

THE CHALLENGES FACED BY COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER PROGRAM IN COMMUNITY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT: IRAN AS A CASE STUDY

Akbar Zolfaghari, Mohammad Shatar Sabran, Ali Zolfaghari
University Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia
E-mail: akbar_zolfaghari@yahoo.com, shatar@putra.upm.edu.my,
ali_zolfaghari2007@yahoo.com

Abstract

Literacy has played a very important role in Community Development. Without literacy; people have difficulties improving their quality of lives. Iran is no exception. For this reason, Iran has implemented the various literacy programs. One of the programs is Community Learning Center Program (CLCP). So far, CLCP has been implemented into 3517 communities in the country.

Therefore, the general objective of this study was to examine the challenges faced by Community Learning Center Program (CLCP) in Community Literacy Development (CLD) while the specific objective of this study was to describe the necessary actions to strengthen the CLCP in CLD.

Key words: *community learning centers program, community, literacy, development.*

Introduction

Today, 750 million adults are illiterate in the world. In addition to that, 113 million children haven't a chance to attend school. Most of illiterates in the world live in the developing countries. Iran as a developing country has embraced 9 million illiterates. Thus, Iran has allocated great efforts and budgets on the literacy development to improve the qualities of lives (Etaat, 2000). Following the efforts, the government has implemented various literacy programs for literacy development. The Public Program, Literacy Program for the Armed Forces and Person to Person Program were among the launched programs for literacy development in Iran. One of the major literacy programs that has been implemented for this purpose is CLCP (Ebrahimian, 2002b; Mehdizadeh, 2003).

CLCP initially was 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 Asian and the Pacific Countries in 1998 (APPEAL, 2005). The program has been accepted as a result of its history of implementing governmental programmes that were insufficiently responsive to the needs of learners. So far, 25 countries such as Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Vietnam have joined the program (APPEAL, October 2005).

In Iran, the CLCP was launched by the government of Iran in 2000s. Initially, there were four communities in two states were selected to pioneer the program; Chalab, Nasr, Jahanabad, and Hematabad communities in Fars and Ilam states. The communities were selected based on their literacy

level. Communities with the lowest literacy levels and most privation were selected and designed for a two-years period (Ebrahimian, 2002a).

Based on the literacy assessment that was conducted by Ministry of Education of Iran in 2002, encouraging results were found in the pilot program. Due to the significant achievements, all the states in Iran have started to set up their own CLCP. Thus, the number of CLCP in Iran has increased tremendously from 2,317 centers in 2004 to 2,648 centers in 2006 and to 3517 centers in 2007 (Ebrahimian, Mokhtab, & Mosavi, 2007). In the context of Iran, adult literacy level is defined as the population aged 10 years and over who can both read and write with understanding a short, simple statement on their everyday life.

Problem of the Study

Since Islamic Revolution (1979), literacy programs have become a major tool to promote the level of literacy (Ebrahimian, 2002b; Jamshidi, 1988). A sizeable amount of capital has been allocated for the purpose. Despite all of these efforts, the literacy level in Iran was still low (79.5%) compared to other neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Libya, Qatar, Kuwait (Sabagheian, 1992; UNESCO, 2005). Many of the people, who had participated in literacy classes, did not experience much improvement in their literacy level (Abedi, 1991). Several studies have analyzed the factors contributed to the failure of the classes. These studies showed the three main factors that are as follows:

1. Absence of an effective program in the communities
2. Lack of commitment by the people
3. Lack of peoples' participation (Adli & Javdan, 1999 ; Afshang, 1997)

Based on the three factors, the studies concluded that, the lack of an effective program was the major reason in the failure of CLD in Iran. The studies also revealed that, the lack of an effective program will result in deficiencies in other factors, such as lack of community participation and lack of peoples' commitment (Davoudpour, 1994; Ghafari, 1997). Because of the failure of the literacy classes, the government decided to introduce a new program to achieve higher level of literacy. For this purpose, the government has launched the CLCP to improve the level of literacy in the early 2000s. It was expected that, the illiteracy level in communities involved in the program, would be reduced to less than 5% by the end of 2009 as it has been anticipated in Third and Forth Literacy Development Plans of Iran. Despite having significant contribution to literacy development, there are still rooms for improvement for better results. This is due to the several challenges that have been faced by CLCP. Hence, the main questions of the study are: what are the challenges of CLCs in improving the level of literacy in the country; and, what are the challenges of beneficiaries in the use of CLCP?

