PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICES FOR DIFFERENTLY ABLED PERSONS: LITERATURE REVIEW WITH GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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This paper critically examines the literature published in the first two decades of 21st century on public library services for differently abled persons and presented in a chronological order. The primary objective of the paper is to assess the current scenario of the public library services for differently abled persons across the world. The inferences drawn from the review of literature reveals that the current status of public library services for differently abled is not at all encouraging as majority of the public libraries are not even providing minimum service to this user group especially in under developed countries. Public libraries are physically inaccessible to differently abled persons, besides suffering from lack of resources in alternative formats and services. Majority of the research literature is published from the developed countries as compared to developing countries. Published literature also stressed on the need for major improvements in services and further research in the area of resources and services for differently abled user community.

Key words: Public library, public library services, Differently abled Persons, Review of Literature, Accessibility, Assistive technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries are always considered as agents of democracy, equal opportunities and empowerment. They have a great history of being keenly involved in the social justice movements of different nations in different context. The fundamental principle of public library is that services for all and not directed to one group in the community to the exclusion of others. (Gill, 2001, p. 8) The UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 1994 defines that, the services of the public library are provided on the basis of equality of access for all, regardless of age, race, sex, religion, nationality, language or economic/social status. (Public Library Manifesto, 1994). Further, it states that, public library must provide specific services and resources for those who cannot, use the regular services and resources. Despite the fact that public libraries can play a dominant role in the society, they are lagging behind or failed to provide minimum services or equal accessibility to

some communities of the society. The differently abled persons are such community which is largely denied access to public library services across the world especially in the developing countries like India where social interaction and mobility of them still continues to be a challenge. As Roger Carver goes on to say, it is ironic that in the Age of Information there is still a type of person who is "literally starving" for information. (Jeal et al., 1996). It should be the obligation of public libraries to ensure equal accessibility for differently abled persons, who for some reason may not be able to use the conventional services. To accomplish universal access, well structured library buildings, reading materials in alternative formats, assistive technologies are essential with well trained and helpful staff. Along with this the public libraries have to also keep in mind that differently abled persons have to overcome not only physical barriers, but also psychological barriers to come to the public library and use it. (Irvall and Nielsen, 2005, p. 11).

Review of literature plays a very important role in research activities, as it forms the very first step of research quest and gives theoretical and empirical background about research theme or topic. It includes the current knowledge and helps to understand how the findings of the study fit into the existing body of knowledge. It also helps to know what other researchers have found in regard to the same or similar questions, what theories have been put forward and what gaps exist in the relevant body of knowledge. (Kumar, 2014, P. 49) According to Borg & Gall, the review of literature involves locating, reading and evaluating reports of research as well as reports of casual observation and opinion that are related to individual's planned research project (Prabhakar, 2013).

NEED FOR THE STUDY

Public libraries across the world experiencing a paradigm shift on how to deal non accessibility amid growing awareness on disability rights, debates on social inclusion, emergence of assistive technologies and passing of disability acts. The continuous and constant instructions from IFLA/UNESCO in the form of public library manifestos and other publications also prompted public libraries to reconsider their responsibility in terms of providing accessibility and to plan, design and implement different kinds of services to differently abled persons. Besides this, there is an ever growing demand to provide equal opportunity to differently abled persons in order to make them information consumers. Also to enable them to enjoy the services of public library as all other persons of the society do. Hence there is a need to carry out these kinds of studies to a state-of-the-art understanding of public library services for differently abled persons.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on intensive literature search performed on the internet. The articles and book chapters were collected from the online databases, consortiums, repositories and various journal websites. The study covers literature published in the form of journal articles, conference papers and book chapters. Some of the studies are only abstracts as fulltext were not found and few of the studies reviewed are comprises other types of libraries (academic, school and special) along with the public libraries in the same article. To make study more relevant and precise, articles and book chapters which are published after 2001 were considered and chronologically analyzed. The Findings,

suggestions and recommendations were mainly highlighted to accommodate more studies.

Public library services for Differently abled Persons

Kinnell and Creaser (2001) suggest many recommendations on policies, budget, staffing, partnerships, services and materials provision to guarantee greater equity for visually impaired persons in UK public libraries. McCaskill and Goulding (2001) establish that majority of the public libraries in England are responded well to the Disability Discrimination Act and started providing services in accordance with the provisions made in the act. However, progress is rather slow and concentrated only on the needs of certain groups of differently abled persons. Williamson et al (2001) critically examines the research on online services for differently abled persons recommended that public libraries should seek to develop cordial relationships with the local disability groups to provide better online services.

