
Festival of Reading Clubs for Children: New Adventures in Social Reading

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Introduction

In recent decades, engagement with books and literary culture has waned among Iranian youth, as studies indicate that only 26% of children voluntarily read beyond school texts, with rates decreasing amidst the proliferation of entertainment options like social media.² This decline is rooted in an education system overly focused on standardized testing and economic factors that limit access to books. However, it is crucial to recognize

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² Qanei Rad, Mohammad Amin, Ali Zamanian, and Abdolhossein Zamiri, "Cultural and Social Consequences of the Lack of Inclination toward Books and Reading in Iran," *Quarterly Journal of Book Review in Social Sciences* 4, no. 14 (2017): 21-5.

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that Iranians retain deep-seated memories and positive sentiments toward books, upholding a profound respect for the written word despite a decline in active reading. Yet, the invaluable benefits of reading, such as cultivating creativity, communication, and empathy in young minds, confront significant challenges in competing with digital diversions. In the face of this complex landscape, concerned authors, educators, and policymakers grapple with finding solutions, asking how reading can regain prominence and how supportive communities can be fostered to reignite the passion for books among the youth. Past state-driven efforts have proven inadequate, calling for a shift toward a new grassroots approach to address the multifaceted challenges within the literary landscape in Iran.

In this contextual milieu, a transformative cultural initiative crystallized—the Festival of Reading Clubs. Its conceptualization in 2014, within the framework of Iran’s Book Capital program, marked a strategic endeavor to immerse children in the pleasures of reading. Manifesting as an open network of local book clubs across the country, this innovative venture provided a platform for young individuals to convene, exchange books, and engage in personal reflections and public discussions. Local facilitators intentionally adopted a hands-off approach, affording participants the autonomy to select literature aligned with their individual interests. The ensuing creative outputs, such as epistolary correspondences with authors and social media expressions inspired by literature, bestowed a sense of ownership upon the youthful cohort.

The idea of running Reading Clubs did not emerge in isolation; rather, it resonated with historical and cultural antecedents. Underpinning this initiative were theoretical foundations valuing decentralized participation, dialogic communication, and an expansive conception of books as entities transcending mere textual artifacts. Crucially, the Festival harnessed Iran’s profound cultural veneration for the written word, fostering dynamic reading communities. The adoption and adaptation of the UNESCO World Book Capital designation played a pivotal role as a catalyst, injecting momentum into this cultural enterprise. In this juncture, a discernible and fortuitous opening materialized within the state, providing an opportune terrain for the realization of this transformative initiative.

The clubs sought to make reading social, fun and tied to youth's identities – contrasting schools' centralized pedagogy. They provided a platform for marginalized voices and activated public spaces through reading. Instead of mandated books, participants chose materials based on interests. Outcomes like films and author letters gave them ownership over interpretation. The aim was to spark infectious enthusiasm for reading by immersing kids in participatory reading cultures alive with free exploration.

This paper documents the initiative's ambitious implementation from 2014-2020 across Iran. It traces conceptual origins, training of facilitators, club establishment, social media integration and impacts on over 450,000 children in 1,800+ towns. Despite challenges, the clubs helped renew books' cultural presence and nurture reading passion in youth. The paper illuminates the successes, lessons and legacy of a program demonstrating the power of decentralized, creative efforts grounded in community participation.

From Idea to Implementation

The idea of building an interactive network of reading clubs tailored for children and young individuals originated within the framework of Iran's Book Capital initiative. Launched in 2013, this initiative represented a localized adaptation of UNESCO's World Book Capital program, designed to incite competition among cities vying for the prestigious title. Two cities, Ahvaz and Neishabur, proposed free book reading competitions during secondary school periods as part of their programs to win the title. The fact that this proposal was put forward in two different regions suggested that it had the potential to be accepted more widely across Iran. A group of writers and researchers specializing in children and youth literature, mainly from the Association of Writers for Children and Adolescents, gathered to revise the original plan, making it suitable for implementation in a range of cities throughout the country.

The main concept involved reading clubs that had a minimal structure, allowing for comparisons and competitions, while maintaining open spaces and opportunities for individual creativity and collective freedom. Local facilitators, who were carefully

negotiated and trained were from the community of local teachers, librarians, and activists, were called to establish reading clubs in collaboration with children. The clubs would buy books and regularly meet to discuss them. During these meetings, which included book exchanges, the children would choose to write letters to their favorite authors, create brief video presentations of books on Instagram, and collectively nominate the best book.

