

Library Services to the Physically Challenged: Nature, Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

Purpose: the purpose of this paper is to explore the nature, challenges and strategies of library services to the physically challenged

Design/Methodology/Approach: this is an opinion paper based on extensive literature review and practical experiences of serving physically challenged students in the researchers places of work.

Findings: Findings from the study revealed that library services to the physically challenged exist in form of oral reading services, provision of reading materials in varied formats, telephone order and renewal of materials etc. The study also revealed that among the challenges faced by physically challenged people in using the library are architectural barriers, funds to procure equipment, lack of skilled manpower to produce materials needed by the physically challenged etc.

Practical Implications: The need to integrate the physically challenged people into the main stream of societal life and remains a utopian task unless the physical challenged have access to knowledge.

Originality/Value: This paper emanated from the researchers interest to ensure that everybody has access to the library.

Key words: Challenges, Inclusive Library Services, Libraries, Nature, Physically Challenged, Status

Introduction

Physically challenged, disabled, impaired persons belong to a group of people with impaired vision, impaired hearing, speech handicaps or with orthopedic or neurological impairments (Cruickshank, 1975). The physically disabled students in the words of Gunn (1977) is one “who suffers physical or sensory impairment, or chronic sickness which could cause educational disadvantages”. This in turn may be regarded as the blind, or partially sighted, a hearing impairment, serious speech defect, paralyzed limbs or defective control over limbs or bodily functions through congenital or acquired disorder or disease, and requiring continued attention, treatment or care. In the world today, the number of people who have disabilities are growing due to a number of factors which Deines-Jones and Fleet (1995) summaries as:

- Increase in population
- Availability of medical technologies (which are increasing the chances of survival of infant’s with disabilities).

- Public funding for health services is decreasing and
- Healthcare is becoming more expensive thereby putting more children at risks for birth defects. Added to the above is increase in road crash and the global economic depression or meltdown which has reduced the propensity to provide aid to poor people, accidents victims and families with physically disabled.

Until recently, the society looks at physically challenged as valueless or burden. They are mostly left to rot away at homes and if lucky packed to shanks known as rehabilitations centers. Most rehabilitation homes do more harm than good. They isolate these children from participation in the wider society and make them more maladjusted and disabled than nature or accident made them. Most handicapped persons are capable of learning and of eventually becoming economically self-sufficient, if they are given an opportunity for an education which maximizes capabilities.

Disability does not mean incapability. It is only a challenge. It is hurdle which needs a little extra effort to overcome. A disable person in the mist of other person's with the same disability might not feel disabled. Disability is a factor of the encounter between the person with disability and the wider environment. (Ndinda, 2005) regard disability as the relationship between the individual and the society. He went further to say that it is a loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the life of the community on an equal level. A desirable approach to dealing with disability is not to eliminate the differences or to ignore them, but to furnish avenues of incorporating these inherent differences in such a way that they are useful to each endeavor and to the community.

Two notable theories have been propounded by hunt (1966) on disability. The Social theory of disability and its medical counter pact. The theories impact differently in the lives of the disabled. Social theory enables the disabled to look at themselves in a more positive way which increases their self esteem and independence while the medical theory makes the disabled people feel a loss for all the things they would like to do but cannot do, a loss of goals and dreams that seems unattainable, to feel they are a burden to family and friends and a problem for doctors who cannot cure them. This paper is based on the social theory of disability because it supports inclusive education and respect for everybody in the society and their right to live independently and comfortably in the society. UNESCO (1993) defines inclusive education as education for everybody in the same environment. Inclusive library service in this paper means that while planning the library building, there should be appropriate budget for the disabled such as:

- ❖ Architectural design - Lifters
- ❖ Physical facilities - clutches, wheel chairs, ramps etc
- ❖ Information Resources - books, brails, juls and electronics
- ❖ Trained staff specifically to serve them

These should be inclusive because in the past libraries especially in Africa were not making adequate provision for the physically challenged to use the library resources.

The importance of library services to the physically challenged cannot be

overemphasized. The physically challenged have the same information needs as any other person in the society, but they needed a more convenient strategy to access that information from the information professionals. The challenges in providing excellent service to all library users is imperative and paramount if the libraries mission and purposes is to be fulfilled

The purpose of this paper therefore is to X-ray the nature and problems of Library Services to the physically handicapped, the challenges librarians may face in order to provide the needed services to these classes of users and the strategies for handling these peculiar users and the kind of services they need in the libraries.

Nature of Services rendered to the physically challenged

There are many services given to people with disability in order for them to have access to information in a variety of formats and be able to use this knowledge to form their own opinions and participate in the development of a society. It has been librarians dream to offer everybody regardless of background and nationality access to the world's knowledge and wisdom. Universal Accessibility of Publication (UAP) cited in Ndinda (2005) made it clear that libraries must be readily accessible, its doors open for free and equal use by all members of the community regardless of race, colour, nationality, age, sex, religion, language, status or educational background.

- **Inclusive Library Service.** Handicapped people have the right to receive the best library services just as other people do (Alemna,1995).Thus, the school, public or university library, whatever the case is obliged to serve these individuals and help them obtain special reading materials as well as offer the same service that the rest of the community enjoys. If the disabled people are to join and be integrated into the mainstream society, the way the society is organized must be changed. Removing the barriers which exclude disabled people such as prejudice, bias and stereotypes towards the disabled, the inflexible organizational procedures and practice, in-accessible information, inaccessible transportation, inaccessible buildings are depicted by environmental modifications. In this vein Sebba and Ainscow (1996) opined that schools

(educational institutions) of which the library is one should restructure their environments and methods of organization to accommodate disabled children with special needs and different learning speeds. For inclusive library service to be functional, libraries will play a functional role in the communication of information by making published materials available in electronic form. A well run inclusive library system and a good educational system is a prerequisite for offering everyone a genuine opportunity to learn about our society and its background, to improve themselves and grow personally.

