

RELEASE IN FULL

Afghanistan Education Support
July – August 2009

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Assignment

My plane departed New York Kennedy for Kabul on July 28th and the refrain replayed and replayed in my head “you are going where? Afghanistan. And why?” I was recruited by the AFT’s international department to support the Afghan Teacher Education Department’s RPM (Rapid Production of Materials) activity in which two dozen curriculum experts wrote teacher training materials for classroom teachers. The other two members of the AFT team, Betty Harris (ABC California) and Amber Prentice (St. Paul), arrived in late August

The RPM took place daily over a period of five weeks at the Sayyed Jumalladin Teacher Training College in Kabul. Twenty Afghan educators were organized into three groups, each responsible for completing the training manuals for one grade level (4-6, 7-9 and 10-12). For each subject at each grade level, a module of five 90-minute training sessions was created. This activity was part of the ongoing USAID program aimed at providing in-service training to all Afghan teachers across eleven provinces of the country. My primary assignment was to review an English translation of sessions as they were produced and to make technical edits which facilitated the flow and focus without losing the voice and intent of the Afghan authors.

The site staff included three translators and three Provincial Monitoring Officers (PMO’s) who had been diverted from training in the field in order to work on the RPM. The PMO’s played an important role in facilitating the whole project and in helping the AFT team to positively influence the process. They were knowledgeable about pedagogical theories, teacher training, and the needs of teachers in the field. We had regular daily conversations about teacher and trainer needs and how to meet them. The PMO’s then shared these ideas with the RPM groups. Before sessions were translated into English for my review, the PMO’s also reviewed, edited and discussed the material with the drafting groups. This nuanced intervention by the PMO’s substantially improved the quality of the initial drafts.

In addition to editing, I was encouraged to monitor the drafting work and interact with RPM participants. It soon became clear that Afghan teachers in the field needed low-prep, low-resource ideas for encouraging active student learning. I made several short presentations to the whole group on low resource teaching tools, such as two sheets of paper folded over into a four-section flipbook. This becomes a handy organizer of information for students and teachers alike. The PMO’s helped to connect the ideas in my presentations to the specific interests of the audience.

The AFT team’s experience as working teachers and professional developers was valuable in facilitating the RPM at several key points. For example, we were able to apply our experience in coordinating the activities and output of large groups of teachers. We created graphic organizers which listed all the modules/sessions to be produced so that each stage of production could be monitored easily. This helped the groups to establish and maintain a pace of

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work which led to the completion of all of their training materials on schedule. We were also able to suggest practices, such as deliberate labeling of the teaching strategy and grouping for each activity, which helped to produce higher quality drafts.

A great challenge to the production of effective training manuals was that they would have to survive a “cascade” of at least three levels of turnkey training while retaining clarity and effectiveness for final delivery to the often under-prepared, under-resourced, teachers in the field. The training process had to build the skills of teachers, deepen their content knowledge, and establish a foundation for ongoing professional collaboration at the school level. Moreover, the teachers in the field, at least, would not be paid for attending the trainings, so the training materials had to be coherent and speak to their immediate needs. One of the most important AFT team contributions was to address these challenges by refining the five training sessions for each subject into templates with standardized formats and language. The templates respected the language and content choices of the Afghan drafters, but also helped to ensure that the training could be executed effectively by moderately skilled trainers.

When my colleagues Betty Harris (ABC California) and Amber Prentice (St. Paul) arrived in late August, the ground had been prepared for our team to complete the technical editing of the Grades 4-6 RPM materials on schedule, to present appropriate teacher training ideas to an audience of RPM participants and other Teacher Education Department officials, and to consult constructively with the PMO’s and NGO partners of Creative regarding the plans for the implementation of the training materials.

