Drop by Drop, a River is Formed: Community and Education in Kabul, Afghanistan

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Dedication

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

Up on the hill that overlooks the valley where my parents grew up in Logar, Afghanistan, there is a cemetery, a newly-constructed military base, and a three-story school—in that order. I saw her there, on her way to school. A little girl, maybe seven or eight, wearing a bright green sequin dress and a chiffon green scarf with green embroidered flowers. A book in her hand, she sparkled against the dust rising from the unpaved road that students, workers, and mullahs take every morning to school, work, and mosque.

When one visits Afghanistan what you notice is the dust, the sticky dust that clings to your skin and seeps in through the windows. It intensifies during periods of droughts, which are becoming more common. You notice the endless layers of massive, arid, gray mountains, the lack of trees and water in Kabul, and the helicopters flying overhead, sometimes north, but mostly south. If you stay for a little, you might witness the girl in the green, dazzling dress appear out of the clouds of dust. But you might not understand her joy, her excitement to wake up in the morning, wear her clean, shimmering dress and matching scarf, and walk to school. I have been blessed to have many people throughout my life who have taught me to see the beauty beyond the dust.

I dedicate this work to my grandfather in whose arms I spent the first years of my life in a refugee camp, whose love and attention planted a seed in me to always question the representation of Afghan men and women in popular discourse in my new home on the other side of the world; to my parents who kept taking us back to that valley in Logar

and to Kabul, where so many of our relatives now live, so that we could connect to our *watan,* so that we could experience the love of a welcoming and warm home; and finally, to the teachers and students at Roshan Street who opened a greater window into Afghanistan, where my knowledge and experiences are not only connected to my own family but also to many other families from across the country who seek a better future for their children and their homeland.

"My Lord, increase me in knowledge."
[Qur'an 20:114]

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Abstract

Community is typically approached as either an obstacle or an asset in education. The history of Afghanistan includes periods of educational policies designed to limit community involvement and redefine social norms. More recently, with increased international involvement in education, community structures and resources have been leveraged to support education. Both approaches are based in static conceptualizations of community.

Drawing on ethnography, portraiture, and case study, this dissertation examines the relationship between community and education through a process approach, which recognizes the dynamic nature of social relations and identity. I explore the perspectives and experiences of teachers, students, and school community members in one community-based school in the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan, searching for what community means in a context of insecurity and displacement and with national and global involvement in education. My findings show that there is a transformational and reciprocal relationship between community and education. Three mechanisms—trust, belonging, and relationships—explain these connections between community and education. As educational opportunities open and strengthen, new layers of community emerge and strengthen, and vice versa. In this equation, quality of learning, one of these educational opportunities, creates greater possibilities for long-term sustainability of educational gains.

Glossary

ADAB: "A system of moral conduct" (Abdugafurova, 2018, p. 215).
AFAREEN: Good job!
AFGHANIYAT: Afghan-ness or the way of being Afghan.
AKHLAQ: Character, nature, or disposition**.**
ASALAMU ALAIKUM: A common Muslim greeting that translates to "Peace be upon you."
ASALAMU ALAIKUM WA RAHMATULLAHI WA BARAKATU: May the peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be with you.
ATRAAF: Periphery/rural.
AZAN: Call to prayer.
BACHEM: My child.
DAESH: The Arabic acronym for ISIS, which sounds similar to word "bigot" in Arabic and is used by Muslims in place of Islamic State to condemn the groups' violent actions.
DARAJAT: Degrees.
DARI/FARSI: Formally called, Farsi-e Dari, Dari is one of the official languages of Afghanistan. Often referred to as Farsi by locals.
HADEES (Hadith in Arabic): **"**A collection of traditions containing sayings of the prophet Muhammad which, with accounts of his daily practice (the Sunnah), constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the Qur'an" (Oxford Dictionary, 2021).
IMAM: Leader, commonly interchangeable with *mullah*.
INSHALLAH: Allah willing.
INQELAB: Revolution.
INSANYAT: The quality of being human.
JIHAD: Literally means "to struggle." In contemporary Afghanistan, it typically refers to the war against the Soviets.
KAKA: Uncle, kind form of address for any non-related, older man.
KAREEM: Noble/generous/honorable.
KHUDA: God.
MADRASSA: Translates to "school" in Arabic. In Afghanistan, it refers to schools that focus on teaching Islamic sciences and can consist of classes at a mosque or separate building.
MAHALI/MAHAL: Place.
MAKTAB: School.
MALIM: Teacher
MARATIB: Levels.
MASJID: Mosque.
MOSSESSA: Establishment; usually refers to NGOs.
MUFTI: A jurist/scholar "capable of giving, when requested, a nonbinding opinion on a point of Islamic law" (Esposito, 2009).
MUJAHIDEEN: One who engages in *jihad*; typically refers to Afghans who fought against the Soviets.
MULLAH: An individual with knowledge of the foundations of Islamic theology, and who serves as a leader in a mosque—leading prayers, giving sermons, and teaching

classes.
NAMUS: Honor.
NANGA: Honor (Pashto).
PARAHAN TOMBAN: Traditional male dress that consists of a long, cotton tunic (*parahan*) and matching loose trousers (*tomban*).
PARCHA: Report card.
PASHTO: One of the official languages of Afghanistan; commonly spoken by the Pashtun ethnic group.
PASHTUN: The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan; often identified by speaking Pashto.
PASHTUNWALI: A code of ethics attributed to the Pashtun ethnic group.
QARI: An individual who can recite the Qur'an with proper pronunciation, typically has the Qur'an memorized, and can lead prayers in a mosque when requested.
REESH SAFAID: Literal meaning is "white beards," refers to elderly men who partake in community decisions.
SAHIB: A polite title or form of address for a man.
SHAHR: City.
SHAMSHAD: Sunshine.
SHAREEF: Noble.
SHARI'AH: Islamic law.
SHURA: Council that typically consists of male representatives from a specific locality that are selected through a consultative process to resolve disputes and represent community interests.
SURAH: Chapter of Qur'an.
TALEEM: Fact-based education.
TARBIA: Proper ethical training.
TILAWAT: Recital; often refers to Qur'an recital.
UMMAH: Islamic conception of community.
USTAD: Literally translates to "master." One who is a master at a particular skill; typically refers to teachers and professors.
WALAIKUMASALAAM: The response *to Asalamu alaikum* which means "and peace be upon you."
WATAN: Homeland, could refer to village/province/country.
WAZIFA: Duty.
WUDU: Ritual puri

