

# ACQUISITION OF INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS BY STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALIST

BY

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## **Abstract**

*Information literacy recognizes the need for information to solve problems, develop ideas, and locate appropriate information that would be used by individuals. The school library media centre has an important role of disseminating information to all students regardless of their physical abilities. This article examined the acquisition of information literacy skills by disabled students and the role of the school library media specialist in ensuring that they become information literate through the teaching of information skills that would give them lifelong support in accessing information necessary for their daily living.*

*The study also examined the objectives of information literacy and the advantages of information literacy skills. The article recommended, among others, that school library media specialists should work pro-actively in partnership with special education teachers through curriculum planning and also to align the school library with educational goals as relating to information literacy skills of the disabled.*

## **Introduction**

Children with disabilities typically are at a disadvantage in information literacy exposure from the start. Children with disabilities historically have been treated differently and, for the most part, poorly by others. These individuals were often perceived as fools, monsters, subhuman, or demonically possessed (Katims, 2000). This is because parents of children with disabilities are often confronted with issues such as poor health and maladaptive behavior that preclude efforts to provide opportunities for literacy experiences (Laz, 2009). Due to enlightenment the issue of seclusion is now changing for the better in Nigeria. Parents are now sending

their children to special schools established by both government and private organizations. However, the greatest challenge for the society in the twenty-first century is keeping pace with the knowledge and technological expertise necessary for finding, applying and evaluating information. It is acknowledged that we live in an information-rich society where the amount of information and knowledge in the world is presently doubling every two years (Thornburg, 1997) School libraries can make an important contribution to the education of students with disabilities, especially in teaching them information skills that will give them lifelong support in accessing information that will enhance their daily living. When students with disabilities are included in mainstream schools, school librarians in such schools need to gather information and knowledge about the most effective ways of teaching information skills to this group of students. In other words, the school library should provide resources and services for all students including students with disabilities/special needs (Farmer, 2009).

School libraries in Nigeria can contribute immensely to the education of disabled students, and one area where there can be an impact is in the acquisition of information skills. For students with disabilities, acquiring skills that will enable them to access information that affects their lives is of the utmost importance. If students are to become information-literate, access to information skills program administered by a professional librarian is essential and disabled students should not be left out. Information literacy encompasses skills that go beyond locating information. It stresses the basic concepts of how information is organized, the formats it comes in, and the structures used by different disciplines/subjects to record and transmit information. Information literacy is also a means to express personal ideas, develop arguments, refute the opinions of others, learn new things, or simply identify the truth or factual evidence about a topic (Murray, 2008). Information literate individuals can analyze and interpret information and this ability enables them to respond critically and creatively to problems.

### **What is Information Literacy?**

There are several definitions of Information Literacy and few of them would be examined for the purpose of this study. Information Literacy is the acquisition, interpretation, and dissemination of information, focusing on effective methods for locating, evaluating, using and generating information. This includes using the Internet and other electronic information resources for research and knowledge building (Izzo, Murray and O'Hanlon, 2005). Information literacy is the ability to

access, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources. **Information literacy according to the Canadian Association of School Libraries (2007) is the ability to:**

- a. *recognize the need for information to solve problems and develop ideas; pose important questions; use a variety of information gathering strategies; locate relevant and appropriate information; assess information for quality, authority, accuracy and authenticity.*
- b. *includes the abilities to use the practical and conceptual tools of information technology to understand form, format, location and access methods, how information is situated and produced, research processes, and*
- c. *to format and publish in textual and multimedia formats and to adapt to emerging technologies.*

Webber and Johnston (2001) also propose a broad definition of Information literacy, which is the adoption of appropriate information behaviour to obtain through whatever channel or medium, information well fitted to information needs, together with critical awareness of the importance of wise and ethical use of information in society. According to Correia (2002) Information Literacy can further be divided into two sets of skills which include the following:

- a. Knowing how to locate and access information.
- b. Knowing how to understand and use information.

Bundy (2004) defines an information literate person as one who:

- recognises the need for information and determines the nature and extent of the information needed
- finds needed information effectively and efficiently
- critically evaluates information and the information seeking process
- manages information collected or generated
- applies prior and new information to construct new concepts or create new understandings and
- uses information with understanding and acknowledges cultural, ethical, economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information.

Taking a critical look at these definitions, to be an information literate citizen the disabled child or exceptional child must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate and use information effectively.

### **Objectives of information literacy**

The acquisition of information literacy, according to Queens University Library Newsletter (2009) involves mastery of information skills, the development of specific knowledge, and the adoption of certain attitudes.

