Role played by an academic library in fostering a reading culture amongst children with special needs

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Abstract:

This study was conducted to determine the impact Mzuzu University Children's Library has had in nurturing a reading culture amongst children with special needs from St John of God in Mzuzu. The study adopted a case study design whose findings were drawn from data collected through focus-group discussion, in-depth interview and observation. Proceedings of the interviews were recorded using tape recorders, transcribed in MS Word, and analysed using Nvivo software. Observations made from the Library were recorded in notebooks using pens. Themes emerging from the data were used to answer the research questions. Findings revealed that the Mzuzu University Children's Library is having a significant impact in nurturing a reading culture amongst children with special needs from St John of God. Patronage was discovered to be high whilst cartoons were the most popular service amongst the children. Other activities undertaken at the Library included book readings, storytelling sessions, video shows, etc. The major challenges patrons faced included inadequate staffing, accessibility to children on wheelchairs, and lack of appropriate information resources. Not many academic libraries incorporate children library services in their programmes. Experiences learned in this case study, therefore, can be a catalyst for development of newer library service models necessitating academic libraries to go beyond servicing their core client group. Moreover, findings made in this study could assist in improving service delivery at the study site if acted upon.

Keywords: *Children's library, reading culture, children with special needs, case study, Malawi.*

Introduction

A number of studies (Chandrasekar and Sivathaasan, 2016; Goodman, 2008) have pointed out that libraries play a critical role in fostering a reading culture amongst children. However, to ably accomplish this task, libraries need to operate in a serene environment, be stocked with

appropriate resources, and also offer services that that are taylor-made to the needs of the children being served.

Although it is desirable that children's libraries operate in purpose-built structures for their convenience, not all communities are lucky to have such structures. Yet, the absence of such structures has not deterred some communities from offering library services to community members in need of library services, and children in particular. A typical example is Thailand where the Royal Police Division modified a disused train carriage into a beautiful library to cater for street children (Cheunwattana and Meksawat, 2002). The service offering in that library proved to be a big success as it was well patronized by both street children and other community members, a development that resulted in its replication in others parts of the country. Notwithstanding this, a well-lit library encompassing a diversified range of sections offering specialised services is desirable.

Most children's libraries offer a variety of services and information resources that include video shows, storytelling sessions, gaming devices, print and electronic books, etc. All these services are meant to foster a reading culture amongst the children. Whilst print books have over the years been the main information resource collection of libraries, e-books are steadily coming to the fore. According to Jeong (2012), e-books have certain advantages over paper or print books (p-books) with regard to storage capacity, price, searchability, font adjustability, and easier readability at night. While research has shown that users derive the same level of satisfaction from reading an e-book to that of a p-book (Nielsen, 2010), e-book reading speeds are generally said to be slower than those of p-books. Moreover, Wu and Mitchell (2010) have observed that some users still prefer to use e-books over traditional paper textbooks. Further, a study conducted by Korat (2009) found that children between the ages of 4 and 6 showed significant improvement in their word-reading ability after having read an e-book. While this finding strengthens the case for the use of e-books in children's libraries, the use of both types in libraries especially those in Malawi where p-books have for a long time been the main information resource carrier would be ideal. Stocking both would ensure that those who may not have prior experience in the use of e-books do not feel out of place whenever they visit children's libraries.

Background to Mzuzu University Children's Library

Mzuzu University Children's Library was established in 2004 as part of Mzuzu University's outreach activities. The Library is one of a kind as it is the only children's library affiliated to an academic institution in the country. It offers services to primary school going children and others within age range of 6-14 in and around Mzuzu. Each school and centre is accorded one special programme per week whilst walk-in patrons from the neighbourhood are also allowed mainly in the afternoon. While other patrons visit the Children's Library in the afternoon, children with special needs (children with learning difficulties, behavioural problems, cerebral palsy, mobility challenges [wheelchair bound], and more) from St John of God Services, located 5 kilometres away in the city centre visit the library every Wednesday in the morning for 1 hour 30 minutes. This service started in 2007, three years after the Children's library opened its doors.

