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Bridging The Information Divide: The Role of School Libraries in Providing Information to Disabled Children

Ezeani, C.N.
Nnamdi Azikiwe Library
University of Nigeria,
Nsukka

Abstract

This article deals with the various ways, in which the school libraries can contribute, to the growth of the disabled children in mainstream schools. The article highlights several ways in which school Libraries can help the students not only in their academic pursuits but also in building greater social skills.

INTRODUCTION

In ancient times, handicapped people were not helped, if anything they were simply left to die. Their disability was either seen as a punishment that their forebears committed or the works of an evil spirit. This is because most ancient cultures believed that evil spirits were responsible for injury and diseases within the communities they found themselves in. Handicapped people who could not fulfil their responsibilities threatened the safety of others and most were driven away. Handicaps for most part were regarded with disdain and fear, some were even regarded as witches and were seen to bring shame to their families. Economically, they were not given any background that would help them delve into any meaningful venture in life and therefore they were waste pipes which only consumed but contributed nothing. As people became more literate, attitudes began to change and handicaps started being treated as humans. Over time policies for equalizing educational opportunities for the handicapped and such other groups that were hitherto marginalized were established. In 1975, the United Nations General Assembly made the declaration of the right of the disabled person's thus:

Disabled persons have the
right to education which

will enable them develop
their capacities and skills
and will hasten the process
of their social integration
quoted in (Adeniran,
1989:5)

The 1975 idea of the right to education led to the democratization of education, the objective, was ensuring that "everybody without distinction had the opportunity to exercise his/her right to education" (Adeniran, 1989:5)

Today there are many established special education sections or units in all the federal ministries of the thirty-six states of the federation. The main objective of this article is to examine various ways in which school libraries can help disabled children in academic work through provision of appropriate information.

The school library which is a classroom extension of sorts, has a great role to play in special education. Most classroom works are consolidated in the school libraries and certain classroom features are usually reinforced in the school libraries. The main goal of the school library is to concretize what is taught in the classroom and this can be achieved through maps, charts, films, audiovisuals, photographs, slides,

cassette recorders etc. All this help in consolidation of knowledge. This paper however, posits that school libraries should do more than mere provision of books in their libraries. These libraries should be sensitive to supporting certain new needs and situations within the educational system such as special education. Handicaps especially those of disfiguring dimensions always require a 'secret friend' and this can so easily be found in the school libraries, where when once they are enmeshed in a book, the author removes them albeit for a short while from their world as handicaps to the world of the author. Building library resources for the disabled has become an urgent and critical work of the school librarian. This is because, the disabled more than normal children will need this 'extra' attention in order to perform well. Since, their disability is already a limiting factor.

Definition of Disability

It is important at this point to define who a disabled is, in order to be able to understand fully what the role of the school libraries ought to be. For the purpose of this work the word 'handicap' will be used interchangeably with the word 'disabled' since both connote the same meaning.

Disabled children are those children who deviate from the average in physical, social or mental characteristics to such an extent that they are unable to profit from the program of the conventional school and require special provisions for their care, education and development. The school library always works hand in hand with the school to help children in their educational pursuit, the school library therefore, has a great mandate of providing resources not only for the normal children but for disabled children. Originally library personnel who provided leadership to special children had no training in this area of exceptionality, but there is a growing recognition, recently of the need for more training for library personnel to equip them in order to give leadership and supervisory assistance to disabled children.

The world book encyclopedia (1995:44) describes handicap as a term used to describe people who have a physical or mental disability that interferes with leading a happy productive life. *The new book of knowledge* (1997:176) sees disability as a permanent condition that makes it difficult for a person to do something important in

everyday life. People with such conditions are said to be disabled. The blind will normally have a problem of being able to move about easily and in reading print. Physically disabled people have great difficulty in moving about. Mentally retarded people are limited in their ability to learn. Emotionally disturbed people have great problems concentrating and have very small attention span. The writer therefore, finds this last definition more apt in dealing with the subject of the disabled with regards to this work. The physically challenged are people with all kinds of physical disabilities namely blindness, deafness muscular and nervous disorders, paralysis and loss of limbs.

Types of physical deformities, and ways the school libraries can be of help.

