

HOME-BASED SCHOOLING: ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION FOR AFGHAN GIRLS

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Abstract

Girls' education in Afghanistan has begun to recover from the devastating Taliban regime. In March 2003, at the beginning of the school year, over 1,200,000 girls enrolled in primary school. A year later, almost 1,400 000 girls enrolled.¹ Yet nearly 60% of school-age Afghan girls remain out of school and those who are in school are not assured of completing sixth grade. This paper describes a home-based schooling program that provides primary education for children in Kabul, Paktia, Logar and Nangahar Provinces. The program is particularly interesting in a country wracked by decades of war that is redefining its education policies and education system. Can the contributions of international NGOs serve to support this new Afghanistan education system, and especially to support the provision of quality education for girls?

The IRC Home-based Schools Program

At the time of the data collection in August 2005, the International Rescue Committee was supporting education programs in four provinces (see Table 1) of Afghanistan, training and supporting a total of 261 teachers, teaching over 10,000 rural children, of which more than half were girls.²

Table 1: IRC Support for Education

Province	Classes	Enrolments			Teachers		
		M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Kabul	66	807	999	1806	40	12	52
Logar	123	1437	2262	3699	68	54	122
Paktia	159	2593	2044	4637	80	7	87
Total	348	4837	5305	10 142	188	73	261

¹ UNICEF Rapid Assessment of Learning Spaces (RALS), 2003/4.

² IRC has since started an education program in Heart Province, Western Afghanistan, and so the numbers of students and teachers for 2006 have changed.

The IRC was requested to work in these communities because they are too far from government schools to have young children – especially girls – travel daily, and the communities are unsure about the quality and the appropriateness of the government schools. This paper draws on interviews with 19 teachers teaching in IRC supported home-based schools as well as their students, conducted as part of the IRC's Healing Classrooms action-research project on teacher development for student well-being.³ It also draws on research conducted as part of a forthcoming study of home-based schools as part of USAID's 'EQUIPS 2' program of research on complementary education models.⁴

A home-based school is basically a one-class school operating in a room in a home, space in a mosque, or the shade of a tree. Just as the classroom space varies, so too does the supply of learning materials, some classrooms are decorated with wall charts and visual materials whereas others are quite bare and children sit on mats on the floor of empty rooms.

The schools follow the daily and annual program of the Ministry of Education, and teach its curriculum. Classes are scheduled for three hours, in the morning or afternoon, six days a week (Friday is off) and children learn Dari or Pashto (depending on the local majority language), Math, Holy Koran, Islamiat (religious studies), writing and drawing until grade 4 when a second language, geography and history, science and health are added. The schools have been very successful in increasing girls' enrolments from 48 % girls in 2003 to 52% girls in 2004, with some provincial variation.⁵

Home-based School Teachers and Teacher Support

Teachers not only teach, but also reach out to the community on education issues and advocate for girls' education. Teachers in the IRC supported home-based schools are volunteers or have been asked by the *shura*⁶ to teach. Many of the teachers are women. (see Table 1) but many mullahs also teach in these schools as they are often the most educated members of the community and consider teaching to be part of their religious responsibilities.

Teachers have different education levels. A few are highly trained but most have no prior training; some are students themselves go to school and teach in home-based schools at the same time. IRC trains these teachers in three sessions of approximately 13 days per year providing a 'nuts and bolts' of teaching and classroom management that includes lesson planning, classroom organization, exam writing and grading as well as very concrete skills in six pedagogical strategies including the following: i) group work; ii) question and answer; iii) role play; iv) story telling; v) brainstorming, and vi) class or group competitions. The seminar promotes active learning and student participation, whatever the student's ability. Teachers are also trained in Dari (or Pashto in Nangarhar Province), maths – and materials development which the teachers particularly enjoy. A 14-day psychosocial awareness seminar helps teachers communicate with their students and address their emotional problems. The program emphasizes listening skills and encourages teachers to talk with students about their feelings and concerns.

