

**THE RELEVANCE OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES FOR
THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The paper discusses the relevance of library and information services to the visually impaired persons in Nigeria. The visually impaired persons have some peculiarities and their disabilities vary according to the degree of severity requiring tailored library and information services, which is responsive to individual needs. It acknowledges government efforts as well as that of organizations and individuals in the educational provisions for the visually impaired in the country since 1957, though library and information services are still in their infancy. Problems encountered by the visually impaired in an attempt to have access to library services are also highlighted while recommendations were proffered for developing library and information services for this category of handicapped people.

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Introduction

The growing number of visually impaired in schools in Nigeria and the need to develop the potentials of this category of handicapped persons, makes it imperative for adequate library and information services to be extended to them. This will go a long way to facilitate the educational pursuit and enhance the development in the society. The ultimate aim should be to completely integrate the blind into the society on a basis of equality. This involves the removal of legal, economic and social discriminations; the education of the public on new concepts of blindness, and the attainment by all blind people the right to exercise to the fullest, their individual talents and capabilities. It means the right of blind to work along with their sighted neighbors in the professions, common callings, skilled trades and regular occupation.

The visually impaired according to Abosi and Ozoji (1985) include persons who are visually handicapped, totally blind, low in vision and those who are partially sighted. These people need the best education that one can provide to enable them minimize the effect of disability and develop adequate powers and potentialities.

A person is said to be blind if he cannot read and write print materials after all optical corrective measures have been taken. He uses braille as a medium for reading and writing. Lowenfeld (1971) however says that a person is blind if he has a central visual acuity of 20/200 or less in the better eye with correcting glasses. This means that the eye can see at a distance of 20 feet what a normal eye can see at 200 feet. The visually impaired can only find adequate educational provisions in special schools or specially equipped ordinary educational settings where teaching is individualized and with specialized equipment.

The effect of visual problems on a child's development according to the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (1997) depends on the sovereignty, type of loss, age at which the condition appears, and overall functioning level of the child. Many children who have multiple disabilities may also have visual impairments resulting in motor, cognitive, and/or social developmental delays.

A young child with visual impairments has little reason to explore interesting objects in the environment and, thus, may miss opportunities to have experiences and to learn. This lack of exploration may continue until learning becomes motivating or until intervention begins. Because the child cannot see parents or peers, he or she may be unable to imitate social behaviour or understand nonverbal cues. Visual handicaps can create obstacles to a growing child's independence.

Children with visual impairments should be assessed early to benefit from early intervention programs, when applicable. Technology in the form of computers and low-vision optical and video aids enable many partially sighted, low vision and blind children to participate in regular class activities. Large print materials, books on tape, and Braille books are available. Students with visual impairments may need additional help with special equipment and modification and mobility, vocation/ career options and daily living skills. Students with low vision or those who are legally blind may need help in using their residual vision more efficiently and in working with special aids and materials. Students who have visual impairments combined with other types of disabilities have a greater need for an interdisciplinary approach and may require greater emphasis on self care and daily living skills.

Educational Provisions for the Visually Impaired Persons in Nigeria

The visually impaired in the country suffered serious setbacks with the introduction of Western education which at its beginning made no provisions for this category of handicapped people. Some of these setbacks according to Abosi and Ozoji (1985) include deprivation, dejection, neglect, illiteracy, apparent loss of self-image and personality, economic insecurity, the impairing stigma abusively imputed to the blind, social insecurity and a hopeless future.

Regrettably however, the government did not get actively involved in the education of the visually impaired, leaving the initiative and action to be taken by the Royal Commonwealth Society who established the farmcraft center at Ikeja in 1957 which they later handed over to the government in 1960. It is worth mentioning also that before and after 1960, many bodies have shown interest in the education of the visually impaired and they include: -

- ❖ The Nigerian National Advisory Council for the Blind
- ❖ The Federal Society for the Blind
- ❖ The Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind
- ❖ The Universities of Ibadan, Jos, Ilorin and Kaduna Polytechnic
- ❖ The British Council
- ❖ The Nigerian Education Research Council

Also the Ministries of Education; in conjunction with NITEL installed special gadgets for blind telephone operators and also gave Braille materials free. The development resulted in the establishment of twelve special schools and training centers for the visually impaired in the country.

