Towards Inclusive Education: Narratives of Setting Up a School for Students with Disabilities in Afghanistan

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Following decades of social and government upheavals, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges for the education system in Afghanistan, particularly the education of students with disabilities living in under-resourced conditions. In this article, we explore the narratives of three members of a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Afghanistan about the development of a pioneering special education school with an inclusive education approach in Kabul, Afghanistan. Using an interdisciplinary Critical Disability Studies (CDS) and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach rooted in grounded theory and qualitative methods, we situate these narratives within current trends and promising practices in inclusive education and educational needs and barriers in Afghanistan. Our findings highlight (a) the benefits of a multi-sectoral whole family approach to education, (b) the obstacles to the school's establishment and the reliance on NGOs for such initiatives, and (c) complex inner workings of gender and disability for female students in the country. We also discuss the implications of an intersectional approach for the work of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Keywords: Afghanistan; students with disabilities; special education; NGOs; gender and education.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to highlight emerging practices related to inclusive education in Afghanistan- a timely and critical topic given the current and complex political situation in the country. In this article, we highlight the educational practices of members of a non-governmental organization (NGO), A Step Ahead Initiative (ASA), whose mission is to: (a) provide safe spaces for children and youth with disabilities to access their rights to education, (b) increase awareness and understanding of disability across Afghanistan, (c) promote inclusion for persons with disabilities, and (d) support self-directed dignified lives for persons with disabilities. All names of people and organizations are pseudonyms in accordance with institutional review board approval.

With large international organizations focused on disability-inclusive development in low-resourced countries in the global South (World Bank, 2019), it is critical to identify the current supports for disabled students and their families in Afghanistan. For example, organizations like the United Nations, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank aim to make all their education programs and projects disability inclusive by 2025 (World Bank, 2018). Our objective is to articulate the steps ASA took to develop the foundations of inclusive education in Afghanistan with the goal of receiving support from international development organizations and thereby expanding future educational efforts.

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed in August 2021, igniting significant concern for historically marginalized persons (e.g., women, disabled people) who were unable to escape the new Taliban rule (Murray, 2021). Given that 1 billion disabled people inhabit the planet (i.e., the world's largest minority), many of whom live below the poverty line, this population is one of the most vulnerable (World Health Organization, 2021). These realities mean significant barriers to education exist for disabled people, and according to the United Nations (2020: 1), access to 'inclusive education should be a 'non-negotiable' right for all children'.

Educational challenges for multiply marginalized students in Afghanistan

Years of conflict and violence have caused great challenges for the education system in Afghanistan (Trani et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2021), which has only been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. Especially impacted by these circumstances, are students with disabilities living in under-resourced conditions (UNICEF, 2021). According to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Education (MoE) in 2015, 45% of primary school children, including students with disabilities, female students, students from ethnic minorities, and families living in poverty have lower enrollment and higher dropout rates before completing school, with a mean of 3.2 years of schooling (Blum et al., 2019). These numbers have only increased in recent years due to the pandemic and recent collapse of the government. These realities have also led to increasingly unclear educational conditions for female students and students with disabilities under the Taliban regime (Amnesty International, n.d.).

The decades-long conflict in Afghanistan resulted in a significant number of children disabled by war conditions and a lack of basic healthcare for females and children (Trani et al., 2019). Consequently, educational opportunities for children with disabilities and female students have been a greater concern compared to their non-disabled male counterparts despite the recent steps taken by the Afghan MoE towards access to universal education for all students. In 2002, the MoE incorporated the UNESCO Education for All (EFA) goals and launched the 'Back to School' campaign for all students (UNESCO, 2002). As a result, the number of schools quadrupled between 2001 and 2017, and the female student enrollment ballooned to 39% (Rauf, 2021). Similarly, the MoE developed teacher preparation programs, parent advocacy

programs, and measures to increase children with disabilities' access to quality education (Trani et al., 2012).

