

Analyzing an Alternative Approach to Education Delivery in Badakhshan Province: The COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan of Afghanistan's Ministry of Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the emergency response strategy for education during the COVID-19 pandemic in Badakhshan, Afghanistan. The main focus was to examine the policy's goals and achievements in accessing education. The study used qualitative, semi-structured interviews with administrators, teachers, and students who were in schools during the pandemic. The results show a number of challenges (faced to access education as per emergency), Lack of network coverage, a shortage of electricity, and insufficient knowledge of technology literacy among instructors and students are among the most pressing challenges. Meanwhile, the academic year ended for the schools at the same time following assessments, which was challenging for those who did not access any source of education and had to pass the assessments. The study emphasizes that there is a need for the restructuring of education systems with a focus on minimizing these barriers and ensuring efficient instruction in emergency situations.

Keywords: COVID-19; Education; Technology Integration; Network Outreach; Access; Emergency Response.

Introduction

Education is crucial to a healthy community and a nation's future. Afghanistan has had a turbulent history, and today it struggles to receive a solid education. Afghanistan's development, social harmony, and youth opportunities depend on its education system.

During COVID-19 in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Education, under the direction of the President, created an emergency response strategy to address the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on education. In order to maintain the students' education at home, the strategy aims to make use of the ministry's assets and capabilities. In addition, the strategy is to put numerous cutting-edge methods into practice while taking into account the pandemics medical and health guidelines, such as distance learning, using television and mobile devices, and educating in small groups (Ministry of Education, 2020).

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. In 200 countries, 35 million people got sick, and around 1 million people died. Afghanistan is a war-torn country and sustains itself on international funds; therefore, providing healthcare is not easy due to limited services, a shortage of qualified healthcare workers, and the condition of hospitals. Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health began getting ready for COVID-19 in December 2019. The poor make up most of the 32 million people who live in rural places. The Ministry of Public Health's early estimates suggested that 80% of the people in Kabul,

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the country's capital, could get sick, and if COVID-related health measures were not practiced, over 125,000 people could die (Basij-Rasikh et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the Ministry of Public Health announced that it was important to follow the COVID-19 prevention instructions. The Ministry of Public Health delivered warnings that, if not taken seriously, up to 80% of the population may get sick or die. Authorities implemented measures at all levels, including quarantine and distancing in all places, even airports. The Intensive Care Unit (ICU), isolation rooms, and isolation centers were prepared. On the other hand, several strategies have been developed to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the country (Prisno et al., 2020). "Alternate Education Service Delivery COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan" was a strategic plan of the Ministry of Education and proposed three alternate learning options: self-learning, distance learning, and small learning groups.

The Ministry was in charge of monitoring and effectively providing educational practice at all levels. However, the effectiveness of the paths was not further studied or investigated to understand how the policies were implemented and to what extent the goal of access to education was achieved. In order to analyze the policy application and consider the plan of the emergency COVID-19 reaction plan for education in Afghanistan, the study primarily makes a connection between the policy and its application. The study evaluated whether the policy's purpose and goal were met after implementation in Badakhshan, a province in northern Afghanistan. Badakhshan is one of the rural and mountainous provinces with a challenging geographical location (BBC, 2012). Badakhshan's economic stability depends on agriculture and cattle farming. Badakhshan has long winters, which limits resident road accessibility (Himalayan Database, n. d). Therefore, it lacks standard infrastructure like schools, hospitals, and roads. This study's main research focus is how did the COVID-19 Emergency Response Plan aim at providing education delivery? How successful was the education policy in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak in Badakhshan province?

Literature

Modern Education in Afghanistan

Schools in Afghanistan provide modern education, while madrasas focus on teaching Islamic and Arabic subjects. The graduates from madrasa became Mullahs and worked as prolocutor in mosques or in Islamic jurisprudence. Whereas graduates from schools can go to colleges or universities for higher education or later look for jobs in government institutions. (Sherzad et al., 2017).

Amir Habibullah made the first significant steps toward establishing an advanced system of education between 1901 and 1919. He established the Habibia Lycee in 1903, a school that utilized the same curriculum as British Indian high schools. This lycee raised many intellectuals, and even transported some students to British India to continue their education. These improvements in education led to substantial breakthroughs in fields like social literacy, newspaper accessibility, library construction, and enhanced public discourse (Yazdani, 2020).

All children had to go to primary school when King Amanullah Khan was in charge (1919–1929). The government set up the Ministry of Education during this time. There were more high schools, and German and French teachers were joined by Afghan teachers in Kabul's high schools. Initially, the schools were constructed outside the city. At the time, there were 322 elementary schools, and the department of education sent a few hundred students abroad to study in places like Turkey, Italy, Germany, and Russia. In 1921, when girls' schools first opened, the department of education sent some girls there to go to school (Khwajamir, 2016).

