

My carrel, my second home: sense of belonging amongst the visually impaired students

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ABSTRACT

Libraries handle issues regarding their disable users in a social context. Public and academic libraries aim to remove barriers, which hamper disabled users from participating in library activities and using library services. This paper explores the visually impaired students' sense of belonging in a university library setting. The focus is on finding out the student's attitudes towards the study carrels provided for their use at a university library. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussion with five female and thirteen male students. Their ages are between 20 and 37 years old. The findings highlight the importance of the carrels to the visually handicapped, who regard the carrels as their second home. The students expressed their appreciation and were happy that they have been given a special place. The carrels invoked a sense of belonging to the library as they could study and do their assignments in a familiar and save place. They could also use it as a social place to meet student volunteers who reads to them or record their readings as well confer and discuss with their peers in the their carrels, not causing distractions to other students using the library. The findings hope to increase awareness to libraries of the need to design for such space for the disabled users.

Keywords: Visually handicapped; Library services to special groups; Sense of belonging in libraries; Inclusion policy in libraries

INTRODUCTION

According to the last report of the World Health Organization, between five hundred and six hundred million people in the world suffer from at least one type of disability (World Health Organization, 2005). The population of disabled people in Malaysia, based on numbers from the Social Welfare Department in 2010, is around 299,305. This is about 1% of total population in 2010 and it was based on disabled voluntary registration, which means that this number may not be the real population.

Disability is a concept with variant definitions. A medical definition describes disability as an individual with medical limitations, while a social model considers disability as a concept created by societies based on the inappropriate environment in fulfilling an individual's needs. The field of library and information science (LIS) seems to favor the social model and emphasized on removing barriers and creating an accessible environment to disable users. This is sometimes referred to as the library's inclusive policy, which focuses on providing a conducive environment for their disabled users. The term social inclusion

connotes a wider context. In brief, social inclusion is a process in providing opportunities for disabled individuals to establish or re-establish their social connectedness through increasing their access to social activities and sources in all aspects. Social inclusion happens when people connect, have relationships or communicate with other peers or individuals in that community. One of the fundamental factors in creating such a connectedness is through increasing users sense of belonging. In this study we attempt to address the sense of belonging to the library as expressed by the visually impaired students at the University of Malaya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The initial part of this section considers the origin of the social model of disability. This is followed by an explanation of the two main barriers for the disabled in LIS (physical accessibility and attitudes), highlighting the difference between the two concepts, integration and social inclusion then explains the meaning of sense of belonging and Malaysian literature on the disabled in LIS. Disabled sociologists like Oliver (1990) and Finkelstein (1980) introduced the social model of disability to challenge the restrictive medical model. The social model noted that people are not disabled just because of their psychosocial or physical limitation but are limited by the inappropriate environments which have been designed by normal people. The main subject of this model is individuals' difficulties in their daily life, which limit their participation in a community. Presenting social models caused international or national organizations to legislate guidelines, like the American Disability Act (2005) and the Disability Discrimination Act (2006).

A glimpse into LIS literature indicates that the current discussion is based on the social model of disability. The aim of public and academic libraries is to remove barriers, which hamper disabled users from participating in library activities and using library services. Disability occurred because of the limiting environment in libraries. Libraries as part of an environment in society have to give the disabled a chance to find their own place within the library environments. Library environments consist of different dimensions such as physical, social, economic and political, which, interchangeably affects each other. Physical and attitudinal barriers are the two most important dimensions, which are considered in LIS literature as barriers for inclusion of disabled users in libraries.

