"I Can See Now" Understanding Literacy Practices in the Context of Afghanistan

Anita Anastacio
“I can see now”

Understanding Literacy practices in

the context of Afghanistan

Masters Project

by Anita Anastacio

July 2006

Center for International Education

University of Massachusetts
# Table of Content

**CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION**

**CHAPTER 2 – SETTING THE CONTEXT**
- The historical, political and educational context of Afghanistan 12
- Historical Background of Literacy Programs in Afghanistan 21
- Learning for Life, a brief introduction 22

**CHAPTER 3 - LITERATURE REVIEW**
- Understanding literacy
  - Literacy as a set of skills 24
  - Literacy as a social practice 25
  - Literacy as a learning process 26
  - Literacy as text 29

**CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY**
- Methodology 31
- Positioning myself 33
- Research Design
  - Observations 36
  - Interviews 37
- Document Analysis 38
- Selection of Location and Participants 39
- Choosing the location 40
- Limitations 42

**CHAPTER 5 - LITERACY AS TEXT**
- Gender and Development 44
- USAID’s policy on gender and education 46
- Reflections on Learning for Life from a practitioner’s view 49

**CHAPTER 6 – LITERACY PRACTICES/EVENTS IN BOLOCH-E-AHENGAR**
- The research location - Boloch-e-Ahengar 56
My host family
My host family's setting
Literacy Practices in the family
Calculating expenses and shopping the cheapest way
Becoming computer literate in Baba
The importance of English
Local library and its users
Embroidery experts among the women in Boloch-e-Ahengar
Specific Literacy Events during my stay
Language issues in class
Issues of Power
Exploring further research possibilities
Linking ethnographic research to planning and policy

REFERENCE LIST
### List of Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AHDO</td>
<td>Agriculture and Health Development Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWEC</td>
<td>Afghan Women’s Educational Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPHS</td>
<td>Basic Package of Health Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHW</td>
<td>Community Health Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIE</td>
<td>Center for International Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoAR</td>
<td>Coordination for Afghan Relief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FG</td>
<td>Future Generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAD</td>
<td>Gender and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRC</td>
<td>International Rescue Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Implementing Partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JACK</td>
<td>Just for Afghan Capacity and Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LFL</td>
<td>Learning for Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSH</td>
<td>Management Sciences for Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSD</td>
<td>Partners in Social Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REACH</td>
<td>Rural Expansion of Afghanistan’s Community-based Healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDF</td>
<td>Sanayee Development Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STARS</td>
<td>Skills Training and Rehabilitation Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMASS</td>
<td>University of Massachusetts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WID</td>
<td>Women in Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Map of Afghanistan
Figure 2: Map of Baba region, Jaghori district, Ghazni Province (adopted from map drawn by the children in my hostfamily)

* Names in map reflect the different hamlets within Baba manteqa

1 - Baba Highschool
2 - Baba main mosque (with library)
3 - Baba Comprehensive Health Clinic
Chapter 1 - Introduction

Since my daughter-in-law goes to the literacy class everyday she does not help me anymore. What’s the use of her reading and writing? She will not go and work outside anyway, so why bother? (an older mother-in-law complaining to me, field notes, 03/12/06)

The general objective [of literacy and non-formal education] is the eradication of illiteracy so that our people become literate and ready for taking an active part in the social, cultural, economic and political affairs of our country.

(Independent High Commission on Education for Afghanistan, in UNESCO, 2003 p. 37)

Literacy has and as one can see from the second quote above is still being advocated as the solution to economic development, and thus has been a priority on the agendas of governments, financial institutions and non-governmental organizations for many years.

Reasoning from this perspective, one continues along these lines by presenting a rationale that might go as follows:

In 1990, UNESCO reported an overall illiterate population of 948 million not much different than in 1985 (949.5 million). 97% of the world’s illiterates in 1990 were from the “developing” countries with women accounting for 79% of them (UNESCO, 1990; as cited in Ballara, 1991, p. 5). In 2006, a UNESCO report documents the world’s illiterates at 771 million for the years 2000 to 2004. Of this 771 million, a much larger proportion (98.4%) of illiterates are from “developing” countries (UNESCO, 2006. p. 165).

Afghanistan after almost three decades of violent conflict has moved into a phase of opportunities for peace and stability. It’s a country plagued by high illiteracy rates, high child and maternal mortality rates and chronic poverty. Long term foreign financial assistance will be necessary to establish a strong government, improve economic
prosperity and ensure an educated engaged population. Priorities have been defined by the government with the support of the international community. One such priority is to provide Afghanistan’s rural and urban population access to functioning health services.

A national health strategy has been adopted and various institutions have started implementing activities aimed at achieving this goal. A functional health care system requires not only infrastructure but also trained health personnel. At first given that many Afghans are unemployed, one might assume finding staff might be easy. But working within the socio-cultural context of Afghanistan Afghan women will require female health personnel. Well, qualified female health professionals are hard to find, especially in rural Afghanistan. Over 80% of Afghan women are illiterate. How can women be working in the health sector without literacy skills? The solution: Provide literacy classes and women will be able to read and write. That’s how policy turns into projects. This is how Learning for Life (LFL), a health-focused literacy program, came into existence. Then to measure the success of LFL we simply count how many women have enrolled in literacy classes and how many have achieved what level of competency. Evaluations would be conducted that show how successful (or not) this literacy project had been. Policy makers and practitioners would learn from the successes and failures which in turn would leads to new ‘better designed’ plans and projects.

Studying the relationship between policy and practice in this way is what Mosse calls "the instrumental view of policy as rational problem solving – directly shaping the way in which development is done… and with that “implicitly, policy makers and project managers are attributed a perfect hegemony over other development actors” (2005, p. 2).
I have worked and continue to work using an “instrumental view” in my role as a development practitioner. I participated in the shaping of the rationale and design of the Learning for Life project as well as playing an active part in its implementation and evaluation.

In between, I moved in and out of the role of a researcher / graduate student becoming more aware of another development perspective that “sees policy as a rationalizing technical discourse concealing hidden purposes of bureaucratic power or dominance, which are the true political intent of development (Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1994, cf. Shore and Wright 1997, as cited in Mosse, 2005, p.5).

Both perspectives are important in that both contribute to how development continues to work.

A third perspective, “drawn on Foucault’s notion of governmentality – ‘a type of power which both acts on and through the agency and subjectivity of individuals as ethically free and rational subjects’ is what Mosse calls “a new ethnography of development… [which] show how policy relates social life and makes subjects and citizens, not by repression and over control but through a productive power which engenders subjectivities and aspirations” (Foucault 1979, Li 1999 & 2002, as cited in Mosse, 2005, p.6).

Looking at this third perspective helped me to return to my role as a practitioner. What I have learned throughout my graduate studies is to better reflect upon my own assumptions and see beyond the obvious, question the dominant discourses and be more humble with myself and with those who are affected by my interventions.
Going back to Learning for Life I have taken two different approaches in this study. One is a 'critical view' examining the underlying assumptions of development in which a project like Learning for Life is embedded which I framed “literacy as text”. The second approach is an ethnographic account presenting literacy practices of learners in LFL and seen as “literacy as a social practice shaped by a particular context and people’s background”.

More concretely, the following questions shaped my study:

1) What were the underlying assumptions about development made by planners and practitioners that led to the design of the literacy project called Learning for Life?
2) What are the present literacy practices of women in Afghanistan and how do they relate to the kind of literacy promoted through Learning for Life?
3) Will such a project lead to ‘literate’ and ‘developed’ women?

The aim of my research was twofold:

1. Using a gender analysis of key documents I would like to show that in the case of Learning for Life, key actors: the Ministry of Health, the United States Agency for International Development, the LFL staff and practitioners and LFL literacy participants each have different underlying assumptions of literacy.

2. Using an ethnographic approach to studying literacy as a social practice I was able to explore current literacy practices in rural Afghanistan. This helped me in understanding the context in which rural women engage (or not) with literacy which I believe is important for the design of future literacy interventions. How can such an approach be integrated into the planning and implementation of literacy programs like LFL?
This study has given me the unique opportunity to not only reflect on my role as a researcher but has also allowed me experience-the role of a practitioner involved in a literacy project. In this study I move in and out of these roles interchangeably. While using an ethnographic approach to studying literacy practices in rural Afghanistan I am presenting the view of some of the LFL participants.

I have structured my paper as follows:

Chapter 2 of this paper provides an overview of the historical, political and educational context of Afghanistan out of which a project like Learning for Life, a health-focused literacy project and the focus of my study emerged.

Chapter 3 familiarizes the reader with the theoretical discussions that have shaped the concept of literacy. I will do that by using a framework used by UNESCO (2006) that presents the theory using four approaches to understanding the meaning of literacy.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology of the research I carried out by looking at the type of approach I used, its rationale and the tools and methods of analysis I used.

Chapter 5 examines how policy makers and practitioners who have supported, designed and implemented Learning for Life, are influenced by hegemonic discourses on development, gender and literacy of its institutions. Here I use one of the four approaches: "literacy understood as text".

Chapter 6 explores current literacy practices in a village where women were enrolled in the LFL literacy class. Using the approach of the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984) it moves from practices to concrete literacy events.
Chapter 7 reviews the original intent of my research and looks at how thoughtfully examining and understanding literacy and numeracy practices is a first critical step in planning meaningful literacy programs for Afghan women. This chapter also discusses implications for policy and programming offering suggestions for further research and inquiry.
Chapter 2 – Setting the Context

This chapter provides the macro context in which my study took place. I begin this chapter by looking at Afghanistan’s past and present socio-political conditions and their relationship to education. I then provide a closer look at the role of literacy in Afghanistan followed by providing the reader with a background of the project in which the study took place.

The historical, political and educational context of Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a mountainous, landlocked country in the shape of what Krieger calls an “irregular leaf... hanging from the Wakhan Corridor at its stem” (Krieger, 1986, p. 78). Its area is approximately 637,397 square kilometers, comparable to the size of Texas. The majority of its citizens, a mix of different ethnic, tribal and linguistic groups, embrace Islam however there are sectarian differences like Shia/Sunni interpretations which divide Afghans. A 2004 UNICEF report lists nine ethnic groups inhabiting the country today, of which Pashtuns represent the majority (38%), followed by Tajiks (25%), Hazaras (19%) and Uzbeks (6%). The remaining groups of Kyrgyz, Baluchs, Turkmen, Ismaili, Nuristani and Aimaq comprise of no more than 12% (UNICEF, 2004). Pashtuns have been regarded as the most powerful ethnic group throughout history while Hazaras on the other hand have been seen as the group of lowest status. The main languages spoken in the country are Pasthu, Dari, Uzbek and Turkmen with Dari and Pashtu being both used in the central government sphere.

Afghanistan as a country came into existence only a little more than a hundred
years ago when Abdur Rahman Khan (1881 – 1901) ruled the region. Dependent on the British Empire for financial support he tried to convert the region from “a tribal confederacy into a centralized state” which was never fully successful (Johnson & Leslie, 2004, p. 138). Abdur Rahman Khan used power and violent measures to provide his own ethnic group, the Pashtuns, more land and more influence over other ethnic groups. Pashtuns, originally inhabiting the south and east of the region, were offered land in the North.

Abdur Rahman Khan also provided grazing rights to Pashto nomads (Kuchis) on land owned by Hazaras, an ethnic minority, in the areas known as Hazarajat (also the site of my study). Scholars estimated that half of the population of Hazarajat was killed by the army of Abdur Rahman Khan. Those alive either complied or left for Pakistan. A majority of Hazara refugees took up residence in the city of Quetta where they integrated.

The same king started reforms aimed at improving the status of women by abolishing slavery in 1895, along with a customary law ruling that widows who wanted to remarry were bound to marry their husband’s next of kin. The decrees he put in place – hardly making a difference in the tribal affairs of the country – gave widows free choice to remarry whom they wanted. He further introduced laws concerning child marriages, the registration of marriages and the opportunity for women to sue their husband for alimony or divorce should he not support her or show violent behaviors. The king’s son, Habibullah Khan, who followed his father’s steps went further to restrict the size of the dowry and marriage expenses. As these practices continue to exist even to this date there is no doubt that the state had little control over its tribal population.

Afghanistan did not have much of a ‘modern’ education system until 1903 when
the first secondary school, Habibia, was opened for boys in Kabul. The initial objective for opening this school, which had Afghan and foreign teachers, was to prepare a cadre of civil servants (Samady, 2001, p. 588). Several primary schools and the first teacher institution opened and by 1909 the government established the first board of education tasked with supervising the government’s education system along with the religious schools that existed prior to the formal school setup. Schools for boys and some for girls continued to open in the years to follow by the new king, Amanullah Khan, who replaced his assassinated father in 1919.

Amanullah, called by Gregorian (1969, p.227) the “ill-fated champion of modernization” went further than his predecessors by actively promoting the education of girls and the expansion of modern education. The first Minister of Education was appointed by the King in 1922 (Samady, 2001, p.589). By 1928, for example, about 800 Afghan women were enrolled in schools in Kabul with a few even studying abroad. Not only did he try to introduce modern education he also introduced other reforms aimed at modernizing the country such as trade reforms, land reforms, tax introduction and road constructions.

The country established its first constitution in 1921 which according to Moghadam “was among the most progressive in the Muslim world” because it dealt with issues of child marriage and polygamy (2001, p. 238). Together with his wife, Queen Soraya who was the first Afghan woman to be seen without a veil, he was adamant in elevating the status of women. The religious clergy met his reforms with resistance which turned into revolts against the Afghan government by tribes in the Khost area in 1924. Moghadam (2001, p. 239) writes: “In 1928, the Loya Jirga, the traditional Afghan
consultative body, rejected Amanullah’s proposal to set an age limit on marriage... and ... opposed modern, Western education for Afghan girls, either in Afghanistan or outside it”. By then Amanullah was forced due to continued tribal revolts to abandon most of his modernization measures. This meant the temporary end for girls’ formal education in Kabul.

Nevertheless revoking a number of measures did not help him much and by 1929 Amanullah was ousted and fled the country. The new king, a Tajik Bacha i Saqao who led the revolt only governed Afghanistan for a year before being overthrown by Nadir Khan, the eldest of the Pashtun Musahiban brothers. In 1931, a new constitution was adopted which for the first time in the history of Afghanistan declared primary schooling to be compulsory for all Afghans. Primary to tertiary education was provided free of charge to all Afghan citizens.