Methodology of Research

To answer these questions, three types of data were collected; educators, learners and executives' data. Learners' data: from people who have participated in CLCP to learn literacy skills. Educators' data were collected from people who have participated in CLCP to teach illiterates. Executives' data were collected from people who have participated in CLCP to help both educators and learners in their goals. These people were selected because they were involved directly with the CLCs. The respondents have been selected using the purposive sampling technique. There were two types of data that had been collected in this study. There were the primary and the secondary data. The primary data had been collected by having both Face to Face and Focus Group Discussion (FGD), while the secondary data had been collected through the printed and unprinted media, published and unpublished articles, journals, books, reports, and newspapers.

This study was a qualitative analysis study. The results of this study had been analyzed qualitatively such as frequencies, and transcriptions of data gathered during the interview with the respondents. In this study, the qualitative aspects of the documents both published and unpublished had been summarized and classified according to the necessary data in the study.

Results of Research

Challenges faced by CLCP in CLD

Based on the results of the study, centralization, the lack of an effective policy-making, shortage of textbooks, non-concentration of local officials on literacy, insufficient salaries of teachers, financial limitations, poverty among learners, low- insight of the community towards literacy, limitations of specialty human capital, non-update of teaching methods were the main challenges faced by CLCP in CLD in Iran. The detail of challenges faced by CLCP in CLD in the country is shown in the following Figure 1.

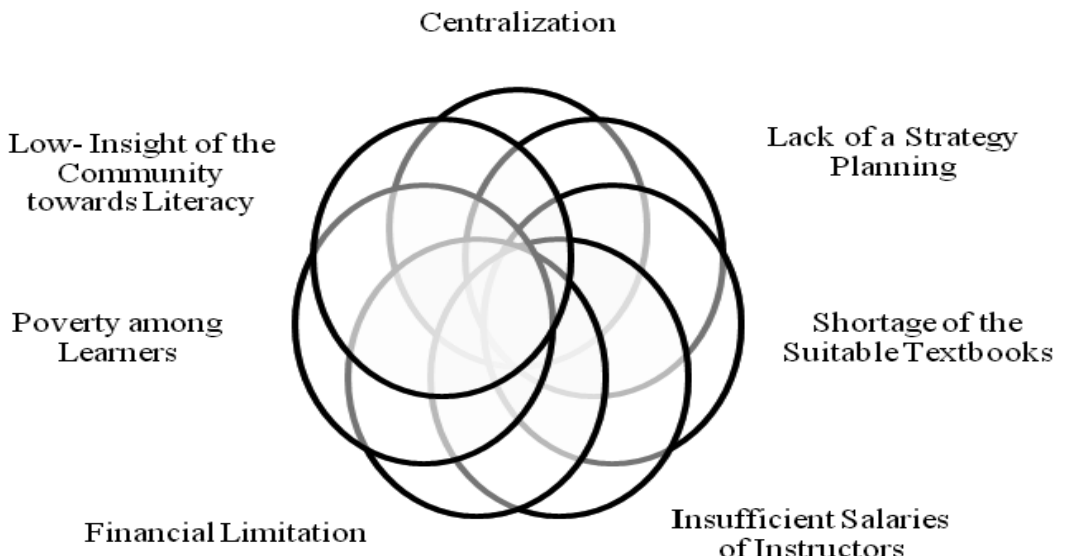


Figure 1. Challenges Faced by CLCP in CLD in Iran.

As shown in Figure 1, the centralization challenge is one of the challenges faced by CLCP in CLD in Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition to the challenge, some other challenges such as the lack of a policy-making, shortage of textbooks, non-concentration of local officials, insufficient salaries of teachers, financial limitation, poverty among learners, and low- insight of the community towards literacy, limitation of specialty human capital, non-update of teaching methods were found. Enfeeblement of CLCP in CLD is dependent on the challenges in which are connected to one another. Overall, all the three different groups of the study believed that, CLCP faced several challenges in improving the level of literacy in communities.

Future Necessary Actions Improving CLCP in CLD

Besides challenges, the results of the study have also shown that, several actions should be implemented to strengthen the role of CLCP in CLD in Iran. Based on the study, change of the community-perception towards literacy, decentralization, financial supports, effective policy-making, localization of the literacy textbooks, building the capacity of CLCP and attention to the needs of communities to design the new textbooks were the important actions to strengthen the role of CLCP in CLD in Iran. The detail of the necessary actions to strengthen the role of CLCP in CLD in Iran that have been studied is shown in Figure 2.

