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Redesigning library services to meet the needs of children and young adults with special needs: expectations of public libraries in developing countries

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Abstract:

The paper is focused on redesigning of library services to meet the needs of children and young adults with special needs. The study aims at examining the issues from the perspective of public libraries in developing countries: The highlights of the paper include the nature of children and young adults with special needs, rationale for providing special library services to children and young adults with special needs, areas of public library services that require redesigning. Skills and competences required for effective library service provision to children and young adult with special needs, challenges to providing library services to children with special needs. Recommendations were made in line with the studies.

1.0 Introduction

Children are generally defined as persons under 18 years of age, are exposed to a range of risks when forced to flee from their homes. There is no doubt that when children are not properly taken care of them the larger society is at risk. Children and young adults are part of any society and recognized in any development philosophy in any nation. They enjoy fundamental human right like adults. International agencies recognizing the place of children in any society, especially in view off the fact that they are the future leaders of any nation, then efforts should be made to ensure that that their rights are fully protected. Nevertheless, among these children and young adults are class or groups that need special attention because of the circumstances surrounding them, either they are physically challenged or they belong to internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Internally displaced adolescents are faced with various educational problems and these include inaccessibility to school, inability to participate in educational activities (such as study group) and inaccessibility to library/laboratory facilities (Durosaro and Ajiboye, 2011). These children with special needs must be given sense of belonging in the society by giving them educational opportunities among other privileges. According to Children with disabilities, like all children, are individuals and have their own needs and abilities, while boys and girls with mobility impairments may have trouble entering inaccessible school buildings, children with sensory impairment may primarily face communication issues (Sambo and Bwoi, 2015).

Children need library for lifelong education in consonance with the national educational policy (Ebiwolate, 2010). The fundamental problem for the special needs students is the difficulty of obtaining the necessary information (Atabor, 2016). People with special needs have either single or multiple functional disabilities which can create great hindrances in their accessibility in day-to-day living (Bhattacharya & Roy, 2013). As noted by Aboyade, Ishola, Ojokuku and Chris-Israel (2016), children as an important arm of the rural populace and democratic society, client of the public library need the library for lifelong education in consonance with the national education policy. Children service help to make available books and other information resources to children who have been exposed initially to books in their schools (Sokari, Abdullahi & Abdullahi, 2017). One of the social institution that really carter for children and young adults is the public library.

The modern public library is a proactive, centrally located, attractive, spacious multifaceted and very busy institution open for long hours and seven days a week it is the community's cultural and meeting place, which doesn't regard its users as "Customers" but owners (Uzoigwe, 2017). Public library services serve all dimensions of needs of the populace through various means (Onoyeyan, 2013). Public libraries are usually established in towns, cities and villages and such libraries are maintained with public funds and by their nature have an array of materials covering various shades of opinion and across different age barriers (Innocent, 2015).

Public libraries give children access to a wider range of books more than could be provided by school library and plays a significant part in equalizing opportunities for learning resources to be available to all irrespective of the economic status of the parents or guardians. It gives the young reader access to information resources after school hours and arouses their

interest to read outside the school curriculum (Kalu, Okai and Unagha, 2015, p.150). According to Aju (2014), the role of public libraries in Nigeria is to select, acquire, organize, preserve/conservate and disseminate the information resources so stocked to intending user in order to satisfy their individual and organizational needs. He noted that though these roles are universally expected of any public library, however, the approaches taken by individual public library to accomplish these roles depends on the vision and circumstance within which a particular public library operates and the quality of its staff.

Librarians and their affiliated institutions have long been philosophically proactive in providing equal access to information for everyone (Carter, 2004). Libraries work as service organizations which facilitate all their users without discrimination, including persons with special needs as well (Bashir *et al*, 2017). As service-oriented institutions established and run with public fund, public libraries have the vital role of providing services to all, including children (Ekere and Ugwuanyi, 2011).

Public libraries as a social institution in Nigeria just like most developing countries hardly meet up to the expectations of school children, especially those with special needs such as being physically challenged or internally displaced. It is on this premise that this paper is focused on redesigning library services to meet the needs of children and young adults with special needs with emphasis on the expectations of public libraries.