#### **Knowledge objectives**

Students should understand:

1. The range of resources in various formats for information-finding purposes.
2. The selection of tools such as indexes available to access information.
3. The organization of information as it is represented in various access tools such as catalogues as well as its arrangement within specific disciplines.
4. The means by which information can be disseminated.
5. The publication sequence of information as it is transformed from idea to the published word in book format.

#### **Skills objectives**

Students would be able to:

1. recognize an information need.
2. design a research strategy that identifies the steps necessary to secure needed information.
3. evaluate information and determine its relevance in relation to a given information need.
4. use computerized information tools to locate information.
5. summarize and analyze essential information from pertinent resources.

#### **Attitudinal objectives**

Students would appreciate that:

1. An information search takes time and requires persistence.
2. Self-confidence in finding information increases with practice.
3. The information search process is learned gradually over an extended period of time just as the content of any subject area is mastered.
4. Careful scrutiny of information-finding tools and resulting resources is essential to a successful search.
5. The information search process is an evolutionary process that transforms over the course of investigation as new information is acquired.

### **Who are Students with Disabilities?**

Farmer (2009) defines a child with a disability as one:

- (i) With mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and
- (ii) Who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

These related services include libraries and media resources centers. The integration and inclusion of the disabled child/student in the Nigerian school system means that more students with disabilities are attending mainstream schools. Some of these students are readily accepted while others may suffer rejection from their classmates, their teachers or the parents of their classmates. Students with disabilities may lack social skills and/or academic skills and it is vital that their self-esteem and confidence is established and maintained. The Nigerian School Library Media Centre (SLMC) should be an arena in which students have the opportunity to interact independently without the constraints of a classroom.

### **Acquisition of information literacy skills by the disabled child**

There have been tremendous changes in the philosophy and practices associated with the education of students who are disabled during the last few decades in Nigeria. Disabled children had few opportunities for academic success in the regular classrooms many years ago, but they can now attain their formal education in both private and public schools. Limited opportunities for educational programming for children with disabilities have dramatically expanded with the provision of supports which allow these children to attend public schools with their age-appropriate peers. (MacCuspie, 2002).

For students with disabilities, the opportunity to become information literate offers a lifelong tool which can encourage the building of self-esteem and independence. Information skills in classes or lessons in the library often make use of peer tutoring and co-operative learning which have been found to benefit many children with learning disabilities (Farmer, 2009). Nigerian School Library Media Specialists (SLMS) should work closely with special education teachers in planning content, adapting worksheets and other materials to suit individual student's needs. Where possible, SLMS should offer one to one instruction to students. During library lessons, the SLMS could leave the students to manage on

their own, this would also promote independence. On the other hand, an aide might be indispensable in the case of a student with a considerable learning disability in a mainstream class. Whatever method was used, these students would experience success in learning information literacy skills (Murray, 1999).

The term information literacy (IL) refers to the broad set of skills and understandings that enable a person to recognize an information need, to decide which resources will best answer that need, to use the resources effectively, and to evaluate the information they find (Lamond and White, 2008).

Advantages of information literacy skills for the disabled are:

- improvement in academic performance and classroom behaviour, as well as increased motivation and more positive self-concept;
- changes in the way students with disabilities are perceived by their peers; since they can achieve more on their own, they would be perceived to be more capable.

#### **The role of the school media specialists in acquisition of information literacy skills**

Research (Murray, 1999; Farner, 2009) has shown that the attitude of teachers, school library media specialists and other staff to students with disabilities could influence the attitude of other students.

- a. The first step to be taken to ensure that the library appears to be welcoming to students with disabilities is to consider the attitudes of all the library staff to disability [Murray, 1999]. Although some students would find it difficult to use the school library without the support of an aide, others find it as one place where they can manage independently, because the library staff are there to assist them, just as they are for any other student.
- b. School library media centres should allow students with disabilities to pair up with other colleagues to use the library or read together.
- c. In ensuring that the library has a welcoming environment, physical accessibility such as ramps is essential. At least one enquiry terminal at wheelchair height should be constructed and ensuring that there is sufficient space between shelving for wheelchairs to be manoeuvred. Many students who used wheelchairs became very frustrated at the barriers they encountered in libraries.

