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Teaching in the Midst of a War Zone

An Interview with Captain Bryan Schroeder and Amin Wardak*

BY SUE SHARMA

In the last edition of the *Michigan Reading Journal*, you were introduced to Bryan Schroeder, a Michigan principal who is also a deployed U.S. service member. Bryan continues to work with other deployed U.S. service members and civilians through “Operation Outreach Afghanistan” to provide literacy supplies such as books, paper, pencils, and pens to children in Afghanistan.

In this edition, Amin Wardak, from UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and a member of the International Reading Association, joins the conversation with Captain Schroeder, an honorary member of the Michigan Reading Association. Together their unique roles and perspectives will provide Michigan educators with a glimpse at global literacy issues spotlighting teachers in Afghanistan whose priority is to the literacy growth of their students, even in the midst of a war zone. Teachers are teachers the world around. Their hearts’ desire is to meet the needs of their students the best way they can.

Sharma: What do you see as some of the issues surrounding the development of educational institutions in transitional countries such as Afghanistan?

Wardak: In Afghanistan, the Ministry of Education has a special deputy ministry which focuses only on literacy programs, literacy curriculum and literacy teacher development. The Literacy Department and its partners have regular training to facilitate the 9-month literacy program for the illiterate adults all over the country. Since the remote areas are lacking education, it is difficult to find qualified facilitators/literacy teachers. There is no department specifically dealing with adult education in universities and teacher training colleges in the country, therefore, the Literacy Department would like to establish a Literacy Teacher Education Institute but it still hasn’t taken place.

Some of the issues educational institutions are facing in Afghanistan are:

- Co-education and education for women
- Lack of employment opportunities in education and low remuneration of employees in education field

- Climate and geographical problems, which has effects on many developments in the country
- Deterioration of the security in the country
- Traditional thinking

Sharma: Please describe how teachers in Afghanistan creatively navigate the affordances and constraints of their schools.

Schroeder: From what I have witnessed, teachers really just do the best with what they have.

Wardak: Education is free of charge in Afghanistan, and the government provides books, stationary, and other required facilities are free. Teachers together with parents, the community education councils and school management councils are solving problems of schools.

Sharma: How are Afghanistan teachers prepared for the teaching service?

Schroeder: The local university has a 2-year teacher prep program.

Wardak: Most teachers are graduates from Teacher Training Centers and Education University and education faculties. Here they get pre-service and in-service long term and short-term teacher trainings.

Sharma: What kinds of professional resources do Afghanistan teachers have access to?

Wardak: Throughout the country teachers have access to teacher training centers at the district and provincial level, Libraries and resource centers and supervisors’ professional support

Sharma: Describe some of the challenges Afghanistan teachers face.

* MRA President Sue Sharma conducted this interview through email. The accompanying photos of literacy classes were provided by Amin Wardak and taken in the Ghazni Province of Afghanistan.

Schroeder: In Kabul, teachers face serious overcrowding issues, along with teaching supply challenges and lack of facilities for classes. The coalition forces have provided money to build schools, but the need is so great only a small percentage of schools are actually refurbished or built.

Wardak: Hard climate, security problems, lack of enough facilities and lack of further education opportunities in the rural areas are some of the challenges teachers face in Afghanistan.

Sharma: How are the professional development needs of Afghanistan teachers being met?

Schroeder: Teachers do not participate in formal professional development.

Wardak: In-service teachers receive professional trainings. Teachers participate in informal meetings with supervisors and teachers with other teachers.

Sharma: Describe how Project Outreach and UNESCO are supporting the literacy education practices of teachers in the country of Afghanistan.

Schroeder: Project Outreach is supporting teachers and the education system by providing teaching materials and student materials.

Wardak: UNESCO has been implementing a huge literacy program in Afghanistan, which is covering 600,000 illiterate adults across the country. Currently, UNESCO has 5,800 literacy teachers providing literacy skills for 290,000 learners. It develops the skills of the teachers through pre-service and in-service trainings, supervisors meetings with teachers, and teachers meetings with teachers.

Sharma: What kind of recommendations or suggestions can you make that would apply to longer-term improvement of the quality of literacy education in Afghanistan?



Wardak: Some suggestions to improve the quality of literacy education in Afghanistan would include providing 1) professional trainings with the establishment of teacher support centers at the community level, 2) integration of literacy skills development, 3) developing curriculum for literacy teachers, and 4) practical and supportive supervision of literacy teachers.

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