2.0 Conceptual Analysis of Key Words

The key words used in this paper are explained in this section. These include public library, internally displaced persons (IDPs), children, young adults and special needs.

2.1 Public library

The public libraries are those social institutions that are established by and managed with state funds. They are libraries provided wholly or partly from public funds and the use of which is not restricted to any class of persons in the community. They are libraries established to serve everybody without any restriction (Ekere & Ugwuanyi, 2011). Public libraries are essentially the means by which records of man's thoughts and ideas and the expression of his creative imagination are made freely available to all (Enyia, 2002). Public libraries offer services like awareness projects, mobile library services, literacy programmes, community information, provision of meeting spaces etc. (Onoyeyan, 2013).

Public libraries are community agency providing access at local level to a range of knowledge and information for the society as a whole (Oghentega, Erimieleagbn & Ugulu, 2014). Public libraries are often considered as an essential part of having an education and literate population. It enlightens, uplifts and sustains the educational status of people in the society (Anyalebechi & Udo- Anyanwu, 2015). Public libraries are social institution and extended arm of governments. In Nigeria, they are usually established, supported and funded by the state governments. Aina (2004) sees public library as more or less a universal library expected to serve all kinds of people including young children and people with disabilities or even people who for one reason or the other are incapacitated. Anyalebechi and Udo-Anyanwu (2016) summarized the service provided by public libraries as mobile library services, information and referral services, outreach programmes, current awareness programmes, library service children, selective dissemination of information (SDI), internet services, photocopy service and book depot. Public libraries in Nigeria as pointed out by Ebiwolate (2010), are part of the government, in terms of administration and budget procedures, and the establishment of public libraries in Nigeria has been limited mostly to urban areas. Vital as the role of public libraries are, it is a thing of surprise that after many years of public library existence in Nigeria, most of its objectives are yet to be achieved due to several problems militating against them (Anyalebechi & Udo-Anyanwu, 2016).

2.2 Internally Displaced persons

IDPs legally remain under the protection of their own government, even though that government might be the cause of their flights. As citizens, they retain all of their rights and protection under both human rights and international humanitarian law (Abbas, 2015). Internally displaced persons do not need such a substitute or a surrogate protection. Rather as human beings who are in a situation of vulnerability, they are entitled to the enjoyment of all relevant guarantees of human rights and humanitarian law, including those that are of special importance to them (Oduwole & Fadeyi, 2013).

2.3 Children and Young Adult

This term semantically mean the same with the term “minors” which by the African Youth Charter means young people ages 15 to 17 years subject to country’s laws. Aina (2004) sees children as essentially pre-primary school children. Youth and young people refer to every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years.

The various categories of children and young adults with special needs include:

- ***The visually impaired children and young adults:*** all over the world, people with visual impairments has to face numerous difficulties as they seek to assert their position in a modern, complex and competitive world dominated by able-bodied individual (Rayini, 2017). The visually impaired, like other handicapped people, suffer social discrimination and other cultural bias that negatively impact on their information seeking behaviour (Eskay and Chima, 2013).

- ***Children and young adults in internally displaced camps (IDCs):*** The issue of displaced persons in recent times as pointed out by Fatile and Bello (2015) has been a global phenomenon and the displacement across the globe is due to communal violence, natural disaster, internal armed conflicts, border conflicts, ethno-religious conflicts and terrorist attacks. Internally displaced person are mostly victims of the inhumanity of man against man. They are victims of various kind of injustices or violence confrontations, perpetrated by either their own government against them or by others, such as communal clashes, terrorism, riots, religious conflicts, natural disasters (Akuto, 2017).

- ***Children with hearing impairment:*** hearing impairment as pointed out by Bhattacharya & Roy (2013) is the category of physical impairment that includes people who are completely or partially deaf.

- ***Physically handicapped children and young adults:*** These users according to Aina (2004) include wheel chair carrying users. The people in this category are sometimes immobile and stay at homes.

2.4 Special Needs

The term “special needs” in the context of library services relates to the needs of people who cannot make use of conventional libraries and library materials and services (Abdelrahman, 2016).