Most physically challenged children suffer emotional trauma of some type. The strongest blows usually are to their egos. Therefore they suffer a loss of self-esteem, self worth, confidence and initiative. It is reasonable to expect defense mechanisms to develop because of these circumstances. What follows is a discussion of the main types of physical deformities, and ways the school libraries can be of help.

Blindness

For the blind children, the school library should equip their libraries with catalogues and books to be able to accommodate this group of people. Cassette tape, cassette catalogues and a listening section for playing cassette tapes can be especially useful. This millennium presently has a lot of emphasis on timely, relevant, and adequate information, therefore visually impaired persons should be exposed to information through multimedia reading materials, like talking books, Braille books and specialized computers for the blind

Deafness

The deaf children will obviously need their world expanded. This is because their development of concepts can be limited because of their hearing and speech disability. This can be achieved through suitable slides, picture books and books with lots of illustrations, colour pictures, diagrams, these go a long way in opening a new world for them.

Children with muscular and nervous disorders, paralysis, and loss of limbs.

The most important problem associated with these ailments is that of physical movement. Once the barrier is removed and physical access is gained other needs might not be as complex. Shelves should be built in such a way that these category of users can easily access the books they desire. In order words, shelves should be wheelchair accessible. The weight of a book will also be important to a child with poor muscle development. A hard cover book and its paperback edition have different weight. While this might not be a problem with a normal child, it can make a difference whether it can or cannot be handled by a disabled child.

The emotionally disturbed children.

An emotionally disturbed child is always in conflict with himself, his family, his peers, his teachers and his society. Consequently, they have great problems relating to other people in socially acceptable ways. They are often times, hyperactive, egocentric, lack self control and raise temper tantrums, they often fight and use vulgar languages and are sometimes withdrawn and are usually easily distracted.

The school librarian in selecting books for the emotionally disturbed will have to bear all these in mind. Open-ended books with unresolved situations will not augur well for this category of people. Their emotional problems may interfere with academic achievement, consequently, many operate on a lower level than their innate ability indicate. Books for the emotionally disturbed should have non threatening situations and should show models of acceptance and deal with interpersonal relationships and must show a resolution of differences and disputes. They need stories dealing with coming to terms with their limitations because they often have difficulty accepting themselves.

Mentally retarded Children

Mental retardation in children is usually caused due to certain illnesses which cause brain damage or some congenital deformities. These children are therefore relatively slower than their peer groups. In selecting books for this group of children, it is important to move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Their books require only a simple

sentence structure and simple sentences for a start. The vocabulary of such books should be limited only within the reach of such children. Books acquired for beginners in this category need to be repetitive. This is because of their slow cognitive development.

Various ways in which the school library can help the personal growth of the disabled.

The school library can affect the personal lives of the disabled through the following:

Creating confidence, self-esteem and independence in the disabled

Disabled students need to be helped to develop positive self-concepts. This eventually, improves their ability to perform well academically. This can be successfully done through the use of information to change both the attitude of the disabled and that of the non-disabled. When the correct information is given normal students will then be made to see that it is discrimination not disability that disables people. This will then invariably strengthen the relationship between the disabled and their normal peers. When an atmosphere of interaction is created the disabled children will then be helped academically by their peers.

Hopkins (1989) investigated how school library can be of help in fostering positive self-concepts. Her investigation discovered that school libraries can help in this regard through:

- Establishing opportunities for teamwork with students.
- By creating a positive and welcoming learning environment.
- By creating independence which is done through creating independent reading habits.
- By molding positive self-concept which can be achieved through the positive and caring attitude of the school librarian. This positive attitude can also affect the attitudes of colleagues.

Adaptive technology:

Computers are a very important equipment for the disabled, this is particularly useful for children with limited mobility. Adaptive technology such as the ones we have in developed countries like

specialized keyboards, voice output devices and large print screens can foster independence in the disabled especially those with motor capacity limitation.