Statement of the Problem

Eleven years have now elapsed from the time the Children's Library started serving children with special needs from St. John of God. However, no formal assessment has been done to determine the impact of the programme. The absence of documented evidence of the effectiveness of this programme and the challenges it is facing has not only made it difficult for the Library to share with others its success stories but also affected service delivery as challenges remain unresolved. This study was, therefore, conducted to address this challenge. It aims at answering the following questions:

1. What services are offered to children with special needs from St. John of God by Mzuzu University Children's Library?
2. To what extent is the Mzuzu University Children's Library patronized by children with special needs?
3. What impact has the Library had in nurturing a reading culture amongst children with special needs?
4. What are the major challenges that the Library faces in serving students with special needs?

The study was perceived to be valuable in that its findings could greatly assist the Children's Library to know the impact its services are having on its users thereby acting as a catalyst for improvement.

Literature Review

Literature reviewed in this section was mainly sourced from journal articles and books. The thematic areas on which the literature focusses on are information resources and service offering in children's libraries, impact of children's libraries, and the challenges faced.

Much of the academic discourse on the topic has focused on the relevance of the children's library in the present era when children seem to be preoccupied with video games, cartoons and other films. However, studies show that libraries are still important for children (Chandrasekar and Sivathaasan, 2016; Goodman, 2008). For instance, a survey conducted by Chandrasekar and Sivathaasan (2016) in Sri Lanka targeting children aged 6-14 revealed that children patronised the library a lot. The study further revealed that the main reason for visiting the library was to read books and other materials (78%), followed by studying (74%), attending children's programmes (64%) and borrowing library materials (54%). Nevertheless, the study revealed that the purpose for visiting the library varied amongst the different age groups with children aged 6-8 mainly attracted by children's programmes, and those aged 12-14 mainly desiring to study. Consequently, the researcher advises that planning for children's libraries should focus on the age range of potential users. Similarly, a study conducted by Goodman (2008) in rural village libraries in Ghana and Burkina Faso revealed that more than 90% of the primary and junior secondary school students surveyed used the libraries. However, Goodman concluded that leisure reading was not widespread in Ghana compared to Burkina Faso. She attributed this situation to social differences that existed in the two communities. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) contends that leisure reading is good for children because it enables them to experience pleasure and gain general, cultural and practical knowledge. Therefore, the absence of leisure reading recorded in the Ghanaian study implies that children involved were missing out on these benefits.

Besides providing the much-needed space to facilitate reading, it is also imperative that libraries should devise measures that would enable children to gain competence in reading. Several scholars, Calkins (2000) and Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) in particular, have argued that motivation is the main driver behind the development of a reading culture in children. Consequently, libraries should work on motivating children to read. There are several ways of motivating children to read. Chandrasekar and Sivathaasan (2016) have indicated that providing services suited to children could be one of the strategies. This is possible if the library is properly designed. Moreover, re-designing and refreshing the library space could also

4

encourage students to visit the library (Loh et al., 2017). Lefebvre (1991) has observed that design and organization of space can influence social relations. This implies that the way students feel about a particular space contributes to their desire to visit the space and to engage in particular learning behaviours.

Another way of motivating children to read is through provision of relevant information resources and providing services that will assist children to read. As libraries exist to acquire, organise and disseminate information (Chowdhury et al., 2008), it is recommended that libraries should constantly update their collections by including not only books popular to children such as young adult literature, comics and magazines (Getrost and Lance, 2014), but also include e-books which are steadily gaining popularity amongst children (Schreurs, 2013). This would make the collection diversified and rich thereby ensuring that varied interests of patrons are met. Provision of reading materials is the first step in the development of a reading culture. But there is also need to develop mechanisms to assist children to overcome the obstacles they encounter in the actual reading exercise. This role can be filled by trained teacher-librarians. Trained teacher-librarians can play the role of reading specialists who will assist weaker readers with their reading (Parrott and Keith, 2015).