LIBRARY BUILDING ACCESSIBILITY

The first and main barrier noted is the physical dimension encountered by disabled users. Deason (1992), in a study on rural libraries in India, declared that only 56% of libraries under study were wheelchair friendly. Chew and Higgins (2000) figured out while disabled users have the same information needs in comparison with normal users, they lack transportation system or library building accessibility which prevents their access to the library. McCaskill and Goulding (2001) compared the public library compliance with UK Disability Discrimination Act and found that physical accessibility plays an important role in motivating the disabled to come to the library. Todaro (2005) examined the current situation of public libraries in Argentina based on the guidelines formulated by the American Library Association in providing appropriate environment for visually impaired users. He declared that a third of library buildings in Argentina were exclusive for the disabled as most libraries were victims of low budgets. Bonnici et al (2009) indicate the

important role of budget in enabling libraries to provide accessible and relevant materials for the disabled in libraries. Koulikourdi(2008) considered elevators, ramps, accessible workstations and signage as main criteria for increasing library accessibility in Greece.

LIBRARIAN ATTITUDES, AWARENESS AND TRAINING

Vitzansky(1994) emphasized the importance of librarians' positive attitudes in realizing the provision of appropriate services for visually impaired users in libraries. He also outlined the role of front line librarians and their awareness, which affects their attitude and consequently the successful provision of a comfortable atmosphere for disabled users in academic libraries. McCaskill and Goulding(2001) considered librarians' negative attitudes as one of the barriers, which can be overcome through increased awareness trainings on the needs of disabled users. Birdi(2008) had emphasized that librarian's attitudes and awareness was key in the successful design and provision of services for disabled users. Wallis (2005) noted the increased awareness and training of web site designer's about library users disabilities, could results in the incorporation of suitable features into their website designs. Todaro(2005) pointed out that staff in public libraries in Argentina were not graduates in LIS and the lack of their awareness toward the disabled makes them unable to consider the disabled needs when planning services. Forest (2006) noted that according to the Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), by providing training session for librarians, increasing their awareness about disabled users and the assistive technologies they use, libraries can overcome the attitudinal barrier in libraries in order to provide better quality services or facilities. Bonnici et al (2009) pointed out that a lack of awareness about special users and insufficient content in LIS school's curriculum are two limiting factors in providing appropriate services for disabled users. Koulikourdi(2008), in his survey of Greek libraries, noted that the lack of legislation as the first barrier in providing suitable services for disabled users, as well as the lack of statistics about disable users, lack of librarian's awareness and inadequate budget. Koulikourdi demonstrated that only 18.18% of libraries provide an accessible website and half of the library OPAC did not provide any assistive technology to meet their special users' needs.

INTEGRATION OR SOCIAL INCLUSION

A distinction needs to be made between inclusion or integration and social inclusion. Inclusion can be defined as integrating people with disabilities with normal people in one place or environment. This concept is mostly used in education through efforts to integrate students with or without disabilities in the same classroom. While this concept is correct, it does not indicate social inclusion. Loreman(2002)describes inclusion to mean integrating all students with different abilities or skills in one situation which has been modified to meet the needs of all participants. The aim of inclusion is to increase the access of individuals to sources and considers the physical access as an important aspect.

In contrast to inclusion or integration, the aim of social inclusion is to provide opportunities for individuals through both physical and social dimensions to connect them to their environment in a way that they feel accepted and comfortable. An overview of published literature in LIS indicates that libraries only aim to include or integrate disabled users with normal users through improving library buildings or service accessibilities. Pinder (2005), in his study about UK academic libraries, pointed out that libraries should not only stress on

integration of individuals with disabilities in libraries, but should also review library policy, service design and so on to meet all needs of all users. Joint(2005) explained that one of the most important factors in adopting a social model of disability in libraries is increasing librarian awareness through staff and user training about appropriate services for disabled. Birdi(2008) defines social inclusion as integrating individuals who has been excluded from society mainstream, by removing barriers which prevent them from participation.

Baker et al (2007) declares that the real meaning of accessibility is more than just providing the ramps or widening the doors, but should include providing the disable experiences, a sense of well being through their interactions with other people and peers in the setting. Iwakuma (2002)suggested that the strategy for adjusting the disabled people in an environment consists of considering their physical limitations as well as their psychological well being. In addition, Moore (2003) pointed out in the educational system, the emotional development should be considered more than social development and this can be provided through both physical and social dimensions and their effect on the psychological feelings of disabled students.