Despite these efforts, educational disparities persist and the recent government collapse, reversed the process of development by limiting female education and extending difficulties for children with disabilities, thereby creating fears over the future of Afghan education. The conditions for students with disabilities have remained exceptionally difficult (Bakhshi et al., 2006; Trani et al., 2009), specifically due to persistent beliefs and attitudes towards disabilities that lead to prejudice and discrimination against students with disabilities (Iqtadar et al., 2020). In Afghanistan as in other nations, social representations of disability and what children with disabilities are believed and expected to achieve, influences their access to quality education (Cerveau, 2011; Trani et al., 2012). Consequently, little is known about the educational trajectories of students with disabilities, including those who are female. In this article, we attempt to bridge this gap in the literature by engaging in dialogue with administrators of a special education school system in Kabul. In this iteration of the project, we asked the following research questions:

1. What is the current context of inclusive education for students with disabilities and their families in Afghanistan?
2. What emerging educational practices can promote the development of inclusive education practices in Afghanistan?
3. What barriers do students with disabilities face in accessing inclusive education in Afghanistan?
4. What transnational opportunities exist for the development of inclusive education in Afghanistan?
5. In what ways are girls with disabilities supported in accessing inclusive education in Afghanistan?

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Disability Studies

Critical Disability Studies (CDS) is a field and mode of inquiry through which scholars and practitioners problematize the historical, material, social, psychological and political understandings of disability in the global context (Meekosha, 2006; Minich, 2016). As CDS scholars engaged in global disability politics, we recognize that almost 80% of the world's disability is created under war conditions, through globalization and the global North's interest convergence in the global South (Meekosha & Soldatić, 2011). Thus, CDS scholars begin with disability as the center point and a space to understand the impact of these political, historical, and practical issues, which acutely impact the education of students with disabilities in the global South (Goodley, 2011). In educational contexts, this includes exploring the educational

experiences of disabled students and their families, as well as exploring the western-influenced inclusive education project, based on an assimilationist model influenced by traditional special education ideologies from the global North and appropriated by Southern countries (Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018). Additionally, CDS scholars argue for a global, intersectional analysis of disability experience, such as female students with disabilities, disabled students living below the poverty line or experiencing racism and ableism with little to no access to quality education (Iqtadar et al., 2021). To engage such a framework, we employed a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach to promote and model transnational collaboration and further develop equitable access to education for children with disabilities in Afghanistan.

Community-Based Participatory Research

To center the narratives of our ASA partners, we designed this research project around the tenets of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR is a research method, through which researchers engage community stakeholders as the most informed members of the research process (Wulfhorst et al., 2008). This participation may not necessarily be reflected in all phases of the project (i.e., analysis and publication), however, it supports the researcher in understanding the local context and add credibility and trustworthiness to the research process (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). We conceptualize CBPR not only as a method, but a useful theoretical lens through which to view inclusive education and think about how to engage stakeholders respectfully and ethically, particularly disabled persons, in the inclusive education reform process. By taking this approach, we emphasized community collaboration and established collaborative research practices with clear and immediate application to local communities (Stanton, 2014). Historically, CBPR researchers have leveraged their research methods alongside marginalized populations around the world (Beh et al., 2013). In Southern contexts, CBPR is perceived as a viable approach to working on social issues in under-resourced locations (Kamanda et al., 2013). For example, CBPR methods in rural western Kenya were used to collaboratively develop sustainable inclusive education practices with local stakeholders (see Damiani et al., 2021; Elder et al., 2022).

Researcher Positionality

Shehreen is a recent immigrant to the United States from Pakistan. She is specifically sensitive to the issues of segregated education systems in Southern contexts, as well as the neoliberal educational agendas imported from the global North to countries of the global South without nuanced understanding of local contexts nor engagement with students with disabilities and their families or special education teachers and administrators impacted by these policies and practices. She acknowledges that the global South is non-monolithic, and understands her privileges as a western-based non-disabled educator and academic who did not grow up in war-impacted areas. She centers local knowledge and narratives in her work to counter-narrate the

intersectional disablism that historically marginalized communities experience in their day-to-day lives.