Nadir Khan was assassinated in 1933 and his son, Zahir Shah succeeded him – at the time only 19 years old. Zahir Shah with the help of foreign support continued the modernization process of his country. The first Faculty of Medicine was established in 1932 which expanded into the Kabul University by 1946. During his reign, in an effort to unify the country, Pashtu became the official language of the country. “The pace of educational development slowed down considerably during the Second World War” writes Samady (2001, p. 589) mainly because of “economic and technical constraints”. Nevertheless the numbers of students enrolled rose considerably; from 1,590 students in 1930 to 59,300 (with 4,350 being girls) in 1950. The post-war era witnessed the return of foreign specialists assisting the government in expanding education, improving the quality of education, and decentralizing administrative tasks from Kabul to the provincial
education offices. Furthermore, under Zahir Shah's rule social reforms aimed at the improvement of women's status were re-introduced. Foreign aid became the main vehicle for economic development. As Barnett R. Rubin notes, from 1956 to 1973, 80% of the country's investment and development expenditures was financed by foreign grants and loans (Johnson & Leslie, 2004, p. 139).

In 1964 a new constitution was introduced announcing monarchy and the establishment of an elected House of People and a partially elected House of Elders to accommodate "key constituencies, for example urban intellectuals and rural traditional leaders" (Johnson & Leslie, 2004, p. 140). For the first time women were allowed to vote. However, Zahir Shah never gave up full control and did not allow the establishment of independent parties and thus parliament was not "seen as an institution for nationwide democracy but as a means of gaining legitimacy and political support" (Johnson & Leslie, 2004, p.140).

General Mohammad Daoud, the King's former prime minister (from 1953 – 1963) and cousin, ousted him in 1973 becoming President of the Republic of Afghanistan. This change in state structure however did little to improve the situation and it certainly did not help gain the support of the Afghan population. His tenure was characterized as a period of great oppression with anyone who was against the regime being thrown in jail. While in power as prime minister, he had turned to the Soviet Union for financial and military support. As President, however, pressured by the religious clergy, he reduced the dependency on Russia and instead looked to the Muslim world for increased financial support. In April 1978 (also known as the Saur Revolution), after another death of an important member of the Communist Party
key people organized a coup overthrowing Daud’s regime, killing him and most of his family members.

The next President, Nur Mohammad Taraki, one of the leaders of the PDPA changed the country’s name from the Republic of Afghanistan to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The PDPA had been divided for some time between the Parcham and the Khalq factions which resulted in a period of three different presidents, a dissatisfied population due to harsh land reforms and changes to women’s empowerment and finally the invasion of the Soviet Union into Afghanistan.

In turn religious and tribal leaders began an Islamic movement calling on Jihad which led a disastrous civil war between the Soviet backed Afghan government and “Mujahedin” fighters backed by the US and Pakistan. Over a million Afghans died between 1979 and 1989 and more than 5 million fled the country. During this time “the Soviets virtually controlled the Afghan state structure” and “in economic terms, government-controlled Afghanistan became a Soviet republic” with its expenditures paid by the Soviet Union (Johnson & Leslie, 2004, p. 142).

While the cities continued to thrive, the countryside experienced heavy fighting and destruction. Samady (2001, p. 592) reported that over two-thirds of the schools in the countryside were destroyed. People in the urban centers continued to be employed and benefited from somewhat functioning health and education services. Healthcare services were offered free of charge to all citizens after 1981. Worth noting is that for the first time the communist government introduced a policy to include the instruction of minority languages besides Dari and Pashtu in the curriculum. It is not clear however, how many
schools in the country were able to implement this policy. While over one million children including girls were enrolled in schools in 1979 the number dropped to about 700,000 in 1985 (Samady, 2001, p. 592). At the same time, foreign aid was used to support education to the refugee population living mainly in camps in Pakistan and to a much lesser degree in Iran. The US government, for example, financed the development and production of new textbooks at the request of the Mujahedin fighters in Pakistan which were not only used in schools in refugee camps in Pakistan but long after the Taliban left. As Carol Off, a reporter for CBS, reported in January 2002: "The Mujahideen had wanted to prepare the next generation of Afghans to fight the enemy, so pupils learned the proper clips for a Kalashnikov rifle, the weight of bombs needed to flatten a house, and how to calculate the speed of bullets. Even the girls learn it" (Off, 2002).

By 1985, encouraged by the US, different Islamic Jihad parties formed an alliance in Pakistan against the Soviet invaders. The US provided large amounts of money to the fighters and finally by 1988 Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, the US and Pakistan signed peace accords and Soviet troops started leaving the country. By 1992 all of the Soviet troops were gone.

The fourth president during the Soviet invasion, Dr. Najibullah, came to power in 1986 and a new constitution was adopted which included measures such as the establishment of a multiple party-system, freedom of expression and the introduction of the Islamic legal system with an independent judiciary presiding over it. Many of the previous reforms were revoked but he continued to hold onto power until 1992 despite large resistance by the Mujahedin parties who gained greater control after the Soviet
withdrawal. By 1992 he had no choice but to step down and went into exile within his own country by seeking refugee in a United Nations compound.

While the aim of the Mujahedin – gaining independence from a foreign invader – was fulfilled war did not stop. Instead the different factions of the Mujahedin began a four year battle with different factions gaining control over the capital and the central government. The battle for central control left Kabul with over 50,000 people killed and most of its infrastructure and housing destroyed. Urban Kabulis began to flee Kabul and either settled in Pakistan or in camps alongside the Afghan-Pakistani border. Atrocities especially towards women were the norm with hundreds of women sold into prostitution, others being raped or forced into marriage by Mujahedin fighters.

The Taliban, a religious faction of one of the Mujahedin parties, emerged in this chaos as the winners by overrunning province by province until the capital Kabul was reached in September 1996. They returned the State to anarchy and took away the few rights women had gained throughout the different regimes. Schools for girls were closed, female teachers sent home and employment for women in spheres other than health was forbidden. While the Taliban succeeded in expelling women from the public space, many Afghan women continued to educate their girls secretly. Home schooling whereby a number of neighborhood girls were taught in the home of a teacher spread to all major urban cities as well as to the countryside controlled by the Taliban regime. Boys continued to have access to school but only a handful of aid agencies helped with providing basics to boys-only schools. Others decided purposefully not to fund them based on their mission statement calling for equality in education (author’s own experiences while working in Afghanistan from 1996 – 2000).
With the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 Afghanistan entered into a new period of state formation. The US, blaming Osama bin Laden and his now famous Al Qaeda group for the attacks, invaded Afghanistan shortly after the Taliban’s refusal to handover the now most wanted man in the world. With the help of the Northern Alliance, which in September 2001 controlled about 5% of the country, the Taliban regime was overthrown.

A consultation process known as the Bonn process was convened with opposition Afghan parties in November 2001 agreeing to a road map designed move the country into a permanent broad-based, representative and democratically elected government. The Bonn Agreement called for a new constitution and free presidential and parliamentary elections. The interim administration was succeeded by a transitional government elected by an Emergency Loya Jirga in July 2002. A new constitution was adopted in January 2004 and President Hamid Karzai who already headed the country’s interim and transitional government was elected by popular vote ten months later. The holding of parliamentary elections in September 2005 marked the formal end of the Bonn process, although it is anticipated that considerable international assistance will continue to be required to help with reconstruction and maintaining stability.

The beginning of the 2002 school year (School starts on March 21st each year marking the Afghan New Year.) saw an immense increase in the number of children entering grades 1 to 12, from an estimated one million in 1979 to over three million (DANIDA, 2005, p. 104).

Despite large amounts of money flooding into Afghanistan since 2002 and despite an expanding international security force (ISAF), many Afghans are becoming
disillusioned with the slow pace of development. The central government continues to be weak and is seen by many as puppet government with the US directing the process of development.

The Human Development Indicator, last tracked in 1996 for Afghanistan, ranks the country among the poorest nations in the world: 169 out of 174 countries. The literacy rate in 2004 was estimated to be 51 percent for men and 21 percent for women. Maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world and every 5th child dies before reaching the age of 5 (UNICEF, 2004).

**Historical Background of Literacy Programs in Afghanistan**

Adult Literacy is not a new concept in Afghanistan. It was first promoted in 1979 as a nation-wide campaign by the communist government under the leadership of the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW) starting in 1979. The Literacy campaign went hand in hand with attempts to abolish traditional marriage practices in Afghanistan. Over 600 schools were setup in rural Afghanistan offering literacy classes to women, men and children. The campaign ultimately failed to achieve its primary objective (advancing or empowering women to bring about radical changes in the political, economic, and cultural structure of the society), and was one of the factors leading to the strong, armed resistance of many religious Afghans. In Moghadam's words: "the attempt to impose a minimum age for marriage, prohibit forced marriage, limit divorce payments, and send girls to school deeply offended what one scholar referred to as the "massive male chauvinism" of Afghan men" (2001, p. ). The consequences of introducing radical changes in Afghanistan are well known and
documented — more than twenty years of violent and destructive conflict (Moghadam, 2001, p.).

Literacy classes have also been implemented by a number of non-governmental agencies (NGOs) working with refugee populations mainly in Pakistan during the years of conflict (Samady, 2001).

Literacy today is one of the key recommendations made by the Independent High Commission on Education as can be seen from the second quote in chapter 1. Literacy is implemented by several non-governmental organizations in various forms from stand-alone literacy programs to literacy integrated into larger development programs but very little information is available. These programs tend to be small and it is unclear to what extent numbers of literates are fed back into the statistics of the Ministry.

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is one of the main donors that responded to the Afghan government’s call for halving illiteracy by 2015, and funded two major literacy efforts in the country in early 2004. One of them, Learning for Life, began in May 2004 and was nearing closure when I conducted my study in March 2006. As Learning for Life is the project I am concerned about in this study I will provide a brief introduction about its main objectives and outcomes.

**Learning for Life, a brief introduction**

Learning for Life was focused on increasing the number of literate rural women in 12 selected provinces in Afghanistan who could subsequently enter further training to become community health workers and community midwives. Over 8,000 women

---

1 A much more detailed overview can be found in appendix 1.
enrolled in over 361 classes in 12 provinces and studied for a period of roughly eight to
nine months. More than 91% of all women tested for a grade 3 equivalency passed the
test. Another 1,000 women passed the test for a grade 6 equivalency. About 530
women studied in classes at grade 6 and higher and by passing the entry exam could
enroll in the 18 months’ community midwife residence training program. By the end of
Learning for Life it was doubtful if any of the women who were not already community
health workers but had passed the test would in fact enter further health training due to
scheduling and criteria of health worker training programs. The major health program
implemented by Management Sciences for Health (MSH) under which Learning for Life
was funded also ended in April 2006. MSH had previously trained many community
health workers in the areas where Learning for Life had established classes. While a
follow-on health program is now being funded it is clear that the focus on training
community health workers and community midwives will shift to other areas in need of
trained health personnel.
Chapter 3 - Literature Review

Understanding literacy

While scholars continue the debate surrounding literacy, and definitions are highly contested I found the framework used by UNESCO very helpful to understand ways of thinking about literacy:

- literacy as a skill
- literacy as a set of practices depending on its context
- literacy as a learning process, and
- literacy understood as text. (UNESCO, 2006, p. 148)

I will briefly describe these four approaches.

Literacy as a set of skills

Here literacy is understood as a set of technical skills “particularly cognitive skills of reading and writing” that can be acquired in a neutral way (UNESCO, 2006, p. 149).

UNESCO and the World Bank have come up with a definition that is widely accepted and it reads: “Adult illiteracy is defined here as the proportion of the population fifteen years and older who cannot, with understanding, read and write a short, simple statement on their everyday life”. (UNESCO, 2006, p.153).

This definition has provided governments with a way of accounting for its literate or illiterate population. However, how one measures ‘short, simple statement’ has been interpreted differently from country to country.
Street (1984) calls this the “autonomous” model of literacy, while Rogers (1994) explains it as “deficit model of literacy”. Proponents of this model are Goody, Watt and Ong (Goody, 1986; Goody & Watt, 1963, Ong 1982). They and others support the argument that “the advent of literacy in a society will cause the same social and psychological effects, no matter which society is being studied” (Ahearn, 2001, p.47). Literacy in their terms is seen a technical skill acquired in neutral ways and independent of social context (Street, 1984).

Furthermore, this argument has been linked to “broader societal development, so that literacy becomes a condition (or instrument) for economic growth” (Goody, 1977; Ong, 1982; Olsen, 1977, 1994; as cited in UNESCO, 2006, p. 149).

**Literacy as a social practice**

Scholars not content just with looking at literacy as a technical skills are more concerned with the ‘application’ of these skills. This is when UNESCO moved from its definition in 1958 to what is now termed “functional literacy”, meaning:

_A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community’s development._ (UNESCO, 2006, p. 30)

Rogers in his study on post-literacy describes this functionality as an “approach is similar to that of primary school: it urges that one should learn literacy first and practice it afterwards. Literacy is seen as a prerequisite for further development programmes - without literacy, the participant groups are felt to be severely disadvantaged” (1994, p. 59)

The concept of functional literacy was challenged by scholars of what is called the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984, 1993; Baynham 1995; Gee, 2000; Barton &
Hamilton, 2000, Prinsloo & Breier, 1996, Robinson-Pant, 2001). They argue that literacy is never practiced neutrally but is situated and contextual.

It is also always political in that as Street (1995) describes a powerful dominant group of people unilaterally assumes the responsibility of spreading literacy to other members of the society.

Baynham, in his book *Literacy Practices: Investigating literacy in social contexts* writes: “Investigating literacy as a practice involves investigating literacy as ‘concrete human activity’, not just what people do with literacy, but also what they make of what they do, the values they place on it and the ideologies that surround it” (1995, p.1). Literacy practices are different in different context that are often also called domains. Here I mean different settings in which literacy takes on different practices such as school, workplace, home, markets (bazaaars) etc.

Literacy events on the other hand can be defined as “instances and occasions where uses of literacy play a role” (Baynham, 1995, p.54).

**Literacy as a learning process**

Literacy programs are particularly interested in literacy as a learning process. Adults learn when they can see it improving their lives or when they identify gaps or interests as a number of scholars said (A. Rogers, M. Knowles, D.A. Kolb).

Scholars like Paulo Freire, Alan Rogers, Carl Rogers, Malcom Knowles and others state that learning is not just a change in behavior but the very process of change – from adapting to or applying a new situation by using previous experiences often combining them with new knowledge. Learning, however, is not just any experience but
the ability to take a new experience and being able to relate it to a previous experience and being able to adapt the previous experience to a new experience.