Extant literature documents a number of challenges facing children's libraries. For instance, a study conducted by Goodman (2008) in Ghana and Burkina Faso indicated that whilst users were satisfied with the library, its services and the collections, they also called for the inclusion of more books and more diverse titles into the collection. Patrons in the study by Goodman also expressed concerns about the libraries' physical space that included air circulation, seating, and tables. Similarly, a study conducted by Chaputula and Mapulanga (2017) revealed that many libraries in Malawi do not provide relevant equipment, reading materials and even services appropriate to people with disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the psycholinguistic model of reading which was developed by Kenneth S. Goodman in 1967 (Paran, 1996). According to Goodman, "the skill in reading involves not greater precision, but more accurate first guesses based on better sampling techniques, greater control over language structure, broadened experiences and increased conceptual development" (Goodman, 1976, p. 7). In other words, the process of reading is essentially a

process of predicting meaning based on the reader's knowledge of oral language syntax, semantics, and phonological cues (Sheridan, 1981).

The psycholinguistic theory, according to Paran (1996), has achieved great popularity in language teaching even with the advent of interactive models. Other scholars have also used it as an anchoring model in their studies. For example, Bernhardt (2005) and Field (1984) have all based their work on this theory. This is the reason why this model was chosen as an anchoring model in this study.

Methodology

The researcher deployed a case study research design to investigate the research problem. The study was undertaken at Mzuzu University Children's Library targeting children with special needs from St John of God. The case study was deemed appropriate for this research because it enabled the researcher to examine the phenomena under investigation in-depth.

Data for the study was collected through interviews and observations. In terms of former, the researcher conducted a focus-group discussion with three (3) library staff from Mzuzu University Children's Library (1 assistant librarian and 2 library assistants; entire staffing of Library) and one teacher from St John of God in Mzuzu. Purposive sampling was used to identify the four participants to this study. Library Staff that participated in focus-group were involved either in planning or actual provision of services to the patrons hence suited for the study. Conversely, the teacher interviewed was actively involved in teaching and bringing children to the library hence better suited to provide answers that helped to address the research questions (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). Interview guides that contained open-ended questions were used in guiding the focus-group discussion and the semi-structured interview whilst tape recorders and notebooks were used to capture and record proceedings of the interviews respectively. The researcher further observed classes involving the children under study taking place in the Children's Library, and also toured the facility. Observations made were recorded using an observation protocol.

A number of methods were used to validate the data collection instruments. The interview guides and observation protocols were given out to some experienced researchers who commented on their appropriateness. Comments received from such experts, together with observations and feedback received during pilot-testing conducted at National Library Service

(Mzuzu Branch) was used in amending the instruments to enhance their effectiveness. The researcher also used member checking technique to validate the research findings. This technique is commonly used in qualitative studies, and has been described by Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.314) as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility". Member checking involves taking data, analyses, interpretations and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy of the account (Creswell, 2013). The aim is to enable participants check not only the accuracy of the findings but even the language used. Library Staff involved in focus-group and the teacher interviewed were sent analyses of their accounts for verification.

To comply with research ethics, the researcher got gate keepers' permission before entering the study site. Furthermore, the researcher solicited consent of the participants before conducting the interviews and tape-recording. The researcher personally conducted the focus-group and the interview in June 2018. The data was codified and analysed using Nvivo software.

Results and Discussion

Service Offering of the Mzuzu University Children's Library to Children with Special Needs
The study revealed that Mzuzu University Children's Library offers a number of general and specialised services to children from St John of God in Mzuzu. The service offering includes video shows, book readings, writing (coloring and drawings), storytelling sessions, and singing, among others. However, information collected from the focus-group conducted with Library Staff and the interview conducted with one of the teachers reveled that video shows that involve showing of cartoons is the most popular service offered by the Children's Library. The teacher interviewed attested to this when he said:

> *"children enjoy cartoons so much that every Wednesday [day when the children visit the Library] they keep reminding us that 'today we are going to the library' because they want to watch cartoons. In fact, whenever they arrive here the first thing they want to see is that big screen" [pointing at the television set used for showing the cartoons].*

The focus-group also revealed that children are very fascinated with cartoons. One of the library staff stated:

> *"Children become very excited when I indicate that it is time for them to watch cartoons. This is the reason why the cartoons are usually shown last because whenever they start watching, they do not want to do anything else."*

The researcher corroborated these findings when he observed one of the classes. When the cartoons were shown, children could be seen singing along the songs shown and shouting out names of the shapes and animals they could see on the television screen saying *"triangle…rectangle…zebra…lion..."*

The study discovered that the children are also trained on how they can handle books, read picture books, draw and colour picture books, among others. Library Staff indicated that the children are taught on how to handle books because some of them have challenges in book handling, especially during the early stages due to their physical and mental state. It was leant that some of the children hold the books upside down during that time.