Brent's positionality is inherently tied to western understandings of disability and inclusive education and disability. As a white, non-disabled, educated, academic from a historically non-colonized country, he understands that his role is not to speak for or represent colonized people, but to redistribute his privileges to global South partners through transnational collaboration, serving as an ally committed to inclusive education and decolonizing practices (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2008). While his outsider-researcher status is unavoidable, he has extensive experience conducting transnational CDS-informed CBPR research around the world.

Nasir is a strong advocate for disability rights in Afghanistan. With a background in linguistic studies and experience working with persons with disabilities (PWD), Nasir supports inclusion of PWD in schools within Afghanistan. He believes advocacy and efforts are necessary to provide PWD in Afghanistan with the basic right to education. Nasir also believes that equal and inclusive education is vital for national development and future generations; however, unless the ban on girls' education is lifted, inclusive education will not make sense. Nasir continues to work to give this right to the female students in the country.

Methods

We used qualitative methods to understand participants' meaning-making and experiences in relation to the education of students with disabilities in Afghanistan (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Our goal was to better understand the current context of inclusive education, emerging educational practices and barriers to quality education, and educational opportunities and needs for students with intersectional identities, including female students with disabilities living below the poverty line. This qualitative research approach allowed for rich conversations with the three ASA administrators about their school initiative, The Blossoms School, and provided a platform for participants to share their perspectives and experiences that may otherwise be ignored on their own terms (Pugach, 2001). We used the CBPR as a participatory-methodological approach to collaborate with our participants and engage them as informed subjects who work with researchers to provide research ideas and questions and guide methodological directions (Wulfhorst et al., 2008).

The research study and data collection procedures

In 2019, Brent (Author 2) was introduced to one of the participants, Leah, by international disability rights advocate, Judy Heumann. Leah is the director of A Step Ahead Initiative (ASA) and she co-founded the organization with a group of volunteers thirteen years ago in Afghanistan. Brent and Leah began brainstorming ways to collaborate and support the development of The Blossoms School as an inclusive school in Kabul. Initially Brent and Leah

planned to meet in California and tour model programs for inclusive education, but the trip was put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the years, Brent and Leah stayed in contact, and the current version of this project came to life in 2022. The other two participants of this first iteration of this study include Javed, who is one of the administrators at ASA, and Ahmad, who is the school administrator at The Blossoms School.

The data we present in this paper was collected as part of an ongoing larger study from 2022-2023 with inclusive education stakeholders at the Blossoms School: administrators, teachers, therapists, psychologists, and parents of children with disabilities. The goal for the larger study is to understand emerging inclusive practices in Afghanistan, identify the needs and challenges of education of children with disabilities, and collaborate with the ASA team to co-develop professional development opportunities to better support students with disabilities. The Blossoms School was established based on the lessons that ASA team learned from running the Hope for Tomorrow [residential home], the first project of ASA, doing local advocacy work and engaging with families of children with disabilities. Over time, the ASA administration understood there was a critical need for (a) education of children with disabilities, (b) children with disabilities to be seen as valued family members and (c) reducing the risk of children with disabilities facing abuse and abandonment. These in-field lessons led to the establishment of the first special education school of its kind, The Blossoms School, in Kabul, which enrolled all students with disabilities without discrimination.

In this iteration of this institutional review board (IRB)-approved project, our data collection procedures involved an hour-long semi-structured Zoom-based focus group interview with Leah, Javed and Ahmad. This process also involved maintaining field notes of interviews and asking follow-up questions through email after reading the transcript and field notes (Turner, 2010). Through the larger study, we aim to conduct focus group interviews with more than 20 participants, including teachers, therapists, psychologists, and parents of students with disabilities. As the first step, the semi-structured focus group interview with administrators, provided insight about the school system at the administrative level as well as the local context. Consistent with the nature of CBPR, the focus group interview was conversational in nature (Kamanda et al., 2013). As participants reflected on their school policies and practices, we asked expanded questions that provided opportunities to unpack their experiences and the social conditions associated with the education of students with disabilities in Afghanistan. We audio-recorded and transcribed the focus group interview, and field notes collected by Shehreen (Author 1) and Brent (Author 2) informed the follow-up questions we asked the ASA team through emails.

