Afghan President Hamid Karzai talks during the opening ceremony for the "National Institute of Administration and managment" at Amani high school in Kabul on September 6, 2008.
AFP PHOTO/ Massoud HOSSAINI

How to do more, faster: The Current Status of Afghanistan's Education

By Jo Ann K. Intili, Ph.D and Ed Kissam[1]
Aguirre Division, JBS International Inc.

Introduction

In 2002-2003 there was a 'rapid response' to the challenge of rebuilding Afghanistan's education system. In 2005, the pace of progress has slowed; and, as of 2008, while there is a clear plan and organization capacity-building efforts have increased, there is little evidence of enhanced system effectiveness on the ground, outside of Kabul. For students and communities outside of Kabul, very little of the intense planning has translated into perceptible changes in the quality of instruction students receive day to day in the country's more than 9,000 schools. With limited visible improvements, resurgent conservative groups are resuming their attacks on schools, making further improvement more difficult.

In this article we discuss the current situation of education in Afghanistan and argue that decentralizing the system, moving quickly toward community-managed schools, with greater utilization of accelerated learning program designs is more likely to succeed than the current cautious, centralized, approach.

Afghanistan's Education System at the End of Emergency Reconstruction from 2002-2004

As of 2004 the condition of school facilities in Afghanistan was challeng-

ing but dramatic progress had been made in the previous 3 years. About 4.8 million students were in school and there were 121,000 teachers. However, less than 17% of the communities had a facility in which secondary level teaching took place; and there were few teachers available and able to teach at that level in any case.[2] An underlying strategic question which emerged then and continues today is whether dramatic increases in primary enrollment will actually sufficiently prepare a new generation of Afghan children to work in emerging occupations in a revitalized economy, and whether the quality of student outcomes at the end of the constitutionally guaranteed 9 years of free public school instruction will result in improved productivity and meaningful participation in democratic processes.

Status Quo of Afghanistan's Education System as of late 2007

By late 2007, the condition of the education system in Afghanistan improved somewhat with more school facilities, more available textbooks, improvement in some school conditions, more students attending school, and more teachers available to teach. As of 2007, under Minister Hanif Atmar, community-based schools and their teachers were incorporated as part of the formal government school system. Many schools were adding grades to provide instruction for grades 7-9 where these were not previously available. However, in 2007 and 2008, with about 4.9 million students actually attending school (although 5.8 million were officially enrolled), there had been a very small increase in the number of teachers available to teach them – up by 17% from 2004 to about 142,000 classroom teachers.[3] In fact few new teachers were going into pre-service teacher training because of the teaching conditions and financial incentives.[4]

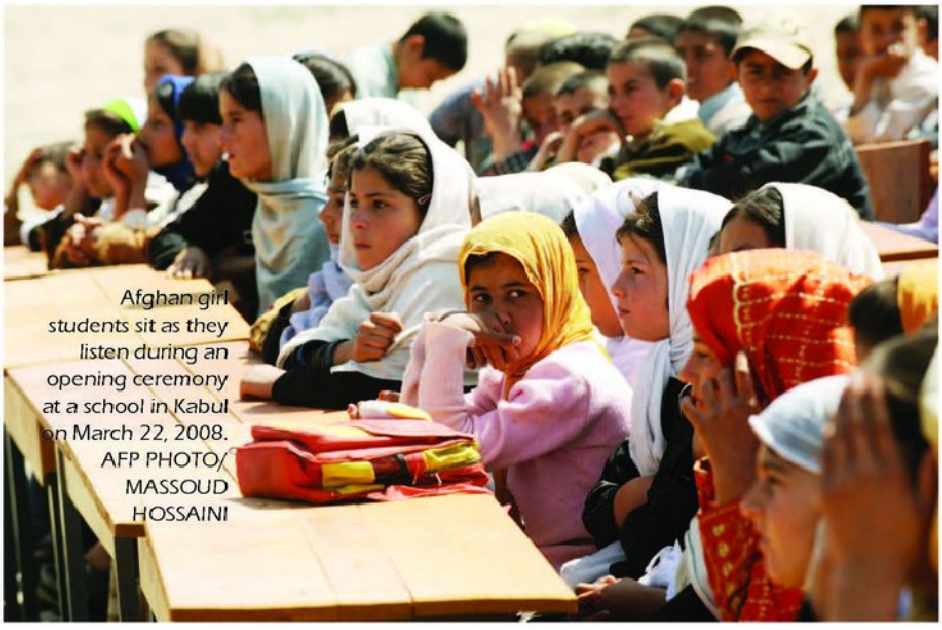
Teaching and Learning as of 2008[5]