How does one best learn? There are theorists such as Thorndike, Pavlov and others who concentrated on the behaviorist orientation to learning, arguing that learning needs stimulation from the outside. Teachers using behaviorist orientation to learning are quick to use praise and punishment tactics and are first and foremost interested in correct answers. Here the focus is on the active role of the teacher and the students who are passive. Furthermore, the underlying assumption is that “knowledge is truth and can be known; it is independent of both the teacher and learner, it is the same for all learners” (Rogers, 1996, p. 97).

The cognitive learning theories as emphasized by Bloom, Gagne and others focuses on the subject-matter. Here, the teacher and students are seen as passive even though the learner might be seen as more active when working with material i.e. “the material ....dominates the process”. (Rogers, 1996, p. 98). Bloom lists a number of cognitive processes through which learners move such as “knowledge and comprehension... application ... analysis ... synthesis [and]... evaluation” (as described in Rogers, 1996, p. 98).

The humanist theories evolved later in the process with the recognition of post-modernism and post-structuralism and the notion of the instability of knowledge and truth. Because there seems to be more than one “Truth”, humanists stress the importance of the active role of the learner. As Rogers describes it, “the motivation for learning comes from within and the material on which the learning drive fastens is the whole of life, the cultural and interpersonal relationships that form the social context” (Rogers,
1996, p.99). I agree with how he defines learning; as “part of a process of conflict in which the learners are seeking to take control of their own life processes” (Rogers, 1996, p.100).

While the above theories contributed to a better understanding of the process of creating change they however do not provide sufficient understanding of how such change can lead to transformation and critical thinking. This might be better explained through transformational theories and critical pedagogy. Learning according to Mezirow is thus “the process of using prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” and “to be able to act, we make a critical reflective choice among competing systems of logic and truth to select one to impose on the data, depending upon the context” (Mezirow, 1995, p.49 & 52).

Another major influence has been Paulo Freire (1972), and scholars drawing from his theory, to examine the political nature of education. He emphasized as a pedagogical tool, a form of “dialogue” which:

- draws people into conversations,
- requires mutual respect of differences,
- changes the roles of the teacher and learners,
- emphasizes process over product, and
- leads to action against injustice and oppression, and
- leads to more critical “reading” of the context in which learners live.
Literacy as text

A fourth approach to literacy is that of understanding it as “subject matter” (UNESCO, 2006, p. 150). It looks at how text is produced and how people internalize it. Scholars using this approach pay particular attention to the analysis of text to make visible how knowledge gets constructed in order to “legitimize and reproduce existing power structures” (see Gee, 1990; Fairclough, 1991, as cited in UNESCO, 2006, p. 150).

Gee (1992, as cited in Powell, 1999, p. 12) has called this a form of discourse. He argues that there are different literacy discourses depending on the social and cultural context. In a family setting we learn our “primary discourse” and in schools or other institutions we learn to speak or write differently, that is, what he calls “secondary discourses”. He further argues that some literacy discourses are more dominant and groups able to use these dominant discourses are usually those linked to power, status or money. Those groups further control the way in which institutions teach literacy discourses in order to maintain dominance. Powell, for example argues that the way children are being taught in classrooms in the US is promoting a kind of literacy that enables them to “function” in society but not to question or challenge it. She sets out to provide an answer to the enhancing functional literacy by using critical literacy (Powell, 1999).

In summary, seeing that literacy is more than technical neutrally acquired skills has changed the way governments create policy decision on literacy and how literacy programs get designed and implemented. At the same time, struggling with the various meanings of literacy I see these approaches as intertwined, a fabric constructed from the weaving of literacy as a technical skills that depends on the situation and context of those
acquiring it, hopefully a process by which learning is enhanced to becoming critically aware of how the written word is a political constructed.

**UNESCO emphasizes the goal of universal literacy under the motto ‘Literacy as Freedom,’ reflecting the evolution of the conception of literacy: beyond its simple notion as the set of technical skills of reading, writing and calculating . . . to a plural notion encompassing the manifold meanings and dimensions of these undeniably vital competencies. Such a view, responding to recent economic, political and social transformations, including globalization, and the advancement of information and communication technologies, recognizes that there are many practices of literacy embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures (UNESCO, 2004b; as cited in UNESCO, 2006, p. 155).**

I use two of these approaches, namely, by first looking at literacy in Afghanistan as text and how it gets constructed in the larger social context of development, and second, by exploring what literacy practices women in rural Afghanistan are currently engaged in.
Chapter 4 - Methodology

This chapter introduces the methodologies I used in this study. I employed two methodologies. The first is a critical analysis of literacy seen as text while the second methodology uses an ethnographic approach to studying current literacy practices of women in rural Afghanistan. The chapter outlines the methodologies, followed by reflections on who I am in this study. It then provides an overview of the data collection process, and introduces how I chose the location and participants in my study. It concludes with limitations.

Methodology

This study really draws upon two different approaches to understanding literacy in the context of Afghanistan.

The first approach is a critical analysis or what others termed a discourse analysis of important policy documents that influenced the emergence of Learning for Life. I here primarily look at the education and gender strategies of the United States Agency for International Development.

The second approach to understanding literacy is looking at the context and practices in which Afghans are currently engaged. This approach is influenced by the New Literacy Studies in which ethnography is used to study social practices.

Ethnography is one form of qualitative research. Let me start with defining qualitative research by using Denzin & Lincoln definition that is: “a field of inquiry in its own right ... crosscut[ting] disciplines, fields, and subject matters” [and] “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 2 & 3).
Qualitative research according to Denzin & Lincoln began with the work of the “Chicago School” in the 1920s and moved from traditional forms of qualitative research to postmodern forms of inquiry (p. 1 & 3).

Contemporary forms of qualitative research have changed to include the researcher’s location within the context and acknowledging “one’s own subjectivity” (p. 3).

I agree with Rossman & Rallis (2000) who said that “qualitative research begins with questions: its ultimate purpose is learning” (p. 4). In my work as a development practitioner I always grapple with many questions about the “target beneficiaries” and all too often assume that all poor Afghans require help. Having been in Afghanistan for a number of years and being able to communicate in one of the languages I have a little closer understanding of the life experiences of some Afghans. I started my work with Learning for Life at a point of knowing very little about the women this project was targeting. I trusted the professional experience of the “experts” within CIE who seemed to know. Once in the field I began to see the dilemma between the rhetoric of “experts” and the practice. What I saw when visiting classes and training sessions in Afghanistan was not what the proposal had stated it should look like. Why not? This piqued my interest in further inquiry. As Rossman & Rallis argue and I agree, research should ultimately improve “some social circumstance” (p. 4).

Thus qualitative research begins with questions about a particular context. In my case, I was curious to make visible the social context in which Afgan women are motivated enough to enter a literacy class in Learning for Life.
I believe that qualitative research might be better suited to explore contextual issues than a quantitative research method could do. As Denzin & Lincoln state: “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3).

As Robinson-Pant in her account of literacy programs in Nepal noted: “viewing literacy and development as social processes, I needed a research methodology that could explore and analyze the complexities rather than attempt to quantify outcomes or products of development programmes” (2001, p. 9). Such an approach, often criticized by conventional studies as being too subjective, provided an opportunity for me to reflect on my own role as researcher and practitioner in analyzing and interpreting data from the field.

**Positioning myself**

I have been working as a development practitioner with various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Afghanistan since 1995. Part of my initial work included advising and guiding Afghan urban women involved in disseminating health messages to women and children who benefited from newly constructed latrines in their homes. During most of my years working with women I felt that I contributed to women and children being less sick. At the same time I often felt disillusioned when I did not see any changes in women’s health behaviors. Other agencies involved in health education confirmed my findings. I then began to look more critically into how messages
are disseminated and tried to introduce different teaching methods I had seen used in other projects.

During the Taliban era (1996 – 2001) women’s employment was restricted to the health sector. Agencies including the one I worked for found ways to disguise different programs aimed at helping women in particular aimed at women-headed households by continuing to promote health messages. Some agencies used hospitals or clinics to get women together to talk about health issues, others such as mine hired health educators to go house to house and educate women on health issues. While some of the programs helped a large number of women financially (those directly employed as health educators or others being engaged in food for work activities) the impact on changes in health behavior is more questionable. Statistics on high mortality rates have not diminished.

By 2004 I worked as the campus coordinator at the Center for International Education (CIE). CIE through a contract funded by USAID tried to implement a large-scale health-focused literacy program aimed at increasing the literacy rates of rural women in 13 provinces of the country. I worked in Kabul during all the semester breaks helping design monitoring manuals, testing monitoring tools, and training staff in the use of the monitoring tools.

In January 2006 to early March 2006 I was responsible for conducting a final summative evaluation of LFL to determine the effectiveness of the field implementation, the success in achieving its stated objectives and the impact LFL had on learners, families and communities. While this evaluation used both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods I felt that the results were quite superficial and not very “telling”. According to this evaluation the project succeeded its expected results in many ways: it
succeeded to certify women with a grade 3 and grade 6 equivalencies; it also succeeded in terms of the impact the program had on everybody. Women when asked in interviews spoke very highly of the literacy course saying how much the health messages helped them improve their families' lives and how much they themselves changed as a result of being in the course (CIE, 2006).

The decision to use an ethnographic approach to studying the structure and content of a literacy program and the literacy practices present in rural Afghanistan today came when I was in the field observing classes in the summer of 2005. During one of the field visits to classes in Jaghuri district in Ghazni provinces I was struck by the notion of women repeatedly stating that they came to the class because they wanted to become “better people” and that being educated leads to a “better life”.

My immediate response to their views was “aren’t you a good person already?” I wondered: “Are we doing the right thing to promote such views? How can I help to promote the idea that Afghan women who are illiterate by traditional views of literacy have not needed the use of reading and writing but have adopted and learned ways of dealing with written text that worked for them.

Using an ethnographic approach as Street and other suggest may lead to a shift away from curriculum and pedagogy that traditional programs including LFL now embrace. It is my belief that understanding current local literacy (and numeracy) practices in rural Afghanistan will lead to literacy interventions that are better at meeting women's needs.

My underlying assumption is that the current literacy practices of women require different and varied uses of literacies and numeracies. Thus the aim of my study was to
bring forward current literacy and numeracy practices of a few women in a rural Afghanistan to help planners and policy makers make more informed choices based on grounded accounts of the literacies people need and use in their daily lives.

I was interested in finding answers to the following questions:

1. What are the uses of literacy and numeracy of women in a rural setting in Afghanistan?
2. Is Dari the best choice? What other languages might be more appropriate?
3. What are motivating factors for women to attend a literacy course?
4. Is the curriculum currently used meeting the demands of rural women?

Research Design

Part of the study is based on my own experiences while working directly with the staff and the learners in this project until its closure in April 2006. I will make use of field notes and trip reports I did while visiting trainings of facilitators and classes, of individual stories received from learners in a number of provinces, as well as from interviews conducted during the summative evaluation.

Another part of my findings are drawn from my immersion in an Afghan family setting in one of the hamlets in Jaghuri district, Ghazni province in March 2006. During my stay, I conducted opportunistic observations at home, in the classroom, and at other locations such as neighbors, the local school and the mosque. I also held informal interviews with the mother, the facilitator, her family and several other learners.
Observations

I observed the living environment of the family during a 14-day stay. Even when leaving Boloch-e-Ahengar for Gumbad, a comparable location of an LFL class, I returned back to the house. I visited 8 neighboring families in Boloch-e-Ahengar based upon their request or invitation, all of which had a female LFL learner.

I went once to the local school in Baba bazaar and was able to see the local school library, the computer center and the English class. I spent about two hours in the computer class and about half an hour in the English class. I also went to the main mosque in Baba where I was shown the great pride, a sponsored library. I spent about an hour in the library and interviewed the local librarian.

I sat in the LFL literacy course run by the facilitator I stayed which was located within the next hamlet’s mosque in Shokh Shegan. Three different hamlets make use of the LFL class including Boloch-e-Ahengar which contributed most of the learners. I observed 13 class periods.

I visited Gumbad, an hour from Boloch-e-Ahengar twice. Another LFL class was run in Gumbad and I was curious to see the quality of the class and meet the learners looking for differences and commonalities. I conducted two entire class observations in Gumbad and held informal interviews with the facilitator and some of the learners.

When in class I wrote my observations during class. When at home or other locations I wrote observation notes at night.

Interviews

I did not hold structured interviews because I felt them to be too formal but also I
saw the limits of my language ability to fully conduct an interview with learners who only understood limited amounts of Dari. I began a small dictionary by recording words in Hazaragi which I would hear in conversations. I would stop the person I was talking to and ask what the word meant in Dari. Often someone was nearby who knew the Dari word other times I would write it down and ask at night. Kazim, my chaperone helped a lot, but also he often required further explanation to some of the words that are not part of his Hazaragi-dialect spoken in his local province, Parwan. I talked extensively with the facilitator and her mother with whom I lived. In addition I informally ‘chatted’ with about 5 learners living in Boloch-e-Ahengar, and their mothers or fathers.

**Document Analysis**

Document analysis is “a process aimed at uncovering embedded information and making it explicit” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p 203). Prior to my field study I tried to find studies on adult literacy, on rural adult literacy in Afghanistan and was not surprised to find not much. The literature I found is mainly about education in general, empirical information that helped complement my research but not enrich it. I found the New Literacy Studies done by Street, Prinsloo & Breier, Barton and others however very helpful in guiding my own research.

As part of this study concerns the design and implementation of Learning for Life I used key documents such as USAID’s Gender Strategy, USAID’s Education Strategy for Afghanistan 2005-2010, Learning for Life’s Proposal, and LFL’s instructional materials.
Selection of Location and Participants

Deciding on a location for my study was not easy given that LFL ran over 350 classes in 12 provinces. However, when I visited Jaghori district last summer I knew that it would be the district of my study.

Jaghori district lies within the province of Ghazni. Ghazni province is interesting because it has an almost south – north divide between two ethnic groups. Ghazni has 16 districts of which 5 are occupied almost to 100% by Hazaras, while 8 are inhabited by almost 100% Pashton. The remaining districts are divided with Pashtons and Hazaras living close together. Ghazni, the only major city and province capital has Tadjiks, Pashtons, Hazaras and even Hindus.

Jaghori district is also one of many districts making up what is called the Hazarajat region.

