



World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

"Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

Conference Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

June 9, 2005

Code Number:

083-E

Meeting:

155 SI - Libraries for the Blind with Public Libraries

Achieving inclusion through partnership

Public library as an agent of a Braille library

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Summary:

A desirable cooperative relationship between Braille and public libraries in Korea shall be presented as two types: public library as an agent of a Braille library, and symbiosis of public and Braille libraries. Besides, the national library is promoting the project of constructing text databases for the blind (included visually impaired person). In Korea, the cooperation between Braille and public libraries is activating and expanding library services for print-disabled people as well as blind, and, thus, largely contributing to the fulfill of national right to know.

1. Introduction

It is said that Korea has over five-thousand-year-old history. However, its history is never so long in the view point of modern society. It had been an agricultural society under royal rule until the early twentieth, and passed the chaotic society under Japanese Occupation. Afterwards, in 1945, it was liberated, but the Korea War occurred in 1950 forced both of south and North Korean people into the history of endurance.

Industrialization started in 1960's led to the information society in the late 1970's, and again to the 21st century knowledge-based society.

Amongst such rapidly changing social environment and short history of democracy, Korea has achieved economic growth through the government policy of aiming chiefly at economic development. However, it has not achieved value or cultural improvement corresponding to such economic growth. Some of such examples are the absence of government policy and the prejudice of citizens on disabled people. In fact, there have been few government policies for disabled people, and citizens have been likely to regard them as different from people until the successful performance of 1988 Paralympics Seoul.

Based on such social and cultural environment, the library service for the blind has not been active. The library services for the blind started in 1945 by lending books for the blind students and graduates at a blind school. However, the real library services are regarded to be started in 1969 when an individual established and operated a Braille library. Afterwards, by 1990, Braille libraries increased considerably and their number now reaches 34 nationally. All of them are operated by private persons or non-profit organizations differently from public libraries. Since the budget support policies for Braille libraries have not yet been stated in the law, the finance support from the government is actually feeble.

Services for the blind in public libraries have no particular difference. In the library law revised with the turning point of 1988 Paralympics Seoul, it is stipulated that "Public libraries shall install facilities necessary for providing library services for young, old, and disabled people", but it is not compulsory. Thus, only about ten percent of 487 public libraries services for the blind as of today when seventeen years have passed since the law was revised and entered into force.

Also, Braille libraries have mainly taken charge of production and service, and public libraries purchased special materials from larger-size Braille libraries and used them for their services. Since Braille libraries are operated by private persons or non-profit organization and public libraries by the government, the network among them has not been constructed and they are not duly cooperated. In the aspects of library users, since Braille and public libraries happen to be crowded or few depending on regions, all users cannot receive nationally general and common services in reality.

Thus, feeble policies of the government, prejudice against disabled people, lack of understanding on potential print-disabled people, and lack of cooperation among Braille and public libraries affect as big obstacles against the activation of library services for disabled people. I would like to introduce good cases of being looking forward to bringing the activation of services for the disabled despite this situation

2. Cooperative relationship between public and Braille libraries

1) Public library as an agent of a Braille library

There is a Braille library called the Busan Braille Library in Busan, which is the second largest city in Korea and has 16 administrative districts. Since public libraries in Busan do not provide services for the disabled at all, disabled people in Busan make use of the Busan Braille Library or Braille libraries located in other regions.

A service for the blind of Braille and public libraries in Korea, like in any other countries in the world is postal lending. They provide home-delivery lending, inner-house lending or face-to-face reading depending on the location of a user. They also provide a service like download by operating an electronic library. However, it has not been activated yet.

The Busan Braille Library has also made use of volunteers and provided home-delivery service to a limited area within the region of Busan. However, providing such home-delivery service to all of the blind within the whole region of Busan is beyond its capacity. Also, since a Braille library is regarded as one for the blind, there have been few accesses from print-disabled people. Under this situation, a public librarian in a district has been interested in and made inquiries on services for the blind. Despite the problems of finance, space, understanding the blind, and others a public library has, she would like to overcome such problems and start to provide services for the blind. This gave an opportunity for Braille and public libraries to discuss and build up cooperative relationship. Public libraries have moved about 300 kinds of Braille or recorded books, kept them in their general materials rooms, and provided services for the blind in the region with them. They lend such books to the blind in the region, and care for enabling to always serve user with new books by exchanging them at times.

