

**AN ADVOCATE FOR THE EXPANDING ROLE OF UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY RESOURCES AND SERVICES FOR THE BENEFIT
OF DISABLED USERS**

BY ABUBAKAR MOHAMMED BITAGI

and

SALAMATU K. GARBA

LIBRARY SERVICES DEPARTMENT,

**FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, MINNA, NIGER STATE.
NIGERIA.**

Abstract

This paper identifies users who belong to the category of disabled. An examination of the roles of libraries and librarians in providing essential information resources and services to disabled users in tertiary institutions in Nigeria is x-rayed. The extent of such services as currently provided are assumed to be inadequate and improper. The paper then argues that the non-provision of special library services to disabled users constitutes a cog in the wheel of progress, educationally. In view of that, the establishment of special section in University libraries to solely serve the needs of disabled users is proposed. The compartmentalization of the proposed special section into three units for efficiency is also suggested. The paper concludes that the availability of this section will provide the disabled users with unhindered access to information of their need and consequently increase their contribution to national development.

Introduction

Librarians and library service world wide have been seen as enabling factors for the advancement of knowledge in all facets of human endeavour and especially in education. The public library policy, for example provides for services in all subject areas for everybody in the community whether he/she is able bodied or disabled. Mamman (1999) while quoting minimum standards for public libraries-1976 said that "the fundamental objectives of the library are to provide for the information needs of the community (everybody inclusive) to encourage reading habits especially among children".

In a like manner, since our higher institutions are established with the objective of admitting qualified Nigerian youths irrespective of their physical status, their libraries should have been designed and stocked with materials that could cater for all the users. From this author's observation, not much attention had been paid in that direction as far as disabled users are concerned. For the purpose of clarification and this write-up, disabled users are those who suffer from one form of mental or physical disability which makes it impossible for them to compete perfectly with

their able bodied counterparts. According to the National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004), people who are disabled "can not cope with regular school/college organization and methods without formal special educational training". The NPE (2004) further categorized the disabled into the following groups:

- (a) visually impaired (blind and the partially sighted);
- (b) hearing impaired (deaf and partially hearing);
- (c) physically and health impaired (deformed limbs, asthmatic);
- (d) mentally retarded (educable, trainable, bed ridden);
- (e) emotionally disturbed (hyperactive, hypoactive/ the socially maladjusted behavior disorder);
- (f) speech impaired (stammerers, stutters);
- (g) learning disabled (have psychological / neurological educational phobias and challenges);
- (h) multiply handicapped.

In recent times, there arose curiosity in finding ways of solving multifaceted problems associated with the disabled including provision of library services. In this direction that Baskin and Harris (1976) observed that "increasing interest has been evident lately about myriad problems involved in providing library service to exceptional children". In some Nigerian universities, Departments of Special Education have been doing all they could within and outside the campuses to solve the educationally related problems of disabled people. In this wise, symposia, conferences, lectures and workshops have been held variously. In addition to these, articles have been written in periodicals.

While the teachers are trying to provide educationally related services through lectures in multilevel classrooms and sometimes individualized instructions and related administrative arrangements, Baskin and Harris (1976) also saw the need for the librarian to be prepared to modify the library to the needs of the category of people who require specific attention. To achieve this objective, they argued further that: the librarian will need to investigate such areas as adaptations to the total environment, innovative changes in equipment and technology, enabling legislation, dissemination networks, sources, materials development and utilization, specifically focused programming and other information which will maximize knowledge, sensitivity and skill of the disabled.

From the above analysis, it could be deduced that the disabled people can not cope with regular schools without organizing a special educational training for them. It could therefore be safely argued that these set of people can not equally use the conventional libraries established in formal educational institutions where they are provided with required special training. This situation therefore

necessitates the establishment of special sections in libraries within such institutions so that the disabled users could seek for information resources and services at their own convenience and pace. The jamming up of library services for them at conventional libraries may not only cause them and other users some amount of embarrassment but they (disabled) may end up not even attempting to utilize the facilities meant for them in these libraries.

