



Original Article

Infrastructural Needs for Establishing Non-Formal Schools in Afghanistan: A Case Study



Hazrat Usman Mashwani

Department of Education, Hazara University, Mansehra – Pakistan

 50133-2011@hu.edu.pk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5468-5015>

Syed Manzoor Hussain Shah

Department of Education, Hazara University, Mansehra – Pakistan

 drmhshaah@hu.edu.pk

Muhammad Ilyas Khan

Department of Education, Hazara University, Mansehra – Pakistan

 drilyas@hu.edu.pk

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Abstract

This study explored the infrastructural needs for the establishment of Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) within the existing setup of mosques and guesthouses of the community, aiming to enrol out-of-school children and alleviate illiteracy in Kunar province, Afghanistan. Employing a case study and qualitative research design, 62 research participants from the education sector and the Hajj and Islamic Affairs sector were purposively selected. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that generally buildings and carpets were the available facilities for the initiative; however, other essential facilities such as furniture, teaching materials, stationery, and qualified teaching staff were needed for the establishment of NFSs in the province. The study suggests that the government need to collaborate with non-governmental organizations and support the initiative by devising comprehensive policies, allocating sufficient funds, and providing the basic infrastructure facilities to open NFSs addressing the issue of illiteracy in the province and the country.

Keywords: Afghan education, Education and equity, Education for all, Educational infrastructure, Non-formal education

INTRODUCTION

Education constitutes an essential need and a fundamental right for every individual. Education fosters positive behavioral changes and life improvements (Hiq et al., 2021). It serves as a comprehensive process that contributes to individual development across various dimensions, ultimately leading to the establishment of a stable, peaceful, economically robust, and prosperous society (Sultana et al., 2019; Terziev & Vasileva 2022; McIntyre, 2017). Afghanistan, as a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), acknowledges the inherent right of every child to education (Fazel, 2020). Moreover, the Afghan government has implemented rigorous measures to promote education, enshrining it as a fundamental right for all citizens from primary to bachelor levels in public institutions, as articulated in article 43 of the national constitution (Khan et al., 2020). Article 44 of the national constitution further mandates the government to implement effective educational programs for both genders, aiming to enhance education at all levels and eradicate illiteracy nationwide.

Despite these concerted efforts, the state of education in Afghanistan remains suboptimal. The overall literacy rate hovers around 40%, falling below the global average (UIL, 2020). Additionally, approximately 4 million school-age children are presently out of school, primarily due to poverty and an inadequate number of formal schools (Menteş & Talas, 2021). The existing Formal Schools (FSs) system lacks comprehensive coverage, leaving a significant portion of the child population without access to education. In circumstances where pervasive challenges, including poverty and a shortage of FSs, impede child education, Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) such as Mosque Schools (MSs) and community guesthouse schools emerge as potential solutions. If economic constraints prevent the operation of an adequate number of FSs in the province, the establishment of NFSs within existing Mosques and guesthouses could represent a cost-effective and sustainable strategy. This approach has the potential to enrol out-of-school children in the education system, thereby improving the country's overall literacy rate.

The focal point of this study is to investigate the infrastructural requirements for establishing NFSs (MSs and schools in community guesthouses) to enrol out-of-school children and alleviate illiteracy in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. The current study focused on Kunar province which is being studied as a case study. The study aimed to assess both the existing facilities and the necessary infrastructure for the establishment of non-formal schools within Mosques and guesthouses in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.

Research Objectives:

- To evaluate the current infrastructural facilities of Mosques and guesthouses for the establishment of non-formal schools in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.
- To explore the required infrastructural facilities for the establishment of non-formal schools in Kunar Province, Afghanistan.

Research Questions:

- What infrastructural facilities are available for the establishment of non-formal schools in Kunar Province, Afghanistan?
- What are the required infrastructural facilities for the establishment of non-formal schools in Kunar Province, Afghanistan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) are also known as alternative or second chance schools. These educational institutions adopt formal curricula but differ significantly in terms of financing, management, operating environment, and staffing conditions (Nyaga, 2016). Designed as alternative entities, NFSs complement Formal Schools (FSs) by providing basic education to those marginalized within the educational landscape. Gull and Sarwar (2020) emphasize that NFSs primarily aim to assist children who are neglected within the formal education system, particularly those facing economic difficulties (Yasunaga, 2014). Non-Formal Education (NFE) is considered a flexible and cost-effective solution for children who are out-of-school due to various reasons (Mbilu, 2019). NFSs, particularly in developing countries, have demonstrated substantial success in elevating literacy rates (Gull & Sarwar, 2020; Sud, 2010; Powdyel, 2016). Considering the pressing issue of out-of-school children and low child literacy rates in Afghanistan, establishing an NFSs within mosques and community guesthouses is deemed essential to promote literacy, especially among children.