Qualitative Study and Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach informed by CDS and CBPR guided our data analysis procedures (Charmaz, 2014). With only one interview for this round of the study, our data analysis began

with the data collection phase. Nasir did not participate in the data analysis due to the time difference and unreliability of the internet in Afghanistan. To maintain trustworthiness and credibility, all participants provided feedback over the initial draft of findings as exit member checks, which helped us validate our inferences and sense making of the data, while also establishing immediate dissemination of the study results with the organization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Utley-Smith et al., 2006). A graduate assistant working with Shehreen cleaned the transcript after the interview transcript was generated via zoom.

Descriptive Coding

Using Bogdan and Biklen's (2007) descriptive and selective coding methods to analyze the data, Shehreen read the transcript line-by-line and added codes as she deemed fit. These initial codes were highly descriptive and somewhat repetitive, and they spoke more strongly to the questions asked (Glaser & Holton, 2004). Once Shehreen established the codes, Shehreen and Brent met for peer debriefing and discussed Brent's feedback regarding the codes in triangulation with the field notes collected by Shehreen and Brent during the interview (Creswell, 1998). At this time, Shehreen and Brent discussed the emergence of a new category related to educational experiences of female students with disabilities in Afghanistan. They emailed the three participants with additional questions related to the educational conditions of female students with disabilities in Afghanistan. Once received, Shehreen and Brent included these responses in the analysis.

Selective Coding

From a constant comparative analysis across the constructed categories for the participants, Shehreen identified themes and then described them using three sets of questions identified before the focus group interview. The three questions are related to the (a) context of disability and inclusive education in Afghanistan and the steps that ASA took to establish the school, (b) the successes and challenges they saw over time, especially during the earlier phase of establishing the school, and (c) the process of curriculum adaptation, and engagement with family and students' needs. Shehreen and Brent used selective coding to identify the excerpts that fit each category of questions. Shehreen first selected 10 excerpts for each category. Next, Shehreen and Brent collectively identified nine excerpts for the first question, six for the second, and five for the third. The result is a careful retelling of the narratives of the three stakeholders about establishing a school for students with disabilities and their experiences working with the students and families in the Afghanistan context.

Findings and discussion

We present the findings as a composite-layered narrative of three administrators' intricate experiences working with students with disabilities in Afghanistan. A composite-layered

narrative enables researchers to draw inferences and blend the narratives of study participants, abstract conceptual thinking, and theory of consciousness to represent the multiplicity of voices and the complexity of their experiences working with marginalized populations within systems of oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). To center their narratives, we present interview questions followed by participants' responses. We then connect their responses to relevant literature.

We started the focus group interview with questions about the context of ASA, disability, and inclusive education in Afghanistan. Then, we discussed the successes and challenges experienced by the ASA team in setting up The Blossoms School, and then asked about how the needs of students and families influenced their decisions to adapt their curricula. To begin the focus group interview, Shehreen and Brent asked the following set of questions using a semi-structed protocol (Turner, 2010):

Why did you establish ASA? What is the context of disability and inclusive education in Afghanistan? What steps did you take to begin to establish the school?

In this first response, Ahmad described the context of education for students with disabilities throughout Afghanistan:

> Ahmad: Special education in Afghanistan has not been highly considered. We have general education. We have very limited schools for [children with] sensory disabilities... There are seven states that have schools for children with sensory disabilities, children who are hearing impaired, and children who are visually impaired. But for children with other types of disabilities, like children with intellectual disability, physical disability, Down syndrome, autism, and so on, there is nothing.

