Information accessibility for students with disabilities: An exploratory study of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan is signatory to the 'Convention on the Right of Person with Disabilities' which reiterates upon equal right of information accessibility. This exploratory study is aimed to investigate the actual situation of information accessibility for students with disabilities (SWDs) in Lahore city of Pakistan. It involves qualitative data gathering techniques using interviews involving six SWDs and reality verifying observations of their school and college library services. Findings indicate that: (a) SWDs rely on only family members and teachers for support in accessing information; (b) both schools and colleges' library services hardly provide required information services to the SWDs. Desired steps have been recommended to enhance information accessibility for SWDs. It is recommended that SWDs be provided with a library is located at accessible places, and equipped with trained staff, as well as reading materials in suitable alternative formats. This study is an effort for generating awareness among all stakeholders providing SWDs for equal information accessibility, such as the government, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions and Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals not only in Pakistan but also in other South Asia countries experiencing similar conditions of equality issues in information services.

Keywords: Information Accessibility; Equality; Diversity; Students with Disabilities; Inclusion in Libraries.

INTRODUCTION

Accessibility to information has been declared a fundamental right of every member of the society, regardless of their ethnicity, creed, religion and physical condition. The United Nation Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression reported that "everyone has the right to seek, receive and impart information and that this imposes a positive obligation on States to ensure access to information" (Mendel 2000, p.2).

As such, persons with disability (PWDs) are also a part of our society, and they possess an equal right to access information. The social model defines disability as "adaptability difficulty within the social environment" and it "typically restricts the individual participation due to society constraints" (Hosking 2006, p. 229; Newton, Ormerod and Thomas 2007, p. 611). This study extends this definition to the context of LIS services and defines PWDs as the individuals who possess certain 'adaptability' difficulty in accessing the information within the library environment.

The World Health Organization (2007) reported that millions of families in developing countries are affected due to disability of a family member. The Helping Hand for Relief & Development, an international non-governmental organization (NGO) reported that more

than 5.035 million people in Pakistan are living their lives with various disabilities. The Punjab province alone constitutes 55.9% share of total disabled population and this figure is more than the combined population of Multan, Hyderabad and Peshawar (Helping Hand for Relief & Development 2012). It reported that there are a total of 2,816,795 persons with disabilities in Punjab and 142,421 are in Lahore (p. 22). This statistics clearly show that the number of PWDs is large enough to take serious steps for fulfillment of their needs.

Pakistan is also a signatory to the Convention on the Right of Person with disabilities. Pakistan signed on convention on the right of person with disability (CRPD) in 2008, which was finally confirmed and ratified in 2011. Various Articles of this convention clearly mandate the government to provide information accessibility to the PWDs. For example Article 9 states, "States Parties shall also take appropriate measures to promote other appropriate forms of assistance and support to persons with disabilities to ensure their access to information" (United Nation/ Division for Social Policy and Development Organization 2006, p.75).

There is a lack of awareness about the issues of disability in developing countries in general. PWDs face inequality issues in all walks of life, and they also face discrimination with regards to getting information. The Government of Punjab has established two hundred and sixty four special education institutions in the last decade. Hundreds of special schools, centers and colleges in Punjab are providing education facility to twenty five thousand SWDs. Although the Government is seriously working to educate PWDs but it is assumed that PWDs are not being provided enough facilities for an access to information as much as to a normal student or person in our country. It is assumed that even library professionals are also not familiar with providing an equal access opportunity to information services for the PWDs. Even The PWDs are often unaware of their own rights as they lack information in this regard.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is important for PWDs to have an equal access to information. Research conducted by Office for Disability Issues (2008) in the United Kingdom for developing a toolkit for providing better information to PWDs reported that inadequate information can be a barrier in their life for availing the services they need, which would ultimately affect their chances to grow well. Many professionals talk about providing better information accessibility to the society but few is working for a segment of society who is living with disability. Katsui (2005) expressed that from the past to the present time, disabled people are facing discrimination and biases of society especially in education, employment and family life. As a result, they become isolated in their home and consider their challenges as a natural phenomenon due to their impairment. Society ignores the voices of this community due to which disabled people internalize a negative image. Singh and Moirangthem (2010) realized that people with visual impairment and not being able to read or write at the same level as everybody else, is a serious disadvantage in the knowledge society. The researchers who investigated the information needs and seeking behavior of visually-impaired persons emphasized the importance of making information accessible for this disadvantaged group.