Infrastructural Needs of Non-Formal Schools

The infrastructure of an educational system encompasses facilities essential for the teaching and learning process. These facilities include buildings, textbooks, computers, electricity, and internet access (Sholihah, 2019; Lawanson & Gede, 2011; Asiabaka, 2008). Infrastructure plays a pivotal role in achieving school goals, influencing the quality of teaching and overall school success (Hamid, 2016; Khan & Iqbal, 2012; Saleem, 2009). The study focuses on three critical components of NFS infrastructural needs: physical facilities, textbooks/study materials, and teaching staff.

Physical Facilities in Non-Formal Schools

Physical facilities in schools refer to physical entities that help in the teaching/learning process. These facilities encompass buildings, furniture, tools/devices, and amenities like water, electricity, playgrounds, and roads (Sholihah, 2019; Arshad et al., 2018; Awan, 2018; Mackatiani, 2017; Lawanson & Gede, 2011; Asiabaka, 2008). Research has consistently shown that well-equipped schools with adequate physical facilities contribute to higher student achievements (Barrett et al., 2019; Arshad et al., 2018; Gul, 2018; Mackatiani, 2017; Koroye, 2016; Kiarie, 2013). Physical facilities, including buildings, furniture, and instructional tools, play a pivotal role in the teaching and learning process, significantly influencing students' academic achievements.

Textbooks/Study Materials in Non-Formal Schools

Textbooks and study materials are fundamental components of any literacy program. These study materials directly impact student achievement (Saleem, 2009). The availability and quality of these materials are crucial for the success of literacy programs, as a lack or shortage can impede program goals (Gull, 2018; Ampiah, 2011; Davis & Krajcik, 2005; Harbison & Hanushek, 1992). Ensuring an adequate supply of textbooks and study materials is essential for the success of NFSs, as studies affirm their role in student achievements and overall school success.

Teaching Staff for Non-Formal Schools

The presence of qualified teaching staff is an indispensable element for any educational institution. An unqualified staff jeopardize the goals of an NFS system (Boudersa, 2016). Studies underscore the paramount importance of professional qualifications for the success and continuity of NFSs (Nyagah & Gathumbi, 2017; Hamid, 2016; Wabwoba et al., 2014). Professional and academic qualifications are recognized as crucial factors influencing the implementation and success of educational programs.

In summary, the professional qualification of teachers stands as a cornerstone in the success and effectiveness of NFSs.

The existing literature on Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) often provides insights into their pedagogical aspects and effectiveness in diverse global contexts. However, a noticeable research gap is discernible when it comes to a focused examination of the infrastructural needs for establishing NFSs in Afghanistan, particularly within the unique framework of Mosques and guesthouses. While studies in other regions have explored the operational and educational dimensions of NFSs, there is a scarcity of in-depth analysis regarding the specific infrastructural requisites for successful implementation in Afghanistan. This gap is particularly pertinent in light of the distinct challenges faced by the Afghan educational system, including issues of literacy, socio-political dynamics, and access to formal schooling. By scrutinizing and addressing the infrastructural needs for NFSs in Kunar province, this research endeavours to contribute valuable insights that fill the existing void and inform future initiatives aimed at enhancing non-formal education in Afghanistan.

METHODOLOGY

This section provides an overview of the methodology employed in the current study. It encompasses discussions on research design, the study's population, sample selection, research instruments, as well as the procedures for data collection and subsequent data analysis. Moreover, the section explains the considerations taken into account for the validity and reliability of the study.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in the Kunar province, Afghanistan, encompassing 15 districts with Asadabad serving as its provincial capital (Sharma & Afzali, 2018). Positioned in the northeast of the country, the province spans approximately 4,339 km², with 96% of its terrain characterized as mountainous or semi-mountainous. As of 2022, an estimated 0.5 million individuals inhabit in the province. Known as the birthplace of the scholar Allama Sayyed Jamaluddin Afghani, the main public university of the province is being named after him. The educational landscape of the province comprises of a provincial education directorate, 15 district education directorates, 441 formal public and private schools, around 4,000 teachers, and a student population of 184,256. Additionally, the province has 2,175 mosques.