Jaghori (also spelt Jaghuri or Jaghoori) is a major business center and one of the main districts of Ghazni province in Afghanistan. It is situated in the highlands of the central Hazarajat region. The population was estimated at 192,216 in 2002, making it one of the most populous districts in Afghanistan.... Sange-e-Masha is a small bazaar of mud and dust. The rest of the district comprises of villages of different sizes all dependent on agriculture as the main source of income and food. Jaghori's economy is overwhelmingly agriculture-based. Wheat is the main crop while nuts, apples, and grapes are also grown in significant amount. Cattles include cows, sheep, and goats. Transportation is a combination of vehicles and animals. The well-off use modern transportation. In contrast to the rest of the country Jaghori has witnessed little destruction, although local militia and forces loyal to the warlords have destroyed the little infrastructure that existed. Jaghori has in recent years produced the largest number of students to qualify for a place in Kabul and other universities in Afghanistan, which some estimate to be in thousands. The new trend towards learning and education has come as a reaction against what people went through during the decades of factional, tribal, ethnic and religious conflicts. Currently there are a number of High Schools, and hundreds of smaller primary and middle schools in the district but there are few signs of other infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water or gas. ("Jaghori", n.d.)
According to UNHCR’s district profile Jaghuri alone has 17 functioning high schools, 11 primary schools and 615 secondary schools (UNHCR, 2002, p. 2). The people of Jaghori, unlike other districts I have seen, seem to put great emphasis on the education of both boys and girls. The majority of primary schools are open to girls and boys however they are segregated by using different shifts. UNHCR further reports that there is an almost equal number of High Schools for boys and for girls. As many Jaghuris I spoke too confirmed girls’ schools continued to operate in the district up to grade six despite the Taliban’ presence. Another factor not usually seen in many district capitals is a large library of Sange-e-Masha housed in one of the mosques (approx. 5000 books stored).

The district is divided in manteqas (sub-districts) and I ended up in a qawm or small hamlet comprised of 25 houses called Boloch-e-Ahengar, in the Baba manteqa. It takes about an hour by car in good weather to reach the Baba bazaar from the district capital, Sange Masha and another 20 minutes to get into Boloch-e-Ahengar. The main bazaar also houses the only school, a comprehensive health center and the main mosque. From the bazaar there are about 5 roads leading to several smaller hamlets that are all reachable within an hour by foot. From the bazaar the main road continues and turns into Zabul province.

Choosing the location

I did not choose my location randomly but rather decided spontaneously when the

2 A qawm is difficult to define within the English vocabulary but often is referred to as “solidarity group” (Monsutti, 2005, p. 83) in which members could be relatives but also people with no relations other than from the same religious or ethnic group. A manteqa links several qawms together and could also be described as a “sub-district”.

40
opportunity came up. While I knew that Jaghuri district would be the district of my research I was more open about places within Jaghuri. I was tempted to use a place I had seen before, either during my summer visit or during the evaluation visit in February. When I arrived back in Afghanistan in early January of 2006 I had asked an LFL colleague who went to monitor classes in Ghazni province in January to speak to participants about my study and to identify a learner who would be willing to have me stay. Lots of snow restricted her visits to classes which limited the choice of location for my study. She had spoken to facilitators and learners in Baba sub-district and the facilitator in Gumbad was very interested in having me stay at her house.

While my intent was not to study a facilitator I was nevertheless grateful for her search. However in February, during a visit to Boloch-e-Ahengar, a small hamlet also in the Baba manteqa, I decided to make this my area of study. In addition to the beautiful view I had from the window of the house of the facilitator who we were interviewing for the evaluation, it was the fact that the mother of the facilitator was also one of the LFL participants that made this location feel perfect.

While I stayed in Boloch-e-Ahengar I visited Gumbad twice to observe the literacy course there and I was satisfied with my decision not to stay with the facilitator there. The facilitator in Gumbad was only recently hired because the previous facilitator had left for Pakistan. Her two brothers lived in Australia and one of them (she had never seen) was supposed to arrive from Australia for the New Year’s Celebration and I did not want to be an additional guest in the house. At the same time her family seemed to be well off (the facilitator possessed her own satellite phone) compared to my host family.
I see this study more as an emerging ethnographic account. My experience is based on three periods, the first two were when I went to monitor and later evaluate classes, conducted class observations, individual and focus group interviews. The third and most intense period was living with a learner's family for 2 weeks.

The aim was to understand and explore existing literacy practices of literacy participants. The time only allowed me to examine practices within a family but focused on women's practices. As my research participant continued to go to a literacy course her literacy practices at the time of my study was very much related to her relationship with the literacy course. A longer period of field study which would ideally include understanding literacy practices prior to her enrollment in the literacy course and after might have provided a richer picture.

Furthermore, hoping to explore not just literacy domains such as home, classroom, work and neighbors, I had hoped to study literacy practices in the bazaar. I made one attempt to do so and visited the Baba bazaar. I was not allowed to go by myself - Latifa and Rahmatullah accompanied me. The bazaar episode was quite an event for me and my companions. When we arrived and began walking alongside the road looking at the various shops men stopped everything they were doing, it seemed. Shopkeepers walked out of their shops to stare at us, customers mostly younger men started following us. We were surrounded by far too many men. Studying any literacy practices seemed out of the question. We fled into one shop and I began to study the goods sold here. A great variety of goods were sold in this shop and it was not different than many shops next door. Fresh oranges and onions, candies from mainly China and
Iran, oil and flour from Pakistan and India and all kinds of plastic goods and toys followed. While I talked to the shopkeeper and his friend who were sitting close to an Afghan stove men and children peeked their eyes through the large glass door and windows. I purchased some sweets for the children and then left the store. We simply left the bazaar and went back to Boloch-e-Ahengar and on our way out of the bazaar met one of the learners and her mother from the Gumbad class. They were the only other women I saw that morning in the bazaar. When I arrived in the literacy class an hour later and described to the women what happened to us in the bazaar the learners told me that this was their main reason not to go to the bazaar by themselves. Studying literacy practices in a bazaar in rural Afghanistan obviously requires stamina and patience both of which I did not have. However, it would enrich our understanding of how different practices are at play, to observe such a setting.

Another domain I did not consider exploring was that of the local health clinic. I went to the local clinic once but it was officially closed. As the education about health comprises a major part of Learning for Life understanding how LFL learners interact with text in clinics when visiting would have immensely contributed to the understanding about changes towards health. During my stay none of the family members went to the clinic so I could not observe their practices in this domain. I also decided against revisiting the clinic because I felt I would be misperceived as an aid worker employed by MSH who has come to monitor their activities.
Chapter 5 - Literacy as text

To understand how policy shapes and is influenced by various stakeholders I would like to begin by examining how USAID defines their funding policy in relation to their gender, development and literacy strategies. Preceding this analysis is an introduction to the historical debates of development and gender. Following the analysis of key documents of USAID I proceed by reflecting upon my own experience – that of a practitioner – to look at how Learning for Life was designed and implemented, its challenges and its successes.

Gender and Development

What is known as ‘Women in Development’ (WID) emerged as an approach in the late 1960s. It is still dominant among a number of institutions albeit gone through several language modifications. Boserup’s account in “Women’s Role in Economic Development” (1970) is viewed by a number of scholars as the starting point for WID (Parpat & Marchand, 1995; Razavi & Miller, 1995, Chaudhry, 1995) because it challenged the prevailing discourse on Third World women where women were presented as housewives, confined to the private sphere with men having full control over them, or as simply sex objects or victims of circumstance. Her analysis, which focuses on Africa, shows that women were indeed active participants within the productive spheres and due to dominant development practices had largely been neglected. This led to an increased focus on studying marginalized women and a subsequent lobbying among liberal feminists and development practitioners for more resources to be allocated to
women-only programs aimed at; a) increasing equality among women and men, and b) part of a solution towards economic development.

Women had largely been left out of development discourse and had become now “a hitherto undervalued economic resource in the development process” (Razavi & Miller, 1995, p. 4). WID soon became integrated in institutions dealing with developing countries like the World Bank, as Chowdhry (1995) explains, which has resulted in three dominant approaches to World Bank funding aimed at increasing women’s equality and active participation. These approaches are commonly known as the “welfare approach”, “anti-poverty approach” and “efficiency approach”. The welfare approach aims to provide improved women and children’s well-being and mainly focuses on increased health care for women and children as well as the provision of family planning programs. The anti-poverty approach has been used, and is still used, to provide for basic needs in response to continued poverty. As Chowdhry notes: “Women classified as the poorest of the poor became one of the targets” (1995, p. 32). Solutions applied within the anti-poverty approach did not differ much from those of the welfare approach but in addition placed greater importance on educating women. Thus educated women, as presented through many empirical studies around the world, became the direct link to better health care and reduced family sizes. The efficiency approach is used within the realm of the World Bank’s much cited ‘Structural Adjustment Programs’ whereby women are seen as active participants in the development process and not only in their reproductive roles, but rather within their productive role. All three approaches are hard to separate and they continue to be part of the World Bank’s response to development. The WID approach is criticized by many for not challenging the neo-classical/neo-colonial discourse of
development by continuing to see Third World women as victims in need of help from the North (Chowdhry, 1995). In addition “focusing on women in isolation” omitted the essentially relational nature of their subordination (Razavi & Miller, 1995). Social scientists became more and more critical of the WID discourse and began to focus their research on the importance of power, conflict and gender relations which has became more commonly known as the Gender and Development (GAD) discourse. By looking at gender, as “the process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male or female become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally-defined attributes of masculinity and femininity” (Kabeer, as cited in Parpat & Marchand, 1995, p. 14), as socially constructed it opens up opportunities for seeking change in relations between men and women. GAD has contributed to a deeper understanding of Third World women’s lives but, just like WID, has not challenged the neo-colonial/neo-classical discourse of development.

**USAID’s policy on gender and education**

I started by using the keyword “Women” and was immediately taken to USAID’s site “Women in Development”. Alone the phrase “Women in Development” is quite telling and one could be quick to conclude that USAID works within the Women in Development (WID) framework. The website is part of USAID’s section on “cross-cutting programs”. It starts out with the following paragraph:

*The contributions that women make to the economic, social, and political lives of their nations, communities, families and the next generation make them key actors in effective development. More than 800 million women are economically active worldwide -- in agriculture, small and micro-enterprise, and, increasingly, in the export processing industries that drive globalization. Over 70 percent of these*
women live in the developing regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Women's unemployment rates remain high relative to those of men, and when employed, they are paid less than men for the same work. It is not surprising, then, that women constitute 60 percent of the rural poor. (USAID, 2005, Highlights are mine.).

WID emphasizes equality and the productive role of women as key to development. USAID, as acknowledged in the first sentences, has incorporated the WID’s approach. However, from the next paragraph USAID seems to have adopted some of the rhetoric of the Gender and Development (GAD) framework.

Promoting a stronger and more productive role for women in development demands a broad and flexible approach. USAID's approach to gender is to design programs that take both women's and men's participation into account. When this is done development programs are more effective. (USAID, 2005, Highlights are mine)

The USAID Women in Development office, established in 1974, was most likely a response to WID feminists. Today, USAID has incorporated a number of activities within their gender focused development, economic development, education, human rights promotion and fight against trafficking. Their Education Strategy (USAID, 2005) emphasizes funding for two broad areas: a) provision of basic education including literacy and b) improved skills for increased productivity. The language used throughout the text is that education is the pre-requisite for economic growth and development.

To be competitive, countries require workers with both the basic literacy and critical thinking skills needed to be productive and to adapt to ongoing changes in the marketplace. Education and training must be relevant to the growth strategies of each country. (USAID, 2005, p. 11)

What becomes clear from the Education Strategy paper and the WID website is that USAID does not challenge the discourse of modernization and economic growth. “Farmers with good basic education adopt new techniques more readily and are better
able to shift into more lucrative jobs outside of agriculture. Educated workers are economically flexible and productive” (p. 2). What is assumed here is that farmers want new techniques for farming and that all people should be productive.

Women are half of the population and thus their productive role is seen as paramount if a country wants to develop and prosper. Education is necessary to prepare them for the various productive roles they take on in an increasingly globalized world. To quote a USAID strategy paper confirming its role in educating girls: “When one takes into account all its benefits, educating girls yields a higher rate of return than any other investment available in the developing world” (Summers, 1992, as cited in USAID, 2005, p. 3). However, from the various readings on women and globalization what is also known is that women’s increased participation in production of any kind is not necessarily linked to education. Multinational corporations do not necessarily increase wages because women in their factory setting have had more education. They continue to hire women because of their perceived “natural” ability to produce better and faster.

USAID’s guiding principles offer further food for thought. Resources according to their strategy will be allocated to countries with the “greatest need” and “strongest commitment to education and overall development progress” (p. 13).

They say that they are committed to leaving it up to host-countries to determine their education policy. At the same time they advocate for democratically run governments and privatization of educational services, as well as promoting a kind of education that foster political participation. “Increased efficiency” is another principle that guides this education strategy. The strategy makes reference to the overall amount of dollars spent on education citing, “well into the tens of billions of dollars” and lots of it
being wasted due to "inefficiency that plagues most educational systems" in countries where USAID has assisted. What this statement does is to lay blame on the countries' educational system rather than accepting that the education policies that USAID had previously put in place had little effect in these countries.

In the context of Afghanistan, USAID has committed large amounts of money and is actively promoting the development of a modern state. Their five-year strategy (2005 – 2010) is aimed at three key areas:

- A thriving economy led by the private sector
- A democratic government with broad citizen participation
- A better educated and healthier population" (USAID Afghanistan Strategy, 2005, p. ii)

Reflections on Learning for Life from a practitioner's view

Learning for Life was the answer to "a better educated and healthier population". Economic indicators serve as the rationale to pursue strategic development objectives. In the case of Afghanistan the most alarming indicators – I assume are found in many agencies project proposals – are low literacy rates and high maternal and child mortality rates.

The government of Afghanistan which now depends on close to 90% foreign funding has little say in how development of their country should look and has in various strategy papers made it clear that they are in line with USAID’s (and other donors’) policies.
The health and education goals as formulated in the National Strategic Framework are in line with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and the Education for All (EFA) goals.

To reduce maternal and child mortality rates the Ministry of Health is implementing a national health program funded by several donors including USAID called the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS). Funds from USAID were given to Management Sciences for Health (MSH) to implement the BPHS program in 13 of the 35 provinces. In addition they provided money to MSH to implement a health focused literacy program aimed at increasing the pool of literate women who could in turn be trained as health workers or who would through health messages be enabled to live healthier lives. MSH contracted the Center for International Education (CIE) to implement this literacy program in 13 provinces.

The proposal to implement Learning for Life was developed in the United States by a team of education and literacy specialist. Some of the questions they had to ask were

a) With the cultural constraints often placed upon women’s education will rural women enroll in literacy classes?

b) With literacy rates in some provinces lower than the one for the whole country will we be able to find enough qualified educators?

c) With the security situation deteriorating in some provinces how will be able to run classes and ensure a good training and support system?

d) Will there be enough locally created materials (textbooks etc) that could be used in the classes?

e) With a depleted human capital in the country will we be able to hire, train and put to work qualified support staff?

f) With not much prior Afghan experience and no office how will we be able to run classes (about 300) in 13 provinces?

g) How will the newly literate women link up with training as health and community workers?