What Ahmad described above aligns with the Education Cannot Wait (ECW, 2021) report on the state of education in Afghanistan. According to the report, approximately 3.7 million children are out of school; of these, 60% are girls, and in certain provinces, 85% (or more) of girls may not have access to education. Further, 95% of students with disabilities do not attend school. This means that families are left to support their children with disabilities at home when they may be struggling to simply survive. In the next excerpt, Leah and Ahmad explained that the school originated as a response to the needs of families with children with disabilities:

> Leah: The Blossoms school came from the fact that we realized that most of the children … admitted to Hope for Tomorrow [a residential home run by ASA]…were being abandoned. So we started asking ourselves, 'What can we do to help families and children before they reach the point of having to be in an institution'? And one of the things that we were hearing a lot of was that families needed a place for children to go during the day…So, that's where the idea for the school came from….we made that

conscious decision at the beginning not to limit the children we enroll based on disability. So our criteria is just under 18 with a disability.

Recognizing that many families of children with disabilities may not be able to prioritize education when they are struggling to survive, is one way that the actions of ASA align to a CDS perspective (Ghai, 2002). The participants have a strong understanding of disability in their local context, and when families of children with disabilities are impacted by war, daily life becomes even more precarious (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). In 2018, prior to the government collapse, the MoE revised the Community-Based Education Policy and Guidelines to better support girls and children with disabilities in accessing education. The MoE created a program managed by families, NGOs, and community partners (UNICEF, 2021), a similar approach taken by ASA as they developed their school. In the next excerpt, Ahmad described the steps of this ASA approach:

> Ahmad: I saw [students with many different disabilities accessing school] for the first time…We equipped [and] settled classes, we formed administration teams, teaching teams, [teams of] psychologists, physiotherapists, and special educators. The main reason to do this was to let children with disabilities join the school and get a basic education, and then go towards the future phases which are [going to be based on] inclusive education.

Here, Ahmad described a progressive realization approach: first, get disabled students into school, then have them included in government schools as they figured out best how to support their students and their families. According to Article 4, Section 2 of the CRPD (UN, 2006):

> Each State must take measures to realize economic, social and cultural rights progressively, using the greatest amount of available resources to do so. This obligation, commonly referred to as progressive realization, acknowledges that it often takes time to realize many of these rights fully, for example, when social-security or health-care systems must be created or improved.

To do this, as Leah explained, ASA had to leverage their disability-related network throughout the country:

> Leah: We really utilized our networks, because when it comes to the disability arena in Afghanistan, it's kind of a small network…So we reached out to that network with organizations that we had partnered with in the past…Plus, we advertised for the [director] position at the NGO recruitment agency here. Because there's no certifications or teacher training programs for teachers working with children with disabilities we really worked hard to find people who had on-the-job experience. But I think the main thing was finding people who had the right attitude about a disability,

and believing in these kids. I think we did find that.

Operating within a government system lacking a formal training program for teachers of the most vulnerable students was a challenge. Leah noted that having a positive attitude coupled with a strength-based approach to special education were critical qualities for The Blossoms School faculty and staff. Similarly, when considering CBPR-informed teacher education approaches in western Kenya, Elder et al. (2015) found that attitudes and inclusive teaching practices can evolve concurrently with a community of like-minded practitioners working toward common disability-inclusive goals. Connected to disability-related training and support, in the following excerpt, Ahmad and Javed discussed how they supported families upon initial contact with The Blossoms School:

> Ahmad: We call families, parents, or a specific person who is mostly involved with the child…First, we give them [materials focused on] awareness that they should know about how to handle certain situations with the child. Then, [we provide] information about children with disabilities, and how to behave with them. Likewise, we have our home visit program where the team goes to the home [and] assists with a certain situation and see what the parents have done [to support their child].

> Javed: We [also] work with [the child's] caretakers. If they are [the child's] grandfather, grandmother, a sister, or a brother. [We hold] meetings on a monthly basis, and there are needs-based meetings with the parents as well.

