

Provision of Inclusive Information Services for the Visually Challenged Patrons in Rivers State Public Library

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Abstracts

This study examined the provision of inclusive information service for the visually challenged patrons in Rivers State public library. Four research questions guided the study; a descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The population of the study consisted of all the 20 staff in Rivers State Public Library Board. A total enumeration sampling technique was used to select all the staff at the Central Library Bernard Carr Street, Port Harcourt, and its branches, the Jubilee branch Library, Bori Branch Library, and Ogoloma branch Library in Okirika. A four-point scale questionnaire was used for data collection. The reliability of the instrument was determined using the Cronbach alpha with a value of 0.77. Data was analyzed using frequency and mean. The findings of the study showed that respondents highly agreed that the inclusive services provided in the Rivers State public library include personalized reference service, current awareness service, and selective dissemination of information but disagreed with book clubs for visually and lending services for the blind respectively. Respondents also agreed to the availability of collection development and accessibility policy, they highly agreed to audiobooks, speech input/output accessible mobile reading apps, and braille. Findings also showed that the challenges against inclusive service for visually challenged patrons include poor funds, lack of awareness and training for library staff, and lack of technological expertise among others. The study recommends among others that the government should improve on funds for public libraries, and provide adequate staff training to understand how to work with visually challenged patrons.

Keywords: Inclusion, public library, visually challenged, information service

Introduction

Society comprises persons with disabilities such as the visually impaired who have their own diverse needs and challenges and deserve fair treatment, respect, and a decent approach. Just like all abled individuals, they need to be accorded equal access to opportunities that will help them better their lives and foster settings of inclusiveness without any bias. Trussler and Robinson, (2015) posit that inclusion entails all deliberate efforts to counter inequality and adapt responses to diversity. Gaur, and Bhatt, (2016) opined that inclusion goes beyond tolerance to involving people who may have been traditionally excluded and treated unequally to actively participate in the same gainful activities as others without any discrimination. Also, John, and Wheeler (2018) described inclusive practices as providing equal opportunities that suit their needs regardless of their disabilities. This concept goes across different spheres of life such as social, political, educational, and others. Looking at inclusion in the contexts of education and the provision of library and information services in particular, it is aimed at fostering a sense of belonging, where everyone can have equal opportunities and access to the available information resources and services for personal and societal development. An inclusive library has an open hand to embrace all categories of users irrespective of the situation surrounding them such as age, race, beliefs and physical challenges, sexual orientation, and others (Grassi, 2013).

The Public library is a community learning center that, provides more than books to community members, it is an innovative development center that adapts and uses modern enabling technologies to give access to learning resources and provide information services to its patrons. It provides access to knowledge, information, and works of literary imagination through a range of resources and services that are available to all members of the community regardless of their age, gender, religion, language, disability, economic status, and educational attainment. A fundamental principle of the public library is that its services must be available to all and not directed to one group of patrons. Provisions are made to ensure services are equally available to minority groups who for reasons such as linguistics, minorities, people with disabilities, or those that are divided by technology, urbanization, and level of literacy are not able to use the mainstream services. The design of libraries should be done in such a way as to promote inclusivity and diversity.

The development of resources and service provision must meet the fundamental principle of access for all in formats such as braille and talking books for people who are visually challenged. Information and communications technology must be exploited to provide improved service and operations in the library to allow access to the library collections that will enhance the provision of information resources for all patrons who will benefit from the library pool of resources funded by the taxpayers (IFLA/UNESCO, 2001). The visually challenged are those with sight impairment, who are completely blind or partially sighted. Sambo (2016) pointed out that, library service to this user group is often challenging and demands a high level of competency and patience. However, technology integration has brought a paradigm shift in both the utilization and provision of information for the visually challenged as the use of assistive technologies such as audiobooks,

text-to-speech software, large prints, speech-recorder, magnifiers, braille, and others are helping in ensuring the inclusivity in the library spaces all over the world (Akanwa and Chimdi, 2020; Steffen Lehmann, 2024).