Given this abbreviated list of questions I believe that planners and designers of literacy programs usually work with a given set of assumption that leads into programmatic design decisions. The assumptions derive from either the personal experience of planners that have been in the country for a long period of time or from documents about the country.

In the case of Learning for Life the proposal convinced MSH to contract CIE to implement.

During the implementation phase plans were modified to accommodate unforeseen challenges while some questions that were of great concern during the design phase turned out to be small. For example, LFL had no difficulties finding enough women who were allowed to attend literacy classes. The demand was higher than what the design team had assumed. The recruitment of facilitators anticipated as a big challenge proved to be less of challenge. What CIE had not planned for was the delay its partner organization, the International Rescue Committee, encountered identifying staff.
Timing became the major threat to the program. The design of materials became another obstacle. Material that was available was found not to be suitable. Different international curriculum specialists arrived but did not stay, each with their own vision of suitable material. In addition to restarts this left the national staff with lots of confusing ideas about how to prepare adequate literacy materials. Initially not a focus, health as a central subject in the curriculum became a major emphasis. Staff lacked knowledge on health as subject matter. Finding suitable partners in the 13 provinces proved another challenge the design team had not thought about.

The list goes on and on and looking at this from a practitioners point the project was doomed to fail from the onset. It did and it did not. According to the evaluation report (CIE, 2006) the program exceeded the number of women with grade 3 and 6 equivalencies. The number of women, not passing the tests, was very low and they were hardly any drop-outs. All women that were interviewed during the evaluation were satisfied with what they learned and the majority really liked the knowledge they gained about religion and health. The staff did a terrific job given all of the challenges. There were several setbacks to the program that from my perspective limited the success of the program somewhat.

First, very few women will have the opportunity to enroll in future health worker trainings because in the very same areas were women received literacy MSH trained other women as community health workers. While some of the newly trained health workers ended up attending the LFL classes others were already literate. Depending on the size of a village the policy has been to employ (on a voluntary basis) a male and a female community health worker. In most of the villages where LFL ran literacy classes
community health workers have already been identified and trained. The same goes for women who entered higher level classes (LFL called them “bridging classes” which are for women grade 6 and higher). They were motivated to enroll in the classes because they wanted to become a community midwife. This is what they were told by the staff implementing the program and was part of the original goal of the project. The community midwifery training program implemented through REACH closed by March – about the same time the learners had finished their education – and it was not clear if and when such training would start again.

Second, due to a delayed start resulting from the delays in the instructional materials, the majority of learners never moved through the full set of activities and not surprisingly were quite disappointed when the classes closed.

Third, due to various constraints there was no time for planned phase out. While all of the women were tested and received certificates they had not been prepared for a sudden stop of classes.

Fourth, the test designed to assess progress made by learners is in itself questionable as well as its application and thus we do not really know how many of the learners actually are at a 3rd grade equivalency and what it means to their future reading and writing skills retention.

Fifth, because of various delays in developing instructional materials they were not tested before the print and distribution. The instructional materials were written by Afghan women from urban settings for an audience in rural setting and because of not testing them, we can only guess if the needs of the learners were actually taken into consideration. The curriculum design team had their own assumptions about the learners
and the facilitator's capability to facilitate a class and rarely went into classes to assess how the facilitator used the materials.

Sixth, the support system envisaged in the original proposal by which provincial trainers support facilitators with on the job training or micro-teaching methods did not work. Travel to classes from the provincial or district level office often took more than 2 hours. In general, one trainer was responsible for ten facilitators and often had to share transportation with other trainers. A large number of provincial trainers had no prior training experience, they were either former teachers or recent high school graduates. With the exception of one training workshop that looked at training skills all other training provided was primarily targeted at facilitators.

Again this list might be different depending on "who" on the implementation team you talk to. Here I reflected on how I interpreted the process of implementing Learning for Life by simply using my own lens of how Learning for Life should have been implemented and thus "failed".

Policy makers, donors, planners, designers and implementers all have quite a different understanding of what literacy is and what success means. To the policy makers and donors the number of women successfully made literate is enough. To the planners, designers and implementers while they were happy to have reached the numbers of women targeted might nevertheless not be happy with the process. This is not to say that the donors or policy makers are not aware of these processes. To the women learners while happy to have become "literate" they were certainly not happy that classes closed, that support ceased and that potential opportunities did not open up.
We all took hold of this project in different ways, valued it in different ways and our objectives were not mutual. Literacy for all of us was understood as a technical skill, however, what we understood by being literate was not the same for every one. Some women as said earlier understood that being literate for them meant to sign their name. I on the other hand had wanted to see the needs of women being met which LFL could have better studied prior to the design of a universal curriculum.

This is why I decided to study the literacy practices women are currently engaged in and the following chapters will move into the results of this case study.
Chapter 6 – Literacy Practices/events in Boloch-e-Ahengar

This chapter describes some of the present literacy practices I have seen during my stay in Boloch-e-Ahengar. I begin by setting the context, the hamlet of Boloch-e-Ahengar. This will be followed by an introduction of my host family upon which most of my data is drawn. While not able to explore a larger variety of domains I restrict this chapter to the family’s home, class and community.

The research location - Boloch-e-Ahengar

Boloch-e-Ahengar, the qawm (hamlet) I stayed in, is about an hour by foot from Baba bazaar (see figure 2 & 3). Reaching this hamlet can be challenging as I experienced every time I went or left. During the evaluation our two 4W-vehicles stopped half way between Baba bazaar and Boloch-e-Ahengar and our team went by foot to the facilitator’s house. The local Toyota Corolla I rented in Sange Masha for about $15 made it but the driver was not too happy to return the same way. We rented another Toyota Corolla for our return to Kabul and the first car got stuck in the valley crossing the stream. The driver went to borrow another vehicle from a neighbor and this car succeeded.

The hamlet is composed of 22 houses (house number 7 is that of my host family – see appendix - map 2), a population of about 213 people with about 16 men living and working in either Iran, London and as far away as Australia. Often, a house is shared by several brothers.
The hamlet is quite mountainous and the inhabitants have given names to each of the surrounding peaks (see map 2). A stream runs through the valley with the houses usually being up by about 300 – 500m above the stream on each side. There are a number of fruit trees, mostly apricots and almond trees, within the area of wheat and animal fodder fields. Not every family owns land as is the case of my host family. I arrived at the end of winter with night temperature close to 0°C and day temperatures of
up to 15°C. One night before the Afghan New Year (March 21st) it snowed.

Each hamlet has a local membar, a local mosque. It seems to be more than a place to worship and study. The membars I have seen in various small hamlets in Jaghuri district are two-story mud buildings with several rooms on each floor often separate rooms for women and men. The membar is also a place for local travelers. Many of the LFL classes were held in the local mosque. Monsutti (2005) describes the membar as a place of worship usually comprised of several rooms which includes the mosque and an outside yard. While used for religious events and in particular during the moharram (the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar) it also serves other functions within a community.

My host family

Before moving onto describing specific literacy practices I observed while staying with my host family I would like to introduce its family members.

Ahmad, the father, is maybe in his 50s. He seems very quiet and friendly. His face show signs of hard work. He never went to school but can nevertheless count money and do simple additions, subtractions and multiplications. According to him he learned most of it when he worked in construction in Teheran for about 3 years from 2002 – 2005. At the time of my study he was helping his brother built an extension to his house.

Gulbegum, the mother and one of the main participants of my study, is about 40 years old. She is a beautiful, very kind woman who I never saw shouting at her children. Her long hair is braided and hidden behind a long veil that she keeps on all the time,
inside and outside the house. Now that her two older daughters have taken over the daily
chores of cooking and cleaning she has more free time that she spends spinning wool
which is sold to a trader or attends to the animals. She also takes care of her youngest
daughter Zia Gul who is only 3 years old. As she told me she is the one taking her goats
and sheep into the mountains during the warmer months. A lot more work seems to be
done during the summer months then when I was there. Gulbegum never went to school
and it is the first time that she has attended a literacy course. However, when she got first
married to Ahmad she began sewing clothes for herself and neighbors. When I asked her
what she was sewing she told me that it was mainly the beautiful machine embroidered
vests the older Hazara women wore in this area. I asked her how she determined the
price for a vest. She said that she had gone to other hamlets in Baba where she would ask
the local tailor what they were charging and based on the information she collected she
decided on the price. “Did the customers always pay in cash?” I asked and she told me
that often they did not. They agreed on exchanging products or favors such as a customer
would pay with eggs or other food produce. She stopped sewing for others when she
enrolled in the Learning for Life class. During my stay I often saw her sitting over her
books reading or copying text into her notebook during different times of the day but also
during the evenings.

**Latifa** is the oldest daughter and about 19 years old. She has long hair that is also
hidden behind a long veil she wears all the time. Unlike her mother who uses different
silver-looking clasps to keep her hair in small braids she simply wears a ponytail. She is
not yet married and once school starts again she will continue studying at the local high
school in grade 9. During my stay, I saw her going to school late mornings to attend the
half-hour English class provided by one of the local teachers during the winter months. She is an incredible young woman who manages the full household. She is the first one in the morning to get up and the last to go to bed. Usually she rises at 4am and starts the fire in the kitchen. If there is no water from the previous night, she fetches water at the spring about 100m from the house. Then she starts the kettle to prepare hot water for tea and the morning wash of the entire family. This is followed by her morning prayers for which she returns to the living room. After her prayers she takes out the dough she prepared the evening before and starts forming small balls of bread – during my stay she would bake about 30 pieces of bread. Bread is baked differently here than in most other villages in Afghanistan. The tandor – (a clay oven that is put in the floor in kitchens or outside areas) is used throughout many villages in Afghanistan. This family like all families in Boloch-e-Ahengar does not use a tandor but rather makes use of the open fire place. A round metal cover is placed over the open fire and on top of the cover is where the dough is put. This type of bread making usually requires two people, one who prepares the dough, rolls it and forms it over a round piece of mold and then sticks it onto the metal cover, while the other person keeps the right fire going. The final bread looks like the very crisp form of a pizza foundation. When Latifa is done she separates the bread for the morning and the bread that is used throughout the day covering both batches with a big fabric. She does the final touches of tea and her sisters and her mother start getting out the tea glasses and about 3 smaller tea kettles. While the young sons prepare the living room, getting out the big table cloth and laying out the bread she would be the last one to enter the room and eat breakfast. She then cleans the dishes and either starts getting herself ready for school or starts preparation for lunch or dinner. She is also the
one that knows what is missing in the household in terms of daily things and either keeps money she received from her father or her sister, who makes money as a literacy facilitator for the LfL program. She often gives money to her older brother when things are required from the bazaar. She seems to be the one in charge of all these household issues. When she has some time left she can be seen sitting in the living room with her English book, reading her English lesson or copying the text from the book into her notebook.

Khadija is the literacy facilitator and another woman who I used in this study. She also has long straight hair that she wears like Latifa – a long ponytail. She also wears a veil all the time and even when she makes her hair she never loses touch of the veil on her head. She is about 17 years old but it has been difficult to determine her approximate age as is difficult for her oldest sister and her older brother. During the evaluation she was telling us that she is only 15 years old. During my stay I estimated her age more like 17. Her mother told me that she was born about two years after Latifa and that her brother Ramazan was born two years after her. Both Latifa and her are attending school together and are in the same class – beginning grade 9 on March 21st. She would have liked to attend English class but due to her task as a facilitator of the literacy course she was not able to do so. She feels that her grades in school suffered due to her workload as a facilitator. She seemed rather relieved that the literacy course finishes before the new school year starts. It seems that due to her role as facilitator she has been less burdened by household tasks. She told me that she was responsible for cleaning the dishes, to clean the house and sometimes to fetch water. More often than less I would see her sitting in the morning preparing for class. When I arrived she was
also busy studying for her tests that she missed during grade 8 because she was sick
during the time of the tests. She took tests in English, Geography and Biology during my
first days in Boloch-e-Ahengar. Khadija like her sister Latifa went to the local mullah
to learn the Quran, and to read and write basic forms of Dari. She attended the local
madrassa teaching for about 4 to 5 years full time. Full time in this context meant class
starts at 9am and ends at about 4pm in the afternoon with several breaks in between.
During the last years of the Taliban regime classes would continue in the local school and
her mother and father made the decision to send both Latifa and Khadija to the school.
Khadija entered at 3rd grade while Latifa entered at grade 5. Attending the local Islamic
teaching helped both not to have to enter at grade 1. Latifa also took part of an earlier
education opportunity when a female doctor at the local clinic started offering courses in
the clinic of what seems today basics in literacy and health. Shee attended for about two
years and then moved into the formal school system when it was possible.

Ramazan is the oldest son and about 15 years old. He is tall and seems to be the
laziest in the household. He went to the local madrassa for 6 full years and entered
formal school at grade 2. He left school last year completing grade 6. He was tired of
school and wanted to leave to find work in Iran. His father did not let him go at this early
age but I assume that he will eventually be leaving for Iran when he is a little older. His
father found him an apprenticeship in the local bazaar in Baba where he learns how to
repair the Chinese motorbikes which many local men own in the area. Ramazan himself
owns such a motorbike and he proudly shows off his driving skills. He is the one that
brings the things from the bazaar that are necessary for the family. During my stay he
stopped going to his apprenticeship much to the dismay of his father. He rather preferred
to spend his days with Kazim, my so-called chaperone I was advised to take.

**Rahmatullah** is the youngest son and about 13 years old. He is a very joyful and active young boy. He seems to be the only one in the family that was not vaccinated and is the only one that suffered from polio. His right leg is deformed but it does not seem to hinder his mobility. He also attends English class during the winter months and usually he and Latifa go to school together. He also went for about 3 years to the local madrassa and thus was able to enter school at grade 2 skipping grade 1. He is now in grade 6.

**Gulghorai** is the third daughter and about 11 years old. She was my little friend who would help me with my morning and evening washes. She is in grade 5 and during my stay she would attend the local mullah class held in the same mosque where the literacy course took place. Her daily tasks were to fetch the water and to help her father and mother with the animals in the morning and evening. She has short hair and does not wear a veil.

**Ziagul** is the youngest daughter of Ahmad and Gulbegum and 3 years old. Her birthday is the only one recorded in the family-owned Quran. She was the one that could never get close to me. She kept her distance, for her I was the “American” as she called me once. But she began to be friends with Kazim quite early on and never left his side. He was quite clever, probably having learned from his own bunch of cousins, nieces and nephews, always keeping a stock of chewing gums ready to distribute to Ziagul and the other smaller children in the neighborhood. She was the favorite of all in the family and would be pampered. But unlike Western small kids she would never really make scenes when she would not get what she wanted.