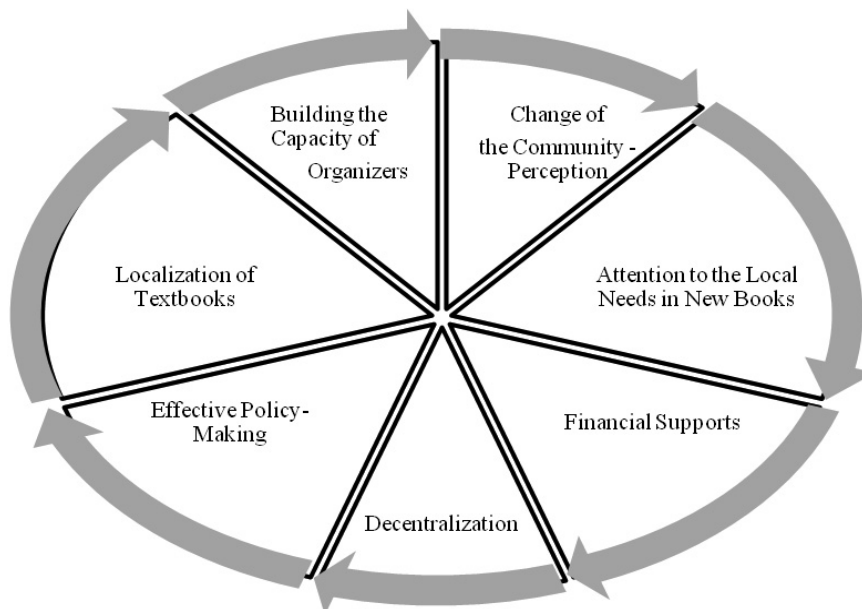


Figure 2. Future Actions to Strengthen CLCP in CLD in Iran.

As shown in Figure 2, to remove the challenges faced by CLCP in strengthening the role of the program in CLD in Iran, several actions need to be implemented. They are the change of community-perception towards literacy using motivational speeches in regards the importance of literacy in daily life, decentralization, financial supports, effective policy-making, localization of textbooks and building the capacity of CLCP organizers. Therefore, many respondents thought, reinforcement of CLCP in CLD are dependent on several necessary actions which are connected to one another. Without these actions, the success of CLCP in CLD faces possible challenges that might affect its accomplishment. These actions help CLCP to improve the level of literacy in different levels both in rural and in urban communities. They are interrelated in the promoting of literacy among the people in the communities. All of the literacy programs and activities in CLCP in the communities will be implemented effectively with cooperation of the actions.

Discussion

The results of some studies, for instance, (APPEAL, 1998, 2008; Sabagheian, 1992; UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2006) show that, challenges faced by CLCP vary from country to country. While China has been able to meet the Dakar literacy goal, more efforts are still needed from other countries, especially in the South Asian region. In Iran, one of the main challenges faced by CLCP was the financial limitations. The financial limitations have been taken into consideration as a challenge faced by CLCP by APPEAL(2008). In list of APPEAL for challenges faced by CLCP in CLD, financial limitations challenge appear to be the first on the list, followed by the linking CLCP to national policy and programmes, management of CLCP, scope of CLCP, CLCP support to Education for All, and collaborative networking.

According to APPEAL(2008), financial limitations are challenges raised in almost all Pacific countries. For example, Thailand presents an analysis of those CLCs which were not initiated and supported by the government and reported: the government should extend financial support to those CLCs with a view to augmenting the quality and coverage of programmes. In addition to Thailand, Indonesian has announced that, the present level of funding is not adequate. Besides the two above, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Nepal, Uzbekistan and Vietnam have also cited financial limitation as a major challenge.

APPEAL(2008) believes that, to harness and sustain the valuable contributions of CLCs and their future potential for reducing illiteracy and promoting literacy, effective arrangements must be

made or explored to strengthen and augment the CLCs' financial base within the broader framework of country-level programme support and funding.

Poverty among learners was the next challenge faced by CLCP in CLD. Middelborg (2002) has addressed the poverty among learners as a challenge faced by CLCP and noted that, to implement a CLCP in communities, that communities must be vocal and competent enough to develop a project proposal and obtain support from the project, because; some of the poorest communities may not have the capacity or resources to develop such a proposal, some among the neediest communities may, hence, be excluded from the process and lose an opportunity to obtain a CLCP that they probably require more than others.

Another challenge faced by CLCP in CLD that has been identified by the respondents of the study was low- insight of the community towards literacy. UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education(2006) have brought up the low- insight of the community towards literacy as a common challenge faced by CLCP and have reported that, because of the challenge, literacy budgets are rather small compared with formal education budgets. It has also proposed that, to remove the challenge, appropriate statistical data on literacy should become available to provide policy makers with concrete evidence concerning the effectiveness of literacy, for example, how many students in equivalency programmes go on to formal schooling(UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, 2006).