Afghanistan's permanent teachers are required to have a 12th grade education. However, one cannot assume that teachers with the requisite educational attainment necessarily have the knowledge and skills to teach elementary school, especially as the subjects become more difficult from grades 4 through 9. In late 2005 about 15% of the nation's teachers attended an initial pilot program of in-service training (INSET I). By 2008, a "national" teacher training initiative was begun, with about 65 hours of actual workshop time centering on general instructional techniques, but without achievement benchmarks for teachers or reference to expected student learning outcomes and skills acquisition. Although follow-up training is planned, interviews with a subset of teachers in the pilot for the first training were unclear how it would help them; or what they would be able to do with what they already learned.[6]

Grade-by-grade analysis of 2007 National School Survey data suggest that more and more parents are deciding not to enroll their children in 1st grade.

This short-term training approach is clearly inadequate as a means for addressing chronic shortages of qualified teachers since there are no provisions for teachers to continue to build their skills; nor does it address either teacher turnover or differences in teachers' levels of training need. With somewhere between 15,000 and 30,000 teacher leaving the teaching labor pool each year, managing skill development is a real issue; and with no way to assess need for training – for there were no clear outcomes defined or expected from the training – there is a real opportunity for wasting resources with unneeded training.

With regard to student learning outcomes it is not possible to say what has been achieved by education investments in Afghanistan. In our review of end-of-year tests (typically 10 questions per subject, developed by the teacher, either individually or as a team), what was measured was haphazard—sometimes it was the most recently-taught material, sometimes the most basic material taught during the year. There are plans to change the testing process, but without attention to what students actually need to know or how they would use it or how teacher training will impact learning. Without adequate supplies of paper (or storage for records) the problem of student assessment is larger than the operation of test construction.



Afghan girl students sit as they listen during an opening ceremony at a school in Kabul on March 22, 2008. AFP PHOTO/ MASSOUD HOSSAINI

Kabul on March 22, 2008.
AFP PHOTO/
MASSOUD HOSSAINI

The Results of Stalled Top-Down Education Reform

Grade-by-grade analysis of 2007 National School Survey data suggest that more and more parents are deciding not to enroll their children in 1st grade. In 2007, the cohort of students who entered 1st grade in 2004 was 9% larger (even after 4 years of attrition as they moved toward 4th grade), than the 2007 cohort of entering 1st graders. While rates of student dropout vary greatly from province to province, the national dropout rate is about 15% per year. Students and/or their parents are "voting with their feet" to pull students out of school to enter the labor market or to marry.[7] Data from the National Rural Vulnerability Assessment 2005 survey (MRRD 2007) suggest a rural primary enrollment rate of only 36% of eligible children.[8]

Significant problems regarding overall numbers of trained teachers are exacerbated in the rural areas by exacerbated by lack of funding for student supplies (paper to write on, pencils and pens), instructional materials (maps, wall charts, library books to provide reading opportunities beyond the skeletal material in textbooks). Additionally, use of multiple shifts to accommodate schooling demand (in one-third of the schools), teachers absenteeism (due to salary lapses of up to 6 months, and the need to hold second jobs), cancellation of classes for local celebrations; and bad weather (due to some classes' lack of heating, cooling, or proper shelter) constrain teaching and learning effectiveness.

