



CHILDREN'S LIBRARY SERVICES IN NIGERIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND THE PATH FORWARD

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Abstract

The children's section of public libraries represents a critical space for nurturing literacy, cultural awareness, and cognitive development in young people. This article examines the historical development, current state, and challenges facing children's library services in Nigerian public libraries. Drawing on historical records, policy documents, and scholarly literature, the paper traces the evolution of children's librarianship from its early beginnings to contemporary practice. The article explores the conceptual foundations of children's library services, the objectives of public libraries, the specific challenges facing Nigerian public libraries, and proposes strategies for strengthening children's library services. Particular attention is paid to the role of children's libraries as "third places" that complement home and school environments in supporting child development. The paper concludes that despite significant challenges, Nigerian public libraries have the potential to transform children's educational outcomes and cultural development through strategic investment and innovative programming.

Keywords: Children's libraries, public libraries, Nigeria, library services, children's literature, literacy development, library funding



1. Introduction

The future belongs to children, a truism that carries profound implications for how societies invest in their youngest members. Yet the present belongs to planning, to understanding both short-term and long-term interests, and to making appropriate choices in housing, childcare, education, shelter, food, and clothing for every sector of society. At the center of this societal framework is the child. Parents and society generally seek to provide what they consider best for their children, and among the most valuable gifts a child can receive is the literature that adults choose to share with them.

Libraries have been described as beautiful places where users are introduced to new and wonderful worlds. For a child, the library experience is potentially life-changing, making it essential that offerings are carefully selected in terms of quality, content, and variety. This is particularly important when we recognize that reading elicits two fundamental responses: efferent reading, taking knowledge from texts, and aesthetic reading, living, by extension, the life presented in the texts. These correspond to reading for information and reading for pleasure, respectively.

Virginia Walter's assertion that "we must ensure that they are given the supports and opportunities" situates the relevance of providing foundations upon which children's futures can be built. One such "support and opportunity" is the library. As Nwosu (2017) observes, "through library collections, mankind receives a major part of its cultural heritage." Culture relates to the totality of society's responses to and evolution in social engineering, which makes humanity what it is. The library serves as the record of human evolution from the caves to the moon and beyond. Every generation deposits its achievements in the library, and successive generations must review the successes and failures of preceding generations to create their own path to the future. Any generation that fails to review previous achievements risks being caught in a Sisyphean cycle.

This article examines the children's section of public libraries in Nigeria, exploring their historical development, current state, challenges, and potential for transformation. By analyzing the conceptual foundations, historical timeline, and contemporary issues facing children's library services, the paper aims to contribute to discussions about strengthening library services for young people in Nigeria.



2. Meaning of Public Libraries

Public libraries are, essentially, libraries set up without restrictions as to who may use them. They are free community hubs that are saddled with the responsibility of providing books and sundry other materials for social development. The qualities of public libraries, include, but not limited to, democratic access, preservation and learning, and community anchor; unlike special, academic, and school libraries with their restricted clientele, public libraries level the playing field by offering far more books, on far more diverse subjects, offering, where available, free access to computers and internet, and, in the age of globalization and digitalization, public libraries curate the processes of innovation, development and adaptation (Nudyschuk 2026; Blanchard, Fitzjohn, & McGivern, 2026). They also safeguard cultural history, promote lifelong learning, life skills, and serve as safe, neutral space for community engagement, creativity, and social equity.

3. Definition of Concepts

3.1 The Concept of Children's Library

Adults care about children and what they consume. The acculturation process involves getting children to become cultured, which happens experientially and through reading books. The world is progressively more complex today than it was centuries ago, and books are now written on almost every topic conceivable at varying degrees of difficulty (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2005). Social complexity-induced difficulty, a feature of today's books, must be mediated to ensure children can make sense of and interpret the cultural materials that form the purview of books. Often, the mediators are teachers and librarians.

Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (2005) assert that "teachers and librarians who read... books regularly, who are informed about recently published books are likely to be able to interest children in books" (p. 11). Between teachers and librarians, two issues are considered when selecting children's books: readability and conceptual difficulty. Harries and Hodges (1995) define readability as the ease of comprehension because of style of writing, while Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson (2005) see conceptual difficulty as pertaining to the complexity of ideas treated in the work and how these ideas are presented.

