

LIBRARY PROVISION FOR THE BLIND IN AFRICA

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Abstract: This paper presents a brief overview of the existing library provision for the blind in some African countries. It has been found that although there are signs of improvement in the educational and social services for the blind in Africa, there is little evidence that library services for the blind are improving. Various challenges facing librarians in Africa in their attempts to provide services for the blind are outlined, and the implications of these challenges are also discussed.

Introduction

Handicapped people live in every part of Africa - in small towns, large cities, rural areas, institutions and colleges. In many countries, the existing educational system also embraces educational opportunities for the visually handicapped. Some blind students, after the completion of their primary and secondary education, have even succeeded in being admitted to universities or other higher educational institutions. Some visually handicapped people, although an absolute minority, have been gainfully employed after having completed their vocational or academic training. To this group of visually handicapped also belongs the educated, newly or late blind adults. However, the illiterate blind still represents by far the largest group of visually handicapped people in Africa.

Some of the blind do attend special schools or institutions and are served by libraries there. But some of them are able to attend regular schools or live within the regular community and are perfectly capable of doing as well as, or better than their able-bodied peers. The blind should not receive services only from special libraries for the visually handicapped, but from their school, university and public libraries as well. They have a right to receive the best library services available, just as other people do. Thus the school, public or university library, whatever the case may be, is obligated to serve these individuals and help them obtain special reading materials as well as offer the same service that the rest of the community

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enjoys. It is the duty of all librarians everywhere to meet the reading needs of the patrons in their area and this does not exclude the physically disabled.

Library services for the blind in Africa

In Africa, social services of any sort to any handicapped group is a very recent development. As such, in most African countries, established and organised library services to the blind and visually handicapped is almost non-existent. Except for a few countries such as Malawi and the Republic of South Africa, there are no national braille presses for large scale production of braille materials.

In Botswana where attempts have been made, albeit in a small way, to provide materials for the blind, this consists of a few collections of braille books found in a few institutions and a small collection of braille and talking books at the University of Botswana Library. Most of these are donations from the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) in the U.K. and the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) in the U.S.A.¹ In the main, the collections do not meet the educational needs of the students.

Writing with reference to Nigeria, Atinmo² states that library services to the visually handicapped is minimal, almost non-existent. Only one out of nine schools for the blind in Nigeria has a school library service, and a few university library are now attempting to acquire and organise library materials for the visually handicapped.

In Ghana, despite the long history of education for the blind and visually handicapped library and information services are largely geared toward sighted individuals. There is a dearth of appropriate material such as books in braille and talking books to aid the blind. The University of Ghana Library, with the aid of Rotary Club (Ghana), recently set up collections for the visually handicapped, forty years after the inception of the library. The existing public library system does not provide any services to the blind and visually handicapped.

The Republic of South Africa appears to have the best developed library services for the blind on the continent. The South African Library for the Blind has a braille press that provides materials for the blind in and around the Southern African region. An organisation known as Tape Aids for the Blind (South Africa) is in charge of recording some of the essential texts on standards cassettes and organising volunteer readers through the local Rotary Club³.

The present situation in Africa as briefly described, is rather disappointing. Similar conditions can be found in other African countries. But blindness is a physical condition and not a mental handicap. As such, the taste of blind readers do not differ from the sighted reader. Therefore books and magazines on wide variety of subjects

covering a broad spectrum of reading interests must be made available. Further, the alternatives available for sighted readers for obtaining material, such as local bookstores, are not available to this group. The library therefore becomes one of the very few sources, if not the sole source of reading materials.

Challenges

One of the major challenges for librarians in their attempt to provide services to the blind in Africa is the lack of reliable figures for the number, age, sex, and educational level of the blind in Africa. Statistical data has always been a problem for African countries. This makes it difficult to draw up a programme based on specific targets.

The question of target groups and priorities was discussed in detail at the Unesco/IFLA Seminar on Library Service to Visually Handicapped Readers in African Developing countries, held in Tanzania in November, 1980. The participants, 18 representing library associations and association for or of the blind in 15 African countries identified the target groups as follows:

1. the visually handicapped in institutions (primary and secondary schools, universities, vocational, or rehabilitation centres.)
2. the educated, employed visually handicapped, including the newly-blind educated adults.
3. the illiterates, representing the majority of the visually handicapped population in Africa.

Due to limited financial and human resources in the countries represented at the Seminar, the participants realised the necessity of priorities in library service to the identified target groups. The participants concluded that those in institutions should be given first priority library service.⁴

The lack of production and distribution facilities for reading materials in Africa also poses a big challenge. Most of the schools for the blind and visually handicapped produce their own textbooks in braille for the use of the students. While not condemning this self-help attitude, the inexperience in this area often results in poor quality productions as there are no manuals to guide in the production. For those who rely on foreign materials, there is often the problem of obtaining materials that do not bear any relation to the culture and background of the students.

