual framework in which a variety of bodies could contribute to the task of improving the supply of educational materials and media, and services such as libraries, museums, and archives. (p. 70)

Another recommendation dealt with the supply of books and materials. The review emphasized the need for the Ministry of Education to make provisions for the establishment of a national coordinated system that would be responsible for the development of libraries, archives, and museums. This provision underlined the value of these services for education and culture and the importance of ensuring a fair distribution of these services throughout the country.

Library education in the country also needed review and, with the help of the local British Council, Professor W.L. Saunders was invited to Sierra Leone in March 1974 to assist with policy matters relating to library education, with particular reference to middle-level assistance and school libraries. In his report, Professor Saunders noted that the situation was one of crisis, with no funds being allocated for the purchase of books, inadequate or nonexistent library accommodation (with occasional exceptions, such as Yengema secondary school, which sacrificed a classroom for a library, or Bo school with its new building presented by the old students), and little or no opportunity or encouragement to use the library as a teaching resource. In spite of all these handicaps, he noted that some of the schools were making gallant attempts to keep a school library service going, more so in Roman Catholic schools. He recommended that the school library be under the direction of someone who understood not only the technical process of librarianship, but the educational use of the school library. He recommended that the school librarian should be a teacher-librarian with a generous allowance of time free from normal class teaching.

In April 1975, the Sierra Leone School Library Association was formed during the Third Library Science Easter Residential School in order to promote the development of school libraries in the country. The Association organized seminars and workshops for its members and operated in four regional branches. It also held an annual conference. At the Fourth Library Science Easter Residential School, the objectives of the Sierra Leone School Library Association were consolidated by the production of a draft of minimum standards for secondary school libraries. These standards were transmitted to the Conference of Principals with recommendations for implementation. The Sierra Leone Library Association reported in 1976 the following statistics for school libraries nationwide: 13 school libraries, no

professional library staff, and 4,000 volumes in collections serving a population of 10,000 students.

Throughout the history of school library development in Sierra Leone, an important role has been played by the Sierra Leone Library Board. The Library Board, as stated in the 1958 government white paper on educational development, was established to provide effective library services for children and young pupils, including services for schools. In its initial stage, the Library Board had a primary school services department concerned with the provision of books for primary schools in small towns and villages where libraries had not been established. This was a nationwide service; books were distributed by two Land Rover-type mobile libraries. Books were lent for a period of one school year, and on every visit, the books that were no longer required were returned and a new selection made. The Library Board also gave assistance to primary and secondary schools in book selection. It served as a central agency for book orders, and, in the case of government schools, the Library Board controlled the annual book allotment given to such schools.

The Library Board has a children's library department in Freetown that caters to the preschool child right up to children of the age of 17. The entire book stock is in the English language, with stock being chosen from simple texts, bright illustrations, and attractive format. There is also a small collection of magazines. The department organizes story hours, essay competitions, quizzes, and provides educational film shows for children. Occasionally, children, especially those in Freetown and its environs, are accompanied by their teachers on conducted tours of the library, especially the children's department where they are introduced to the holdings of the department and how they are used. In order to encourage local writers to write materials for children, the Board also organizes workshops, as was done in 1990 and 1994.

Between 1991 and 1994, the Ministry of Education, through the Textbook Task Force, provided textbook materials to primary schools nationwide. This service was complemented by the Third International Development Agency Scheme Educational Project Textbooks component, the Book Box Circulation Service. The service provided supplementary reading materials to support textbooks that were already supplied to primary schools. However, this service was short lived as a result of the ongoing rebel war in the country. In lieu of drastic budget cuts, the Library Board could do nothing more than provide second-hand books received from donors.

In summary, the basis for the establishment of school libraries in the country was laid in the 1960s and 1970s. Teachers, as well as the Ministry of Education, were and are aware of the crucial role libraries play in the learning process. Schools include a minimal fee for libraries in their "extra charges." The Ministry of Education continues to give a minimal grant per child in schools for libraries. Just recently, the Ministry of Education donated some

books and educational technology materials to various schools as a nucleus of library development.

Unfortunately, the status of most school libraries in Sierra Leone is that of a storehouse of very old books or, occasionally, an accumulation of textbooks and valuable and useful reference books kept for security in an inconspicuous corner of the head teacher's office. Those schools that have school libraries in the proper sense are those with strong parent-teachers' associations or old boys' ~r girls' organizations, and, of course, dynamic principal leadership.

Problems in School Library Development in Sierra Leone

Lack of funds and poor foreign exchange rates are a major problem in the development of school libraries in Sierra Leone. The grant for libraries is not always given to the schools by the government. Minimal library fees are charged by the schools, but these fees are often used for other purposes. Materials in most libraries are inadequate and obsolete and, to a great degree, bear little relevance to the needs of pupils and teachers, let alone the curriculum. Because books are expensive, schools often depend on donated stock, but some of the stock does not suit the goals of the school library.

As a result of the ongoing rebel war, there has been an increased intake of children in schools in Freetown and other big towns. Almost every classroom in these schools is needed for teaching purposes. Those schools that have separate buildings for libraries often use these facilities as classrooms because of lack of space. Thus cupboards and corners or the head teacher's office have to be used to house school library materials.

One common problem in these schools is that libraries are run by paraprofessional staff. Their conditions of service are discouraging, and this often drives these staff from work. Little was done by the School Library Association (which is itself now defunct) to advocate for an improvement in conditions of service for these staff.

The country's only library school (Institute of Library Archive and Information Studies) does not offer school librarianship in its curriculum. Schools rarely can send their staff for further training because of the cost involved. Some teachers have had a taste of school librarianship because they enrolled in school library education as an optional module while in college, but they have had limited coursework and generally are not interested in continuing in school librarianship.

Conclusion

The importance of a good library in school cannot be overemphasized. Unfortunately, it is evident that the general school library situation in Sierra Leone is far from satisfactory. Many school libraries exhibit serious shortcomings or are virtually nonexistent. Many children leave school with limited reading ability and no inclination to read for personal development.

There is no single aspect of Sierra Leone's national educational policy in more urgent need of development than the school library.

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