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LIBRARY ENVIRONMENT AND EQUIPMENTS FOR THE EDUCATION OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

This study specifies what the library environment for the blind should be in terms of space, furniture and equipment. In conclusion, it suggests for a need to embark on researches on the advancement as it pertains to blind peoples access to information technology in Nigeria.

Introduction

The general believe is that the methods of instruction for the visually impaired individual are the same as those for the sighted and that only the media differ. The belief that the education of the blind in Nigeria is secondary has made it to suffer a severe set back. Okuoyibo (1996) states, "Disabled persons were generally ignored in the educational process". He stated further that, educating the handicapped was the thinking of missionaries and voluntary organisations working basically on humanitarian grounds. However, the absence of a public library service to the visually handicapped is tantamount to neglect and discrimination of the group. This is contrary to the dictates of a modern society as stated in the United Nations (UN) charter for the disabled (Owino: 1995).

Some 20 - 15 years ago, according to Abosi and Ozoji (1985) officials of state ministries of education held the view that the sighted education takes priority. Consequently, they misrepresent the fate of the blind to the public and government. Abosi and Ozoji (1985) explained that once such officials declared, "we have not got enough resources for the sighted, how then do we take care of the blind?" It was this notion that explains the uncoordinated educational programme for the blind in Nigeria, which adversely affected the provision of library facilities for the blind. In the 1986 statistics of Special Education Development in Nigeria (FME, 1986), which was based on 1976 UNESCO estimates, ten percent of school age children in Nigeria are stated to be handicapped, of these, 0.1 per cent are visually handicapped - - - only a handful of whom are enrolled in education programmes (Sykes & Ozoji, 1992).

Much of the information and understanding that individuals with normal vision seem to acquire almost effortlessly may not be learned at all (or incorrectly) by the visually impaired person unless someone deliberately teaches it to them.

Willies (1981) stated, "Most learning tasks involve vision to a high degree". When information is deliberately presented to the visually impaired children, they may

not learn it exactly the same way as children with normal vision would (Heward and Orlausky, 1980). They may learn to make good use of their other senses. Hearing, touch, smells and taste can be very useful channels of sensory inputs, but they do not totally compensate for the loss of vision. Hearing can tell them a good deal about near and distant environment. Hearing seldom provides information, which is as complete, as continuous, or as exact as the information people obtain from being constantly able to see their environment.

The library is an important setting in which vision is critical for successful learning and development. That is, people must be able to see clearly what they are reading and be able to interpret many things simultaneously. They must be able to maintain visual concentration. In case an individual does not have any of these skills, it will be difficult to learn.

This study defines visual impairment as the extent to which a child's vision affects learning and makes special method or materials necessary (Heward and Orlansky, 1980). Orlansky (1982) also defines the term "visually impaired" as children who require specialised educational process, materials or other services because of their visual function. In America, blind children are eligible to receive a wide variety of educational services, materials and benefits from governmental and voluntary agencies. For example, they obtain records, tapes and record players (known as talking books) from the library of congress. Schools may also receive money to buy books and educational materials from the American printing house for the blind. Some countries in Africa also provide library services to the visually impaired. An example is Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia. According to Tsadik and Gupta (1992), the University since 1961 has been admitting visually handicapped students to its various faculties and programmes and it started providing library services to these people in 1976. They stated further that the handicapped unit of the library is staffed by two library staff members and has 3,500 braille books, two braille writers, one braille copier, one roll cassette recorder, 1,700 audio recorders, 11 radio cassette and 43 tape recorders.

The main medium of reading and writing for the blind is Braille, which is a system based on six raised dots (•). Various combinations of these dots denote letters, words, contractions and punctuations. There are two grades: Grade II includes all signs and contractions. Grade I uses 42 dots each standing for an alphabetical letter or a punctuation sign, and carrying but one interpretation, no contractions are employed (Ogbue, *et al* 1987).

