



Islamic studies as early childhood education in countries affected by conflict: The role of mosque schools in remote Afghan villages



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between an early Islamic education and academic achievement in Afghanistan. Fears of political indoctrination have dominated discussions of Islamic schooling among many Westerners, making some policy-makers hesitant to support the kind of education to which most children in Afghanistan have access. In addition, misunderstandings of Islamic education as well as assumptions about the lack of educational benefits from pre-primary or primary Islamic schools have helped sideline them in policy discussions. But mosque schools may play an important role in preparing children for academic success. Children who attend mosque schools score better on tests of literacy than those who do not. This is particularly significant in countries like Afghanistan where many children do not have access to formal education. These findings suggest that mosque schools merit more careful attention.

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1. Introduction

Conventional Western views of Islamic education in Afghanistan assume that radical madrassas play a prominent role in educating Afghan children. In fact, the importance and prevalence of madrassas in Afghan society is dwarfed by another type of religious school commonly known among Afghans as mosque-based early education, or “mosque schools” for short. Because mosque schools are often confused with madrassas, it is important to highlight the differences between them. Mosque schools offer religious classes held in a mosque, taught by the local mullah, or religious leader. In Afghanistan, young children—up to age eleven or twelve—usually attend mosque schools to study the Qur’an and related religious texts and attend in the early morning for a couple of hours per day, often six days per week. Madrassas typically cater to older students, offer longer and more varied classes, and are sometimes boarding schools. Although no statistics are available on the total numbers of madrassas in Afghanistan, most qualitative and anecdotal reports indicate that while there

may be several of them in cities, provinces often have only one per district, as was true in our study of community-based education in Ghor Province discussed below.¹ Indeed, madrassas in Afghanistan appear to play a negligible role in rural children’s religious education. In contrast, mosque schools play a prominent role in every day Afghan life and in educating young children. Of the 819 6–11 year-old children in our study described below, for example, only four (0.5%) attended a madrassa during the 2007–2008 study period while 688 (83.8%) attended a mosque school.^{2,3}

¹ A number of these are “official” madrassas, managed by the Ministry of Education and sponsored by the state. Community-based schools, also registered with the government, are housed in existing local infrastructure—in the case of this study, usually in the mosque, but while mosque schools only provide religious education, community-based schools offer a full range of math, science, and language lessons from government textbooks.

² It is likely that madrassa attendance in the region is overestimated in the popular press. In neighboring Pakistan, for example, according to some reports, madrassa enrollment may account for less than one percent of total enrollment in schools. In spite of such low enrollment, much has been made of the dangerous role these schools play in the country (Andrabi et al., 2006).

³ Although the children included in this study range in age from 6–11 and therefore are older than most who participate in early childhood education programs, we believe that because this is their first schooling experience, our findings are relevant to this type of education.

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Yet many foreign policymakers in Afghanistan have, to date, virtually ignored the existence of mosque schools. Many are not aware of these schools (personal interviews, September 2012; March 2013). Others who may have information about mosque schools, such as some US policymakers, rarely incorporate them into education policy toward Afghanistan. There are several reasons why this is so. First, US law prohibits the use of government funds to support foreign religious organizations.⁴ Second, given the divisive role religious education is thought to play in magnifying social divisions between Afghans and Westerners, and between Afghans and human rights norms, foreign policymakers working in Afghanistan have typically been reluctant to address Islamic education in their plans. Thus, the media image of vitriolic madrassas has crowded out the everyday forms of Islamic schooling that are much more relevant to Afghan society and to Afghan and foreign policymakers alike. Third and crucially important, many consider the pedagogical practice typical of mosque schools to hold little educational value.

In Afghanistan, where the education system struggles to serve the rural population, approximately 75 percent of which lives in villages, mosque schools are too important to overlook. In this paper, we examine mosque schools for their academic merit. We argue that mosque schools extend the potential for universal access to education, providing basic literacy skills that enhance school readiness for young children.⁵ In our study of community-based schools in Ghor Province, Afghanistan, we show that children with better attendance at mosque schools performed significantly better on literacy tests than their counterparts who did not attend.