Moreover, the systematic and steady advancement of Afghan education was a key priority under Zahir Shah's forty-year administration. There was a significant increase in students as a result of the construction of several schools in Kabul along with other locations. Access to education improved in the regions. From 1992 to 1996, the Mujahedeen took power, and access to education was challenged by the new government until Kabul fell to the Taliban from 1997 until 2001, especially for girls (Yazdani, 2020).

This excerpt explores what transpired in Afghanistan following the collapse of the Taliban in 2001. It adds that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's new government and the international community, which had pledged to support the nation's reconstruction efforts, both placed a high value on education. Both the new government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the international community, which had pledged to support the nation's reconstruction efforts, recognized the system of education as an important issue requiring assistance and attention (Yazdani, 2020).

Education System in Afghanistan

Afghanistan's official education system includes primary schools (grades 1–6), middle schools (grades 7–9), high schools (grades 10–12), and a variety of vocational training institutions, such as instructors' schools and vocational schools, which are each run by the Ministry of Education (MoE). Usually, students between the ages of 7 and 12 go to elementary school, those between 13 and 15 go to middle school, and those between 16 and 18 go to high school (Arooje & Burrridge, 2020).

In Afghanistan, formal compulsory education traditionally begins at age six to ninth grade. Students have two options after the ninth grade. The Ministry of Education (MOE) is in charge of overseeing not just general education but also giving students who are interested in Islamic studies access to Islamic education. Grades 1 through 12 are covered by Madrassas, whereas grades 14 and up are covered by Dar-ul-Ulums, which offer a larger curriculum outside Quranic study, and Dar-ul-Huffaz, which emphasizes Quranic education. Each district typically has one Islamic school, and the province capitals each have one of the Dar-ul Ulum and Dar-ul Huffaz (World Bank, 2018).

In Afghanistan, children attend primary education from the age of seven to six years. There are various forms of education available at the primary school level, including community-based, home-based, and religious schools. All students must receive free and compulsory education (Afghanistan, 2020).

The secondary education system in Afghanistan consists of two three-year cycles: the Mutawasita, or lower secondary school, and the Lycee, or upper secondary education, encompassing grades 7 through 9. The latter, which includes grades 7 through 9, had 1,744,305 registered students in 2018. Moreover, the Afghan law on education says that basic education is for children in grades 1–9. Students in grades 10 through 12 of the three-year upper school education are between 16 and 18 years old. In 2017, there were 947,241 students in high schools across the country (Arooje & Burrridge, 2020; Afghanistan, 2020).

Education Technology in Afghanistan

Technology in education is the study of the ways we engage in learning and how we can make it better by using scientific methods and knowledge. Laptops, gadgets, handheld devices, applications, and other tools are used in educational technology to improve and speed up the way knowledge is shared. Due to educational technology, students as well as educators can easily talk to each other and work together using a variety of

apps and platforms (Alizada et al., 2023). In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, along with the Ministries of Education and Higher Education, worked together to make a policy that emphasizes the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the school system. The goal of these programs is to establish the culture of distance learning and attract scholars to help Afghan educational institutions improve their ICT (Falah et al., 2021).

However, in Afghanistan, the biggest trouble with online education in colleges and universities is that there is not enough IT infrastructure (Frough, 2019). Furthermore, a lack of technological knowledge and resources among educational actors challenged distance learning by all means. (Sarwari et al., 2022).

The effectiveness of e-learning depends on its technological infrastructure, which consists of components like device availability, access to the internet, and e-learning platforms (Hakimi et al., 2024). Improving Afghanistan's technological infrastructure is crucial because it will enable more people to receive high-quality education in locations with limited access to traditional educational resources (Brown, Jones, & Williams, 2021). The ability of educators to use digital technologies and modify their lesson plans for the online setting is critical to the success of e-learning (Karami et al., 2020).

In order to improve the use of ICT (information and communication technology) in education, the Ministries of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) have decided to collaborate. Additionally, MCIT has promised to finance the execution of this agreement. The biggest difficulty, though, is properly integrating ICT into Afghan classrooms. Many research studies indicated lecturers' unwillingness to use new teaching tools during teaching in Afghanistan universities (Falah et al., 2022).

In addition only a few schools in Kabul, the country's capital, have computer labs and can provide actual computer education. Additionally, some schools just offer theoretical instruction in computer science with no practical application. It will take at least another ten years to complete the necessary infrastructure improvements in order to meet the objectives set forth by the Ministry of Education (Arooje & Burrige, 2020).