Ahmad and Javed recognized family members may have significantly less access to existing resources, supplies, and healthcare services due to harsh realities in Afghanistan. This situation required a multi-sectoral whole family approach (Grech, 2014), in which families' multiple critical needs could be met in one location (e.g., the school provides wrap-around services related to education, health, therapies, in-home support). Ahmad also elaborated on the categorized services that The Blossoms School uses to allocate support for students:

> Ahmad: We have three categories at school: (a) One is for the students learning to get an education; (b) Another one is learning and caring; and (c) The third category is only for those children who we give them care… Once students are assessed by the psychology team and by the technical team, then, we put them into these categories. For each category we have a separate timetable which we follow accordingly.

In this section, we highlighted the disability-related context in which the participants established their school. In the next section of the focus group interview, the participants discussed some of the successes and challenges they experienced while designing and implementing services for disabled students and their families. To begin discussing the participants' successes, Shehreen and Brent asked the following question:

What are some of the successes and challenges you saw over time, especially during the earlier phase of establishing the school?

The ASA team noted their first major success in setting up the school was finding technical and human resources. In this excerpt, Leah reflected on how they identified strong candidates for positions in the school:

> Leah: The first success for me was finding a great team. I was just very pleased with the quality of the staff that we were able to recruit…You hear a lot that Afghanistan doesn't have a lot of technical capacity. But the country actually *does* have a lot of human capacity…I think that we were able to find the right team with great qualifications and a lot of energy for this type of work.

In this quote, Leah underscored that despite great political turmoil, Afghanistan has many qualified people who are ready and willing to work in the disability sector. One potential reason for the team's ability to build technical capacity for disability relates to the National Education Strategic Plan enacted 2017-2021. According to this plan (UNICEF, 2021 26), the aim was:

> to orientate all ministry staff on its objectives towards inclusion. MoE trained 30 teachers on inclusive education as part of an inclusive education pilot project in Kabul in 2007. In addition, MoE developed training packages that provided support to teachers for working with children with disabilities.

As the technical reputation of the staff at The Blossoms School grew, Javed noted the increased demand for similar services throughout the country:

> Javed: We have been receiving a lot of requests from other provinces, as we are based in Kabul…Our programs in the provinces have been asking if there is any facility like this in other provinces…Although there are a lot of challenges to doing this work, [people in other provinces] are demanding more [services for students with disabilities].

Given that Afghanistan is currently ranked 9th out of 178 countries on the 'Fragile Index,' which measures the impact of humanitarian crises (UNICEF, 2021), it is not surprising that there is a large need to support the disability community throughout the country. In particular, this support is a compelling issue for females with disabilities. Upon debriefing and reflecting on the focus group interview, Shehreen and Brent followed up through email with the ASA team, specifically about how they support *female* students with disabilities. Ahmad explained the school's intersectional approach below:

> Ahmad: When we started, we had a higher number of boys than girls. But we slowly increased the number of female students as we gave it a priority and to have a balance

in the number of our students, and to keep a gender equality policy at school. Female students were less and are still less than boys (i.e., 30 female students, 37 male students), but we are flexible with female students when they are referred to us. We have a specific time of enrolling students at school during a year, from February to the end of April, but for female students, they can enroll at any time if we have free seats.

From a CDS and CBPR perspective, ASA team recognized and valued the needs of female students with disabilities in a global South context, specifically Afghanistan. Similarly, for Pakistan, Hammad and Singal (2015) highlighted how the skills and capabilities of female students with disabilities are bound to their socio-economic status and the negative perceptions and stigmas associated with disability in wider society. In this project, the members of the ASA team were very much aware of the realities of female students' lives. To support and retain female students, Ahmad explained the school's strategies.

> Ahmad: ASA provides vehicles…to pick and drop them from their homes as it is difficult and sometimes impossible for female students with disabilities to come to school. Another point is that we have female teachers, psychologists, [and] caretakers to provide required services for our female students. This has encouraged parents to send their girls to our school without any tension or problem. The school teams have been working with families of female students to ensure that their girls are safe, and that they are not harassed in any way…We [also] preferably choose the nearest school for the student so that she is able to go to school with or without assistance from her family.

