

Strategies for Meeting Information Needs of People with Learning Disabilities (Dyslexia) By Public Libraries in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper discusses the need for information services delivery for people with learning disabilities (dyslexia), their classification/categories, information needs. The paper also examined the role of public libraries in providing library resources and services to people with learning disabilities, challenges encountered in the delivery of services to this group of users, prospects and recommendations were made to reduce the constraints of information services delivery to dyslexia people

Keywords: Dyslexia, Learning Disability, Information Needs, Public Libraries

Introduction

Information is essential to all human beings and public 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, nationality and language. This core function includes the provision of information to people with disability. According to Bagadanshwa (2006), all persons have the right to information, regardless of disability. He maintains that information is power because it is the source of knowledge and facts. Similarly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1997) states that equal right implies that the needs of each individual are of equal importance and that those needs must be the basis for planning. It also infers that all possible resources must be employed to ensure that every individual enjoys equal opportunities for participation.

Reasoning in line with the above, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) introduced in 1999 meant that even students with learning disability would get attention that would assist them attain education in their full potential. This reiterates the National Policy of Equal Education opportunities for all children, (NPE, 2004).

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Research Objectives

This study aims to propose possible strategies of meeting the information needs and use of public libraries by people with learning disabilities. Specifically, the study aims to achieve the following:

To create awareness to librarians in public libraries about people with learning disabilities (dyslexia)

To identify possible barriers that could affect dyslexic people's library use

To establish how the public libraries can improve their services to enable dyslexic to use the library with ease.

The concept of learning disabilities (LDs) has been defined variously among which is that of the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) which presents learning disabilities thus: a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction.

A learning disability is a disorder with a basic psychological processes which involve the understanding in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia (Donald, 2009). A child with a learning disability cannot try harder, pay closer attention, or improve motivation on his own; they need help and assistance to learn how to do those things. A learning disability or learning disorder is not a problem with intelligence, however, learning disorders are caused by a difference in the brain that affects how information is received, processed or communicated.

The term dyslexia is a broad term defining a learning disability that impairs a person's fluency or comprehension accuracy in being able to read and spell, and which can manifest itself as a difficulty with phonological awareness, phonological decoding, orthographic coding, auditory short-term memory, and/or rapid naming. Dyslexia is separate and distinct from reading difficulties resulting from other causes, such as a non-neurological deficiency with vision or hearing, or from poor or inadequate reading instruction. (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)Dyslexia is a specific learning difficulty which mainly affects the development of literacy and language related skills. It is likely to be present at birth and to be lifelong in its effects. It is characterized by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities (Gyda, 2006).

Signs and Symptoms of Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a spectrum disorder with symptoms ranging from mild to severe. People with dyslexia have particular difficulty with phonological awareness, verbal memory, rapid serial naming and verb processing speed.

Types of Dyslexia

There are several variations in the categorization of the term dyslexia. However, Carlson (1998) has suggested two major types as follows:

Developmental Dyslexia: it is caused by biological anomalies, usually genetic, in the brain at various levels (i.e. morphological or synaptic) from prenatal through childhood development.

Acquired Dyslexia: it is caused by brain trauma that may occur prenatally or later, which leads to similar behavioral characteristics of developmental SLDs.

Other common types of learning disabilities includes:

- a) **Dyslexia.** It means difficulty in processing language. It is characterized by problems of reading, writing, spelling and speaking
- b) **Dyscalculia.** It means difficulty with mathematics. It is characterized by problems doing mathematics problems, understanding time and using money.
- c) **Dysgraphia.** It means difficulty with writing. It is characterized with problems of handwriting, spelling and organizing ideas.
- d) **Dyspraxia (sensory integration disorder).** It means difficulty with fine motor skills. It is characterized by problems of hand-eye coordination, balance and manual dexterity.
- e) **Auditory processing disorder.** It means difficulty hearing differences between sounds. It is characterized with problems of reading comprehension and language.
- f) **Visual processing disorder.** It means difficulty in interpreting visual information. It is characterized with problems of reading mathematics, maps, charts, symbols and pictures.

Source: <http://www.helpguide.org/mental/learning-disability.htm>

Role of Public Libraries in Providing Services to Persons with Learning Disability

The contemporary public library is the most economically efficient community resource for providing people of all ages and educational levels with ready access to information and knowledge (Heron, 2004). It is expedient for public libraries to be proactive in nature and make the library conducive and have services to suite the dyslexic who are also part of the population of any society. The public library is a service institution and public library buildings must be adequate both in design and space in order to facilitate the rendering of that service (Umunna, 2008).

Access to information resources and services within the larger society cannot be achieved without involving public libraries because they are one of the building blocks of the local information and knowledge infrastructure, (Tiso, 2000). Public library is open to all types of readers regardless of any disabilities and should be able to meet their needs.

In order for public libraries to provide relevant and meaningful services and facilities to people with dyslexia, there must be an awareness of the problem of dyslexia by the staff, there must be an understanding of their needs, and the problems they may encounter while using the library services and facilities. Hence, the library staff should strive to meet the needs of their various user communities. Libraries should have laid down strategies so as to help users no matter their disability. It therefore behooves librarians to make sure that persons with learning disabilities (including dyslexia) do not have difficulties in accessing and using library materials when they visit the library.

For this reason, public libraries need to proactively offer extra help and support to suit persons with dyslexia. Libraries need to make their services and collections more accessible to users irrespective of any inherent challenge, (Christina, 2001).

Information needs of people with Learning Disabilities /Importance of Libraries to People with Learning Disabilities

People with learning disabilities need information just like any other person in the society. Their information needs do not differ from other categories of users in the library. They equally need information on health, education, housing, employment, entertainment, sports and other activities.