3.0 Rationale for Providing Special Library Services to Children

Information is essential to all human beings and every library’s aim is to provide the right information at the right time and in the right format to its patrons regardless of race, religion, age, sex, nationality and language and this includes provision of information to people with disabilities (Rayini, 2017). When children grow up in displacement, their education is often interrupted or entirely forgone (IDMC, 2010). Stating further, groups of IDPs may be kept out of school through residency requirements, language barriers, and

discrimination, while children in host families can lose access to schools when the buildings are used to house IDPs.

Experience shows that children and youth have been, are and will remain one indispensable sector of focus of a national / public library services in every country (Moshoesho- Chadzinga, 2014). Atabor (2015) reasoned that the involvement of libraries in provision of information services to individuals with special needs will afford them the opportunity of wider exposure, as they will be able to learn more about themselves as well as other people. With regards to internally displaced children and young adults, it is imperative to align with the thought of Fatile and Bello (2015) when they affirmed that IDPs remain citizen or habitual residents of a particular country and continue to be entitled to enjoy the rights available to the population as a whole.

Ayiah (2007) maintained that access to information is a pre-requisite towards enlightenment and meaningful development at all levels of human endeavour and any part of society that deny a section from enjoying the benefits accruing from access to information is likely to suffer from exclusion and decadence in this modern society that is being driven by information.

4.0 Services Provided by Public Libraries that Need to be Redesign

The various services that public libraries in Nigeria provides that requires redesigning are as follows:

a. Provision of Braille library services for the blind and visually impaired Persons (VIPs)

The provision of library and information services to people with visual impairment in most developed countries is considered a social service and it is dependent on the nature of their disability (Ayiah (2007). The blind children and young adults need special attention. However, while some public libraries do provide Braille library services, it is clear that the service needs to be redesigned in order to really fulfil the fundamental philosophy behind it. For instance, Eskay and Chima (2013:626) recognizing the changes in library services propelled by technological developments asserted that:

The path to providing quality library services to people who cannot read standard print with corrective lenses or who cannot handle printed materials has endured many advances, twists, and setbacks. The commitment and dedications and developments in Braille and recording technology have significantly improved access to written materials.

Ng'ang'a (2003) opined that public libraries should form an integral part in enhancing literacy among the visually impaired persons outside the classroom. According to Eskay and Chima (2013), library services delivery for blind and physically handicapped individuals is an ever expanding phenomenon precipitated by both the innovative spirit of the community and the advances of technology. More so, transcription service for the VIPs can be provided by public libraries, even though this may seem to be against the established practice according to Ayiah (2007). Eskay and Chima (2013) citing Babalola and Haliso (2011) identified braille books, talking books, talking newspaper, large printed material as part of specialized information services developed by libraries and information centres around the world to meet the needs of visually impaired clientele.

Braille library services for the blind and visually impaired persons (VIPs) should be redesigned for it to adequately cater for the needs of people with special need.

b. Provision of outreach/mobile library services to the physically challenged in rural areas

Mobile libraries are used to provide library services to villages and city suburbs without library buildings. They also service those who have difficulty accessing libraries, with retirement homes being common stops. Some libraries use their book mobiles to deliver material such as audio books, large prints, novels to homebound patrons who don't have anyone to go to the library for them (Oghenelega, Erimieleagbon & Ugulu, 2014). As noted by Ebiwolate (2010), bookmobile services were introduced in Nigeria by the regional governments in the 1960s and 1970s with the level of success varying. These services can be redesigned as strategy for reaching to the physically challenged in the Nigerian society. This requires having a profile or database of physically challenged young people in order to re-positioning the public libraries with a view of reaching out to them. Outreach programmed should be designed strategically to meet the needs of the internally displaced persons in Nigeria.

These services as it were can be redesigned to meet the needs of teeming Nigerian children, young adults with special needs and those found in internally displaced camps, that can no longer accessed the main public libraries. Provision of outreach /mobile library services to these children and young people with special needs will not only give them sense of belonging in the society, but also open ups the windows of opportunities for them to fulfil their aspirations and contribute their own quota to the development of the society.