Chapter 1: Mahal (Place)

Hay alas-salah, Hay alas-salah	*Come to prayer, Come to prayer*
Hay alal-falah, Hay alal-falah	*Come to success, Come to success*
Asalaatu khairum minanaum	*Prayer is better than sleep*

The *azan* echoes across the valleys in the between the mountains of Kabul at dawn—that time in between the pitch darkness of the night and the first rays of the sun, the time of the first prayer of the day. There isn't one call from one mosque. Every few blocks is a separate mosque and each mosque announces the *azan* for each of the five prayers. Soon enough, the sparrows and doves join the *mullahs* in their song. The lanky aspen trees and the red and pink roses in the courtyards swing in the faint morning breeze, the dew from their leaves dispersing a much-needed fresh moisture into the arid, hot summer air.

I step out onto the cool, white, marble balcony and gaze at the dark silhouettes of the majestic mountain ranges that divide Kabul from the province of Logar. This is southern Kabul, where the new residents outnumber the locals. Most of the residents have come to take refuge from their homes in southern and eastern Afghanistan, some pulled by the prospects of economic opportunity and some pushed by conflict and instability. A third group of migrants consists of repatriated refugees from Pakistan and Iran. It is estimated that the population of Kabul ballooned from 1.5 million after the international intervention of Afghanistan in 2001 to 6 million by 2014 (Rasmussen, 2014). The rumbling, black helicopters that return to Kabul at dawn, disrupting the morning melody, serve as reminders of conflict people left behind, still on-going.

A decade ago the flat-roof dwellings had not reached the hilltops. Today, they are grander and more colorful—three story houses and condos with large balconies and

courtyards. Dotted in between are the old, modest clay houses. To their best effort, families and friends buy or rent homes near each other, clustering and replicating mini-villages. Within these urban villages, the mosque remains the center of the community. Each neighborhood selects a *mullah* through consensus and contributes to the upkeep of the mosque and the salary of the *mullah*. Two primary reasons drive the production of urban villages in southern Kabul: comfort and necessity. Shared sociocultural norms and practices reproduce the comforts of home and enable the preservation of identity. Perhaps more importantly, strong social networks safeguard against the spike in criminal activity in Kabul, ranging from theft and forced entry to kidnapping. While Kabul has become a sanctuary for millions of Afghans, the state has struggled to manage the rapid pace of growth, widening inequality, and criminal activity.

Inevitably, however, in the midst of swift transformation and in pursuit of a living income, sustaining interaction only with kinsmen is no longer possible the way it might have been in the villages that shape the culture and landscape of southern Kabul. Neighbors must join forces to negotiate with provincial reconstruction teams to address persistent power outages, the lack of paved roads, and sewage maintenance. The neighborhood boys from the valley chat on their way to the mountainside to bring fresh drinking water, as population growth has coincided with the contamination of water supplies at the basin. On Friday afternoons, the hillside is speckled with boys and men playing cricket or soccer. Women connect with non-relatives during weddings, funerals, and at the local clinics and bazaars. Whether a sense of solidarity exists is uncertain, but a shared experience of living at the margins close to the nation's capital is undeniable.

About seven miles north along the Kabul-Logar highway, the Qari[1] also wakes up for the morning prayer from the call of the mosque adjacent to his house. A large turquoise, metal gate adorned with two golden hearts on each panel standing in stark contrast with the tan walls, opens into a small concrete-covered courtyard. There are no trees or rose bushes; two red hens brighten the bare yard; a faucet with potable water, a privilege in Kabul, stands in the corner of the yard. His house is composed of five simple rooms, each one with a history. The first room, the newest addition to the house, located to the left of the front gate, is disconnected from the rest of the house. Rusty, brown, metal shelves rest along the wall of the door.

In a few hours, the shelves will be full of children's shoes. Inside is a colorful, lively children's refuge away from the concrete walls and dusty atmosphere. This is one of the classrooms of the community-based school of which the Qari is the head teacher. The walls proudly display a map of Afghanistan in stripes of black, red, and green crayon—the colors of the flag; the letters of the Pashto alphabet along a string; numbers 1 through 100 on individual pastel yellow notecards. Above, sandals made from floral magazine covers and model houses constructed from cardboard boxes hang along the wooden beams of the ceiling from one end of the room to the other. A cobalt blue, plastic mat with red and green flowers and stripes cover the floor. The walls appear to have been painted several coats of white paint but splotches of gray concrete peak through. Next to the front door hangs a small white board, the class schedule, and list of student groups. Across the room, four metal bookcases that create a U along the adjacent walls hold the Qari's books. The only window in the room to the left of the front door is half covered by

[1] Qari is a title for someone who can recite the Qur'an according to the proper rules of recitation. In Afghanistan, it often indicates that the person has also memorized the entire Qur'an.

a white curtain printed with upside down gold and maroon San Francisco 49ers logos. I imagine this curtain was brought to Kabul by an Afghan-American fan from California; a second home for so many Afghans in the diaspora, maybe as a donation, probably by someone who doesn't even know the Qari's family. Because, I imagine that if this person knew the Qari he would have informed him the curtain is hung upside down. Afghanistan's re-entry into the global political economy post-2001 has enabled more Afghans from the diaspora to more regularly visit their homeland, facilitating the flow of American, European, and Asian goods and capital.

