

Teacher Librarians' Basic Skills for Ensuring Lifelong Literacy of Students with Special Needs

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Abstract

Lifelong literacy is intended for every student regardless of the physical attributes of such an individual, status or other similar considerations. The programme of lifelong literacy should be consciously embarked upon so as to achieve desired results. Students with special needs should be assisted by programme organizers to ensure that basic requirements – personnel, skills and logistics are provided in required quantity and quality. This paper emphasizes needed skills expected to be possessed by any teacher librarians that worth his/her salt in providing leadership and ensuring effective lifelong literacy of students with special needs. Students with special needs would require same materials used by other normal students. However, there is need for the teacher librarian to make some modifications and adjustments so as to be able to deliver on the assignment of educating students with special needs in a lifelong literacy programme of the school. This is where the need for possession and utilization of relevant skills become very vital. Suggestions include need to employ adequate qualified personnel to teach the people with special needs; awareness should be created to correct the negative attitude of

people to people with special needs; required facilities should be provided as at when necessary; training and capacity building programmes should be made available for people with special needs; and should be initiated and instituted by the relevant authorities concerned amongst others

Introduction

Lifelong literacy is very important to every individual regardless social, economic, cultural or racial factor. Lifelong literacy is a process of teaching, training and learning, or a particular kind of teaching or training lasting or existing all through one's life to improve knowledge and develop skills. It is also referred to as lifelong education or lifelong learning. Availability of library personnel in required quantity and quality is basic to modern education, which is seen as both learner-centered and resource-based especially for people with special needs. Modern educational philosophy sees learning as an active process that takes place through interaction between the learner and resources in the environment. The resource person is also seen as part of resources here since a regular teacher could not effectively meet the needs of the individual with special needs. It is believed that education must begin with the learner – his or her characteristics, needs and interests. These will guide development of content, resources and learning activities set forth in the educational programme. However, education does not end with the curriculum: it is indeed only the beginning, the rough outline, plan or guide. To realize educational objectives, policy must be put into practice and the requisite resources (including personnel) provided and used effectively to promote learning.

Transforming the plan on paper to efficient educational practice requires some personnel. Some of these personnel are responsible for social adjustment of the persons with special needs while others are concerned with the provision of the learning resources and utilization of these resources. Among those ensuring the development of the required adjustment mechanism and coping strategies are the specialists – Audiologists, Speech Therapists/Trainers, Sign Language Interpreters, Braillists/Transcribers, Bibliotherapists, Physiotherapists and the likes. Those concerned with the provision and use of the needed resources include – Special Education Teachers (Specialist in Gifted and Talented, Learning Disability, Mental Retardation, Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment and the Physically Challenged

Education), School/College Librarians, School Media Specialists, Typists, Computer Operators/Instructors, Educational Authorities, Authors, Illustrators, Producers and many more. These people are expected to perform different functions of creating, producing, selecting and distributing resources for effective use.

In terms of effective use, one thinks first and foremost of the teachers who mediate resources directly with students in the classroom. School administrators also play a key role – the school head, the librarians, and beyond that, the supervisory personnel at local, state and federal levels. Teacher educators are yet another tier of personnel, both those who prepare teachers in the colleges and universities and those involved with in-service training.

No doubt, if these categories of personnel co-operate in the education of the people with special needs, lifelong literacy would be achieved. The period and point of intervention could be different but a programmed teaching-learning would be achieved. This will remain with these categories of individuals for a very long time.

It must also be mentioned that if these categories of personnel are not well motivated and trained, learning resources for lifelong literacy will not be effectively used. Due to their central role in bringing learners and learning resources together, the initial focus was on special education teachers, the personnel within the school system. However, optimal use of learning resources requires communication, cooperation and partnership between the various people involved in their provision and use. For this reason, the scope of this write-up is extended to cover the authors and designers, producers, publishers and illustrators as well as distributors responsible for resources provision. The efforts of all these personnel are needed to bring learners and resources together in fruitful interaction for effective lifelong literacy.

Learning resources for lifelong literacy are numerous in nature. However, they are not different from resources used for teaching-learning in a regular classroom. They only exist with some modifications. These resources would include print, non-print and electronic media vis-à-vis digital resources which are now enjoying greater patronage from everyone involved in the education industry. These resources must be provided in required quantity and quality so as to achieve the desired results.

