

Establishing a Practical Library for the Visually Impaired

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Abstract

This article attempts to examine the need for the establishment of a practical library for the visually impaired especially in an inclusive educational setting. Acknowledging the fact that there is indeed a necessity for such radical thinking in today's world which is Information Communication and Technology (ICT) driven, the article attempts to identify some of the issues that must be considered. Such issues include the concept of inclusive library services, requirements for such services for the visually impaired and problems associated with provision of library services for the visually impaired. Far-reaching recommendations are made towards encouraging the establishment of practical libraries for the visually impaired in inclusive educational settings across the African continent.

Introduction

Education is the most effective way of liberating the mind and society from evils of ignorance. It is the root for any success in life. The ultimate aim of education is the transfer of information into knowledge which eventually results in associated learned changes in skills and behaviours. Thus development is the ability of man to conquer his environment using every necessary tool at his disposal and subsequently utilizing the said environment to his very advantage.

The library, as an information centre and custodian of information banking, is a very important instrument for the survival of education and development of a nation. This shows that information is a vital resource in education if learning must occur. Being informed and able to access information is very important to everybody. The visually impaired have the right to every means of survival and access to information is one of such right.

The Visually Impaired

Individuals with visual impairment are those who cannot use vision adequately. They range from total blindness to relatively good residual

vision. Sight is of tremendous importance in gathering information about the world around us. Through sight we obtain information about ordinary events, phenomena, and occurring events in the environment that one has not been exposed to. Events that are retrieved through archival modalities also need to be seen and read. Therefore, anyone whose sense of sight is non functional cannot benefit much if left alone (Kanu, 2003). This is because much of what is learned in one's lifetime is due to vision – the ability to see. Emphasizing the importance of vision, Cobun (1968) said,

An overwhelming 83% of our learning is through visual experience. We learn about 1% through taste and another 1% through sense of touch. The sense of smell provides about 3½% and hearing provides about 11½ of what we learn.

In the same vein, Dove (1975) also has this to say about sense of vision, “I see, I remember, I hear, I forget; I read, I understand... marry the two together however and the result should be even more impressive”.

The visually impaired are at great disadvantage because most of the things we do require visual interaction with graphic symbols. For the visually impaired to feel the impact of learning and enjoy the learning environment in our present technological age, their needs must be met. These needs range from architectural set-up, the conducive environment, information materials to be re-represented in a different format, specialised staff, specialised faculties suitable for their comfortable use and understanding. Libraries have important roles to play in these needs. The librarian, by training in information, stands a better chance to ensure that everybody in the society, including the visually impaired, can access and use the required information for their education. The objective of the Nigerian Federal Government Policy on Education (1981) states that functional education should be provided for all categories of people because every individual has the right to education and other social facilities in the society. It emphasised equity and fairness to all irrespective of birth conditions, race, tribe or any other circumstances. This objective requires that the talents of adults and children with visual impairment be also exploited and be fully integrated and allowed access to service that will assist them in acquiring the much needed education for the development of a sound mind. The information to be provided must be practical in nature, that is, easy to access and relevant. There should also be expert staff and technicians and a friendly environment with suitable buildings and facilities for their category. This then calls for an inclusive functional library services for the visually impaired. A big challenge to the library profession is to ensure that librarians must be transformed and be

ready for more complex and sophisticated library operations. They must be able to go an extra mile to get the required information materials, re-package it to be useful, taking cognizance of the present trend in information dissemination, and also to ensure that the various needs are adequately met and that the materials are easily accessible to all users.

Inclusive Library Services

The library is the life blood of any institution and a crucial centre in the educational development and knowledge acquisition of man at any level. Libraries are agents of social, economic and political reforms in any community, so their doors should be wide open to all categories of people. The library is thus crowned with the responsibility of making available all forms of information materials – books and non-books that will meet these needs, after such materials may have been well sorted and properly organised for easy retrieval. It is the function of the library to make adequate provision by designing ways that the visually impaired user can meet their needs through the provision of alternative formats.

The main idea behind the concept of inclusive library services, according to Kanu (2003), is that of developing the child along side his or her peers through exposing the child to all the experiences he or she should acquire. Inclusion also implies that no one is left out of every vital experience and privilege available in the school (Kanu, 2001) and that the major proponents in this movement mandate that all schools should make themselves suitable for the learner no matter the type of handicap or special educational needs.

In the case of running libraries within institutions, public or private, it is expected that inclusive practices that will enable them extend their services to especially the visually impaired should be adopted. In the past institutional libraries did not live up to expectation in serving exceptional individuals. Previous studies seem to indicate that in most African libraries, there has not been that concern on the inclusive provision for the handicapped generally besides the scanty provision for their reading within the general reading areas in some educational institutions. In some libraries, these are not even there. This situation makes learning very difficult for them as against the goal of libraries which emphasise reaching everybody in the society. Libraries therefore try to see that the needs of their users are adequately met. Adingorah (1985) suggested a separate section for disabled persons particularly the visually impaired when designing a library building.

It is essential to note that it is not possible for libraries in all institutions of learning or in the localities to provide special facilities for the visually impaired due to financial and other constraints as most libraries are grossly under funded. With this situation, the existing regular

libraries no doubt find it difficult to set new libraries for the visually impaired but to only make adaptations or modifications of existing ones for them.

