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REVIEW PAPER

THE PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED AND THE DEARTH OF RELEVANT FACILITIES IN NIGERIAN LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria is faced with precarious situations like leadership crisis, misplaced priorities, poverty, insecurity, infrastructural decay, economic strife, and most importantly, the politicization of education. Statistical records show that in Nigeria, physical facilities in some university libraries are inadequate for effective learning, and needed facilities for the physically challenged are nearly non-existent. As a result, there are growing concerns about the numerous challenges encountered by physically challenged individuals in the use of the library. This review paper therefore, x-rays these challenges beyond rhetorics and shelf-destined findings and reports. Overall, it highlights the need to improve the current status of Nigerian libraries to meet the multidimensional service demands of citizens living with disabilities.

Key Words: *Facilities, Library, Nigeria, Physically challenged*

INTRODUCTION

The responsibilities of government's towards the governed irrespective of class, ethnicity, age, creed, education, and the like, have been well articulated. The concept of equal rights for all citizens is also a well known injunction. Unfortunately, there are growing concerns about the demeaning and discriminatory attitudes/policies against individuals living with congenital or acquired disabilities worldwide. It is rather worrisome to note that policy makers and the public at large hold the common view that disabled people and disability issues, are Charity and Welfare matters, and not Human rights (DFID, 2008). According to Okoli (2005) as cited in Lawal-Solarin (2012), disabled people are living in an environment that is hostile to their yearnings and aspirations.

Although there are conflicts on the various terms used in describing individuals with disabilities, various authors however, have come to accept the term "*physically challenged*" as the functional descriptive term for individuals with various forms of disability like blindness, deafness, loss of limbs, and mental retardation, as well as other forms of muscular, nervous, and sensory disorders (Ilayaraja and Manoharan, 2012). Of particular interest, is the fact that individuals with disabilities encounter physical access limitations (Viney, 2006 as cited in Lawal-Solarin (2012) and 'architectural discrimination' (Okoli, 2010).

Indeed, concerns about the challenges encountered by physically challenged individuals, have been expressed by various authors (Ejedafiru and Isebe, 2011; Ilayaraja and Manoharan, 2012; Lawal-Solarin, 2012). In fact, the associated frustrations, stereotyping, derogatory labeling, depersonalization, rejection, isolation, and maltreatment, have as well being highlighted (Upadhya and Tiwari, 1985; Holmes and Karst, 1990; Fitchen et al., 1991; Crisp,

2002; Adesokan, 2003; Viney, 2006; Okoye, 2010), indicating that there is a need to constantly appraise the trend theoretical and empirically.

Moreover, it has been affirmed that in an academic community, information is required primarily for academic purposes (Ajiboye and Tella, 2007) which specifically include learning, teaching, research, and leisure (Ukpanah, 2006). In addition, there is available evidence that students' information-seeking behaviors promote academic excellence (Kakai et al., 2004) and that valuable information to students determines to a very large extent their success and future development (Akinade and Ogunyade, 2002; and Onohwakpor, 2007 as cited in Lawal-Solarin, 2012).

With focus on the educational and information needs of individuals with disabilities, and judging by the fact that students, irrespective of their status (able or disabled), seek information from the library, this review article therefore, x-rays their challenges beyond rhetorics and 'shelf-destined' studies, findings, and reports. It also highlights the need to improve on the current status of Nigerian libraries to meet the multidimensional service demands of citizens living with disabilities.

ESTABLISHED LIBRARY STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS

Following the desire to provide equal opportunities for all library users worldwide, the committee of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons (LSDP), developed a standard checklist intended to serve as a practical tool for all types of libraries (public, academic, school, special), and to assess existing levels of accessibility to library buildings, services, materials and programs. Excerpts of LSDP declaration include:

1. Everybody should be able to use the libraries of a country. The surroundings, entrance, restrooms, stairs, elevators, and special rooms, should be accessible for persons with different kinds of disabilities. A person in a wheelchair should be able to reach all the departments, and a visually impaired person should be able to walk with a cane or a guide dog and find his/her way without bumping into obstacles. A deaf person should be able to communicate with library staff, and a person with an intellectual impairment should be able to easily find books and other materials. Also, a person with dyslexia or another reading problem should be able to find his/her way around.
2. People with disabilities should be able to arrive at the site, approach the library building and enter the building easily and safely. If the main entrance cannot be made accessible, a secondary accessible entrance should be provided, equipped with automatic door opener, a ramp, and a telephone.
3. A person in a wheelchair or using crutches or a walker should be able to enter through the door and pass through security check points. A blind person with a cane or a guide dog should also be able to enter without encountering obstacles.
4. All parts of the library should be accessible. The space should be logically arranged with clear signs and a floor plan posted close to the entrance. Service desks should be located close to the entrance. Wheelchairs should be able to move around inside the whole library. There should be a lift for wheelchairs or a ramp, if the library has more than one level. There should be no doorsteps and all doors should have automatic openers. Ideally, shelves should be reachable from a wheelchair. A certain number of tables and computer workstations should be adapted for persons in wheelchairs. There should be at least one toilet for disabled persons.
5. People with reading disabilities need special attention when they visit the library. The library staff should be knowledgeable about various disabilities and how to serve persons with these disabilities. Materials specifically produced for persons with reading disabilities should be easy to find. These materials may include talking books, easy-to-read books, Braille books and large print books, which in some countries are commercially produced and in other countries produced by the Library for the Blind.
6. All library materials should ideally be accessible for all customers. There are various ways to achieve this goal. Libraries should acquire talking books, video/DVD books with subtitles and/or sign language, Braille books, accessible e-books, easy-to-read books or other non-print materials. Library staff should know how to borrow such materials from other libraries, including the National Library for the Blind.