Back outside, directly across the front gates is the old and main part of the house that survived the Soviet War and the civil war that forced the Qari's family to flee to Pakistan. There are two rooms on the first floor and two rooms on the second floor. A tattered set of concrete stairs with uneven spacing in between each stair leads to the second floor where the Qari's wife, three young daughters, and three younger sons call home. The rooms downstairs are reserved for the school. The one on the right, directly from the front gate is decorated with peach-colored floral floor cushions and a red Afghan rug and serves as a meeting room for teachers and visitors, such as the *shura* and NGO staff. Next to this room is the second classroom.

A delicate, white lace curtain covers the large window next to entrance. With splotchy, light pink walls and the same cobalt blue plastic mat, this room is more minimal but equally vibrant. Directly in front of the door hangs a whiteboard over a metal chest that contains classroom materials. On each side of the board is a student-created poster: two smiling rabbits on one and trees and fruit on the other. Over the board, from the beams on the ceiling hangs one string of yarn with meticulously placed student artwork

on individual pieces of white paper extending from one wall to the other—a girl in a red dress; a rainbow house; the rest, vases with flowers. The wall to the left of the board displays a black and white cloth poster with the Dari alphabet—Alif, Allah; saad, *sabr* (patience); ayn, *ilm* (knowledge); kaf, *kishwar* (country). Another monochrome cloth poster with numbers one through 100 hangs parallel to the alphabet poster. The wall across displays a multicolor map of Afghanistan and a graphic poster that illustrates the timing of each prayer in relation to the position of the sun in the horizon. In contrast to the energetic, colorful classroom across the yard, this room exudes order and serenity.

These two classrooms constitute the community-based school, or in Dari, *maktab-e mahali*. *Maktab*, a word with Arabic origins, means school in Dari. *Mahali* comes from the word *mahal*, which means place. The term seems appropriate as it centers the importance of place in Afghan individual and community identity formation. Contrary to the focus on ethnic identity in political discourse on Afghanistan, I find that place represents a more salient symbol of identification. Often you will hear Afghans discuss *watan* (homeland), a term connected to the conception of place. To me as an Afghan who grew up in the US, *watan* always referred to Afghanistan, the nation. To my surprise, however, to locals, *watan* has levels and often refers to their town or province of origin. It comes natural to even a child born and raised in Kabul to identify with Paktia, Logar, or Khost—their parents' homeland. I wonder then if ideas of home remain static, ***how is community cultivated in contexts of displacement and change?***

Positioning community in the "city"

7:30am

I sit in the evergreen Corolla and make the journey out of the narrow, unpaved alleys of my relatives' neighborhood to the Kabul-Logar highway, which will take me to the community-based school. One of the arteries that sustains Afghanistan, the highway facilitates the flow of goods and military convoys south to conflict-stricken regions of the country and human capital—businessmen, students, and laborers—north to the city. Each morning, groups of men in suits and traditional garments wait by the side of the highway for transportation to the city in vans and private vehicles; school girls in black knee-length dresses, trousers, and white headscarves and boys in black trousers and blue button-up shirts walk to school along the street; and, once in a while you'll notice a sun-kissed shepherd in faded clothes journeying north as well behind his sheep.

Buildings and stalls, some in old shipping containers, some in remnants of clay structures, and others in newer glass-covered high rises occupy every inch of land on both sides of the street. We pass the local one-room clinic where a gentle, doctor in pastel blue *parahan-tomban*, the traditional dress for men consisting of a matching cotton trouser and long tunic, treats babies suffering from dehydration and women from nutritional deficiencies; produce stalls featuring an array of local fruits and vegetables; bakeries with fresh flat bread and restaurants that serve breakfast; the deafening mechanic shops. And there is always more under construction. The rumbling of generators is occasionally met with 90s Bollywood songs from the restaurants and Islamic hymns from cars. These three seemingly clashing sounds epitomize the central preoccupations of people here—work, religion, and leisure. I close the car window to seek shelter from the dust and smoke.

At the point where the road curves around the bend of the old fort on the hill from the era of British colonial influence, is a bustling town where several streets intersect and join the highway. Signs for private schools and English courses cover the walls of private properties, shops, and electricity polls. The demand for education is evident throughout Kabul. These courses are taken by high school students during the winter break, college students, as well as individuals who are out of the education system. Locals agree that the highest quality English courses are offered in the city.

The hills and valleys of Kabul have witnessed waves of growth and conflict in Afghanistan. In 1992, *mujahideen* political leaders, many of whom who had never stepped foot onto the battlefield against the Soviets, stormed Kabul, fighting for control over the nation's capital and marking the beginning of a civil war that left the city in rubble. Kabul had thus far been insulated from the decade-long war with the Soviet Union that wreaked havoc on the nation's rural and remote areas (Nadiri & Hakimyar, 2018), precipitating a mass exodus of Afghans to Iran and Pakistan. These same families are now returning, voluntarily and forcibly, to the surroundings of Kabul city. The hills of Kabul became the new battleground after the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent cessation of aid to Najibullah's communist government (Barfield, 2012; Shahrani, 2018). While some *mujahideen* political leaders entered the city, others flocked the hills south of Kabul and began shelling the city. Over the course of the next four years, it is estimated that at least 25,000 individuals lost their lives (Barfield, 2012). Amongst them was the Qari's father, a reputable judge and community leader, who biked to the corner of the neighborhood to bring medicine for his daughter but never returned home.