According to Krill (2008)exclusion and inclusion are two sides of one coin and consists of four fundamental components such as sense of belonging, sense of control, self-esteem and the feeling of meaningful existence. There is a an understanding that inclusion is a reality only when an individual connects to their circumstances or feels a sense of belonging to the environment he is in.

SENSE OF BELONGING

Maslow (1998) identified sense of belonging as one of most important factors in the educational system and defined it as being cared for by a group and therefore feeling accepted by group members. Maslow emphasized that real learning happens when this need is met through the system. Anant(1966) refers to sense of belonging as a feeling of being integrated, involved and accepted in an environment. Hagerty(1992)declared the strong effect on an individual's perception of and feeling within their relationships or their interaction with the environment is a sense of belonging. Hence, it is concerned with an individuals' psychological well-being. Seyed (2006) introduced the component of sense of belonging as a sense of membership, influence, integration and emotion. Sense of belonging as a membership implies being accepted as a member of society. The sense of influence refers to an individual's feelings that they can exert some influence in the system they are a member of, where a lack of it causes reluctance to participate. The sense of integration refers to sharing the same values with others in a community where positive emotion binds individuals with members of a group through frequency of interaction. Hagerty et al (1992)divided a sense of belonging into two broad dimensions; psychology and sociology. Based on psychology, a sense of belonging means the internal perception or feeling of individuals about their position in an environment as being connected or valued by the system or not. Through sociology, a sense of belonging means being a member in a community and membership is one sign of belonging.

Hagerty et al (1992)believes that a sense of belonging increases when a person experiences being valued, needed or is important to other people in the environment, and when the person experiences the fit between himself and other individuals in the environment. Maestas(2007)examined the factors which impact on a sense of belonging in

Hispanic serving institutions through distributing a questionnaire to students. They noted various factors have an effect on a student's sense of belonging such as experiences and perception of diversity, student's interaction and living on campus. A lack of a sense of belonging affects a student's life satisfaction and increases his or her anxiety. Upton (2010) indicated disabled people assign more value on social engagement and a lack of this decreases their satisfaction with life. Hagerty et al (1992) indicated that when individuals cannot find their own place in the environment or in relation with other individuals in that place, they will start to feel with social anxiety. One consequence of social anxiety would be the desire to leave the environment and decrease of self-esteem.

In summary, studies on a sense of belonging play an important role in identifying areas for improvement or removing barriers to psychological wellbeing, especially in an educational system.

MALAYSIAN LIS STUDIES

A brief look at Malaysian literature depicts the current trend in LIS for integrating disabled users with normal users through improving library buildings, equipment and service accessibility. Pak(2007) evaluated the current situation of 18 public libraries in Malaysia which apparently provided expedient resources, services and equipment for the visually impaired users. Pak noted that among the 18 public libraries just 3 of them had statistics on their visually impaired users. Mohamad (1994) also reported on the lack of reliable statistics in Malaysian libraries about their disabled users and this is regarded as the main barriers for providing appropriate sources and services for their visually impaired users. Devatason and Mariam (1996) found the lack of accurate statistics as one of the barriers to justify allocation of budget to provide appropriate services for disabled users. Abrizah and Ruslina (2010) studied school libraries and their inclusive programmers for disabled users, noted physical, sources, curriculum, school legislation and attitudinal barriers as the main difficulties which hamper the creation of an inclusive environment.

Malaysian literature in LIS highlights two main difficulties. The first highlight the lack of studies about disabled users (all types of disabilities) in all aspects in Malaysian libraries. The second indicated the current trend which considers only integrating disabled users with normal users without considering the psychological aspect in designing library services for disabled users to increase their sense of belonging. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore the visually impaired student's perceptions, experiences and their sense of belonging toward the library. We focus on understanding in what ways their study carrels help trigger the feeling of belonging to the university library.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

One of the gaps in knowledge concerning disabled users' perceptions of libraries is a lack of data on their psychological feeling in a library environment. As mentioned before, a sense of belonging is one of the main factors which play an important role in human's psychological well-being. It is difficult to find out about feelings in a quantitative study. As this study involves probing students feelings and emotions, a qualitative approach is used.