Comments

- An earlier arrival would have helped the AFT team to make more strategic contributions to the process, such as deepening participants’ understanding of group learning activities before they started drafting them.
- It was an advantage to send one member of the AFT team ahead in order to get a feel for the project and prepare the ground for the rest of the team.
- Close interaction with Afghan educators helped us to discern some important issues. These included the importance of recruiting and supporting first grade teachers, who are often the first contact with formal education for children and their families, especially in towns and villages. We also learned that there is a high dropout rate during Grades 4 to 6. It emerged that there is substantial variation in attitudes toward education in different regions of the country, where local experience and tradition exert such powerful influences.
- Language barriers, despite the help of translators, inhibited the kind of nuanced group facilitation in which AFT/Teacher Center trainers are skilled.
- Helping to refine the flow of the twelve-day trainings is where our AFT experience and skills would be especially valuable. We expected that Amber would be involved in this for much of September, but there were apparently some delays.
- Some delays were undoubtedly due to the difficulties of retranslation of our edited sessions back into Dari and Pashtu. The similar format and language of the edited sessions was expected to save time in translation after the first example was complete, but apparently this did not flow as smoothly as we had hoped.

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Collaboration with Creative Associates

I was profoundly impressed by the qualities of the local Afghan staff who work with the U.S. contractor Creative Associates. They are serious people. In particular, the three Provincial Monitoring Officers who worked on the RPM project demonstrated real depth of knowledge about pedagogy, understanding of effective practices of professional development, and familiarity with conditions in the field which are likely to influence the effectiveness of the RPM training materials. The ancillary staff (translators and typists) were sometimes inconsistent in their attendance and in the volume of their work. However, they always cheerfully helped with presentations and facilitated interactions with non-English speakers.

Comments

- Better communication before our arrival would have facilitated better decisions about what materials to bring and helped us to plan ahead in order to utilize most fully the skills and experience of the AFT team.
- The practice of regular reporting to the COP and at staff meetings helped us to ensure that the priorities, pace and quality of work were consistent with expectations.
- There was some confusion in working with the Afghan translators. They were cheerful and professional, but it was difficult accurately to assess the efficiency of their work as they translated the RPM materials back into Dari and Pashtu.

Living and Working Conditions

Accommodation at Creative's "Green House" residence in Kabul was comfortable but not lavish. The rooms were air-conditioned (a necessity) and mine had its own bath. Local staff cooked excellent meals took care of the rooms and our laundry. On a couple of occasions, we were able to entertain people to meals. It certainly felt safe, since the gates were secured by guards around the clock and the deputy security manager lived in.

For most of August, there were strict restrictions on movement. Even a short walk down the street to the Creative main office involved half a dozen of the security staff. It was easy to arrange with the security manager for outings in the evening to guarded restaurants which catered to foreigners and for visits to the grocery store and certain secure shops. Tourist activities such as strolling through the bazaar or along the main streets were not possible. After Betty and Amber arrived, we were able to visit the National Museum (with evidence of multiple lootings still visible) and the palace of the former Kings. The latter was an engrossing though eerie experience – in many ways a symbol of all the havoc wrought upon Afghanistan by a generation of war.

Conditions out at the teacher training site were rather more challenging. Although traveling in an armored vehicle, we were often stuck in traffic jams and the trip sometimes took upwards of forty-five minutes. The site was a spacious classroom in the middle of the Kabul Teachers' College campus. There were crowds of students everywhere, but one of the Creative security staff was always on duty at the door, while the car remained just outside throughout the day. Until the election lockdown began in mid-August, we were out at the RPM site five and a half days a week. The workday generally ran from 8:30 to about 3:30. We seldom moved from

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the room until leaving at the end of the day. During one week the heat regularly reached 110 degrees. There were electric fans and water coolers, but the flies and dust steadily swirling through the open windows were hard on the people and computer equipment alike. When working at the Creative main office, we were given our own desk space.

Comments

- Living conditions might seem a bit spartan to person attached to the comforts of home or a hotel.
- Working conditions out at the Sayyed Jumalladin Teacher College site would be difficult for a person unaccustomed to heat, dust, flies and minimal amenities.
- All movement outside of the residences is tightly controlled. One cannot stroll around the neighborhood.
- On several occasions, we were conscious of gunfire and explosions in the general vicinity. A person who felt especially nervous about random rockets at night or explosions on the streets during the day would have found this mission difficult.
- Social life in Kabul exists, but is restricted by security considerations.

