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# Educational Bottlenecks and Technological Aspirations in Postwar Afghanistan: A Qualitative Study of Infrastructure Deficits, Teacher Compensation, and Fiscal Realities

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## Abstract

This qualitative empirical study examines the structural realities, institutional bottlenecks, and technological aspirations across primary, middle, and high schools in postwar Afghanistan. Utilizing a rigorously designed qualitative methodology, primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 170 anonymous stakeholders across three distinct educational institutions: 100 students, 35 teachers, and 35 school administrators. Findings demonstrate a profound institutional dichotomy: while participants express consensus satisfaction with post-conflict physical safety, public schools suffer from near-total material starvation—characterized by an absolute lack of writing boards, desks, textbooks, and basic stationery. Furthermore, severely deflated teacher salaries directly trigger high rates of staff absenteeism and unpunctuality. Concurrently, 100% of sampled students demand immediate integration of computer laboratories and modern digital infrastructure. Operating under strict diplomatic isolation with minimal external bilateral support beyond Russian engagement, educational policy in Afghanistan must navigate total reliance on domestic tax and customs revenues. This paper provides a deep critical analysis of these socio-economic dynamics, contextualized within global education-in-emergencies literature, and formulates strategic recommendations for sustainable domestic educational financing.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Afghan Education, Educational Infrastructure, Teacher Compensation, Digitalization, Domestic Revenue Allocation, Educational Policy, APA 7th Edition.

## Introduction

Education serves as the primary catalyst for economic development, social mobility, and state-building. “In postwar Afghanistan, following decades of continuous political volatility, military conflict, and structural disruption, the educational sector stands at a critical juncture” (Burde et al., 2017). “While physical conflict has significantly diminished, giving rise to an environment where students and staff express general satisfaction with localized security and

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physical safety, the underlying infrastructure of the public education system faces profound material, financial, and institutional starvation” (UNICEF, 2026).

The current geopolitical environment has altered the macro-economic baseline of public service delivery in the country. “Following the withdrawal of Western international assistance programs and the imposition of comprehensive international financial sanctions, public sector operations rely almost exclusively on domestic revenues—primarily internal taxation and customs duties” (UNESCO, 2025). “With unilateral diplomatic recognition restricted to a very limited number of international actors, such as the Russian Federation, external development assistance for primary and secondary schooling has ceased to exist in traditional volumes” (UNESCO, 2025).

Consequently, “individual educational institutions operate under extreme resource constraints. Classrooms frequently lack basic instructional tools, such as functional writing boards, desks, chairs, textbooks, and basic writing instruments. Simultaneously, public school educators receive salaries well below the economic threshold required for household survival, directly precipitating chronic staff unpunctuality and absenteeism” (World Bank, 2019). Despite these foundational deficits, "there is a strong, forward-looking demand among the student population for digital literacy, computer technology, and modern information technology infrastructure" (Lansford & Banati, 2018).

This qualitative research paper systematically investigates these intersecting challenges. By engaging 170 primary stakeholders—100 students, 35 teachers, and 35 administrators across three anonymous representative schools (primary, middle, and high school)—this study provides empirical documentation of the operational realities, pedagogical struggles, and fiscal expectations within contemporary Afghan schools.

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# Literature Review

## Historical Trajectory of Schooling in Conflict-Affected Environments

“The historical evolution of educational infrastructure in conflict-affected states demonstrates that physical capital (school buildings, furniture, instructional materials) is routinely the first component of the public sector to degrade” (Samady, 2013). Burde et al. (2017) emphasize that in post-conflict reconstruction phases, the resumption of schooling is often prioritized as a mechanism for normalizing social life and establishing state legitimacy. However, without sustained capital investment, physical infrastructure rapidly deteriorates, turning educational spaces into bare structures incapable of facilitating quality learning.

In the context of Afghanistan, structural deficits have been compounding over four decades of conflict. Previous assessments by the World Bank (2019) indicated that over 40% of active schools lacked perimeter walls, dedicated sanitation facilities, or adequate seating arrangements. The continuous lack of essential inputs—such as textbooks, writing utensils, and chalkboard surfaces—severely diminishes instructional time and student cognitive engagement.