The new program featured revised key concepts, emphasizing a facilitative approach that was less authoritarian in its approach to encouraging book reading. It also underscored the optimal utilization of existing subjective and objective resources, as well as promoting dialogue as a principle and method at all levels. The program aims to foster active engagement and self-expression among children and teenagers, encouraging them to actively participate in reading and community activities. It strives to create an environment where they can gather, immerse themselves in private reading, and later share their reading experiences upon joining the community. The plan started by assembling a team comprising about thirty children's book writers and invested social activists, who would convene to create and rehearse a two-day lesson plan to be executed in different cities. After this, the group members would travel in pairs to the cities to run the educational program they had devised. Also, as a part of the plan, sixteen cities across Iran were identified as destinations for the first round. These cities were selected based on their high scores in the first and second rounds of the Iranian Book Capital project. The cities initially designated included Ahvaz, Bushehr, Dezful, Gonbad-e-Kavus, Isfahan, Kashan, Khorramabad, Neishabur, Ramhormuz, Rasht, Ray, Sabzevar, Shahrekord, Shiraz, Tabriz, and Yazd, reflecting a respect for the diversity of different geographical regions and ethnic groups. In the second round, the number of cities increased to fifty and as the program expanded, it became difficult to send writers and trainers to all the sites requesting a visit. Therefore, in the third round, the workshop implementation was modified to incorporate two stages. Workshops were conducted in all provincial centers to train facilitators. In the fourth round, the program was extended to include villages, resulting in over 1,800 participating cities and villages in total.

The program's expansion allowed for a wider reach and a greater impact on the community, providing access to reading clubs to children and young people across Iran. The program's success is a testament to the dedication and hard work of the trainers, facilitators, and organizers who made it possible. As a professional social worker, I commend their efforts and am inspired by their commitment to promoting literacy and education among Iranian youth.

The program was designed to rely primarily on local independent activists with minimal support from state agencies. Despite several rounds of negotiations with the ministries of education and the national broadcasting system, the efforts proved unsuccessful for political reasons or the rigid and inflexible structure they maintained. However, Reading Clubs were well received by numerous schools and teachers across various cities, and all participants joined the program in their personal capacities.

The Training Programs

A training workshop was established in each city based on the executive and educational program. Local offices of culture provided minimal funding and organization for these workshops. The participants were individuals who were interested in promoting reading, including those who had some association with books and children. A group of teachers, trainers from the Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents, librarians, kindergarten teachers, and other interested parties were invited to these workshops through local announcements and coordination.

The two-day training workshops covered a range of theoretical concepts and practical approaches about the nature and significance of books and reading for children. Participants discussed methods for evaluating books, promoting reading for children, and exchanged their experiences. The schedule of training workshops is presented in the table below:

Table 1. Schedule of Workshops

	8-10 AM	10:30-12	13:30-15	15-16:30
Day 1	Introduction	What we will learn	Individual and Collective Experiences in Promoting Reading	Introducing and Evaluating Children's Books
Day 2	Child Development through Books and Literature	Establishing and Supporting Reading Clubs	Networking with Other Organizations	Documentation and Communication of Activities

The training workshops were designed to cover a range of topics related to promoting book reading and establishing book clubs for children and young adults. The workshops were divided into four main themes, each focusing on specific aspects of promoting book reading and running book clubs.

The first workshop aimed to introduce participants to the program and create a workshop environment by grouping them. In centralized communities, the transition from a structured educational environment to an open workshop space wasn't merely a change in setting; it evolved into an intrinsic creative journey. This shift empowered participants to move beyond formality, encouraging dynamic exploration and active engagement with their world. The workshop also provided an overview of what participants needed to know before launching a book club for children and young adults.

The second workshop focused on sharing individual and collective experiences in promoting book reading. Participants, often experiencing this opportunity for the first time, had the chance to openly exchange insights, ideas, and best practices for establishing and running book clubs, fostering communication with their peers or individuals from Tehran.

The third workshop focused on introducing and evaluating children's books. Participants learned how to select and evaluate books for children and young adults, and how to choose books appropriate for different age groups. In this session, some educational materials were distributed but the participants were also encouraged to discuss their ideas and experiences.

The fourth workshop focused on child development through books and literature. Participants learned how books and literature can promote child development and how to use literature to enhance learning experiences for children and young adults.