What we are seeing here, in part, is that the problems of infrastructure taint pursuit of quality in education experience. Parents and community members, as well as community and educational leaders don't know exactly what to look for as high-quality student learning. They don't know if it's worth waiting for or how long they will have to wait. What they do see is the uneven operation of a struggling education system—schools which do not always operate every day of the week, or on a set daily schedule, and teachers struggling to master the subjects they teach. Understandably, they are uncertain as to what the process might be for moving toward quality education and how the education system and others are leading them toward it.[9]

Prospects for Education Reform

The National Strategic Plan for Education in Afghanistan (December 2006) addressed a range of relevant issues, but the plan for action has a long lead time before it can reach local schools.[10] The question that looms when looking at strategic planning for education is how much can be done from the top? How long will it take? How can the communities themselves be brought into the process; how can the local teachers and administrators be brought into the process? Which parts of the process can be sped up, and which parts require external control? None of these have been addressed.

Right now a large cohort of students is moving from elementary into mid-

dle and high school. Something must be done to actively involve them in an ongoing education process, or they will be left behind, turned off perhaps, and cut short in their personal, social and vocational development. This is not an idle concern. What is at stake is the possible loss of a generation of people who could help foster the well-being of their families, and position Afghanistan for forward movement into the 21st century. This is also, a political goal since a population which has gotten little from school attendance beyond a certificate cannot be expected to truly appreciate education, support investments in education, and engage fully in dialogue about policy options. The growing numbers of dissatisfied and disappointed students and parents erode support for education as a national priority. Uneven access and inequitable allocation of scarce resources underscore the populace's worst fears about government institutions.

The process of responding to widespread demand for quality education must urgently be accelerated before Afghanistan reaches a "tipping point" where commitment to education (for girls or boys) crumbles.

Lessons Learned–Accelerated Learning and Relevant Student Learning Outcomes

Accelerated learning (AL), as it has been implemented in Afghanistan to date, would essentially double the capacity of the national education system because, by covering two grades in one year, each cohort of students would finish school in half the usual span of time. Accelerated learning (AL) programs have worked for Afghanistan to increase both student enrollment and regularity of attendance, with better than adequate outcomes [11] Starting at the lower primary levels, this would free up some teachers to work at higher primary levels; and would involve communities in visualizing and reviewing the outcomes – in becoming engaged and committed.

Generally the opposition to accelerated learning has been that it cheapens education preparation. Arguably students don't get a rich educational experience from it; it seems like a shortcut. [12] However, in tests of the outcomes from accelerated learning educational formats in the USAID-funded AL program for Afghanistan (APEP), as well as in other settings outside of Kabul, learners have gained at least as much in AL programs as standard programs.[13] Moreover, in APEP, evaluation data showed that AL improved local appre-

Parents and community members, as well as community and educational leaders don't know exactly what to look for as high-quality student learning.

Afghan girl students sit as they listen during an opening ceremony at a school in Kabul on March 22, 2008. More than 5.4 million children are enrolled in Afghan schools today, 35 percent of whom are girls, compared to a little more than a million five years ago, with almost no girls. AFP PHOTO/MASSOUD HOSSAINI

ciation of schools and what they can do for a community. These also improved student performance through community involvement; and cumulative drop-out for AL Grades 1-6 was about 12% - less than a third of the drop-out rate in the formal schools.

The promise of AL has been closely linked to reconsideration of curriculum content. An alliance of educators, business people, and others, brought together in The Partnership for 21st Century Skills[14], notes that the focus of learning for students today needs to respond not only to the basic skills of yore but also to include 21st century interdisciplinary themes – global awareness, economic and entrepreneurial literacy, civic literacy and health literacy. More emphasis on thinking, learning, problem-solving, creativity, innovation, communication, and collaboration skills will be required in Afghanistan's education system, as well as focus on information and communication technology and provision of a solid foundation for lifelong self-directed learning (especially since access to and quality of the formal education system is so compromised).[15]

The vision of accelerated learning, as an adaptive approach to fostering student learning can and should be integrally linked to reforming curriculum to address pressing societal needs, and a rapid movement toward decentralization to the local school level. As Pearlman points out, effective school design is not just a matter of the moment. Rather it is the result of reviewing curricula, activities and learning activities in terms of how they foster desired outcomes. It requires making use of assessments and school management strategies that foster this sort of learning and constructing or modifying schools so the physical plant and learning environments are appropriate for this. What is needed is a consideration of what a 'learning community' means in the context of the country and what it takes to get there.[16]