The American Library Association (ALA), through its divisions, offices and units and through collaborations with outside associations and agencies is dedicated to eradicate inequities

and improving attitudes toward services and opportunities for people with disabilities. It recognized:

> *People with disabilities are a large and neglected minority in the community and are severely underrepresented in the library profession. Disabilities cause many personal challenges. In addition, many people with disabilities face economic inequity, illiteracy, cultural isolation, and discrimination in education, employment and the broad range of societal activities. Libraries play a catalytic role in the lives of people with disabilities by facilitating their full participation in society. Libraries should use strategies based upon the principles of universal design to ensure that library policy, resource and services meet the needs of all people.* (Americans Library Association 2001).

It is realized that equitable access to the information is a concept that provides benefit for both students with disabilities and without disabilities. Some researchers have discussed the importance of academic libraries assisting students with disabilities (SWDs) with reference services and recommended that staff's attitudinal training, equipment training and service training is essential for providing equitable access of information to SWDs (Carter 2004; Miller-Gattenby and Chittenden 2000). However, Greens (2009), who examined cases of library services on the type and level of support offered to disabled users, found that only 30% of the surveyed libraries in Valdosta, a county of Georgia, offered special services and technologies for individuals with disabilities. He provided recommendations to librarians on how to improve accessibility and address barriers to service for individual with disability, so that they can concentrate on their information need without any distraction due to disability.

Challenges to the implementation of library services for the disabled have been identified through a few studies. Todaro (2005) surveyed 20 different libraries in Argentina that provide services for the visually impaired and physically handicapped people and concluded that these libraries are not in a position to provide the best library services to these disadvantage groups. It was seen that there are still many things to improve to implement UNESCO's manifesto 1994 for public libraries that clearly emphasized on the access to information for people with disabilities. Epp (2006) explored the challenges in providing the alternate format of information to the individuals with disabilities, which include "training attitudes, organizational isolation, diversity of alternate formats, non-adherence to standards, inaccessible online services, an uncooperative publishing industry, inconsistent and inadequate access to equipment (p.411). Abrizah and Ahmad (2010) identified six barriers in the provision of inclusive school libraries, namely physical, resources, curriculum, policy, unintentional and intentional attitudinal barrier. They emphasized on the enhanced communication and cooperation between school librarians and special education teachers for improving information accessibility through the inclusive library system.

Hunt et.al (2004) highlighted collaboration between teachers and special educators as the cornerstone to effective high quality inclusion. Bishop and Rhind (2011) identified the important factors under four major themes: the student's attitude (i.e. self-identity, positive aspects of being visually impaired engagement with support), institutional provision (i.e. campus navigability, central services support, school-level support), external support (i.e. travelling to and from campus, external financial support) and others' attitudes (i.e. parental attitudes, staff attitudes). They suggested working to overcome these barriers to facilitate the visually impaired students as well other students with various disabilities. Bodaghi and Zainab (2013) studied on the perceptions and experiences

of visually impaired person with study carrels located in the university library. They pointed out the importance of carrels in libraries in their research. The visually impaired felt for carrels as a protected, safe, comforted, convenient place which ultimately transmits a positive attitude for the libraries. It triggers a sense of belonging and considers themselves as respected and accepted members of society.

A few studies have been conducted on various issues of PWDs in Pakistan. Haider (2008) studied the challenges faced by PWDs in getting the higher education in Pakistan and in South Asian developing countries. Ahmed, Khan and Nasem (2011) analyzed the policies of the government and evaluated the impacts of these policies on the persons with disabilities. Bakhsh and Mehmood (2012) evaluated the web sites of the central government in Pakistan including all ministries and divisions using accessibility evaluation tools based on World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) web accessibility standards. The results showed that most of the web sites are not developed according to the accessibility standards for disabled persons.

