

The Prison Library: Its Roles and Challenges.

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Abstract

Reading is a universal right. Considering the need for sound library and information services to be provided to all in the society of today, establishment of Prison Library is very much required. In this paper, along with the role of Prison Library the challenges are also discussed. These libraries have very important roles to play in the life of inmates. To achieve the goals of these libraries, the staff and the authorities have many challenges in front of them. If the authorities follow the standards and guidelines, wisely plan their course of action and execute it properly, the goals can be achieved.

Keywords: Prison Libraries

Introduction

There is no friend as loyal as a book. A good book is a good guide, friend, teacher and a great company. The library, which is a hub of good books and other knowledgeable and recreational resources are made accessible for use, can fabricate the social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing among the people who are behind the bars or working in correction cells. It is important to build an atmosphere inside the correctional institutions so that the aim of these institutions may be achieved i.e. to normalize and reintegrate the inmates into the society. The inmates in the prisons or in the correctional institutions come in contact with the prison culture. If they get the access to the good books, mass media, etc. we can prepare them for the life outside. The significant tool in this course of action of normalization and rehabilitation is the prison library. The provision of the prison library helps the inmates to improve their personality behind the bars.

Prison Libraries Standards and Guidelines

Standards and guidelines are required to establish any institution. Therefore for Prison Libraries too the standards and guidelines do exist as a tool at national and international level for the establishment, development and management of these libraries. According to, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA);

“Every institution shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and the prisoners shall be encouraged to make use of it.”

The IFLA Guidelines were developed with the supposition that all citizens may be general public or prisoners, are allowed to have right to use the information. And for prisoners, the libraries should be located inside the prisons to provide access to the reading materials without any hindrance. In addition to this, the prison library must be an essential and integral part of the prison and the prisoners should get the ample time to use it. Further, the library should promote an environment of intellectual freedom, inquisitiveness,

accountability, and cultural understanding, and should lend a hand to prisoners in preparing them for the re-entry into society.

The IFLA Standards and Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners are developed with the aim to serve as a guide for individual countries to develop and modify their own standards and guidelines which suits their own local circumstances.

Under these common principles, IFLA tries to cover almost all aspects of good library services and facilities, which includes policies and procedures for collection development, staff levels and their qualifications, physical infrastructure, equipments and funds for the library.

Role/ Importance of Prison Libraries

What are the major roles of a Prison Library? As we all know that there are different types of libraries for different purposes, like Academic Libraries, Special Libraries, Public Libraries, etc. The roles of prison libraries are almost similar to the public libraries. The prison libraries help both the inmates and the public in terms of educating the inmates, reduce the recidivism and improve family bonds in them through reading.

Education may develops the skills in inmates to transit back into society once they are released after completing their sentence period and libraries are at the fore front to help them in learning these skills. For this purpose these special libraries can offer so many programmes like life skills, literacy classes, and classes on how to use libraries, etc.

Other than educational opportunities, the prison libraries may help these inmates to develop positive and meaningful relationship with their families. For instance; the libraries through their programmes provide the books for the inmates to read them to their children and grand children on the day they visit them. Prisoners may be provided with the same reading material what their children and grand children are reading, so may they have something common to talk about. Even the inmates may be provided with colouring books and crayons colours, etc to record their feelings, which may be sent to their families and vice versa.

Prison libraries have one more important role i.e. to bring in contact the inmates with same interest. The librarian of these libraries can form the book clubs, and even initiate the community service projects. This platform helps the inmates in indulge in such creative activities to get rid of their present situations. Even the librarian guides them the topics of their interest for further discussions.

Prison libraries may develop a School Curriculum support activity at correctional centres where the libraries may provide materials that supplement textbooks and improve the classroom activities and help the juvenile to re-join their studies after completing their punishments.

Even these libraries can organise different programmes which may help the inmates to polish their personalities like programmes on anger control management, etc.

Challenges

Prison libraries have very important roles in our modern society. But there are number of challenges faced by these libraries.

No library can function independently, so is the case with prison libraries. It does not function independently but function within the controlled environment of the prison. Prison's have their own missions and security policies which often conflict with the library profession's code of ethics i.e. free access to information. The librarians of prison libraries are facing the biggest challenge of how to provide the information freely in the controlled environment of prisons, where almost all the aspects of daily life is controlled by the prison's rules and regulations.

Another challenge which the librarians have to handle is to meet the diverse informational needs of the inmates which came there from different walks of life and are forced to live together.

Use of technology is again a most challenging issue for these libraries. Technology helps us to be in contact with others while sitting at home. But if the inmates are allowed to use the internet and other technologies, it may cause a major disaster. But on the other hand, we are not supposed to prevent the inmates to access the wide range of information which is useful for their education and personal development. If a proper planning and control measures is taken up, it is indeed possible to provide access to their required information.

Shortage of staff, funds and space in such libraries are other important problems. In such circumstances where the staff and funds are limited, providing basic services is itself a big challenge, still the librarians have to try to initiate some activities and programs which helps in achieving the goals of these libraries, i.e. to develop the ability in inmates to recognize their own personality and establish the meaningful relationships and bond with their families and society. For this, the library staffs need to encourage and convince the inmates to participate in these activities and programmes. A positive attitude of library staff is very much required. The funding agencies have to keep the prison libraries on priority to help the staff to provide up-to-date information.

Some other constraints are time, selection of material for such libraries, etc. Selecting the reading material for such library is a big responsibility.

Conclusion

It is quite obvious that a well stocked, well established prison library can fulfil the requirements of the inmates. The library is as good as the professional library staff makes it. Facilitating these libraries and their staff to increase their full potential, both more practical and moral support from the authorities and the general public is required. Having a skilled, well-educated and passionate staff is the key to a successful prison library. It is a big problem with our society that they do not understand and appreciate the purpose behind these services and assistance. But if the government take the initiative and make the society aware about the aims and purposes of these libraries, achieving the aim will become easier.

Working in prison library is a challenging job that requires flexibility, persistence, emotional maturity, sound judgement, sense of humour and ability to handle stress. Bringing a positive change in someone's life is indeed a gratifying reward. This is a noble job and there is no other job that gives such satisfaction.

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