

Community Learning Centers Beyond the Traditional Role

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Abstract: This study was aimed at exploring the necessity of life skills education from the viewpoint of learners at the Community Learning Centers (CLCs) in Iran. The target population of this survey research was learners of 16 community learning centers. A stratified random sample of 130 learners participated in the study. Data were collected using a five-point Likert type scale developed by the researchers based on the life skills suggested in the literature. Results indicated that all participants were in favor of life skills education at CLCs. Finally, some suggestions were made towards the improvement of the life skills education for adult learners.

Key words: Life Skills • Community Learning Centers (CLCs) • Adult education

INTRODUCTION

Education for All suggested by UNESCO at The World Education Forum in 2000 has gained the collective commitment of the world community towards education for 'every citizen in every society'. In particular, all countries are now encouraged to ensure that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programs by 2015 [1].

Brighouse [2] suggests a social and practical perspective of education based on four principles flourishing learners to be able:

- to have the opportunity to live autonomously,
- to have the capacity for economic self reliance,
- to have their general and particular interests met and
- to embrace the concept of being good citizens.

In sum, Brighouse [2] advocates an educational system where curriculum is focused yet broad enough to provide students with a variety of opportunities to learn about family life and its complexities, economic life and its demands and about what makes a flourishing life.

As Aguilar and Retamal [3] argued there is a need to expand the scope of community learning centers beyond the traditional concept of literacy. Educational activities should provide a range of learning experiences that will

enable all adult learners to expand their understanding of the world and to better develop their new knowledge and skills. Whatever the situations, education is an essential right of all students. Yet, many children are denied this right and consequently, could not develop and acquire knowledge and skills required to better cope with the challenges of rapidly changing world. Therefore, they fail to contribute to the good of community and cope with life complexities and demands.

Although the buildings and educational equipments may be inappropriate and teachers may not well qualified, still community learning centers are the main establishment available to adult learners in order to enhance their knowledge and skills. Therefore, it seems the most practical approach to adult learning is to steer the existing community learning centers towards a redefinition of literacy.

Various disciplines contributed to life skills education embarked on in 1960s following a shift towards competency-oriented health models [4]. Life skills have received so much attention in the literature [5-14] and are defined as the abilities help people enjoy a productive and satisfying life [15] and to make thoughtful decisions [16]. In general, life skills refer to a range of skills necessary for successful living and are assumed to have a significant impact on individual development. Adult development is meant to promote competent, healthy and successful adults through various kinds of experiences, supports and opportunities leading to positive developmental outcomes

[17]. Life skills training is vital for the promotion of healthy individual development, as well as for the preparation of young people for changing social circumstances. Life skills would help people successfully contribute to the society in which they live. Life skills can be physical, behavioral, or cognitive ones [18]. Life skills education should reflect and satisfy the needs of the target population. Therefore, the type of life skills very much depend on the target population and it may differ from one group to another.

In her study, Anyon [19], identified four kinds of training described as preparation for mechanical labor, low- to middle-level office work, intellectual, scientific and artistic work and finally, leadership, ownership and control. Her research was focused on explicit link between classroom practices and opportunity structures.

Community learning centers are expected to meet the need of relevancy and to take students beyond the traditional reading/writing processes and help adult learners for understanding life, earning a living and contributing to the good of community.

Following the establishment of Literacy Movement Organization shortly after the Islamic revolution in Iran, Community Learning Centers were provisionally established in 1996 to provide all adult learners with basic and continuing education. Through three phases these centers have been widely established across the country.

The present study was aimed at exploring the importance of life skills education from the viewpoint of learners at CLCs in Iran.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This survey research was aimed at exploring perceptions of learners on life skills needed to be taught at the community learning centers. Based on the literature a questionnaire was developed by the researchers. The following main areas were covered in the questionnaire:

- Self-awareness building skills
- Empathy
- Interpersonal communication skills
- Decision-making skills
- Problem-solving
- Critical thinking skills
- Skills for managing feelings

A 50-item Likert type scale was used for data collection. The respondents were asked to express their views on the importance of the presented life skills in relation to the programs offered at community learning centers. The questionnaire had a satisfactory Cronbach's alpha of 91%.

The survey instrument was administered to a stratified random sample of 130 adult learners from 16 community learning centers in Iran.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Responses of participants are presented separately in terms of the main areas of life skills. In general, for data analysis, firstly the unweighted means of aggregated item scores were compared to a theoretical mean using one-sample T-tests.

Table 1 presents responses of learners to items related to self-awareness building skills.

Table 1 shows responses of learners to items of self-awareness skills. All means of item scores were significantly above the theoretical mean.

As for empathy as the second category of life skills, Table 2 present the responses of participants.

As Table 2 indicates, the means of the first two items did not differ significantly from the theoretical mean and therefore they were not found to be essential parts of the program. However, respondents found themselves incapable of considering problems as understood by others. Therefore, they need to be well prepared in this regard by further training and appropriate programs.