The family has been living in this house that is not theirs for about 3 years. Prior
to that time they lived in the house of Ahmad’s father sharing it with his 3 other brothers. Space was scarce and thus they decided to move. The house in which they now live belongs to a villager who has been living in Quetta for many years and who does not seem to ever return to his homeland. The family does not pay any rent as agreed with the landlord but sort of keeps an eye on the property with the understanding that they might stay in the place forever. The family does not own any land, the land belonging to Ahmad is shared by all four brothers and only one of the brothers who now lives in the family house takes care of the small plot of land.

My host family’s setting

Houses in Boloch-e-Ahengar are made of mud with the ground floors usually reserved for the animals like sheep, goat or cows. The rooms are heated through an underground piping system leading off the kitchen’s fireplace(s) through pipes beneath some of the rooms. Most rooms have especially warm areas where guests are invited to sit. These are closest to the kitchen’s fire place and its connecting walls feel much warmer.

There is usually a living room serving a number of purposes depending on the number of rooms available in each house. My host family, for example, has two rooms, one for storage and one for living. A hallway is connecting the two rooms and the kitchen is in the back of the house. The living room is about 4x5m and the little annex divided by a glass door about 4x3m. The storage room is also about 4x5m. The kitchen is a bigger room as its length covers the width of hallway, storage and living room. The width of the kitchen however is fairly small – maybe about 2.5m. A terrace leads into the
first floor – the place where one can often find the daughters washing clothes. The living room is barren when compared to Western style living room. Handmade rugs from the area cover the floor. Sometimes when important guests visit tushaks (mattresses) are put on the rug to allow for more comfortable sitting if family members seem to be uncomfortable sitting on the rug only. To the right of the main door is a small TV placed on the box it was carried in. A VCD player stored in its box during the day is on top of the TV. An extension cable is plugged into the only outlet next to the door where the light switch is. Across from the main door is a larger window where I could spend hours watching the incredible landscape of Boloch-e-Ahengar. A row of hooks are on one side of the wall and sometimes the plastic bag holding notebooks and books of either the mother, the son or the daughter are placed here. The glass door has a large frame allowing used as a shelf. Here the Quran wrapped in fabric is placed as well as a couple of different medical bottles or pills.

The small annex again a barren room is the place where all tushaks and smaller pillows are stored away during the day. A shelf inside the mud wall holds some clothes belonging to different family members. The window reveal is mostly used by Khadija. She keeps some of the facilitator books, notebooks, and flipcharts here. Another row of hooks provide additional space for hanging clothes.

The living room serves as the sleeping area for all family members at night, especially during the winter months when only the first part of the room receives underground heat from the fire place. In the summer months the family might move into the annex too or sleep outside on the roof of the house. All meals are served in this part too, usually a table cloth or a plastic table cloth are put on the floor and bread and other
food are placed on the cloth. Members of the family sit around the cloth on the floor. In the case of my host family I noticed that the men sat on one side together eating from one big bowl while the women sit on the other side and have their own big bowl. A guest like me gets their own little bowl. I am not sure if this seating order is also done when there are no guests.

My host family has a small plot of land right next to the house where it grew potatoes and carrots. The plot also has a storage place for the animal fodder that is collected for the harsh winter months when the herds are living inside. My guess is that the herd transfers to the outside plot in the warmer months. I am not sure if the family uses the land during the summer months.

The house also has an outdoor latrine which consists of two pits and an open entrance. It is about 5 m away from the house with the entrance invisible to the house but visible to the small path connecting my host family’s house to the neighboring houses and the mosque. It has always been a challenge for me to use this latrine and often I would wait until I made it to the class in the next hamlet because the mosque’s public latrine had a fabric cover.

**Literacy Practices in the family**

Gulbegum and Ahmad’s family do not seem to differ much from that of what I have seen among other families in Boloch-e-Ahengar. As a learner in the LFL literacy class I often saw Gulbegum with her learner’s book or her notebook. Usually in between breakfast and lunch, depending on other duties she would perform she would read passages out of her two learner’s books – language and health. Sitting on the bare
carpet or sometimes on a tushak she would be on her knees in an almost lying position
looking over the pages. She would read to herself. At other times she would copy
sentences out of her learner’s book into her notebook. Her daughter, Khadija, would give
all learners homework at the end of each class. As learners do not have math books
Khadija would write a number of math exercises on the board at the end of math and the
learners would copy it in their notebooks. As for language, health and religion she
would use the text from the learner’s books and give them exercises – usually copying
things.

The family does possess a number of books of which the most valued is the
Quran. It is placed on the small wooden shelf in the glass door covered in a fabric.
During my entire stay I only saw Rahmatullah once actually read in it. One morning after
breakfast he took the Quran out of its cover, opened the pages and began ‘humming’ one
Suhra after another. I asked him if I could take a look at it. The Quran looked old and
its pages worn. On the last page of the Quran, the first page in Western books, I noticed
some writing in Dari. I had learned from Afghan friends and colleagues that nowadays
the birth date of children is recorded in the Quran. What I found in this Quran was the
birth date of Ziagul, the youngest daughter. When I asked who wrote this Rahmatullah
told me that it was the local akhun (Hazaragi for mullah). I wondered why only Ziagul’s
name was written down and not the other names if it is the local akhun who writes it
anyway but Rahmatullah could not tell me.

Most other written texts which I found in the house were school books, some
magazines which Khadija received from the local partner organization, Sanayee
Development Foundation (SDF), which implemented Learning for Life in Jaghuri

---

4 Dari writing starts from the right to the left, and books begin the opposite way to Western books.
district. The magazine is SDF’s monthly publication about the National Solidarity Program, a national community empowerment program implemented by a number of non-governmental organizations on behalf of the government. Khadija liked that some articles are in English and Dari and it helps her work on her English.

With the exception of the English books Latifa and Rahmatullah owned, all other books and the magazines were in Dari. The English book which both Rahmatullah and Latifa are studying are from a series called “New American Streamline” by Bernard Hartley and Peter Viney. They were studying the book called “Destinations”.

The inside text had everything to do with American life—very unreal coming across it in the setting of Afghanistan. These books are used by everyone in the local English course and can be found in the Baba bazaar.

Here are some examples of the type of lessons it contains:

One topic in the books is about “Marriage counseling” depicting a blond bride and her handsome groom. Another page that I opened was called “Earth Day” and showed pictures of Western looking women, men and children talking about the environment.

Sometimes Rahmatullah or Latifa asked me if I could help them learn for their English class. What they meant by learning for their English class was to memorize the entire text of a page. The activities
in their English book were a lot of small dialogues with someone asking question and someone else answering. And here my role was to either ask the question or answer to a question. The text I worked with both was about traveling on a plane or checking into a hotel.

The family's television which Ramazan won in a local lottery seems to have made major changes by connecting the outside world with their own. During my stay every night the family watched a film – usually Indian. The VCDs were either borrowed from neighboring friends or bought from the Baba bazaar. Almost all Indian movies we watched were dubbed in Farsi, the Iranian form of Persian. The films were shot in India and often were about an Indian 'mafia' or love. Men and women were shown wearing 'modern' dresses and the women often in very short skirts and not wearing a veil. Modern cars would be used as would 'modern' homes. What was interesting for me was to observe how the sons or my chaperone censored what was watched. When a scene would show a young woman in a mini-skirt to a man the boys would quickly press the fast-forward button. The same when violence was shown, i.e. a shooting or a fight with lots of injured bodies. Kazim in particular who seemed to have seen most of the movies was quick to fast-forward at particular scenes. Gulbegum, Khadija and Latifa often seemed upset about the nightly practice of watching a movie although they would often been seen watching it. At other times they would move into the annex to continue with their own studies. That was also what I often did.

I was also interested in understanding what other LFL participants had in terms of reading resources at home. During one class I had asked Khadija to allow me some time to begin a discussion about their reading resources and why I was interested. I had
invited all learners during the previous class to bring whatever they had in reading resources, books, magazines etc. I asked them not to bring school books, nor the Quran or their own LFL material. Eight out of the twenty two learners brought books and one magazine. I asked each of the women to present their books and while presenting I was asking the presenter questions about the various books. For example questions I asked:

- Are these your own books or where did you get them from?
- Have you read any of them? Which?
- Can you describe the content of the book to the other learners?
- Can you read a passage to the others?

While only eight women brought books, most of them got them from their own homes. Only one had a book from the local library (more about the library below) which she had gone to pick up herself. She was among the three more advanced learners studying in Level 2.

Most books were religious texts about the life of Mohamad some of which were written in Arabic and some in Dari. Only one learner had read in some of the books she brought. The others said that they just brought them with only some of them ever trying to read a page or a sentence. However, all of the learners who brought books did try to read a passage from the book they brought in. At the end of the class we talked about the opportunity to make use of each other’s resources as well as the library.

We further discussed the issue of losing the newly acquired skills mainly because I brought it up. The learners did seem concerned about this and did not want their class
to finish soon. When the SDF provincial trainer announced that the class finished in one week all of the learners looked disappointed. I had tried to bring up the issue but for some reasons they would not believe that classes were finishing. I had asked them what they would do if SDF cuts the payment of the facilitator. Most of them said that they could not do anything and that they would not be able to study on their own and that I should help not to cut the salary. They made sure to talk to their male family members after class because the next day in class the male community health worker and one of the participant’s father came to class to provide me with a request written on the computer and in English and signed by members of the different qawms requesting me to help that the class could continue. What was surprising to me was that the men had used a medium known to me rather then to them to lobby for my support.

I discussed the continuation with Gulbegum and Khadija. Khadija seemed quite relieved that the class was not continuing and told me that she needed to concentrate more on her own school and grades. She felt that she had suffered during the past months teaching these women. She was late with her tests getting her into the next grade and had to miss the English course. She was also not confident that the women would have the ability to pay a fee for her to teach them. I encouraged her to think about how it might be possible to continue the class by either reducing the number of days to teach or the number of hours so that she had more time to concentrate on her own studies. She thought about it and then in one of the last classes I attended they discussed in how to continue. The women wanted to continue and agreed that they would each pay Afs 50 per month ($1). Khadija offered to teach 4 days instead of 6 days a week – I had suggested 3 days but she felt that it was good to teach 4 days a week because of the four
subject matters within the LFL curriculum. I then offered to pay Khadija an additional $20 for the next 5 months. This was more my contribution for being able to stay at her house but if I had given money directly for this the family would not have accepted it. This is the length of time she felt was needed to get all of the learners through level 1 and 2 materials. I further promised to send her instructional materials that she had not previously received so that she would be able to continue. The only outstanding issue remaining before I left was the future location of the class. Khadija wanted the class to be taking place in the membar of Boloch-e-Ahengar which would for the majority of students mean a walk of 5 minutes but for others who lived in Shokh Shegan mean a walk of 20 minutes. I am curious to see when I return if and where the course continued.

**Calculating expenses and shopping the cheapest way**

Understanding how the family survived financially I asked the father and the mother how much they needed for monthly expenses. As this was not the main purpose of the study I did not persist in fully understanding expenses and income strategies. Therefore, while I did receive some interesting answers from both parents I feel that further inquiry is necessary to fully understand for example, how much the father made in Iran, how much the mother took from the hawala over the period the father was in Iran, etc. What this example however showed is how people with no formal schooling use numeracy skills like adding, multiplying, comparing in their daily life.

During my stay Ahmad worked at one of his brother’s house. His brother decided to add another room to the house and hired Ahmad and a couple of others in the village to help him build the room. For that the huge stones found all over the land in Jaghuri were
used. Dynamite was used to split the big stones into smaller pieces that could be used to build the foundation. Ahmad would leave in the morning – his work only being blocks away – and return in the late afternoon. He would take his lunch at his brother’s place. His wage, he said, was a meager Afs 100 a day (Kabul wages for an untrained daily laborer is around Afs 300 at the time of this study). But as he said, there is hardly anything to do in the area and any job is better than no job. Not finding work led him to spend three years in Iran where construction work is paid considerably higher than Afghanistan or Pakistan. He said that he will have this work for at least a month.

Khadija has been receiving an equivalent of $50 a month working as the LFL facilitator. She gives some of her earnings to her father who is reluctant to take it all and than gives the remainder to her sister Latifa. Latifa manages the household using this money to cover additional expenses.

The family seems to live off the savings from Ahmad’s work in Teheran. The family purchases main food and household items once a year. Once a year they go to Ghazni for their bulk purchases of flour, rice, oil, sugar and tea.

Last year, they told me they purchased the following main items right after harvest time:

- 10 bags of flour (approx 980kg) usually lasting 12 months (one bag = 14 ser\(^5\))
- 1 bag of rice (50kg) usually only eaten during the winter months and lasting the entire winter
- 3 large bottles of oil (16 kg)
- 6 kg of black tea, and

\(^5\) A ser according to the Kabul measurement is about 7 kg.
- 1 kg of green tea.

They also purchase wood for cooking and heating once a year. Last year they purchased about 7 tons of wood at the equivalent of $500. A truckload usually carries about $800 worth of wood and two houses divide the truck and pay the truck driver for the full load. They also purchase animal fodder (alaaf) for about another $400 which last for the entire winter. At this time of the year they require about an equivalent of $1,000 to purchase food supplies. How do they get all the money? They do not have relatives as other families have who would regularly send money. They told me that only once were they not able to save this money. When the father was in Iran he would make use of the local hawala (the money transfer structure) to send home money. The sub-district of Baba has two local hawalas one of which comes from Boloch-e-Ahengar. Local hawalas are local traders with connections in Iran – like Mirza from Boloch-e-Ahengar, whose brothers is a trader in Iran. Ahmad sent home through the hawala about Rs 200,000 (about $3,500) for which the hawala took 2% transfer costs. During his time in Iran, Gulbegum when she needed funds would go to Mirza and take what she needed from the money Ahmad had sent.

This type of calculation requires inquiring about prices in bazaars in Baba and larger towns. How has Ahmed who is not literate been able to keep track of prices received at several locations? It further requires a system of organization of how money is used within the household and decisions involving clear calculations about the availability of funds and their most effective use. What would be interesting to inquire if this type of ‘wholesale’ shopping is the norm in the village or more of a coping mechanism to deal with shortage of money.
Becoming computer literate in Baba

On my fourth day in Boloch-e-Ahengar I went to the high school, the only one in this area serving – according to the principal I spoke to – over 1,800 pupils, girls and boys. While a high school on paper, students have so far only been studying until grade 9 – they are no students enrolled in grades 10 – 12. Every year the grades go up and so on March 21st 2006 the school had its first 10th grade pupils. The school building was an old one-floor mud building with maybe at the most 8 classrooms. One room was reserved for the teachers, one for the school library and another room housed the computer lab. Yes, a computer lab in Baba’s school – most schools in Kabul do not house a computer lab!