Research Design

A qualitative case study research design was employed to gather detailed and in-depth data. Qualitative case study design offers a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2013; Fraenkel et al., 2016). Furthermore, the case study approach explores a case i.e., an individual, a classroom, a city, a province, a system and so on using observation, interviews, documents, or reports (Cresswell, 2013; Gay et al., 2012). The proposed design facilitated the exploration of infrastructural needs for opening Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) in Kunar province, examining the entire province as the unit of analysis.

Population of the Study

Population refers to individuals, objects, events, organization, and so on to which the outcome of the research may be generalised. While qualitative research does not typically aim for generalization, insights gleaned from the findings may inform broader perspectives within the population. The population of the study consisted of officials from the education sector, officials from the Hajj and Islamic Affairs Directorate, headmasters, teachers, Mosque/Madrasa Imams, and parents in Kunar province.

Sample of the Study

Sample is a subset of the population. It refers to the individuals, objects, events on which the data is obtained for a research study. A purposive sample of 62 participants was selected to achieve saturation in data collection. Participants included the provincial director of education, provincial director of Hajj and Islamic Affairs, district director of education, district director of Hajj and Islamic Affairs, a Mosque/Madrasa Imam, a headmaster, a teacher, and a parent from 10 districts in Kunar Province. As suggested by Onwuegbuzie & Collins (2007), this sample size aimed to strike a balance between comprehensiveness

and depth for in-depth analysis.

Research Instruments

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool. Semi-structured interviews are useful in collecting in-depth data. These are also considered useful because of their flexibility, striking a balance between rigidity and openness (Abd Gani et al., 2020; Kendall, 2014). Interview items, along with probes and prompts, were meticulously crafted based on the instruments used in prior studies in the field.

Data Collection

Data collection commenced with interviews with the provincial director of education and the provincial director of Hajj (Pilgrimage) and Islamic Affairs, followed by district-level data collection. Conducted in the native Pashto language for participant convenience, the data was subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to scrutinize and interpret the data, following the six sequential steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) for this analytical approach. These steps encompassed data familiarization, creation of initial codes, exploration of themes, revision of themes, nomination of themes, and the subsequent production of the final report. To ensure confidentiality, participants were anonymized through the assignment of pseudonyms. Specifically, PD1 and PD2 denote Provincial Directors; DDE1, DDE2, DDE3, and so forth indicate District Directors of Education; DDHIA1, DDHIA2, DDHIA3, and so on represent District Directors of Hajj and Islamic Affairs; HM1, HM2, HM3, and so forth stand for Headmasters; T1, T2, T3, and so on represent Teachers; MI1, MI2, MI3, and so on designate Mosque Imams, while P1, P2, P3, and so on denote Parents. The ensuing section presents the emergent themes.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are paramount considerations in ensuring the robustness of any research endeavour. In the context of the current study, efforts were made to enhance both validity and reliability throughout the research process. Validity, pertaining to the accuracy and truthfulness of the study's findings, was upheld through several means. Firstly, the research design, employing a qualitative case study approach, facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the infrastructural needs for Non-Formal Schools (NFSs) in Kunar province. The alignment of the study objectives with the research questions and the use of established thematic analysis steps, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), contributed to the content validity of the study.

Additionally, the inclusion of diverse stakeholders, such as officials from the education sector, Mosque Imams, parents, and teachers, ensured a multifaceted understanding of the infrastructural requirements. Similarly, reliability, denoting the consistency and repeatability of the study, was bolstered by employing systematic and transparent research methods. The use of semi-structured interviews, with predefined questions and probes, enhanced the reliability of data collection, ensuring consistency across participants. Moreover, the meticulous documentation of the research process, including the steps followed in thematic analysis, contributes to the study's transparency and reproducibility. The use of pseudonyms for participant anonymity also adds a layer of reliability by safeguarding confidentiality. In a nutshell, the study made conscientious efforts to uphold both validity and reliability, employing rigorous methodologies and ensuring transparency throughout the research process. These considerations enhance the credibility of the findings and contribute to the overall robustness of the study.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

The following is a presentation of the main findings of the study.

Existing Facilities of the Mosques and Guesthouses for Opening Non-Formal School System in Kunar Province

Based on the first objective of the study i.e., to evaluate the existing facilities in the mosques and

guesthouses of the community in Kunar province, the following main and sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the data as shown in figure 1.