This finding is particularly significant considering disability and gender are often explored as separate identities in the education system (Arooje & Burridge, 2020; Corboz et al., 2019). At the time of writing, the intersections of disability and gender were especially tenuous as the de facto authorities in Afghanistan banned girls from attending school past the sixth grade, including higher education. Women had already been banned from working in NGOs, making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for girls to access basic services (Associated Press, 2022). As a result, female students with disabilities are the most adversely impacted by this decision.

Further complicating the situation, when asked about other challenges the ASA team faced when setting up the school, Leah had this to say:

> Leah: [There] are some significant challenges. I remember the Ministry of Education being quite confused about how to categorize our school. You know, it's a private school, but it's a charity school because we're not for profit. It's a special education school, but we're required to follow the national academic curriculum.

In addition to the MoE not knowing how to categorize the school, Ahmad described how families responded to the founding of the school:

> Ahmad: [In the beginning] families used to come to us, and they were. . . facing lots of problems with [their children]. [Parents would say], 'I just want him or her to be here and [for me to] have some relaxed time to stay at home or to do my work.' But now the mindset has changed. They are well aware about their child's rights, and about what we have done at the school…We have a parents' meeting every month [and] they know what to do and how to work with their child.

Echoing some of the tenets of Disability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework in the field of Disability Studies in Education (DSE), in which disability and race are socially constructed categories, (re)produced by white supremacy that work in tandem, see Annamma et al., 2013), in the above excerpt, Ahmad acknowledged these parents and their children have been systematically denied their rights to education and disadvantaged by their inability to access those rights (Adams & Erevelles, 2016). While a universal and western approach to human rights can be viewed as neocolonial (de Sousa Santos, 2008; Elder & Migliarini, 2020), we agree that giving people the resources and language through which to advocate for educational justice can be transformative for disabled people and their families.

Wanting to move beyond the myriad multi-sectoral challenges that routinely shape the discussion around Afghanistan, Shehreen and Brent intentionally asked the ASA team how they developed effective support for the students they support. Shehreen and Brent asked the following questions to shape what can happen to support and educate students with disabilities even in the challenging landscape of Afghanistan:

What did the process of curriculum adaptation look like? And what does it look like now after engaging with family and students' needs?

As director of The Blossoms School, Ahmad explained how they developed their curriculum:

> Ahmad: We started from a rehabilitation [perspective]...[and] found a specific curriculum that we are [currently] following. It [focuses on] life skills, sports, local languages, and maths.

Since most of these children never had the right to attend school before, the ASA team acknowledged that the need to acclimatize the children to being students and focus on teaching skills, would be most useful for this group. A similar student-centered approach was implemented by teachers developing inclusive education practices in western Kenya. When teachers in these schools began instructing students with and without disabilities together, they held sustained discussions on disability and inclusive education and how best to modify the

classroom environment and curricula to meet the needs of all students (Elder & Kuja, 2018). Ahmad articulated the differences between their special education curriculum and the general education curriculum in the following excerpt:

> Ahmad: [The special education curriculum] is different from [the general education curriculum] that we have made, but we have shared it with respective departments. Unfortunately, we have not received any assistance, and what we have made is with the assistance of our networks…But, [we have had no support] from the Ministry of Education. Of course, we are following local languages like Dari and Pashto. But we also teach sports, we have a life skills class, and we focus on practical subjects to encourage students to participate in class activities.

It is no surprise the ASA team had minimal support from the MoE in setting up their school, given the current political context of Afghanistan. However, their ability to effectively leverage expertise from their existing network aligns with how many under-resourced countries around the world use NGOs to help implement educational programs and education policy (Gali & Schechter, 2021).

Related to the three service categories of education used by The Blossoms School to allocate support for students, Ahmad and Javed elaborated:

> Ahmad: When we receive children, we don't say that 'this child has mild disability, let's accept them,' and 'that child has a severe disability, no, let's not accept that child.' So that's why we have kept one category for children who have severe disabilities, and we give them good care.

> Javed: Also, the 'Caring Category' is more like, where we teach [them] social skills, like to change their clothes or to eat food. And then [gradually] we teach them learning strategies. We have a psychologist [who] works with them to minimize or reduce the barriers in their learning.

