

Accelerated learning in Afghanistan

by Christine Capacci Carneal and Anne Ullman McLaughlin

Most accelerated learning (AL) programmes are 'catch up' initiatives to assist out-of-school youth into formal education. But what happens when adults join and complete AL classes?

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) started an AL programme in Afghanistan's north-eastern Kapisa and Parwan provinces in 2002. It aims to offer basic educational opportunities to rural youth and women who have missed out on schooling due to war, poverty or cultural constraints. The programme enables participants to compress one grade into six months or less. Younger students are helped to return to standard schools while older students learn the three Rs in the hope they will pass on knowledge to others as informal teachers. Once they have caught up, younger participants enter Afghanistan's formal education system. Because conflict has disrupted education for so long, it is common to find women in their thirties or older in AL classes alongside ten year-olds

Most classes are held in spaces donated by the community, rooms in private houses or in mosques. Conservative opposition to allowing girls classes has given way to general recognition of the value of AL for girls. The father of one participant told our staff: "I never believed that my daughter would be able to accomplish anything. Now she is reading and writing. You are most welcome in our village!"

Community Learning Systems (CLS) was launched as a complementary scheme to address the needs of the older women who on completion of the AL programme are unable to go on to enrol in schools. CLS was designed to improve community-based structures for supporting the AL project by addressing needs identified by the older women through their newly established women's groups. It responds to their desires to maintain and enhance their newly

developed literacy and numeracy skills and support their children's education.

Sayida, a 35-year-old mother of six, says, "I was 15 when I got married and had never been to school because my family didn't have enough money to send me. As far as I am concerned, it's never too late to learn. My eldest daughter goes to school. She is in the 5th grade. I am also in the 5th grade. It is nice we can help each other."

Women's groups supported by the CLS project bring together those who have completed the AL programme and other community members interested in education. With facilitation from CRS and its implementing partner, women from different villages are able to get together to identify personal goals and develop plans for community development initiatives.

During initial training sessions in leadership skills members of the women's groups identified electricity, pre-schooling, maternal-child health care, clean water, employment and vocational training as priorities. Their decision to start by establishing pre-schools was in order to give women with children wider opportunities to participate in the AL project as well as preparing young children for future educational opportunities. The process of establishing the pre-schools and choosing staff was participatory. The women discussed the best kind of pre-schooling considering their context and funding availability. Whereas government-supported pre-schools are called Kodakistan ('child states') the women decided their smaller, community-based pre-schools should have the more modest name of Otak-e-Kodak ('child rooms').

Women identified to run the pre-schools received training and materials with support from Save the Children USA and UNICEF. Each of the 18 pre-schools - open six days a week for three hours - has two teachers, one of whom must be literate. The second teacher is often a grandmother who has never attended school. Grandmothers have been enthusiastic trainees and are now

Kapisa Province,
Afghanistan



imparting their traditional knowledge and folklore to the students.

Our experience has demonstrated that accelerated learning can be a strategy which connects education in emergency responses to holistic longer-term development efforts. For women to go from learning numeracy, literacy and life skills in an AL class to becoming community leaders in Afghanistan is a challenge because this process also requires significant behavioural changes and shifts in cultural norms. CRS has found that supporting community learning is a promising starting point to build local networks linked to provincial and national education opportunities. The AL project needed the CLS project to assist the older women to define and determine their next steps for improving their and their families' lives in the community. The CLS project and pre-school activities have given the women a means for continuing to build upon their literacy and numeracy skills and to better support their children as they go through the education system. Finally, they have regained confidence in their abilities and understand how they are strong and able community members.

Reasons for the success of the project have included:

- flexible programming able to reflect the emerging needs of communities and beneficiaries during the course of implementation
- willingness to understand, prepare for and meet local needs
- high level of commitment from project staff and partners
- coordination and network building: CRS has worked in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders to share experience and lessons learned¹

Next steps

CRS/Afghanistan staff need to brainstorm among themselves and liaise with national and district representatives, as well as donors, to advocate for interventions to build upon and complement the women's groups' work. Newly literate women are in a good position to be trained as community health agents. Small village-based libraries are being es-



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tablished to enable the newly literate to keep up their reading and learn new things. It may be premature to begin to work with the community on gender issues and the rights of women but the AL classes will have less impact if these issues are not regularly discussed with all community members, including men. CRS/Afghanistan respects cultural norms and this is appreciated and contributes to the success of the project. However, as behaviour change is in part a result of the AL project, it is important to consider, prepare for and discuss with CRS and partner agency staff the strategies for broaching sensitive subjects. CRS/Afghanistan is well placed to do this, since CRS and partners have a continuing dialogue with the men, especially through the AL classes for men and boys that they support. In a given village, though support is primarily for women and girls, men and boys have also benefited from the outset.

The women's groups can help ease girls' transition from the AL classes to the formal schools. Many girl students, and their families, are concerned about the dangers of reaching distant government schools – although ones under construction will be nearer. The women's groups can help to support a system to facilitate getting girls to and from schools in

safety and without perceived threats to their modesty and honour. They can also continue to talk to the communities about why it is important for girls to continue in education.

It is clear that participants involved in the projects are both learning and gaining confidence in their skills. It is imperative to keep the momentum going and to continue to create pathways for village groups to realise the goal of collective and self development.

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For further information about CRS' support to education in Afghanistan, see: www.catholicrelief.org/our_work/where_we_work/overseas/asia/afghanistan/education.cfm

1. In addition to national and district education authorities these have included the International Office of Migration (IOM)/USAID, Caritas Italiana, Caritas Norway, the Asian Development Bank, Save the Children/USA, UNICEF, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst's Center for International Education, and women's groups in the United States.

Kapisa Province, Afghanistan