In Nigeria, many individuals and organisations had at one time or the other donated educational materials to the blind. Ayoku (1996) reported the efforts of the following organisations:

- (a) the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), which has a unit that produces braille paper for blind students throughout the country;

- (b) the Niger Wives Association established a Computer Based Braille production centre to meet the needs of blind students;
- (c) a community organisation gave Pacelli School for the Blind, a unit which helps in the production of braille books for the former students scattered all over secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria;
- (d) Hope for the Blind in Zaria and the Federal Nigerian Society for the blind, Oshodi, Lagos provide recorded materials for the blind; and
- (e) Nigerian Paper Mill, Jebba also provides on request, braille paper for institutions to help the blind.

However, media and materials do play an important role in the education of children with impaired vision. Therefore, the library facilities for the blind must take into consideration how these materials can be acquired, organised, stored and retrieved for the use of the blind persons. This is necessary so that timely and adequate information will be disseminated to them. More so, the early development of orderly habit with regards to the storage and retrieval of equipment and working materials will help in the location and retrieval of this equipment for their future use.

The Library Environment for the Blind

It is necessary at this point, to briefly look at what the library environment for the blind should be. The blind person's environment is not the same as that of a sighted person although their physical environment is generally the same. According to Nolan (1978), restriction in opportunities to move about the environment to provide new opportunities for observation and experience.

Much more should be done in the design of the physical environment of the library to make it serve both the handicapped and non-handicapped person. This means that within the normal library, a section could be designated for the use of the blind or more so, the blind can have their own "Braille library". It should be apparent that the library environment for the blind requires careful specification in terms of space, furniture, equipment and so on. There are some basic factors that should be taken into consideration in providing a suitable learning environment for the blind:

indiscriminate placement of obstacles on pedestrian ways like refuse dumps, construction equipment etc. must be avoided;

lack of kerbs, pavements, standardised roads and buildings are architectural barriers that must be looked into to encourage a good library environment for the blind; and

indicators such as fire alarms, devices that detect environmental features and present them in sound or in textual form must be provided in a library environment.

The equipments for the use of the blind must be placed in such a way that will not hinder movement in the library. The goal of a blind person is independence, that is, free from assistance from sighted person except where the blind seeks such assistance. However, a blind person must be informed about the likely obstacle, he/she may find in a library environment. All materials, aids and equipments must be labelled in large print braille for easy identification. A visually impaired person must have control of the library environment to some extent. If furniture or storage places are altered, they should be forewarned of this. Whatever is the mode of delivery of special education services, safe and efficient mobility is crucial for each blind student (Ayoku: 1996). Since passivity may result from environmental restrictions, the child must be taught to actively engage in the world around him/her (Nolan: 1978).

Education and Library Services for the Blind in Nigeria

Today, many states in the federation have built residential schools for the blind children. According to Okuyibo (1996), the period of darkness is gradually fading away giving way to light because the education of the handicapped is receiving some positive attention. He stated further that the change can be observed in the recognition, approval and funding of education of handicapped children. Education for the handicapped is free at all levels in most countries of the world such as Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Ireland, Japan, Norway, Sri-lanka and so on (UNESCO: 1988). The Nigerian government had established some vocational training centres all around the country. Before and after 1960, according to Abosi and Ozoji (1985), many bodies got involved also in the education of the blind in Nigeria. Some of these include:

- i. The Nigerian National Advisory Council for the blind;
- ii The Federal Society of the blind;
- iii The Royal Commonwealth Society for the blind;
- iv The University of Ibadan, Jos, Ilorin and Kaduna Polytechnic;
- v The British Council;
- vi The Nigerian Education Research Council; and
- vii The Ministries of Education.

Others include missionary bodies like the Irish Sisters of Charity (founders of Pacelli School of Blind in Lagos), Salvation Army, Sudan United Mission, Church Missionary Society (CMS), etc. According to Gbogbin and Sokalo (1996) vocational rehabilitation centres for the disabled are established at Moniya in Oyo State, Oshodi in Lagos; Emene in Enugu; Kano; Kaduna; and Jos. In spite of the general high level of interest in special education, many services are yet to be fully introduced and many of the goals of the National Policy on Education are yet to be reached (Sykes and Ozoji: 1992).

However, the National Policy on Education (1981) states, "Libraries are one of the most important educational services". However, this area has been neglected for a long time especially library services for the handicapped. The government proposed the establishment of a Braille Press and library but nothing came out of it (Abosi and Ozoji: 1985). The few residential schools cannot accommodate all the blind pupils that need education. However, research evidence has shown that more than 80 per cent of learning is achieved through the visual modality (Ogbue 1987, *et al*).