Statement of Problem

Many potential users of the public library are denied access to information resources and services by the composition of collection development and provision of information resources in most public libraries which do not factor in people with special needs such as visually challenged patrons in the planning and building of their resources. These have greatly left a vacuum in attaining the fundamental principles of providing and facilitating access to information for all irrespective of while is true that most public libraries have unintentionally excluded the visually challenged persons from accessing information resources but due to the available provisions, they cannot provide access to information resources that will cater for the visually challenged patrons. Despite this limitation, a study must be conducted to know what some public libraries such as Rivers State are doing for the promotion of inclusivity in its provision of information resources and services to the visually challenged patrons in the state.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are the inclusive services for information provision for visually challenged patrons in Rivers State Public Library?
2. What are the inclusive policies for information provision for the visually challenged public library patrons in Rivers State public library?
3. What are the inclusive resources for information provision for visually challenged patrons in Rivers State public library?
4. What are the challenges against inclusive service for information provision among the visually challenged patrons in Rivers State public library?

Literature Review

There are numerous services provided by the public library that are carefully planned and implemented for the inclusion of visually challenged patrons (VCP), these are done according to their specific information needs and situations. However, according to Osman et al. (2020), these services can be categorized under personalized reference service, Current Awareness Service (CAS), and Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI)

The visually challenged are offered one-on-one assistance that is customized and personalized to meet their information needs, they are given support in locating specific information, accessing resources, and navigating the library catalog. Akanwa and Chimdi, (2020) are of the view that

librarians help the visually impaired by providing detailed verbal descriptions and assisting them with technology to have access to materials.

Current Awareness Service (CAS) is another service of the library to visually impaired users. According to Onoyeyan (2019) it is a process of keeping users informed about new resources, events, and developments in their areas of interest. Visually challenged individuals benefit from staying up-to-date with the latest materials and technologies. Libraries offer curated lists of newly available audiobooks, braille materials, and other digital resources. This service ensures that users with visual impairments have access to the most recent and relevant information in accessible formats. Furthermore Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) involves proactively providing relevant information to users based on their preferences and interests, SDI for visually challenged patrons ensures that information is tailored to their needs without being actively searching for it. Libraries can create profiles for users, including preferences for accessible formats, topics of interest, and preferred delivery methods. Abutayeh, and García-Orosa, (2021) are of the view that libraries have to continually adapt to the constantly turning cycles of technology such as open-source software, mobile technology, and voice-activated technology like Alexa, Google Home, Cortana, and others to transmit relevant and accurate information of a particular profile. As regards the available information resources for the VCP, Kapoor, (2012) in his studies revealed that numerous manual and technological-driven resources facilitate information provision for these categories of persons which include; assistive technologies like screen readers, magnifiers, and braille, among others. This will enable visually challenged individuals to navigate library services independently, fostering a sense of inclusion. Chijioke et al. (2020) in their observation affirmed that libraries that offer services to people with disabilities have some common resources and equipment they associated with them, such as braille texts, talking books, playback machines, audiotapes, screen readers, signaling devices, braille embossers, stylus, speech input/output, and others.

On available policies of public libraries for VCP, Ndumbaro (2019) opined that to drive an inclusive public library, there must be comprehensive policy documents to direct, monitor, and regulate the activities and actions of the library staff and management in taking decisions that affect the interest of the physically challenged patrons. To ensure equitable access and inclusion of people with a disability there must be the implementation of policies particularly as regards their collections development, accessibility to resources, use of technological devices, lending of materials, and privacy of their information (Tom-George, 2018; Zard, 2024). However, some factors hinder the successful implementation of inclusive practices in public libraries. Iqal et al. (2021) reported that public libraries face constraints in budgets, staffing, physical space, technological resources, and lack of training opportunities among others. These impede their efforts to create inclusive environments for visually challenged patrons. Zard, (2017) advocated for increasing funds to public libraries to enable inclusive services and stressed that available services of such should be advertised and promoted on the library website.

The attitude of library staff may also affect service provision for visually challenged patrons as some may not fully understand the importance of inclusion, diversity, and equity. Also, some staff may lack cultural competence, leading to unintentional insensitivity or even exclusionary practices (Jaeger, 2018). It is necessary to understand and respect the cultural backgrounds and needs of diverse communities to foster inclusion. Apparently, in an increasingly digital world, the digital divide can exclude individuals with a disability with limited access to technology therefore, libraries should ensure that their services are accessible to everyone, regardless of their digital literacy. Moirangthem, and Phuritsabam (2022) opined that legal and policy barrier such as censorship laws or restrictions on certain materials, may limit the library's ability to fully embrace inclusivity for visually challenged persons, hence such should be addressed.