Walling (2001) assesses the information needs related to mentally retarded persons to explain how public libraries can provide support to persons with mental retardation through the implementation of "Guidelines for Library Services for People with Mental Retardation", developed by the American Library Association. Ross and Akin (2002) argue that most of the public librarians are reluctant to serve children with learning disabilities in ten regions of Texas. Moreover, the authors stressed on the need for further research in the area so that public libraries can serve these children more effectively. Myhill (2002) confirms that Greenshead public libraries are committed to serve differently abled persons and striving hard to achieve the vision of an inclusive society by designing, developing and implementing the services and undertaking new projects related to disability services.

McQuigg (2003) focuses on Australia's hearing impaired community and its informational needs and impact of Disability Discrimination Act on public library services in Victoria. The author suggests several recommendations in terms of services being provided to the hearing impaired persons in Victoria's public libraries. Ryder (2004) expresses his concern that many of the public libraries in United Kingdom are providing only symbolic services to differently abled persons. However, there were few good examples of best practices in public libraries where range of good services is being provided. Hicken (2004) argues that public libraries must play a bigger role as democratic institution if they are to meet the challenge of social exclusion. The socially excluded users must be encouraged to develop lifelong learning habit by providing accessible, safe and healthy environment in public libraries.

Todaro (2005) makes it clear that Argentinean libraries are not in a position to provide best services for visually and physically challenged persons as libraries of the country face challenge of finding the correct way to accomplish the planned goals as a social institution. The author hoped for readjustment of the existing library services be carried out with the goal of adapting services to the needs. Beaton (2005) opined that it is a great challenge for public libraries in Glasgow, Scotland to be able to offer quality services to its huge and diverse community of differently abled persons. The paper elaborates how public libraries can make attempts to meet the challenge of providing services to different

community of differently abled persons with accessible services. Khailova (2005) found that South Carolinian public libraries have made a significant progress in physical access, though there are some shortcomings in collections of reading materials, Services, Staff, and Policymaking. The author suggests that public libraries of South Carolina need to conduct user surveys to identify differently abled persons in their societies and develop resources, policies and services according to the needs and requirements of these persons.

Thi Bac (2005) substantiates that in Vietnam public library websites and browsers are specifically designed for visually impaired persons and also orientation and training programs are conducted on how to make use of them. But still there are several challenges to be taken care of to create fully integrated and all inclusive public library services for the visually impaired persons. Cylke et al. (2007) reflect that persons with visual and physical problems have the same interests, intellectual capacity, and ambitions as any other persons of society. Also they have a determination that they should enjoy the same benefits from the public library. Koulikourdi (2008)[a] depicts that the lack of services for the differently abled persons in libraries of Greece. The author recommends for collections in alternative formats and assistive devices along with the adaptations in legislation, librarian support and development of guidelines to improve the services for differently abled persons.

Koulikourdi (2008)[b] found that there is a lack of availability of Assistive Technologies in Greek libraries because the existing legal and regulatory framework with regards to Assistive

Technologies is inadequate and also the libraries are not interested in procuring the AT products and services. Hence, there is a need for further research to keep abreast with the new developments in the Assistive Technologies and libraries' field. Holmes's (2008) study revealed lesser usage of public library from the patrons with developmental disabilities. The author argued for same quality of library services which are being provided to all other public library patrons for this user community. Bonnici et al. (2009) determines that lack of information technologies and well trained human resources are the key challenges to the future of information access to differently abled persons. The survey participants opined that there is a huge possibility that technologies and the internet can bridge the information access gap provided, if public libraries are committed to offer information access through assistive technologies.

Ingle et al. (2009) evidences from responses of some librarians that web designers are not fully aware of the techniques that make public library websites fully accessible to differently abled persons. Burke (2009) suggests that more comprehensive research should be carried to assess the perceptions of differently abled persons on public library access and services. Further, the public library should include differently abled persons in research and assessment of services. Regarding accommodations, public libraries have to think on increasing the availability of assistive technology and provide better physical access and the resources in alternative formats. Lacey and Smith (2010) found that the public libraries have adopted latest technologies, books and other resources, and run projects for community of persons with learning disabilities in Birmingham.

Leong and Higgins (2010) indicate that information needs and reading habits of wheelchair-bound young people of Singapore were no different from any other young persons and they face difficulties in using public library facilities and services largely because of architectural and physical access problems. Copeland (2011) reveales that despite many problems with inaccessibility, all differently abled patrons have profound love for libraries. Hill (2011) gave clear understanding of how public libraries of Ontario are contributing to the freedom and capabilities of differently abled persons and suggests further research for improvements.