Assessment

This summer's collaboration in Afghanistan between the AFT and Ministry of Education was a remarkable success. The skills and experience of the AFT team were well matched to the needs of the BESST project. We shared in common with the Afghan educators so many similar concerns about the training and support of teachers that it was easy to step in and support the production of training manuals. The Provincial Monitoring Officers were remarkably effective in helping us to understand and respond to the needs of Afghan teachers. The Creative team in Kabul were practical, open-minded, and welcomed our participation in the project. Our full AFT team of three persons, although only together for a week, was able to collaborate frankly and efficiently from the start. Our primary tasks – supporting the rapid production by Afghan educators of teacher training materials and preparing the Grades 4-6 manual for publication – were completed on time and to a high standard of quality. The project could not have been more serious. Our AFT Team, in my opinion, made a substantive contribution to the idea that Afghan teachers can be a community of educators.

This was a marvellous professional experience. It has convinced me that if Americans listen carefully and lead pragmatically, we can help Afghans to build a professional community of educators which could be a sturdy foundation for civil society. The AFT, with our tradition of practical support in response to the needs of teachers in the classroom, can fill an essential role in the process.

Recommendations for the AFT in responding to the needs of educators in Afganistan

- Train Afghan educators in the use of low-prep, low-resource dependent strategies for supporting active student learning, including graphic organizers and paper manipulatives;
- Share and support practices for developing reading materials which are both developmentally and culturally appropriate, such as collections of stories about local families, occupations, traditions, and history;

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- Share experience and help develop techniques for handling large classes (sometimes of 100 students or more), especially in the early grades;
- Share experience in effective instructional planning and execution under circumstances where the school day, school year, and student attendance are not consistent;
- Help Afghan Teacher Education Department officials and the teachers whom they train and monitor to understand the value of formative assessments in monitoring student learning, especially with regard to proficiency in reading and writing;
- Provide training in Curriculum Mapping and strategies for sustaining the practice so that Afghan educators are enabled to coordinate their efforts among subjects, grade levels and schools;
- Disseminate aspects of brain research with immediate, obvious application to instruction, such as how the link between age and the length of attention span can inform lesson planning;
- Support more efficient planning and instruction by teachers in the field by providing templates, strategies for setting priorities, and techniques for self-evaluation;
- At the policy level, in training for school leaders, and in training for teachers, present a paradigm of differentiated instruction which synthesizes common sense experience with theories of learning into an agenda for sustained improvement of teaching and learning. In support of this objective, I would recommend translating and adapting Judy Dodge's *Differentiation in Action* and *25 Short Formative Assessments*. These ideas are digestible in small bites by teachers with limited resources;
- Support the expansion and refinement of Teacher Learning Circles (school-based professional groups);
- Introduce and support effective practices for organizing, mobilizing, and sustaining structures for local collaboration, such as Teacher Learning Circles, Lead Teachers, community sponsorship of school activities, and provincial/district resource centers;
- Share experience in techniques for building connects between schools and parents;
- Help to develop a plan for teacher induction, development and retention;
- Share experience in developing supports for 1st Grade teachers, who play a critical role in Afghanistan as the first point of contact with formal education for many children and their parents;
- Help Afghan educators to widen the area of common language, experience and benchmarks for proficiency in the teaching profession;
- Through training of administrators, lead teachers, and instructional specialists, facilitate supportive school supervision and provincial leadership;
- Support analysis of the high drop-out rate in Grades 4-6 and help to develop strategic responses so that more children move on to middle and high school;
- Share low-cost but effective practices for acknowledging and encouraging professional accomplishment by teachers;
- Share techniques for building professional connections among teachers across provincial boundaries. (The current set-up seems to be of the hub and spokes variety, with national TED in Kabul at the hub, provincial TED's at the end of the spokes, and very little reciprocal communication even between the national and provincial administrative centers);

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- Support development of a growing cadre of master teachers and skilled supervisors embedded in the Teacher Education Department, other parts of the Ministry of Education, and Provincial education headquarters. The RPM process and involvement of TED staff in the “Expert” level training has established a good foundation.

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