Problem Statement

People with special needs wherever they are have always formed the impression that their interest are not well catered for. They do not; most of the time have a sense of inclusion especially when they are in a mixed school. However, librarians are of the opinion that library resources are provided for every category of people regardless their challenges. Even, libraries provide for anticipated needs. Interesting as that may sound, for any library to meet the needs of people with special needs, the librarians need to possess and exhibit certain fundamental skills to administer a library that will be useful for the people with special needs in the area of development of life long literacy. Some of these basic skills and required personnel are highlighted in this paper.

The Situation Report on Education and Lifelong Literacy

Regardless the position on paper, we are consciously aware that education in the Nigerian school system is far from being learner-centered or resource-based. Classroom instruction at all levels is teacher-dominated (Dike, 2006). Teachers see themselves as the alpha and omega of their courses. Lessons are characterized by rote learning and copying of notes from the board. Notes and textbooks are memorized and regurgitated during exams – there is little room for active or independent learning, self-expression, discussion, questioning or critical thinking. Also, schools are characterized by paucity of learning resources and a poor learning environment. Many schools consist of long open halls with patches of blackboard along the walls as the only evident teaching aid.

Another problem relates to obtaining the requisite learning resources. Examination of publishing output reveals huge gaps. It is evident that we face formidable problems in both the provision and effective use of learning resources in the Nigerian school system. Will the activities of the personnel involved in the education of the people with special needs impact on their lifelong education?

Roles of the Librarian in Assisting the People with Special Needs

The role of the librarian can be summarized into three or four depending on what one is looking at. The librarian is expected to select and acquire useful library materials needed by every category of library users; process and describe these resources and place them at the appropriate shelves as well as retrieve and disseminate these resources for utilization by the patron. Also, the librarian plays the

role of an administrator. He administers the library personnel and resources likewise. He is to coordinate other functional staff of the library to ensure information generation, processing and utilization. He also coordinates other services in all other units of the library so as to make desired impact in the lives of users of the library. The librarian also performs educational role. He ensures that needed materials to drive the curricula are provided in the required quality and quantity and format. Materials that need some forms of modification should be modified in order to serve the useful purposes for the people with special needs. Materials that would be used by different categories of people with special needs after little adjustment must be identified by the librarian and prompt attention should be given at all times to such needs. In completing assignments that has to do with reading, a librarian should volunteer to read aloud for the people with special needs. Locating materials by the people on wheel chairs becomes a difficult exercise if no assistance is provided by the librarian.

Another major role of the librarian to the people with special needs include that of a counselor. Many of these people, because of their peculiarity, rely so much on the judgment of the librarian to recommend reading and useful texts to them so as to complete assignments and in meeting deadlines too. So many of these people are still in their formative age when the challenge was noticed, therefore, they are a bit challenged. Whatever the librarian recommends becomes the most sought after text among the people with special needs.

Required Personnel to Provide Learning Resources

The provision of learning resources for lifelong literacy must be sought from authors and designers, producers, publishers and illustrators as well as distributors responsible for resources provision. These individuals are concerned with the creation and production of books and other instructional support resources. Those who evaluate, select and distribute them, such as governmental agencies, librarians and booksellers are also of concern. To consider these categories of personnel one by one is our main focus but it is assumed that a lot has been written on some of these personnel. Effort would be concentrated on the school library media specialist

and categories of special personnel required in lifelong education for the learners with special needs.

The School Library Media Specialists/School Librarians/Teacher-Librarians

The nomenclature for the personnel in charge of school learning resources ranges from school librarian to teacher-librarian and/or media specialists or a combination of any two of the listed titles. Since this paper is concerned with the personnel and learning resources requirements for the provision of life-long literacy for people with special needs, the media specialists in charge of the school library media centre warrant special attention. Are they well trained, sufficiently equipped and adequately motivated?

The media specialists need to be well trained. They must not be teachers without any library training or qualification. Also library work should not be seen as assigned duties in addition to their regular teaching load. Opportunities for further training locally and internationally should be provided. More attention should also be given to the teaching of library studies in colleges of education, universities and other teacher training institutes.

Motivation of the media specialists should not be taken with levity. The potential contributions of the media specialist should be valued. The teaching load for media specialist should be reduced and certain extra allowances should be given to him/her. There should also be an established position for media specialists and should be answerable to only the school head. Lack of motivation and training would make it difficult for media specialists to perform, even when they have the will to do so in lifelong literacy.

Special Education Teachers and the Learners

Let us then turn our attention to the special education teachers, who form the front line in the lifelong education and school system generally. Are they well motivated, sufficiently equipped and trained for the effective use of learning resources to deliver lifelong literacy? Education has suffered a decline in status over the years. Teachers for lifelong literacy should be respected and held in high esteem. They must not be disregarded. Lifelong literacy should be accorded the value education once had. For lifelong literacy to survive, teachers' input must be sought on all matters relating to them.