This study utilized a qualitative data collection method, which included using semi-structure interviews and focus groups. The interviews provided an atmosphere where the

researcher can learn about the participants' experiences easily by following the students' flow of conversations. Focus groups are also regarded as an assistive method in exploring participants' perceptions and experiences deeper. Indeed, the researcher used focus groups to probe further students in groups, observing participants' attitudes and beliefs toward the research topic. The objective was to observe participants' interactions with other individuals and figure out how they deal with contrary ideas and how social norms affect their attitudes.

This paper is based on seven months work from November 2011 till June 2012. The students are visually impaired, who use the University of Malaya (UM) library. The choice of the University of Malay library due to convenience and also because the library has provided special services for visual impaired students for a long time and based on participants point of view is the first and preferred destination of visual impaired students in Malaysia.

Eighteen in-depth interviews and four focus groups were conducted with the visual impaired users of the University of Malaya library. The interviews were conducted with five females and thirteen males. Their ages are between twenty and thirty seven years old. Nine of the participants are postgraduate students (three PhDs. and six Masters) and nine of them are undergraduate students. Each interview lasted between forty-five to sixty minutes. Also, the duration of the focus group interviews was one hour and forty-five minutes to two hours. All interviews and focus groups were recorded with a digital audio recorder. Besides interviews and focus groups, the researcher noted her personal observations about the context or circumstances in which the interviews happened and also her thoughts. Before each interview, the researcher personally approached the participants and explained her project, then requested for their email addresses and phone numbers. An information sheet describing the aim of the research, what the researcher expected them to do during interviews, and also, what will happen to the information at the end of research was related to every participant. Every participant was read the contents of the consent form and signed it before interview session could begin. Also, the researcher emphasized to each participant they could withdraw from the research at any time they wished without any disadvantage and that their anonymity would be kept when reporting the research findings. Additional information at any time based on the participants' request was also provided.

All interview and focus group discussions have been transcribed. As Creswell(2007) noted, the process of data collection and analysis should happen concurrently. So, each transcript was first read several times in order to be familiar with the data in the interview which later helped in categorizing it more easily. Then significant statements were extracted and for each of them a meaning unit was identified. Then the codes in one group were categorized and themes were created from these. During the analysis in extracting the themes, the researcher tried to integrate the interview and focus group data when describing under the emerging themes. In the following section explored themes will be discussed in relation to the literature. This paper focuses on participants' feelings about the study carrels especially allocated for them by the library.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Carrel as a Second home

'The carrel room is like my second home. I always go there to study. Compare it to my bedroom, it is more comfortable! We can put our books, our reading materials and laptop, so we can study and do our assignments. The carrel gives me an environment that makes me think and feel positively about the library.' (Amir, 26)

Amir (26 years old), like most of the visually impaired interviewed, claimed that the carrel is for him like a second home and he is comfortable there. He has his own privacy and can put his belongings in the carrel. Hadi (22) and Laila (22) also noted they can come to the library any time and they would always have a place in the library because of the carrel provided for them. They felt that the carrel symbolizes their acceptance in the library and they feel safe to leave their reading materials and other belongings inside the carrel.

'...I think I am accepted in this library. Yes. Because, I am given a carrel room ... This means that whenever I am in the library, I am assured of a place where I know that everytime I go to the library, I can come here, it's my place, I can come here, put my things, my stuff here and do my work, assignments, everything. I put all the necessary equipment in the carrel, such as my laptop, which means I don't need to carry my study materials wherever I go within the campus in the University of Malaya' (Hadi, 22)

'... We have this carrel. This carrel is provided for us the blind. We just have to register once a year..., so if you register it means that you can come here any time that you want and we can put anything here' (Laila, 22)

All visual impaired students use the carrel for praying and noted they prefer to say prayers in their carrel and feel more comfortable. For instance, Leila (22) and Shams (24) mentioned the surau [prayer room] in the library is on the third floor, and therefore far from their carrel and is not easily accessible and it is difficult to go to. In contrast, they mentioned the location of their carrels is perfect and is near the rest room. As such they prefer to pray in their own carrel.