Methodology

This study adopted the descriptive survey design. The population of the study consisted of all the 20 staff in Rivers State Public Library Board. A total enumeration sampling technique was used to select all the staff in the central library Bernard Carr Street, Port Harcourt, and its branches the Jubilee branch Library in Port Harcourt, Bori Branch Library in Khana Local Government Area, and Ogoloma branch Library in Okirika Local Government Area. The staff were considered as the population of the study because they are in charge of collection development and provision of information in their library. A four-point scale of 'Strongly Agree', 'Agree', 'Disagree', and 'Strongly Disagree' response type questionnaires for data collection. The internal consistency of reliability was determined using the Cronbach alpha with a value of 0.77. Based on the coefficient obtained, the questionnaire was considered reliable. Answering the research questions, a mean response below 2.5 was adjudged as 'not agree', while a mean response of 2.5 was adjudged as 'agree' and a mean response above 2.5 was adjudged as 'highly agree'. Data was analyzed using mean.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the inclusive services for information provision for visually challenged patrons in Rivers State Public Library?

Table 1: Inclusive services for information provision for visually challenged patrons in Rivers State Public Library

S/N	Items	SA	A	SD	D	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Personalized reference service	15	4	1	0	3.9	0.98	Highly Agree
2	Current awareness services	10	5	2	3	3.2	0.89	Highly Agree
3	Selective dissemination of information	10	10	0	0	3.5	0.93	Highly Agree
4	Book clubs for visually challenged patrons.	3	2	5	10	1.9	0.89	Not Agree
5	Book lending service for the blind	5	3	6	6	2.3	0.68	Not Agree
	Grand mean					2.9		Highly agree

Table 1 shows the inclusive information services that are available for the visually challenged patrons in Rivers State Public Library. Respondents highly agreed that they offer personalized reference service with a mean of 3.9 and SD of 0.98. They highly agreed to current awareness services with a mean score of 3.2 and SD of 0.89. They also highly agreed to selective dissemination of information with a mean of 3.5 and SD 0.93. Table 1 therefore shows that all the items listed above have mean values above the criterion mean of 2.5, more so, the grand mean (2.9) is greater than the criterion mean (2.5). However, respondents did not agree to book club and lending services for the blind with means of 1.9 and 2.3 as well as SD of 0.89 and 0.68 respectively.

Research Question 2: What are the inclusive policies for information provision for the visually challenged public library patrons in Rivers State public library?

Table 2: The inclusive policies for information provision for the visually challenged public library patrons in Rivers State public library.

S/N	Items	Mean	SD	Remark
1	Collection development policy	3.5	0.98	Highly Agree
2	Accessibility policy	1.2	0.58	Not Agree
3	Technology and assistive devices	2.3	0.78	Not Agree
4	Lending policy	3.7	0.99	Highly Agree
5	Privacy and confidentiality policy	3.2	0.94	Highly Agree
Grand mean		2.7		

Table 2 shows the inclusive policies for providing information for visually challenged patrons in Rivers State Public Library including collection development, lending, privacy, and confidentiality policy. However, some of the respondents did not agree with the accessibility and assistive technology use policy. Items 1, 4, and 5 all have mean values above the criterion mean of 2.5 showing that they are available, more so, the grand mean (2.7) is greater than the criterion mean (2.5) except items 2 and 3 which are not available.

Research Question 3 What are the inclusive resources for information provision for the visually challenged patrons in Rivers State public library?

Table 3: The inclusive resources for information provision for the visually challenged patrons in Rivers State public library.

Items	Mean	SD	Remark
Audiobooks	2.0	0.74	Not Agree
Speech input/output	1.8	0.70	Not Agree
Accessible mobile reading Apps	1.5	0.64	Not Agree
Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD)	1.5	0.64	Not Agree
Braille and embroider	2.5	0.82	Agree
Grand mean	1.8		Not Agree

Table 3 shows the inclusive resources for providing information for visually challenged patrons in Rivers State Public Library. Respondents did not agree to the availability of items 1, 2, 3, and 4 with a grand mean score of 2.0, 1.8, and 1.5 which is less than the criterion mean of 2.5 except item 5 braille and embroiders which indicated the agreed meaning available.