In addition to the above, it is incumbent for institutions of higher learning that provides special educational training for disabled persons to respect their fundamental human rights by giving every citizen, irrespective of their "physical, sensory, mental, psychological or emotional disabilities" (NPE 2004). This implies that equal educational opportunities should be given to disabled so that they can contribute effectively to the development of themselves, their immediate community and the nation at large. The provision of the educational right to the disabled can not be wholly achieved or successful without providing them with library service as outlined by the same educational policy, stipulated in the NPE (2004).

Background information.

Libraries are age long institutions that are established to provide information resources and services to the general public or specific group of users. Libraries established in educational institutions are meant to profit the teachers and students irrespective of whether they are able bodied or disabled. Bayero University, Kano and University of Jos, just to mention two, where there are Departments devoted to special education training are cases in view. However, it must be mentioned that the disabled users can not adequately benefit from the conventional libraries because they were initially designed and equipped to serve non-disabled teachers and students.

In any educational environment, the provision of library services serves as a necessary supplement to the teaching and learning process. Education and the library are therefore like identical twins sharing almost everything in common. Ajibero (1992) agreed with the above assertion when he observed that "libraries and education have been inextricably interwoven for such a long time that presently one takes this symbiosis for granted".

Since the disabled have every legal right to acquire education, it therefore, becomes imperative that special sections are designed and built along functional academic libraries for the specific purpose of providing information resources and services for the disabled community of the institution. This is necessary because for any form of education and training for the disabled to be effective, provision of library resources and services must be considered as a primary objective. Elaturoti

(1999) supported this observation when he opined that “the school library media centre is an integrated part of the school system that has major contributions to make the success of the education programme of the school”.

In view of the above analysis therefore, the integration of an equipped and well organized section into academic institutions' libraries where disabled are trained becomes a necessity. This is because the library is acclaimed to play a central role in any successful educational system or training programme where what is learnt is not only intended for the inculcation of permanent literacy but also where skills are acquired for the development of the learner himself and the community at large. It is also expected that where these type of sections are established, librarians who are vast in information management and dissemination are employed and motivated to help the disabled users gain information and skills necessary to function successfully in their learning environment.

Educational Rights of the Disabled Persons in the Society

Some people wonder if there is any need to pay particular attention to persons who may be suffering from various forms of handicaps such as blindness, partial sightedness, deafness, hard of hearing, mental retardation, physical handicap etc. Apart from serious mental retardation, people suffering from other forms of disabilities could be as intelligent as their able bodied counterpart. It is in recognition of this fact that the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), without discrimination provides for fundamental rights of Nigerian citizens irrespective of whether they are able bodied or not. In general terms therefore, the constitution provides for equal opportunities of:

right to life, right to dignity of human person, right to personal liberty, right to fair hearing, right to freedom of expression and the press, right to peaceful assembly and association, right to Freedom of movement, right to freedom from discrimination.

In more specific terms however, the right of the disabled persons to acquire high level of education and contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of the country are spelt out and emphasized in the NPE (2004). In its statement of objective, the NPE provides in part that special education is to:

1. equalize educational opportunities for all irrespective of abilities or disabilities.
2. provide opportunities for disabled persons to contribute their quota to national development. The essence of providing for these rights is to ensure that the disabled are not discriminated against in whatever form. Therefore, like their able bodied counterparts, the disabled are entitled to equal opportunities as far as education and other services are concerned.

The opportunity to exploit education to the fullest may not however, be realized in totality without supplementing what is learnt with adequate and relevant library materials. For this reason, the disabled persons in educational environment should have access to organized library resources and services including modern information technologies. This is considered imperative because in the library, the disabled persons are expected to discover themselves and the world around them. Through the use of the library, the disabled could match effectively in the performance of certain intellectual tasks with their able bodied counterpart. They are also expected to acquire the desired courage and morale boosters from the use of the library facilities such as the audio-visual and other forms of information technologies particularly the computers. It is the assumption of these authors that with all necessary materials provided in the special library, the disabled clientele could do what they want to in the best way.

