

Transferring Cultural Knowledge and Skills: Afghan Teachers for Afghan Students in Montreal

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Abstract

This article describes the experiences and perceptions of a small group of Afghan women teachers who have set up a small community school for Afghan children in Montreal. It situates the work that they are doing in the context of knowledge transfer and of social capital building in a diasporic context and discusses this heritage education program in relation to transnational processes of living and learning in multiple sites. The women, who were all teachers in Afghanistan, experienced conflict and a political situation which ultimately forced them to leave their homes; as immigrants to Canada they experience the multiple challenges of individual and family integration. However, as volunteer community teachers, they have strong ideas about the work they do and a strong sense of purpose to it; they use their own professional understandings and skills to transmit the cultural knowledge and language skills which they believe are important for young Afghan Canadians and their families in Montreal.

Résumé

L'article décrit les expériences et les perceptions d'un petit groupe d'enseignantes afghanes qui a mis sur pied une petite école communautaire pour les enfants afghans à Montréal. Il situe le travail qu'elles font dans le cadre du transfert de connaissances et de l'investissement social, dans le contexte de la diaspora, et met ce programme d'éducation sur le patrimoine en rapport avec les processus transnationaux de vie et d'apprentissage dans des endroits variés. Les enseignantes, œuvrant toutes en Afghanistan, vivent des conflits et une situation politique

qui finit par les forcer à quitter leur patrie. En tant qu'immigrantes au Canada, elles font face à de nombreux défis relativement à l'intégration individuelle et familiale. Toutefois, comme enseignantes communautaires bénévoles, elles ont une opinion définie sur le travail qu'elles font et visent des buts bien précis. Elles se servent de leurs propres connaissances et compétences professionnelles pour transmettre le savoir culturel et les habiletés langagières qu'elles jugent nécessaires aux jeunes Canadiens afghans et à leur famille à Montréal.

Introduction

Since it opened on October 18th, 2003, a new Dari language and culture program for Afghan children living on the Island of Montreal has enrolled over thirty children. These young Afghan Canadians spend from 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. every Saturday in the classes which are held at an inner-city primary school and are taught by two Afghan women teachers. Other students, who live on the South Shore of Montreal, have been attending similar classes since December 2002. This article describes the experiences and perceptions of the small group of Afghan women teachers who have initiated and developed this program as an initiative of the Afghan Women's Association in Montreal. An introductory section of the article introduces the school and describes the student and teacher population. This is followed by a discussion of the teachers' own experiences, their perceptions of the knowledge transfer processes they are engaged in, of what is important for them to teach the students and why. This data is collected from a series of informal visits to the school, from a group discussion, and then from a follow-up, in-depth interview with the school

director. The women talk about the importance of mother tongue instruction, and of the development of *tarbia*, which is a particularly significant Afghan concept that refers to good manners and proper development of a child. The article concludes with some thoughts on the multi-levelled benefits of this program, and some recommendations for further research and policy development.

A Community School for Young Afghan Canadians

According to the Statistics Canada census of 2001, there are approximately 2,900 people of Afghan origin living in Montreal. This population is relatively spread out, with families in Park Extension, Côte des Neiges, and also further east on Henri Bourassa. There is also a concentration of Afghan Canadians on the South Shore. The relatively small numbers mean that there are few services specifically for Afghans. For example, Afghans have no special mosque in Montreal, but will attend with other Muslims from other countries. The Afghan Women's Association is a new initiative aimed to provide specific information and services, in Dari and Pashto, to women in Montreal; Afghan women are welcomed to the South Asia Women's Community Centre, but financial restrictions mean there are limited services specifically for them.

The "Afghan school" is a project of the Afghan Women's Association, and was initiated by the director and founder of the association, Makai Aref. There are the thirty children enrolled in the Montreal class and there are approximately fifty students enrolled in the three-hour program which takes place every Sunday during the school term in a classroom at a local Islamic centre in Brossard, on the South Shore. Both classes comprise a special program of Dari language and Afghan culture, with some Koranic instruction. The program has been developed by the teachers and the director, based on a small selection of materials, originally from Afghanistan and Iran.

As a result of the immigration and education laws in Quebec, the students who attend the program are all attending French schools in Montreal; in fact outside of the class time, most of them chat to each other in French. They are aged between 6 and 15, with most in the upper primary grades, and the classes include several brothers and sisters from the same family. Even outside these family groups, many of the students know each other and their families very well as, living in a certain few neighbourhoods, they may attend the same school, the same mosque, and the same cultural, community events. Some of the families know each other from Kabul or other places of origin in Afghanistan, and family, clan, and regional networks and ties continue to play an important part in their Montreal

lives. The students have a variety of immigration stories themselves; some were born in Montreal to parents who left Afghanistan in the 1990s, others remember their early years in Afghanistan, and many have memories of refugee life and schooling in Iran or in Pakistan.