This lab housed 8 computers donated partly by the same immigrants who helped fix up the school building and partly by a local NGO. The computer instructor, Ali, was proud to show me the computers which are powered by a local generator, and its fuel paid through the fees collected from the students on a monthly basis. According to Ali there are about 70 students attending classes six days a week and each student contributes Afs 200 (about $4) a month compared to the willingness by the LFL learners to pay $1 for the literacy course to continue. Ali lived in Pakistan until he was asked by his brother to return to Baba to teach the local children computers. Ali was not happy about returning but felt that he needed to help his village. His brother is one of the immigrants living in London. Ali himself tried to get to London but was caught at the Turkish border and deported to Iran. Instead of returning to Afghanistan he lived with relatives in Quetta, studying English and computers. He is married to one of the advanced LFL participants, since 3 years and he and his wife were expecting their first child.

From the fees collected from the students Ali is able to pay himself about $300 a
month (and according to my experience quite a large sum for a rural village job – a
government teacher makes about $50 a month) and pays for the fuel and other minor
expenses.

When I entered the lab I was surprised that the floor was carpeted. Ali was happy
to find someone who also understood computers and asked my help in fixing some
computers. I spent over an hour on two computers with some success I was able to clean
up old files and showed Ali how to setup safety features on the computers so that he
protects software and hardware setting from being changed by new students. While
doing the cleanup I was able to observe the students of the computer course the great
majority being young women and girls. All of them were students in the school but some
even themselves teachers of lower grade students. The school like so many in the
country lacks qualified teachers and this school made use of its students in secondary
levels to teach the children in primary levels.

During involvement with this project I often noticed that in many rural areas I
visited younger people were attending English or computer classes and parents willing to
pay for it. At the same time many women from these areas attending the LFL literacy
course would complain to me that LFL is not continuing to support the teacher and the
class. When I responded with a question “Why are you not continuing your class on your
own by paying the teacher themselves?”, their response was that their husbands would
not provide money for their education. My first inclination would be that people might
see more economic benefit by investing in their son’s or girl’s English and computer
skills. People might have seen NGO staff with their computers talking to foreign people
in English and the staff is seen as “having made it”. Men refusing to pay for a literacy
course for their wives or daughters might not necessarily see the same benefits specially when their daughters are married off and leaving the house. I believe that this issue requiring further research might help program planners and designers to early on identify the opportunities or limitations when designing sustainable literacy classes.

The importance of English

I also sat in the half-hour long English class and observed how the replacement teacher – the younger brother of the local English teacher – taught English to girls and boys of different ages. Latifa told me that classes in the normal school system are usually not mixed – there are classes and separate schedules for girls and boys.

The girls were sitting on one side and the boys on the other side. The girls were mostly of Latifa’s age while the boys seemed much younger. The teacher was not much older and himself a student in grade 9. Latifa and Rahmatullah did not particularly like him as a teacher – but they did not have much choice. Each student pays Afs 100 ($2) per month – double the amount suggested by the literacy learners for their class to continue - to attend a half-an-hour English class for 6 days a week during the free winter months. The instructions were those I had seen in other classes; the teacher stood in front of the blackboard and was explaining “past tense” during this class. He gave a couple of examples and then would ask the students to give him additional examples which he would write on the blackboard. Girls and boys alike would raise their hands or simply shout examples at the teacher and he in turn would write it on the blackboard – often with spelling mistakes.
Local library and its users

Khadjia had told me about the local library in the main mosque close to the Baba bazaar. After the English class was over Latifa, Rahmatullah and I made our way to the library. I was welcomed by the local librarian – I am not sure if he is also the local mullah - who directed me into a room to the right inside the mosque. This mosque is a one-storey building unlike the membars I had seen in Boloch-e-Ahengar and other hamlets in Jaghuri district.

I entered a room of about 10x12m. Along one of the longer sides and one of the shorter sides were shelves housing a large numbers of books. The room also contained a sofa, a table, two sofa chairs, the librarian’s desk and chair. Two register books were on the desk containing innumerable records of local borrowers, one book for men and the other for women. The majority of the books in the library were religious texts either in Arabic or in the Iranian Farsi. But I also found other books, some Iranian novels, English dictionaries, other English books (mainly books for the study of Economy, Philosophy or Engineering) and even a novel in my native language - German.

The books were donated by a local villager now a “Sheikh” living in Iraq. The large majority of the female borrowers were young girls from the neighboring high school. Khadija and Latifa for example would regularly go to get books. They particularly liked the religious books in Farsi and in Khadija words “Reading about Mohamad’s life in Farsi has helped me better.
understand Islam. The Quran is in Arabic and we only learn to memorize the text and do not understand its meaning”. This is a similar response I had first heard from women in another class we visited last summer in Jaghuri. The class had been running for about a month when we arrived and the large majority of its learners were good writers and readers. I was surprised because I was told that none of them had been to school. How did they learn to read and write in one month? The answer, they went to the Mullah’s class for many years and had learned how to read and write in Dari. When I asked them why then they enrolled in the LFL class all of them said that while they had learned about their religion in Arabic, they memorized it but they did not learn the meaning. Thus religion as a subject in the Learning for Life class was highly valued by many of the learners I spoke to. The importance that women and men place on religious teaching should not be underestimated and instead of dismissing religious teaching as a subject in a literacy program – as some donors do – we could learn to better understand how then religion can be incorporated sensitively.

Children in many of the villages and hamlets in Jaghuri attend the local mullah’s class. What was new to me is that children here study much longer at the local mosque than say children in Kabul. During the winter months when there is no formal school many parents send their children – not all of the parents do and not all of the children are sent – to the local mosque for the day. Here they are taught by the mullah in the various books of Islam. For example, Gulghorai would leave the house in the morning around 9am and finish her studies at the time the LFL class finished in the afternoon – around 4.30pm. I saw that the children had regular breaks where they would play in the courtyard of the mosque. The classes in the mosque were also mixed and their ages were
between 6 and 14.

Khadjia also found resources in the library that helped her in her teaching practice; she showed me a book written for teachers in Iran in how to better teach children.

Embroidery experts among the women in Boloch-e-Ahengar

The women’s movement in Boloch-e-Ahengar seems to be restricted within their qawm\(^6\) where they freely move from house to house. They often did when I was there and the younger women were usually seen with their embroidery under their arms. They would use white cotton fabric their male members would buy in the bazaar or they would exchange pieces among themselves. The thread they used was usually white and black. Women drew different forms onto the fabric using only a pen and their own imaginations. Many of the embroidered fabric I was given contained flower ornaments depending on its use. If the fabric was to be used for a shirt the upper front part would be covered with white chain-stitches. I noticed that women would talk about their designs and it seems that some women drew patterns for other women’s pieces. I saw only younger women being engaged in embroidery. Gulbegum, for example, never did any serious needlepoint work while I was there – even though I saw her picking up one of Khadija’s embroidery pieces and work on it for a while. She instead spun wool from the fur collected off their sheep which her husband would later on sell in the bazaar.

While these skills require basic knowledge of geometry skills none of the women learned them through the formal school system. Instead they were transmitted from

---

\(^6\) Exceptions are for girls who attend school who can be seen walking in groups or alone to the school in Baba.
mother to daughter or grandmother to granddaughter – a form of literacy.

*Specific Literacy Events during my stay*

*Language issues in class*

Organizations implementing literacy projects are often conditioned by policies and funds available when deciding what language(s) to use in literacy classes. Learning for Life is no exception.

Afghanistan, in its new constitution signed in January 2004, declared in Art. 16 that “Pashtu and Dari are the official languages of the state” while at the same time preparing “the ground for teaching in mother tongues [for example: Uzbeki, Turkmani, Baluchi, Pashai, Nuristani, Pamiri] in areas where they are spoken” (Government of Afghanistan, 2004, p. 8 & 12). This is in line with UNESCO’s Declaration in 1953 that “literacy work was best done in the vernacular” (Robinson-Pant, 2001, p.52).

Learning for Life early on decided to use the two main languages, Dari and Pashto for its literacy instruction. Most of the provinces were Learning for Life was implemented the learners were using one of the two languages. However the program also encountered a number of provinces where learners as well as some facilitators were not familiar with either of these two languages.

One locality not using Dari or Pashto was the hamlet in which I stayed. People use Hazaragi, a language mixed of Turkish and Dari. In the beginning of my stay I had great difficulty understanding what members of the family or participants in the literacy

---

7 During the summative evaluation field study I encountered classes in Faryab and Ghazni where learners could not speak either Dari or Pashto. In Faryab, for example, the main language used is Uzbek. There are attempts by the government to promote Uzbek textbooks in school as of last year but most schools are still waiting for textbooks.
class would say to me. Many words used in Hazaragi seem to have no common ground with words in the Dari vocabulary. Over time with the help of a small self-created dictionary I remembered words people were using in their daily communication. I found myself talking in Dari to the family members or the learners and them not understanding me. I then tried to repeat what I said or changed the words I used or included a lot of body language. More often Khadjia or Kazim helped translating for me from Dari into Hazaragi.

I began to look into how the women are able to learn a language they do not really speak. What I saw in the classes and not only in Khadija’s is that the facilitator is often restricted to certain teaching methods due to the language issue. For example, Khadija often translated the text she read to the learners into Hazaragi before moving them into groups and particular tasks around this text.

*Khadija divided the learners into four groups. Two groups are working on activity four of milestone three while the third group is working on activity nine of the same milestone and the last group is working on activity three of milestone one for level two. Khadija moves along the groups and introduces the activity to each group using Hazaragi.* (fieldnotes, 03/12/06)

While the participants were reading and writing in the official Dari language, instructions are done in Hazaragi. Often Khadija would also explain difficult parts of a text using Hazaragi. I noted this switching between languages in other areas too where the majority of learners were not familiar with Dari.

In Faryab, for example, I observed how a facilitator would read a text from the learner’s book first, then she would explain the whole text in Uzbek and finally she would end up having the learners collectively read the full text in Dari over and over
again. Many of the facilitators I observed during other field visits also code-switched between the vernacular and the official literacy language.

Also, training sessions for the facilitators in Faryab took much longer than trainings done in other areas due to the lack of Dari knowledge among many of the facilitators. This led to cuts of the content of the training rather than an increase in the number of training days. It is therefore not difficult to see that the facilitators stick to simple sentences, rote learning and reading of texts repetitiously.

At the same time the participants often felt that learning the official language provides them with status and more importantly access to the outside world. For example, the learners in Khadija’s class wanted to learn Dari as it would “help them communicate with foreigners like me”. English was an even more desired language learners to learn. Some of them had already learned the Western numerals prior to the class as the example showed below.

*Each of the family members (with the exception of Ziagul) had a watch. The father bought them in Iran about a year ago. As with the majority of watches – I actually have not seen a watch with Eastern Arabic-Indic numerals among the many colleagues I worked with – the numbers were in Western numerals. I was looking at Gulbegum’s watch and ask her if she could tell me the time. She looked at her watch – it took her some time – and then she said in a question form: “It’s 12.30, isn’t it?” by showing me her watch. It was correct. I asked her how she learned to read the numbers in English and she told me that they learned it in the literacy class. They had a chapter on reading the calendar, dates and times. The calendar provided by the program to each class contained 3 different calendars – the (lunar) Muslim calendar, the (solar) official Afghan calendar and the (most widely used) Gregorian calendar. While for them they might have required to learn only the Afghan calendar they insisted they learn*

---

8 Taken from wikipedia.org: the Eastern Arabic-Indic numerals are the ones used in Afghanistan’s languages Dari and Pashtu. (see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu-Arabic_numeral_system)

9 The Afghan calendar is based on the solar calendar (starting date is Mohammad’s move from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE) and is used by Iran and Afghanistan. For more see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_calendar
the Gregorian calendar and with that came learning the numbers in Western numerals. LFL also provided a measuring tape to complement their math activities and the numbers used on the tape were Western numerals. In the end the learners persuaded Khadija to teach them the Western numerals. (field notes, 03/14/06)

While Dari or Pashto are the two languages offered by LFL participants in Khadija’s class had negotiated a third or fourth language.

Issues of Power

Another example highlights what Chomsky noted “questions of language are basically questions of power” (cited in Robinson-Pant, 2001, p. 51).

I was a little troubled when the local community health worker came into class yesterday. He entered the room after he knocked first and I could feel the uneasiness of the women in the room. He sat down next to where I was sitting and he started greeting some of the women. His daughter was in class too and he chatted to her a bit. He also made comments about the group work. He then started to watch the groups while clearly waiting to speak to me. I had met him in Khadjia’s house on the first day and felt at unease with him because he would complain about everything. After a while he pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to me. The paper contained a petition typed in English on a computer addressed to me requesting the literacy course receive continued funding. Various signatures filled the bottom of the page. (fieldnotes, 03/14/06)

Obviously the people in this village had enough exposure to aid agencies and knew that it might increase their chance of continued funding if the letter was in English. They saw me as representing the funding agencies and the one with the power to continue the class. I did not seem very convincing when I tried to explain that I was not the one with the power to make that decision.
In summary, the literacy practices and events I have explored in the homes, the school, and the literacy class are by no means exhaustive. However, these examples provided me with a better picture of how literacy is practiced and perceived.

The new technologies of television, video and CD players, satellite antennas are bringing changes into the people’s homes in Boloch-e-Ahengar. These new technologies require new knowledge which is usually acquired by the younger generation first and then transmitted to the older generation – in the case of Khadija’s house I only observed the children operating the TV and the VCD player. At the same time embroidery skills continue to be transmitted from mother to daughter or friends to daughter.

Looking at literacy solely in terms of reading and writing skills it seems to concentrate around reading for class or school purpose or religious purposes. Reading books and magazines for leisure seems to be an exception rather than the norm. Newspapers and magazines do not seem to be available in the Baba area. Some women who I interviewed during evaluation told me that they now write letters to their family abroad I did not observe such events in the village.

Further research could shed some light in potential changes in the reading and writing practices of those borrowing books from the library. Who are they? How did they learn? How often do they borrow books? What are the subjects they enjoy reading most about?