Design and Environment of the Proposed Library Section

The proposed special library section of the academic library in institutions that provide facilities for training of disabled persons need to be designed in such a way that permit maximum utilization of resources and services. In view of that, such sections should be designed specifically to permit easy entrance by the users, putting into consideration those who could not easily walk or are on wheel chairs and the blind or partially blind users. Because of its peculiarity and set of desired objectives, this section should have different reading apartments. In line with the above proposal, Robertson (1976) was of the view that "reading and reference work should have two apartments; one being for those who read best in an isolated, distraction free area and the other for those who read and study best when they have others surrounding them". In an ideal situation also, comfortable tables, chairs and special shelves should be provided. It is also in the light of this that Robertson further argued that "round tables are more convenient for group areas" and that "comfortable large furniture helps to establish therapeutic environment". In another dimension, Agbaje and Olabode (2000) suggested that "the room (library) should be insulated so as to absorb all forms of noises in addition to the fact that the library building should be with ramps for easy access into the building".

In addition to the above, the library section should be provided with adequate lighting system that would not only beautify but also facilitate easy location of materials and their use. Preferably, the walls should be painted with highly illuminating paints to add to the brightness of the light. This is of utmost importance because Kirk (1976) opined that "the level of illumination (for the low vision individuals) could be increased by the use of illuminating colours and white

ceiling". In a nut shell, the design and environment should be such that "the function, aesthetics and relative comfort have to blend" (Madu 2004)

Expectations from the Librarian(s)

The management, administration and provision of resources and services in the proposed institutional library section calls not only for experienced and qualified librarians, but also those that are interested in moving with and studying the behaviour of the disabled users. It should therefore, be stated from the onset that the disabled could be served more effectively when one moves closer to them and possibly diagnose the extent to which they are impaired. In support of this view, Robertson (1976) observed that "the librarian must remember that in this specialized setting, he or she plays a dual role: that of a librarian and that of a therapist". He continued to argue that "his or her objectives should centre around four focal points: establishing a therapeutic environment, a safe and efficient environment, a varied multimedia environment and an efficient processing area".

From the above views, it could be deduced that to be a librarian in the proposed disabled section of the academic library, it follows that one has to combine the qualities of good qualification and experience with happiness, dedication, enthusiasm and love for the disabled users. On the other hand, he must be a media specialist and computer literate. It is in pursuit of this objective that Sangal (1998) opined that "information specialists are needed to collect, organize, preserve, retrieve and disseminate recorded knowledge whether in printed, audio, visual, magnetic tape and other forms". In Nigerian context, the traditional roles of the librarian in this aspect can not however, be disputed since he/she also functions "as the information broker, mediating, organizing, processing, retrieving and disseminating the knowledge to those who needed or require it", (Daniel, 1998).

From the above analysis and in the present dispensation however, the role of the librarian has to change. The change is necessitated by the change in the type of community to be served (the disabled users), the environment where information is served, type of resources available, method and type of services to provide and the expected currency of the information to be disseminated etc. In this dynamic but yet difficult situation, the librarian has to act as an agent of change, introducing the disabled users to the global change in information acquisition, production and utilization by combining both aspects of traditional and modern librarianship in order to have positive impact on the lives of the disabled users.

Functions of the Special Library Section to the Disabled Users

In every teaching and leaning environment, the major preoccupation of the library is to provide those resources and services that are necessary in

supporting what takes place in the classroom. The role of the library in facilitating the attainment of the aims and objectives of educational institutions in terms of quality and quantity of knowledge to be imparted should not be underrated. This is why the NPE (2004) categorically specified that "the library is at the heart of the education enterprise". The proposed special section of these academic libraries will thus play a central role in realizing the expected objectives of training the disabled in the first place.

In order to achieve the objective of providing the disabled users with effective library service, the special section of the university libraries should be designed to accommodate three different functional units. These include:

1. Printed Materials Unit (PMU). As its name connote, this unit should be the exact replica of its conventional counterpart meant for able bodied users. Materials such as textbooks, reference books, journals and newspapers etc should be stocked here. Also, services in the form of circulation, reference, current awareness, abstracting and indexing etc should be provided. The provision of this unit and services is justified by the fact that there are categories of disabled users who could read not just for relaxation but also for serious academic work.
2. Information Technology Unit (ITU). It is expected that disabled users should be carried along in a world of competitive information creation, storage, retrieval and utilization. To achieve this onerous objective, there need to be an assemblage, in a conducive environment, various categories of information technologies for their practice and utilization.