- **Personnel Services:** Deployment of staff at least one from each department to act as readers to handicapped students. Adina, (1995) talking from experience in Access and Syracuse University had it that handicapped students showed strong preferences for oral readings
- **Circulation Services:** Libraries offering inclusive library service should provide alternative application/registration forms. Some possible alternatives are Braille application which can be completed in Brailles. The application form should as well be formatted in a way that it can be completed using computer machines or type writers. Provisions should be made for surrogate/proxy borrowing. Telephone renewal and use of telephone to order or book for reservations is an ideal service in inclusive librarianship
- **Employment** of medical librarians to provide full time medical services and facilities in the library for the physically challenged
- **In America and Europe**, some libraries offer special extended due date or borrowing

privileges to senior citizens, same should be offered to patrons with disability. This is because, they have difficulties in obtaining regular and reliable transportation to the library

- **Special parking facilities and ramps** to provide access to library reading rooms; plug-in listening aids for the deaf; special constructed toilet facilities for the disabled and electric typewriters

Challenges faced by library professional in serving the physically challenged

The challenges of inclusive library are enormous but not insurmountable. The end result of providing an enabling environment should be the decisive factor. The problems of inclusive library service as identified by Alemno (1995) are as follows.

- ❖ Lack of skilled manpower to produce the material needed by the handicap may result in poor production of the materials. This also affects operation and maintenance of equipments needed for inclusive library service.
- ❖ Lack of properly trained library personnel. This problem originated from the library schools. The curricula of most library schools are geared towards conventional librarianship. Library staffs are therefore often unable to attend to the needs of the blind.
- ❖ Importation often pose the problem of obtaining materials that do not bear any relation to the culture and background of the students.
- ❖ Another problem identified by Alemna, (1995) and Mba (1982) is offering library services to the handicap are architectural barriers. Most of the older libraries especially University libraries were built before the era of inclusive education. Therefore such barriers as steps, high book shelves, narrow doorways and lack of elevators are still prevalent in some libraries. These obstacles can be extremely frustrating, if not impossible for the handicapped to cope with.

- ❖ Funds; Fund is yet another problem militating against effective library service to the handicapped. The material and equipment need for efficient services to the handicapped are very expensive to procure.
 - ❖ Above all, is the problem of seeing the handicapped as liabilities and undervaluing them.
 - ❖ People's way of thinking need to be changed. Development initiatives can come from both able and disabled if all are provided with a favorable condition to perform.
- Acquisition policy; this should be amended to include materials for the handicapped. These materials include:
 - Use of communication devices for the people with difficulty in reading e.g. word board. A word board can be as simple as words written on a piece of paper that the user points to, to communicate. Jaws, a text reader for the blind users, though this requires extensive keystrokes. The key strokes should be taught students on orientation so as to enable normal students help disable ones at will.

Strategies

In the past, a rise in the population of people with disabilities who use libraries might not have had impact on libraries because of lack of transportation, educational opportunities, prejudice and communication barriers. Velleman (1990) saw this situation as changing today because technological advances are creating new opportunities for the print disabled, and people with disability are greatly attending regular public schools and at the same time rightfully expected the same library service as others. The onus is therefore placed on libraries to give them access to life changing information they need to participate actively in the society. This may not cause much, only a slight modification in the way things are done in the area of library building structures, the environment around it, furniture, personnel and acquisition policy.

- In the case of building structure, established library building should be modernized with the needs of disabled people in mind. Emerging buildings should include ramps and lifts for easy movement, good lightening within the library building, special car parking facilities and construction of special toilet facility for the disabled. Carter (2002) recommends and explains that it is important to use a universal design that would work for users of all abilities rather than simply reacting to the last minute when a user needs to be served.
- Furniture: There is the need for special adaptation of the environment at the libraries for all the physically challenged to access the library resources. The shelves should be of moderate size, offering access to all.

Plug in listening aids for the deaf, electric type writers, wheel chairs etc

- Information repackaging: Libraries should repackage information and learning materials so that the final product meets the skill level of the student (De Angelis, 1987). This they can do by taking on the role of providing alternative format books including in-house creation of alternative format, to make original print books equally accessible to users with disability. Alternate format can include various formats such as analogue audio books on CD, print books that can be scanned, ORC'ed for use in Kuzwwiel 3000 or other speech adaptive technologies and the newer DAISY format which has the advantage of searchability and natural sounding voice. Kuzweil 3000 is software that will highlight words on the computer screen and simultaneously read them aloud. There are so many other soft wares available in the market that can help the handicap. Some can turn on lights and open doors when asked. There are others that can turn writing into speech (Drake, 1999)
- .Procurement of e-books in the library. Headphones should be procured to help students listen to the audio books and magnifiers provided for the visually impaired.

Conclusion

The Union of Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) cited in Ndinda (2005) asserts that disability was the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes little or no

account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in mainstream social activities. Gericke (1998) buttresses this further by saying that “it is not people who are disadvantaged but communities which experience disadvantage because of our failure as service providers to offer them the same standard of service as other users. The society is not doing the disabled good by excluding them from societal affair or by being over careful with them. The disabled will like to be appreciated for whom they are and given all the necessary information they require to compete favorably in the wider society. A library can be a friend of all for life, when library policies are inclusive and meaningful strategies to serve everyone is developed thereby ensuring that all users, regardless of disability have equal chances of participation and contribution in societal development. Moreover, library professionals should know that the library is the only one status symbol which is available to all.

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