

LIBRARIES AS BEACONS OF INCLUSIVE SERVICES FOR LOW LITERATE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This article explores the pivotal role of libraries as beacons of inclusive services for low literate communities. In a world increasingly dependent on information and literacy, millions of individuals still struggle with low literacy skills, often due to socio-economic disparities and educational challenges. Libraries, as democratic institutions, have evolved beyond their traditional roles, actively addressing the needs of low literate communities. The article commences by exploring the concept of inclusive services and low literacy. It then proceeds to analyze the importance of inclusive services for low literate communities. It also underscores the consequences of low literacy on individuals and communities and explores the roles of libraries in promoting literacy. Furthermore, it delves into the challenges facing inclusive library services vis a vis the strategies for effective inclusive library services for low literate communities. Conclusion and recommendations were equally made.

Key Words: Libraries, Inclusive Services, Low Literacy

Introduction

In the tapestry of our communities, libraries stand as more than repositories of books. As captured in the words of Popovic (2016), libraries emerge as beacons, casting light upon the path of knowledge for individuals grappling with low literacy. Libraries, traditionally revered as bastions of learning, have evolved into dynamic hubs where inclusivity is not just a goal but a guiding principle. Neary (2014), posited that for low-literate communities, libraries serve as sanctuaries where the written word transforms from a daunting challenge into a gateway for

personal development. From meticulously curated collections to innovative literacy programs, libraries have become veritable champions of breaking down barriers to knowledge.

The inclusivity journey begins with tailored collections, thoughtfully designed to cater to a diverse range of literacy levels. According to Kong (2019), through strategic curation, libraries transform their shelves into welcoming landscapes, offering materials that cater to both beginners and advanced readers. He further buttressed that by embracing a spectrum of literature, these spaces ensure that individuals with varying literacy levels find content that aligns with their abilities and aspirations.

On the other hand, Ajogwu (2016), stated that beyond the physical realm, libraries have also embraced technology to extend their reach as digital platforms and e-resources bring the world of literature to fingertips, offering interactive and adaptive materials that cater to different learning styles. In doing so, libraries not only bridge geographical gaps but also provide low-literate individuals with personalized avenues for skill development. The heartbeat of inclusivity in libraries is undoubtedly the array of literacy programs and initiatives they champion. From adult literacy classes to community reading circles, these programs are designed to empower individuals to overcome literacy challenges in a supportive and non-judgmental environment. Libraries, thus, become transformative spaces where the journey towards improved literacy is a communal endeavor, fostering a sense of belonging and shared progress.

Conceptual Definitions

Inclusive services: As captured in the work of Storer, (2017), inclusive services refers to programs, facilities, or offerings that are designed to accommodate and cater to a diverse range of individuals, regardless of their background, abilities, or characteristics. He maintained that these services are structured to ensure equitable access, participation, and benefits for everyone, including those with disabilities, different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, and varying needs. Inclusive services aim to create environments that foster a sense of belonging, respect, and dignity for all individuals, promoting a society where everyone can fully engage and thrive without encountering barriers or discrimination. This concept is fundamental in various domains such as education, healthcare, public spaces, and social services, striving to build a more equitable and harmonious community for all.

In library context, inclusive services refers to a set of practices and initiatives within the field of library and information science that aim to ensure access, engagement, and support for all members of a diverse communities (Okoli, 2010). Librarians who implement inclusive services actively work to remove barriers and create an environment where every individual, regardless of their background, abilities, or needs, feels welcome and accommodated.

Low literate: In the words of Musingafi and Chiwanza (2012), low literacy refers to an individual's limited ability to read, write, comprehend, and use information effectively in various contexts. It signifies a level of proficiency significantly below what is considered necessary for everyday functioning in modern society. People with low literacy skills may struggle with tasks such as understanding written instructions, filling out forms, comprehending written materials, and engaging with complex texts. This condition can impede their educational, professional, and

personal development, limiting their access to opportunities and resources. Low literacy is a multifaceted issue influenced by factors like limited educational opportunities, socio-economic background, and language barriers.

Importance of Inclusive Service for low Literate communities

In a world where information is the currency of progress and opportunity, the ability to read, write, and comprehend is an undeniable key to empowerment. Yet, in the vast tapestry of our global society, there are countless individuals and communities facing the staggering challenge of low literacy. This challenge transcends borders, socioeconomic divides, and generations, casting a long shadow of limited access to education, economic mobility, and social inclusion. The importance of addressing low literacy through inclusive library services cannot be overstated, for it is a fundamental obstacle to personal growth, community development, and societal advancement.

