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The Bibliotheca Alexandrina Experience: An Overview of the Children Library

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Abstract:

After inspiring and nourishing the imagination of scholars throughout the centuries, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA) was revived to represent the culmination of creative efforts and to fulfill its role in promoting knowledge in Egypt, the region and the world. Thus, the Children Library, being part and parcel from the BA experience, has to develop a unique profile of its own that distinguishes it from any other public, municipal or school library. Not to meet the children's needs and expectations is the nightmare that hunts us in reality, which stipulates that we must set a role model and transfer reading from a developed skill into an indispensable pleasure. The paper outlines the Ch Library sections, collections and missions. It also reports on the assorted steps and programs that the Ch Library has taken since the inauguration of the BA.

A general overview of the Ch Library

After inspiring and nourishing the imagination of scholars throughout the centuries, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA) was revived to represent the culmination of creative efforts and to fulfill its role in promoting knowledge in Egypt, the region and the world. Thus, the Ch Library, being part and parcel from the BA experience, has to develop a unique profile of its own that distinguishes it from any other public, municipal or school library. Not to meet the children's needs and expectations is the nightmare that hunts us in reality, which stipulates that we must set a role model and transfer reading from a developed skill into an indispensable pleasure.

With 8 staff members, the Ch Library provides services for 120 children 6 days a week. The Ch Library sections are: storytelling & puppet show, computer lab, video, activities and the reading area. The collection includes around 3000 titles in different languages mainly Arabic, English and French, varying between stories, encyclopedias, periodicals, videos and cassettes. The collection is carefully selected to be suitable for the primary levels curriculum, as well as needs and points of interest of children.

Accordingly, the Ch Library has set its missions to be as follows:

1. To prepare a generation able to face the challenges imposed by the digital age by encouraging children to explore many useful websites and learn how to carry out an online search. They can also access different fun sites containing games and activities, selected by BA specialists.
2. To open a window for the children on Egypt's history, culture and heritage as well as enhancing their understanding of health and environmental issues through simplified lectures, educational films and other activities.
3. To open a window for the children on the world's culture, folklore and children literature by inviting major libraries and children publishers worldwide to hold assorted exhibitions in the BA.
4. To meet the needs of handicapped and visually impaired children by providing suitable activities and specialized devices that would help them to deal with the different resources of the Library.
5. To enhance children artistic creativity by sponsoring different workshops (painting, calligraphy), handicraft works and various performances (puppet theatre, children choir, etc.).
6. To adopt the idea of the mobile libraries that can reach any child in Egypt through contacting other children libraries all over Egypt.

The Ch Library provides its public with the following services:

1) Information desk:

- Orient the new users,
- Direct the child to various areas of the library,
- Provide the child with information on library services, collections, policies and procedures,
- Show the child how to use the library catalogue,
- Direct the child to information in his/her area of interest,
- Keep the child up-to-date with the latest information,
- Help the child to find resources on the Internet,
- Help the child to find information for his/her assignments,
- Assist the child to find resources and references,
- Refer the child to the best databases to use,
- Analyze the child research needs,
- Explain library card rules,
- Explain library circulation policies regarding overdue materials, reserving library materials and related policies.

2) Computer Lab:

The Ch Library has a computer lab where:

- Computers are provided for the use of children in the library.

- Children can explore thousands of links useful for their schools projects and assignments. They can also get access to different fun sites and enjoy lots of games and amazing activities.

3) AV Materials:

➤ Video

There are 2 types of video shows:

1. Group video shows

According to the set program indicating the hours and titles of shows.

2. Individual video shows

- For members only.
- The user can select according to his/her interest the film that he/she would like to watch from the list indicating the titles of shows.

➤ TV Channel (individual)

- For members only.
- The user can select according to his interest the TV program that he would like to watch.

➤ Cassettes

For visually impaired soon

4) Orientation Tour:

The one hour orientation, held on the computer lab of the Ch Library, provides an introduction to the BA including:

- The history of the ancient library.
- The construction phases and design of the BA.
- Library departments, services, etc.
- The online catalog (OPAC) search techniques.