The Teachers

This education program in the two sites depends on four women teachers who give up their Saturdays and/or Sundays to teach these students; this is in addition to the time, effort, and energy of the director who handles all the administrative work, including recruitment and registration, and negotiation with the school board and the mosque for the space. Two of the teachers, Amina and Mariam, teach in both classes, travelling from their homes on the South Shore to the inner city school each Saturday. Discussions with them and with their colleague Rozia, as well as with the director of the program, provide insights into the background knowledge, perceptions, and priorities these teachers bring to their work with the students in Montreal.

All four of the women were trained and experienced teachers in Afghanistan. Rozia, for example, taught for twenty-five years, having completed a two-year training at a teacher training college. She specialized in Dari and in maths, and came to love her work, saying how it made her happy that her students "became good people for society." Having said this, teaching was not her first choice of career; after high school she was desperate to be a doctor, and when her grandfather refused to allow this, she cried "for three months" until she was eventually allowed to go to teacher training college.

Amina married young, straight out of high school, and although she too wanted to continue her university studies, her husband's family was not keen on the idea, and so instead she became a teacher. Through high school she had already been volunteering as a teacher, so she knew what she was getting into. What she was not prepared to deal with, however, was the shock and distress of the children when conflict broke out and the shelling of Kabul started, with rockets falling around the school. Amina explains how she tried to keep the children calm and concentrated on their studies, telling them that this was the most important thing to do. One day, however, a rocket landed in the school grounds causing destruction, chaos, and distress. It was a real shock for all the students and their parents, and the building was so badly damaged that the school then had to close. After that incident, her family were reluctant for her to return to work; by now she had five children of her own, so she stayed at home with them.

Mariam too was married soon after she graduated from high school, but she continued on to university, studying

part time in the faculty of literature, whilst at the same time looking after her three children. She had always wanted to be a journalist, but it was her own children who wanted her to become a teacher and persuaded her to apply to different schools. With no pre-service training, she was able to accumulate experience on the job and to upgrade her skills through some in-service training opportunities. Through her fifteen years of service she moved through different grades, and was very satisfied by her experience: "I felt very happy with the children—they were like a family—and we had a good atmosphere. I was giving a training to the children and sharing what I had learned. They were very happy to have a good relationship with their teacher."

Makai, the director of the program and of the Afghan Women's Association, was also an experienced teacher in Afghanistan. She went to teacher training college followed by Kabul University, before teaching for about twenty years. Most of these years were spent in one particular school, teaching maths and physics, before she came to be the vice-principal. From this experience she was asked by the Ministry of Education to start a girls' school outside of the city, something she worked hard on until the project was affected by political issues and she was sent back to the ministry in Kabul. She wasn't there for long though, before she was sent out again to develop another girls' school. She did see that project come to fruition, and spent two years as principal before she was asked to move to the government agency for women's affairs. This turned out to be a very exciting career development as she was responsible for mobilizing, training, and supporting women's groups rights across the country. Makai's particular issue was domestic violence, which the social work qualification she had also completed enabled her to work on. This came to an end, though, with the arrival of the mujahadeen in Kabul. They took over the office and all the agency's activities had to cease. It was at this point that Makai and her husband made the decision to leave Afghanistan, firstly to join their daughter studying in St. Petersburg, but eventually moving to Almaty in Kazakhstan.

When the teachers left Afghanistan and became refugees themselves, all four continued to teach and to be involved in community activities. Rozia taught in an NGO school for refugee children in Peshawar, Pakistan, and Amina taught for five years in Delhi, India. She was teaching girls in her own home and, like Rozia, for no salary at all. Mariam, too, continued to teach, but in a private school in Pakistan. They talk about the challenges of teaching in such circumstances, where the children as well as their parents are tense, where everyone is only thinking about leaving, and where for the teachers, the lack of salary makes it hard to maintain energy

and enthusiasm. In the camps in Pakistan this was especially challenging; the heat was almost unbearable, and the school had no supplies or even seats for the students. As Rozia says, the most important aspects of her job at that time were to convince the students that they do have a future, and to keep them as relaxed as possible in the circumstances. Makai was so concerned about the poor conditions for Afghan refugees in Almaty that she set up an NGO that grew into a large organization with multiple projects, including a school, and a privileged relationship with the Azeri Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Common to these women's experience of teaching is coming to it first as a compromise. Despite other desires and dreams, teaching is a career that is acceptable to their families and at least relatively compatible with household chores and child care. However, although they may not have chosen the profession, they have come to appreciate the difference that they do make for the students they work with, and this is perhaps especially so in exile. In a context such as Afghanistan where the possibilities for women to work outside the home and to exert agency in the public realm are relatively limited, teaching is an acceptable way of doing so. This brings with it an obvious personal satisfaction, and a sense of commitment to the profession develops, meaning that even as refugees themselves the women continue to teach in order to do what they can to improve the lives of the children.