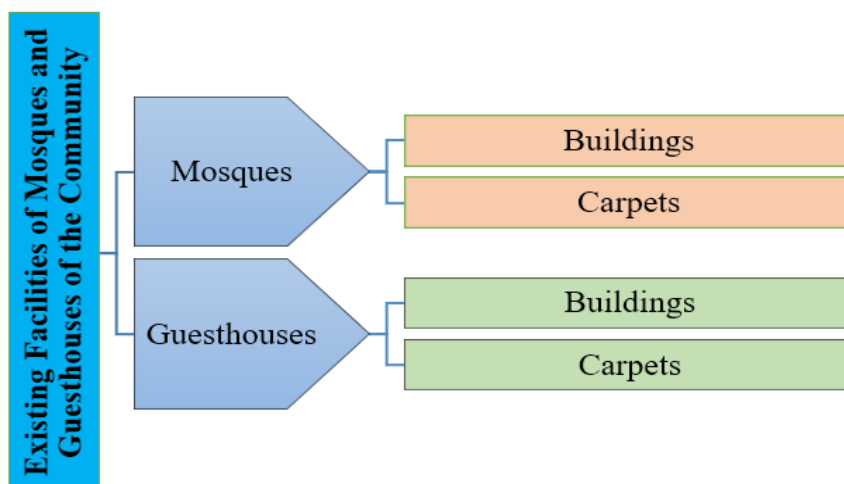


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes based on objective no. 1

Existing facilities in the mosques

This theme represents the facilities currently available in the mosques that could be used for the NFSs. Almost all the participants declared that the mosques have their own buildings and carpets, and they can be used for the NFSs. The following section elaborates this further.

DDHIA4 expressed:

"Majority of our Mosques/Madrasas have their buildings. Moreover, carpets and some of the basic facilities are available here in every Mosque..."

DDE4 expressed:

"Currently, the Mosques/Madrasas have buildings and carpets which could be used for the non-formal schools. However, the other required facilities need to be provided in them"

HM8 said:

"There are no such facilities of furniture in the Mosque/Madrassa, but we can use its building and carpets. There will be no issue in using the existing physical facilities of the Mosque/Madrassa"

Existing Facilities in the Guesthouses

This theme represents the available physical facilities in the form of guesthouses that can be used for the NFSs in the province. Most of the participants declared that the guesthouses in the locality have their own buildings and carpets that can be used for the purpose of these NFSs in the province. The following comments of the participants explain this.

PD1 responded:

"In Kunar, there is one thing that I should mention to you, the people of Kunar are educated people, they have a special admiration for education.... Every person is willing to give us even their houses and guesthouses to teach children there. So, we can use the buildings and carpets of the guesthouse for the non-formal schools"

DDE10 expressed:

"Here, in the district, everyone has big guesthouse i.e., the guesthouses have vast areas. These guesthouses have all the basic facilities such as toilets, wells and so on and can be used for the non-formal schools...."

T2 commented:

"Most of the guesthouses in the village have their own buildings, carpets and some furniture like tables and chairs. I am very much sure that the people of the locality will happily provide their guesthouses along with the available facilities in them for these non-formal schools..."

Required Facilities for Opening Non-Formal School System in Kunar Province

Based on the second objective of the study i.e., to assess the required facilities for opening non-formal school system in Kunar province, the following main and sub-themes emerged from the analysis of the data as shown in summarised in figure 2.

