



Supporting New Teachers in Kharghalton, Western Afghanistan

Kharghalton is a small community in Enjil District of Herat Province, western Afghanistan. Although only 30 kilometers from Herat City, the village is very isolated, far from the main road and several kilometers from the nearest settlement.

A recent addition to the community is the ‘community center’ provided by the Child Protection program of the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Classes for the children of the village take place here for three hours a day, six days week. Education was identified by the community as a priority for the children, so IRC supported the community to establish non-formal schooling. One of the major challenges in such communities is to identify a suitable teacher because there are very few educated people. Often the mullah is the most educated person, although he will likely have studied little more than the Holy Quran, with little or no experience of general primary education.

This was the case in Kharghalton where the mullah was identified as the most suitable teacher. Teaching and learning materials were provided, along with some very basic teacher training and support. The mullah-teacher, although constrained by low levels of content knowledge and no teaching experience, nonetheless did the best he could in difficult circumstances. The number of children in the class grew until it became too many for the one teacher to cope with.

It was decided that one of the older students should help out and teach the lower class. 14-year-old Bazigha — who was top of her class — suddenly became a teacher. Bazigha had no teacher training, and the mullah-teacher who guides her has also had very little. Her subject knowledge is only a little beyond the level she is teaching. But nonetheless, Bazigha shows promise as a teacher. She has students write the sentences they are learning on the board and repeat them out loud for their peers. Up at the board she stands close behind and gently encourages those students who are shy and who have difficulties. She quietly corrects any mistakes that are made. She is also very conscious about encouraging girls to participate equally, and if there has been a series of boys at the board she will insist that the next volunteer is a girl. As she says, “When I see the students who look at the board and listen, I understand that they have learned the lesson. If they don’t pay attention I know they haven’t understood.” When this happens she knows to repeat the lesson and then ask the child to come to the blackboard and repeat the lesson him or herself.

The families of Community Learning Center (CLC) teachers have been prioritized for participation in income-generating projects, but Bazigha herself receives no financial compensation for her work. There are, however, alternative forms of compensation. She says that what she most enjoys is “having many students in the class who learn and

understand the lesson.” She also knows that she is respected in the community for teaching the children and appreciates the fact that she is called ‘teacher’ or ‘malim.’ Her main motivation is to help the mullah-teacher and to serve her community. She is fortunate enough to have his support and encouragement. Bazigha is also fortunate that she has an older sister at home, as this means she does not have too much housework to do.

That is not to say there are no challenges or difficulties. Bazigha says she does not like it when the students are absent and when the class is disorganized. She is also very aware of the contradictions in her position. As she says, “I am not so proud that I am teacher because I am a student.”

IRC supports community teachers and encourages them to feel like professionals. This is the only feasible means at the moment of providing education for children who are outside of the reach of the Ministry of Education. The nearest government primary school is an hour’s walk away, and there are no alternative, more experienced teachers to recruit. At the same time, in places where the daily struggle to survive leaves children very vulnerable, teacher training and support is also a critical child protection strategy. Local teachers know and understand their students, and can be encouraged to use their classes to promote their well-being.

Teachers – as respected individuals in the communities – can be important advocates for children, raising awareness in the community of their needs for time and attention, playtime, adequate clothing, food and health care.

As part of its global Healing Classrooms Initiative, IRC has developed and implemented a new teacher training and support program for Bazigha and the other CLC teachers in other communities in Enjil and Adraskan districts. This training, specifically developed for teachers in the region, links child protection and education in three specific ways: through what they teach, how they teach and what they can do as advocates for children’s rights and children’s well-being within the community. The training – and the classroom-based follow up emphasizes the importance of routines and classroom organization and management which help to foster self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging, pride and hope in the children’s identities as students.

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