Mother Tongue Instruction in the Diasporic Context

Once they are resettled in Canada, the context is quite different, but the women's commitment to teaching Afghan children is equally strong, if not even stronger. There are multiple barriers to their being accepted as qualified teachers by the Ministry of Quebec. These are primarily language, but also official certificates, as well as the fact that they have families to care for and a heavy load of household and child-care responsibilities. Teaching the Afghan children within their community both Dari language and Afghan culture is clearly very important to them on a number of different levels, and they articulate why providing the program is so important.

Although the students chat amongst themselves in French, there is a clear interest in their Dari language program; hands are enthusiastically raised to answer different questions, or to volunteer to read from their copies. Writing on the blackboard is particularly popular, and the students especially like to practice forming and then reading the different letters and sounds they are learning. Most of the students speak their mother tongue fluently, using it at home in everyday conversation with their family and

other community members. However, reading and writing require more concerted attention and instruction. Research shows that a strong grounding in their own first language and culture supports immigrant children's integration into a new community and promotes their personal and academic development. Especially in Quebec, where fluency in both English and French is increasingly required of young people, as Amina explains, "You really need a strong mother tongue in Quebec." But this is not only for reasons of cognitive development.

The teachers talk about how the parents are keen for their children to develop the mother tongue language skills. They see that fluency in Dari is needed for the students to be able to communicate well with their parents and with their community. As one of the teachers explained, "They need to have the same language to have a relationship with them." The students also need to be able to read and write Dari to be able to communicate with family members back in Afghanistan; they mention the traditional form of correspondence—letter writing—as well as the increasingly popular form of communication, e-mail. With the fall of the Taliban, although conditions in Afghanistan are still not easy, the teachers also imagine that some of the students will at some stage want to return to their home country, either for a holiday or maybe to stay. According to Amina, this fluent knowledge of their mother tongue, in-depth communication with their family, and a possible return to Afghanistan are all parts of "knowing their story," which is an important aspect of growing up in a diasporic context. The children apparently want to know "where they come from and where their parents came from," and learning Dari is an important means to accessing this cultural knowledge.

Cultural Knowledge Transfer

At the same time, as teaching Dari, the Afghan school program also has a strong component of explicit instruction in Afghan culture. *Tarbia* is a very important concept for Afghan children and their parents, and therefore also for educators. It is a term that the teachers want to use frequently to describe their work, but find it very difficult to translate. According to Save the Children, there are four especially important aspects of good *tarbia*: good and clean language, respect for elders and parents, bodily cleanliness, and hospitality.¹ Children who have *tarbia* are polite, obedient, respectful, sociable, and peaceful. They know how to eat, sit, dress, and pray properly. They do not fight unnecessarily and they do as their parents suggest. In contrast, children with bad *tarbia*, ("be *tarbia*" or "without *tarbia*") are rude, antisocial, and argumentative. Instruction relating to *tarbia*—to good manners and appropriate behaviour—was important to the teachers when they started out teaching in Kabul, and all

three teachers assert the importance of teaching children far more than academic subjects. *Tarbia* is equally important, but with different dimensions, here in Montreal. The teachers see their role as preserving the cultural traditions, mores, and values of Afghan cultural, but at the same time helping the children to understand and effectively negotiate the differences between the cultural traditions and expectations of their parents and other family members, and those of their teachers and non-Afghan peers. "They need to know how things are different, but be able to take the best of both," says Rozia.

One of the cornerstones of *tarbia* is the respect that is accorded to teachers and the value that is placed on the teachers' advice. As the teachers laugh, when they were teaching in Kabul, parents would comment how much their children listened to them, and how they took far more notice of the teacher than of their own parents. Interestingly, women see it as important to perpetuate this respect and to continue to instill it in their students, whilst at the same time they use this very respect and receptivity on the part of their students to provide guidance on how to understand and cope with what must often be perceived as "*be tarbia*" Canadian children and behaviours. I am told, "In Afghanistan teachers have lots of respect, but here it is very different." Makai explains that the students ask why their Afghan education is so "closed" compared to their Montreal school which is so "open." They want to know why they have different rules and limits placed on them than their Canadian friends. Answering such questions is challenging for the teachers, especially as the resources they work with—the story books from Afghanistan that contain *tarbia*-related stories—do not relate well to the students' experiences in Montreal; they don't understand, for example, the references made to farming and to rural life. As the women explain, they then have to find their own examples from the children's lives here which would help them to make sense of what *tarbia* demands of them. Furthermore, Makai recognizes that in contrast to the usual teaching methods in Afghanistan, the diasporic children expect and need more active learning activities—and especially so on a Saturday morning. According to Amina, it is important for children of all ages to have limitations and for them to know these. She and her colleagues encourage the students to respect the limitations they are given, not to be late home, and especially not to keep secrets from parents, but to talk to them openly. They encourage them to "take the middle ground" by enjoying the opportunities they have here in Montreal, but at the same time "not going the wrong way"—not smoking, drinking, and disobeying parents, for example. "Teachers have to give ad-

vice on how to make good friends and how to be a good person,” says Makai.