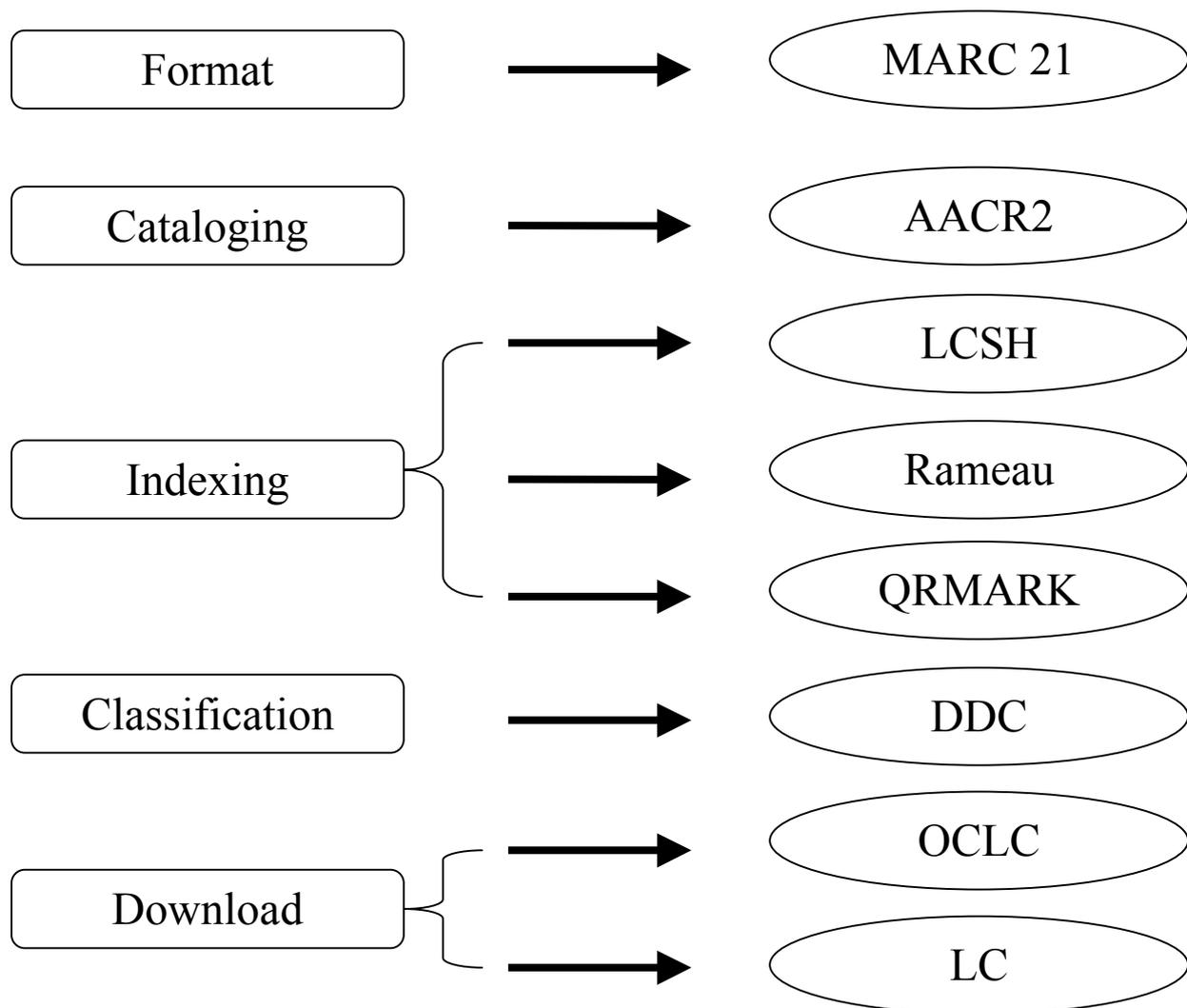
5) Services for Handicapped Children

Soon.

In addition to these services, the staff members are required to take part in the cataloging process and the Ch Library website.

