

Community Learning Centre Program as an Educational Tool for Rural Community Literacy Development: Community of Nasr Abad as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Literacy plays a key role in community development. Literate people improve their quality of life with less difficulty, and Iran is no exception. For this purpose, the government of Iran has invested a lot of human, innovation, natural, and social capitals for literacy development to improve the quality of life of its people after the Islamic Revolution. Various programs have been set up for this purpose. One of the main programs for literacy development is the Community Learning Centre Program (CLCP) and one of the communities that has joined the program is the community of Nasr Abad. Hence, the objective of this paper was to examine the role of the community learning centre program in the rural community literacy development in the community of Nasr Abad.

Keywords: Community Learning Centre Program, community, literacy, development, community development

INTRODUCTION

There are 9 million illiterates in the Islamic Republic of Iran at present. In particular, adults formulate the main illiterate population in the country. A person is defined as an illiterate if he/she cannot, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement in his everyday life (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, April 2008). Hence, rural community literacy development means expansion of the reading,

writing, and numerical skills at the community level (Yopp and Singer, 1994). In Iran, adults in literacy refer to the persons aged over 10 year old who have lagged behind formal education system and are enrolled in adult literacy classes (LMO, 2006a).

Since 1979 and after the Islamic Revolution, literacy programs have become a major tool in promoting the level of literacy in the communities in Iran (Ebrahimian, 2002; Jamshidi, 1988). A

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large number of people, infrastructure, and capitals have been allocated for this purpose. Despite all these efforts, the literacy level in Iran is still low (79.5%) compared to other neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Libya, Qatar, Kuwait (Sabagheian, 1992; UNESCO, 2005).

Thus, to improve the level of literacy in the country, the government of Iran has carried out various literacy programs. Among these programs are the Public Program, Literacy Program for Employees and Labourers, Literacy Program for the Armed Forces, Conscript Teacher Program, the Program of Literacy Mobilization, the Program for Nomadic People, Person-to-Person Program, Miscellaneous Learners Program, Literacy Program for People on Dole, Literacy Program with the Help of Prayer Imams in Mosques, and Literacy Program for Parents at School.

However, after several years of implementation of such programs, the results are still not very encouraging. Many people who had participated in these literacy programs indicated that they did not experience much improvement in their literacy levels (Abedi, 1991). Several studies have analyzed the factors which could contribute to the failure of the literacy activities in the Islamic Republic of Iran (e.g. Adli and Javdan, 1999; Afshang, 1997). These studies revealed three main contributing factors, as follows:

- Absence of an effective program in the communities;
- Lack of commitment by the people; and
- Lack of the participation from the people.

Based on the three factors, the researchers concluded that the lack of effective programs was the most important reason for the failure of the previous literacy programs in the country. It was also concluded that the lack of an effective program resulted in deficiencies in other elements such as community participation and the commitment from the people (Davoudpour, 1994; Ghafari, 1997).

Therefore, the government decided to introduce a new program in order to achieve higher levels of literacy due to the shortcomings and the failure of previous literacy programs in Iran, particularly in solving the problem of illiteracy in the country (Mehdizadeh, 2003). For this purpose, Iran has introduced a new program known as Community Learning Centre Program (CLCP) (Abhami, 2002; Ebrahimian, 2002; Mehdizadeh, 2003).

Community learning centre program was initially set up in the framework of UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Programme of Education For All (APPEAL), with the financial assistance of Japan and Norway in the Asian and the Pacific Countries in 1998 (APPEAL, 2005). Iran launched the program in 2000. As one of the rural communities in the country, the community of Nasr Abad joined the program in 2003.

According to the latest national statistics of Iran, the community of Nasr Abad comprised of around 1,950 people, with 1000 males and 950 females. Most of the population are adults (SCI, 2006a; 2006b). A year prior to the program, this community had around 350 illiterate adults. After four years of implementation, the program is proven to have significantly decreased the number of illiterate adults. At present, there are only about 100 people who are still illiterate.

METHODOLOGY

The current study was carried out among the people in the community of Nasr Abad living in the state of Yazd. This community was chosen because they had had the lowest literacy level in the state of Yazd. In this study, two types of data were collected; the primary and the secondary data. The primary data were collected by having both face-to-face interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD), while the secondary data were gathered through printed and unprinted media, published and unpublished articles, journals, books, and reports.