A review of literature published in Pakistan presents a very dismal state of accessibility studies on issues of PWDs. No study regarding their information needs has been reported in the local literature; moreover no study has been done regarding information accessibility in Pakistan, either by LIS professionals or by the Special Education experts. The literature does not show any indication for an inclusion of PWDs in this information society. It demands special attention from the government, NGOs, educators, and LIS professionals to explore at place, the issues and barriers in this regard. It is time to explore the information needs of PWDs and their perception about libraries as the first step. It is evident from the available statistics that 80% of population with disability of whole world belongs to developing countries of Asia (Katsui 2005), thus the work will also be useful for other developing countries with similar situations. This study hopefully could play a role in the creation of awareness, and inform the government and library professionals for future planning and decision making in rendering information services to the disadvantaged groups.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of SWDs in relation to information accessibility and the status of library services for them. The objectives of this study are threefold:

a) To explore the existing facilities of information access to the students with disabilities;

b) To identify the challenges faced by the students with disabilities in getting information;

c) To identify the challenges faced by the library administration in providing access to information to the students with disabilities

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative data gathering techniques to understand the experiences of SWDs in relation to information accessibility and the status of library services for them. Using exploratory research design, the focus of this study was the everyday experiences

and practices of SWDs to get access to information. The viewpoints of the library administration and staff were also sought to explore the challenges faced in the provision of library services to the SWDs. The fieldwork for this study was conducted at the Special Education School and College campuses established under the Government of Punjab in Lahore city, simply due to the fact that the main administrative setup of Special Education Department of Punjab is located in Lahore. It is a capital city of Punjab and a good number of special schools and colleges have been established in this city. Therefore, schools and colleges of Lahore were selected by assuming that nearly same or even worse situation may exist in other institutions of Punjab. A total of six research settings, comprising three schools and three colleges with a particular type of disability were purposively sampled.

Participants

In general, there are four major types of disability: physical, visual and hearing impaired, and intellectual or emotionally challenged. This research has confined the SWDs as participants to the first three types of disability: visual, hearing, physically impaired. Intellectual or emotionally challenged students are excluded because they are generally assumed as uneducable, i.e. incapable of being educated and in Pakistan, after the primary level education, the government places no requirement on schools and other learning institutions to educate those deemed to be uneducable.

In this study participants were students and they receive special education, hence they belonged to families who are positive thinking and have awareness that their disabled children should be granted access to education and services that they would need. This study involved a total of six SWDs, comprising three school students and three college students who are respectively hearing impaired, visually impaired and physically disabled. The participants comprised both males and females, and the school students were between 13 to 16 years old, and the college students were between 17 to 20 years. The SWDS were purposively sampled as they were willing to participate in the study, and were motivated people who had an urge for their self-development in the life. The Head of Special Education Institution and a library staff were also approached in this study to seek their viewpoints on the challenges faced by them regarding library service provision and information accessibility to the SWDs.

Data Collection

The fieldwork took about three weeks in December 2013. The first author (indicated as the researcher in subsequent statements) personally visited the schools and colleges and interviewed the participants. Face to face semi- structured interviews were conducted and each interview session ranged between 20 to 60 minutes. Interviews were video-taped by taking a prior permission from the participants and administrators of the institutions involved. Important notes were also written down on field notebook simultaneously. The heads of the institutions sampled further helped the researcher to meet the SWDs and facilitated the data collection. The researcher conducted interviews with hearing impaired participants with the help of an interpreter who knew the standard sign language, provided by the Special Education Department. The interpreter was an experienced teacher in a local school for students with hearing impairment. The researcher asked the hearing impaired students questions, of which the interpreter converted the interview questions into sign languages and clearly conveyed them to the participants. The participants then responded in signs and the interpreter conveyed to the researcher their answers in the English language. The interpreter had also assisted the researcher to interpret different expressions for useful observation in the local context. The social model of disability was used as theoretical instrument for this study. Advocacy or emancipatory worldview was kept in mind in the conduct of this research. Disability studies especially

highlight the creation of useful data with an emancipator approach for changing the policy and practice to meet the needs of disabled people (Barnes 2003).

