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Poor Quality: A Concern for Afghan Education

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Introduction

Quality is considered prominent at all the stages of education system for all the nations of the world. This is due to a major shift that the contemporary society has made in the conceptions of knowledge from quantity to quality. While quality of education is associated with the student learning outcomes, it is not only the World Bank (2006) that stresses on student's outcomes as an indicator of quality but education specialists around the world also assert that quality refers to an education that is student-centered and driven by the needs of the local community. Therefore the curriculum in schools must be relevant to the immediate community, learning environment must be stimulating and attractive to students, classroom learning activities need to be problem based and interactive, teaching methods should promote critical thinking skills, creativity, and innovative approaches and school based management must be responsive to social development needs. All the above mentioned areas of concern in the education system that can bring improvement in quality of education place a major responsibility on school teachers and their professional



the contemporary education system in Afghanistan. There is a need to bring a marked improvement in the student learning outcomes and teacher competency levels. Despite the guidelines from various government policy documents and reports submitted by several agencies working in Afghanistan to bring improvement in the education quality there are hardly many suitable strategies developed and implemented to improve quality at all the levels/stages of education.

A Brief Overview of Afghan Education System

The history of Afghan school education dates back to its very basic and old Mosques and *Madrassa* based system. People used to get religious education from the clerics (Mullahs) in mosques and Madrasa which still remain as traditional education centers in the Afghan community. The modern education system was instituted at the end of 19th century for the first time. In 1878, two schools for modern education were built in Kabul, the capital city of Afghanistan. These two schools were: one military and one general school. Later, in 1903 another high school was founded with not more than ten Afghan and Indian teachers. But still the number of schools did not exceed four up to the 1919 when King Amanullah Khan came in power (1919-1929), who is branded a reformist and famous for his modernistic vision in the contemporary history of Afghanistan. Hence, he is believed to be the founder of modern education. Khan allowed a number of innovations in different aspects of the life including female education. He established girl schools for the first time in Afghanistan.

After Amanullah Khan, during 1929 to 2001 considerable enhancements can be seen in this period of time alongside many challenges and deficiencies. At the time of Communist revolution (Sawr Revolution in April 1978) and Soviet Union invasion some changes were made purposely in school curriculum. The communist regime tried to integrate politics in education. The communist ideology was supposed to be taught in regime's schools. Thus, by doing all these moves regime was deeply distrusted by Afghans and people did not want to enroll their children in these schools. As it is claimed by Central Intelligence Agency (2011), only 10 percent children of primary and secondary age were attending classes who were the children of communist party's members only.

Afterward during the Hamid Karzai's government (2001-2014), education was incredibly bloomed. According to the report published by the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan (2012), there were 16,600 schools and training centers in which more than ten million students taught by 2,10,000 teachers, while the number of students in the beginning of "Back to School" campaign in 2001 was only 900,000. However, by passing the four-decades war, the public opinion about education has significantly changed now in Afghanistan. Currently, almost every individual in this country demands for a quality education even in the rural areas. A latest survey conducted by the Center of International Cooperation (CIC, 2016) demonstrates that 96.7 percent Afghans feel sending their children to schools should be one of their first priorities. While 97.3 percent of respondents to the mentioned survey said that sending girls to schools is doing what the *Quran* and *Hadith* teach.

Present Scenario and Policies in Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been involved in a serious conflict for the past four decades, therefore, the



(EFA) Review Report, 2015; National Education Strategic Plan (NESP), Ministry of Education, 2015; Education Sector Analysis Report Draft, 2016 & Mansory, 2010). The main reasons for this problem is being described as the lack of professional teachers, lack of quality teaching-learning materials, inappropriate classroom environment, and security threats in some areas (NESP, 2016). In addition, the studies (Mansory, 2007) also indicate that the quality of education is low and still the teacher-centered method is extensively used by Afghan school teachers and physical punishment is common in some of the Afghan schools.