This paper proceeds in the following way. First, we briefly discuss the state of access to primary education in Afghanistan and the importance early childhood education holds for children living in countries affected by conflict. Second, we provide a review of mosque schools, including what is known to date of their effect on student learning in Afghan and Muslim societies. We illustrate the tensions between Western versus Islamic views of learning and knowledge, showing how this has allowed observers to dismiss the role of early Islamic education in academic achievement. Third, we return to the tensions between religious versus “modern” education⁶ in Afghan society to acknowledge the hurdles that face the incorporation of these schools into a broader system. Fourth, we present our data from structured surveys with parents and their children, complemented by qualitative interviews with parents, village leaders and mullahs. We show how mosque school attendance is associated with academic achievement. The conclusion discusses the implications of our results for policymakers intent on expanding universal access to education as well as implications for current debates regarding the *educational* role of religious education in post-conflict intervention.

2. Background

2.1. Access to education in Afghanistan

Other studies have chronicled the numerous obstacles that prevent many Afghans from gaining access to education (Burde and Linden, 2013; Burde, 2014). Some of the most significant factors include the distance many children must travel to reach school, ongoing conflict that makes both this distance and physical attendance particularly dangerous, and economic hardships requiring children to contribute to labor at home. These challenges are especially detrimental to young children and girls' enrollment. While the Afghan government⁷ has made huge progress in increasing educational enrollment since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, approximately 5 million of the estimated 12 million school-age children still lack access to education (Ayobi, 2010).⁸ No female students are enrolled in grades 10–12 in close to half of the 412 existing urban and rural districts across the country (Ayobi, 2010).

Yet access to early childhood education may be especially important for children in countries experiencing conflict. Children who are likely to face frequent interruptions to their schooling due to violence and the poverty that often accompanies it especially need the boost to academic achievement that early education can offer. Early childhood programs can also offer a stable and safe environment for children that can help to normalize daily life in unstable environments. These programs can provide a caring and safe environment for children during a key time in their psychological and emotional development. Schools also offer a consistent way to reach children in order to provide them with health services such as immunizations. In conflict zones, early childhood education programs are also a means to disseminate important information to children and their parents related to safety in a particular conflict.⁹ Thus these programs can increase the number of children who have access to such services (CGECCD/INEE, 2009; Kamel, 2006). On a national level, these boosts to children's academic success, health and wellbeing can help fulfill broader development goals.

Despite the positive potential these programs hold, in 2008 the Afghan Ministry of Education (MoE) reported that no state system for early childhood education existed outside of approximately 200 day-care centers operating primarily for the children of government employees (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan MoE, 2008). In 2011, the MoE voiced its commitment to early childhood education in response to the Education for All Global Monitoring Report, stating that a section on preschool curriculum development was added to the MoE and that preschools for the children of “working mothers” were established in urban areas. Otherwise, though, the MoE points to mosque schools and NGOs as primary sources of early childhood education provision (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan MoE, 2011). Although some formal provision for early childhood education may be emerging in parts of Afghanistan, it is increasing slowly and maintains limited reach.¹⁰ Without more

⁴ The separation of church and state, mandated by the US Constitution, prohibits USAID from financing activities that are inherently religious, such as “worship, religious instruction, or proselytization” (USAID, 2009, p. 7). Note that although the US government does support faith-based US NGOs as well as vouchers for children in the US to attend religious schools, the government is prohibited from funding foreign religious schools or organizations.

⁵ Although there are likely mosque schools that would be deemed extremist by Western standards, according to historical and anecdotal accounts, and according to our own data shown here, these mosque schools make up a minority of the whole. It is also important to note, however, that we do not assess children's attitudes or beliefs in this study.

⁶ Afghans refer to mainstream government schools that incorporate science and other subjects as “modern” or “worldly” education.

⁷ Although the official name of the government of Afghanistan is the “Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,” in keeping with newspapers and current convention we refer to it as simply the “Afghan government.”

⁸ Enrollment figures are subject to significant debate. Current data puts the total figure at approximately 8 million (FHI360, 2011).

⁹ Although we do not discuss them here, early childhood programs are cited for their secondary effects on parents. During the conflict in Bosnia, for example, parents reported a greater peace of mind from knowing that their children were being cared for despite the conflict.

¹⁰ Recently, the Global Partnership for Education has promoted a mosque-based primary school component as a new government-led initiative. It is not without precedent. King Amanullah Khan's 1920s education decree launched community education across the country, including in mosques where classes were taught by a mullah. This decree was later abandoned in the 1930s (see Burde, 2014 for a more detailed discussion of this history).

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