Male (1997) posits that technology for the disabled can lead to greater academic performance. This is because technology helps the disabled perform academic tasks at a much faster rate. Because these physically challenged can achieve more on their own with technology, they are seen as more capable, more confident and this therefore affects the way they are rated amongst their peers. The school library can help the disabled a great deal by acquiring some of these technologies into their libraries. When this is done the disabled children can come in at will and use these technologies to better their education. This is very important because certain learning disabled students respond more positively to auditory, visual, stimuli and computers as opposed to print media

The challenges faced by School libraries in providing information to disabled children.

The school library as has already been established in this article plays a pivotal role in the educational and social development of the handicapped. It is a known fact that children rely so much on classroom instruction, and the school libraries for the consolidation of such classroom activities. This is no less a fact for the handicapped children. Nonetheless, in providing information to the disabled a lot of challenges are encountered. The first problem is that of inadequate funding by the Government. Ever since the introduction of mainstreaming in schools in 1981 a situation where by the disabled and the able children are allowed to stay together and interact, with a view to helping the disabled acquire some social skills from their non-impaired counterparts, the Federal government has not been seriously committed to this programme. There is severe lack of funds in running many government schools and as a result, little or no attention is paid to acquiring reading

materials for the disabled in mainstream schools. These materials involve reading in alternative formats such as talking books for the deaf books in Braille and large print materials for children with visual impairment. Atinmo (2000) bemoans this plight when she asserts that after the establishment of some special schools for training special teachers that government has stopped short of providing adequate reading materials for the disabled. Mba (2000) and Danlami (2000) also corroborate this view. They opine that government should provide basic supportive services in schools for handicapped children. And to them one of such very important supportive service is the provision of reading materials in alternative formats.

There is also this problem of inadequate infrastructure. The role of information technology on the lives of the handicapped can never be over-emphasized. This is because information technology opens the world of information to the handicapped. The right devices for particular impairment can go a long way in helping disabled students. But unfortunately most of these infrastructural equipment are very rare to find in most school libraries. The information technology mostly needed in schools is the computer. Large screen computer with screen enlarging software can be bought for blind students, voice activated and diction software for the deaf students. Regrettably, these things are a rarity in most school libraries in Nigeria.

In order to create professionalism in the area of Library services to the disabled training is very crucial. But in most school libraries, the librarians are not trained in this area of need and this is one of the biggest challenges of the School libraries. In most library curriculum, children and library services to the disabled are not included and there is always a tendency for library schools to concentrate on teaching information technology skills and as a result adequate training in this area of disability is usually precluded.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Libraries no doubt form a very important part of the educational process. They make it possible for people to acquire what has accumulated over the ages, and also provide a pleasant and relaxed

atmosphere for learning. Librarians give the library its unique personality. A librarian who deals with special children should also receive training in this regard. Even if it entails seminars

and workshops alone on how to deal with this group of children. Otherwise, rather than helping the children, the librarian can inadvertently damage the already fragile psyche of these children.

One of the areas through which the library helps physically challenged children is through the selection for cognitive growth. In this regard the librarian selects books that help in the development of knowledge, skills and competencies that help to achieve good academic results. The librarian can also (to achieve this goal) acquire resource materials for use to teachers of slow learners and learning disabled children. These resources will go a long way in helping the teachers know what to do.

The second category is selection for social development. This involves learning of social skills and knowledge not restricted to academic pursuit. This is very important especially in mainstream schools where normal children are integrated with handicapped children. This includes getting resources that deal with disabilities. Handicapped children are desirous in knowing a lot about their handicapped situation. The causes, symptoms and how to cope with these disabilities. These information should also be made available to the non-impaired children who have handicaps in their classes, so that they know how to deal with them and how to promote understanding between the two groups. The library should be arranged in such a manner to make it accessible to children with physical disability. This includes arranging the library in such a way to accommodate clutches, wheelchairs, etc. Books written in Braille should be procured for blind students. Talking books, cassettes, pictorial books, books with diagrams and illustration should be acquired for the deaf to help stimulate them.

Above all, the school librarian's personality has a very strong effect on the children. If the librarian is warm, concerned and empathetic, it will encourage the children to visit more often, this is because library in itself offers bibliotherapy to these handicaps. A librarian with

a formidable mien can be an instant put-off for these children. Encouragement should come not from parents alone but also from teachers and librarians who deal directly with these group.

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