



PERSPECTIVES OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES ON MAXIMIZING BENEFIT FROM LIBRARY SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

Libraries are important agencies where self-paced learning and nurturing of cognitive skills takes place. The government has created a system of district-level and village-level libraries with a view to provide the benefits of library use to every individual in the society. However, persons with disabilities, face challenges in accessing and using libraries. Due to this they are not able to reap the benefits of library services. This paper presents the views of a group of library users with disabilities and the parents of children with disabilities on how the libraries can be more beneficial to persons with disabilities of all age groups. Participants' responses have been grouped into categories of requirements and their frequencies have been plotted. Action points towards addressing the most frequent suggestions (requirements) have been presented after discussion with concerned authorities.

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INTRODUCTION

Library is a place where people of all ages come to read various kinds of materials and spend a good amount of time engaged in the reading activity. The impact of effective use of library on a person is wholesome. It can be helpful in preparation for academics, employment, general knowledge as well as for recreation. However, libraries need to become accessible to the persons with disabilities so that they can be beneficial to them as much as to persons without disability. In this paper, the voices of persons with disabilities and their guardians have been obtained and analyzed to understand their perception of the most important services required by them. The findings presented in this paper enumerate the services required from libraries for persons with varying disabilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Libraries provide opportunities for persons with and without disabilities to mingle and

interact with each other thereby creating awareness, respect and clarifying misunderstandings among them (Nord, 2015). Historically, libraries have served this purpose in the life of individuals all over the world. However, individuals with disabilities have not been able to benefit from these services of libraries. In the wake of this realization, efforts have been made in various countries and their states to make their libraries accessible and useful to persons with disabilities. Access to libraries was improved by making the infrastructure of the libraries disabled friendly and wheelchair accessible. In these efforts, the access and use of libraries to persons with visual impairments began with the introduction of Braille reading materials and Books on tape (Sanaman, G. & Kumar, S., 2014). Libraries attached to Colleges of Higher Education and Universities have been working to make their information services accessible to students with disabilities with a view to make libraries equitable to all students. They have prepared

such accessibilities through systematic training programmes for the digital record keeping as well as technical and attitudinal training for all staff and faculty (Carter, 2004).

With the advent of various assistive technology and adaptive devices for persons with disabilities, the libraries too have endeavored to bring these technologies as well as various information and communication technologies into their services (Solanki & Mandaliya, 2016). These efforts have certainly improved the access to resources in the libraries for persons with disabilities. Nevertheless, the situation where all libraries are accessible and useful to all members with disabilities in the society is yet to be achieved. Only when persons with disabilities are included as benefactors of the services of libraries, it is possible for libraries to be truly effective in their purpose.

METHODOLOGY

The authors presented a talk on the topic ‘ways to use the library more effectively’ for a group of adults and children with disabilities in the District Central Library of the area. The *research design* followed an informal focus group interview. The *data collection tool* was an open-ended question on their perception on how the library can be made useful to them. Each participant had to write down their responses by listing at least five most important ways the library can be useful to them. The participants included children, teenagers, young adults with visual impairment, mild intellectual disability and their parents. The total number of participants was 24.

The responses of the participants were collected. The data was fed into MS EXCEL spreadsheet. Nine categories for suggestion emerged after the responses were coded for the themes and tallied. The categories and the

frequency of response suggestion in each category are mentioned below.

RESULTS

The analysis of response obtained from the participants brought out nine categories of

suggestions to improve the use of library services for persons with disabilities. These categories of requirements in the responses or suggestions of the participants are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Category of requirement (in the participant responses / suggestions)

S. No.	Category of Suggestion
1	Parent experience sharing sessions
2	Tuitions for children with disabilities
3	Preparation for competitive exam - scribe
4	Reader/volunteer/scribe services
5	Extracurricular activities database
6	Assistive devices
7	Job opportunities awareness
8	Employment skills training
9	Create awareness about library for persons with disabilities

The frequencies for the categories of requirements shown in the above table are shown graphically in figure 1. It can be seen from figure 1 that maximum number of suggestions (frequency = 5) were received for ‘assistive devices’, followed by five categories with second most frequently cited requirement (frequency = 4). These five

categories are – ‘parent experience sharing sessions’, ‘tuitions for children with disabilities’, ‘reader/volunteer/scribe services’, ‘extracurricular activities database’ and ‘employment skills training’. The suggestion of ‘creation of awareness about library for persons with disabilities’ had the least frequency.