In most developed countries, there are instance that some regarded are instances that some regarded as physically challenged has helped in the transformation of their society and community. Therefore, the young children and adults that are visually impaired or challenged in other areas and are living in remote and rural areas outside the city should be taken care of educationally through the provision of mobile library services to support the philosophy of inclusive education. Mobile library service refers to service launched in order to extend library services to everyone in the state, irrespective of location (Sokari, Abdullahi & Abdullahi, 2017).

c. Provision of guided tours of the library

According to Irvall and Nielsen (2005), the library should offer guided tours of the library for both individuals and groups of persons with special needs. Many of these patrons may have difficulties reading information about the library. This service should be redesigned taking cognizance of different categories of people with special needs.

d. Readership promotion campaign (RPC) for the young people

Reading is a process of interpersonal communication allowing contact between individuals and collectivities, regardless of the media content and the type of data. It is also a form of cultural participation, knowledge acquiring, and sources of inspiration and tool of building the intellectual capital (Wojciechowska, 2016). Though the National Library if Nigeria is doing great job in readership promotion campaign such cannot be said of the public libraries, this service therefore should be redesigned to ensure that children and young people with special needs are carried along in the scheme of thing.

e. Repackaging of local information

Public libraries can take practical steps to repackaged local and special information into formats that can be easily accessed and appreciated by children and young people with special needs.

f. Organization of story hours and weekend library services for the children

Public libraries should revive and redesign the story hours and weekend library services to meet the demands and needs of children and young people with special needs.

5.0 Challenges to Providing Library Services to Children with Special Needs

There are several challenges limiting the extent that public libraries can fully provide library services to children and young people with special needs. They include:

i. ***Lack of trained librarians in provision of specialized library services:*** librarians trained in library schools in developing countries lacks the specialized skills necessary to provide special library services to people with special needs. This singular factor limit the extent that librarians in public libraries can go regarding library services to children and young with special needs.

ii. ***Low level of ICT literacy skills:*** most librarians in public libraries are not ICT compliant. This situation makes it difficult for them to incorporate modern technological equipment required to meet needs of special people into their service delivery. As noted by Rayini (2017), most braille publications are created using translation software. Here, electronic text is automatically translated into the braille code, embossed on paper, and tagged or bound as required.

iii. ***Low level of technological facilities:*** most public libraries in Nigeria and most developing countries are yet to fully integrate information and communication technology to its service delivery, hence a broad range of ICTs that are available are underutilized in the provision of library services to people with special needs. For instance, there are innovative technologies such as screen magnifier screen reader, voice recognition software etc.

6.0 Recommendations

In line with challenges identified, the following recommendations were made:

i. ***Training and retraining of librarians:*** As noted by Osuchukwu (2015), trainings, workshops and seminars on the need for regular assessment and provision of relevant resources should be organized for effective and efficient children's library services. Training course should also be conducted in using the Braille system to enable all students to benefit from the available material in Braille (Abdelrahman, 2016). Also, in order to produce correct Braille, libraries must have braillists who are trained and certified. A trained braillist must know the rules of Braille appropriate to the country and language and be aware of the appropriate braille authorities (Rayini, 2017).

ii. ***Alternative source of funding:*** Public libraries should begin to explore alternative sources of funding such as fee-based library services, consulting services. As noted by Anyalebechi & Udo-Anyanwu (2016), public libraries should not depend wholly on government subvention, other sources of funding can be explored so as to provide adequate information resources for the users, especially children and young adults with special needs.

iii. ***Provision of modern technologies:*** Public libraries should make effort to provide modern technologies that can be maximally utilized to provide library services to the children and young people with special needs. This can achieved if only public libraries will embrace the fundamental philosophy of partnerships.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn attention to the need to redesigned library services to meet the needs of children and young adults with special needs with reference to public libraries in developing countries. As shown in this discourse, various library services such as provision of Braille library services for the blind and visually impaired persons (VIPs), outreach/mobile library services to the physically challenged in rural areas, guided tours of the library, repackaging of local information and organization of story hours and weekend library services for the children needs redesigning in order to meet contemporary demands of children and young people with special needs. However, redesigning of public library services in developing countries cannot be realized without resorting to training and retraining of librarians, sourcing for alternative source of funding public libraries and provision of modern technologies.

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