Inclusive library services play a crucial role in supporting low literate communities for several reasons of which provision of access to information is prominent. Grassi, (2013) stated that libraries serve as essential hubs for information dissemination and through their services ensure that low literates in the community have access to a wide range of materials in formats that are suitable for their reading level. He further stated that by providing materials and resources tailored to the needs of low literates, libraries actively contribute to promoting and improving literacy rates within their communities. In the same vain, Sobalage and Ogunmodede, (2015) reiterate that access to books and educational resources empowers low literates

individuals by giving them the tools they need to enhance their reading and comprehension skills, which in turn can lead to increased confidence and self-esteem. The equally stated that inclusive services ensure that everyone, regardless of their literacy level, has equal access to information and educational resources which promotes a more equitable society.

When libraries offer materials that are engaging and accessible for low literates, it can ignite a passion for learning and reading, which can have long-lasting positive effects on an individual's educational journey (Katherine, Gatenby, & Chittenden, 2018). They also captured that libraries can offer programs and workshops designed specifically for low literates, helping them develop critical skills like reading, writing, and digital literacy. On the other hand, Daines (2014) was of the opinion that Inclusive library services create spaces in terms of community building, where individuals with varying literacy levels can come together, fostering a sense of belonging and community. The aspect of life-long learning can never be over emphasized as libraries are spaces where individuals can continue their learning journey throughout their lives (Nazarova, 2010). For low literates, this means ongoing opportunities for skill-building and personal development.

Inclusive library services can also provide resources and programs that support families with low literates, helping to break the cycle of low literacy across generations (Echezona, Osadebe and Asogwa, 2018). They added that by addressing low literacy levels, libraries contribute to tackling broader social issues such as poverty, unemployment, and access to healthcare, as literacy is intricately linked with these factors.

Consequences of Low Literacy on Individuals and Communities

In a world propelled by information and communication, literacy stands as the cornerstone of progress and empowerment. It is the gateway to knowledge, understanding, and participation in the complexities of modern society. However, lurking in the shadows of progress, the specter of low literacy levels continues to cast a long and foreboding shadow. This pervasive issue, affecting millions worldwide, carries repercussions that ripple through the very fabric of individual lives and societies at large.

According to Kong, (2019), low literacy, a condition wherein individuals lack the foundational skills to comprehend and engage with written information, transcends mere educational statistics as it infiltrates every aspect of daily existence, permeating economic opportunities, healthcare accessibility, civic participation, and even the formation of personal identities. At its core, low literacy is a multifaceted challenge, one that reverberates through generations, exacerbating existing inequalities and hampering social development. Low literacy has far-reaching consequences on both individuals and communities. It is a problem that affects people of all ages and backgrounds, and its impact is felt across various aspects of life. In the work of Eskay and Chima (2013), limited economic opportunities is one of the consequences of low literacy on individuals and communities as individuals with low literacy skills often struggle to find well-paying jobs, limiting their earning potential. This can lead to financial instability, poverty, and reliance on social welfare programs. In the same vain, Sobalage and Ogunmodede, (2015) presented that low literacy is linked to poor health literacy, which can result in misunderstanding medical instructions, neglecting preventative care, and making unhealthy

lifestyle choices which invariably leads to higher healthcare costs for individuals and communities.

Low literacy also hinders individuals from participating in civic activities, such as voting or understanding important government policies which can undermine the democratic process and the voice of marginalized communities (Sambo, 2016). They also recorded that parents with low literacy skills may struggle to support their children's education which perpetuates a cycle of low literacy across generations leading individuals and communities to lack access to quality educational resources and opportunities. Low literacy can lead to social isolation, as individuals may avoid situations where they need to read or write, such as social gatherings or community events which can result in feelings of exclusion and loneliness (Sobalage and Ogunmodede, 2015). He further stated that low literacy is associated with higher crime rates, as individuals may turn to illegal activities due to limited employment opportunities. Communities with higher illiteracy rates often experience more crime and insecurity. Additionally, low literacy affects workforce productivity, as employees may struggle with basic tasks like reading instructions or filling out forms. This can have a negative impact on businesses and the overall economy.