Evidence of ongoing security concerns is present in the midst of development of multi-level hospitals, schools, and private learning centers. Military vehicles and bases throughout the country feature three simple words, painted in red ink—*khuda*, *watan*, *wazifa*—God, country, duty, the motto of the fledgling Afghan National Army. At a checkpoint at the end of the fort town, two police officers check every car that passes. Occasionally, a procession of beige tanks and green trucks full of soldiers entering or leaving Kabul halt traffic altogether. For an outsider, it is difficult to distinguish soldiers from police as they all seem to carry military-grade weapons. For locals, they must reconcile the realities of living in a city with opportunity and one that is becoming more unstable, a city that has offered them refuge but has further isolated their hometowns. One of the clearest signs of who is receiving and who is giving in the current socio-political landscape is the flow of resources north and south. Along the way north, construction teams work on an underground channel that will transport potable water from the southeastern hills to the posh neighborhoods of Wazir Akbar Khan, the center of power and prestige. To the people of the city, southern Kabul is considered *atraaf* (periphery/rural), a pejorative term that perpetuates the boundaries of belonging. *Atraaf*, however, is a relative term that captures distance to the urban center. Thus, southern Kabul might be *atraaf* relative to the city but relative to the neighboring provinces, southern Kabul becomes urban and is simply referred to as Kabul by visitors.

While economic deprivation in relation to the city center is visible, signs of progress and hope inhabit the space. I see dozens of girls mingling outside of the doors of Abdul Hakim High School, a predominately girls' school that provides several daily shifts of grades one through 12. This is the closest public school to the community-based

school and is where students are expected to transition after the community-based school ends. The full length of the highway was not paved a decade ago, and the state has plans now to expand it to better manage traffic congestion.

About a mile north of Abdul Hakim, we make a right turn onto Roshan Street, a brick-covered street with produce stalls on each side. The straight rows of brick that blanket the street might go unnoticed under the one-inch mass of dust on top. The street is lined with small businesses—bakeries, a chips and burger stand, traditional healers. Dump trucks carry sand and stones for new constructions. A little further in, houses with large gates and walled courtyards appear. There are almost no trees on the street. The natives remember when the houses were spaced out, all the neighbors knew each other, and green fields stretched as far as the eye could see. Many of the locals live in the original homes built from clay and bricks with small courtyards; some have renovated their homes. Wealthy economic migrants have erected larger and grander homes from concrete and ceramic tiles with large courtyards. Still others, primarily families who have been displaced by conflict, rent homes. A result of poorly managed urban planning, conflict, and mass migration, there is no attempt to hide inequality in Kabul. In some ways, the homes on this street reflect the beneficiaries and losers of the post-2001 sociopolitical and economic reality.

In between the houses where the street slightly curves, stands a three-story, golden ceramic-tiled mosque, in contrast with the gray, concrete surroundings and dust-covered atmosphere. Little boys wait their turn to fill their yellow buckets with water from the faucet outside the corner of the mosque. Two bearded-elderly men with gray turbans, wearing white *parahan tomban* chat in front of the front door. If you listen

closely, you can hear the voices of boys and girls inside reciting verses of the Qur'an in unison. The mosque serves as a gravitational force that unites this heterogeneous group of native locals and migrants. Next door, little bodies with grins on their faces enter the gates of the Qari's house. "Asalaam alaikum, Ustad!" each student greets me. The barren concrete yard has come to life.

In this dissertation, I explore the experiences and perspectives of teachers, students, and families in one community in the outskirts of Kabul province, examining themes of displacement, insecurity, and new relationships and opportunities in the process of cultivating community. Through the methodologies of ethnography and case study and drawing on principles of portraiture, each chapter weaves individual and communal histories with present contextual conditions, intertwining observation and interview data to construct nuanced understandings of three key concepts connected to the cultivation of community and the strengthening of education: trust, belonging, and relationships. Together, my findings build a portrait of the processes by which teachers, with the help of community and international actors, leverage and build community to support education. The chapters focus on the school while also considering national and international forces that shape local experiences.

I identify two primary trends in the connections between community and education, particularly in the history of Afghanistan: community as obstacle and community as asset. I argue that both are static approaches to community. Shifting from these one-dimensional conceptualizations of community, I explore the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between community and education through the case of one community-based school and its links to the neighborhood within which it is embedded,

community institutions, a partner NGO, and the state. My findings indicate that three mechanisms—trust, belonging, and relationships—explain the connections between community and education. The relationship between community and education is transformational. That is, as educational opportunities open and strengthen, new layers of community emerge and strengthen, and vice versa. In this equation, quality of learning, one of these educational opportunities, creates greater possibilities for long-term sustainability of educational gains.

The dissertation is organized as follows. I begin by situating the study in geographic and historical context, including four decades of invasions and war. I highlight the implications of this context for displacement, instability, and war-induced urbanization in Kabul, and what these processes mean for community. Next, in the conceptual framework, I combine key concepts in Afghan culture, conceptualizations of community, and community and education. I assert that a cultural framework that takes into account the interdependent nature of Afghan social relationships helps explain decisions made about education and the cultivation of community. This framework challenges dominant security frameworks through which Afghanistan is examined in the west.

The first findings chapter, "Trust," documents elements that form the foundation of community in the midst of change and expansion. It highlights the prevalence of experiences with displacement, insecurity, and lack of safety. With this backdrop, I then delve into how the Qari's involvement in the community and in the school contributes to the building of new forms of security and safety for both old residents and displaced newcomers. The second findings chapter, "Belonging," zooms in on the classroom space

to illustrate a new community that is formed through learning. It shows how messages of belonging in school compare across the two classrooms—one that is focused on learning the norms of the "educated" class and the other focused on living a holistic life. I demonstrate how these forms of belonging in the classroom mirror patterns of belonging in the community. Finally, the "Relationships" chapter focuses on both the local school and community and what I call 'beyond the local.' It examines how relationships within the school community reflect family arrangements and how these relationships both shape and are shaped by the positions people occupy in the community more broadly. The chapter ends by exploring dimensions of 'beyond the local,' that influence the school and community, including the role of international actors. These relationships bring to light teachers' frustrations over the ill-defined and distant relationship between their community school and the state. I conclude the dissertation with a discussion chapter that synthesizes the findings and examines implications for theory and practice and presents directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Background

Geographical context

Located at the crossroads of major trade routes that connect the markets of the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and East Asia, Afghanistan's strategic geographical location has attracted merchants, traders, and global powers vying for regional hegemony (Hanifi, 2014; See Figure 1 for map). To the west, Afghanistan borders Iran, a country with which it shares a language (Persian) as well as cultural heritage. The former Soviet-controlled Central Asian countries of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan border Afghanistan along the north and northwest. And, a narrow strip of land, known as the Wakhan Corridor, in the northeast touches the western edge of China. Afghanistan shares its longest border with Pakistan to the east. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan bifurcates the Pashtun population who make up the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. The modern borders of Afghanistan took shape over centuries of struggles for sovereignty from Iranian, Russian and British colonial influence.