The work of teachers and librarians is cut out for them as they must evolve a methodology of ensuring a suitable library is created for the child, guaranteeing a well-rounded education that hones and scaffolds their long and short-term interests, their home and environment, their social activities, their hobbies, their skills, and their hopes and plans for a future where they are signal players. Thomas Van der Watt (2004) asserts that "children's librarianship developed into an



area of specialty with more attention being paid to services for children and to the reading material available to them. The role played by librarians in the history of children's literature and in development as an academic discipline should not be underestimated as they were the first group of professionals to take a systematic and knowledgeable interest in what children read." For the librarian, the reason for designating a library as a "children's library" or "children's collection" is essentially because when children are introduced at an early age to books and the adventure of language, an eternal love for books and reading is established.

3.2 Concept of Children's Library Services in Nigerian Public Libraries

Children's library services in Nigeria are a blend of government/institutional official policies, practical challenges, and innovative stakeholder/grassroots responses; the essential goal is to provide children literacy opportunities and equal and adequate access to information. This goal is pursued with attendant significant infrastructure and resource limitations; undergirding this goal and projection is the core belief that, in spite of the attendant limitations, every Nigerian child deserves knowledge (Anunobi 2026). Ogunniyi, Akerele, Adeleke & Ajkaye (2024) assert that provision of a section in every public library specifically for children where resources and services tailored to them is made available is sacrosanct.

The National Library of Nigeria is at the forefront of this vision, establishing Literacy Centres and Book Clubs across the nation during holidays from where children are introduced to robotics and coding (Anunobi 2026). Despite institutions and government establishing community initiatives, mobile libraries, and specialized hubs/green library, such hurdles as inadequate facilities, outdated resources, and out-of-school crisis persist (Edema 2024).

3.3. The Concept of Public Libraries

Public libraries are designed for public use as either social services or subscription-based services. They are established to cater to the reading needs of members of the public, who require tools for their development and the development of the public sphere. Information is a powerful tool for national development, and libraries have traditionally been incubators of ideas and research. The lack of information creates gaps in the developmental chain, and libraries are positioned to fill those gaps.

Olanlokun and Salisu (1993) define public libraries as institutions set up to provide viable and free service to all members of the public for their educational and developmental needs through the acquisition, organization, and presentation of print and non-print materials. Edoke (2000) reports that in 1953, the Federal Government of Nigeria, in concert with UNESCO, initiated



the first regional seminar on developing public libraries in the regions of Nigeria. Some objectives of the seminar included to create and enhance reading habits in children, provide opportunities for personal development, activate imaginative creativity in children and young adults, and support oral tradition and access to cultural expressions.

The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto (1995) declared that "the public library shall in principle be free of charge and services should be provided based on equality of access for all regardless of age, race, gender, religion, nationality, language or social status." According to the manifesto, a public library is to provide universal services with no charges to users of available facilities. The functions of public libraries include providing facilities, resources, and services in different formats and media for use by individuals and groups; providing accurate, pertinent, timely, reliable, and well-packaged information in all subjects; communicating experience and ideas (Okafor, 2020); providing multi-cultural materials, especially in a diversely cultural setup like Nigeria; and providing materials in languages other than English.

4. History of Public Libraries in Nigeria

The first public library in Nigeria was the Tom Jones Library, established in 1910 in Lagos as a subscription library. The word "subscription" limited its services to only subscribers, thus mitigating its public library function of free services. The Carnegie Corporation, between 1932 and 1959, made grants totaling \$136,861 for various services, including library development, book purchases, creating reading rooms, and training courses at the University College, Ibadan for librarians. These funds were expended to bolster the institution of librarianship and set the foundation for a sound reading culture in Lagos and surrounding areas.

Both the East Central State and Rivers State Library Boards were established by Edicts in 1971, and the South Eastern State Library Board was established by an Edict in 1973. These boards were established to coordinate the creation and management of libraries in their respective regions.