Interestingly, rural schools in Afghanistan, faced with ineffective support from Ministry of Education "systems", have out of desperation when shown themselves to be willing to identify and recruit teachers who have only the basic communication and interpersonal skills to effectively teach children; for example, many have identified the most promising and academically outstanding secondary students as appropriate "temporary" teachers for local primary schools. Community leaders have personally donated school supplies, provided space in a mosque for instruction, or contributed to purchasing a kerosene heater so classes could continue in cold weather. There is substantial local willingness to support education in schools——but a first step toward moving forward will be encouragement and "permission" from what currently continues to be a bureaucratic and intensely hierarchical education system to go ahead with local problem-solving.

Afghan young women pack aid packages of school material from UNICEF at the Ministry of Education's main warehouse in Kabul on February 25, 2008. According to the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF), nearly six million children almost half of them girls, enrolled in schools after the fall of the Taliban regime who banned education for girls under their strict Islamic Shariat laws. AFP PHOTO/MASSOUD HOSSAINI

Moreover, in APEP, evaluation data showed that AL improved local appreciation of schools and what they can do for a community.

Feasibility of Accelerated Learning as a Strategy

What the Afghan people want—and this can be seen in reports monitoring public attitudes regarding the Karzai government—is for public investments to result in relevant, concrete improvements to individual, family, community, regional, and national well-being (CSIS 2007;ACBAR 2008).

The current approach to building a sustainable education system has been to engage in multiple rounds of "strategic planning". We see an ever-growing mountain of paper documents as the end products; not significant changes to the system. Over the past 5 years of "rebuilding the education system" it has rarely and unevenly reached into the provinces, and especially the remote rural areas, and provided little succor to actual classrooms in which students learn and to the teachers who instruct them. Our observations are that community members don't know what to expect from 'educational reform' or how it serves them.

While a shift toward an education reform strategy based on accelerated learning program design entails a number of risks itself, the risks associated with the status quo are even more extreme. AL does not have to proceed without strategic planning and without benchmarks. The current course is risky because it is investing millions of dollars more in teacher training programs with few benchmarks for learn-

ing on which one can build, no tracking of those benchmarks, and which, over the course of 4 years, have trained fewer than one-quarter of the nation's teachers.

After the beautiful national strategic plan and the ANDS (Afghanistan's National Development Strategy) is done, it is still unclear whether 6th graders can use simple fractions as part of quantitative reasoning in their day-to-day activities – or how long it will take to train teachers in this if this is desired. Continued "business as usual" – that is, investment in an endless series of "technical" activities, working groups, and draft reports – is infeasible. Moving faster to do more is crucial. The Ministry clearly understands this, but is unclear on how to decentralize and maintain control. It is pushing donors and contractors to 'dance faster', But the way to move faster is not to "dance faster" and form more committees to continue the elaborate processes of negotiating institutional coordination; it is to engage people at the local levels in the process and make progress.

To move faster, it will be necessary to accelerate progress toward doing less in Kabul and more "out in the world". Hope and aspirations toward progress are difficult-to-measure as real assets. In many communities, the entire population of the village is collectively involved in rebuilding -- in some cases, physically (e.g. in post-war reconstruction of rebuilding houses, developing wells) but, also, socially and institutionally. Thus, community engagement in accelerated learning is essentially what has made APEP successful and is why other community schools initiatives have that potential as well. Such initiatives invite children and their families into the education process as meaningful participants in the discussion of educational outcomes and priorities.

References

[1] JoAnn Intili and Ed Kissam have worked in monitoring and evaluation for two large USAID-sponsored education projects in Afghanistan, from 2003 through 2007. As part of the work in those projects, Intili and Kissam, and a team of researchers, worked directly with the Ministry of Education's Planning Department to improve the National School Survey and analyze data so as to better inform planning. Additionally, Kissam worked with Naumann and Kirby on analysis and reporting of education data from the National Rural Vulnerability Assessment, in 2004 and 2005. This work, together with personal school or classroom observations on sites in Baghlan, Daikondi, Jalalabad, Kandahar, Loghar, Nangarhar, Ghazni, Kabul, Sari-e-Pul and Jowzjan,and review of observations in at least eight other provinces.

