

Community Libraries & Combating Illiteracy as a lever to Community Development

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Abstract:

Trust Programs offers various services to marginalized groups in the Palestinian society, especially to villages located in the north west of Jerusalem. These villages are situated behind the annexation wall which isolates them from other urban areas and makes transport and access to social services difficult due to road closures, check-points and restrictions on movement. In many cases these villagers have no access to schools and other educational institutions. With this as a starting point, Trust Programs started working with village communities to establish a community school in partnership with the Palestinian Ministry of Education (MoE). Once the school was established a community library in Al-Jeeb Village was used as a model for other villages in the area. Al-Jeeb community Library is the first community library project to be successfully conducted and implemented and has become a model for other PA and UNRWA schools. This program offers a range of techniques to combat illiteracy and conduct education and community work by learning through dialogue, so participants can reach a level of knowledge which will improve their daily lives. They are able to attain higher achievements in school which creates new opportunities for different generations either through learning, creating job opportunities, or sharing experiences, and cultural and traditional knowledge. The paper will describe how the community library assisted in combating illiteracy in marginalized areas, and how women who are usually neglected in these areas are now the agents of change in their communities.

Keywords: Trust Programs, Palestine, community libraries, women's education

Introduction

The Trust of Programs for Early Childhood (Trust Programs) has developed community schools in cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Education (MoE). The organization was established in Jerusalem in 1984 to raise awareness and to empower the Palestinian community through working with the family as a crucial unit in traditional communities. Trust Programs believes in the importance of bottom-up planning based on the needs of the local community, and works hard to support national

capacities to fight illiteracy through education. The program works to unite families to encourage education, knowledge, and awareness and starts the process by determining individual abilities and building and developing on these. The successful implementation of the program depends on local expertise and trainers who are trained with professional support by social and educational specialists as part of Trust programs intervention. This method is in addition to networking with relevant Ministries and civil society organizations aiming to integrate services.

Trust Programs offers various services to marginalized groups in Palestinian society, especially to villages located in North West of Jerusalem. These villages are situated behind the annexation wall which isolates them from other urban areas, which makes transport and access to social services difficult due to road closures, check-points and restrictions on movement. Trust Programs started working with village communities by firstly establishing a community school in cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Education (MoE). Once the school had established a community library in the Al-Jeeb Village, it was used as a model and copied by other villages in the area. The Al-Jeeb population consisted of approximately 3,805 of whom 1,927 were male and 1,878 female (PCBS, 2007). The illiteracy rate amongst the Al Jeeb population was approximately 7.1%, of whom 78.7% were females. Of the literate population, 14.8% could read and write with no formal education, 30.4% had elementary education, 30% had preparatory education, 12.4% had secondary education and 5.1% had completed higher education (PCBS, 2007).

The community library became a center where all activities were conducted and quickly became an essential part of village life as the library offered its services and activities to all family members. In addition, the library became like a gathering point for all community members to meet, plan, and organize activities. The community library also strongly connected to the people's cultural identity and conducted activities such as Palestinian traditional dance, acting and workshops where parents could produce educational games for their children. In addition, more traditional library activities such as borrowing books, storytelling and educational games were made available for parents, children, and local citizens regardless of gender, to encourage the sustainability of learning by all family members.

Currently, Trust Programs provides assistance for the establishment of community libraries in other two villages located on the other side of the annexation wall. These villages currently face difficult circumstances and shortages of basic needs which allow for a decent living and which causes increased unemployment, violence and dropping out of school. There is also a lack of public institutions that work on community awareness and provide alternative educational pathways for students and adults.

Learn by play program

The community libraries, in cooperation with Trust Programs, targets different groups in the community based on their needs. The first target group is students. Through the community library and with Trust Programs support, 50 female and male (Two - Fifth grade) students with low achievements in school have been targeted. The goal is to combat illiteracy by empowering the students with essential learning skills such as increasing their English and Arabic language skills by simplifying the curriculum and using proper handouts. Other methods include modifying behavior related to psycho-social learning by targeting health concerns, general safety, nutrition and a healthier set of roles within the family and society.

The Learn-by-play program aims to engage students with lower achievements, especially students in PA and UNRWA schools, to improve their reading, writing and math skills, and to lower the percentage of school drop-outs. The program also seeks to empower students by developing their social

skills and values; inspire and develop their creativity and inner capacities; and assist them in gaining real life experiences by completing actual tasks related to realistic life applications using a life learning approach. These students complete activities twice a week through small group work, using methods such as drama, storytelling, games, dancing, music, and work sheets. These activities are planned and carried out by volunteers and family members who began participating in the activities to help their children.

The second target group is parents. The aim here is to get parents more engaged with their children by establishing better communication which focuses on the prevention of violence against children in order to create a safe educational and emotional environment where mutual respect and appreciation of the children's capabilities is encouraged. Activities included an illiteracy workshop for parents (both mothers and fathers). While the mothers' age ranged between 18-50 years old, the father's age ranged between 22-50 years old.