The fifth workshop focused on methods for establishing and supporting reading clubs. Participants learned how to create a supportive environment for book clubs and how to develop strategies for sustaining them over time. Many participants had rich experiences in running reading clubs, and their knowledge and expertise were documented and used by trainers in the following workshops. This knowledge sharing helped to build a community of practice around promoting book reading and running book clubs for children and young adults.

The sixth workshop focused on networking with other relevant organizations, providing participants with opportunities to connect with other organizations and exchange ideas, resources, and experiences. One area of focus was funding book clubs, and participants learned different approaches to securing financial support, such as seeking funding through local charities and independent help. The workshop helped participants to identify potential funding sources and develop strategies for securing the necessary resources to support their book clubs.

The seventh workshop focused on documenting and promoting book club activities. Participants learned effective communication techniques, such as media presence, organizing public events, and using social media platforms like Instagram. They also learned how to create compelling stories to inspire others to read and engage with their book club. The participants had already gained rich experiences in these areas, and the workshop provided them with further incentives and strategies to attract new members, secure funding, and build support within the community for their book clubs.

The workshops were brief, lasting no more than three hours each, making it difficult to cover all topics. However, the organizers enhanced the communication and effectiveness by a variety of measures including making the space more informal and communicative, providing socializing spaces during breaks and recreation, as well as creating online communities for continued discussions. During one meeting, participants

were asked to form a Telegram group to stay in touch with each other and the trainers. As a result, many of these online groups remained active for several years, serving as a friendly platform for sharing information and discussing book promotion in the city and the region.

The program was implemented differently in each city, as each had its own unique set of experiences, questions, and requirements. Despite the differences, the trainers made sure to cover all the essential topics in the program. In subsequent implementations in later years, the training program was updated to include new ideas and concepts. One key addition was a focus on the concept of facilitation, which emphasized the importance of creating dialogue in a collaborative learning environment.

These training workshops uniquely emphasize a workshop format that encourages dialogue over a traditional classroom-style learning experience. The trainers were asked to avoid one-sided presentations and lecturing and to create spaces for the participants to share their knowledge and experiences, and express their opinions, to engage in a more interactive learning process. The concept of facilitation and the Socratic method of dialogue were used to encourage active participation and exchange among the participants. This approach enabled the participants to learn from each other, exchange ideas, and develop strategies collaboratively.

The emphasis on dialogue and active participation in the workshops allowed for a more meaningful and effective learning experience for all the participants, including the trainers. In a workshop environment that encouraged dialogue, the participants had the opportunity to learn from each other and exchange ideas, resulting in a freer and more collaborative learning experience. The trainers themselves gained insights and knowledge from the exchange of ideas and experiences, often deeply rooted in local communities. They shared these experiences in subsequent workshops in other cities.

While some participants were used to traditional classroom structures and methods, the workshop format was well received by most attendees, and provided a strong and working foundation for setting up book clubs in cities. The success of the

workshops was evidenced by follow-up surveys, feedback in online groups, and numerous requests from various cities and villages for additional workshops.

The workshops not only empowered participants with new skills and knowledge but also affirmed the efficacy of locally ingrained approaches, deeply rooted in the practices of committed activists at the local level. This acknowledgement fostered a sense of identity in every city, empowering participants to leverage their unique cultural heritage in crafting impactful and engaging book clubs that resonated authentically with their local communities.

The success of the workshops was largely attributed to the participants' accumulated and pre-existing experience. For instance, in the city of Gonbad-e-Kavus, many of the participants were trainers at the Center for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults as well as local librarians, who had already gained practical experience in promoting reading. Similarly, in every city, there were writers, teachers, educators, librarians, and cultural activists who had reliable experience in promoting reading in local contexts, but due to the dominance of authoritarian and centralized methods, they had not found a platform to express their experiences and apply their knowledge. The workshops provided a space for exchanging experiences that different participating groups shared with each other for the first time after years. This exchange not only helped participants to learn from each other but also helped to foster a sense of community and identity among the participants.