There is also the problem of lack of properly trained library personnel. In most library schools in Africa, the curricula is geared toward conventional librarianship courses. Library staff are therefore often unable to handle the need of the blind. The

idea that the needs of the blind may easily be ignored militates against the provision of services to the blind. Staff attitudes are an essential ingredient in making the library available to the blind.

Another challenge to the provision of library services for the blind in Africa is architectural barriers. Most of the older libraries in Africa (especially university libraries) were built long before the libraries ever considered providing materials for the blind. Therefore such barriers are steps, high book shelves, narrow doorways and lack of elevators are still prevalent in Africa libraries. These obstacles can be extremely frustrating, if not impossible for the blind to cope with.

A large number of countries in Africa have introduced adult education programmes. However, owing to the inadequacy of appropriate reading materials, blind adults have no opportunities for participating in these programmes. The challenge here is how to find ways of getting this very large group of blind people in Africa, to benefit from these programmes.

Implications

Improvement in the library services for the blind in Africa can only be brought about by improvement in attitudes towards the blind. There must be the recognition that given the opportunity and proper training the average blind person can hold the average job in the average place of business, that he can be independent and self-supporting, and that it is vital for society as well as for the individual that this status of independent self-support be brought about.

There is evidence that attitudes about the blind in Africa are improving, at least in certain parts of Africa. They are no longer considered just as street beggars and liabilities. Blind and sighted alike are rejecting begging as an activity for the blind and welfare as a means of subsistence.

Librarians in Africa must learn who the handicapped are, where they are, and what their special needs are before long range planning of library services can take place. In the planning of library services, handicapped readers should be included in all the library services offered to sighted readers, whether reference, readers' advisory, library orientation or special events.⁵

There is clearly a need for closer cooperation with the agencies that are responsible for gathering data on the blind. Many organisations and institutions such as the Rotary Club, the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) and the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) are involved. No library in the field can afford to avoid them. Many of these organisations and

agencies have taken on the responsibilities of distributing braille and talking book machines. Others repair them. These will all promote the services to the blind.

For an efficient and effective provision of library services to the blind in Africa, additional funds will need to be provided for the services. Needham⁶ suggests that funds allocated for the service should be made a visible part of the library's budget. This will enable the library to point out the need for increased funds.

Modern technology has made things easier for the blind. Where it formerly took up to four months to hand-copy a braille book, it can now be done in a few hours. However, since the cost is still very high, braille volunteers will be needed in African libraries. Lesson-by-lesson instruction can be given to those interested in learning to transcribe braille. Some students and library patrons may even volunteer to serve as readers for the visually handicapped in the library.

Though visually handicapped users usually need the help of a sighted reader in using reference books, the librarian should be aware that there are braille editions of such reference books as the *World Book Encyclopedia* and some magazines such as *Readers Digest* and *Newsweek* are available in braille or talking book editions. There is also an IFLA publication: *A Guide to Developing Braille and Talking Book Services*. Edited by Leslie Clark, IFLA, 1986.

More materials on topics relating to library services for the blind in Africa should appear in professional literature. This will help to educate other librarians as well as drawing the attention of the relevant authorities to this issue. Library Associations in Africa should draw the attention of architects and library planners to various architectural barriers to the blind and other physically handicapped in the planning of future library buildings. Wherever possible, existing library facilities should be re-designed to meet standard specifications for the blind and other handicapped users.

Where facilities and materials are available for the blind, they should be adequately publicized. Publicity would be the best means of attracting this group to the library. After all, what is the use of a service or facility if it is not accessible to users? Providing the appropriate materials to blind students for the purposes is one thing, making it accessible is another.

International interlending presents an attractive solution to overcoming the scarcity of relevant materials for the blind in Africa. But as in the case of other library materials, interlending in Africa has its own problems. These include inadequate national bibliographies, poor postal and telecommunication systems and the absence of unified cataloguing rules and classification schemes.⁷

Provided enough special reading materials is available, accomodation and facilities are adequate, and the staff is given special training for the type of work, the establishment of a library service to the blind or visually handicapped people in Africa through the existing library system may be an advantage in most countries. Establishing new libraries altogether may be too expensive, as this will require high initial capital outlay.

On the international level, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Working Group on Libraries for the Blind should continue with their efforts to eliminate obstacles that inhibit production and distribution of materials for the blind. Some of these obstacles include copyright regulations; standardizing media of exchange; identifying locations of special collections for the blind; and postal law/customs regulations.

Conclusion

Handicapped people have special needs because they are special people. But they are not to be set apart and always treated differently either. They also have the same needs as sighted people and the ablebodied. The blind also have their hobby reading needs, vocational reading needs, and recreational reading needs, just as the sighted do. It is time that the library profession in Africa paid close attention to these individuals and made provisions for their reading needs and welcomed them into the regular library community.

Today the blind in Africa are on the move. They are beginning to assert themselves in almost every walk of life. They are mobilising to improve their services, and librarians must join in this partnership. Together we have a big job ahead if we are going to move library services to the blind to a point of comparability with services available to the sighted.

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