Three types of respondents were interviewed so as to gather the primary data required for this study. There were learners, educators, and executives. Learners are those participants

who have taken part in the program. They were taught how to read, write, and do simple calculation. Meanwhile, educators are the people who have also participated in the program as teachers and facilitators to teach the illiterates. The executives are those who assisted both the educators and the learners in achieving their goals in the program.

The people were selected because they were involved directly with the community learning centre program in this community. In this study, 60 respondents, namely 20 learners, 20 educators, and 20 executives were interviewed. They had at least five years working experience related to CLCP activities. The respondents were selected using the purposive sampling technique.

Although this was a qualitative study, the results were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively by considering the frequencies and the transcriptions of the data gathered during the interview with the respondents. In this study, the qualitative aspects of the documents (i.e. both published and unpublished) were summarized and classified according to the necessary data.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To explain the role of community learning centre program in the literacy development of the rural community in this study, five theoretical approaches were applied. The five approaches are top-down, bottom-up, participatory, andragogy, and self-directed approaches. All the five approaches were employed to explain why and how the CLCP is a very successful

program for literacy development. Similarly, these approaches were necessary to ensure the success of the CLCP.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Based on the results, the Community Learning Centre Program was found to have played an encouraging role in the literacy development of the rural community in the community of Nasr Abad. The program taught the learners to read, write, and do simple calculation. The literacy level among the people in the community has improved after the implementation of the community learning centre program. Details of the literacy level after the implementation of the program are shown in Table 1.

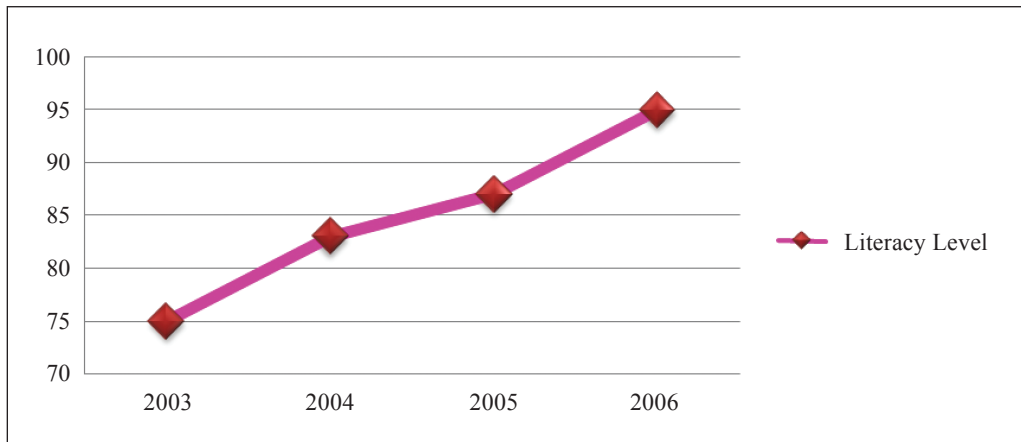
In the community of Nasr Abad, the level of literacy of its people before the introduction of the community learning centre program was 75%. The percentage, however, was found to increase to 95% four years after the implementation of the program (Literacy Movement Department of Taft, 2007). Based on the data presented in Table 1, the literacy level of the people in the community was improved around 20%. This indicates that the literacy level of the people in the community has been steadily increased. To clearly illustrate this trend, the literacy level in Nasr Abad after the implementation of the community learning centre program is depicted in *Fig. 1*.

The respondents of the study also believed that due to the effective role of the Community Learning Centre Program, the community have made a useful contribution to improve

TABLE 1
Literacy level in Nasr Abad after the Community Learning Centre Program

Year	Literacy Level (%)	Illiteracy Level (%)
2003	75	25
2004	83	17
2005	87	13
2006	95	5

Source: Literacy Movement Department of Taft (2007)



Source: Literacy Movement Department of Taft (2007)

Fig. 1: The trend of the literacy level in Nasr Abad after the Community Learning Centre Program

the level of literacy among its people. Based on the results of the study, it can be stated that the Community Learning Centre Program has managed to make the people work collectively to promote their level of literacy. Hence, the CLCP has been successful in encouraging the people in the community to be more enterprising and to enhance their earning ability and empowerment. During the four year's period, the people of Nasr Abad willingly participated in the various activities organized in the community learning centre program. Indeed, the CLCP of the community was able to educate people how to read, write, and do simple calculation.