In Nigeria, learning materials for the blind is scarce. Many of the standard texts are not on braille, tape or large print. Even where there is a reasonable supply of such materials, they are never so abundant and accessible as print materials. Thus, the visually handicapped person is always limited in his choice of reading materials. Ayoku (1996) states that in ensuring success in reading for the visually handicapped, they would need a broad range and variety of experiences to overcome the limitation of their non-visual sense.

Since the inception of education for the blind in Nigeria, foreign libraries such as the library of Royal National Institute for the blind, United Kingdom have provided free lending services. Such services although needed and welcome are only able to provide very limited help and they do not respond on time to students need. Task like reading, learning of science, mathematics, social studies, physical education; among others, constitute the major part of the educational programmes for the visually handicap (Ayoku: 1996). The blind has "library rights" like others because of these tasks. Sykes and Ozoji (1992) quoted Thiele (1982) as stressing that the need for books by the visually handicapped is often greater than that of the seeing population, which has many activities at their disposal. Furthermore, most visually handicapped people cannot afford to buy books and tape.

Some of the schools for the visually handicapped in Nigeria include:

1. Ikeja Farm Craft Centre for the blind;
2. Gindiri School for the blind, Plateau State;
3. School for the deaf and blind at Oji River Unuahia, Enugu State; and
4. Pacelli School for the blind, Lagos State.

Other schools are located at Ilorin, Owo and Ogbomosho. Most of these schools based from Pacelli do not have most of the teaching aids they need for the blind. According to Sykes & Ozoji (1992) facilities for the education of the blind seeking admission into tertiary institution are provided at Universities of Ibadan, Jos, River, Obafemi Awolowo University, Kaduna Polytechnic, University of Sokoto, Nsukka, Morin, Bayero University Kano; Federal College of Education (Special) Oyo. Some of these institutions also offer courses on special education.

The University of Ibadan library has not been providing library services for the visually impaired students even though they are being admitted into different departments every session. The university has a department of special education that caters for the education of teachers for handicap children, but the department has no special library services for its handicapped students. According to Abosi & Ozoji (1985) the University of Ibadan has no section for the blind apart from special education books at its open shelves.

However, things are a bit better at the Federal College of Education (Special) in Oyo. The library caters for some of the needs of the visually impaired in terms of reading room and necessary furniture, but lacks most of the library materials needed for the education of the blind, for example, current books editions in braille, books on cassettes.

The visually handicapped should not be deprived of their rightful access to library services in their educational programme. In as much as the visually impaired student in secondary and tertiary institutions attend regular classes with their seeing peers (Ayoku: 1996), they must be provided with adequate library services like their seeing peers in these institution. Much of the instruction in the classroom both at higher and lower levels of education today is oral and is not a disadvantage to the learning programme of the blind. What happens to leisure reading and current affairs? Given the time, special materials and systematically well planned programmes, the blind will create impart in the society.

Suggested Library Materials for the Blind

For a long time, library services in Nigeria do not have facilities that cater for the blind. According to Ayoku (1996) the library services provided by the Federal Nigerian Society of the Blind (FMSB) is largely poor as most books on the shelves are over three decades old and are tangential to the educational need of the blind students. There is a need at this point to identify some media equipments to be found in the library for the blind. Some of these equipments are:

- a. *Cramer Abacus*: this is a mathematical aid for blind students. Manipulation of the abacus bead is particularly useful in counting, addition and subtractions;
- b. *The APII speech plus calculator*: this device gives results of the calculation process in both visual and auditory form;
- c. *Embossed relief maps, diagrams and three-dimensional models*: these are useful adaptations that have been designed to encourage blind students in studying science and social studies;
- d. *Optacon (optical-to-tactile converter)*: is a small electronic device that converts regular prints into a readable vibrating form for blind people;
- e. *Thermoform Machines*: the primary duplicating device for braille;

- f. *Talking Books*: these are educational materials, which are recorded and could be played. The use of an earphone will be needed for the use of the talking book as a library material;
- g. *Embossed and relief pictures*: these are produced objects in outlines that can be felt tactually. It is very useful in the study of Biology and Geography;
- h. *IBM Braille Typewriter*: when a letter is pushed or pressed down the keyboard, the braille equivalent comes out; and
- i. *Kurzweil Reading Machines*: this is one of many technological developed machine manufactured in America. This sophisticated computer actually reads books and other reprinted matters aloud, using synthetic speech. The reader can regulate the speech and tone of the voice and can even have the machine spell out words letter by letter as desired. This will be a good aid in reading daily newspaper.