Figure 1: Afghanistan in the region

Source: University of Texas at Austin

The ethnic composition of the country reflects the diversity of the region within which it is embedded. A linguistically and ethnically varied country, the population is composed of four main ethnic groups—Pashtuns (42 percent), Tajiks (27 percent), Hazaras (9 percent), and Uzbek (9 percent) (Library of Congress, 2008). Over 30 languages are spoken in Afghanistan, with Pashto and Dari (Eastern dialect of Persian) as the two official languages. Historically, Pashtuns from a particular tribal lineage have served as heads of state, but Dari has been the lingua franca and the "language of the government bureaucracy and court" (Barfield, p. 157). Language fluency in Dari is particularly pertinent in diverse urban hubs, such as Kabul, that draw in individuals and families for educational, economic, and social opportunities.

As the center of opportunity, Kabul represents a microcosm of Afghanistan's ethnic and linguistic diversity. It is important to note that the capital city of Kabul is

located within the province of Kabul. Locals typically refer to the province as Kabul and the capital as *shahr,* meaning city. Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hazaras, Uzbeks and various smaller ethnic groups inhabit the city's hills and valleys. And though some areas are segregated along ethnic and linguistic divides, Kabul is relatively heterogenous. In addition to economic migrants, conflict and forced repatriation of refugees from Iran and Pakistan, have multiplied the population of the province since the 2001 US-led NATO intervention (Koser, 2007).

Nearly 20 percent of Afghanistan's 35 million people live in the mountainous province of Kabul. The population density is 7,907 people in one square kilometer (the highest in the country) (Reliefweb, 2015). While the average household size is 6.9 people, family size varies and is typically larger in the outskirts of the city. The population of Kabul is overwhelming young, and there are more men (51 percent) than women (48 percent), an imbalance that is likely connected to the migration of men to the city for work opportunities. That said, unemployment is high and increasing. Only 35 percent of the population were engaged in economic activities in 2015. In regards to education, literacy rate among youth between the ages 15-24 is 70.7 percent (higher than the country average of 48 percent) (Reliefweb, 2015). Statistics, however, tell only part of the story. There is a lack of in-depth qualitative studies that center the lives of Afghans amidst a country undergoing rapid change and continuous instability. Qualitative studies are critically important not only in policymaking but also discourse that shapes images of the country and drive policies and programs. My study aims to address this gap.

Figure 2: Kabul province districts

Source: Foschini, 2019. Note the lack of detail between the center and the peripheries of Kabul province.

The Soviet war (1979-1989) and the subsequent civil war (1989-1996) had a transformative effect on Kabul's demographics and culture. Two decades of continuous armed conflict contributed to the exodus of a large percentage of Kabul (city and province) natives. Moreover, the civil war of the 1990s forced communities to ally with various ethnic-associated groups, leading to greater segregation. As economic, political, and security conditions deteriorate and international funding and interest in the country dwindles with the rise of other humanitarian emergencies in the region, fears of another civil war has led to further ethnic segregation in Kabul (Gutcher, 2011). Southern Kabul, the site of my study, is overwhelmingly inhabited by Pashtuns with small enclaves of Tajiks and Hazaras (See Figure 2 for map of Kabul).

History: Four decades of invasions and wars

Afghan anthropologist, Nazif Shahrani (2018), argues that, "The peoples of Afghanistan, their state, society, and local communities, embattled as they have become at the dawn of the twenty-first century, cannot be understood except as part of the much larger struggles of the colonized non-Western societies, especially Muslim societies of the Middle East and Central Asia" (p. 3). Understood through this framework, the modern history of Afghanistan must be examined within a broader global landscape of opposing ideologies and power struggles. To engage with the present situation in Afghanistan, it is important to go back several decades and examine the roots of conflict. In this brief historical overview, I begin with the Cold War era (1979-1989), followed by the civil war (1989-1996) that gave rise to the Taliban (1996-2001), and end with the US-led invasion (2001-present) and the current political and security situation. Amongst attention to structural inequalities and the role of international involvement, I highlight the impact of war on displacement and war-induced urbanization, relevant to this study. Four decades of war in Afghanistan have contributed to multiple waves of displacement and in some cases entire communities have been relocated, raising questions about what community means in a setting of mass migration and instability.

A time of (negative) peace

Most Afghans who lived in the country during the 1960s describe the reign of the last king of Afghanistan, Mohammad Zahir Shah, as the "golden era," the last time the country experienced a sustained period of peace and political stability. Zahir Shah ruled the country for a period of 40 years, beginning in 1933 (Barfield, 2012). While the era is remembered as a peaceful time, Zahir Shah's rule was marked by what Galtung (1969)

calls negative peace, or the absence of direct violence, rather than positive peace, the absence of structural violence. Around the 1960s, signs of threats to Zahir Shah's traditional monarchial rule, which privileged a small ruling elite and employed a passive approach to the majority rural population, became evident. Against the backdrop of Global Southern liberation movements of the 1960s as well tensions between dominant socioeconomic ideologies, a new generation of educated Leftists and Islamists demanded greater political pluralism (Ruttig, 2013). Inspired by political movements in the Middle East, such as the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt*, Jamiat-i-Islami* (Islamic Society), an Islamist political party, grew out of a student movement based in the Sharia Law Faculty at Kabul University (Barfield, 2012). Around the same time, in 1965, communists formed the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which later split into two factions—the largely Pashtun Khalq (Masses) led by Nur Muhammad Taraki, and the mainly Dari-speaking Parcham (Banner) under the leadership of Babrak Karmal (Barfield, 2012). Operating in a clandestine left-wing network, members of PDPA soon infiltrated the military (Ruttig, 2018). Elements of these diverging political movements, based in institutions of higher education, would be entangled in a struggle to determine the direction of the country for the next several decades.

