
Satellite Meeting: Library Services to People with Special Needs & Libraries for Children and Young Adults Sections
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Public Information Access for Children and Young Adults with Special Needs: A Case of Meru County KNLS Library, Kenya

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Abstract:

The cardinal mandate of a library is to meet, effectively, the information needs of users. The Kenya National Library Service (KNLS) was established by the Government of Kenya in 1965 and is at the forefront of promoting the right to access of information as stipulated in Chapter 4 of the Constitution and Access to Information Act, 2016. KNLS libraries are funded by taxpayers to facilitate efficient access to information for all citizens, irrespective of age, learning abilities and social or economic class. It is within this background that the needs of children and young people with special needs come into focus. Public libraries are not adequately equipped to ease information access for children with various forms of disability and financial incapacitation. The proliferation of Information Communication Technology (ICT), though, heralds a new dawn for disadvantaged young people. KNLS, Meru Library, has been as the forefront of integrating ICT in promoting information access for autistic and dyslexic children, young girls in rehabilitation centres and secondary school children. Through ICT tools such as Wi-Fi internet, a cybercafé, e-readers and a website called ‘Tunachop’, children and young people with special needs can now access the latest information and learning materials, just like their abled counterparts and other members of the public. Data for the study was collected from 50 individuals; ten each from children with autism, children with dyslexia, girls at Tumaini Rescue Centre and secondary school

students. Data from children with dyslexia and those with autism was collected through their teachers using structured interviews, while students in secondary schools and rehabilitation centres offered information through questionnaires. It was established that e-readers, Tunachop, tablets and the cybercafé were critical in addressing information needs of children with special needs. By availing adequate and timely information on a wide range of topics, including academic materials, ICT greatly benefitted this category of library users. Nevertheless, lack of digital skills, inadequacy of ICT equipment and slow internet speed were critical hindrances to information access for children with special needs. It was recommended that KNLS and other public libraries needed to invest in more ICT equipment, broadband internet and digital skills training to promote information access through ICT for children and young people with special needs.

Keywords: Information Communication Technology, special needs, information access

INTRODUCTION

According to Kaeding (2015), one of the underlying principles of public libraries is to promote information access for all people, those with special needs included. In Australia, public libraries adhere to the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act of 1992, which demands that person with disability be given convenient access to public libraries and the resources therein. UNICEF 2 (2013) asserts that people with disability comprise the largest group of minorities on the globe. Further, children with disability are more marginalized than their adult counterparts. Failure to understand the needs of children with disability results in serious violation of the rights of these young people. Poverty and negative cultural and religious beliefs aggravate the situation for children with special needs.

Public libraries, therefore, are placed on a pedestal when it comes to meeting the information needs of children with disability, including those with learning difficulties. UNICEF (2016) asserts that children with disability have a right to education. Unfortunately, this is not a reality for many Sub-Saharan children, who account for more than 50% of the 59 million school-age children that are not in school. In essence, the information needs of children are not adequately met, even by formal education systems. For children with special needs, the situation is direr.

Kaeding (2015) further opines that despite this unfortunate situation facing children with special needs, it is important to acknowledge efforts that have been expended by public libraries to cater for the information needs of people with disability. Most public libraries have ramps for people using wheelchairs, elevators and wheelchair accessible desks. Some libraries also avail books in braille and audio materials for people with hearing problems. That said, focus has been placed on people with sensory problems, especially for adult library users. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of children with learning disability and others who are marginalized in one way or another. Children with autism, dyslexia and other learning complications are especially excluded from public libraries owing to what are

considered complex problems making these children not to fit, behaviourally, in conventional library spaces.

The disadvantage faced by children with disability when participating in normal classroom activities was highlighted by Hasselbring and Williams (2000) who studied American children. To bridge the gap between the able-bodied children and their counterparts with special needs, it became necessary to apply technology in learning. Information Communication Technology (ICT) when utilized appropriately, can encourage children with various learning problems to appreciate themselves and discover learning abilities they didn't know they have. The efficacy of ICT in promoting inclusive learning by bringing children with special needs on board was also emphasized by Unluer, Kabakci and Uzuner (2011) who carried out a study in Turkey. These researchers realized that children with hearing problems could access learning materials through ICT thus bringing them at par with children without such problems.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

According to Hill (2013), the traditional role of the library – provision of information to the public – must always encompass children with special needs. The latter group includes children with learning disabilities and children in elementary and secondary schools who have no access to critical learning materials. Libraries all over the world continue to seek for novel ways of availing information to young people with special needs. Different countries have crafted respective legislations to advocate for inclusion of people with special needs in disability mainstreaming in information provision. The United States and Canada are some of the countries that have aggressively promoted information access for young disadvantaged people in public and private libraries.