Centralization was another challenge faced by CLCP in CLD. APPEAL(1998) has verified the centralization as a challenge faced by CLCP and added that, the curriculum materials, time-allotment, teachers' appointment, salary and all things that happened in CLCP are decided by the governments; hence, the community has not any control on these issues. UNESCO (2004) says, if both formal and non-formal educational institutions being handed over to the community under the decentralization policy, they can share physical facilities and other resources. Decentralization does not mean everything should be done locally, but, the government as capacity builder, facilitator and supervisor has different roles to play. So, the government is not provider, planner and decision-maker.

The next challenge faced by CLCP in CLD was limitations of the specialized human capital. CLCP faced by the challenge not in Iran but in other participating countries. For example, the government of Bangladesh has reported that; CLCP in Bangladesh suffers from an inadequate manpower, staff lacking required efficiency and skill (APPEAL, 2008). According to UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education(2006), this challenge can be solved by using available resources, including local wisdom. UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education have continued that, for solving the problem, it is necessary to link literacy capacity-building with formal education institutions, especially universities.

Based on the results, another challenge faced by CLCP in CLD was the lack of an effective policy-making. This argument has been well supported by Sabagheian. She (1992) believes that, concentration on mere literacy is an effective policy-making to develop the community literacy, because; whenever there is no a concentration on mere literacy, it is not clear, what are the exact duties of CLCP, what is the exact meaning of literacy and what area is more important to focus.

APPEAL (2008) has also addressed the lack of an effective policy-making as a challenge for CLCP and has affirmed that, scope of CLCP is very broad. The area of CLCP varies widely in scope and operation modalities. Measures to delineate and systematize the scope and coverage of programme activities should be based on priority needs, availability of resources and technical expertise. APPEAL (2008) has kept on, CLCP must not claim to do everything, everywhere. CLCP must select and choose programmes and activities that are deemed most essential by the locals, and those that can be managed and supported by the resources available to them.

The last challenge of CLCP in CLD was the non- update of teaching methods. This argument has been supported by UNESCO. UNESCO (2004) has introduced the non- update of teaching methods as a practical challenge faced by CLCP in CLD and has noted that, to solve the problem, policy reinforcement is essential to ensure that the learning needs of the community people in particular disadvantaged groups, ethnic minorities, girls and women are met.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The general conclusion that can be made from all the three different groups which have been discussed is that, there are several challenges faced by CLCP in CLD. Centralization, lack of an effective policy-making, non-update of teaching methods, limitation of specialized human capital, financial limitation, poverty among illiterates, insufficient salaries of teachers, shortage of suitable textbooks were the most challenges of CLCP in CLD.

All the three different groups have also revealed that, several actions are needed to strengthen the role of CLCP in CLD. Change of the community insight towards literacy, decentralization, financial supports, and effective policy-making, motivational speeches about the importance of literacy in daily life, localization of textbooks, attention to the tasteful diversity and local needs in writing the textbooks were the most important actions to promote the role of CLCP in CLD.

The continuation of CLCP' activities are not based on one action. The continuation of CLCP' activities are based on several necessary actions in which of the actions are connected to the other actions. Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations will be the best to promote the level of literacy in the country.

1. Organizing the strategic planning in CLCs
2. Attention to the needs of communities in writing the literacy textbooks.
3. Capacity building of the human capitals
4. Change of the communities-perception toward literacy
5. Attention to the tongue language in literacy classes
6. Applying the new educational models
7. Qualifying the literacy education and classes and
8. Using new techniques such as media for teaching

It is hoped that, these recommendations will become significant guidelines for the government of Iran, Ministry of Education and Literacy Movement Organization of Iran for future community literacy development programs in the country. This is important because Iran could not afford any longer to finance a program which does not produce adequate returns on the investment. This will benefit the people in communities, as the government will have more money to spend on other needs, such as economic, infrastructures and the social development needs of the people, especially during the economic and financial crisis that the country is experiencing today.

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*Advised by Zulhamri Abdullah,
University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia*

Akbar Zolfaghari

PhD Student in Community Development in Faculty of Human Ecology at University of Putra Malaysia, 43400, UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.
Phone: 006-0122646430.
E-mail: Akbar_zolfaghari@yahoo.com
Website: <http://www.upm.edu.my>

Mohammad Shatar Sabran

Associate Professor in Leadership and Community Development at the Faculty of Human Ecology and the Director for Curriculum Center, University Putra Malaysia, 43400, UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.
Phone: 006-03894688557.
E-mail: Shatar@putra.upm.edu.my
Website: <http://www.upm.edu.my>

Ali Zolfaghari

PhD student in Politics and Government in Faculty of Human Ecology at University of Putra Malaysia, 43400, UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.
Phone: 006-0173947415.
E-mail: Ali_zolfaghari2007@yahoo.com
Website: <http://www.upm.edu.my>