Lifelong literacy teachers should be encouraged to be committed. Erratic pay should be abolished so as not to encourage teachers resolve to other means of livelihood, to the detriment of their teaching assignments. The main focus of special teacher is to help people with special needs learn in spite of their differences and exceptionalities. What to teach, where to teach and how to teach should be the next question to answer but this is not the focus of this paper. However, the teaching should be the type that considers the individual differences and provides for such differences. This is what Mba (1991) referred to as ideal general education.

A learner with special need is seen as an exceptional child who deviates from the normal or average child in mental characteristics, sensory abilities, neuro-muscular or physical characteristics, social or emotional behaviour, communication abilities or in multiple handicaps, to such an extent that he requires a modification of school practices or special education services in order to develop to his maximum. Library skills are needed and they are considered to be the roots of education (Baird, 1994).

Required Skills for Teachers and Learners Taught by Librarians

In their submission, Kolade and Olaajo (2008) recommended five skills needed for lifelong literacy as introduction to proper way to handle library resources; provision of information about types and usage skills of resources housed in the library, how the library works especially in different sections; competency in the use of the library resources, and locating information necessary for promoting lifelong learning, especially in the area of numeric, manipulative, communicative and social life skills. The educational roles of librarians permit them to teach required skills so as to achieve results and make people with special needs feel a sense of inclusion.

Other skills needed include survival skills for the blind and need for mobility (that is independence travel). The survival skills according to Olawale (2000) quoting Adeniran and Ajobiewe (1999) refers to daily skills meant for taking care of one's body and materials on daily basis in order to achieve the ultimate in personal hygiene and become functional members of the society. On the other hand, mobility is the ability of the individual, whether sighted or blind, to move from one point of his environment to the other without difficulty (Abosi and Ozoji, 1985).

Visual literacy, expressive and receptive skills are needed by the hearing impaired individuals. Expressive skills involve his ability to communicate through the use of signs, symbols, body movement, finger spelling, total and manual communication. He should be able to combine any of the above listed means to pass information to listener or recipient effectively. Receptive skills involve the ability to understand the message being communicated through any of the above listed means and forms of communication. Visual literacy is not least important.

Survival skills for the mentally retarded children would include toilet training, eating habit, hygiene and personal grooming, washing, leisure or recreation/aesthetic enjoyment, handling menstruation, bed-making, food preparation, dressing skills and lots more. Motor and mobility skills are recommended as very important for the physically and health impaired individuals to enjoy lifelong literacy.

For the hearing disabled individual willing to partake in lifelong literacy, social skills training; self-awareness; awareness of others; self control and decision-making skills are necessary. The above can be achieved through the principles of reinforcement, shaping and stimulus-control. The emotionally disturbed individual requires organizational skills, reasoning skills, bibliotherapy and activities that are likely to reduce his anxiety, worry, unhappiness or generalized fear should be encouraged.

Learners with multiple handicaps would benefit from all the skills listed in this paper depending on how severe or mild the handicapping condition is. A gifted and talented individual participating in a lifelong literacy needs a lot of challenging tasks that would put his ability to test. Enquiry skills, finding skills, qualitative and quantitative skills development would be of assistance in his lifelong literacy programme.

Other personnel such as Sign Language Instructors, Braillists, Computer Operators/Instructors, Typists, Transcribers, Speech Therapists, Audiologists and other important personnel perform several other functions at their different levels of intervention so as to ensure successful lifelong education for the people with special needs. It must be emphasized that the major key role players have been given more attention in this paper.

Conclusion

The role of the stakeholders such as teachers, media specialists and other professionals is germane to the delivery of lifelong education of the people with special needs. Resources must be provided in the required format, quality and quantity for effectiveness and efficiency. At the same time certain skills are crucial to attainment of lifelong education by the people with special needs. A combination of two or more skills would assist instructors deliver the lifelong education curriculum to any category of people with special needs.

Recommendations

The following recommendations would assist the people with special needs achieve lifelong education:

- Adequate qualified personnel should be employed to teach the people with special needs.
- Awareness should be created to correct negative attitude of the people to the otherwise-able people.
- Required facilities: Instructional support resources, accommodation and equipment should be provided as at when necessary.
- Training and capacity building programmes should be made available for the librarians teaching and working in libraries where these learners with special needs undergo learning processes.
- Motivation in terms of allowances, study leave and praises cum public recognition and award should be initiated and instituted by the relevant authorities concerned. There should be administrative structure in place that would make it possible for any librarian to upgrade his/her skills and develop along approved career progression.

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