Steps to Implementation

The program assigned the responsibility of creating and establishing one or more clubs to individual participants, now referred to as facilitators, who invited approximately ten children from the same age group to join in a social environment to read together. During the first meeting, the club's regulations and name were to be settled. Extensive discussions took place during the two-day workshop regarding selecting a culturally significant and child-friendly club name. The importance of using local names for clubs was emphasized during the workshop, particularly when the aim was to establish a local identity. The children were afforded an unlimited degree of agency in the process of

name selection, wherein they were encouraged to exercise their imagination, preferences, and values. Additionally, the facilitators collected information from the families of club members, including their names, surnames, and national ID numbers, to register them on a website. To become official, the club needed register more information, such as the club name, facilitator name, contact number, email address, age range of club members, and identification information about the members. This information was registered on the book promotion network website at bookpromotion.ir. The facilitators were sent a confirmation via email upon successful registration.

Registered reading clubs had the freedom to hold meetings in any shared space. During the workshops, outdoor spaces were suggested as an option for clubs to meet during favorable summer weather. However, formal spaces such as school classrooms, private education centers, and libraries were prioritized. Each club was encouraged to select a small sign, even just the size of a folder, to serve as its emblem and help establish its identity alongside its name.

In addition to the general framework for club activities, the facilitators were encouraged to engage their experience and creativity to develop the clubs based on members' interests and resources available. Interesting and creative ideas for club development were discussed during each workshop and later put into practice. Examples of such initiatives included Telegram groups, Instagram channels, exhibitions to showcase members' cultural and artistic activities, visits to cultural sites, and meetings with writers, poets, and other local cultural figures.

Books for the Reading Clubs

Traditional book reading competitions usually center around a specific book as the study subject, requiring participants to attend a physical or online space for a test on a designated date. In contrast, Reading Clubs adopt a distinct approach, emphasizing free reading and group discussions. Unlike conventional competitions, there is no assigned book for members; instead, they have the liberty to choose their own reading materials and participate in collective discussions.

To introduce books for the clubs, a group of writers curated a collection of approximately 600 books published in the past five years for children and adolescents. The literature selection was categorized into four age groups: pre-elementary school (prior to the age of 7), the initial three years of elementary school (ages 7 to 10), the latter three years of elementary school (ages 10 to 13), and middle school years (ages +13). Notably, in Iran, the prevalent focus on centralized university exams and the associated competitive environment impedes the cultivation of a culture of free reading among students at the secondary level. The facilitators were asked to rely on their own judgment for this classification, taking into account the children's abilities and capacities, particularly within the two categories related to elementary school years. By using their knowledge of the children's potential and capabilities, the facilitators could determine whether a member belonged to the first or second three years of elementary school. The book list provided enough diversity to allow children to have a wide range of choices. The list was created for three main purposes. Firstly, it aimed to provide a comprehensive collection of recommended books from various expert bodies including the Children's Book Council, the Institute for Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, and the Association of Writers for Children and Adolescents. Secondly, it aimed to weed out unreviewed and low-quality books. Thirdly, it aimed to coordinate with bookstores and publishers to offer discounted prices for the books purchased by the Book Club members. Registered children could buy books with a 50% discount from their local bookstores regardless of their geographical location, and a more limited book list was provided to better manage the distribution process while still including all the decent quality books available in the market.

The Reading Clubs had a key objective of introducing children to the bookstore environment and encouraging them to explore it. To achieve this, Book Club members, along with their friends and facilitators, would visit a local bookstore, where the books recommended for the Book Clubs had been placed on a special shelf or table. This made it easier for the children to find and choose their books. This initiative proved successful, with some bookstores struggling to keep up with the demand generated by the large number of children visiting their shops. Book Club members' information, including their

national ID numbers, was made available to local bookstores via the website, which allowed members to receive a 50% discount on any book purchased from the list, thanks to the support of the Book House Institute.

Thus, each child purchased at least one book at a discounted price, based on their own preferences. Facilitators helped ensure that multiple copies of the same book were not purchased and that there was a diverse selection of books bought by Reading Club members. This diversity was important because children in the Reading Club read the books they had purchased and then exchanged them with their friends.

Club Activities

Club members were required to provide two main outputs: a letter to an author of their choice, and a short film centered around the books they have read. Children were encouraged to discuss the book within their club, orally reproduce the story in their own words, and share their opinions on the book, its story, characters, language, illustrations, cover design, and even authorial intentions. During their discussions, the children generated ideas for writing a letter to the author and creating a short film. The children's work during these sessions was documented by the facilitator and included in a report.