[2] This is based on analyses of data collected in over 3,300 villages for monitoring purposes, supported by USAID under the Afghan Primary Education Program (APEP), and review of 2005 Ministry of Education Department of Planning National Survey data.

[3] op. cit. See summary of general education teachers and students' attendance by province. There are nominally 5.675 student enrolled in general education (Grades 1-12 excluding Islamic schools) but 839,000 are listed as permanently absent. The total of 142,000 teachers summarized in the 2007 National School Survey report may actually represent an underestimate of supply of teachers since some school system employees categorized as administrative staff (school principals, head teachers) may actually be available at least part-time for teaching. At the same time, there appears to be very high turnover of teachers within the education system so there are uncertainties as to how many teachers may actually be available at any point in time. While there nominally is an average ratio of 1 teacher to 34 students, this varies widely across provinces; and within provinces.

[4] In 2007, we found anecdotal evidence, through on-site discussions associated with development of teacher competencies supported by USAID under the BESST project, .that most individuals attending teacher training institutions were already teaching. This finding was supported by more systematic research in 2005 where we interviewed managers of 10 Pedagogic institutes, for the Ministry of Higher Education, supported by USAID under the Afghan Primary Education Program (APEP).

[5] The statistics in this section are based on 2005/6 data from the Ministry of Education, as analyzed by Aguirre Division of JBS International staff, under the auspices USAID Contract No. GS-10F-0466P, Task Order No. 306-M-00-06-00508-00

[6] This was documented in the preliminary evaluation of the training conducting in Sar-e-Pul and Jowzjan, in 2006-7.

[7] See tabulation of "students permanently absent" in Table 11: General Education Students' Attendance by Province (1386), EMIS Department, Department of Planning, Ministry of Education, January, 2008.

[8] NRVA provides the best estimate of proportion of school-age population because it is a household survey and, thus, generates contemporary data on enrolled students and school-age children overall (although it is believed that there may be underreporting of female children—making the survey's estimate of a girl's NER of 27% optimistic.

[9] These statements are based on interviews and a survey by Omar Qargha and Parwez Besmel, undertaken under USAID, Contract No. GS-10F-0466P, Task Order No. 306-M-00-06-00508-00, in support of developing a teacher competency framework for Afghanistan, see "Developing a Teacher Competency Framework: Feedback from Stakeholders in Afghanistan's Education System, 2007".

[10] These planning documents are, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, typically seen as funding proposals and, thus, recite a laundry list of "pressing needs", present attractive rhetorical framing of goals which would be reasonable in an ideal world but fail to articulate a plan of action which is truly strategic in articulating ways to move forward despite barriers.

[11] For a review of the varying definitions of accelerated learning programs, See Jo Ann Intili and Ed Kissam Foundations for the Future: The Prospects for Accelerated Learning as a Strand in Afghanistan's National Development Strategy, prepared under USAID Contract for the APEP Project Consortium, February, 20, 2004 also see Ed Kissam, Trish Hernandez, Jo Ann Intili, Afghanistan's Primary Education Program (APEP) At the Close of Grade 6, January, 2007, project report. In curriculum-referenced tests, AL students achieved well above grade level in the first three grades, and met at least grade level expectations if not better in grades two through six.

[12] Raymond J. Wlodkowski and Carol E. Kasworm (Eds. "Accelerated Learning for Adults; the Promise and Practice of Intensive Educational Formats," in New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, Number 97, Jossey-Bass, Spring 2003.