Owino (1995). grouped the needs for the establishment of the library for the visually impaired into three (3) groups namely Materials, Personnel and Services.

- a. **Materials:**
 - Magazines, novels, plays and factual reading materials
 - Braille books preferably in grade II.
 - Books on cassettes recorded by experts.
- b. **Personnel:**
 - Transcribers
 - Staff to assist them in reading out parts of printed books so as to enable them in deciding which books to borrow.
- c. **Services:**
 - A reliable postal service.
 - Creation of reading space in the library where one could bring in a sighted colleague.

The Future of Library Services to the Blind

Libraries in Nigeria in the new millennium should begin to look for ways of meeting the needs of blind persons in the digital age. There is a need to embark on researches/studies on advancements as it pertains to blind persons access to information technology. This is necessary in order to provide information about emerging technologies to the blind.

Some of the areas that need to be investigated and researched are:

1. the production and use of a braille card catalogue to order books by the blind; and
2. the use of CD-ROM and the Internet as a good source of reference material for the blind.

In America, the Library of Congress has started something on this. The Newsletter of the National Library Services for the Blind and Physically Handicapped published by the Library of Congress (1996) stated that:

"an Internet user reading war and peace in English can search the Internet, retrieve the full text and down load it to a computer, using braille translation software such as Mega Dots to translate it into braille and read it from a refreshable braille display, all within a short span of time".

It is pertinent to note that many high tech aids and devices are presently not available in Nigeria due to financial constraints and the economic instability facing the country. With the new democratic government in place, there is hope that the economy of the nation will improve with time.

Suggestions for Improving Library Services to the Blind

1. It is necessary for public and academic libraries to provide a section devoted to outreach programmes and extra-library services required by the visually impaired individuals;
2. In view of the economic situation of Nigeria, efforts should be made to seek donation of braille books and large print from established libraries overseas. In Addis Ababa University Library, most of the books were acquired through the library of congress, Washington (DC) USA and Braille international, India (Tsadik and Gupta: 1992). Also in Nigeria Sykes and Ozoji (1985) claimed that this has been done successfully at the University of Jos and Bayero University, Kano where both braille and prints text were generously donated to them by America's National Federation for the blind. As a result of the democratic dispensation in Nigeria, most of these organisations will be disposed to granting such request from the National Library and other academic institutions;
3. Librarians and Information specialists should seek to know more about the information needs of the visually impaired in order to provide a well meaningful library service;
4. There is need for library use education for special educators and teachers of the visually impaired at school. This is important for them to know what operates in a library in order to use the library facilities to the maximum;
5. There is need for computerised braille to be acquired and used. There is an urgent need for the production of braille in Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa codes; and
6. According to Ayoku (1996), local production of some of these materials for the visually impaired should be explored. He quoted Weneris (1988), suggesting that the recourse to the local production of equipment and aids by the disabled in

collaboration with the community would substantially reduce the cost of production and importation of such materials.

Conclusion

In Nigeria, a braille will continue to be the major method of reading for the visually impaired individuals. It therefore follows that a sustained way of making braille readily available must be found in order to disseminate timely and adequate information for the visually impaired. The Nigerian Library Association and the National Library should develop a strategy that will provide an extensive library of braille reference materials, dictionaries, textbooks, diagrams, magazines and worksheets.

Abosj and Ozoji (1985), reported that the National Braille library opened by Lady Ademola in Lagos has since grown into disuse. However, this library should be resuscitated. It is necessary that government policy and initiatives should be implemented to ensure quality education for the visually impaired. Nigeria should follow the example of Addis Ababa University library stated earlier in the article by establishing a functional library most especially in our institutions of high learning. These libraries would provide the visually impaired with academic and leisure text in visually and tapes. We must not leave the visually impaired behind in the dark when information is changing rapidly all around the world.

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