Women tend to be illiterate more than men due to early marriage or because they go out to work early on the farms and help their mothers at home. Even though many of these men and women received an education until the tenth grade, they are still unable to read and write. Such people do not fall in the illiteracy category in the national statistics. A major difficulty for the program was the refusal of many people to attend the illiteracy workshop because they were ashamed or shy. After some home visits by Trust Programs staff and the community library committee, more parents were encouraged to attend these workshops.

The illiteracy workshops include teaching reading and writing, life education and gaining knowledge about the surrounding environment. They also produce stories, comic books and puppets for their children. An advanced illiteracy workshop has also been developed on how to use computers to help participants in their jobs and in teaching their children. The community library has become a hub for parents to exchange their experiences in raising children and how to create a healthy environment within the family that encourages education and discourages dropping out of school.

The Trust Programs also work with school teachers, as part of a comprehensive and holistic approach and act as a support agent for students inside and outside the school. This aim is met by organizing meeting sessions, discussion groups and helping teacher to develop new strategies when dealing with students. It is worth mentioning that a parent-teacher committee has been established to support the above-mentioned activities.

Who works with the students? This role has largely been taken on by young women volunteers aged between eighteen and twenty-five years old who dropped out of school at fifteen years of age. These women are marginalized in their village and generally have very few opportunities to move on in life. Through the community library women work with students according to the criteria of the Learn-by-Play program implemented by Trust Programs, using simple activities applied to the curriculum and worksheets. In this way these women also achieve knowledge in a way that also raises their self-esteem, family and social awareness. The Learn-by-Play program equips these young women with skills such as teaching strategies which cater for individual needs, effective communication skills and the importance of keeping open and democratic dialogue between the teacher and the learner. Furthermore, women are encouraged to volunteer in the community activities of the library and take responsibility in administering the community library.

Mother-to-mother program

The other program which targets women through the community library is the Mother-to-mother Program. This program enables mothers to become familiar with essential knowledge of early childhood development. After the training, the mothers pass on their newly acquired knowledge to other women in their village with the guidance of the Trust Programs staff. The program also strengthens mothers within their social context and encourages them to commit themselves to community work. The program is culturally oriented, the materials given are in Arabic and written according to the needs of the Palestinian community. In addition the program uses children's nursery rhymes from the Arabic culture. The program is modular in nature with a range of different dimensions such as paraprofessional training for mothers who become supervisors, home visiting where the supervisors visit their peers at their home, group supervision at the community library and couples group supervision. The program has proved to become a base to assist with family intervention and for women empowerment programs as many of the family and women programs originated from the Mother-to-mother Program.

Networking

For the community school and community library to succeed and be able to achieve its goal, it was important to network with other NGOs. The Trust Programs have established a strong network with local communities, local institutions, the UNRWA, local councils and the Palestinian Red Crescent. Several activities have been organized with the above mentioned bodies.

Consistency of the Project and Compatibility

As a result of the Trust Programs' projects, the work with the partners will lead to both self and collective empowerment for participants. Students will be able to develop their values, understandings and behavior, through an educational plan that is focused on the student and building his/her character as a whole. On the other hand, collective empowerment will be implemented through group work based on the idea that all people have the right to education, knowledge, entertainment and integration in order to avoid stigma and exclusion. The provision of a suitable environment such as the Community Library helps to develop the values of democracy, humanity, forgiveness and equality between genders. Empowering women's skills and their financial situation, not only involves them in a wider range of life activities, but also leads to empowerment and the sustainable development of women's rights and equality in society. Mothers will be empowered as individuals, as parents and within society as they attend workshops about gender, social roles, time management and how to combat illiteracy. Men are also empowered by attending workshops especially those on combating illiteracy. Men are also targeted in the workshops about their roles within their families as spouses and as parents, as the programs try to reinforce their support for women to attain positive change. Women and men are engaged in the goals and philosophy of the work so as to ensure the prevention of the role gap between women and men. Hence the Trust Programs are directed towards both women and men in the family and not just women.

Conclusions

The importance of the Trust Programs lies in assisting villagers to be able to read, and write as well as saving their oral heritage through documenting their history, traditions, norms, and art in the form of traditional stories and songs. After attending the library activities and workshops, participants worked in groups to write down and document traditional stories told by the elderly or traditional songs and

food recipes. After some time another individual used their newly obtained skills in typing and started to type those narratives into small booklets, thus reserving the history of their ancestors. Fatimah, a beneficiary sums up the value of literacy: “Now I can read electricity and water bills to know how much and where I have to pay”.

The secondary benefit of the program is that the community libraries now are not only a learning hub for reading and writing, but also a tool for documenting the history of these villages. Activities which have been added to the library programs enrich the concept of a community library as a learning hub, thus encouraging those who were not able to continue their education for political, social, or financial reasons. Activating the participants’ sense of belonging to their culture and tradition reinforce their knowledge of themselves and the surrounding environment and encourages working and networking between all age groups and both genders.

References

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