³For more information on the Healing Classrooms Initiative, please contact the authors: jackie.kirk@theirc.org; rebecca.winthrop@theirc.org

⁴See http://www.equip123.net/equip2/index_new.html

⁵In Kabul Province, for example, girls comprise over 55 % of the total enrollment, whereas in Paktia, they comprise only 44 %.

⁶Community or village council.

Ongoing Supervision

Teachers have regular monitoring and supervision visits after their initial training. In Kabul Province a team of three master trainers (2 male and 1 female) plan monthly visits, and more frequently visit weak teachers. The master trainers observe one class period, and record observations on a specially-designed form, sharing comments and feedback after hearing the teacher's perceptions of the lesson. Trainers also collect attendance and other basic data on each home-based class so that the education team can assess training needs and plan seminars.

Local Teachers and Gender Roles

Classrooms are both co-educational and single-sex, but the main focus is on educating girls who were kept out of school by the Taliban. Girls in the home-based schools tend to range between 6-15 years old; the older girls typically remain in single-sex classes or in classes with young boys only. Parents prefer single-sex education and female students remark on the value of having female teachers and classmates. As one girl says, "If there were boys here our parents wouldn't let us come." Female teachers encourage parents to let their daughters attend school. "It is important to have a woman teacher as she is like us and we can ask her the questions in our minds, and we can be very courageous in front of her."

Male teachers are also more acceptable if they come from the same community as the children they teach. Their familiarity to parents makes them trustworthy. "It would be better to have a woman teacher, but it is alright," says one girl. A mixed-sex classroom is more tolerable for a community when all the children come from the community. "We are all from the same village and so we know each other and it is fine. Sometimes we go to each others' houses – we are in our own village – and we don't allow any strangers in." In another class, the interview group explains that the seating arrangements comply with cultural attitudes towards mixing boys and girls: "It is simple: the boys sit in the front and the girls behind." A girl explains, "Our parents say we shouldn't be very free with the boys and that we should sit aside from them", and her male classmates rather proudly says, "The boys in this class are very good and are not teasing the girls. The teacher also says 'Don't tease the girls and be very good with them'".

Local teachers know the children and understand community attitudes. They work at knowing their students, their families, their strengths and weaknesses. One teacher describes this: "As far as possible we know the students individually. Yes, the strengths and weaknesses of our students are clear – some of them are more intelligent and understand more, others are weaker. Most of our students are living together in society with us and we are always in touch with their families. All of our students know their classmates. I know where they live and we know their economic situation and where their fathers are working." This intimate knowledge is a significant advantage for the home-based school teachers in addition to their sustained commitment and resourcefulness.

Teachers typically have a traditional approach to teaching, which includes rote learning, teachers giving and checking homework, writing a lesson on the blackboard and reading it to the class. Some teachers do use small groups and innovative pedagogies. One student describes the activity he most enjoys in class: "She [his teacher] jumbles different words from a sentence, and has the students read and reorders the words themselves; she uses a

homemade set of plastic pockets on the wall for students to sequence jumbled numbers, and to fill in missing ones.”

The traditional pedagogy is modified by the teachers’ familiarity with their students and communities. They adapt their teaching to the local context, making it more accessible and enjoyable for students. One girl describes enjoying how her teacher relates the lessons to their everyday lives. Indeed, all of the students interviewed said that they were very comfortable asking their teacher to explain something they had not understood. Some students described their teachers’ insistence that they ask questions. “Our teacher says, ‘Keep asking me if you don’t understand.’” “We tell our teacher, ‘please repeat this lesson as we don’t understand.’” One boy who has no one at home to help him explains how he manages to keep up: “Only my teacher knows the lessons, so I ask the teacher, then I repeat myself many times until I understand.”