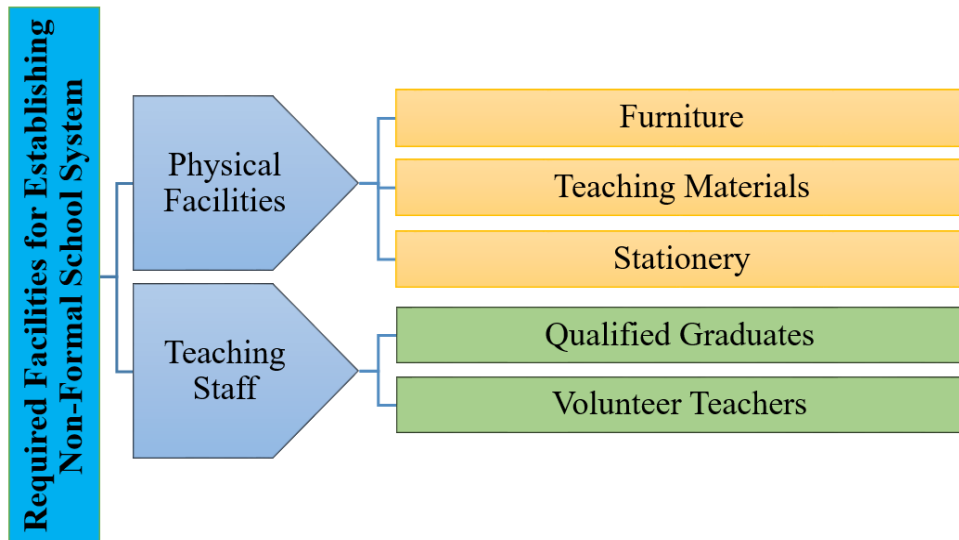


Figure 2. Themes and sub-themes based on objective no. 2

Physical Facilities

This theme represents the physical facilities required for opening NFSs in Kunar province. Furniture, teaching materials and stationery were identified as the required physical facilities for the NFSs by the participants.

- **Furniture**

Majority of the participants pointed out furniture as the required physical facility for opening NFSs in the Mosques and guesthouses in Kunar Province. This is further elaborated in the views of the participants as follow.

DDE8 shared his point of view:

"There should be furniture and other required facilities in these schools. Because when there is no furniture, such as chairs, tables and so on, then where the children will sit? So, the learning environment needs to be arranged for these schools".

MI4 stated:

"The non-formal schools require furniture because furniture facilitates in the teaching and learning process. Furniture such as chairs, disks, tables and so on are essential for these non-formal schools".

- **Teaching Materials**

Teaching materials are other facilities suggested by the participants for these NFSs. The participants advocated that there should be enough teaching materials that could help in the teaching/learning process in these NFSs. The following are some of their standpoints that explain this.

DDHIA6 emphasized:

"The people of the district could help you in providing the physical facilities needed for these schools. However, the teaching materials needs to be provided".

T5 stated:

"In addition to other physical facilities, teaching materials may be provided in these schools. Children can use the teaching materials more effectively and need to be provided in enough quantity...."

- **Stationery**

Some of the participants suggested that stationery is a required physical facility in the NFSs. They advocated that stationery is an important element in the teaching/learning process and should be provided in these schools. The following comments represents their point of views.

DDE1 expressed:

"In physical facilities, stationery is one of the required physical facilities for these schools. It is one of the fundamental elements of physical facilities required for an educational program and should be provided in these schools"

DDHIA1 suggested:

"Once we have the basic required facilities in these schools; next we have to provide the students at these schools with the stationery like schoolbags, books, pens, pencils, black-board/white-board, markers and so on"

Teaching Staff of NFSs

This theme represents the suitable candidate who could teach in the NFSs in Kunar province. The following sub-themes appeared from the analysis of the data in this regard.

- **Qualified Graduates**

Majority of the participants stated that those people may teach in these NFSs who have recently completed their higher studies and currently are unemployed. They argued that they are young people with enormous energy and motivation. Similarly, they are qualified people and will provide quality education to the students in these schools. Moreover, these young and qualified people are currently unemployed too, so hiring them in these NFSs will help them in providing a reasonable job opportunity as well. The following are some of their comments.

PD2 argued as:

"As you know, every year a big number of students graduate from universities. Due to the limited job opportunities, many of these graduates can not find jobs. So, it will be better to hire these young graduates because they are qualified and will teach effectively in these schools...."

DDE2 emphasized as:

"Well qualified people should teach in these schools. We know that there are many well qualified people in the community who are currently jobless. So, we should hire these people as teachers in these schools. They will provide quality education to our children...."

MI7 recommended as:

"There is a need for qualified teachers to teach in these schools. We have plenty of youngsters in the community who are been graduated from universities and Alhamdulillah they have great talent, but they are currently jobless. So, if they could be and I am sure they can effectively teach in these schools"

- **Volunteer Teachers**

Many of the participants also remarked that the teaching staff of these NFSs should be volunteer teachers. They expressed that volunteer teachers have motivation and positive energy, and these can help them to effectively teach in these NFSs. Moreover, the volunteer teachers will have no other occupation and will have enough time to teach in these schools. The following are some of their viewpoints that explain this.