'...I just go to the surau [prayer room] once. Now I just pray inside my carrel room. ... My carrel isn't far from the WC. I know all the place of all things inside my carrel. But in the surau sometimes other student change the location of certain things and this makes it difficult for me. Also, the surau is used by many people ... so, it's difficult for me' (Laila, 22)

'...Previously, the prayer room was big and it was on the first level. However, now they change the location, now I get too distracted there, I don't know why! Any way now I prefer to pray in my carrel room' (Shams, 24)

'... I use to pray in my carrel room, that's why I take off my shoes, I prefer people who wants to come in this room to take off their shoes too, because I want to pray in this carrel.'

McAndrew (1998) pointed out the important role of physical environment in creating the feeling of belonging and its effect on an individuals' personal identity. The carrels are special place for the visually impaired students since they evoked the feeling as being a

real member of the library, system, where they have a familiar and safe place in that environment. The visually impaired students felt that the library authorities provided for them with a special place based on their needs and this made them feel that they belong to the library. Osterman(2000)and Lamont-Strayhorn(2008) demonstrated that when people see that the system care about their needs and meet their needs, they would feel they have been valued by the members of the system which results in a feeling of belonging.

Carrel as Forums

A sense of belonging is vital for all students in an educational system especially for disabled students who come to the inclusive systems with a lack of social skills . Cothran (2000), and Syed (2006) indicated that the first priority of an educational system is to prepare the educational environment in which disabled students would feel comfortable and can interact with their peers to achieve their educational goals. Hence, we can argue that one of the most important roles of a carrel for a visually impaired student's life is it provided them with a suitable place to meet-up with their own volunteer readers and their friends. In this context the carrel plays an important role in their social life. Having the chance to meet normal students as volunteer readers is the first step to improving the visual impaired students' social skills as they spend their time with their non-disabled peers in their carrel who help them to complete their assignments or discuss their subjects.

'... When we have our reader session, the readers come here, it is better to have a carrel room because it would be easier for the volunteer to help us in here, in our our personal space...my visual impaired friends come to see me in my carrel too and I also go to their carrels to chat and during lunch time we can go out to have lunch together... I don't have any problems for friends whom I already know to come to visit me in my carrel. But I prefer to meet strangers outside my carrels first' (Amir, 26).

The carrel provides the visually handicapped with a place to meet their peers. The views expressed infer that they use the carrel to maintain social connections, to keep in touch with their own community. Amir (26 years old) indicated that he meets his volunteer readers in his carrel and having a carrel gives him the opportunity to have and control his own space in the library. Louvee (28 years), Farhad(22), and Hadi (22) explained they see their classmates or visual impaired friends in their own carrel or they go to their friends' carrels during their break time to chat with them.

'.. Sometime my friends come to my carrel to help me as a reader, and sometimes if they say they want to visit me, they also can see me in my carrel, so they come to library; it's more convenient for them' (Louvee, 28)

'I think the positive thing that this library has done is in giving us this carrel, which helps us and makes it convenient for us to meet our readers, I think, is a good service'(Farhad, 22)

'... Sometimes I bring my friends to my carrel, I bring five or four of my friends to come along here to discuss'(Hadi, 22)

Carrel as a Save and Quiet Heaven

Rovai et al (2004) and Salend(2004) pointed out that students who feel they belong to the system, are willing to join, continue and be successful in their studies. Also, those who felt

satisfied with their experiences in an environment would feel a deeper sense of belonging and relatedness to the learning system and all the visually impaired participants in this study considered their carrel as a place, which they found conducive for studying. They felt that they could concentrate and complete their assignment peacefully in their carrels. They felt less distracted by noises and could study. They indicated being satisfied and privileged to be given the carrels and find the carrels useful.