Teachers very clearly see themselves as serving their community by teaching and consider that good teaching must include kindness towards children; local teachers clearly feel that they are serving their community and its children. “The teacher should enter class with a happy face – if a teacher goes to class with a stick then the children will be very uncomfortable and will not learn.” Another woman says, “In my opinion, a teacher should be kind and should treat their students like their own children. A good teacher should have a happy face and not be harsh – if they are harsh then the children will be scared and won’t learn. If a child has forgotten something like a textbook or exercise-book then the teacher should tell them to share and coordinate – the teacher should also help.” “A good teacher is very kind, children can trust them with their problems and concerns (and not tell other people), a good teacher is friendly and has good manners – she should be friendly with children”. There is anecdotal evidence of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, politics and language in government schools, whereas home-based teachers appear more likely to practice and promote equality, tolerance and acceptance of diversity. Several teachers in the study make the point that they may know some students a little better than others but should nonetheless treat them all equally.

Local teachers understand that parents are sending their children to school to become literate, and ultimately be able to serve their country, community and family. Education is linked with national pride and socialized behavior: coming to school encourages students to be clean and well-mannered. Students explained that their teacher tells them not to fight and to argue with each other, “that is for dogs and you are humans and not dogs.” “My teacher tells us to be good friends and not to fight,” says another student. “He tells us not to walk through the fields and not to disturb people, and not to fight on the way home. He tells us whenever we see an older person to say ‘*salaam*.’” Another teacher is described as follows by her students: “She advises us to respect and to be good humans. She helps us with other problems too, like with chores”.

One young woman teacher who runs three classes in her family compound describes how she came to be a teacher. “When I got married and came here my husband was in Iran and I was bored so I first started to teach the girls in the village the Holy Koran, and when I saw that they were very interested I began to teach them other things. At first I had nothing, not even any chalk, and so I used a wood stick and some coal.” Another woman teacher indicates the value of teaching: “School helps me forget my problems and sorrows – before I was teaching

I was very sad all the time. I enjoy being with the children and it helps me forget my pain. They learn from me and I learn from them too.

Few of the 19 teachers in the study consider themselves to be ‘career teachers.’ Three teachers (two men, one woman) teach in government schools in the morning. Another man has become the principal of a nearby girls’ secondary school, explaining that he has always been interested in teaching and has been doing so now for 11 years. Another woman teacher explained that she got married in Grade 11 and only started to teach a home-based class with her sister-in-law much later. She has since returned to school to complete Grade 12.

Students appreciate their teachers. Even students who described being punished (in three classes) say that this is necessary and helps them to learn. One girl described that her teacher makes her stand in the corner if she has forgotten her homework, but she believed that this was necessary to prevent other students from becoming careless. The boys in another class explained that their teacher and the class captain have sticks but that neither hit very hard. In contrast, in two of the classes, the students were quite explicit about the fact that their teacher does not hit them: “Our teacher is very kind, she doesn’t even bring a stick”, they say. And, “Our teacher never beats us – he says if I beat you, then you won’t come to school. He just tells us to be good students”.

Being a student has social status for these Afghan children. Wearing a uniform – however ad hoc it might be – and/or just washing and putting on clean clothes to go to school clearly contribute to feelings of well-being, of being ‘on the right track’ for a bright future. In the very first interview conducted with students, girls quite spontaneously started talking about how going to school means that they have to be clean and to wear clean clothes. One child remarked that it is good when the teacher says how clean they look, and although they do not have a specific uniform at this class, they explain that they do have separate clothes for school. Another girl agreed: “Yes, I also like to wear clean clothes and comb my hair and then people know that we are going to school.” Neither she nor her classmates have a school uniform but they keep certain clothes for school and change once they arrive home after class. Three girls from a different class where all children wear the black and white school uniform confirm their pleasure in wearing this, “because we feel like school students.” Another girl in another uniformed class explains, “When I come to school people recognize that I am going to school because of my uniform and my clean white chador.⁷” It would appear that for girls especially, the pride that this sort of recognition brings them is a very positive factor in their schooling experience.

The Challenges

The local successes of the home-based schooling model are many, as are the challenges. The working conditions of the school and the isolation of the teachers constitute a very real challenge. Although for the children and teachers the home-based schools are very ‘real’ schools, ensuring their sustainability is difficult, especially as the teachers receive no formal compensation for their work. From the Afghan authorities there has been a perception that these schools are stop-gap solutions as Afghanistan gets back on its feet. The longer-term challenge is how to gradually integrate and institutionalize these schools into the national system, given that the Ministry of Education is not able to meet the demand for education;

⁷large headscarf

currently they receive no financial or technical support from the Ministry of Education and rely entirely on community and donor support.