In the digital age, low literacy limits access to the internet and digital resources, hindering individuals from staying informed and connected (Nazarova, 2010). Communities without access to information struggle to adapt to changing times. In-line with the above submissions, IFLA (2015), revealed that low literacy places a burden on social services, including remedial education programs and healthcare services as communities bear the cost of addressing these issues, diverting resources from other essential services. It was also stated that low literacy can

hinder personal growth and self-esteem, leading to a lack of confidence and reduced aspirations causing individuals to miss out on opportunities for personal development and fulfillment.

The Roles of Libraries in Promoting Literacy in Low Literate Communities

Libraries have long been regarded as institutions that play a pivotal role in promoting literacy, both in traditional and contemporary contexts. They stand as dynamic hubs, wielding influence as vital conduits for education and champions of literacy in diverse communities worldwide. Their significance extends beyond mere bookshelves, as they serve as vibrant centers for intellectual exploration, digital access, and community engagement. Through their services, they provide access to diverse information resources. According to (Ajogwu, 2016), one of the primary functions of libraries in promoting literacy is providing access to a wide array of reading materials as libraries house books, magazines, newspapers, and digital resources that cater to readers of all ages and interests. This vast collection not only encourages reading but also helps individuals develop their reading preferences.

Libraries often offer programs and services targeted at young children to cultivate early literacy skills. Story time sessions, interactive workshops, and book clubs for children foster a love for reading and lay the foundation for early childhood literacy and lifelong learning (Moisey, 2017). He also buttressed that libraries support adult literacy by offering programs and materials tailored to adult learners. This includes resources for those learning to read, improving language skills, or seeking information on practical topics such as job hunting and financial literacy. In the same vain, Popovic (2016), wrote that in the digital age, libraries have expanded their roles to

encompass digital literacy by offering computer access, internet connectivity and training to bridge the digital divide which empowers individuals with the skills needed to navigate the online world effectively.

Libraries serve as community hubs, hosting events and activities that foster a sense of belonging. Book clubs, writing workshops, and author talks encourage social interaction and discussion, which can enhance reading comprehension and critical thinking. Many libraries also engage in outreach programs, taking their services to underserved communities. Mobile libraries and literacy initiatives in schools, prisons, and remote areas help reach individuals who might otherwise lack access to reading materials and resources. Musingafi and Chiwanza (2012), posited that libraries promote the concept of lifelong learning by offering resources and programs for continued education and personal development. From online courses to educational workshops, libraries encourage individuals to pursue learning throughout their lives. Furthermore, libraries in multicultural societies provide materials in multiple languages, thereby supporting linguistic diversity and encouraging literacy among non-native speakers.

Technology integration according to Neary (2014), is another role of libraries in promoting literacy in low literate communities. To adapt to changing times, libraries have incorporated technology into their services. E-books, audiobooks, and online databases have become integral parts of modern libraries, making literacy resources more accessible. In a nutshell, libraries are indispensable in the endeavor to promote literacy across all age groups and communities. They serve as dynamic centers of knowledge and learning, offering diverse resources, fostering community engagement, and adapting to the evolving needs of society. As

literacy remains a cornerstone of personal and societal development, libraries continue to play a crucial role in shaping a more literate and informed world.

Challenges Facing Inclusive Library Services for Low Literate Communities

Libraries serve as democratic spaces, offering access to information and resources for all members of society. However, this noble mission is confronted by a multitude of challenges that hinder the seamless provision of inclusive services. Prominent amongst the challenges according to Storer, (2017), is diversity of user needs. Libraries serve a wide range of patrons, each with unique needs, including language barriers, disabilities, cultural differences, and varying levels of digital literacy. Addressing this diversity while maintaining an equitable service model poses a significant challenge. Additionally, libraries often grapple with budget constraints and limited staffing. This affects their ability to invest in technologies, adapt facilities, and provide specialized training for staff to cater to diverse needs effectively. In the words of Irunebo (2013), ensuring that library spaces are physically accessible to all, including individuals with mobility challenges, is a key concern. Older or inadequately designed library buildings may present significant barriers. He further pointed that cultural sensitivity and competence is also a challenge as libraries must be attuned to the cultural nuances of their communities. This includes offering collections and programming that represent diverse perspectives and fostering an inclusive environment where all feel welcome. In-line with the above submission, Eskay and Chima (2013), revealed that lack of diverse content possess great challenge as the availability of culturally sensitive and diverse materials can be limited. Libraries face the challenge of curating collections that reflect the varied interests and identities of their patrons.

