

Challenges Facing Public Education in Afghanistan: Examining the State of Middle Level Education

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Few educational systems throughout the world have experienced the extent of educational oppression seen in Afghanistan. Members of the Taliban have destroyed schools, killed teachers, and denied women the opportunity to receive a basic education. The Taliban Regime has been overthrown since 2001 and a resurgence of educational opportunities is underway. The educational system is in a period of reconstruction and the role of middle level education needs to be explored. This essay provides a basic overview of the Afghan educational system and explores the state of middle level education.

A History of Oppression

Afghanistan has a long history of violence directed toward students, teachers, and educational institutions. The communist coup of 1978 spawned an armed resistance movement against Soviet forces and warfare spread throughout the country. The country's educational system became a victim of the hostilities. In 1983 the Afghan Foreign Minister notified the United Nations that 50% of the schools in Afghanistan had been destroyed (Glad, 2009). The Taliban Regime secured power in the mid 1990's and used violence, arson, intimidation, and murder to actively oppress education. Skaine (2002) noted "one of the Taliban's first rulings prohibited girls and women from attending school" (p. 65). The hostile environment caused many of the best-qualified teachers to flee the country (Ewans, 2002).

A Resurgence of Education

The Afghan educational system is reemerging, expanding, and developing in the wake of the Taliban's oppression. Foreign aid, support from non-government organizations, charitable contributions, and the efforts of the Ministry of Education have promoted new educational opportunities. New schools have been constructed, literacy rates have increased, and girls are actively encouraged to attend school. The U.S. spent 408 million dollars, between 2002 and 2008, for educational projects in Afghanistan (USAID, 2009). Organizations such as the Central Asia Institute are building schools in rural areas (Mortenson and Relin, 2006; Mortenson, 2009). Middle school students from the U.S. have helped fund the Central Asia Institute through a charitable initiative known as Pennies for Peace (Central Asia Institute, 2010). The cumulative effect of the educational support has produced favorable results. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Culture Organization Institute for Statistics (2010) reported the percentage of female students, enrolled in primary education, was 7% in 1999 and rose to 38% in 2008. Schools under the control of the Ministry of Education have increased enrollment from 900,000 in 2001 to more than 6 million in 2008 (Glad, 2009).

Modern Challenges

Although the resurgence of learning is a welcomed step forward, it faces some daunting challenges. The Afghan government currently lacks the ability to provide universal access to all prospective students. Approximately 5 million of the estimated 12 million school-aged children do not have access to education (Ministry of Education, 2010). The main obstacles for universal access are funding and security. Although the

Taliban have lost political control of the country, they are desperately trying to regain it and militants continue to launch attacks against the education system. A total of 1,153 attacks were carried out against schools, educators, and students between January of 2006 and December of 2008 (Glad, 2009).

What is Middle Level Education?

The Ministry of Education has not officially established middle school as a separate entity. The primary reason is that the development process would substantially increase the cost of the educational reconstruction effort. Moreover, Afghanistan still needs to provide basic access to approximant 5 million children as soon as possible. Adding a separate entity would slow the efforts to expand education because it would require scarce resources such as teachers and buildings.

The Afghan government has developed a 9-3 educational model. Primary education includes grades 1 through 9 and secondary education includes grades 10 through 12. However, alternative models have been established by non-government organizations. The Ministry of Education usually welcomes non-government organizations that can establish schools in places where the Afghan government cannot. Several middle schools have developed in this fashion. The United States Agency for International Development built the Sherzad Girls Middle School located in the Nangarhar province and the Central Asia Institute has built at least two middle schools in the Badakshan Province.

A specific age group that corresponds to specific grade levels has traditionally defined middle level education in the U.S. (e.g. grades 6 through 8). This U.S. model is

not a ready fit for Afghanistan because the relationship between student age and grade level is not static. Middle level education cannot be defined by grade level and corresponding curriculum because it would ignore the wide variation in student age and their corresponding developmental needs. Many students enter the system for the first time at a very late age. It is not uncommon for an 11-year-old student to enroll in the first grade. The age variation is attributed to scattered access and limited opportunities throughout the country. New schools are often built in locations where children have never had access and children of all ages are encouraged to enroll. The Ministry of Education has set a goal of implementing a twelve year plan in which all school age children would be in attendance by 2015 (Ministry of Education, 2004). If successful, the plan would greatly reduce or eliminate the age variation among grade levels. This would eventually lead to a more static relationship between student age and their grade level. This could be a significant step toward creating conditions in which middle level institutions could be developed.

Any future institution or educational model will involve extensive research and the difficulty in defining middle level education can pose a unique challenge for researchers. Traditional quantitative studies are unlikely to accurately represent middle level populations because a universally accepted definition has not been established. If researchers define a study exclusively in terms of age, it would ignore the variation in grade level. Conversely, if researchers define a study exclusively in terms grade level or curriculum, it would ignore the variation in student age. Indeed, middle level education is “too complex to be defined by only one element” (Clark and Clark, 1994, p. 6). Researchers can become trapped in a quantitative quagmire. Accordingly, qualitative

research methods are the best tools available for conducting future research in Afghanistan.

Conclusions

Afghanistan's educational reconstruction effort continues in spite of the danger posed by the Taliban. Substantial improvements have been made for public education and a resurgence of learning is underway. Although the current situation remains extremely volatile, the future for public education in Afghanistan can be promising. The international community should continue to work with the Afghan government to establish peace and promote education. If peace, stability, and universal access to education are achieved then the government could begin to develop separate middle level institutions. In the meantime, researchers should pursue qualitative case studies of the existing middle schools that have been developed by non-government organizations.

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