Home-based School Conditions

Accessible home-based schools take place in teachers' homes, mosques and other community buildings that were not built to be schools. Teaching and learning resources such as textbooks are all provided by NGOs and donor agencies. Teachers themselves lack some basic necessities for quality learning, such as textbooks and even desks and chairs. One teacher, whose girls' class is run in the mosque, explains: "It is difficult teaching in the mosque – the class should be very open. In the mosque the girls cannot play during their breaks – they can't read poems as they should." This teacher has seen government schools with large tents as classrooms, and he would like one of these to put on his own land. Another mosque-based teacher says, "Yes, I am happy because I see my students improving – but the environment in the mosque is not good – sometimes the mullah says it is not good to teach math in the mosque, for example, that I should only be teaching Islamiat. In sports period, for example, we can't do anything in the mosque or even outside. It would be better if the class were more open and if all the classes in the village were put together and then the teachers and the students could meet each other."

Some teachers express their frustration: "Not having school materials that the students need" and their inability to make the improvements they would like to in the classroom environment are frustrating. Students, who appreciate the work they do in school may also express their disappointment with the environment. "Yes, our class is beautiful, but in other schools they have benches for the students and for the teachers too." Girls who study in the mosque also find it frustrating having to learn there. They are not allowed to read out loud, play sports or even have breaks as there is nowhere to go. They should not disturb the people who are coming to the building to pray. Two boys, who used to study in a mosque and have moved to the terrace outside the teacher's home. They dislike not having a real classroom. They preferred being in the mosque to the teachers' home as they feel a little uncomfortable in his compound. Another boy is quite adamant that the mosque is preferable, as "in a teacher's house their children come and ask for this and that, but this doesn't happen in a mosque." Two girls who attend a class in a half-built house explain, "We like studying, but we don't like coming to the house – it is not like a school. Also the way to [this] school is not easy – there is no path and we have to come over the fields, past the trees." They only have to walk about 5 minutes from their homes, but they still feel unsafe. This became especially understandable when later the girls explain that they started their studies in a clandestine class during the Taliban time: "Still now we don't feel secure – we are thinking that any time they will tell us to leave this home."

Professional Isolation

The dedicated teachers in the home-based schools are trying to provide a quality education for children in their communities despite many challenges and lack of regular interaction with other teachers. This is a problem in particular for the women teachers. One male teacher says that he meets up with other home-based school male teachers in the village, and that over a cup of tea they talk about their work and share some ideas. Women have fewer opportunities for such sharing. One woman occasionally meets another male teacher in the village but relies on the trainers' visits for professional exchange and discussion. A young woman who is completing 12th grade says, "As I am in school myself I see my own teachers

in school and follow what they are doing and how they are teaching.” This is a particular issue for teachers with little formal training. Being alone they are responsible for all the subjects: “Just one teacher can hardly teach six subjects – it is very difficult to plan and prepare.” In order to manage these sorts of responsibilities, teachers could benefit from visiting colleagues’ classrooms, sharing methods, successes and challenges.

The Tentativeness of Home-based Schooling

The home-based school is perceived by some students to be tentative unlike “the government school (which) has a future and is forever.” This is particularly so because teachers volunteer to teach and are not paid. Teachers understand why they receive little compensation – “The students are poorer than I am – how can they pay?” – but the result is that financial pressures may limit teachers’ tenure. Many male teachers will continue teaching while they can do small contracts, or farm their own land in the mornings before school starts. Younger men can teach while still living with their parents but will eventually think about earning income. The priority of young men and women who are students and teachers is their own education, and so they may leave to continue higher education. Women teachers need the approval and support of their fathers and husbands, and the support will vary with the situation. One woman continues to teach with her small baby but her generally supportive husband is worried that she is tiring herself too much. Many women have less understanding husbands and in-laws. The women teachers know that they may be forced to give up teaching to earn money or to devote more time to household and family activities.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Home-based schooling responds to a need at a particular moment in Afghan history. Its durability may be an issue, but the lessons that it can offer to the Afghan government are worth noting. They raise a number of significant policy issues: i) where possible, the integration of home-based schools into the government system; ii) sustaining and improving home-based schools where they are the only available school; iii) improving teacher training and support, and iv) recognizing the ‘alternative qualifications’ of home-based school teachers and finding ways to accredit them. One real issue here is how to upgrade the teachers and the schools to become the equivalent of government schools – and officially certified as such. This is an issue facing the community schools in other parts of the world as well.

