Book Review: Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan’, by Dana Burde,

Mieke Lopes Cardozo
University of Amsterdam
T.A.LopesCardozo@uva.nl

and

Felix Fritsch
University of Amsterdam

and

Taru Niskanen
University of Amsterdam

2014

The original version of this working paper is published in: South Asia Journal, 4/2015. December 2015.


A Pashto edition of a textbook printed in 2011 refers to the letter T: Topak (gun). “My uncle has a gun. He does Jihad with the gun” (p.77). These and similar references to war are not uncommon in what Dana Burde calls the negative curriculum of Jihadist textbooks. In her study of Schools for Conflict or for Peace in Afghanistan she traces the history of Jihadist books which were first developed during the Cold War as part of the United States propaganda against Soviet Union’s influence in Afghanistan. Due to their widespread distribution and poor revision they continue to have a damaging effect on education in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Burde’s in-depth study of these textbooks is part of a broad analysis of unequal access to education. She argues that ‘negative curricula’ are likely to nurture conflict, while expanding access to good quality community-based education that uses ‘positive curricula’ could contribute to peace in Afghanistan.

Burde’s book is based on her considerable experience as consultant and academic researcher in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected regions. In the book, Burde draws together a selection of research projects carried out over the past decade. In doing so, she presents a rich, but at the same time somewhat eclectic story of the role of education (interventions, policies, practices) in – and sometimes beyond – Afghanistan. Yet, the selective reader might find the clear structuration of separately organized chapters around themes quite useful. The author has written the book with a varied audience in mind, as she sets out in the introduction, including “scholarly” readers from a range of backgrounds including international relations and political sciences as well as “the curious nonspecialist” (p.23-24). We wonder if the children’s drawing on the front cover is really best suited to attract academics from political sciences or international relations, and reach beyond the regular ‘Education in Emergency’ audience.

Chapter one gives a broad introduction to the topic, and introduces Afghanistan's educational institutions as a key battlefield for historical and present-day struggles between progressive and conservative, urban and rural, secular and religious forces. Education is framed as a deeply political instrument of state-building, and a potentially dangerous tool deployed for projects of radicalization and indoctrination, which makes the control over it necessarily contested. Chapter two explains how and why support for education has been largely excluded from historical – and current - narratives of humanitarian aid. This neglect by both practitioners and policymakers is due to two myths, the ‘emergency imaginary’ and the positioning of humanitarian intervention as apolitical and only focused on fulfilling urgent needs. In criticizing the needs-based framework, Burde calls for the revision of the concept of emergency that needs to move away from separating humanitarian aid from development support.
The analysis of the Jihadist textbooks, in chapter three, further supports one of Burde’s main arguments presented in the book: that aid to education is never a-political. The reader is triggered when the author further asserts that negative curricula are potentially more problematic in religious schools than in secular schools (p.59), yet she does not fully elaborate the thesis. Chapter four illustrates how foreign-led stabilization efforts through counterinsurgency strategies have further intensified underlying conditions of conflict. More specifically, the book shows how stabilization initiatives – both by design and by default – have enhanced disparities in education and exacerbated (real or perceived) horizontal societal inequalities and grievances against the government.

Towards the end of the book (chapter five), the author turns towards exploring a more hopeful scenario how education could help to mitigate conflict and promote peace. Burde convincingly argues that community-based schools could improve access to education as they solve problems of proximity of other forms of schooling in remote areas, in particular improving girls’ attendance rates. These assertions are only partly backed by research about the actual impact of curriculum content and leave unexplored whether educational spaces are likely to remain safe from attack in the long run. One should remain cautious about the assumption that government-affiliated and foreign-backed community-based arrangements can avoid the danger of school attacks by diverse insurgent groups, of which the Taliban are but one example.

Throughout the book the author vigorously critiques the strategic past and current involvement of the US government and military. This is an important message that deserves to be read by a broad audience. While the book succeeds in providing a solid elaboration of US involvement, it largely restrains from analyzing similar interventions by other international actors and countries. This perhaps makes the book particularly relevant for an American audience. While more emphasis could have been placed on exploring the underlying causes and mechanisms that drive existing frameworks of foreign interventions, we appreciate the author’s effort to also address readers involved in policy making and aid practice. Overall, the book provides an excellent overview and diverse analysis of the historical emergence of and currently existing relationship between education, peace and conflict, within and beyond Afghanistan.

Lopes Cardozo, Micke, Felix Fritsch and Taru Niskanen
University of Amsterdam