The letter to the author is a crucial element of the Reading Clubs, as it provides children with a unique opportunity to connect with their favorite writers and establish a relationship with them. The Reading Clubs strive to establish direct relationships between all individuals involved in the book cycle, most specifically authors, bestsellers and readers, thus promoting social cohesion and eliminating hierarchical barriers. Moreover, authors benefit from gaining direct insight into the minds of children. For writers living in large cities, understanding how children from different regions of Iran with diverse socio-economic backgrounds interpret their work and what they think about the book is of utmost importance. This connection can serve as a foundation for new and creative literary works. After several rounds of the Reading Clubs for children and young adults, many authors have expressed their eagerness to travel and meet the children who have written them letters.

ما معلم و فتنه ما شایسته خدمت شما نویسنده‌ی ارجمند حساب کتاب می‌رساند و مسرتان آرزوی ما است.
اول از همه به شما عرض می‌کنم که به حق نوشتن کتاب «لالایی برای دختر مرده»
کتاب شما نکته‌های جالب و زندگی آمیزی داشت که آرا و اندیشه‌های بسیار جالب کتاب
اطلاعه به هم نمی‌خوانند؛ لازم نبود در باره‌ی شکر کردن از عنوان خیلی توضیح دهیم، می‌توانستید
نکات خسته کننده مثل بعضی از سخنان «میرزا جعفر خان» یا شخصیت «من» را حذف کنید این گونه
صحف کتابتان کم‌تر می‌شد، اما این را هم می‌دانم که بابت نوشتن کتاب رنج و مصیبت‌های
بسیاری کشیده‌اید. خیلی ازتون استقبال کردم که موضوع «دختران توپانی» را برای ما
بازگو کردید. راستش در دنیا انسان‌هایی هستند که به کمک ما نیاز دارند. شما با این کتاب
به ما هم یادید که همان‌طور که کره‌ی زمین گرد است دنیا هم روزی گرد خواهد شد
آن وقت انسان‌هایی سحرمان می‌ماند که به یکدیگر نیکی کنند و یکدیگر را با همدیگر با هم دوست
بدارند. خداوند یار و نگهدار شما باشد. . . .

زهره لقی از باشگاه انسی
کتاب: لالایی برای دختر مرده.

Image 1. Reproduction of a letter by an eleven-year-old girl to Hamid Reza Shahabadi, young adult novelist (translated below).

Below is an example of a letter written by an eleven-year-old girl to a writer.

Hi Dear Respected Author, Mr. Hamid Reza Shahabadi,

First of all, I would like to say thank you for writing the book “Lullaby for the Dead Girl”. Your book had interesting and educational points, but to be honest, in some parts of the book, it was hard to read. It was not necessary to explain the Arghavan village so much. You could have removed some boring points such as some of the speeches of “Mirza Jafar Khan” or the character “I”. This way, your book would have been shorter. However, we know that you have gone through a lot of hardships to write this book. I am very grateful to you for telling us about the subject of “selling girls in Goochan”. In this world, there are people who need our help. With this book, you have taught us that just like the earth is round, the world will also turn one day. At that time, kind people will remain who will be kind to each other and love each other despite any distance. May God be with you and protect you.

Sincerely,

Zohreh from Ensi Reading Club.

In the five rounds of the Reading Club Festival, thousands of letters have been received by the secretariat, demonstrating the high value of reading and analysis. Several times this number has been written in each region, but some were excluded from being sent to the secretariat in the initial evaluations and local judging. Even if these letters were rejected for their writing style and composition, they still hold analytical value and contain important cultural contents that have been overlooked by centralized approaches. Most importantly, they have created a sense of connection between young readers and their favorite authors.

The start of reading clubs in Iran coincided with the rise in popularity of social media, particularly Instagram. Although advanced digital cameras and relatively good internet were available, the ability to use them effectively and produce meaningful content was lacking, resulting in untapped potential. Reading clubs provided a platform for these tools to be utilized in creating short films that promote reading and books for children. The stories in books offer excellent themes for short films, where children can act out scenes from the story, give oral presentations about the book and its lessons, or share their thoughts on the story. These ideas, inspired by the text and discussions held in reading clubs, can be used to produce compelling short films that can be shared on social media platforms like Instagram or submitted to festivals. Typically, the number of films received by the central secretariat is equal to or greater than the number of written submissions, and the most creative and honest works stand out. However, since adults are often involved in creating the films, they can sometimes be infused with adult thoughts and concerns, resulting in less intimacy than can be found in written submissions. Nonetheless, children's reading clubs provide a supportive and inspiring environment for children to create meaningful and impactful video content that can encourage other children to read and learn.