Here, Ahmad stated that all students are welcome, regardless of the level of care the disabled students need. Additionally, Javed highlighted that students with the most complex disabilities (e.g., those in the 'Caring Category') receive the most relevant educational support, with the expectation that they can and will learn in more inclusive settings over time as the team learns to remove barriers to learning for these students. These excerpts highlight The Blossoms School team's strength-based approaches to inclusive education (Elder et al., 2018) as well as its DSE lens, locating disability in inaccessible environments rather than an inherent deficiency located in the student (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). This finding is critical, considering the traditional special education system, as a neocolonial project, is often influenced by global North policies and practices that may undermine inclusive education agendas in local contexts

(Muthukrishna & Engelbrecht, 2018). However, the work of ASA team demonstrates not only collaboration and networking with the global disability network, but that a critical approach to disability in war-inflicted and inaccessible environments is crucial if schools are to value the needs of their students with disabilities.

Conclusion and Implications

In this paper, we have engaged the work of ASA to highlight some of the emerging inclusive education practices in Afghanistan. Specifically, we focused on one school system, The Blossoms School, and the narratives and reflections of two ASA administrators and one Blossoms School administrator who invested more than a decade to establish the first educational institution for students with disabilities in Kabul. Their narratives might serve as an example of potential inclusive education practices for similar transnational contexts. While facing many upheavals, including war-related challenges, the participants' culturally sustaining and multi-sectoral whole family approach is rooted in the needs of the students with disabilities and their families in the local context. From a CDS perspective, we understand that an inclusive education agenda is embedded in cultural pedagogy and includes the narratives of those impacted. Simply adopting the special education practices and policies from the global North (i.e., assimilationist model) would be counterproductive to the needs of local students and families.

From the DisCrit perspective, this work contributes to the rarely explored intersection of gender and disability in Afghanistan, specifically the educational needs of female students with disabilities in that country (Iqtadar et al., 2021). As the findings demonstrate, ASA took multiple intersectional approaches to education, including (a) admitting female students with disabilities throughout the year, (b) providing transportation services and female staff across the services, (c) choosing the nearest schools for female students, and (d) providing awareness programs for parents of female students with disabilities. ASA's work has been transformative in Kabul during the last decade. However, the current ban on the education of female students past the sixth grade is negatively impacting female education and is counterproductive to female student retention, even after the ban is lifted. Additionally, the ban on female staff members also negatively impacts the attendance of female students with disabilities in the school system (Associated Press, 2022). The trust and relationship that families of female students with disabilities in Afghanistan develop with their female teachers puts them at more ease to send their female students to the school. Not having female teachers will impact the attendance of female students over time (Trani et al., 2012).

While we acknowledge that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006: Article 6) includes some references to the provision of educational opportunities for female students with disabilities, discussion about the intersection of disability and gender, or race and disability, does not venture beyond basic and additive forms of vulnerability (Ribet,

2011; Iqtadar et al., 2021). Although the recognition of multiple forms of vulnerabilities is highly important, we suggest that a text as globally important as the CRPD should address more clearly the dynamics of multiple subordination and co-construction of disability and gender-based discrimination (Ribet, 2011; Annamma et al., 2013).

As signatory states value and adopt the CRPD, it is timely and critical to consider what it means to locate disability in ways that are fully conscious of gender politics of subordination in local and global contexts. Our findings highlight the ASA team had minimal support from the MoE in setting up their school, which led to overreliance on their networks and NGOs to help implement educational programs and policies. Equally critical is the need to refocus on the politics of war in the global South and the production of impairment under war conditions (Soldatić & Grech, 2014). In countries of the global South facing significant social strife, education may not be the focus. However, as this study and its participants have shown, disability is a reality in any context, and opportunities to center disabled students and their families are possible even in the absence of government support and in war-torn Southern nations. We hope the lessons from ASA and the Blossoms School in Kabul are lessons other similarly resourced nations can modify and apply in their respective locations.

Acknowledgements

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