Data were also gathered using observation to examine the existing facilities for information accessibility; the physical condition and availability or non-availability of a library in the school and college campuses were specifically noted. The observations made also helped to gain an ample insight of the libraries, along with the attitude of people managing the library, such as the head of Institutions and library staff. Observations were also made to know how the teachers, heads and even disabled peers interact with each other. The recorded events of fieldwork in the natural setting like library and classrooms were transcribed as supplementary data drawn by observation, and were documented as field notes mostly on the same day of the interviews. The researcher conducted unstructured observations by taking the position of an unobtrusive observer.

Data collection and analysis were carried out on the same days. Major themes were separated out for analysis of recorded data from the transcribed materials. For handling the credibility of data and interpretation, the transcribed materials with their analysis were provided to the participants, who then verified the correctness and accuracy of interpretations. Two teachers also helped examined the transcription and analyses. In this way member checking and external assessment on validity were conducted.

Ethical Issues

The data collection regarding disabled people in the form of interviews and observation usually generates specific ethical issues. The researcher took the consent of each participant before conducting the interview. A consent form was filled up by the participant. For the visually impaired, the informed consent form was completed by a sighted person on the student's behalf. After acquiring the consent, a copy of form was given to the participant. In addition to filling the consent form, actual names of participants and institutions were not mentioned while reporting the study. Recordings of interviews had also been kept confidential.

A permission to conduct the study was obtained from the higher authority i.e. the Secretary of Special Education. The first author remained as a librarian in one of teachers' training college at the Special Government Department from April 2011 to September 2013 and this had facilitated her to approach the SWDs and administrative staff of Special Education Department.

FINDINGS

The Existing Facilities of Information Access to SWDs

SWDs in this study conveyed that their family members and teachers facilitate them in getting the information they need. A school student with visual impairment (Female, 14 years old) expressed: *My family and teachers are the major source of information for me. They always try to give the information I desire.*

This is echoed by school and college students with physical disability:

Our family member, peers and teachers assist us to get information (Male, 18 years old).

My parents and teacher helped me a lot, they provide information, but now I also use computer and internet to get information which is needed for my studies (Male, 15 years old).

Students with hearing impairment face more problems in getting information compared to those students with physical disability in a limb, due to the former's deafness and dumbness. A school student with hearing impairment (Male, 16 years old) said: *Teacher better understand the information I want, usually other people do not understand our questions* [the sign languages]*, unless we give them in writing, eventually we feel more comfortable to share information among our own community, because they understand. At times, I use the computer.*

Findings indicate the followings:
a)   It appears that their family members and teachers are main source of information.
b)   SWDs that have access to the computers and Internet also use them to access information.
c)   Deaf students rely more on their own teachers and deaf peers, as they feel more comfortable to communicate with them and sharing information.

Challenges in Accessing Information

Generally a library plays a pivotal role in the provision of access to information. The SWDs from schools expressed their wish to have access to library resources and services, similar to those enjoyed by the normal students. SWD who is visually impaired (Female, 14 years old) voiced: *I have not heard yet that there is this library which meets our information needs as it should be. Neither a school nor a public library provides information accessibility to us. I know there is only one library in Islamabad that may provide audio materials for the blind… but that is out of reach for us.*

Other SWD participants also indicated the need for a library and the absence of suitable library resources and services for them: A school student with physical disability (Male, 15 years old) said: *We have heard that there is a library having many books but it remains locked and we have no access to the information even if we use the library.*

A school student with hearing impairment (Male, 16 years old) frankly stated: *There is no library for us in our school.*

An SWD who is visually impaired (Female, 14 years old) said: *The librarian in charge gives us a book on submitting an application request, however, he is already burdened with multiple assignments, and otherwise he would help us.*

Observations of the school and college libraries where the SWDs in this study patronize at revealed that there was an absence of special mechanism used to facilitate information access to the disabled students. Only textbooks and the Holy Quran in Braille format were available in school and college libraries for students with visual impairment. Library services were being provided in college libraries, in a manner which were similarly adopted in providing information to the normal students in regular colleges.