Asked to say if they had observed any differences in terms of usage of the services in relation to age and sex, the Library Staff indicated that they had not noticed any. They stated that the only variations they had observed were in relation to the nature of disability other than age and sex. On the contrary, the teacher interviewed indicated that he had observed some differences in that the older children seemed to prefer some cartoons as opposed to the younger ones who were willing to watch any cartoons shown.

The information resources stocked by the Children's Library that caters for children with special needs are picture books, CDs, worksheets for colouring, television set, number games, and word cards, among others.

It is not surprising that children in this study were very interested in cartoons and drawings as both services are favoured by children. Similarly, Getrost and Lance (2014) have argued for the inclusion of resources popular to children such as young adult literature, comics and magazines, some of which were offered at the Mzuzu University Children's Library. In spite of this, the Children's Library did not have e-books in stock which goes against the advice of Schreurs (2013) who has advocated for their inclusion in children's libraries as the scholar's study had noted that e-books were gaining popularity amongst children.

Level of Patronage of the Children's Library by Children with Special Needs

The study findings indicate that children from St John of God in Mzuzu visit Mzuzu University Children's Library once every week (Wednesdays) for a period of one and half hours. Library Staff indicated that the children like the Library so much, and sometimes they ask for more time but the Library finds it difficult to accommodate them because of its tight schedule. The teacher interviewed substantiated these findings and stated that children are always eager to visit the Library whenever it is time to do so saying:

> *"When Wednesdays come, the children are so eager to come such that they keep reminding the driver not to go away."*

The teacher further indicated that the Library has become so popular amongst the children to the extent that most of them do not want to miss trips to the Library. It was further learnt that the institution uses trips to the Library as a way of instilling discipline amongst the children to the extent that those who misbehave are excluded from coming to the Library for some time. Children that are excluded behave well next time because they do not want to miss out coming to the Library, a development that has led to higher disciplinary standards. The teacher further indicated that the number of children wanting to come is high but they have taken deliberate steps to limit the numbers to ensure that the classes remain manageable.

Children from St John of God in Mzuzu that patronize the Children's Library comprise those with learning difficulties, cerebral palsy, wheelchair bound and other mobility challenges, behavioural challenges (mental disability), and other health challenges. Although patronage is high, it was noted through the focus-groups and interview with the teacher that the Library is not easily accessible to children on wheelchairs. The researcher also corroborated these findings when he visited the Library.

Studies conducted by Chandrasekar and Sivathaasan (2016) and Goodman (2008) have equally shown children's patronage of libraries to be high. This is in sharp contrast to people's earlier fears that the advent of video games, cartoons and other films would negatively impact on children's patronage of libraries. However, the present study differed with that conducted by Chandrasekar and Sivathaasan (2016) in Sri Lanka in terms of the services accessed from the library. Whilst children in the present study mainly visited the Library to access cartoons, those in the SriLankan study visited the library mainly to read books and other materials (78%), to

study (74%), attend children's programmes (64%) and borrow library materials (54%). The differences noted could be attributed to both nature and age of the patrons in the two studies. Patrons in the current study were children with special needs whilst those in the Sri Lankan study were those without any disability.

Impact the Library has had in nurturing a reading culture amongst children with special needs
The focus group revealed that the Children's Library has put in place a number of measures that are designed to encourage children to read. One of the measures is the integration of technology in teaching evident by the use of television in teaching. As already discussed, the measure has proven to be very popular amongst the children. Following the success of this approach, the Library staff indicated that they plan to use a lot of teaching and learning resources and vary activities to ensure that the children do not get bored. Some of the learners, despite being young also have learning difficulties that culminates in shorter attention spans. Consequently, the Library staff indicated that they plan to use a lot of learner-centred activities throughout reading lessons to ensure that the children remain active. The teacher interviewed also indicated that children are given special care to assist them gain competence in reading. Children observed not to benefit much are kept at school to help them improve.