Confidence in using the school library is an important factor which can then lead to frequent library use and this enhances acquisition of information skills. Acquiring information literacy skills by the disabled students is not entirely different from that of a normal child; the difference is that their disabilities should be taken into consideration. Special education materials should be included in the SLMC, for example acquisition of large print materials, audio-books and Braille for the visually impaired and computers for hearing impaired students. The role of the school library media specialist in information literacy according to Uoro and Usanga (2007) also includes:

- a. Inviting authors and subject specialists for lecture and informal talks.
- b. Organizing educative recreational film shows and radio book talks. Children and youths will be directed toward continuous and lifelong learning.
- c. Display of books and posters to reflect current events, fellow students' creative works, and the works of children from other parts of the world. These types of activities will create awareness and curiosity. Works of disabled students from other places should also be displayed where available.
- d. Friends of the library club: The activities of these clubs include reading together with children and helping them prepare library guides, simple teaching aids, and reading competition. Excursions to other schools and libraries are also beneficial.
- e. School library magazines: Articles for the magazine should be from the school children, to help develop writing skills.
- f. Other activities include story hours, book talks, and the like. These activities, when well planned, provide much scope for advising and guiding children in their reading and for developing the habit of lifelong learning.

Farmer [2009] identified four categories of library services that need to be addressed while supporting information literacy skills for students with disabilities. SLMC/SLMS in Nigeria should take all these into consideration:

- 1) **Policies and Procedures.** School library policies must comply with government laws and regulations as regard special students. School library media specialists also need to make sure that the entire school community, particularly families with affected students, know how the library implements those policies through appropriate accommodations. Sample policies include

selection policies that address needs of students with special needs, differentiated circulation periods, differentiated class management procedures, and Web page development.

- 2) **Access to facilities and equipment.** Shelving heights, aisle widths, traffic flow, signage, furniture, and lighting all need to accommodate students with physical challenges. Adaptive technologies need to be available so all students can have physical access to information, e.g., larger monitors for computers, keyboards with track balls, optical scanners, and reading software.
- 3) **Specific services.** Information needs to be available in a variety of formats, such as Braille, audio, captioned videos, and electronic files. Student-specific services may also be called for, such as extended lending periods, delivery of materials to students' homes, customized picture books (e.g. texturized), customized teaching aids (e.g., task cards), and individual instruction.
- 4) **Staff development.** Library staff need training to enable them to interact successfully with students with special needs. Some training could be general and other trainings could be disability-specific e.g. autism or vision impairment and student-specific, based on each student's individual education plan.

The following measures should also be taken by the SLMS in ensuring that the disabled child becomes information literate:

1. Consulting with special educators to learn about students with disabilities and their challenges. Do these students use the library? Why or why not?
2. Seeking out colleagues or members of the school community with assistive technology expertise. There is a need to also find out resources and services existing in the school and these could be used for disabled students.
3. Touring the library to identify barriers that could hinder the disabled students from using the library and assessing the variety resources available for students with diverse needs.
4. Allocating professional development time for learning information literacy skills and special education. The SLMS should visit other libraries, schools and suppliers, meet with specialists and attend conferences to gain more knowledge.
5. Forming a focus group to include colleagues who share an interest in information literacy skills.

6. Assessing the need for funding and identifying budget and grant options.
7. There is need to ask vendors to provide trial products that could enhance information literacy skills.
8. Publicizing library acquisitions that could be of use to disabled students. The school community should be informed of the SLMC's progress in newsletters, staff meetings and other announcements.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, School Library Media Centres must not discriminate against students with disabilities and should ensure that they have equal access to library resources. By taking this into consideration, the disabled student in Nigeria would have access to services such as extended loan periods, waived late fines, extended reserve periods, library cards for proxies, books by mail, reference services by fax or email, home delivery service, remote access to the OPAC, remote electronic access to library resources, volunteer readers in the library, volunteer technology assistants in the library, and radio reading services. The school library collections should also include materials with accurate and up-to-date information on the spectrum of disabilities, disability issues, and services for people with disabilities, their families, and other concerned persons. With all these in place the disabled student in Nigeria would acquire information literacy skills like their other colleagues.

School Library Media Specialists should work pro-actively in partnership with special education teachers through curriculum planning and also to align the school library with the educational purpose as relating to information literacy skills of the disabled. The SLMS should also create partnerships in the wider community with other school libraries, public libraries, booksellers, community and voluntary groups in the education of the disabled in Nigeria. The SLMS should understand the reading cultures of the students with disabilities and ensure that library services could meet and support their information needs. Policy makers in the educational sector in Nigeria should ensure that SLMS who are professionally trained in librarianship should also undertake training in teaching, learning, child development and special education while library use education should be included in Nigerian teacher training curriculum.

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