Integrating Home-based Schools into the Government System

IRC supported home-based schools are not alternative schools, but rather temporary solutions that would be gradually integrated into the government system. There is no comprehensive, national policy for integration yet, but at the provincial level, there are many children and some of the teachers who meet the national requirements, being gradually transferred to nearby government schools, as new schools are opened. Thousands of children in IRC supported home-based schools have been integrated into government schools to date as the Ministry of Education slowly rebuilds the education system.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that integrated pupils do well in their government schools. Their teachers are impressed by their knowledge and skills. However, integration requires careful follow up to maintain attendance and of motivation, and ensure that the best practices from the home-based schools are maintained and even improved in the more formal setting. This is especially important to sustain high levels of girls’ participation.

Sustaining and Improving Home-based Schools

For rural, under-served areas, home-based schools will remain necessary for some time to come, especially for girls. But home-based education must be officially recognized to give girls access to further studies. A critical mass of girls ready and keen to continue their schooling may encourage communities to find ways of allowing them to attend distant secondary schools.

One possible strategy to maintain the home-based schools where they are needed is to establish partnerships where the home-based school is a 'satellite' of a formal school. In this way, the home-based school teachers could also benefit from the training and other resources being provided to the formal sector. It could also encourage the government schools to adopt the home-based schools' successful strategies for attracting enrolments, *e.g.* employing only female teachers known in the community.

Teacher Training and Support

Teacher training and support are essential. The teachers need to know very basic pedagogical methods and strategies, and to orient their teaching to student learning, and IRC is always trying to find more effect ways to train and support teachers. A future more consolidated basic teacher training course will integrate psychosocial and gender awareness together with subject content in maths, Dari and Islamiat. The Ministry of Education is also implementing an ambitious Teacher Education Program (TEP) of in-service training for 105 000 teachers that might, in the future, include home-based school teachers. Discussions have started with the Department of Teacher Training and IRC trainers have been trained as Master Trainers on the TEP materials.

Another new innovation are the regular village teachers' meetings being supported by IRC. Teachers appreciate the meetings, especially women who had never before even seen the other teachers even in the same village. Despite some uncertainty about whether the men and women would be able to meet together, mixed sex meetings do take place and the participants are comfortable with this arrangement.

Teacher Accreditation

The Ministry of Education needs to develop a well-educated and trained teaching body but will surely struggle to find local teachers with the requisite 12th grade training required to be a government teacher, especially in remote, rural areas. It is especially difficult to find women who meet these criteria. Appropriate mechanisms are needed to recognize the prior experience and qualifications of home-based teachers with lower levels of formal education, for example, home-based school teachers who show mastery of basic teaching concepts and methodologies, demonstrate concern for student well-being and show a commitment to the profession should be fully included in the government system and given ongoing professional support. This is critical for changing the perception of the fragility of home-based school teaching. This will be particularly important for retaining women teachers and promoting education for girls.

Conclusions

Home-based schools provide many thousands of children – and particularly girls, who would otherwise be excluded from education, with a culturally acceptable education. Teachers have a vested interest in their pupils' learning and happiness. They understand the context and can

make education relevant to them. Home-based teachers need further training and support but they already possess many important teaching skills and attitudes.

As the Ministry of Education expands and strengthens the education system in Afghanistan, the home-based schools offer some indications of positive pedagogical approaches that could be useful, particularly in rural communities. The policy implications here are similar to those in other countries where complementary schooling models provide support to yet also introduce new ideas and methods into traditional and often relatively dysfunctional systems.