The open education which was also embarked upon from the early sixties made provisions for the visually impaired to be educated side by side with their sighted counterparts. This implies that the visually impaired will be absorbed in small groups into the routine of the ordinary day school without upsetting the normal setting of work in the schools.

The newly blind students in schools are faced with the difficulty of having to learn a new set of symbols and alphabets, which are the braille alphabets. They would need to learn to read by touch instead of the conventional method of reading by sight. The gate to learning could only be opened through the knowledge of braille. Once a child can read and write using braille, he will then find other school subjects easy to cope with. This method according to Abang (1986) becomes more acute depending on the age of the student. The older the student, the more difficult it is to read by touch, since the sense of touch declines with age.

Besides the aforementioned, blind students in the country have difficulties getting Braille materials as they are generally in short supply. There are very limited numbers of Braille books and most textbooks are in printed form requiring one to undertake the tedious job of having to transcribe the books into braille. At the moment, there is only one functioning small braille press organized by the Nigerian Educational Research Council in the country which however has not been able to cope with the high demand for publications required by blind students in schools. Other

braille materials lacking in the schools include braille rulers, cubarithon, braille machines, embossed maps, talking clocks and calculator, and lots more. It should be mentioned that though braille materials are lacking in schools, the few available ones are very expensive and most times, unaffordable by the blind students. The blind student is therefore faced with the difficulty of getting funds to purchase equipment that 'could enable him progress in his educational career.

In addition, the dearth of mobility instructors in schools poses yet, another difficulty for the visually impaired students. The students will then have to depend mostly on sighted guides. This however affects adequate development of self-concept in the blind students. They may therefore, get frustrated since they have to depend most times on their sighted colleagues for mobility.

The Need for Library and Information Services for the Visually Impaired

The realization of the increasing population of the visually-impaired in the societies, as well as the growing demands of the visually-impaired persons themselves for equalization of educational opportunities irrespective of the handicapping conditions, has created the much needed awareness and interest of the various governments and good spirited individuals to extend educational services to the visually- impaired as well as those of the sighted. This will also imply the provision of adequate library and information services to the visually impaired, which will enable them to develop positive self-concept and achieve better educational standard in the society. The 1991 census puts the total number of handicapped persons in Nigeria at 375,476. Of this number, 73,751 representing 19.6% were certified blind. This according to the report excludes those with low vision, astigmatism and partially sighted.

It is important to state that in providing library services to the visually impaired persons less attention should be paid to the implications of the term - visual impairment? This is an all embracing concept. This becomes necessary because visual impairment varies in nature and severity of disability while some can read standard print with reading aid, others may find it difficult to read even large prints with reading aids. The degree to which each visually impaired is disabled therefore

determines the type of service provision which expectedly, should meet the particular needs of the visually impaired.

The policy of integration as practiced in public and private schools in Nigeria implies not only equalization of education for the visually impaired with the sighted, but equal provision of various services aimed at self-fulfillment of school children. Atinmo (1979), indicated in a survey that the handicapped children in Nigeria are not provided with adequate library services even, in schools that specially cater for them. This is particularly true because of the negating attitudes the vast majorities of the public hold about the handicapped, and also lack of knowledge of the special needs and services of this category of people. The visually impaired persons are like their sighted colleagues and would therefore need equal access to services provided in schools as they also have reading and information needs. By implication, the visually impaired expects that adequate library and information services should be extended to them viewed from the concept of their right to education and equality of opportunities with the sighted. Like the sighted therefore, they need access to the libraries in their various schools and in the larger society where they could obtain relevant information, and borrow books that will be appropriate to their special needs.