In 1973, the king's cousin, General Daud, supported by Leftist political parties and officers trained in the USSR, "mounted a coup and declared a republic" (Barfield, 2012). With Zahir Shah exiled in Italy, General Daud aimed to consolidate his power by fostering new regional ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia and "[playing] off the United States and the Soviet Union" (Barfield, p. 216). Concerned about the escalation of communist activity and the challenge it posed to his ability to maintain power, General

Daud moved to clear out Marxist and Islamist influences from the government and military, leading to further marginalization and underground movements (Barfield, 2012). In 1978 the mysterious killing of the PDPA's main theoretician Mir Akbar Khaibar sparked fears within the PDPA that Daud was out to eliminate them (Ruttig, 2018). While who was behind the killing is contested, the two communist factions momentarily rejoined. The same year, officers from within the military with ties to the communist parties staged a violent coup, killing General Daud and his family (Ruttig, 2018). Known as the Saur Revolution (*inqelab*), after the second month of the Persian calendar when the coup occurred, April 1978 marked the beginning of four decades of instability and war.

Soviet war: Afghans on both sides of a global war

Headed by the more radical Khalqis under Taraki, the PDPA "[was] not just interested in ruling Afghanistan but also in transforming the country through revolutionary policies of land reform, education, and changes in family law" (Barfield, 2012, p. 225). This was a stark departure from Zahir Shah whose policies were designed to maintain the status quo in the peripheries and power in the urban ruling class. With a loosely consolidated communist regime that included Taraki, Karmal as well as Hafizullah Amin, a Khalqi politician, at the helm of the new Soviet-backed state, the PDPA embarked on radical reforms that included seizing and redistributing land in rural areas—"the economic foundation of rural life" (Barfield, 2012, p. 233). Coupled with social reforms such as compulsory co-ed literacy campaigns, an armed resistance to the PDPA soon grew, concentrated outside of Kabul. The PDPA responded with brutal repression. Consequently, the opposition, known as the *mujahideen*, a group of young

men from across ethnic and linguistic divides consisting of students, *mullahs*, and farmers, burgeoned in the rural peripheries.

Internal divisions and struggles for power marred the communist government. In 1979, Amin assassinated Taraki, and named himself president. Allegations that Amin, who graduated from Columbia University, was working for the CIA and would abandon the Soviet bloc, led the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan the same year, killing Amin, and installing Karmal as the new ruler (Barfield, 2012; Ruttig, 2018).

Scholars of Afghanistan argue that the Soviet Union did not plan to engage in a full-fledged, protracted military invasion; rather their goal was to prop up an allied communist government. Thomas Ruttig (2018) of Afghanistan Analysts Network argues, "direct Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan, in the midst of global tensions, internationalized an internal political conflict which, so far, had been mainly over the question of whether to modernize (or not), at which pace and in which form." Motivated by its own geopolitical interests, the US, with the help of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, began a concerted effort to support the fledgling *mujahideen* resistance through the provision of training, arms, and financial support (Barfield, 2012). Military support and funding also came from individual sources, the most infamous one being Osama bin Laden who would join the war himself. The armed resistance against the Soviets is known as the *jihad*, the Arabic word for "struggle" (thus, *mujahideen* means those who engage in *jihad*). With Afghans on the front lines of each side, the line between foreign invasion and civil war has been blurry in Afghanistan's modern history.

Although the *mujahideen* consisted mainly of men from rural areas who fought for their homeland, their leaders enjoyed sanctuary outside of Afghanistan. The US and

Pakistan funneled supplies and money, which reached a billion dollars a year in the mid-1980s, through seven Sunni *mujahideen* leaders who resided in the Pashtun borderlands of Pakistan (Barfield, 2012). Iran provided support to a smaller group of Shia *mujahideen*. Motivated by different factors, outsiders—particularly Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United States— were successful in sidelining exiled the Pashtun nationalists, while propping up the exiled religious fundamentalists (who prior to this point did not have extensive following in Afghanistan) (Burde, 2014). The decade-long war led to the "death of one million Afghans, the flight of four million [to five million] refugees to Pakistan and Iran, and the displacement of millions of others internally" (Barfield, 2012, p. 234). In Kabul, "the urban professional classes escaped or disappeared during this time," replaced by millions of people from rural areas who flocked to urban areas for safety (Nadiri & Hakimyar, 2018, p. 82). The invasion and mass displacement across borders and within national boundaries had profound impact on traditional social structures, communal relationships, and connection to a homeland. In Kabul, it changed the configuration of the city, with a diverse internally displaced population replacing much of the native residents.

By 1986, the war began to take an important turn due to political changes in Moscow and advancement in *mujahideen* capabilities. The US supplied the *mujahideen* with Stinger antiaircraft missiles, "greatly reducing Soviet air superiority on the battlefield" (Barfield, 2012, p. 238). Meanwhile, Mikhail Gorbachev, the new leader of the Soviet Union, "shifted Soviet strategy to give primacy to negotiations and to reorganizing the PDPA government to give it more internal stability" (Barfield, 2012, p. 238). Najibullah Ahmadzai, known as Dr. Najib, the head of the PDPA's secret police,

replaced Karmal, and instituted a series of symbolic and political changes to invite resistance parties into the government. He changed the name of the party to purge the PDPA of its Marxist association, began a campaign to rebuild damaged mosques, and put *mullahs* on payroll. The *mujahideen* leaders, however, had little interest in a negotiated settlement with the Najib government. When the last Soviet troops were driven out of Afghanistan in 1989, the major international actors disengaged from the region, leaving the *mujahideen* and Najib with a shattered nation whose citizens were dispersed throughout the globe.