Umunna (2008) observes that libraries in African countries must strive to achieve the ideal of providing information to young people with various disabilities. For children with autism and dyslexia, innovative strategies must be employed to provide information to these special children. Similarly, young adults have information needs that can only be fulfilled outside conventional classroom settings. Jain and Saraf (2013) assert that young people must be categorized as disadvantaged and measures be taken to help them access the information they need from public libraries. Libraries can meet the information needs of young adults and children with learning disabilities by utilizing ICT tools.

According to Donald (2009), the learning process for some children is interrupted by physiological and biological processes to the extent that a child may not fully understand what is being taught; may have difficulties in expressing himself or herself, and may not retain what is taught for long. However, it is important to note that these children and not less intelligent than their 'normal' counterparts. Educators and librarians must devise measures to assist such children to receive information, process it and express what they have learnt and understood. 4

A key challenge facing children with learning disabilities such as dyslexia and autism is the manner in which education systems are structured. Abdulrahman (2015) buttresses these assertions by observing that dyslexic children experience difficulties when learning how to read and spell. Further, autistic learners need to be treated with special care when they access information in public libraries owing to the limitations they face (Stern, 2014). According to Obiyo, Etonyeaku and Ofoegbu (2013), the Nigerian education system is not amenable to the needs of children with autism. The curriculum and school structures are designed for children without learning difficulties.

One of the most innovative program that seek to utilize ICT to boost information access in public libraries is EIFL-PLIP (Electronic Information for Libraries - Public Library Innovation Program meme). EIFL operates in 54 developing countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. EIFL-PLIP is financed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. According to Petuchovaite (2016), EIFL-PLIP) started in 2009 with an aim of improving information access in libraries through utilization of technology. The program begins with community needs assessment which yields vital information on the type and nature of technology that needs to be implemented in a public library (EIFL, 2016).

Shariful and Zabed (2012) assert that librarians must study and understand the information-seeking behavior of the target community if pertinent strategies are to succeed. Considering the needs of young adults and children with special needs, community needs assessment cannot be overemphasized. After the needs of the community are established, EIFL-PLIP engages in capacity building to equip librarians and the community with relevant skills to manage information access technology. The indicators for monitoring the program are also developed.

Dehpadekani and Pourhamidi (2011) conducted a study to establish how best to meet the information needs of youth who were not resident in one particular place. The study established the information needs of the youth and favourite formats. They also investigated where the students were located, how best to deliver the information and how this material was utilized. The study recommended that library services be remodeled and new partnerships be created, bringing together librarians, learning institutions, post offices and other entities that participated in the long chain of relations that ensured young people received and read books. A previous study in Vancouver, Canada, conducted in 2004, had emphasized the need to understand the needs of poor and marginalized communities in order to devise responsive and effective methods of information access through libraries.

According to EIFL (2016), EIFL formed a partnership with the Kenya National Library Service (KNLS) in 2010 to boost information access in public libraries. Following needs' assessment studies across libraries in Kenya, a strategy was developed to change the attitudes of both the government and members of the public towards public libraries. Key aspects of this strategy included transforming public library services based on the information needs of the public and building the capacity of librarians to offer top-notch services. Through this partnership and with the collaboration of Information Communication Technology Authority

of Kenya (ICT Authority), public libraries were equipped with computers, internet and related ICT infrastructure to boost access to digital information. Public libraries are now focal points for accessing information on farming, education, health, employment and so on. More importantly, this program enables young adults and children with special needs to fulfil their thirst for information.