The study has discovered that the Children's Library has had a significant impact on the reading abilities of the children. Library staff indicated that most of the children have low self-esteem at the beginning because some of them come from homes where they are neglected. However, the Library has assisted them to open up. Most of them are now able to speak freely after some time due to, among others, the interactions that take place at the Library. It was further noted that most of the children are at kindergarten level the time they start patronising the Library but they are able to proceed to primary school after sometime, a development which the Library staff indicated as a sign of progress. On his part, the teacher interviewed pointed out that the *"children are able to count, recognise animals and other characters as a result of the experiences gotten from the library."* The teacher added that the children have a short attention span but they are able to practice what they learn from the Library which he also attributed as a success story of the Library. However, he indicated that the change is gradual, a point that was reiterated by the librarians in the focus-group. According to the library staff, it takes roughly a term (3 months) to observe change in the children mainly because the nature of disabilities amongst the children is diverse. In the lesson observed, the researcher noted that children were able to handle books well, and were attentive to what was going on. Moreover,

the children were able to sing along the songs played on the television set, and able to recognise letters and characters shown which signified their growing reading abilities.

Major Challenges the Children's Library Faces in Serving Students with Special Needs

Findings made from the focus groups revealed that staffing, mobility, and lack of resources were the major challenges the Mzuzu University Children's Library faces in serving children with special needs from St John of God (Mzuzu). With regard to staffing, both the Library Staff and the teacher interviewed acknowledged that dealing with a diversified group of children with special needs requires more staff to attend to the needs of each one of them. However, the Library staff complement besides being thin, has not attained specialised training to handle children with special needs. This makes their job difficult. Findings also indicated that the Library does not have ramps to facilitate mobility of children on wheelchairs. Similarly, only few toilets have been provided, and even the available few are not tailor-made to handle children with special needs. This challenge is compounded by shortage of water at times. Furthermore, the Library does not have special chairs to handle some of the children. It was further noted that the Library has limited space. Library Staff indicated that children with special needs need more space to operate in but the Library is small. The teacher interviewed while echoing the same problem indicated that shortage of space in the Library has forced them to limit the number of children coming to the Library. Findings also indicated that the Library does not have enough and appropriate resources for teaching. In this regard, Library staff stated that some of the resources used in teaching such as tracing letters are not available in adequate numbers. The teacher interviewed also indicated that some of the materials stocked by the Library are not appropriate for the children saying:

> *"Some of the books the Library has are very advanced for the children.*
> *Standard 1,2, and 3 books are not available. There is need for English and*
> *Chichewa books, possibly on tapes and visuals."*

The researcher corroborated these findings when he visited the Library. It was noted that the Library has a lot of books but many of these are of foreign authorship. Again, most of the books in stock seemed to be suitable for children who may already be competent readers hence not suitable for starters like those covered by this study.

Challenges observed in the current study have similarly been recorded in other studies. For instance, a study conducted by Chaputula and Mapulanga (2017) revealed that many libraries in Malawi do not provide relevant equipment, reading materials and even services appropriate

to people with disabilities. Findings recorded in this study then shows that not much has been done to address the challenges reported in that study. Another study conducted by Goodman (2008) in Ghana and Burkina Faso discovered that libraries catering for children had inadequate collections, seating space and tables while the air circulation in the libraries was also rated poorly.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings indicated that Mzuzu University Children's Library has had a significant impact in nurturing a reading culture amongst children with special needs from St John of God in Mzuzu. Findings showed that create methods are used by the Library to attract children to the Library and enable them gain competence in reading. The Library also faces some challenges that include lack of teaching resources, shortage of space and staffing, among others.

In light of this, it is recommended that the Library staff should collaborate with other organisations venturing in the same field, particularly those with hands-on experience as way of overcoming some of the challenges faced. It is further recommended that the Library should source information resources not in stock through budgetary allocations and development partners.

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