With regard to interpersonal communication skills Table 3 shows responses of participants

As shown in Table 3, analysis reveals the agreement of all respondents on the importance of those skills.

With regard to decision making skills Table 4 include responses of the participants.

As shown in Table 4, participants unanimously agreed on importance of the skills presented.

Responses of participants regarding problem solving skills are presented in Table 5.

Clearly, participants were in agreement with the importance of skills concerned.

Table 6 includes responses of participants regarding critical thinking skills.

Obviously, participants significantly agreed with the importance of the skills in question.

Responses to items representing skills for managing feelings are included in Table 7.

Table 1: Self-awareness building skills (N=130)

Item	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Ability to know yourself	4.32	0.65	23.17	0.000
Self-confidence	4.49	0.63	27.75	0.000
Awareness of rights and responsibilities	3.67	0.63	12.16	0.000
Appropriate and accessible goals	3.88	0.54	18.42	0.000

Table 2: Empathy skills (N=130)

Item	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
To show respect for others	3.05	0.45	1.18	0.241
Ability to understand others' needs and circumstances	2.97	0.62	-0.56	0.574
To see issues from others' perspectives	4.04	0.55	21.59	0.000

Table 3: Communication skills (N=130)

Item	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Verbal and non-verbal communication skills	3.38	0.60	7.28	0.000
Ability to express her/his views in a group	4.24	0.63	22.33	0.000
Ability to listen to others	3.51	0.57	10.09	0.000
Ability to negotiate with others	3.80	0.61	14.83	0.000

Table 4: Decision making skills

Item	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Ability to make appropriate decisions	3.72	0.68	11.91	0.000
Ability to evaluate consequences of present actions	3.67	0.66	11.50	0.000
To take responsibility of decisions made	3.11	0.52	2.38	0.019
To make decisions based on possibilities and limitations	3.81	0.69	13.26	0.000
To revise decisions according to new requirements	4.02	0.61	180.98	0.000

Table 5: Problem solving skills (N=130)

Item	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
To diagnose and define problems	3.97	0.65	17.10	0.000
To collect data and relevant information	3.63	0.56	12.87	0.000
To consider alternative solutions to problems	3.83	0.71	13.42	0.000
To choose the best possible solution	3.78	0.54	16.49	0.000
Flexibility in the implementing the solution	3.36	0.56	7.40	0.000

Table 6: Critical thinking skills (N=130)

Item	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
To analyze and investigate issues	4.15	0.68	19.13	0.000
Impartial evaluation and analysis	4.14	0.58	22.35	0.000
To identify relevant information and sources	4.10	0.68	18.44	0.000
To demonstrate an awareness of inequalities, biases and unfair judgments	4.12	0.68	18.77	0.000
To consider issues from different angles	4.06	0.55	21.87	0.000

Table 7: Skills for managing feelings (N=130)

Item	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Positive thinking	3.48	0.59	9.41	0.000
Anger management	4.27	0.68	21.29	0.000
Coping skills for dealing with anxiety	3.32	0.47	7.71	0.000
Coping with anxiety using appropriate techniques	3.59	0.68	9.95	0.000
To understand the consequences of severe anxiety and violence	3.57	0.62	10.44	0.000

As shown in Table 7, skills for coping with feelings are significantly valued by respondents and there should be a need for further training and appropriate programs.

In sum, it can be concluded that participants attached considerable importance to various life skills enabling them to be good members of the society. Meanwhile, results imply that the courses being offered at CLCs are inadequate in preparing adult learners for a pleasant and productive life. Therefore, policymakers should take these skills into account in designing relevant courses and programs.

CONCLUSION

Further, Butterwick and Benjamin [20] argued that life skills are in part a response to the requirements of post-industrial globalization demanding cheap, flexible workers to fulfil the needs of the highly mobile labour market. Having focused on importance of personal development in the new globalized market, Opengart and Short [21] pointed out that the successful people are those who know themselves, their strengths, values and competence to perform and contribute to the society. Also, they properly argued that a market of this kind demands high mobility in labour force led towards employability security rather than job security. To adapt to this new labour market, personal development of workers is of high importance and therefore, workers are required to have proper attitudes and dispositions, high self-esteem, self-efficacy, openness and passion for achievement and change.

As mentioned earlier, the educational system of Iran has expanded learning opportunities for adult learners by establishing and promoting community learning centers. However, there is some doubt about the effectiveness of the CLCs. This paper addressed the need for continuing education for adults beyond the traditional concept of literacy. It seems that adult learners need to be well equipped with required life skills in order to be able to be good citizens and productive members of the society.

Current study reveals the importance attached to life skills by adult learners at community learning centers in Iran. Also, the findings indicate that attention given to life skills education by no means is adequate and therefore, it is essential for Iranian curriculum policymakers to rethink and revise the present curriculum and expand life skills courses for adult learners.

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