The curriculum for the education of blind is basically the same as that of the sighted in the regular schools. The difference however lies in the inclusion of special subjects like braille reading and writing, typing and mobility and orientation, which are all taught by specialist teachers trained to handle the visually impaired in schools. Development of library and information services that is pertinent to the visually impaired will therefore be achieved when materials are provided in the alternative formats which will include reading aids and transcription equipment. The visually impaired may be obliged to borrow alternatives to print like the spoken word (audio cassettes), embossed print and electronic materials because they are not able to access the printed equivalent.

Chapman-Ukolin, A (2000) in a briefing paper, reported that the present level of library and information services for the visually impaired Population of the UK, apart from the specialist services in the voluntary sector, is inadequate and in no way integrated with the facilities available to people without sight problems. She however

submitted that recent initiatives and legislations on social inclusion have prompted improvements both in government circles and in the voluntary sector.

Contributing also, Creaser, C. Davies, J. E. and Wisdom, S (2002) reports the key findings from a project, undertaken by the Library and Information Statistics Unit, Loughborough University (LISU) and funded by resource: The Council for Museums Achieves and Library, under auspices of the share the vision programme, to conduct an extensive survey of visually impaired people in the UK, with a view to determining their perceptions, opinions and activities regarding relevant information sources and library services that are available to them. The survey focused on: levels of use; alternative formats; use of information technology; and users satisfaction. Concludes that there are opportunities for greater cooperation between the various agencies since, in 1999, less than one third of Public library authorities reported having working relationships with any of the other providers considered in this study, and this picture had not changed for some years.

Considering ICT for access to information services for disabled people, Myhill, C. E. (2002) in a case study, submitted that providing access to information for all users, irrespective of their physical disabilities, is a requirement for all libraries and ICT can be used to assist this. The case study describes a range of projects and services that have been developed by Gates head libraries using ICT to enable disabled people gain access to information. These projects range from AIRS (which started with the production of a talking newspaper in 1987), to MISSISSIPI (which uses video telephony for sign language communication for deaf people) to the Web accessibility guidelines used for Gateshead Grid for Learning.

The problem of mobility adversely affects the visually impaired as they finds it difficult to go to the library or get into the physical structure. They also encounter difficulty in locating the various sections in the library as well as acquiring needed services. In developing library services to the visually impaired in schools in the country, one should therefore ensure that they have access to the structures housing library materials. This according to Machell (1996), can be done with the advice of professionals (architects, access officers) and of the visually impaired people

themselves, which should be sought, both in the design of new buildings and in alterations to existing premises.

CILIP (2005) carried out Equal Opportunities Briefings for Library and Information work on library and information services for visually impaired people. This briefing gives pointers to best practice for information and library staffs who come in contact with people with visual disabilities. It gives advice about how to provide access to services and stock for this user group, and how assistive technology can be beneficial. Contact for organizations who can advice about specific aspects of service provision to visually people are included.

Conclusion

The need for the development of library and information services to the visually impaired in schools, cannot be over-emphasized. Since the curriculum in schools are not in anyway different, it suffices that libraries in schools should be adequately equipped with the collections well developed to meet the needs of individual students including the visually impaired. The peculiar nature of the visually impaired has to be given adequate consideration to ensure accessibilities of materials in libraries.

In addition, the visually impaired persons will need access to buildings, and want staff who understands their needs and show enormous care in an attempt to benefit from provisions in the libraries. To achieve this, the library staff should endeavor to discuss with the visually impaired to know what their needs are and be able to ensure that materials are delivered in usable formats within the required time. Problems encountered in educational settings by the visually impaired persons though numerous, are therefore not unsurmountable. It only requires adequate understanding of their peculiarity by the library staff to ensure that the specific needs of the visually impaired are met.

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