Indeed, in many parts of the country, schools struggle to get access to the internet, and many, many schools struggle to get access to electricity (Asia Foundation, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the biggest ever disruption in education, affecting around 1.6 billion pupils across more than 190 nations on all continents. 94% of students worldwide have been impacted by school closures, with that number rising to 99% in nations with poor and lower-middle incomes (United Nations, 2020). This pandemic has had a huge impact on the educational field and has forced educational institutions to implement online-based distance learning at all levels, from pre-kindergarten to post-graduate. But because many students do not have access to the required tools and facilities, this transformation has created a number of difficulties that have had tragic results, like casualties (Rulandari, 2020).

At the highest point of the pandemic, 45 countries in Europe and Central Asia closed their schools, affecting 185 million students. Teachers and educational administrators had to quickly develop urgent online learning systems since this transition occurred suddenly, leaving them unprepared. The inability of professors and students to immediately engage, which is essential for forging a personal connection, is a drawback of emergency remote learning. However, several nations have discovered ways to enhance distance learning

by utilizing various techniques like social networking sites, email, phone calls, and even ordinary mail. Unfortunately, evidence reveals that school closures have actually resulted in learning setbacks despite efforts to foster an advantageous remote learning environment (Donnelly et al., 2021).

Methodology

The present study employs a qualitative approach to scrutinize an alternative method of delivering education amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Badakhshan province. The primary focus is on assessing the implementation of Afghanistan's Ministry of Education's emergency response plan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through an online platform, with each interview lasting between 20 and 25 minutes. The primary participants encompassed both male and female individuals, including principals, teachers, and students. The study targeted 8 schools spanning grades 7 to 12 in Badakhshan, with a total of 30 respondents who had direct experience with education accessibility during the COVID-19 pandemic in the province. Moreover, Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants for the study.

Analysis

In this study, the data analysis took several steps, such as translating the data from Dari to English, cleaning the data with color coding, making charts, and analyzing the primary findings. By following these rules, I gained an understanding of the data and its outcome.

Findings

After deeply analyzing the emergency response plan of Afghanistan's Ministry of Education in terms of delivering distance learning during COVID-19 and a semi-structured interview with target respondents, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. This study found the following obstacles that hindered the successful implementation of the emergency plan in the Northern Province of Afghanistan. While the fundamental goal of the COVID-19 emergency response plan of Afghanistan's Ministry of Education is to deliver timely access to education programs. Furthermore, it underlines the need for self-learning training packages to increase the abilities and knowledge of teachers, head teachers, and school and madrasa principals during lockdown periods (Ministry of Education, 2020). In addition, according to the Ministry of Education (2020), there are three approaches to delivering education during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- A. **Self-Learning:** students will study social sciences, languages, and Islamic education independently using Ministry instructions. Moreover, regional radio stations will offer linguistic and social science seminars. Administrators and instructors will build their capabilities by following the Ministry's guidelines and using distributed learning materials (Ministry of Education, 2020).
- B. **Distance learning:** distance learning programs will teach science, mathematics, and foreign languages in lower- and upper-secondary schools, in addition to elementary school core subjects. Scheduled television broadcasts will teach these subjects (Ministry of Education, 2020).
- C. **Small learning groups:** when electricity, television, and cell phones are scarce and parents can't help, classrooms will be divided into 5-8 students and classes will be done in an open space. (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Key challenges faced by principals, Teachers and Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Badakhshan Province

Teachers

A. Absence of Network Coverage

In most of the regions in Badakhshan province, learners suffered from a lack of network coverage. According to the teachers, the ministry of education provided online guidance and tutorials for teachers in terms of teaching during the pandemic on the ministry's website, to which teachers could refer and use the contents. However, the shortage, breakage, and low signals of internet coverage at the district level were ignored, and teachers were not able to follow the emergency plan. Indeed, the targeted participants in Faizabad did not face connective challenges, but the internet high price was another form of limitation for them.

B. Internet Affordability

During the interview with teachers both from remote areas and center of Badakhshan province, teachers have complained about the high price of internet. According to the teachers, during the pandemic, in one hand the price of food and every things got double on the other hand teacher's salary is very low which they cannot afford to even pay for internet from their own salary to teach online.

"I live in the center of Badakhshan province, there was internet coverage, but during the COVID- 19, the price was too high, and teachers' salaries were too low to cover the expense, so we were not able to pay for a data bundle" (Teacher).

Students

C. Lack of Electricity

Energy shortages in areas of Badakhshan province challenged the use of digital gadgets and online learning. Students in both urban and remote areas cannot follow television broadcasts, which serve as a medium for instruction. On top of that, electricity accessibility in the entire country is a challenge, especially in rural areas. However, according to the emergency plan of the Ministry of Education in Afghanistan in the areas of electricity shortage, small learning groups of 5-8 students were planned to be formed. Teachers will deliver lessons for these groups in open areas in the villages. However, the plan was realistic based on the plan in practice and was not practical during the pandemic. Meanwhile, all the education facilities were closed, and neither principals, teachers, nor students had access to e-learning.