DDHIA7 expressed as:

"I think, the volunteer teachers are very important for these schools. They can effectively teach in these schools. Because they have motivation. If they teach in the sense that these are my relatives/villagers and teach with sincerity to them, these schools will be very successful. So, the volunteer teachers should teach in these schools"

MI2 remarked as:

"I think if volunteer teacher may teach in these schools, it will be better...."

T9 stated as:

"Well, we have to keep both cost effectiveness and quality of teaching/learning in these non-formal schools; so, I think the better choice with us is to appoint qualified volunteer teachers for these schools"

Discussion

The literacy rate in Afghanistan has consistently fallen below the desired standards, prompting extensive efforts by the government to enhance literacy throughout the country. Despite these efforts, the current literacy rate stands at approximately 40% (UNICEF, 2021; UIL, 2020). Compounding this challenge, a substantial number, estimated at around 4 million, of school-age children are presently out of school due to various impediments (UNICEF, 2021). The prevailing issues include civil wars, political tensions, poverty, a shortage of schools, and cultural norms (Menteş & Talas, 2021; Daud, 2020; Noori, 2017; Khwajamir, 2016). In the current situation of economic struggles of the country, where both the government and the populace face financial constraints to educate children through Formal Schools (FSs), there is an imperative to establish a cost-effective Non-Formal School (NFS) system within existing Mosques and guesthouses to enrol out-of-school children and mitigate illiteracy. NFSs have proven effective in providing basic education in marginalized societies, given their flexibility and cost-effectiveness (Gul & Sarwar, 2020; Mbilu, 2019; Yasunaga, 2014). Consequently, the present study serves as a needs assessment for the requisite infrastructure to establish NFSs and address illiteracy in Kunar province, Afghanistan. Specifically, the study investigated the availability of physical facilities in Mosques and guesthouses for NFSs in Kunar Province and assessed the required infrastructure for implementing an NFS system.

The findings revealed that existing physical facilities in the Mosques and guesthouses of Kunar province include buildings and carpets, suggesting potential utilization for NFSs. Additionally, the study identified furniture, teaching materials, and stationery as essential infrastructural needs for establishing NFSs in the province, aligning with recommendations by Awan (2018) and Macketiani (2017), who highlighted the importance of school buildings, rooms, furniture, laboratories, blackboards/whiteboards, and washrooms for effective school functioning. Numerous studies corroborate the significance of adequate physical facilities in the teaching/learning process (Sholihah, 2019; Barrett et al., 2019; Arshad et al., 2018; Ramli & Zain, 2018; Gul, 2018; Macketiani, 2017; Koroye, 2016; Kiarie, 2013; Lawanson & Gede, 2011; Asiabaka, 2008). Moreover, the study identified university graduates and volunteer teachers as suitable candidates for teaching in these NFSs. The presence of qualified graduates, especially those currently unemployed, was recognized as valuable due to their youth, energy, and motivation. The significance of qualified teaching staff in the success of educational programs is underscored by previous research, such as the study conducted by Nyagah and Gathumbi (2017) in Kenya, which highlighted the negative impact of a lack of qualified teachers on the quality of Non-Formal Education Centres (NFECS). This aligns with the assertion by Hamid (2016) that qualified teachers significantly influence the teaching/learning process in educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the mosques and guesthouses within the community in Kunar province possess their own buildings and carpets, rendering them viable for the implementation of Non-Formal Schools (NFSs). Additionally, the study emphasized that essential facilities for initiating NFSs in this setting include furniture, teaching materials, stationery, and a qualified teaching staff. In summary, the available facilities encompass buildings and carpets, while the requisite facilities for establishing the NFS system in the existing mosques and guesthouses of the community in Kunar Province include furniture, teaching materials, stationery, and qualified teaching staff. This infrastructure is deemed crucial for enrolling out-of-school children and addressing the issue of illiteracy in Kunar province, Afghanistan.

Recommendations

The study found that some basic facilities such as buildings and carpets, are generally present in the mosques and guesthouses of the community, potentially suitable for the establishment of Non-Formal

Schools (NFSs) in Kunar province. Nevertheless, there is need for the provision of essential furniture, teaching materials, stationery, and qualified teaching staff to begin the process of education in these places in the NFSs context. This study, therefore, suggests that the Ministry of Education, Afghanistan (MoE), either independently or through collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), take proactive measures to furnish these essential facilities and facilitate the establishment of the NFS system in Kunar province to address the prevailing issue of illiteracy within the province and, consequently, contribute to nationwide literacy enhancement.

Competing Interest

The authors had no competing interests.

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