With the new development in technology, some institutions of learning have tried to improve the information environment of the visually impaired. This is evidenced in the southwest part of Nigeria through the establishment of libraries for the blind. It is also gratifying to note that library professionals have also shown their readiness to extend the frontier of this service to include people with visual impairment (Atinmo, 2003).

Requirements for an Inclusive Library

These groups are special people so their materials and facilities should also be special, and suitable for their usage. For the visually impaired to really appreciate and gain satisfaction in their educational pursuit, they must be able to access adequate information for use. These requirements as presented by Agbaje (2000), Kanu (2003), Dada (2003), and Ojebode (2003) are similar and hence are grouped as follows:-

Building/accommodation:

If the old building is to be used, then there is need to re-model or partition by shelves to separate the reading areas for the different categories to meet their basic requirements.

For the construction of a new building solely for the visually impaired, the design of the library building should be taken into consideration. Dada (2003) made the following suggestions for new buildings for the comfortable use by the visually impaired. There should be easy steps and curbs should be provided into the library. Car pelted floors should be provided for easy and comfortable movement (should not be slippery) without hindrances. These would prevent noise from their pathfinder canes. Large doors that control auditory and visual exposure to the condors without restricted access and where they can go through easily.

Kanu (2001) suggested partitioning the reading area with shelves to separate reading areas for the different categories of users. Toilet facilities and doors should be large enough to permit free and independent movement.

Agbaje (1996) suggests adjustable furniture i.e. shelves with Braille class marks on them to encourage easy identification of the required information materials by touch. In addition, facilities for evacuation should be appropriate in case of fire. Railings should also be provided to stair cases as guides to prevent the visually impaired from knocking their heads.

Physical environment

Conducive and friendly environment with utmost silence for academic work is required so that they can relax while using the facility. In and around the library should be easily accessible so that they can be motivated towards getting in and out on their own. All barriers should be removed if possible or alternatively they should be provided with separate entrance to their reading rooms if the library is for general use.

Library resources

To meaningfully include the visually impaired, the library must make provisions for some materials to be procured or loaned from other libraries. These should be re-presented in different special formats to aid in effective use of the library. Agbaje (2001) mentioned that in fairness to the visually impaired, all resources should be provided in Braille or audio alternatives. Such resources must include,

- Recorded information on cassette/CD etc.
- Books in diverse subject matters to be produced in Braille.
- Large print books for the partially sighted or those with low vision.
- Talking books.
- *Reading aids i.e. magnifying glasses for the partially sighted.*
- Braille catalogue cards with Braille instructions on the catalogue drawers for their understanding.
- Felt tip pens and Braille measuring devices.
- Electronic Braille (computer hard and software typewriters all in Braille).
- Screen reading software with software synthesized (for visually impaired computer users).
- Language laboratory with modern equipments for listening i.e. cassette and video tapes etc.
- Thermoform machines.
- Braille printers.
- Braille duplicators.
- Duxbury Braille (Translation software).
- Special Binders.
- Heavy Duty Guillotine for cutting recycled paper to size.
- Perkins Braille writers (special machine used for transcribing printed materials into Braille).
- Talking calculators. etc..

Library staff

Visually impaired persons need special library services. Librarians must therefore develop special love and interest and be ready to assist them in their quest for knowledge and information.

- Library staff should be trained in communication skills, well mannered with good human relations to be able to handle this category of persons with special needs effectively.
- Special education and counselling specialists would also be required to cooperate with librarians towards effective and fruitful service to the visually impaired.
- A recording staff is also required.
- Brailist to do the transcription or the brailing of text as being read by the staff.
- A brailist who will proofread the brailing and then thermoform with brailing sheets before binding with special binding machines to form the Braille book.
- Another specialist staff to produce tactile surfaces such as maps, animals etc thus embossed representation of objects in the library.

Problems of Equipping a Library for the visually impaired

- Funds: - The equipments/facilities e.g. Braille machines, tape recorders, Braille computer are very expensive etc. Most libraries are under funded so are very afraid to undertake such projects.
- Irregular power supply (a Problem in many African countries): therefore most equipment cannot function properly. The backup system (solar system etc) may not be reliable. A lot of money could be used for power generation.
- Inadequate skilled technicians and repairs of equipments.
- Replacement of consumables like Braille papers and Braille sheets could also be difficult as they are foreign products.

Recommendation

African governments should provide adequate funds for acquisition of needed human and material resources. Brailed books on diverse subjects should be acquired so that the visually impaired can read on their own. Automation now allows users to access the Internet for a variety of resources. This is reducing the gap between the choices available for the sighted and the visually handicapped.

Through the Internet, the developed library would have opened the world of information to the visually handicapped readers. These can

include access to computer based catalogues either via enlarged screen or synthesized speech. This provides varieties of information to the visually handicapped. Though the materials are costly and usually difficult to obtain, those available can be improvised.

It is also noteworthy that, librarians with little knowledge on this group of physically challenged individuals can update their knowledge through workshops, symposiums, conferences and on the job training. In planning to meet their needs, the visually impaired should be involved because they know them better.

Any attempt to formulate or update library services for the visually impaired should adopt a multi-disciplinary approach. Furthermore, it might be a worthwhile exercise if mobile libraries in especially local areas are provided at intervals to ensure the provision of practical library services for the visually impaired in an inclusive setting.

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