Serving communities with a multitude of languages presents a considerable challenge. Libraries must find effective ways to bridge linguistic gaps, offering resources and services in multiple languages. Ensuring that library resources and services are accessible to individuals with disabilities according to Nazarova (2010), is also a critical concern. This encompasses not only physical access but also digital resources, such as screen readers and adaptive technologies. He also added that engaging with diverse communities and understanding their unique needs is pivotal and libraries face the challenge of reaching out effectively and building trust among under-represented groups.

Strategies for Effective Inclusive Library Services for Low Literate Communities

Inclusive library services play a crucial role in fostering an equitable and accessible learning environment for all members of society, including low literate communities. These communities often face barriers in accessing information, which can limit their educational and personal development opportunities. In addressing the potential challenges key areas need to be looked into. According to Katherine, Gatenby and Chittenden (2018), conducting a thorough needs assessment is the cornerstone of designing effective inclusive library services as engaging with low literate communities directly allows libraries to understand their unique requirements, preferences, and challenges. Surveys, focus groups, and community meetings can help gather valuable insights that shape service offerings. They also maintained in their work that libraries should curate a diverse collection of resources that cater to the varying literacy levels within low literate communities. This includes materials like large-print books, audiobooks, graphic novels,

and materials in multiple languages. Additionally, incorporating resources on basic literacy skills, such as phonics and vocabulary-building, is essential.

In the work of Musingafi and Chiwanzam (2012), providing access to digital resources is crucial in today's information age. They suggested that libraries should offer computer training programs, workshops on basic digital skills and ensure that their websites and digital catalogs are user-friendly and accessible for all. Additionally, they buttressed that recognizing linguistic diversity is vital. Stressing that libraries should stock materials in different languages spoken by the community members. Moreover, hiring staff who are proficient in these languages can bridge communication gaps and create a more inclusive atmosphere.

Partnerships with local community organizations, schools, literacy programs, and government agencies according to Sambo, (2016), is another strategy that can enhance the library's capacity to serve low literate communities. These collaborations can lead to shared resources, joint programming, and expanded outreach efforts. He also opined that libraries should offer a range of flexible services and programs tailored to the needs of low literate individuals. This may include adult literacy classes, storytelling sessions, one-on-one tutoring, and workshops on practical skills like financial literacy or job hunting.

In the work of Daines, (2014), libraries should be designed with inclusivity in mind. This involves providing comfortable seating, clear signage, and spaces that accommodate diverse learning styles. Sensitivity to cultural differences ensures that everyone feels welcome and respected. It was also stressed that library staff should receive training on working with low

literate communities, including understanding their unique challenges and providing empathetic assistance. Ongoing professional development opportunities can keep staff updated on best practices.

Libraries investing in assistive technologies, such as screen readers or text-to-speech software, to accommodate individuals with different learning needs is another key strategy (Daines, 2014). Additionally, physical facilities should be designed with accessibility in mind, ensuring that all visitors can navigate the space comfortably. Furthermore, establishing feedback loops with community members allows libraries to assess the effectiveness of their services and make necessary adjustments. This iterative process ensures that services remain responsive to the evolving needs of low literate communities.

Recommendations

The work therefore recommends that;

1. Libraries should continue to develop and expand tailored literacy programs that cater to the specific needs of low literacy communities.
2. Libraries should actively seek partnerships with local schools, community centers, and literacy-focused organizations.
3. Given the increasing importance of digital skills, libraries should prioritize digital literacy initiatives. Providing access to technology, training in digital tools, and guidance on

online resources will empower low literate individuals to participate more fully in the digital age.

4. Libraries should embrace cultural sensitivity and linguistic diversity in their programs and collections. Offering materials and services in multiple languages, as well as celebrating diverse cultural traditions, ensures that all members of the community feel valued and included.
5. Libraries should actively advocate for policies that support literacy initiatives at the local, regional, and national levels. They can also play a crucial role in raising awareness about the importance of literacy and the services available to low literacy communities.

Conclusion

Libraries stand as powerful beacons of inclusive services for low-literate communities. They serve as vital hubs of learning, empowerment, and community engagement. By recognizing and addressing the unique needs of individuals with varying literacy levels, libraries have the potential to bridge the gap in access to information and knowledge. Through innovative programs and partnerships, libraries can create environments that nurture a culture of lifelong learning and skill development.

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