Civil war and Taliban control in an era of global neglect

Despite adopting more moderate policies and attempts at power-sharing, Najib's efforts to make peace with the resistance fighters failed (Adili & Ruttig, 2017). The PDPA regime's mass atrocities—mass detentions, disappearances, and killings—across the country could not be forgotten. *Mujahideen* leaders, divided along ethnic and regional lines and many of who never entered the battlefield, returned to Afghanistan—Kabul specifically—to form new alliances in an internal struggle for power. Kabul had thus far been insulated from the decade-long war with the Soviet Union that wreaked havoc on the nation's rural and remote areas (Nadiri & Hakimyar, 2018). Barfield (2012) notes, with the fall of the Soviet Union, international interest in Afghanistan waned as each international actor achieved its main goal. "The United States had financed a war to bloody the Soviets, and achieved the result. The Saudis had paid for a war to expel an infidel occupier, who was now gone" (Barfield, 2012, p. 247). Only Pakistani involvement remained to ensure a friendly government in the neighboring country rose to

power. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of aid to Najib's regime, forcing him to seek asylum from the United Nations.

Given the lack of mediated political process to determine the political future of the country, a struggle for power between *mujahideen* leaders was inevitable and "not the result of some Afghan penchant for blood feud or tribal rivalries" (Barfield, 2012, p. 250). As the leader of one *mujahideen* faction, Rabbani seized power in Kabul. Hekmatyar's troops camped on the hills south of Kabul from where he began shelling the city. Over the course of the next four years, it is estimated that at least 25,000 individuals lost their lives (Barfield, 2012). The ensuing violence also resulted in another wave of mass displacement—this time concentrated in the capital city. An estimated half a million people fled Kabul—nearly a third of the total population at the time (Nadiri & Hakimyar, 2018). It is important to emphasize the distinction between the vast majority of *mujahideen* who returned to civilian life following the war from the *mujahideen* political *leaders* who gained immense leverage through financial support from international actors during the Soviet War. It is not unusual to meet former *mujahideen* throughout Afghanistan and in the diaspora who have disengaged from war since the *jihad* against the Soviets. These men, now seniors, also partake in community responsibilities unlike political leaders.

As the battle for control of Kabul continued, the rural regions of the country also faced lawlessness and violence. By 1993, the country was divided into regions controlled by various factions of former *mujahideen* leaders. The lack of law and order was particularly pronounced in the southern provinces of the country where the combined factors of intense Soviet violence and lack of government investment relative to northern

regions left communities vulnerable. It is within this context that a new movement began in the south to address the situation, led by religious students, or *Taliban* (hence the name). Led by Mullah Omar, the Taliban seized control of Kabul in 1996, pushing out *mujahideen* leaders from the nation's capital. The Taliban were quickly supported by Pakistan (Burde, 2014). As alluded to above, Pakistan's support of religious fundamentalists was motivated by efforts to undermine Pashtun nationalist interest in unification (Burde, 2014). The initial popularity the group gained in Kabul following the end of the civil war was weakened by austere social policies and stagnant economic development. Barfield (2012) argues, "In many ways the Taliban proved themselves a mirror image of the PDPA, intent on imposing radical doctrines of foreign origin (this time religious) on a population that was strongly opposed to them" (p. 262). Opposition to the Taliban's grip on power by ethnic minority factions of *mujahedeen* leadership, rebranded as the Northern Alliance, controlled some areas of the northern regions of the country.

US-led invasion: Corruption and reifying internal divisions

Following a decade of global negligence, the September 11 attacks put Afghanistan in the global spotlight again for the Taliban's harboring and refusal to hand over bin Laden, the man behind the coordinated attacks, directly to the US. With ground support from the disaffected Northern Alliance, the US began bombing the nation's capital in October 2001. The US relied on former *mujahideen* factions—who had old scores to settle—in addition to a global coalition under NATO in the invasion of the already war-torn nation. Within a few months, the US "expelled al Qaeda from

Afghanistan and toppled the Taliban regime without deploying any of its regular ground troops" (Barfield, 2012, p. 277). The US' refusal to accept a Taliban surrender in December 2001 and propping up former *mujahideen* leaders, better known as "warlords" in the post-Soviet context, proved to be an irresponsible and shortsighted strategy.

Similar to the Soviets, the US's military strategy is coupled with state-building objectives—this time, grounded in western values of democracy and capitalism. Under the auspices of the United Nations in 2001, a conference was convened in Bonn, Germany to establish an interim government and adopt a new constitution for Afghanistan. Hamid Karzai was selected to head the provisional government, while members of the Northern Alliance took over the "power" ministries (for instance, Ministry of Defense and Interior) (Kipping, 2010, p. 12). Karzai served two presidential cycles. While on the surface the country's first elections appeared to lay the bedrocks of democracy, the US' fast-paced, decontextualized approach, driven in part by plans for the invasion of Iraq, undermined the reconstruction process (Barfield, 2012). The Karzai administration, which gave political legitimacy to human rights abusers, was also mired in corruption. International donors funneled billions of dollars in aid through international contractors, NGOs, and the Afghan government without proper accountability measures. Moreover, international forces were small in number and restricted to Kabul, with the rural economy almost entirely neglected (Barfield, 2012). More resources in Kabul as well as increased insecurity in rural areas resulted in another phase of war-induced urbanization. Nadiri and Hakimyar (2018) show that, largely because of internal displacement since the US intervention, the population of Kabul increased from approximately 1.8 million to an estimated 4.5 million people by 2008.