Whilst *tarbia* is obviously important for the children to be successful within their Afghan cultural context, Makai, the director, also makes a concrete link between *tarbia* and successful integration into Canada. Children showing *tarbia* will be good, positive people, and as she says, “It is important to have positive people for Canada.” But in addition to helping the students manage their immediate family relationships and to contribute to the future of their adopted home, the teachers also see that providing a good grounding and understanding of *tarbia* is critical for the students if they choose to return to Afghanistan at any time. They will need to understand how to talk to elders, for example, and to know what is expected on them. According to the teachers, the parents show commitment to sharing with their children important aspects of their culture—in fact, Makai believes that for them culture is more important than language; just enrolling their children in the program, paying the nominal fees, and ensuring they are dropped off and picked up is a considerable commitment in itself. However, immigrant parents, many of whom experience considerable financial, identity, and other challenges in resettlement contexts, have few resources to do so. They often lack the time and/or the ability to discuss and reason with their children about what *tarbia* implies for, and demands of, young Afghan Canadians. This makes the role of the teachers even more critical than in the home-country context, and yet, as is so often the case in community-based, non-formal education systems, the teachers have to content themselves—and their families—with non-financial compensation for their time, effort and commitment.

Some Concluding Thoughts

From the data presented above we can see that the teachers and the families involved see this opportunity for supplementary instruction in Dari and in Afghan culture as critical for the young students. Not only does it help them in their immediate family relationships, but it can also allow them to participate in transglobal knowledge and family networks, through a common medium of intertwined language and cultural values. The teachers shift their teaching styles and the content of their lessons to attempt to meet the needs and ensure the students gain the most appropriate knowledge for their diasporic context. It is quite different to the contexts for which some of them were originally trained, but their many years of experience and their in-depth understanding of child development from an Afghan cultural perspective allow them to adapt their methods and the content. The challenge of doing so is obviously one that

nonetheless brings a certain amount of satisfaction to the women and allows them to feel that they are making a contribution to their cultural community and to their adopted community. Furthermore, participating in the education programs allows the teachers to further their own engagement in transglobal networks. They know some of the students’ families from their days in Kabul, and in fact over twenty years ago, Amina was a student of Makai’s in the Kabul high school in which she taught.

This exploratory investigation into the experiences and perceptions of a small group of Afghan women teachers who have set up a small community school for Afghan children in Montreal has certainly raised a number of points for further, more in-depth consideration, and for further work with the teachers, but also with the students and their parents. It would also be worthwhile to conduct a comparative study of Afghan students who do not attend the program in order to identify specific attributes of it, and to find out more about the processes of production and reproduction of *tarbia*-related knowledge in the diasporic context. How important is this for the children themselves? For those who do not attend the program, what are alternative sources of this knowledge?

At a more pragmatic level, there is an advocacy agenda to be built for increased municipal, provincial, and federal funding for heritage language and culture programs. In Quebec, a Programme d’Enseignement de Langues d’Origines (PELO) does exist, but to qualify for a school-board-funded teacher to provide one hour a week of language instruction either at lunch time or after school require the demand of at least twenty children in any one school. This program certainly has its limitations, not least of which is the fact that funding has been capped for a number of years now, and for a new class to open now requires one to close. Furthermore, the PELO programs are very much run by the school board. There is no prescribed curriculum, but neither is there much room for community involvement in the program. Outside of this, however, the funding possibilities for such a community school are very limited. The program costs families \$10 per child per month, with a reduction to \$15 per family for two children. This amount at least covers some of the operating costs of the school (including some resources such as photocopies and some compensation for the teachers’ travel costs); however, it does not allow for any extra teaching resources or any compensation for the teachers’ time. Therefore, additional funding is constantly being sought to enable the teachers and the school director to develop the program, and to reach out to Afghan community members who are as yet not involved.

Note

1. Save the Children, *The Children of Kabul* (Kabul/ Westport: Save the Children, 2003).

Jackie Kirk, Ph.D., is a Research Associate of the McGill Centre for Research and Teaching on Women, where her research focuses on gender, education, and conflict; she has been a friend of the Afghan school in Montreal since its opening. Last year

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