Ahn and Park (2011) in-depth analysis found that there is a need to improve disability services and library relations with differently abled persons in Korea and suggests that the policy department of the public library for the disability services has to develop a range of promotional strategies adjusted for every type of the disability and allocate Public Relations (PR) materials to librarians making it certain to use efficient PR methods. Yoon and Kim (2011) presents a strategic development plan as well as a role model concerning with production of alternative format materials based on the mid- to long-term plan and a nation-wide cooperative network centering on the National Library Support Center for differently abled persons in Korea. Ping et al.(2013) state that the public libraries in China are invariably providing services to vulnerable groups. From the analysis of public libraries websites, it is not clear that what their service objectives are. The authors suggest that to better serve the vulnerable groups, public libraries in China need to outline the service essence, provide the guarantees, and implement evaluation systems.

Lewis (2013) confirms that there is a great demand from differently abled persons for equal library services and states that the library professionals cannot consider themselves as information professionals until they understand and provide information to differently abled persons. Slater (2014) suggests that to better serve hearing impaired children, public libraries need to develop their collections and programs through collaboration with hearing impaired community and market their services through a personal and proactive approach. Kaeding (2014) raises the issue of access to public libraries for differently abled persons. The study mainly focused on adults with physical and sensory problems. Hence the author stresses on the need for further research to understand the issues of access to public libraries for children with special needs and their families.

Bonnici et al. (2015) identify human resources, leadership, outreach activities and applying assistive technologies are the major challenges to the future of information access for differently abled persons through the National Library Service for the visually and physically challenged (NLS/BPH) system. Fitzgerald et al. (2015) raises few questions on how international obligations on disability services are put into practice, how they can be better shared and learnt from and more importantly how the ambition of "inclusion for all" is being met in Australia. Yoon and Kim (2016) gave many suggestions on collection development policy for National Library for Individuals with Disabilities (NLID). Thus the study can be used as a policy document and logical basis for discussing the NLID's legal obligations and tasks and library services for differently abled persons in South Korea.

Ekaputri and Susetyo-Salim (2017) reveal that public libraries in DKI Jakarta do not have adequate collection of information resources, services, facilities and human resources to promote the concept of social inclusion for differently abled persons. The author argues that public libraries in DKI Jakarta need to get better in social order to encourage the concept of social inclusion and to establish the public library as a place for inclusion. Pressley (2017) found that majority of public librarians who participated in the survey expressed apprehensions about the impact of persons with serious mental illness upon other patrons. Public librarians are interested on educating themselves more about mental illness and wish to have more awareness on severe mental illness that could help them in their communications with patrons who are having severe mental illness. Ciccone (2018) attempts to throw light on the decision to integrate services of public libraries to deliver within their own capacities have really benefited the visually impaired Canadians. Ikeshita (2019) found that most of the public libraries in Japan do not provide adequate and easy to reading materials to children with dyslexia as compared to public libraries in the Europe.

Major Inferences

1. It is found from the review of published literature that majority of studies are published from the developed countries and only few studies are published from the developing countries. Though India is the largest democratic and fastest growing country in the world but public libraries are not yet developed properly and they are not providing even minimum services to the differently abled persons.

2. It is found from the review of published literature that public libraries across the world are reluctant and rather slow in providing services to the differently abled persons particularly in underdeveloped/developing countries like India.

3. Majority of the studies were concentrated only on persons with physical or visual impairments and, other categories i.e. Hearing and Mentally impaired etc. were somewhat neglected.

4. It is found from the review of published literature that majority of the public libraries around the world are suffering from acute financial problems that lead to poor infrastructure facilities, lack resources, services and efficient personnel. which is hampering them to provide sufficient services to differently abled persons

5. The review of literature shows that public libraries across the world are lagging behind in using Information and Communication Technologies to provide services to differently abled persons.

6. It is found from the review that use of public library services by the differently abled persons is very less and also they are least aware of the services that are being provided by public libraries as compared to other persons.

7. Majority of the authors argued for major improvements in physical accessibility, resources and services of public libraries to provide better and quality services to differently abled persons and they also stressed on the need for further intensive research in the area.

CONCLUSION

Making public library resources and services accessible to differently abled persons will not only achieve the goal of 'Information for all' but also address the major issue of social exclusion to a large extent. Further, it can boost their confidence and sense of belongingness in the society. Though it is evident from the literature review that current scenario of public library services to differently abled persons is not very encouraging particularly, in developing and under developed countries. However, public libraries are slowly realizing the need to include differently abled persons in their scheme of things for future programs. Recent research and development activities, especially, in the Information and Communication Technologies has made it quite obvious for public libraries to make progress in that direction. The research work published across the world in the last two decades is the indication that gradually public libraries as well as researchers have at least understood the need and importance of providing library services to differently abled persons. Finally, in order to provide equal opportunities for differently abled persons, it is really essential from the perspectives of these user groups at the physical condition of public library buildings, as well as services and programs. (Irvall and Nielsen, 2005, p. 3) The proper address of problems of differently abled persons and to satisfy their information needs and requirements is not only the responsibility of the public libraries at the global level but also the order of the days to come in near future.

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