An observation at the school where a visually impaired participant went to also indicated that a staff room was being used as a library. It was a room having some cupboards and six wooden shelves with glass doors placed against the walls. The shelves kept books and the

Holy Quran in Braille. Some audio cassettes were also there, but they seemed old and nonfunctional. The room, to which physically disabled school students were assuming a library, was having books but that room remained locked and was not accessible for the students.

The college for the blind, college for deaf and college for physically disabled students were situated in one big premise. The three colleges had one common library, which was a room situated on the ground floor. The library had limited number of books in Braille, and most books were available in print format only. Audio cassettes were also housed there, but in a very small quantity. No specific library catalogue was available in any format. Only a listing of books was available, and books were placed in cupboards arranged by subject. There were no special desks or tables and chairs customized according to the need of physically disabled students. The physically disabled students were studying on their own wheel chairs. The height of the furniture and shelves in the library was similar to those used for normal students. The library staff in charge had the idea of sign language as he had been working in the institution for the last few years. However, he was also not a professional librarian.

While the deaf students face language and communication barriers in obtaining information, the physically disabled and visually impaired students, who generally required more environmental-friendly facilities, face physical barriers. A college student with physical disability (Female, 18 years old) stated: *Lack of ramps, lift (elevator), and special rest rooms are huddles in mobility and ultimately deter the way of obtaining information from libraries.* The visually impaired students on the other hand required information sources in special format such as books in Braille and audio. The unavailability of reading materials in their accessible form for the visually impaired required them to trust or be dependent on others in accessing the information. One visually impaired college student (Female, 18 years old) expressed her feelings: *We are not able to read information on sign boards or newspapers, except for our syllabus texts or few other books, there is no other resource available in accessible format for us. We face a lot of problems when we have to go from one place to another.* As such, mobility issue may ultimately restrict information accessibility in the long run.

This study has also identified attitudinal barriers that deter information accessibility among the SWDs. Attitudinal barriers prohibit disabled students even to go out from their home. Visually impaired students at school and college level at times experience negative remarks from others in obtaining information, except from their own family and teachers. One visually impaired college student (Female, 18 years old) confessed facing such comments like: *Look how awful is she. She has no sights; probably it is a cause of the parents' sin. This is a shame.*

The deaf are severely affected by the attitudes of the society. A participant with hearing impairment expressed (Male, 16 years old): *they don't bother to tell us any information; they reject our questions by showing their inability to understand; only our own community, our parents and teacher understand and support us.*

It seems that the physically disabled students face less attitudinal barriers from the society, as they are able to communicate with people in a normal way, and are in a better position to express the information they required with everyone.

Challenges faced by Library Staff and Administration

To address the third research objective, interviews were conducted with the people in charge of the library for both educational institutions sampled, i.e. the school and the college. The school library staff understands the specific information needs of the SWDs but expressed the following challenges: *I also wanted to equip the library according to the needs of these special students, but the administration does not take interest, and lack of funds is a barrier to equip this place accordingly.* (Library Staff, School).

The head of the college administration explained the barriers in establishing a proper library setup suitable for SWDs in this manner: *The vacancy for the librarian post has not been filled up; the government has not sent any librarian for this post. The library staff is also not motivated to do the work here. But I think we are providing a library which is sufficient to meet the needs of the disabled students.* (Head, College Administration).

By taking both views, the challenges faced may be interpreted in the following ways: (a) lack of resources and support by the institutional administration may deter the motivation of the library staff to provide library sources and services for the disadvantaged group; (b) absence of a professional librarian to properly plan library sources and services for the disadvantaged group; (c) the difficulty in getting resources from the government to support information services for the disadvantaged group.

Taking both the remarks that *"the existing library infrastructure in our campus is sufficient to meet their (SWDs) needs"* (Head, College Administration), and the researchers' observation that the physical state of libraries clearly indicated that either there was no set up for library or just in a condition which was more suitable for normal students, there was clearly a contradiction between this interview finding and the observation made by the researcher, who is a professional and researcher in information services for SWDs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has focused on the issue of information accessibility among SWDS who were purposively sampled in Lahore Pakistan, and their experiences clearly describe that they do not have equal access to reading materials and other library sources and services. The only major support and sources of information comes from their family members and teachers. There has been lack of mechanism to implement the requirement of 'Convention on the Right of Person with Disabilities' in the provision of information access to this disadvantaged group. It is important to reiterate that Pakistan is signatory to this Convention, which clearly stated that there must be an equal opportunity for PWDs to have access to information. People who cannot use information sources due to a visual, physical, neurological, or perceptual disability need libraries to provide the equitable access.