Historical Development of Public Libraries in Nigeria

Year/Period	Place	Event
1932-1958	Lagos and environs	The Carnegies Corporation made grants totalling \$136,861.00 for procurement of books, establishment of reading centres, training of staff, etc.
1940s and 1950s	World-wide	After second world wars changes in national economics, increased prosperity, increased population and independence of African and Asian countries resulted in the establishment of school libraries
1960s to 1980s	World-wide	A shift in emphasis from school library to school media centre
1970	East central state	Establishment of state library boards by edict
1971	Rivers State	Establishment of state library boards by edict
1973	South Eastern State	Establishment of state library boards by edict

4.1 Funding of Public Libraries in Nigeria

Public libraries receive grants from public institutions for their operations. Since public libraries are not profit-making ventures, they must be funded by either governments or grants from both private and public establishments. Provisions are usually made in government budgets for public libraries. Okiy (2005), in a study on finding alternative funding for public libraries, found that funding of libraries and information centers in Nigeria is usually through budgetary provisions and allocations to relevant and overseeing ministries or institutions. However, government funding for library activities has been poor or even non-existent, leading libraries to canvas for and find alternative sources of funding, including:

Subscription: The imposition of membership fees to fund services and projects in the library.

Library Cess: A model practiced in some states in India and elsewhere, where corporate bodies pay specified revenue or tax, and the monies realized are used to fund library activities and services. The nearest equivalent in Nigeria is TETFUND.



Endowments: Receiving grants from both public and private organizations to fund library activities.

Alumni: Alumni associations making endowments to libraries, similar to endowments.

The objectives of public libraries are specific to the provision of tailored information designed for the generality of the public. The UNESCO Manifesto of 2005 describes the public library as established by law and funded by public funds to offer service free of cost and open for use freely and equally by all members of the public, irrespective of sex, age, religion, language, or education.

5. Functions of Public Libraries

From the three-pronged functions of public libraries, centre for cultures, centre for information, and centre for education, we derive certain core objectives: spread of education, self-development, economic development, personal development, human adjustment, culture and leisure, and science and technology. Public libraries serve to function as centres for cultural development and leisure. Through interaction with the library, knowledge of culture is deepened and exercised; appreciation and enjoyment of artistic outputs and cultural delineation is heightened.

Public libraries have a specific role in education through providing educational tools of diverse characters, providing diversity of information choices, providing current information on diverse human activities, preserving cultural and literacy history and development, assisting in the development of creative capacities, and helping to fashion. Public libraries by their core design, help provide the materials and capacities for personal development and prepare people for adjustment in all spheres of human development. This also paves the way for economic development by making available opportunities for development. The quantum of resources available in public libraries increases the scientific and technological capacities of library users.

6. Library Services to Children in Public Libraries

Libraries are set up differently depending on the prevailing emphasis. Looking at the timeline above, it is apparent that while some libraries were set up as public libraries with children's sections, others were designated as children's libraries from the blueprint up. The functions of these libraries are determined by their designations: a public library with a children's section may not emphasize children's collections but will make provisions for materials relevant to children. How comprehensive this will be is determined by budgetary provisions. On the other hand, libraries that are children's libraries will have a surfeit of materials relevant to children since they cater only to children.



Whether in public libraries with children's collections or in children's libraries, the primary functions of school and children's libraries are the provision of reference materials and information to children and their teachers. Librarians in such facilities assist them in finding materials relevant to their purposes. In ideal situations, other services undertaken by school and children's libraries include visiting schools and providing information-sharing meetings with school staff; hosting class visits from schools; providing services for infants and toddlers; providing group programs for infants to two years; providing personal computers for use by children and young adults; hosting exhibitions and film shows; providing multi-cultural materials and materials in languages other than English; having children's librarians; having a young adult librarian, promoting leisure reading, and promoting services for children with learning disabilities.

The emphasis of these programs is to ensure that children's libraries support development of the child and young adult, and to ensure that libraries are convenient environments for advancement in language development skills. In these specially designated libraries, when services, materials, books, publications, and library programs designed for children are combined properly and presented to a child, there is a likelihood that individuals with a liking for literacy will be raised. These services are best rendered when libraries have studied their known and perceived clientele and designed their collection to meet the reading tastes of their clients. Children's librarians in children's libraries would have basic knowledge of literary quality, social philosophy, suitability of content, popularity of books, human values, child development psychology, reviewers' comments on books, relevant children's value systems, objectivity in book selection, and mass media appeal.