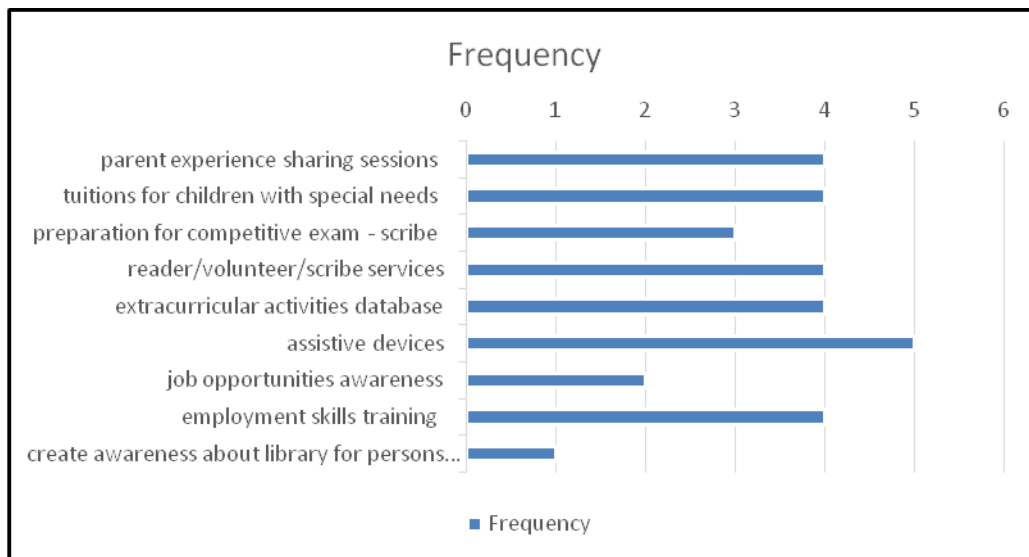


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the frequency of requests for the categories of suggestion.

DISCUSSION

This paper presents the suggestions received from twenty-four persons with disabilities and / or their guardians obtained during a talk presented by the authors on the topic ‘Use of library for persons with disabilities’. The goal of the talk was to bring out strategies to improve library services to enhance the usage of the library by persons with disabilities. In this regard, the responses obtained from the participants regarding their suggestions to

improve the use of library are analyzed and reported here.

The major category of services that would be required to enhance the use of library by persons with disabilities, as gleaned from this analysis, is ‘assistive devices’. This means that the library needs more devices such as assistive technology, services as well as adapted devices both in quality and quantity to become more accessible to persons with disabilities.

The next equally important categories of suggestions were ‘parent experience sharing sessions’, ‘tuitions for children with disabilities’, ‘reader/volunteer/scribe services’, ‘extracurricular activities database’ and ‘employment skills training’. These five categories allude to specific services involving persons to assist as a strategy. The least frequently quoted category of suggestion, ‘creation of awareness about library for persons with disabilities’ indicates that the step of awareness about needs of persons with disabilities is probably reached a higher level. This is supported by the finding that human-based services are suggested as being needed.

Support for preparation for competitive exams and job opportunities awareness were also moderately desirable as seen by the low frequency obtained for these suggestion categories. To follow up on the findings of the analyses presented in this paper, a discussion was held with the Library Coordinator & Trainer, Differently Abled Children’s section of the District Central Library, Coimbatore, regarding the steps that could be undertaken as action plan to address the most frequently cited requirements. The *most frequently cited requirements* are those which were requested by 4 or 5 participants. The action plan for each of these requirements are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Action Plan for Most Frequently Cited Requirements

S. No.	Requirement	Frequency	Action Plan
1.	Assistive Devices	5	- Organize workshops for training on accessibility apps and assistive devices.
2.	Parent experience sharing sessions	4	- Parents awareness and counselling program (disability – wise). - For parents with disability, awareness and counselling program (separate for men and women). - Parents’ experience sharing would be included in these sessions.
3.	Tuitions for children with disabilities	4	- Prepare a team of tutors.
4.	Reader/volunteer/scribe services	4	- Prepare a team of readers and scribe.
5.	Extracurricular activities database	4	- Set up a team of teachers for extracurricular activities such as music, painting, instrumental music. - Explore opportunities to collaborate with institutions providing training on adapted sports and games.
6.	Employment skills training	4	- Explore opportunities to collaborate with institutions providing vocational training.

CONCLUSION

Findings of the analyses reported in this paper have shown that for a district in southern India, awareness levels of needs of persons with disabilities in libraries is required and more than that, the felt need is for human-based assistive services and assistive devices. Making these services available and useable

for persons with disabilities in the libraries can potentially improve the use of libraries by persons with disabilities thereby fulfilling the role as important agencies for self-paced learning and nurturing of cognitive skills for all persons in the society. Drawing up an action plan with the concerned authorities of

the District Central Library is a first step towards meeting the requirements of the persons with disabilities to ensure their

improved participation and use of the library and its services.

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