1- Cataloging

The staff members enter the processed data of the different Ch Library holdings on the BA general database VTLS/VIRTUA. The cataloging process is carried out according to certain criteria as illustrated in the following diagram.



The Ch Library displays on the website its different components and services. It gives informative insight in a simple and comprehensive manner for the children. It allows the distant children to keep a continuous contact with the library and to benefit from its resources through “Ask a librarian” form, which enables the children to enquire about any topic, whether related to his/her field of study or general interest.

Programs and activities

Since the inauguration, October 16, 2003, until the beginning of the following June, the Ch Library has received approximately 20,000 children. The parents were not allowed in. It was firstly a matter of space as the library occupies only 200m², but later on, we found out that it helped in providing the children with the freedom of choice and selection. In these 8 months, our general remark was that some children searched for information randomly. We regarded such case as a negative reading process, where the user spends a lot of time searching the library resources; nevertheless, the benefit is not to be compared to the exerted effort.

This was partly because those children were reluctant to consult the librarians and ask for their help. Moreover, given the fact that the Ch Library was not a part of the original plan of the BA, it was just added four months before the official inauguration and, needless to say, we did not take part in the soft opening, thus, our experience was very limited in dealing with such cases.

As an attempt to find solutions to this phenomenon, the staff members work on 3 parallel fields.

Firstly, they follow up carefully the children in the reading area where they offer them immediate assistance and consultation concerning their topic of research. Furthermore, the Children Library has established a friends association from its active, permanent members, who have comprehensive knowledge of the library sections, services and collections. Those members have helped in breaking the ice between the librarians and the reluctant children, channeling the latter to the best use of the library resources, and eventually, they learn how to deal with the librarians directly.

Secondly, the “Research for All” program has been adopted to guide the children to how to carry out a research, and benefit from the library resources in the less possible time through the following steps:

- Choosing the theme or subject of research,
- Searching for the documents pertaining to the subject,
- Explaining for the children how to search books, references, encyclopedias and the Internet,
- Helping the children to employ the information they acquired in their researches,
- Guiding them to how to benefit as well as others from the results of their researches.

The third field, activities, has enabled the librarians to deal with the children in smaller groups creating a more intimate atmosphere, which helps the children, in their turn, to bridge any fear of the staff and regard them as their friends. The activities have two sides; educational and entertaining, which both aim at developing the creativity of children, enhancing their imagination and opening for them new windows on the past, present and future knowledge. The activities are divided into sessions, workshops and competitions in which all children can participate according to their interests and skills.

Workshops

The workshops available in the time being are: ‘Arabic Calligraphy Workshop’; which covers the history and types of calligraphies. The ‘Agriculture Workshop’ introduces different species of plants and teaches children how to grow some domestic plants. The ‘Handicraft Workshop’ develops the children’s skills and guides them to the best use of natural, recycled or environment-friendly materials.

Sessions

The sessions are held periodically with specialists on various topics such as teeth health, nutrition, heart first aids, team work, etc. Children are welcomed to ask about anything in an open discussion with the lecturers and to take part in the workshops that follow.

Storytelling

The storytelling is one of the most appealing activities for children, in which one of the librarians reads a selected story for children and then asks them to act it with puppets giving them the space to give their own reading and interpretation of the story.

Competitions

As for the competitions, they help in developing the spirit of innovation, confidence, cooperation and teamwork of the children. For instance, the library was invited to take part

in the IEARN project; a network that permits children and young people to use the Internet and the modern technology to establish educational projects. The steps of the competitions can be summed up as follows:

- Choosing a theme, e.g., “ a trip to Alexandria”,
 - Forming the groups (6 children of different ages),
 - Laying down a general work plan and the essential points to be tackled,
 - Distributing the work according to each participant’s interest,
 - Presenting the final result in a magazine or on a website.

* * * *

To conclude, as I have stated before the Ch Library experience is by far growing with every step it takes towards the fulfillment of its missions and the overcoming of new challenges. Our future points of emphasis will be providing services for handicapped children and those who are under the age of 6 as well as establishing further cooperation with school libraries and international establishments in the field.

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