Meru, Kenya, library is a beneficiary of EIFL-PLIP. In 2016, the library benefitted from ICT materials to help deaf and autistic children. Librarians were also equipped with digital skills to assist all library users, including children with special needs. KNLS, Meru Library, is also a beneficiary of similar assistance from Book Aid International from 2013 and 2015. Under this arrangement, the library received tablets and e-readers to inculcate and promote a reading culture among young adults and children with special needs. Through educational apps and Google Play Store, young library users access educational and entertainment content. Another KNLS, Meru initiative for young adults is Tunachop website, a digital platform with school-based learning materials, developed by former students who previously benefitted from library services. This site assists primary and secondary school pupils with materials to supplement what they get in their schools; promotes academic discussions and assists learners to collaborate when doing homework. KNLS Meru, also provided reading materials to girls at Tumaini Rescue Centre.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Public libraries are funded by taxpayers to provide convenient access to timely and useful information by members of the public. There are international conventions and national constitutions and laws that guarantee every citizen the right to information. However, systemic and circumstantial factors prevent some members of the society from enjoying these rights. This is especially so in relation to primary and secondary school students, girls in rescue centres and children with learning disabilities. Thankfully, the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in contemporary library practice has made it possible to reach these marginalized library users with requisite information. This study sought to identify the strategies used by KNLS Meru Library to encourage and boost information access by young adults and special needs children; to evaluate the benefits accruing to this special group of library users; to identify the obstacles encountered in the process and to suggest measures to be taken to improve information access through ICT tools.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study were:

1. To establish how KNLS Library, Meru, promotes information access for children and young adults with special needs.
2. To assess how children and young adults with special needs benefit from using ICT to access information at KNLS Library, Meru.
3. To identify challenges faced by children and young adults with special needs when accessing information through ICT at KNLS Library, Meru.
4. To suggest measures to be taken by KNLS Library, Meru to boost access to information by children and young adults with special needs.