There are several reasons that have contributed to the success of the CLCP in this community. Based on the findings gathered from the respondents, some of the reasons which have contributed to the success of the CLCP in the community are financial management skills, monitoring and evaluation skills, resource mobilization skills, establishing linkages, and networking. Thus, the Community Learning Centre Program (CLCP) implemented in the community has also established linkages and networking between the people and other relevant community-based, national, and international organizations. To improve the

level of literacy, the community learning centre program in Nasr Abad has established a good link between the programme and the local authorities which resulted in the allocation of funds to support its activities.

It is also believed that through linkages and networking among the CLCP and the relevant organizations, there was a feeling of ownership among the people involved in the program.

At the same time, the partnership was also established with the neighbouring vocational school. Hence, the community learning centre program could use the facilities available at the school to train the people in the community to read, write, and do simple calculation. Many of the respondents also pointed out that their effort to improve the level of literacy has also been supported by the local leaders. Costs of heating, electricity, water and sanitation supply, as well as cleaning services at the community learning centre were covered by the local leaders. In addition, the community learning centre program has been granted with more funding from the other authorities, and this is used to pay those who are involved in the programme.

According to the respondents, the CLCP has also established linkages with higher education institutions in neighbouring communities to

promote the level of literacy and reduce the problem of illiteracy among the people in the community of Nasr Abad. The establishment of such collaborations with institutions of higher education institution has enabled these institutions to conduct survey and need assessment of the people for a possible education seminar in the communities.

The respondents also stated that the CLCP has established linkages with the CLCP in other communities to enable them to learn from each other. From the beginning of the CLCP, it has been successful in involving and using mass media to publicize literacy education. For that purpose, means such as records and photos of the CLCP activities, study visits, and seminars have been employed, and also exhibited. It is crucially important to highlight the CLCP has flexible curricula and learning materials for all its learning activities.

The respondents of the study also believe that the CLCP plays a crucial role in improving the level of literacy in Nasr Abad, because its activities have been carefully monitored and evaluated. Some strengths and weaknesses in its activities have also been identified, and the identified problems are solved through monitoring and evaluation of the methodology and implementation process. In this community, the community learning centre program which has limited resources has done its maximum to adjust its activities to fulfil the needs of the local people.

Moreover, the CLCP has made a big impact on the level of literacy among people involved in the program. It has set up in the disadvantaged areas to get literacy skills so as to identify the needs of the people in the community. Finally, the respondents of the study have concluded that the CLCP is a new concept for the local people at Nasr Abad, i.e. to have a learning centre which belongs to all the people.

DISCUSSION

Based on the study, it can be concluded that the Community Learning Centre Program (CLCP) has played a significant role in increasing

the level of literacy among the people in this community. After analysing the results gathered from all of the respondents of the three different groups (learners, educators, and executives), the CLCP can be regarded as an affective program to be used in improving the literacy skills which include reading, writing, and doing simple calculation among the people in this community.

Based on the findings of the study, and as agreed by all the respondents, the CLCP has played a very important role in this community. Learners, who have participated in CLCP literacy classes, are taught to read, write, and do simple calculation. The skills are very significant in their daily life, especially in problem-solving and improving personal life.

This argument is supported by two different adult learning approaches known as andragogy and self-directed approaches. According to these approaches, learners are involved in the planning of their instruction, because they want to solve their problems through their skills. They also participate in the process of identifying and planning their own learning. In this program, learners are most interested in learning subjects which have immediate relevance to their job or personal life (LMO, 2006a; 2006b).