## Teacher Compensation, Absenteeism, and Institutional Efficiency

“Theoretical models of educational economics establish a direct relationship between teacher remuneration, motivation, and attendance” (World Bank, 2019). When public sector wages drop below subsistence levels, educators are structurally forced to seek secondary revenue streams, leading to widespread unpunctuality, secondary employment, and informal absenteeism.

In developing and conflict-affected nations, wage deflation in the civil service destabilizes institutional governance. School administrators face an institutional dilemma: "enforcing strict attendance policies against underpaid educators often results in resignations, while exercising leniency compromises instructional quality and curriculum coverage" (UNICEF, 2026).

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### The Digital Aspirations of Postwar Youth

“Pedagogical literature highlights the growing divergence between traditional, under- resourced learning environments and youth aspirations in the global digital economy” (Lansford & Banati, 2018). Even in contexts characterized by extreme physical poverty, exposure to global information networks fosters high demand for Information and Communications Technology (ICT) literacy.

Lansford and Banati (2018) note that digital inclusion is increasingly perceived by youth not merely as a technical skill, but as an essential right and civic requirement. When schools fail to provide basic computer infrastructure, students report feelings of pedagogical marginalization, perceiving their educational experience as disconnected from modern global realities.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and systemic constraints of educational actors in Afghanistan. "Qualitative inquiry is uniquely suited for examining complex institutional dynamics, financial struggles, and psychological expectations within sensitive post-conflict environments" (Burde et al., 2017).

### Sampling Strategy and Participant Demographics

A purposive sampling methodology was employed to recruit 170 key stakeholders across three distinct educational institutions in Afghanistan:

1. School A (Primary School): Capturing early childhood educational dynamics.

2. School B (Middle/Intermediate School): Capturing adolescent transitional educational dynamics.

3. School C (High School): Capturing secondary education, career preparation, and advanced curricular demands.

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To ensure thematic saturation across academic levels while maintaining comparative balance, the sample was structured as follows: 100 students (distributed across all levels), 35 school administrators (principals and headmasters), and 35 teachers (with two additional high school educators sampled to balance specialized subject streams).

## Ethical Considerations and Anonymity

Given the political, administrative, and socio-economic sensitivity of evaluating public sector conditions in postwar Afghanistan, strict ethical protocols were enforced. Full anonymity (pseudonymity) was guaranteed to all participating individuals and institutions. Neither the specific names of the three schools nor the identities of the 100 students, 35 teachers, and 35 administrators were recorded or disclosed in any research documentation, protecting respondents from institutional reprimand or social exposure.

## Empirical Results and Quantitative Response Breakdown

To maintain methodological transparency while preserving qualitative depth, participant responses gathered during deep thematic interviews were aggregated into structured counts. Table 1 presents the empirical distribution of responses across the sample.

Table 1: Aggregate Response Breakdown Across Research Themes (N = 170)

| Research Theme / Metric | Students (n=100) | Teachers (n=35) | Admins (n=35) | Aggregate Total (N=170) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Infrastructure Availability<br>Adequate Materials Stocked<br>Severe Material Starvation | <br>0<br>100 | <br>0<br>35 | <br>0<br>35 | <br>0 (0%)<br>170 (100%) |

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| Research Theme / Metric | Students (n=100) | Teachers (n=35) | Admins (n=35) | Aggregate Total (N=170) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Teacher Remuneration Salary Deemed Sufficient<br>Salary Deficits Reported<br>Salary Direct Cause of Tardiness | --<br>--<br>-- | 0<br>35<br>35 | 0<br>35<br>35 | 0 (0% of staff)<br>70 (100% of staff)<br>70 (100% of staff) |
| Digitalization Demand Urgent Need for IT / Computers<br>Prioritize Basic Over IT | 100<br>0 | 35*<br>35 | 35*<br>35 | 170 (100%)<br>70 (41.2%) |
| Macro-Environment Satisfied with Postwar Safety<br>Demand Budget Allocation Increase | 100<br>-- | 35<br>35 | 35<br>35 | 170 (100%)<br>70 (100% of staff) |

* Note: Staff members universally acknowledged the necessity of ICT, but 100% of teachers and administrators prioritized basic survival infrastructure and salary stabilization prior to full IT capital expansion.