7. Information Resources and Materials Available in Children's Library Sections

Children's libraries or children's sections of public libraries are designed from the blueprint up with the intention to attract and hold the attention of children. The content of children's libraries should navigate between readability, dictation, and delight. IFLA (2003) asserts that materials provided in children's libraries should include:

Printed materials: Books for babies and toddlers, picture books, books to help with homework, graphic novels, audio books, CD stories in large print, comics, brochures, and periodicals like media: CDs, DVDs, and cassettes; toys and games: Games for learning.; technology: Computers, software, and internet connectivity, and these materials are intended to entrance the child by their attractiveness, delightsomeness, and educatedness.



In addition, such services as lending of materials and offering of information and references, helping and involving children in selecting relevant materials, training in library skills and literacy, promoting reading and creativity through storytelling and play-drama (or acting), and educating parents and caregivers in library resources and services to enable them to become active in the child's learning capacity are provided.

All of these are aimed at ensuring what the Children and Young People Act (2000) stipulates as needful are met, including a wide range of children-friendly resources and services; respectful, supportive, and welcoming services and complementary ambience; intellectual freedom to pursue what delights and educates respective children; equal access to available and free resources, and policies that are aware of and address the diverse needs and interests of young people

8. Challenges of Public Libraries in Nigeria

The challenges faced by public libraries are not universal; public libraries in all locations do not face the same challenges. What may be a challenge for a public library in, say, Nigeria may not be the same for a public library in Japan and vice versa. Generally, however, most public libraries face challenges such as; inadequate funding: Insufficient financial resources to acquire materials, maintain facilities, and pay staff adequately; inadequate and outdated stock: Collections that do not meet the needs of users or reflect current knowledge and interests; lack of adequate and qualified staff: Insufficient numbers of trained librarians and support staff; lack of staff motivation: Low morale due to poor working conditions and remuneration; bad location: libraries situated in inaccessible or unsuitable locations, and insecurity of library materials: Theft and vandalism of library resources.

It has been established that public libraries are essential for societal development. Research, which is pivotal in human development, has libraries as incubators, and for this reason, public libraries must be made to play their roles. Hence the need for the challenges above to be addressed. Signal amongst them is the issue of funding; when libraries are properly funded, issues like inadequate and outdated stock, inadequate qualified staff, and staff motivation can be addressed.

9. Opportunities for Enhancing Children's Library Services in Nigerian Public Libraries in the Digital Age

The digital age presents transformative opportunities for children's library services in Nigerian public libraries, offering pathways to overcome traditional challenges while creating innovative learning environments. Public libraries can serve as critical access points for children who lack



computers and internet connectivity at home. By providing free access to digital resources, libraries can democratize information access and reduce educational inequalities. This positions libraries as essential infrastructure for digital inclusion in Nigerian communities. Libraries can offer structured programs teaching children essential digital skills including online research, information evaluation, and safe internet practices. As noted by Anunobi (2026), initiatives introducing children to robotics and coding during holiday programs demonstrate how libraries can prepare young Nigerians for the digital economy.

Digital technologies enable children's libraries to provide access to vast online collections beyond physical holdings. E-books, audiobooks, educational databases, and international digital libraries can supplement limited print collections, offering Nigerian children exposure to global knowledge and diverse perspectives. The digital age enables creative program delivery through virtual storytelling, online book clubs, and interactive learning platforms. These formats can reach children in remote areas and maintain engagement during holidays or disruptions. Technology can also support individualized learning pathways tailored to children's interests and abilities. Digital technologies allow libraries to create digital archives of Nigerian children's literature, folktales, and cultural materials. This preservation ensures indigenous knowledge and stories remain accessible to future generations while promoting cultural pride and identity. Digital tools facilitate professional networking, continuing education, and resource sharing among librarians across Nigeria. Online platforms enable collaboration with international partners, exposure to global best practices, and access to training opportunities that strengthen service delivery.

Digital platforms extend libraries' reach beyond physical walls, enabling engagement with parents, caregivers, and communities through social media, mobile applications, and virtual programming. This expanded engagement supports the library's role as a community hub for child development. The digital age offers Nigerian public libraries unprecedented opportunities to transform children's services. By strategically leveraging technology for access, literacy development, programming, and community engagement, libraries can position themselves as indispensable resources for Nigerian children's learning and development in the 21st century. However, realizing these opportunities requires investment in infrastructure, staff capacity, and sustainable partnerships.