Based on these approaches, the learning process in the community learning centre program is problem-centred. In the program, learners learn to solve their problems in daily life (Shabani, August 2008). They are also independent in learning, doing, listening to all the other interactions. They prescribed the content of textbooks for themselves. They also play the role of educators to teach themselves and their classmates. Thus, learners are active in the processes of both teaching and learning (Bagheri, July 2008; Shabani, August 2008). The literacy classes in this community learning centre program were when compared to the traditional literacy classes. With these specifications, the community learning centre program was found to implement a successful role in increasing the level of literacy among the people in this community.

The results of this study are also supported by several studies outside Iran (e.g. Abhami, Mohadethnasri and Ghiyami, 2002; Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal, 2008; Horwood, 2008; Kanno and Shrestha, Ministry of Education and Sports of Nepal, 2008; Ramazani and Basharatniya, 2002; Statistics Indonesia, 2008; The National Statistical Office of Thailand, 2008; UNESCO, 2002).

Based on the studies mentioned above, the community learning centre program has undeniably played a very important role in promoting the level of literacy not only in Iran, but also in other participating countries. For example, in Indonesia, the community learning centre program has an effective role in CLD. The literacy level in the country, before the implementation of the community learning centre program, was merely 78%. The percentage, however, increased to 86.8% seven years after the introduction of the community learning centre program (Statistics Indonesia, BPS, 2008). This means the level of literacy in this country was improved around 9% after the implementation of the community learning centre program (Statistics Indonesia, 2008). The ALG was 1.2% in Indonesia. Through the community learning centre program, people in various communities of the country have learned to read, write, and do simple calculating.

UNESCO (2002, p. 3) states that community learning centre program is one of the major strategies used to decentralize the literacy activities which have a key role in the bottom-up strategy to promote the level of literacy in the local communities. According to UNESCO, the community learning centre program has increased the level of literacy in the communities by establishing the bottom-up delivery of education for basic literacy and lifelong learning, and providing the opportunities for community members. The literacy activities in community learning centre program at the community level has been successful, because every community learning centre program is autonomous in the sense that its programs are selected and designed by members of the community in response to

problems they have identified as existing in that particular community (UNESCO, 2002, p. 3).

The findings are also supported by Kanno and Shrestha (2006, p. 1) who indicate that the absence of a local centre is a main challenge faced by the literacy development process in a country with the low level of literacy. The problem leads to another challenge in the literacy programs and also this has also caused the actual needs of communities to be ignored in a literacy program. They also added that the establishment of a community learning centre program as a local program had solved the problem of illiteracy by designing literacy programs based on the actual needs of the communities. In particular, the program increases the level of literacy of the people in the communities by placing the focus on the actual needs of the communities and combining the literacy programs with life skills.

Nepal also has a successful experience in community literacy development through community learning centre program. In this country, the community learning centre program has had a good role in educating the literacy skills such as reading, writing, and simple calculation to its people. At the same time, the literacy programs provided at its community learning centre have been incorporated with basic literacy, post literacy, boys' and girls' literacy, and women education. The programs have improved the literacy level in this country over the years. For instance, the literacy level of the people before the implementation of the community learning centre program was merely 14%. The percentage was increased to 34.9% seven years after the implementation of the community learning centre program in the country (Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal, 2008; Ministry of Education and Sports of Nepal, 2008). Based on the Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal, the level of literacy has been significantly improved around 20.9% after the introduction of community learning centre program in the country. The ALG in Nepal is around 3%.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community learning centre program has played a very encouraging role in the literacy development of the rural community of Nasr Abad in Iran. On the average, the level of literacy in the community was promoted by 20% through community learning centre program within four years. It can also be concluded that on average, the annual growth level of literacy in the community is around 5%.

In addition to this finding, this study also shows that the successful roles that the program is not the only key that has made the community learning centre program a known phenomenon, but what it makes more interesting is the fact that its success is very much dependent on the presence of effective activities and its relationship with other factors such as the local leaders, the participation of the people in the community, international organizations, good educators, and the government. All these factors have contributed equally to the success of community learning centre program. In other words, each factor has its own advantages and strengths. Removing one factor will retard the process of achieving success. One factor is no more or less important than the others.

Therefore, all the literacy activities in community learning centre program at the community level have been implemented effectively with the co-operation of all these factors. Thus, to determine which factor is more or less important for the community learning centre program is a rather complex task to do. Therefore, without these important factors, the community learning centre program will not be able to successfully carried out.

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