Research Question4: What are the challenges against inclusive service for information provision among the visually challenged patrons in Rivers State public library?

Table 4: Challenges against inclusive service for information provision among the visually challenged patrons in Rivers State Public Library

Items	Mean	Sd	Remark
Limited resources	4.0	0.10	Highly Agree
Lack of awareness and Training for library staff	3.9	0.99	Highly Agree
Lack of technological expertise	2.5	0.83	Agree
Resistance due to cultural biases and prejudices	1.6	0.66	Not Agree
Legal and Policy Barriers	2.1	0.76	Not Agree
Grand mean	2.8		Highly agree

Table 4 respondents highly agreed that limited resources and lack of training as challenges. They also agreed to lack of technological expertise with a mean score of 2.5. Respondents did not agree to resistance due to cultural biases, prejudices, and policy barriers with a mean score of 1.6 and 2.1 respectively. More so, with a grand mean of 2.8, it is clearly shown that respondents highly agreed to all these items as challenges.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study on inclusive service and information provision for the visually challenged patrons in Public Library Port Harcourt indicated that the inclusive services available for providing information for the visually challenged patrons in this public library include personalized reference service, current awareness services, selective dissemination of information,

the study discovered that there are no book clubs and book lending service for visually challenged patrons. The unavailability of a book club and lending could be a result of the limited number of book materials for this category of users. This finding is in line with the findings of Osman et al. (2020), who found that customized reference services are an integral part of public library service for visually impaired users. Also, it is of the same view of Onoyeyan (2019) who affirmed that current awareness services and selective provision of information for the blind are major services of the public library for visually challenged users. This is therefore not in conformity with the findings of Akanwa and Chimdi, (2020) whose results indicated the availability of organized book clubs and lending services for visually impaired public library users.

Also, on the inclusive policies for providing information for the visually challenge patrons' results indicated that respondents highly agreed with the collection development policy, but disagreed with a lending policy which may be because of the absence of borrowing in this library. They agreed to the existence of a privacy and confidentiality policy but did not agree to the accessibility and assistive technology use policy. This conforms with the findings of Ndumbaro, (2019), Tom-George (2018), and Zard (2024) who all in their different studies reiterated the need for an operational policy to guide the provision of information for the visually impaired in public libraries. The study also shows that respondents on the resources agreed to audiobooks, speech input/output, and braille embroider but disagreed with the availability of accessible mobile reading apps and braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD). The study observed that lack of funds, lack of awareness and sensitization, and lack of access to technological devices such as computers/laptops and other assistive technologies were some of the major challenges to information provision for visually challenged patrons in public libraries. However, the problem of poor funding and inadequate ICT infrastructure can be said to be perennial problems facing the different institutions in Nigeria and the public library is not an exception as affirmed by Aiyebilehin (2018). This finding is in agreement with the findings of Iqal et al. (2021), and Zard, (2017) who also found that poor funding, lack of access to computers, and poor attitude of library staff also affect service provision for the visually challenged patrons in public libraries.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Inclusion is an important concept that needs to be implemented in every organization, no one deserves to be denied any opportunity to better his life because of disability, culture religion, or race. Everyone should be respected, valued, and accorded a pride of place in whatever their peers are benefiting without being excluded. This work revealed that respondents highly endorsed certain inclusive services such as personalized reference and current awareness services, while expressing dissatisfaction with others like book clubs and lending services for the blind. Additionally, respondents affirmed the availability of collection development and accessibility policies and expressed positive attitudes towards audiobooks, mobile reading apps, and braille materials. However, challenges including inadequate funding, lack of staff awareness and training, and technological limitations were identified as barriers to providing effective inclusive services.

From the result of the study the following recommendations are made:

1. The government and donor agencies should increase funding for public libraries to enable improved collection development and services for visually challenged patrons.
2. The library should provide adequate training for staff to better serve visually challenged patrons
3. There should be increased access to technological devices among staff and patrons to improve provision and accessibility to information among the visually challenged patrons as this will enhance diversity and inclusivity in library service.

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