Social Media

When the Festival of Reading Clubs was first conceived, social media networks were not included in the original plan. However, some trainers suggested creating Telegram groups in each city if members needed to communicate more effectively. The trainers

themselves joined these groups to keep track of ongoing discussions in different cities. In practice, the creation of Telegram groups in each city played a crucial role in the rapid expansion of the Festival. This phenomenon was not limited to Telegram, as many Instagram accounts became active, showcasing the activities of each club. For instance, after launching a club affiliated with a rural library in the outskirts of the northern city of Gonbad-e Kavus, a picture of the club's members was posted on Telegram. This led to an explosion of pictures being shared on Instagram in cities like Khormoj, Yazd, and Shahr-e-Kord in central and southern regions, with each city sharing visual reports of their clubs until the closing ceremony. Many of these early Telegram groups and Instagram pages are active at the time of writing this report. As a result, various images and content produced during the Festival of Reading Clubs spilled over into social media spaces, leveraging the capacities of new media to convey reading promotion messages. Every image posted not only created movement in other clubs and cities but also helped to create fresh identities centered around books. Members of the clubs proudly posed with their books and shared their pictures on social media, which had a ripple effect in other clubs and cities. This contributed to a sense of community and shared identity among the Festival of Reading Clubs participants.

The Five Rounds of the Reading Club Festival

The first round of the Festival of Reading Clubs started on September 5, 2016. Gradually, as instructors traveled to the cities over the following month, the sixteen cities chosen began to form and register book reading clubs. In this round, more than 2,000 clubs were formed quickly and efficiently, representing some 22,000 members.

On Wednesday, March 1, 2017, the closing ceremony of the Festival of Reading Clubs was held in the presence of the ministers of Culture and Islamic Guidance and Education. Instead of a speech, selected members, who were invited from different cities, interviewed Dr. Danesh Ashtiani, the then Minister of Education. They asked him, for example, which books he had read that made him a minister. They also criticized the centralized policies of the formal educational system.

The second round of the Festival of Reading Clubs began in 2017 with a group of children's and young adult literature writers and researchers visiting eighty cities. During this round, over 5,000 clubs with nearly 60,000 members were registered. Each city held a closing ceremony, and news of these events were published in online news agencies and can be searched and viewed. The final closing ceremony was held in Tehran.

Starting from the third round, the reading clubs have been aligned with the national school calendar. During the summer months, workshops were organized in Tehran and provincial centers, followed by provincial workshops held by facilitators invited by each province. The following table illustrates the statistics for these five rounds of execution.

Table 2. Participation statistics for the Festivals of Reading Clubs, 2016-2020

Round	Year	Participants	Clubs	Members
1	2016	15 cities	2000	22000
2	2017	102 cities and villages	5000	60000
3	2018	1746 cities and villages	15107	221320
4	2019	1820 cities and villages	21948	335978
5	2020	1960 cities and villages	27000	450000

Challenges and Problems

The Festival of Reading Clubs was implemented with remarkable cost efficiency in comparison to similar programs. The only substantial expenses were travel costs for dispatching writers to various cities. Each city managed to host trainers with minimal expenses. Even in some small towns, local managers and facilitators generously hosted visiting trainers in their homes, which not only reduced costs but also fostered a more intimate and effective form of communication.

The Festival of Reading Clubs did, however, encounter one major obstacle that posed a greater threat than financial constraints: widespread misconceptions about its format. Despite its flexible structure that could be adapted to various settings and resources, many individuals and government officials remained entrenched in a rigid,

centralized mindset. Instead of recognizing the Festival's emphasis on openness and creativity, they fixated on irrelevant details such as club meeting schedules, age limits, dress codes, and gender segregation. This misguided focus arose from a centralized education and administration system that failed to comprehend the Festival's innovative approach. The Festival encouraged a facilitative and communicative approach that allowed each city and facilitator to tailor the Festival according to their local context, cultural heritage, and economic resources. Despite the Festival's decentralization, many officials still expected centralized control over all matters, big or small. The secretariat acknowledged this as a significant challenge and devised strategies to combat it, such as direct communication at various levels.

The second issue the Festival encountered was administrative in nature, particularly a lack of coordination between state entities. The Books House Institute had pledged to provide book discounts to all children who were club members, a much-needed initiative especially in economically disadvantaged areas. The website provided a comprehensive and accurate live database of club members for the Institute, which successfully facilitated the discount for some children but not for many others. In some cities, the Institute even distributed books for free, which contradicted the Festival's philosophy that free books often remain unread. Such inconsistencies triggered dissatisfaction among club members and their families, leading to a need for additional support from the Festival to address these discrepancies.