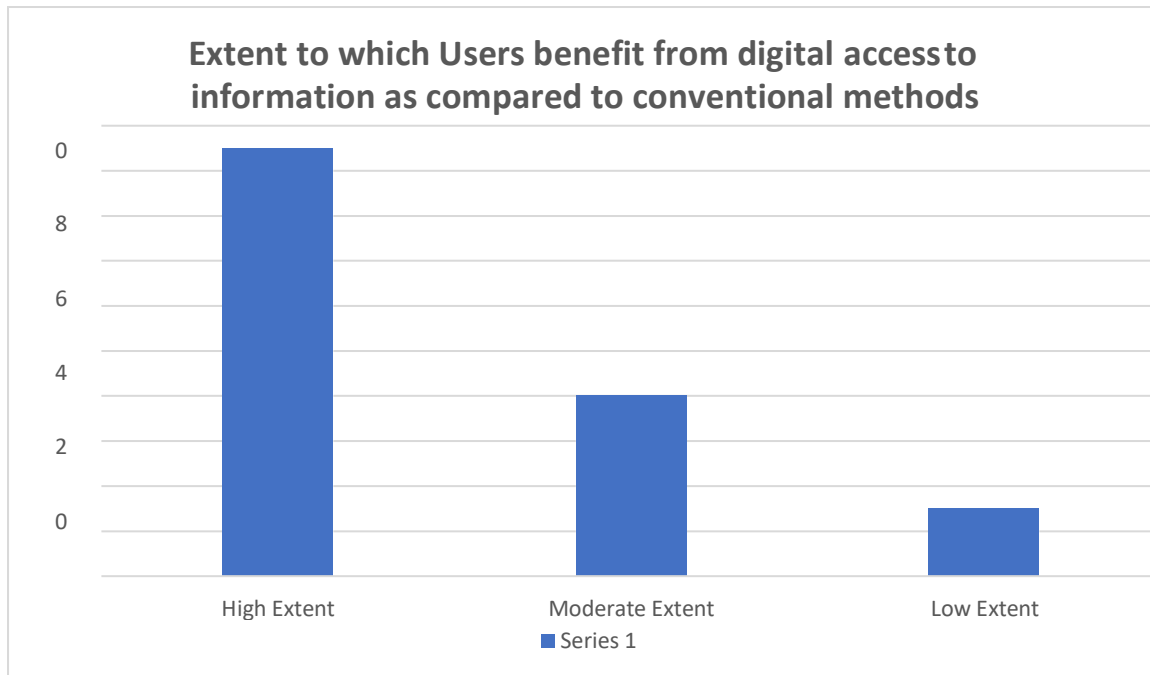
RESEARCH METHODS

This was a descriptive survey design study whose population comprised children with dyslexia and autism, girls living in Tumaini Rescue Centre and primary and secondary school students. The girls at the rescue centre had fled their homes due to from various forms of discrimination and abuse and were schooling at the rescue centre. A sample of 50 participants was drawn from the population using stratified random sampling method. It comprised 15 children with dyslexia, children suffering from autism; 10 girls from the rescue centre and 20 primary and secondary school students from either gender. Girls at the rescue centre and primary and secondary school students volunteered information through questionnaires, while information from children with learning disabilities was gathered through Focus Group Discussions under the guidance of their teachers and librarians. Students and girls from the rescue centre filled in questionnaires in their institution and at the library during school holidays respectively, while children with special learning needs participated in focus group discussions at respective institutions. Data was edited, coded and entered into IBM Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 20 for analysis. Frequency tables, graphs and pie-charts were used to present findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

On the type of technology-based information access platforms at the library, it was evident that most girls at Tumaini Rescue Centre and students preferred using Tunachop website, E-learning and reading clubs, with the library's cybercafe being the next most popular avenue for accessing information digitally. Tunachop was preferred by most students (46.7%) because it helped them with homework issues, sharing of information and career advice. Moreover, most e-learners / e-reader users indicate that their preference for these ICT tools was because of the fun and learning involved. Among children with autism and dyslexia, the most popular (40%) ICT platform was tablets. However, Kids ABC phonics and letters, Measurement, Kids Number, Tichaa-Lite and Kids learning to read were also said to be critical avenues for accessing information. Most of the special need children (65%) indicated that they used ICT tools when library staff visited respective schools on a regular basis. It was evident that the library had an outreach service for children with special needs through ICT platforms. In essence, this public library was well-placed to serve the information needs of children with special needs and adults by utilizing special ICT tools.

On the benefits young adults and children with special needs derived from the use of technology to promote information access, the following were the responses: career guidance, acquisition of digital skills, participation in discussion groups, availability of wide range of learning materials and improved communications schools. When asked to indicate the extent to which they benefitted from digital platforms when accessing information as opposed to conventional means, this group of respondents volunteered the information in Figure 1.



As illustrated in Figure 1, most of school students and Tumaini Resuce Centre girls benefited to a great extent from the digital tools they were using as compared to conventional means of accessing information in the public library.

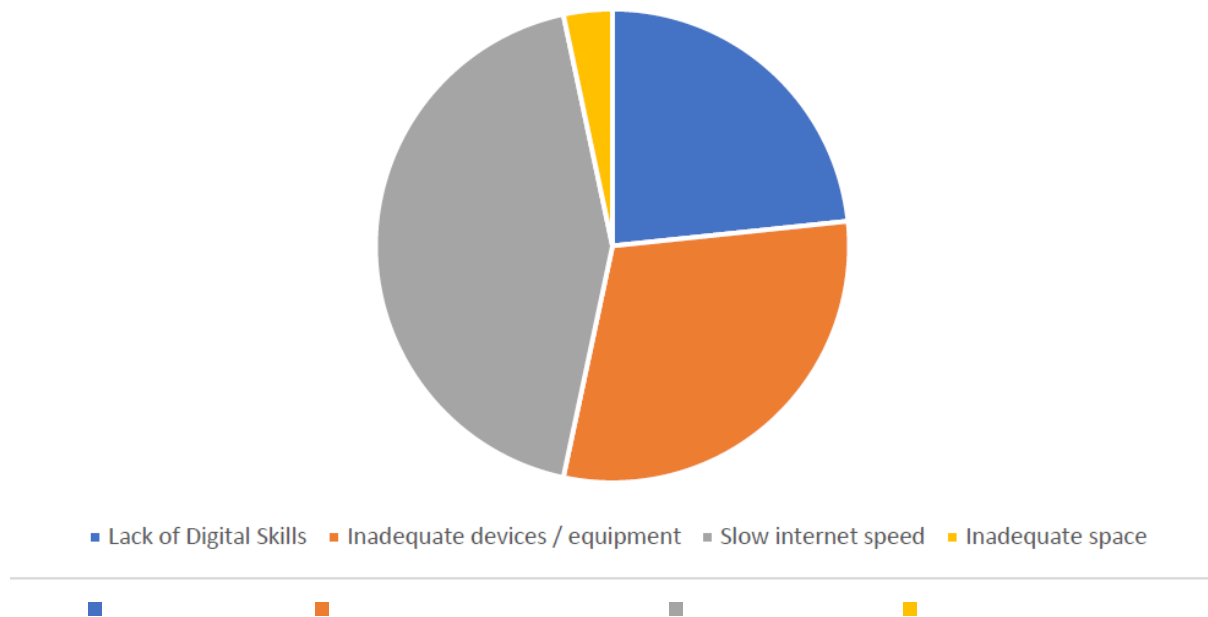
When asked what kind of benefits they derived from using ICT tools at the library, one of the children with leanring problems gave the following reply:

“I enjoy using the tablet to learn maths; I learn to colour pictures using my fingers; I learn how to concentrate, and I am able to write letters using an application on the tablet.”

From the benefits cited by the two groups, the bottom-line is that all the groups of respondents gained immensely from using digital platforms in accessing information. Consequently, information access for young adults and special needs children was achieved.

Concerning impediments to information access while using ICT tools at KNLS Meru Library, the study identified the challenges indicated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Challenges Faced When Accessing Information Using ICT Tools



Slow internet speeds, inadequate devices / equipment and lack of digital skills were the most critical challenges faced by young adults and children with special needs when accessing information digitally at the KNLS, Meru, Library.

When asked the same question, children with autism and those with dyslexia volunteered the following responses:

Slow internet speeds, inadequate devices / equipment and lack of digital skills were the most critical challenges faced by young adults and children with special needs when accessing information digitally at the KNLS, Meru, Library.

When asked the same question, children with autism and those with dyslexia volunteered the following responses:

“Sometimes there is internet outage or very slow speed.”

“I need help when using some applications.”

“I am unable to concentrate for long.”

It is evident that slow internet speed, and lack of digital skills and internet outage were critical hurdles to information access through ICT tools for young adults and children with special need. Finally, the respondents were asked to suggest strategies that could be used to deal with the challenges that had been identified. Table 1 presents their responses.

1 TABLE 1. MEASURES TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO INFORMATION THROUGH ICT

Responses	Frequency	Percent
Increase internet speed	8	26.7
Training in digital skills	12	40.0
Computerize catalogue	1	3.3
Increase computers and other equipment	7	23.3
Increase electricity power access points	1	3.3
Provide technical assistance	1	3.3
Total	30	100.0

From Table 1, it is evident that majority of the school students and girls at the rescue centre (40%) wanted to be equipped with digital skills. However, equally significant are those who recommended that internet speeds and computers / equipment be increased. For children with learning disabilities, recommendations included buying more equipment / devices, increasing internet speeds, increasing educational apps and digital skills training. In conclusion, it is important for the Meru KNLS Library to implement the recommendations cited by the two sets of respondents if information access is to be boosted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study are critical in understanding the situation facing young adults and children with learning disabilities when accessing information in public libraries. It is evident that public libraries must continually devise strategies and develop technological applications to ensure marginalized members of the society are given access to information like other citizens. Adequate funds, modern equipment and digital skills training for both librarians and young library users must be availed. Further, content for young library users must be innovative, educative, interesting and helpful. To augment and complement the work of school teachers, academic content in digital devices must conform to established curricula. To this end, it is important to encourage young people to create sites such as Tunachop. In addition, the entire ICT framework in public libraries must be upscaled. For instance, internet bandwidth must be increased and various forms of internet be availed to young adults and children with special needs. Significant, too, is the need to regularly bring together librarians, children with special needs, young adults, parents, government agencies and ICT experts to review and update information access strategies for disadvantaged young people.

CONCLUSIONS

A public library is a place where all members of the society can access timely and adequate information irrespective of any negative physical, mental or socio-economic conditions these people face. Secondary school students, especially those from poor backgrounds; girls in rescue centres, escaping from various forms of injustices; children with dyslexia and those

with autism, all require equal treatment to all other members of the society when it comes to information needs. It is their constitutional and human right. Public libraries, like educational institutions, must rise to the challenge and provide technological tools that bring these marginalized young people at par with their 'normal' counterparts in terms of information access. To achieve this end, public libraries must invest in more equipment, faster internet, digital skills training, more responsive apps and educative, interactive and informative / educative content.

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