[13] USAID funded the Afghanistan Primary Education Program, 2003 through 2006, under contract no. EEE-C-00-03-00008-00. See J. Intili, E. Kissam, and E. St.George, "Fostering Education for Female, Out-of-School Youth in Afghanistan," Journal of Education for International Development 2:1, March 2006. For a retrospective of the full program, also see Ed Kissam, Trish Hernandez, Jo Ann Intili, Afghanistan's Primary Education Program (APEP) At the Close of Grade 6, January, 2007, project report. Estimates for formal schools based on Amir Mansoori. Dropout Levels in Basic Education Level of Schools in Afghanistan. Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, May, 2007; and supported by figures from the Ministry of Education's 2005 National School Survey and NRVA 2005, analyzed by Craig Naumann and Ed Kissam, for the same elementary school grade range.

[14] See http://www.21stcenturyskills.org; and the skills framework discussed on it - http://www.21stcenturyskills.org/ index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=120

[15] Framework for 21st Century Skills, op cit.

[16] Bob Pearlman, in Schwarz and Kay, loc cit (page 103).

EurasiaCritic

Monthly Magazine on Eurasian Politics www.eurasiacritic.co.uk November 2008

Crimea: The Next Catastrophe

The Montreux Convention And the Black Sea Geopolitics
Prof. Dr. Necmettin AKTEN
Dr. Nur Jale ECE
Nilüfer ORAL, J.D.
Hasan KANBOLAT

Options for Europe's role in the Middle East
Michael Bauer

Neutrality not NATO is Georgia's Best Hope for a Free Future
Mark Almond

•USA $4.00 •UK £2.50 •Turkey YTL3.00 •France €3.00 •Russia RUB109 •China YR 32.2 •India RUP1800 •Malaysia MR14.50 •Saudi Arabia Rls15 •Egypt E£13 •Japan Y480 •Pakistan RUP282 •Kazakhstan T545 •Israel SH16.5 •Australia A$7,5 •Germany €3 •S.Africa R33.6 •Belgium €3 •Iran IR35000 •U.A.E. Dh15

ISSN 1308-1560

EurasiaCritic
November 2008 ISSUE 6
Monthly Magazine on Eurasian Politics
Published every month by
Eurasia Critic News Agency Ltd.
Company No. 6453833
Registered Office:
2nd Floor, 145-157 St. John Street,
London EC1V 4PY, UNITED KINGDOM

Head Office:
24 Uplands Park Road
Enfield EN2 7PT England
T: 0044 (0) 845 224 2564
Turkey
Esat R. No: 55/5 Kucukesat – ANKARA
T: 0090 (312)4170383
F: 0090 (312)4170392

Publisher
Hakki AHMETBEYOGLU
Publishing Director
Servet HASSAN
Editors
Ozer CETINKAYA
Ali ALTAN
Assistant Editor
Caglar KURC

Regional Directors
Middle East / Yousuf AL SHARIF
Southestern Asia / Fazal-UR-RAHMAN
Caucasus / Hasan KANBOLAT
Balkans / Ibrahim ARSLAN
India / Prof. Dr. Ajay Kumar PATNAIK
Azerbaijan / Ganire PASHAEVA
Syria / Ibrahim HAMIDI
Kazakhstan / Murat SHAHANOV
Uzbekstan / Ali KULEBI
Japan / Prof. Dr. Masanori NAITO
Energy Strategies / M. Mete GOKNEL
Nuclear Studies / Prof. Dr. Saleh SULTANSOY
Military Affairs / R.General Cihangir DUMANLI

Advisory Committee
Nuzhet KANDEMIR
Ismael HOSSEIN-ZADEH
Norman STONE
Ali KULEBI
Nasuhi GUNGOR
Mehmet OGUTCU

Media Director
Cigdem BEDIZ

Photography Provider: AFP
Illustrations / Mahmut Karatoprak
Distribution Manager
Mert ALTAN
ISSN 1308-1560
Printers: SAN OFSET

HOW TO CONTACT US
General enquiries: 0044 (0) 845 224 2564
Turkey enquiries : 0090 (312) 4170383
General enquiries : info@eurasiacritic.co.uk
Letters to the Editor : editor@eurasiacritic.co.uk
EurasiaCritic, Dewar House,Central Road,
Harlow CM20 2NH, UK