Despite some progress in training teachers, as reported by the Ministry of Education (2015) more than half of the teachers do not have required qualifications and effective teaching skills which is considered as a big challenge for quality education in Afghanistan. Especially, lack of qualified female teachers in the majority of schools located in districts is believed to be a substantial barrier to the quality education. In a survey conducted by Oxfam (2011) indicates that 26.4% of individuals interviewed named lack of qualified female teachers as a main hindrance to girls' access to quality school education. As one of the participants told to this survey that: "The lack of qualified female teachers creates a lot of problems. Families, especially poor families, are not willing to send their daughters to school because they think it is a waste of resources and time, and they don't want them to have male teachers so this becomes the reason they do not send their children to school."

There are a number of international organization such as UNESCO, UNICEF, Care International, World Bank, Swedish committee for Afghanistan (SCA), British Council and more other have been working with Afghan government, especially along with the Ministry of Education to enhance the professional qualifications of Afghan school teachers but still as it is said by this ministry long way is ahead to modify Afghan teachers' qualifications as they are required. The new NESP (2016) addresses the issue of teacher qualifications and teacher training curriculum strategy. According to this plan, new curriculum tends to be developed in line with different grades and students' curricula. The vast majority of teachers and school principals believe that short term capacity building training programs, conducted by the above organizations, help Afghan teachers to improve their teaching skills. Also, a study conducted by Safi (2014) particularly on the in-service teacher training program, indicates that 71% of the interviewed teachers believe that the inset teacher training program is supportive and necessary for all teachers. But, despite the fact that all principals and teachers interviewed in a study conducted by Atif (2017), admit the essentiality of these capacity building programs, they undermine the nature of these programs regarding their real connection with teachers' daily classroom activities. They believe that the materials presented in all these programs are mostly disconnected with school curriculum and classroom daily basis activities. They argue that the teaching methods and techniques are taught at these programs are not well attached to the new school curriculum which is distributed to the Afghan schools recently. For this reason, most of the teachers are not confident to make use of these new teaching strategies and methods.

Way Forward

The facts on the real ground as reported by the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan (NESP, 2007)



(2010), indicates that quality of Afghan school education particularly secondary school education is low and one of the key reasons for it was inappropriate classroom teaching practice or traditional pedagogy used by the majority of Afghan school teachers. Curriculum was another quality affecting factor to be considered as it is thought to be irrelevant to the real needs and requirements of community. Further, the study conducted by Atif (2017) concluded that teacher competence was still a fundamental quality influential factor in Afghan school education. This study has found that though the vast majority of teachers who have regularly received professional training, they are failed to implement the effective pedagogical methods and teaching strategies in their daily classroom practices. The main reasons for this failure were indicated as the lack of self-efficacy and self-commitment for career, lack of appropriate teaching/learning facilities and lack of operative evaluation and the inefficiency of school administrations. The principals interviewed in this study underscored the importance of all these mentioned quality influential factors but at the same time they emphasized on an effective follow up evaluation procedure which was missing at the time in Afghan schools. According to them, the organizations that work for teacher capacity building, merely focus on the arrangement of more and more workshops, seminars and other short time trainings series disregarding the evaluation of a successful implementation of these programs beyond the delivery.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the accredited organization (governmental, non-governmental) need to make more practical efforts to improve the quality of education in Afghanistan. Especially about the teacher professional development programs, it is vital important that the materials taught in these training programs should be closely related to the school curriculum and teacher daily classroom practices. Secondly, a shared policy is required to be formulated by Afghan government in partnership with non-governmental organizations working in the sector of education, how to conduct a follow up evaluation of the practical impact of these programs in schools. It needs to be ensured to what extent these programs can help teacher to enhance the quality of their teaching. It is also should be evaluated that how much better the teachers are able to apply all the teaching/learning methods and strategies, they learn in these short term training programs, in their classrooms. School administrations should be encouraged to be more responsible for the creating of a cooperative climate in schools where teachers can work together in respect of their professional improvement. Referring to Gregory (2008), in-service training, workshops and other professional development programs are useful for school improvement, but the most important is continuing dialogue with coaches, peers and study teams. The new National Education Strategic Plan (MOE, 2016) reports some new strategies which have been formulated by the Afghan government to improve the quality of curriculum, teachers as well as school governance. This plan considers all these three, particularly teacher performance, relevance of curriculum and school governance as the key components for quality in education. Hence, the successful implementation can help to improve the quality of teaching in Afghan schools.



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