10. Strategies for Improving Children's Library Services

Public Library may wish to adopt the following policies to better a child's library experience:

Strategies for Policymakers

Establish Sustainable Funding

Increase budgetary allocations for children's library services and create dedicated library development funds. Explore innovative funding models including public-private partnerships, endowment schemes, and library trust funds to ensure financial sustainability.

Develop National Standards

Create comprehensive national standards for children's library services addressing collections, staffing, facilities, programming, and service hours. Implement monitoring frameworks to ensure compliance and continuous improvement.

Integrate Libraries into Education Policy

Formally recognize libraries as educational partners within national and state education policies. Support collaboration between libraries and schools through shared programming and coordinated literacy initiatives.

Support Indigenous Publishing

Implement policies promoting children's literature in Nigerian languages through grants, subsidies, and procurement programs for libraries.

Strategies for Library Administrators

Design children's sections with age-appropriate furniture, vibrant displays, comfortable reading areas, and dedicated spaces for various activities. Ensure safety, accessibility, and inclusivity for children with disabilities. Maintain current, diverse collections including picture books, fiction, non-fiction, digital resources, audiobooks, graphic novels, and materials in indigenous languages. Guide selection by quality, cultural relevance, and developmental appropriateness. Offer age-appropriate programs including storytelling, summer reading clubs, homework help, creative writing workshops, book clubs, cultural events, and STEAM activities (robotics, coding, experiments). Provide comprehensive training in children's literature, child development, digital literacy, cultural competence, and customer service. Support continuing professional development opportunities. Provide computer access, internet connectivity, digital literacy training, e-resources, and virtual programming. Ensure technology complements rather than replaces traditional services. Collaborate with schools, community organizations, cultural institutions, businesses, NGOs, and publishers for shared programming, resource sharing, and funding support.



11. Conclusion and Recommendations

Children's library services in Nigerian public libraries stand at a crossroads. Historical foundations provide a platform for renewal, but significant challenges must be addressed. The challenges of inadequate funding, outdated collections, insufficient staff, and limited programming require comprehensive solutions and sustained commitment. However, opportunities are equally significant. Technology integration, recognition of libraries as "third places," emphasis on culturally relevant collections, and innovative programming point toward a transformative future. Initiatives like robotics and coding programs demonstrate what is possible with investment and innovation.

The ultimate measure of success is impact on children's lives, developing love of reading, information literacy skills, and seeing themselves reflected in library collections. Investment in children's library services is investment in Nigeria's future. By addressing challenges and seizing opportunities, Nigerian public libraries can fulfill their potential as essential institutions for child development and national progress. As Virginia Walter (2013) reminds us, we must ensure that children are given the supports and opportunities they need. The library remains one of the most important such supports, providing children with access to information, culture, and the tools they need to navigate an increasingly complex world. By addressing the challenges facing children's library services and seizing the opportunities presented by technological and social change, Nigerian public libraries can fulfill their potential as essential institutions

The paper recommends that policy makers should as a matter of necessity increase budgetary allocations for public libraries with specific provisions for children's services; develop national standards for children's library services addressing collections, staffing, and programming; integrate library services into educational policy frameworks; establish dedicated funding mechanisms for sustainable library development, and support indigenous publishing of children's literature in Nigerian languages

The library administrators should prioritize children's services in strategic planning and resource allocation; invest in staff training and professional development; implement innovative programs including storytelling, homework help, and technology workshops; develop partnerships with schools, community organizations, and cultural institutions; modernize facilities to create welcoming, child-friendly environments, and diversify funding sources beyond government allocations. Librarians should advocate for children's library services to policymakers and communities; continuously update knowledge of children's



literature, child development, and technology; develop digital literacy and technology integration skills; engage with parents and caregivers to promote reading at home; practice culturally responsive librarianship reflecting Nigeria's diversity, and create welcoming, inclusive environments for all children.

Communities should support local libraries through volunteerism, advocacy, and donations; encourage children to participate in library programs; provide constructive feedback to improve services; and advocate for increased government investment in libraries.

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