7. Computers for public use should be accessible. Fast and reliable technical support should be available for both computers and adaptive equipment. Staff should be trained to provide on-site support. National and local disability advocacy and support organizations can provide information on how to make computers accessible.
8. Making the library accessible for persons with disabilities includes the provision of services and programs that meet the needs of these user groups. Communication between them and library staff should be clear and concise. It is important to make they are made to feel welcomed so that they could return. Library staff should keep in mind that persons with disabilities have to overcome not only physical obstacles, but also psychological barriers to come to the library and communicate their needs.
9. Accessibility to the library should be a clearly defined management responsibility. A designated employee should act as liaison person with disability groups and support organizations. It is, however, important that all staff be knowledgeable about various types of disabilities and how to best assist the patron. Staff should also communicate directly with the patron and not through a caregiver.
10. The library should offer guided tours of the library for both individuals and groups of persons with special needs. Many of the persons with disability may have difficulties reading information about the library. Information about access, services, materials, and programs should therefore be available in alternative formats.

THE OBVIOUS CONTRAST AND INHERENT CONCERNS

Nigeria is indeed faced with precarious situations like leadership crisis, misplaced priorities, poverty, insecurity, infrastructural decay, economic strife, and most importantly, the politicization of education. Statistical records show that in Nigeria, physical facilities in some federal university libraries are inadequate for effective learning (Nock, 1998; Oyedum, 2006), and facilities for the physically challenged are nearly non-existent with nothing in place to reverse the order.

Of course, the quality of education that children receive bears direct relevance to the availability or lack thereof of physical facilities and overall atmosphere in which learning takes place (Nwagwu, 1978). Such educational facilities in question have been recognized to play pivotal role in the actualization of set-goals and objectives for both staff and students (Asiabka, 2008).

As earlier emphasized by Knezevich (1975), physical academic needs are met through provision of safe structure, adequate sanitary facilities, a balanced visual environment, appropriate thermal environment, and sufficient shelter space, while emotional academic needs are met by creating pleasant surrounding, a friendly atmosphere, and an inspiring environment. It is disheartening to note therefore, that though challenged students start out with the same qualifications and aspirations as normal students, the challenges they encounter make them perform poorer (Bradley, 2006 as cited in Lawal-Solarin, 2012).

Obviously, the endemic status of corruption in Nigeria and its associated consequences on citizen's welfare, coupled with inherent infrastructural lacuna, poverty, leadership crisis, and insecurity in the midst of abundant resources, prompt many Nigerians to ask: "what is wrong with Nigeria?" and why can't our leaders make the right choices?

It is indeed disheartening to observe that there exists an utter disregard for citizen's welfare and the special needs of persons with disabilities. Judging by the trends in Nigeria, the following questions below are begging for answers:

1. Does the architectural design of Nigerian Libraries meet the various demands of individuals who need library services, but have obvious disabilities?
2. Are there statutory policies that ensure the employment of well-trained library staff to serve persons with disabilities?
3. Are materials specifically meant for persons with reading disabilities like talking books, easy-to-read books, Braille books, and large print books, available in our various libraries?

4. Is the provision of specialized library facilities and materials, part of the minimum accreditation requirements for academic programmes in universities? If not, why?
5. Are there deliberate efforts to make the library accessible for persons with disabilities?

CONCLUSION

Answers to the questions raised by this review article are better imagined, but the major focus remains the fact that there exists a dearth of library facilities for individuals with disabilities in Nigeria. As such, there is an urgent need to ensure that individuals with disabilities have equal access to our libraries and that involves architectural issues, educational materials, public relations, and emergency facilities. It is my opinion therefore, that all education regulatory bodies like the ministry of education and the national universities commission (NUC) should include the library needs of students with disabilities as a part of the compulsory accreditation requirements. Moreover, it is rather inappropriate to relegate reports/findings from various empirical studies on this problem to the shelves.

Agreed that several authors have written on issues concerning library access for disabled persons, the pertinent issue however, is the fact that as at this day, nothing concrete exists on ground to indicate a drift towards providing these needs. The seeming 'static status' in Nigeria, is attributable to the obvious disconnect that exists between government and the governed. This is evident in the misplaced priorities, faulty policies, greed, parochialism, nepotism, institutionalization of corruption, and the politicization of education.

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AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Momodu O.M. is the sole author of this article. However, I received technical assistance from like-minded colleagues.