

# Education, reconstruction and state building in Afghanistan

by Jeaniene Spink

**Since the December 2001 Bonn Agreement, Afghanistan has adopted a new constitution, held democratic elections and established a national army. Education, however, has been treated as merely an 'add on' to the process of nation building.**

Education systems are complex and shaped by a country's economic, social and political history. The various education curricula and textbooks employed in Afghanistan mirror the country's turbulent political development.

In the 1970s the Daoud government promoted its claim to annex Pakistan's North West Frontier Province by teaching children the geographic boundaries of 'Pashtunistan'. Following the communist coup in 1978 and Soviet invasion in 1979 students began to learn a new vocabulary – 'revolution', 'people's democracy' and 'rights of the workers' – and came home from school singing socialist songs and telling their parents that religion was no longer important. The reaction was often extreme. Schools were burnt and teachers killed as many argued that education itself was a threat to the very existence of Afghan and Islamic values. As Afghanistan became a Cold War frontline, fundamentalist

militant groups started receiving international assistance. Various political groups had their own schools inside Afghanistan and in refugee camps. Textbooks developed for the alliance of seven Sunni parties based in Peshawar eventually became official textbooks and were widely used in schools in Afghanistan and in refugee camps for many years. Some Mujahideen groups developed maths exercises with examples of how to divide ammunition to maximise Soviet fatalities. Inflammatory textbooks perverted history by describing the Prophet Muhammad's struggle against non-Sunni Muslims, infidels and communists. Afghan Shi'a refugees in the Pakistani city Quetta also developed their own books with support from Iran.

By the time the Taliban were overthrown in November 2001 Afghanistan had witnessed a period of 23 years during which there had been little or no investment in a quality education system that

valued scholastic achievement and social responsibility.

Over 80% of the population were illiterate and a third of the country's 8,000 schools had been destroyed. The extraordinary return to school in 2002 – a 400% increase in enrolment – exceeded all national and international expectations and gave the war-torn country a sense of hope and stability.<sup>1</sup> However, this unprecedented demand for education – particularly for girls – has again given way to doubts. Parents no longer have whole-hearted trust in education. Simply returning to school has not been enough.

Ninety per cent of international assistance to education is in the primary sector in an effort to achieve Education for All (EFA) goals by 2015. There is proportionately little or no support for pre-primary, secondary or tertiary education. Frustrated in their educational ambitions, many children are forced to leave school after primary completion. Lack of opportunities to train as doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers or engineers means that many Afghans are now choosing to return to Pakistan where there are better educational prospects.

## Limitations of reforms

As in many other post-conflict contexts, Afghanistan experienced a bubble of financial support between 2002 and 2003. Resources flowed into the country but absorptive and technical capacity was limited. There was focus on access, supplies and physical rehabilitation as a succession of education ministers sought to flaunt visible outcomes of their leadership. Complex tasks of curriculum development, teacher training and system reform were not

school curriculum and a proposed public consultation never took place. Knowledge is power, and central government administrators saw no need to discuss plans with provincial authorities, communities, parents or children. Relations between central and provincial education authorities are often strained as even supplies of stationery can be held up in order to demonstrate bureaucratic control.

Teacher training and professional development in Afghanistan have focused on the pedagogical aspects of teaching and the primary focus of the Ministry continues to be short-term in-service teacher training. Teacher training colleges are obsolete socialist-style institutions rather than environments for learning and teaching. Until 2004 teacher training was ad hoc and uncoordinated as many providers developed their own teacher training

as they have teachers. The exact size of the teaching force is unknown and many suspect there are large numbers of 'ghost' teachers. In early 2006 funds were made available to recruit an additional 10,000 teachers per year but this is unlikely to solve the country's teacher shortage. There is no agreed system to recruit teachers, accredit their qualifications, evaluate their competence and performance or even to assess where they are most needed. Teacher morale is dropping.

There is considerable evidence that teachers discriminate against students along ethnic, religious, political and socio-economic lines by means of corporal punishment, denial of access or non-recognition of achievement. NGO efforts to address these problems through 'peace education' programmes do not adequately address the roots of social division. Scattered initiatives cannot succeed while the overall system remains unreformed and secondary school books continue to extol violence.

As Afghanistan attempts to rebuild itself, the engagement of its young people is critically important in view of the country's recent history of violent conflict generated by disaffected youth. The assassination of Daoud in 1978 was instigated by university students. The Taliban – an Arabic/Pushtu word for students/seekers of Islamic knowledge – started as a youth movement. If youth are to help build and not again destabilise Afghanistan they need a quality secondary and tertiary education system that actively engages students in reconstruction and peace building. It is encouraging that recent political reforms have led to an upgrading of the status of the Ministry of Education and recognition of its pivotal role in reconstruction. Afghanistan teaches us that it is no longer acceptable for education to be a post-conflict 'add on': it must be the cornerstone of state building and reconstruction.

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1. See 'Logistics under pressure: UNICEF's Back to School programme in Afghanistan' by Paul Molinaro and Sandie Blanchet, FMR18 [www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR18/fmr1809.pdf](http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR18/fmr1809.pdf)



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adequately addressed. In 2001 the new interim government approved the use of curriculum text books which were identical to those used by the Mujahideen – apart from removal of some of the most overt references to violence. The Basic Competencies of Learning materials developed with UNICEF and Save the Children assistance were not distributed as the education authorities deemed them to be insufficiently religious.

Curriculum and textbook reform remains fraught with political agendas. There is ongoing debate about religious textbooks, particularly how to present non-Sunni religious practices. Ethnic interest groups are vying for influence over how history is taught. Educational administrators have long memories of how a succession of foreign governments manipulated curricula. It took six months to convince the education ministry to accept a UNICEF offer of funds to assist reform of the primary

curricula. Education donors have driven efforts to consolidate funding and resources for teacher professional development. An in-service teacher training curriculum was developed which provided a four-week intensive training course for the country's 100,000 teachers. However, opposing political agendas and corruption within the education ministry have prevented its national roll-out.

Many have assumed that the greatest problem with teachers in Afghanistan is lack of exposure to modern pedagogical skills. However, a study conducted in the north of the country in 2005 revealed a far greater problem – lack of knowledge of the subjects they teach. When 200 primary school teachers were asked to sit the same exams as their students, only ten passed.

Recruitment and remuneration policies must be urgently reviewed. Most schools have as many cleaners