Although the government is trying to implement an inclusive education system for making PWDs more confident and useful citizens, the voices regarding their information needs are not heard. The special education institutions on the other hand do not formalised the support of the library in the formal education for SWDs. Although these school and college do have a library space, but they do not have a special library for SWDs with reasonable sources and services that can support their information needs. It was concluded that the libraries are not in a position to provide a good library service for SWDs: it was seen that there are still many things to correct and improve. The library too had more work to do

and concerns surrounding professional training and funding were raised as possible problems that could prevent the successful implementation of the Convention. Figure 1 summarizes findings from this study that reveals the stakeholders involved, and the corresponding attitudinal or behavioural issues that need to be addressed to make library services accessible to SWDs in order to comply with the Convention.
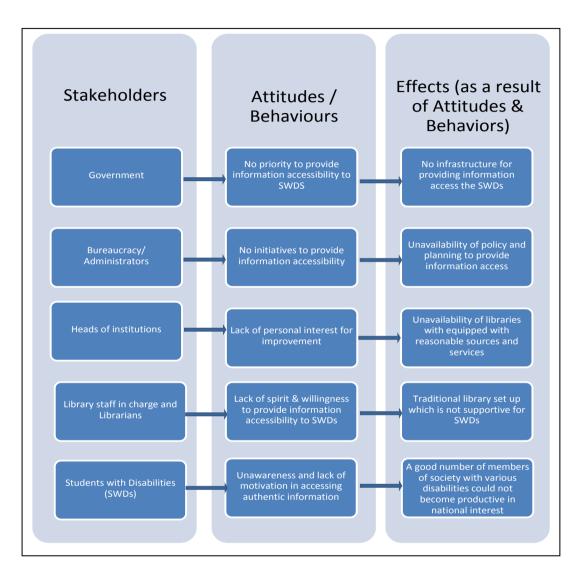

Figure 1: Stakeholders' Attitudinal or Behavioural Issues that need to be addressed **to** Make Library Services Accessible to SWDs

This study has made the following recommendations to improve the legal framework, develop sharing library communities, and apply universal design principles in library services to facilitate information accessibility to PWDs:

a) The government should develop an information infrastructure which fully supports the SWDs' information needs.

b) Heads of institution should develop strategic partnerships, improved library policy, and cooperative agreements to fulfill the promise of equitable access to information sources and services to both normal and SWDs.

c) The library must be accessible by physically disabled students and should be on the ground floor. Architectural barriers to the library must be removed as much as possible.

d) A new library building must be constructed by keeping in view the universally accessible model.

e) Librarian and library staff must be trained sufficiently and professionally to deal with SWDs. They must have a basic knowledge of sign language and using Braille.

f) A subject related to the information needs and behavior of the disadvantaged group who need to have a different handling of services must also be introduced in the Library & information Science curriculum, so that awareness can be heightened among information professionals to continue being helpful and liaise with other colleges and relevant organizations to establish methods of best practice for the library.

g) The electronic mass media should come forward for working on the attitudes of society towards PWDs and the challenges caused to PWDs such as organizational isolation, an uncooperative community, non-adherence to information standards, inaccessible information services, inconsistent access to equipment, and inadequate training.

This small scale study is an attempt to create awareness on the issue of information access among PWDs so that these issues could be heard on important platforms and reach the stakeholders. Proper handling of such issues regarding information accessibility would be a challenge for LIS professionals. Serious efforts must be done by the government, information service organizations, non-governmental organizations and library professionals for this disadvantaged group because an actual statistic value for disabilities is still hidden and it is an underestimated value. Hence, more studies should be done by LIS professionals, so that libraries could be developed which could provide better collection in their accessible format. Moreover, equitable information services could be offered to this group of society, which do not have a solution in the commercial information market services.

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