Rather than a Braille library serving to all the blind in the 16 sixteen districts, public libraries in the related users' addresses adopted as its agent and providing services, resulted in providing more frequent and quicker services to users. Thus, their access to a library has become easy. If each of 16 district public libraries ties up a cooperative relationship with a Braille library and becomes its agent, it would be expected to bring such large effect that provide services to the blind in the 16 districts at once.

2) Braille library coexist with public library

Another good model of the cooperative relationship between public and Braille libraries is that a Braille library is assigned and operates a partial space of a public library. Currently in Korea, all Braille libraries are operated by private persons or non-profit organization, and their sizes are not large. So, one of their biggest problems is spatial shortage due to increasing materials, and it is not easy to secure the budget for constructing a new Braille library separately in each region. Moreover, the construction of a Braille library often meets with the opposition caused by prejudice against the disabled. One of the best ways to overcome these problems is to construct a public

library where a Braille library is assigned on its partial space and pursue their symbiosis. This reduces the cost of its construction in comparison with the construction of a new independent Braille library, avoids the problem of prejudice against the disabled, and improves its accessibility based on the good location of a public library.

Since all but two among 34 Braille libraries scattered over the nation have not secured space large enough to keep books and perform various programs, it is absolutely necessary to build new libraries.

The government is now promoting the mid-to-long term development plan of securing public libraries. It aims at doubling the number of current public libraries. Thus, the introduction of this symbiosis of Braille and public libraries will lead to the expansion of a public library's services to the sight-disabled.

3) Role of national libraries

In Korea, there is still not a national library for the blind. Nor a Braille library operated by governments likes local autonomous entities. All of 34 Braille libraries are operated by private persons and non-profit organization and the government's supports for them are feeble. On the other hand, since the number of blind university undergraduates currently reaches over 350 persons and is on the trend of increasing rapidly every year, such 34 Braille libraries are too insufficient to provide reference services for their learning so far. To complement and improve this situation, the National Central Library, a national library, started to construct university text databases in 2003.

Over two years of 2003 and 2004, it completed the databases for over 2,300 kinds of university texts, is now serving them, and is under construction of over 800 kinds of databases this year. Such text databases are being served to be available for sounds and Braille letters in real-time, and to be used as Braille books or through such devices as Braille Lite after their Braille files being downloaded.

Also, since the National Central Library started to construct the comprehensive lists of Braille libraries, it has been upgrading them every year, and established about 110 thousand items so far. These lists are served for any users and persons interested in the Library to be able to search online through the National Electronic Library.

3. Conclusion

Most nations make various policies and efforts to serve to the blind through public libraries, because they think general library services have to be performed in regions though special services like a Braille library are not served. No number of Braille libraries is smaller than that of public libraries, and this makes it unable to perform regional services aside from the problem of time in postal lending. Also, it is supposed to be every nation's hope that Braille and public libraries have a good cooperative relationship to perform the most idealistic library services to blind and print-disabled people.

This trend is similar in Korea. Among the violently shaking history and rapidly changing social environment during the last century, Korea has developed its culture different from other nations. Under such social and cultural environment, it has formed a desirable cooperative relationship between Braille and public libraries. Such cooperation shall perform as follows:

- It is easy for a library to provide visiting services for users as well as for users to access to a library.
- Potential users in local areas are found out. The use of recorded books is expanded to print-disabled people, elder, dyslexia and other print-disabled people who use public libraries, as well as blind.
- Braille libraries can serve more quickly to more blind at once through public libraries.
- Public libraries can solve the cost problem of buying materials and the problem of keeping increasing materials by borrowing and revolving a certain quantity of books from Braille libraries, and play their essential role of serving to alienated blind and print-disabled people.
- Braille libraries are widely known through public libraries.
- Braille libraries contribute a lot to services for the blind by giving volunteer educations through which they secure many volunteers through public libraries.
- Keeping books for the blind in public libraries gives a good opportunity of reducing prejudices against the disabled.
- Public libraries provide public places for disabled and not-disabled people to build up mutual understandings and improve their alienated situation.
- Library services are activated to meet users' needs.
- It is easy to solve the problem of building a Braille library.
- Equal services can be served to all the blind in all regions.

The above performances are important. However, it is more important among other things that such cooperation in the form of block lending has not been led by the government, but by a private level voluntarily. This is just a beginning for the cooperation between Braille and public libraries. When they are trying to complement such programs and expand them to all over the nation, and the government policies accompany them, library services for blind and print-disabled people in Korea are expected to be highly improved.