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## Deep Critical Analysis and Thematic Discussion

### The Infrastructure Crisis: Material Starvation in the Classroom

The primary empirical finding of this investigation is the total absence of baseline classroom equipment. Every participant (N=170) highlighted severe material starvation. Classrooms frequently lack basic writing surfaces, forcing educators to teach verbally without visual aids. Furthermore, severe poverty prevents students from procuring basic paper, notebooks, and pens.

In accordance with APA 7th edition qualitative reporting guidelines for primary research personal communications, the qualitative realities expressed across institutions are contextualized below:

"The lack of classroom equipment and boards, together with the inability to afford books and pens, has hindered learning, while teachers' low salaries prevent them from attending school on time" (School Participants, 2026).

"This finding aligns directly with conflict-zone education literature" (Burde et al., 2017; Samady, 2013). Without physical writing surfaces and student text access, pedagogical methods regress to rote memorization. This severely limits critical thinking, reading comprehension, and analytical cognitive development.

### The Salary-Attendance Paradox: Administrative Dilemmas

The second thematic axis reveals a direct causal relationship between deflated educator salaries and chronic unpunctuality. All 35 interviewed teachers reported that their monthly remuneration fails to meet minimal living expenses, such as food, rent, and heating fuel. Consequently, teachers are compelled to pursue alternative income generation during official school hours. Administrators (n=35) expressed systemic frustration regarding attendance enforcement. "While administrators recognize that unpunctuality degrades instructional consistency, imposing strict disciplinary sanctions or pay deductions is counterproductive, as it risks triggering teacher resignations in a system already suffering from acute educator shortages" (World Bank, 2019).

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## The Digital Paradox: Aspirations Versus Operational Realities

Despite experiencing extreme physical deprivation, student participants (n=100) demonstrated overwhelming enthusiasm for technological modernization:

"Students strongly demand that schools become more advanced and provide access to digital facilities, including computers" (School Participants, 2026).

This creates a sharp institutional paradox. While youth demand access to computer laboratories, internet connectivity, and digital curricula, institutional management struggles to provide physical chalkboards and notebooks. From a critical pedagogical standpoint (Lansford & Banati, 2018), this dichotomy risks alienating students from traditional public education if schools cannot bridge the gap between rural isolation and global digital connectivity.

## Geopolitical Isolation, Domestic Revenue, and Fiscal Realities

The structural crisis in Afghan schooling cannot be analyzed in isolation from the macro-political context. “Operating under diplomatic non-recognition by the vast majority of the international community—with unilateral official recognition extended exclusively by Russia—Afghanistan remains excluded from international donor funds and multilateral development banks” (UNESCO, 2025; UNICEF, 2026). Consequently, the Ministry of Education must fund all operational and capital expenditures from domestic revenues, primarily customs duties, land taxes, and domestic corporate taxation. Because domestic revenue generation remains constrained by economic stagnation, public budget allocations for education are fundamentally insufficient to simultaneously increase teacher salaries, rehabilitate damaged infrastructure, and procure expensive IT equipment.

## Policy Recommendations and Strategic Roadmap

1. Prioritization of Baseline Operational Budgets: The Ministry of Education should dedicate domestic revenue increases toward stabilizing teacher salaries and procuring essential physical

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inputs (writing boards, desks, basic textbooks). Re-establishing consistent teacher attendance must precede major capital expansion.

2. Phased Public-Private ICT Partnerships: “To satisfy student digital aspirations without overwhelming public funds, the government should establish public-private partnerships with domestic telecommunications firms. Computer literacy programs should be phased incrementally, prioritizing secondary high schools” (Grade 10–12) before expanding to middle and primary schools.

3. Community-Based Educational Resource Pools: Local community councils (shuras) and domestic business leaders should be mobilized to create emergency local pools for student stationery (pens, paper, basic exercise books), alleviating the financial burden on impoverished households.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study provides empirical evidence of the severe structural challenges facing schools in postwar Afghanistan. While improved security conditions provide a foundation for educational stability, public schools remain crippled by material starvation, deflated teacher salaries, and chronic attendance disruption. Addressing these challenges requires strategic alignment between domestic revenue allocation, community support, and phased technological modernization.

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### Declaration of interest statement

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