"In our district, each family has their own single wind electric resource, which is only for lighting, and the capacity is not enough for televisions or other electronic devices"(Student).

D. Limited Knowledge of Technology

Badakhshan is a rural area with limited access to technology; therefore, teachers and students both lacked experience with and knowledge of technological tools, which challenged them to adjust to online learning environments and make efficient use of digital resources. The findings indicate all the respondents especially students in remote areas complain about the low literacy of teachers in modern technology. Moreover, the students were not familiar with the world of technology, including computer practical knowledge, as the computer lessons always have been delivered theoretically at schools. There for it challenged students to learn online.

“Since I remember, I never had any electronic device, either a mobile phone or a computer “(Students).

E. Lack of Technological Equipment

Learners and educators faced difficulties accessing educational opportunities due to the lack of technological devices to enter online learning. In remote areas at the beginning of the COVID-19 virus, schools were open for two months, and with the cooperation of the Agha Khan Foundation (AKF), they distributed antiseptics, masks, sanitizers, and other first aid items for the prevention of the virus. Moreover, in the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed. During the pandemic, only a few learners and educators had access to technological devices or equipment both in rural areas and in the centers of Badakhshan province. Which resulted in the failure of the emergency response to the COVID -19 pandemic.

“During the covid-19 neither ministry of education nor foreign organizations provided any technological device which could help to access online materials” (Student).

Principals

According to principals in Badakhshan Providence, during the pandemic, the quality of education decreased almost to zero. Besides, in the first phase of COVID-19, students and teachers absences were a challenge for principals. While the second phase of the coronavirus caused the closure of all schools in this area, Moreover, the principals struggled to effectively execute their annual plan. Accordingly, without teaching and examinations, students were promoted to higher classes, and the 12th grade students could not succeed in the entrance (Kankor) exam or the public exam for entering universities. Additionally, the health and safety of students and staff were another challenge for principals. Training teachers, managing the distances between students in small groups, and providing separation classes and teachers for all during the first and second phases of COVID-19 were the most challenging moments for principals.

“In rural areas people are not used to of face mask or sanitizer and making students to using masks was the difficult part for us” (principle).

Discussion

Considering the above issues in the alternative approach to education delivery in Badakhshan Province during COVID-19, the education delivery as per the emergency response plan by the Ministry of Education did not achieve its goal. It is to say that the lack of technological devices and equipment, the absence of network coverage, the lack of electricity, the limited knowledge of technology, and the challenges faced by principals, teachers, and students during the COVID-19 pandemic were not under the control of the ministry of education.

Therefore, these situations require collective action. According to the Asia Foundation (2017), most schools in Afghanistan lack access to the solid infrastructure needed to use technology in classrooms. Similarly, in another study, Arooje and Burrige (2020) indicated that it is sorely contestable in the near future that rural areas in Afghanistan could have access to ICT education, computer labs, computer classes, and e-learning programs. Preparing the necessary infrastructure will take more time to achieve the objective set by the Ministry of Education.

Additionally, as indicated in another study by Falah et al. (2022), the Ministries of Education and Communication and Information Technology agreed to collaborate in order to improve the use of Information

and Communication Technology in education. Accordingly, the Ministry of Communication Information Technology (MCIT) also provided financial support for the execution of this agreement. Unfortunately, despite agreement and collaboration, the Ministry of Education's alternative approach to education delivery during COVID-19 was not successfully implemented in Badakhshan province, as discovered through interviews conducted for this study.

To address the above issues, this study suggests a wider collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Energy and Water, as well as collaboration between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Communication Information Technology. Further, there should be collaboration with telecommunications companies in Afghanistan to address the highlighted issues in this study in case of another emergency situation. However, despite being a large province with 28 districts, only a few districts were studied in the present paper, highlighting the need for further research.

Conclusion

Limited access and knowledge of technology smartphones computers and internet connection challenged the participants to access distance learning during COVID - Pandemic in Badakhshan Province. The emergency plan did consider the geographical location therefore, the television broadcasts, distance learning, small group learning in open space did not achieve the plan result.

Principals, instructors, and students encountered a variety of difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. School closings disrupted regular education, resulting in less teaching and learning and a decline in educational quality. Fear of the infection had an impact on students' attendance and participation in class activities. Without adequate assessments, teachers have trouble assessing the learning outcomes of their students. The impact on the overall educational environment resulted in teacher unhappiness and decreased student academic achievement.

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