The Festival of Reading Clubs faced a formidable obstacle in the form of a rigid, centralized culture that failed to comprehend the Festival's innovative approach. Despite the success of the Festival in communicating with children and training facilitators, the formal culture's political and economic power remained unchallenged. The Festival's emphasis on openness, creativity, and decentralization clashed with the centralized mindset of many individuals and government officials. Nonetheless, the Festival made important strides in introducing an informal education approach to school teachers and other facilitators. Its legacy remains a testament to the power of open reading and community-driven initiatives and the potential for change, even in the face of formidable challenges. The Festival's emphasis on free reading and encouraging children to read

what they found interesting and to communicate their understanding of the text, was an essential aspect of its approach to fostering a love for reading, and this message resonated deeply in many towns and villages, creating new identities with open projects to run.

Analysis and Discussion

The success of the Reading Club Festival can be attributed to its emphasis on promoting free reading and encouraging children to read what interested them. This approach fostered a love of reading among participants, and this message resonated deeply in many towns and villages, creating new identities with open projects to run. Moreover, the festival succeeded in bringing about educational phenomena that were not only unexpected, but unprecedented. The most significant phenomenon was the reception of the program in the most remote towns and villages, where many people were interested. Members of the clubs, their families, facilitators, local managers, and even industries in each city seized the opportunity to present their indigenous culture and join a dialogue based on reading and book culture.

The Reading Club Festival was geographically widespread, from Golestan province in the north to Bushehr in the south, and from West Azerbaijan province in the north western corner to Sistan and Baluchestan, Khuzestan, and North Khorasan in the other corners. This geographic and cultural diversity allowed activists to communicate with each other on social media networks and present their achievements, leading to a deeper understanding of themselves and their roles in the world. As a result, waves of diverse cultural activities emerged, inspiring every viewer.

The festival proved to be a powerful platform for women and girls, who represented the majority of participants both as club members and facilitators. Despite operating within a patriarchal society that often suppresses female voices, over 70 percent of the club members were girls, marking a groundbreaking milestone. Through working with texts and choosing their own materials, these girls learned how to read freely, and discovered how subverting dominant norms is possible through reading as a

powerful form of resistance. They were empowered to create their own identities, build their communities, and shape their futures through the transformative act of reading.

The program also revitalized the role of books in public spaces, bringing reading back to the forefront of cultural activities. In particular, children and teenagers eagerly embraced the intellectual and cultural competitions that were previously unheard of in other educational and cultural settings. Bookstores that collaborated with the program were astonished by the visits of children and teenagers, acknowledging the impact of this initiative.

The Festival of Reading Clubs proved to be a unique cultural and social activity that set a simple framework for execution, leaving all the operational details to the main executors – local managers, facilitators, club members and their families. The program provides an unparalleled opportunity for all local managers and activists to implement a standard program with local color. On the one hand, city activists were associated with the local management, and on the other hand, local managers found an opportunity to showcase their abilities and their city's capabilities nationally. This is basically possible around books; any other subject sparks uncontrollable controversies in the first meetings.

Moreover, authors and researchers who were dispatched to cities as trainers both had the opportunity to share their knowledge with people from different cities, and also expressed happiness for gaining new experiences and returning with a full hand of achievements. They saw the Festival of Reading Clubs as a great opportunity for a deeper understanding of the realities and active cultural movements in various cities across Iran. Anyone who has participated in or witnessed the activities of the Festival of Reading Clubs, whether they are a writer, a club member, a facilitator, an expert in one of the small city government agencies, a journalist, an external observer, or – most importantly, a child – will say that they have learned something new from this program.

[Update note: The Festival of Reading Clubs has seen its database expand to include 132,701 club members and 7,277 registered facilitators. However, the outbreak of Covid-19 dealt a severe blow to the Festival, which was further compounded by the

shift in state administration in 2021. As a result, the new leadership at the Ministry of Culture has taken control of the secretariat website, bookpromotion.ir, but they lack the motivation and resources to operate it effectively. Despite this setback, all data has been securely transferred to another domain in search of new opportunities to flourish. Meanwhile, the children and the reading clubs continue reading even more freely.]