In view of the above suggestion, this unit should be stocked with computers and related electronic gadgets to facilitate their exposure to a world of current and easy to create, store and retrieve information for their immediate utilization. Here also, the disabled users are expected to learn about the computerization of various activities and effective browsing through the internet to seek for information of their choice. The relevance of providing this particular service is further emphasized by Oketunji (2000) when he reiterated that "information technology is being heralded by many as a tool that is transforming the society and increasingly considered as ideal for rapid economic, social and political development". If the disabled users are therefore expected to contribute their quota towards national development, they should not be denied access to information technologies from where they are trained.

3. Special Equipment Unit (SEU). The SEU of the proposed special section of the university library is expected to serve the functions of a workroom

where specialized equipment particularly designed and constructed for the disabled are kept. This unit thus distinguishes this section of the university library from other sections in terms of stock and utilization.

The materials that are expected to make the stock of the SEU are some or all of those itemized in the NPE (2004) and include the followings:

- Perkins braille, white / mobility cane/ brailled textbooks, braille, talking watch.
- audio maters, speech trainers, hearing aids, ear mould machines etc.
- educational / psychological toys, for the educationally mentally retarded
- calipers, prostheses crutches, wheel chairs, artificial limbs etc for the physically handicapped.

In addition to the above, provision of film equipment may be desirable. The necessity of creating this unit is to provide an opportunity for the disabled users to learn effective utilization of equipment exclusively designed and produced for their use which will in turn go along way to enhance the productivity and contribution towards national development. More importantly, it should also be expected that with time and given the desired resources, the disabled users will turn the workroom into a workshop where they will design and produce similar equipment for their peers.

Conclusion

With the establishment of special section in the university libraries in conventional institutions of higher learning where people with disabilities are trained, the disabled users will have unhindered access to information resources and services. Consequently, they will be able to contribute meaningfully to the development of the society in various dimensions.

References

- Agbaje, S.A. and Olabode, S. O. (2000). Resources availability to the visually impaired library users in Nigeria: the way out. *Journal of Association of Librarians for the Visually Handicapped*. 1(1) p 68.
- Ajibero, M. I.(1992). The library in the educational system: the state of the art. *Journal of Research in Special Education*. 4(26) pp 2-7.
- Baskin, B. A. and Harris, K. H. (1976). *The special child in the library*. Chicago ALA. pp 1-5.

- Daniel, J. O. (1998). Information technologies application to libraries: internet possibilities. In U. A. Alkaleri (ed.) *Fundamentals of research and Librarianship*. Kaduna: JVC Press. p 71
- Elaturoti, D. F. (1999). Essential knowledge-base for school librarians in a democratic culture. In Information for the sustenance of a democratic culture: a compendium of paper presentations at the 1999 NLA Annual National Conference and AGM held at Port Harcourt, May 8th - 14th. pp 121-126.
- Federal Ministry of Education (2004). *National Policy on Education*. Lagos: NERDC. pp 47-49
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999). *1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria*. Lagos: Federal Government Press. pp 18-26.
- Kirk, E. C. (1976). Designing desirable physical conditions in libraries for visually handicapped children. In Baskin, B. H. and Harris, K. H. (eds) *The special child in the library*. Chicago: ALA. pp 10-13.
- Madu, E. C. (2004). *Technology for information management and service: modern libraries and information centres in developing countries*. Ibadan: Evi-Coleman Publications. p 130
- Mamman, E.S. (1999). Essential knowledge-base for public librarians in a democratic culture. Information for the sustenance of a democratic culture: a compendium of paper presentations at the 1999 NLA Annual National Conference and AGM held at Port Harcourt, May 5th - 14th pp 63-68.
- Okunji, I. (2000). Agenda for putting information technology to work in Nigerian libraries in the new millennium. A paper presented at the NLA Annual National Conference and AGM held at Abuja, June 25th - 30th p 69.
- Robertson, P. (1976). Impact of physical environment on the emotionally Disturbed and socially maladjusted student. In Baskin, B.H. and Harris, K. H. (eds.). *The special child in the library*. Chicago: ALA. pp 7-10
- Sangal, D. G. (1998). Information profession and the education system. In Abubakar, T; Mohammed, Z; and Otim, J. (Eds.). *Issues in the information profession: Nigerian perspectives*. Zaria: NALIS. pp 1-22