Public libraries are supposed to provide information for varied users ranging from farmers, students, children, physically challenged people, those with learning disability, mentally retarded people, prisoners, women in purdah, hospital patients, among others. The importance of information provision to people with learning disability cannot be over-emphasized, though they may be disadvantaged but most of them are very intelligent and do not need to be abandoned because of their situation. It is the duty of librarians to take these groups into consideration in packaging their information in a format that will be accessible to them. Agbaye and Olabode, (2000) stressed that the library is recognized as an essential tool in learning at any level. Its resources and services are one of the required essential things which cannot be overlooked in the educational aspirations of any individual.

Library Services for People with Learning Disability

The Public library is open to all types of users regardless of any disabilities and should be able to meet their needs. In order for public libraries to provide relevant and meaningful services and facilities to people with dyslexia, there must be an awareness of the problem of Dyslexia by the librarian, there must be an understanding of their needs, and the problems they may encounter while using the library services and facilities. Libraries must not discriminate against individuals with disabilities and should ensure that individuals with disabilities have equal access to library resources. To ensure such access, libraries may provide individuals with disabilities with services such as extended loan periods, waived late fines, extended reserve periods, library cards for proxies, books by mail, reference services by fax or email, home delivery service, remote access to the OPAC, remote electronic access to library resources, volunteer readers in the library and radio reading service.

Libraries should include persons with disabilities as participants in the planning, implementing, and evaluating of library services, programs and facilities.

Library Collections

Library materials must be accessible to all patrons include people with disabilities. Materials must be available to individuals with disabilities in a variety of formats and with accommodations, as long as the modified formats and accommodation are “reasonable” do not fundamentally alter the library’s services, and do not place an “undue burden” on the library. Examples of accommodations include assistive technology, auxiliary devices and physical assistance. Public libraries may include related medical health, and mental health information and information on legal rights, accommodations and employment opportunities.

How the Public Libraries in Nigeria are Providing Information Resources and Services to Them

A look at the nature of information services provided in Nigeria is analyzed by Ochogwu, (2007) into three groups, namely; the passive information providers, who show little or no concern when they serve the users. The second group is the reactive group that provides service only when their users come to ask for information while the last group is the proactive group who diagnose the information needs of their users and package them to suit their users. He maintained that many librarians belong to the first and second group. In terms of the availability of information materials for the use of people with learning disability in Nigeria, it is grossly inadequate. Public libraries that should play a pivotal role in supporting people with learning disability are grossly underfunded and neglected; most public libraries at the divisional areas are mere eye sore.

Challenges of Providing Information Services for Persons with Learning Disabilities by Public Libraries

Public library is an indispensable tool in information services delivery. However, there are serious impediments militating against effective information services delivery to the people with learning disabilities. People with learning disabilities have not been taken care of in most of the libraries in Nigeria, most especially public libraries. Prominent among the problems are inadequate funding of public libraries, lack of awareness about available technology, lack of qualified personnel to handle people with learning disabilities, inadequacy of appropriate reading materials. Dyslexic users are challenged with the problem of reading and understanding, confusion about signages/arrows indicating location, problem of communicating with staff and unwillingness to declare their status as being dyslexic. In addition, statistical data has always been a problem for drawing up a programme based on specific targets. There is also inadequate library services and libraries often fail to have specific special provisions that encourage people with learning disabilities to use the library.

Prospects

For public libraries to live up to expectations, it will depend on the quality of resources and services provided to all categories of users which include people living with learning disabilities. Providing adequate resources and quality services to people with learning disability will enhance the following:

1. It will promote the status of public libraries in Nigeria towards meeting the information needs of the people with learning disabilities.
2. There will be increase in the patronage of public libraries by the people with learning disabilities.
3. With the introduction and use of adaptive and assistive technologies in public libraries, it will ensure that people with learning disabilities are carried along in this era of technological advancement.
4. It will enable other disadvantaged groups to embrace and avail themselves to the services provided by the public libraries in Nigeria.
5. It will ensure that people with learning disabilities are adequately involved in public library services in Nigeria
6. Increase in knowledge and awareness by the user community of the relevance of the libraries in information provision

Conclusion and Recommendations

Equipping librarians for an improved information service delivery particularly in this era of electronic information to serve disadvantaged users is vital. Librarians must give critical thought to inform every member of the society with adequate information in other to meet their information needs and also to be relevant in the society.

In the light of all these, the following recommendations will enable public libraries in Nigeria to rise up to the needs of people with learning disabilities.

1. Public libraries should introduce special user education programmes for the people with learning disabilities to educate them on their information needs and how to go about meeting such needs.
2. Public libraries in Nigeria should embrace the qualitative and modern library services to the people with learning disabilities to enable them meet up with the challenges of the new era.
3. Nigerian Government should ensure that all public libraries are adequately equipped with the necessary resources that will meet the information needs of all categories of persons regardless of their disabilities
4. There should be a section for people with reading disabilities and it should be attractively designed.
5. Public Library should provide talking books to dyslexic persons. Talking books could be on tapes, cassettes, or new digital formats
6. Public Libraries must not discriminate against individuals with disabilities and should ensure that people with learning disabilities have equal access to library resources.

7. There should be posters in conspicuous places in the library which carries campaign in support and help of dyslexics. This would make the library welcoming to them and give some form of comfort.
8. Adequate funds should be provided to public at the state and local branches to enable them procure all needed materials for this group of users.
9. Adequate and qualified personnel should be employed and tasked with the responsibility of handling the information needs of the people with learning disabilities.

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