In the near future Boloch-e-Ahengar will have improved communications with the outside through the introduction of mobile phones. While there are satellite phones already with mainly the hawala and used by those with sons, husbands or father abroad calls are almost always initiated by those abroad. Mobile phone access might introduce
a new practices that requires literacy to some extent. Literacy programs might benefit from looking at how technology might feed into a literacy course.

It is my strong belief that creating a literate population as advocated by the present government requires more than a literacy class. It requires creating a culture that sees value in the use of reading and writing. The introduction of various forms during the project cycle that have to be filled out by community councils under the National Solidarity Program might in some ways influence how literacy practices further evolve.
Chapter 7 - Conclusions

If you assume that there is no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, that there are opportunities to change things, there is a possibility that you can contribute to making a better world. That's your choice. 
Noam Chomsky

The analysis of key documents has made me aware of the hidden assumptions we often take for granted. My analysis involved a personal process of moving from a position of ignorance to one of critical awareness of the work I am doing.

I believe that ethnographic accounts can enhance the planning and design process of literacy interventions and can have significant practical implications for those involved in literacy programs.

Exploring further research possibilities

My project looked at the underpinning ideologies of development in policy papers of donors, more concretely USAID. While this analysis has been a starting point for me I began to see the benefits of such an analysis. However, I propose that such an analysis should be done in a way that not only is a text analysis but takes into consideration the effects such text has on people engaged with it – a type of ethnography.

Research, for example, could be done to further analyze what development ideas are rooted in the Learning for Life curriculum. Where do they come from and how are they perceived, challenged or resisted by participants and facilitators?
For example, I observed how a class activity on the issue of monthly menstruation process was affecting learners in different ways. From the reaction of the women, I certainly realized that this is a topic not usually discussed in a public forum even when only women are present. In particular the younger women showed strong feelings of shame and shyness. The older women after some encouragement from Khadija began to engage in the discussion, while the younger women would either hide behind their veils or not make eye contact with anyone. When Khadija moved them into smaller groups the discussion would still be very subdued but there at least were some discussions. When the same topic was continued a couple of days later I observed similar reactions.

Throughout the class I was impressed with how Khadija facilitated the class. She is of the same age or even a little younger as most of the participants. I never saw her giggle once; she showed confidence and courage while addressing this topic. After class, Khadija, her mother and I were alone in the room and the topic of menstruation came up again. I had asked both if they experienced pain during their monthly cycle and Gulbegum replied “sometimes”. Khadija first did not respond and so I looked at her and repeated my question. Her facial expression suddenly changed and she started trembling. Then she quietly looked at me and said “I don’t have my period”. Days earlier when she was preparing her lesson on the subject I was watching what she was doing and we started talking. She then told me privately that her mother never talked to her about the period. “So what did you do when you had your first period?” I had asked. And she explained that prior to her first time she had heard her friends talk about it. It was her friends that knew from other friends. However, I found out that mothers do not usually tell their daughters. Khadija’s reaction was closely linked to her mother being in the
room. It would be interesting to explore why mothers do not tell their daughters. What effect does our trying to encourage a public discussion in the class on a subject like this? I wondered. I believe that understanding current health practices among women and in relationship to men might shed some light into understanding why certain health behaviors have persisted. Is this information critical if we hope to enrich how health could be taught more effectively?

Another example of potential research is to analyze the current LFL health curriculum and to explore health practices of women. What can we learn from traditional practices that could be woven into the health materials?

An example of this kind of practice is the following observation I made at home. The father returned from work one afternoon and had a cut in his hand. He asked Khadija to bring "...". I became curious to see how he would treat the wound and if the family actually used what has been suggested in the LFL health material. Khadija returned a couple of minutes later bringing something that looked like chewing gum but much darker. The father took it and pressed it between his fingers a couple of times. Then he spit on it and rubbed a little more-before putting it on his wound. Khadija brought out a small piece of cloth and they covered the wound. The father looked at me and said grinning: "I know what you think. We should use water and then clean it with alcohol and then cover the wound with a clean cloth. But this stuff here works magic; people prefer it to your way. It's from a plant that grows everywhere around here."

Khadija nodded in agreement.

I believe that learning about their local health practices might be as enriching for us as are some of our messages about health to them.
Another example that might contribute to a rich literacy program is to increase local reading resources. While I did not observe it in Boloch-e-Ahengar I heard it was happening in other provinces. Women like to get together for religious purposes. One could study if and where that is happening. Then it would move further in how it developed and how it is organized.

The issue of the language of instruction for a literacy programs is another area that needs further investigation. Attention needs to be paid to the local situation and needs, not just be a matter of implementing Western policies encouraging the teaching of mother tongue.

In summary, taking an ethnographic approach has allowed me to step back from some commonly held assumptions about the educational aims and agendas of planners and policy makers. As planners and policy makers we can no longer assume that literacy programs are in the best educational and social interest of the ‘recipients’ and that Western advocated teaching methods are the most effective and successful in all contexts.

**Linking ethnographic research to planning and policy**

From a practitioner’s point I see great benefits in my having a better understanding of the literacy and numeracy practices in the context of Afghanistan. Having been involved in evaluating Learning for Life I have been frustrated at times with how responses from learners and others affected by our program are interpreted.
For example, we asked women what they have used from what they learned trying to find out what components of the curriculum they felt was useful to their lives. The majority of women responded that for them the hygiene instructions were the most useful. When asked to tell us what they mean by that many would answer “since I have been in the class I am keeping my house cleaner. I change my clothes more often and I wash myself everyday”. I found these answers in the text of the health books provided for the learner. They had simply answered what I wanted to hear. During my stay in the host family I did not shower everyday because there was simply not enough firewood and with having to carry buckets of water back and forth Gulghorai and her sisters defined how much water was for cooking and how much could be used for bathing. This small example shows two issues here, one that shows the limitation of evaluation whereby answers from interviews are perceived as truth, without triangulating the answers through other methods such as observations, etc.\textsuperscript{10}

While I strongly support the notion that there should be ways in which ethnographic tools could be incorporated into the planning and implementation process I am also aware of the current funding mechanisms that often shape how plans are made and proposals are designed.

Many funding agencies do not allow proposals to contain studies of this type. Ethnography also requires time and energy in many more than the one context I described here because the very idea of ethnography is that they are context specific and not to be taken as universal concepts that can be applied to other contexts. Ethnography also

\textsuperscript{10} An excellent example related to this is Fiedrich’s chapter on a case study of REFLECT in Uganda (in: Robsinon-Pant, 2004, p. 219)
requires different knowledge, attitudes and skills than tools like participatory rural appraisal (PRA) or surveys.

Nevertheless observations and interviews conducted informally by field staff during their daily work can enrich planning and improve the implementation processes.

I would like to end with Jain who in one of her essays, *Engendering: New Visions of Gender* proposed a way very similar to that which I have presented here. It is by no means an easy way because it involves:

*unlearning many of the assumptions, stereotypes and biases around gender [and literacy] that plague today's education and development discourses. This unlearning can be carried out in a number of ways: by engaging with the excellent existing research that demonstrates the real impacts of education and development on women, by pursuing a research-for-action agenda that seeks to more deeply understand local conceptions of equality, power, and identity; and by meeting 'ordinary women from a position of humility, with the active desire to learn from and with them about their realities on their term.*

(Jain, 2001, p. 92)
Learning for Life
Detailed Project Background

In May 2004, USAID contracted Management Sciences for Health (MSH) to improve access to basic health services and to strengthen Afghanistan’s health services. The goal of Rural Expansion of Afghanistan’s Community-based Healthcare (REACH) program is to improve Afghan maternal and child health, focusing on the health of women of reproductive age and children under five years. The REACH program is ensuring that an estimated 7.1 million people throughout Afghanistan have access to a basic package of health services and focuses on the delivery of crucial health services to Afghans in rural and underserved provinces. One of the many areas REACH is involved in is to train medical staff in particular community health workers, community midwives and midwives. In rural areas where Afghanistan’s literacy rate is an estimated 21%, MSH was challenged with recruiting rural women with any formal schooling background. Subsequently, USAID was approached and agreed to add further funds to a program through which the number of women able to read and write would increase. In April 2004, the Center of International Education (CIE) at the University of Massachusetts (UMASS) in partnership with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) was awarded the contract for a health-focused literacy program by MSH.

LFL was implemented in phases, starting with classes in two of the 12 provinces in December 2004 through September 2005 (Kabul & Herat provinces), and then continued in five other provinces in June and another five provinces in July 2005. Classes finished in Kabul and Herat at the end of September 2005 and in the remaining ten provinces by the end of February or March 2006. The LFL project was officially closed in April 2006.

Classes were offered for different entry levels of learners:

1. Foundation classes Level 1 (grade 1 to 3 equivalency) for non-literate, neo-literate and women with up to 2nd grade education;
2. Foundation classes Level 2 (grade 4 to 6 equivalency) for women grades 3 and higher education
3. Bridging classes for women with grades 6 and higher education.

Literacy classes were implemented either through the International Rescue Committee (IRC), an international non-governmental organization (NGO), or local NGOs with prior experience either in adult literacy, education, health or the target geographical areas. Classes in three out of twelve provinces were implemented directly by IRC while seven different partners ran classes across the remaining nine provinces (see province and organization’s name in table 1).

LFL classes usually ran for 2.5 hours a day at times agreed by the participants and facilitator for six days a week for about 9 months for foundation and 6 months for bridging learners. A facilitator from the village was selected jointly by the community and LFL, and then tested and trained through LFL. The majority of facilitators had completed secondary education with some facilitators having lower and some higher than

---

11 LFL worked in the following provinces: Kabul, Ghazni, Paktya, Paktika, Herat, Faryab, Jawzjan, Baghlan, Takhar, Badakshan, Bamyan, Khost
secondary education. Few facilitators were teachers from public primary or secondary schools. Many facilitators were themselves still students in secondary or high schools.

All of the participants were women, usually above the age of 18, however we also found many students below the minimum age. LFL set the maximum number of participants at 25 to ensure quality. In some provinces though the demand was higher and initially more than 25 women enrolled. Table 1 shows enrollment rates for foundation classes while Table 2 provides enrollment data for bridging classes.

Table 1: Enrolment rates in Foundation classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Total Learners</th>
<th>Total Classes/Villages</th>
<th>Implementing Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Badakhshan</td>
<td>503</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>JACK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Baghlan</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>JACK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bamyan</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>FG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Faryab</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>PSD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ghazni</td>
<td>1,029</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>SDF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Herat</td>
<td>608</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>IRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jawzjan</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>CoAR/STARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kabul</td>
<td>684</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>IRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Khost</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>AHDO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Paktika</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>AWEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Paktya</td>
<td>581</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>IRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Takhar</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>JACK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8,061</td>
<td>361</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Enrollment rates in Bridging classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Total Learners</th>
<th>Total Classes</th>
<th>Implementing Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Badakhshan</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>JACK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bamyan</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>FG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jawzjan</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>CoAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Khost</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>AHDO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Paktya</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>IRC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Takhar</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>JACK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>536</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 provides learner entry levels showing that more than 75% of all participants were non-literate. However, wherever I visited classes many women told me that they had previously taken part in a non-formal literacy class run by another agencies or had

---

12 Partner organizations’ names are abbreviated; their definition can be found in the list of abbreviation at the beginning of this study.
received some basic education (reading, writing, reciting religious text) through religious
institutions; i.e. mosques.

Table 3: Entry levels of LFL participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Total Years of Education completed in school</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Illiterate 1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Badakhshan</td>
<td>42 142 58 63 42 59 97</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Baghlan</td>
<td>483 50 50 26 3 10 3</td>
<td>625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bamyan</td>
<td>589 0 0 0 0 0 0</td>
<td>589</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Faryab</td>
<td>672 28 15 7 9 2 2</td>
<td>735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ghazni</td>
<td>712 30 90 94 64 21 18</td>
<td>1,029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Herat</td>
<td>136 168 101 105 62 27 9</td>
<td>608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jawzjan</td>
<td>580 12 19 32 19 14 46</td>
<td>722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Kabul</td>
<td>600 4 25 41 14 0 0</td>
<td>684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Khost</td>
<td>731 3 4 0 0 0 0</td>
<td>748</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Paktika</td>
<td>568 5 5 3 6 4 6</td>
<td>597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Paktya</td>
<td>533 0 11 17 4 2 14</td>
<td>581</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Takhar</td>
<td>413 68 83 52 18 6 0</td>
<td>640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>6,059 510 461 440 241 145 205</td>
<td>8,061</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The facilitator received a set of instructional material comprising several books covering
four main subjects: Math, Language (Dari or Pashto), Religion and Health for Foundation
classes and four main subjects: Math, Language, Communication / Social Studies and
Health for Bridging classes. The facilitator subject books provided sequenced activities
for a particular milestone. Milestones for each domain were developed closely following
the competencies model of primary education.

Facilitators had milestone progress cards to regularly mark a students’ progress. Ideally
learners were given progress cards at the beginning of each class.

Each province in which LFL was implemented had a team of trainers\textsuperscript{13}, community
mobilizers\textsuperscript{14}, a manager, and some administrative support staff. While each of the staff
had important roles to fulfill I like to highlight the role of the provincial trainer. It is
important to note that the trainers and facilitators were all women due to the perceived
ultural constraints separating women and men. Only in exceptional cases are men
allowed to teach women. One of the provincial trainer’s tasks was to train local
facilitators however that was more often done by the centralized master trainers in Kabul.
The more important task of the provincial trainer was the close in-service support to
facilitators. To highlight an example, a provincial trainer visited a facilitator at least two
times a month and offer, where and when necessary, technical support to strengthen the
role of the facilitator. The provincial trainer was further tasked to collect monthly

\textsuperscript{13} One provincial trainer is usually responsible for about ten classes and all trainers are female.

\textsuperscript{14} The majority of community mobilizers are men and the number of community mobilizers depends on
average on the total number of provincial trainers per province.
attendance data and ‘milestone’ progress reports, as well as write-up personal observations and interview notes that she would have conducted with participants and facilitators. Then, the provincial manager was to consolidate all milestone reports and sent them to the LFL main office in Kabul.

The evaluation has shown that Learning for Life reached its objective by enrolling more learners than it was contracted to do. Over 90% of all level 1 learners tested passed the test and received official Ministry of Education Grade 3 equivalency certificates. Over 90% of level 2 learners tested also passed level 2 equivalency. While the test is not officially recognized by the Ministry of Education learners were informed that they could take part in the provincial testing of 6th grade. No tests were administered to Bridging learners. However, it is worth mentioning, that the majority of learners, according to the evaluation and final report, did not complete all of the milestones. Nine or six months seemed too short to complete the wealth of instructional activities.
Reference List