'... My carrel provide me with a save and quiet place for my reading sessions, for my discussion sessions. It provides me with a quiet place to do my own work and to study. I study here because there are no distractions. Also, it is important for me to have a save place because I have to hear recordings of my books and if I use it outside my carrel it would cause a lot of distractions and can be noisy for other users. The sound would be distracting' (Shams, 24).

'... I just called my friends in secondary school and told them that my university have provided me with a carrel in the library... they were surprised and have shown their interest to come to this university. They told me, Oh! I too want to come to your university' (Firooz, 21, a first year student).

'.... I like to stay in my carrel, because I can do anything in privacy, you know what in here, nobody can interrupt me' (Laila, 22).

Also visually impaired students mentioned their braille machines produce a lot of noise when they type. They appreciate that the carrel gave them the opportunity to type without annoying or upsetting the other students.

'... Every time I come to the library, I need to use my braille machine to type my reading material. It may be quite difficult if I wanted to type outside of my carrel, because it will produce a lot of noise...' (Maryam, 22).

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the visually impaired students' sense of belonging in the University of Malaya library. We had concentrated on the special library facility provided for the visually impaired students, which is the study carrel. The findings highlight the importance of the carrels to the visually impaired and hope to make the library aware of this feeling of appreciation expressed by the students. The carrels made the students happy that they have given a special place. The carrels invoked a sense of belonging to the library. The students felt privileged to be given the facility as they could study and do their assignments in a familiar and save place. They could also use it as a social place to meet student volunteers who read to them or record their readings as well as confer and discuss with their peers in the quietness of their carrels, not causing distractions for other students using the library. The findings could increase awareness to libraries of the need to design for such facilities when designing space within the library.

According to Syed (2006), the first priority in an educational system is providing an environment or atmosphere in which disabled users would feel secure and feel that they belong to the system. It seems that considering carrels as personal space for visually impaired students help invoked such a feeling. The visually impaired students need this

space to put all their belongings including reading materials in their carrel as it would be cumbersome for them to carry these items wherever they go. The carrels provide the visually impaired with a space where they can concentrate on their studies, record their audio materials, see their volunteer readers, visit their friends both non-disabled and disabled and makes them feel that they belong to the library, that the library considers their needs and this made them feel that they are being cared for like other users of the library. Osterman (2000) and Strayhorn (2008) noted when people see the group in which they are a member consider their needs and also receive their support through meeting their needs, they feel valued and connected to the group.

MacAndrew (1998) emphasized the role of a sense of belonging in connecting the person to his social identity and can be considered as a process of creating an individual's sense of identification with his social, relational and materials in his environment. Weeks (1990) explained a sense of belonging helps people to find what they have in common with the system in which they are in and which factors differentiate the person from others. Indeed, we can consider this as a catalyst which assists visually impaired students to first feel they belong to the library environment and obtain their place of identity. The second step could be to improve their personal identity in relation to society.

Although the carrels are easily accessible and visually impaired students feel comfortable there, they also mentioned some suggestions in order to improve the current situation of carrels. The first one was about the library's new policy for sharing the carrels with other visually impaired students. Since the University of Malaya is the first destination of visually impaired students to continue their studies, the lack of a sufficient number of carrels is obvious. The students mentioned it is not practical to share their carrels with another person since they are blind and need to put their belongings in the same place without change. Also, they cannot concentrate on doing their assignment while their roommate wants to read materials. The second concerns the acoustic problem. The visually impaired student indicated that they could hear the voices and sounds in their neighboring carrels, which make it difficult to concentrate. Providing tactile tiles from the library entrance to carrels was another suggestion of the interviewees in reply to the researcher's question, 'If you are an architect, what you would add to the library physical space.' Hence, these are some issues that the library needs to consider when planning services to the visually disabled.

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