In the midst of high levels of government corruption and slow progress on infrastructure repairs and improvements, the Taliban capitalized on the opportunity to reassert their power. Thus far, they had retreated back to southern Afghanistan and the Pashtun areas along the border in Pakistan. The US responded by sending additional troops to Afghanistan in 2008 under the Bush administration. A year later, the Obama administration announced another surge, raising the total US troops to 100,000 (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). However, the surge in troops failed to reduce or restrain the Taliban's momentum in economically and politically marginalized Pashtun areas in the south and east, where they set up parallel governance systems in the process (Clark & Bjelica, 2018).

In 2012, the opening of the Taliban's office in Qatar signaled a measure of international legitimacy, opening the beginning of the possibility for a political settlement. Progress on the terms of the agreement between the Taliban and the US has been slow until recently—a welcome sign for a war-fatigued nation. The US and the Taliban reached an agreement to end the war on February 29, 2020; a longer intra-Afghan negotiation process is expected to follow. While statistics on the total number of lives lost and injured are imprecise due to accessibility as well as definitions of what constitutes a civilian, the UN estimates that in 2019 the number of civilian causalities surpassed 100,000 (Kanalstein, 2020). In addition, in recent years a large number of people have experienced yet another cycle of displacement due to escalation of violence, droughts, and forced repatriation. By 2016, over one million Afghans were on the move either due to internal displacement or forced repatriation from Pakistan, Iran, and the European Union (Afghanistan profile-Timeline, 2019). The various phases of

displacement across four decades of war means that some families have experienced displacement more than once, and that, in many cases, entire communities have been uprooted and dispersed within and beyond national boundaries. Hence, building and adapting community becomes ever more important in a context of instability and insecurity.

Education in Afghanistan[2]

Education reflects tensions in political projects between government policies and community practices and identity. An analysis of the history of education in Afghanistan and its relation to community reveals community is perceived as either an obstacle or an asset. In this section, I will layer the geography and history sections above with a brief history of education in Afghanistan.

Policies marked by passivity and inequality during the monarchy of Zahir Shah extended into education. The vast majority of educational opportunities were concentrated in cities like Kabul, which were much smaller in population than today. In the villages, communities relied on mosques and *madrassas* to provide basic education to children in addition to formal schools. The relative lack of government presence and educational opportunities often did not meet local demand for education (Samady, 2001). It was within this context the "village" schools—the predecessors of community-based schools, which involve NGOs—emerged. First documented in national education reports in the 1940s in Afghanistan, "village" schools (Samady, 2001) grew gradually out of local demand for more academic opportunities. Communities dedicated space for classrooms within homes and newly constructed buildings, committed to long-term support of schools, and sought partnership with the local Ministry of Education (MOE) offices to train teachers and provide textbooks (Samady, 2001). This partnership led to the publication and dissemination of three textbooks, one for each of the three primary-level grades, consisting of religion, language, and math. Though a promising collaboration between government and local actors, development of the village schools as

[2] Parts of this section have been adapted from my Qualifying Paper, Faizi, 2017 and Bellino, Faizi & Mehta, 2016.

well as education in general was cut short by political shifts—from monarchy to communism— and war that directly threatened the participation of communities in education.

The harsh entrance of communism into Afghanistan directly clashed with community identity and values. When in 1978, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan established a communist government after a bloody coup, long-held fears of secularization resurfaced. The government viewed education as an important instrument in transforming Afghan society and fostering communist ideology. The Fundamental Principles of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, adopted in 1980, detailed an extensive plan to increase literacy programs, expand basic education, and develop vocational training as well as higher education (Samady, 2001). However, the emphasis on communist ideals, denunciation of religion, and forced school enrollment in rural areas accompanied with broader policies pertaining to land reform and greater ties with the Soviet Union led to a backlash against the state. Spink (2005) explains, "In some communities the reaction was extreme, the schools were burnt and teachers were chased out, and education became seen by many communities as threatening the very existence of Afghan values and culture" (p. 197). At the height of the Cold War, Afghanistan became a focal point for regional and global nations to assert their power. A decade of war generated wider social rifts and inflicted havoc on the education system. Protracted internal conflict followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, resulting in the gradual erosion of what remained of the education system.

Since 2001, the international community, as well as the Afghan government, have invested in rehabilitating the education system through funding to the education system,

which involves a plethora of international and local NGOs involved at the community level. Although there is limited reliable data and the scope of progress in the country is contested, UNESCO (2015) estimated enrollment has increased from one million pupils in 2001, almost all boys, to eight million in 2015, of whom girls constituted 39 percent. While there has been considerable achievement in expansion of access for boys and girls, corruption, quality of education, security, and rural-urban disparities continue to challenge achievements that have been made and stifle further advancement. Moreover, the education system remains a highly centralized structure despite historical deterrents. One of the ways the MOE has addressed capacity limitations is by incorporating alternative education methods into national education policy, including community-based schools. Views about community involvement in education have in many ways changed from community being perceived as an obstacle to being an asset.

One of the most extensive alternative education models in Afghanistan is the community-based schools that cater to the country's geographically isolated areas. Based on the early "village" schools, this model of community involvement serves as the foundation for the way NGOs and the MOE structure community-based education. The USAID-funded Partnership for Advancing Community Education in Afghanistan (PACE-A) was one of the largest and most extensive consortia for CBE programming in the country. By 2008, the MOE reported that an estimated 20,000 community-based classrooms operated throughout Afghanistan. In 2011, when PACE-A's program came to an end, community demand for continuing local CBE led to the formation of the Basic Education for Afghanistan Consortium (BEACON), a coalition of NGOs with decades of experience working in Afghanistan, including CARE, International Rescue Committee

(IRC), Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) (Bellino, Faizi, & Mehta, 2016).

A year later, in 2012, the MOE established policy guidelines on CBE to improve coordination between the Ministry, communities, and a plethora of local and international organizations. In this more formalized model, international NGOs play a significant role in teacher training, community mobilization, and fostering community-government linkages. Moreover, schools are clustered whereby a group of community-based schools are established as feeders to nearby government schools, with a central public or "hub" school linking a cluster of nearby communities. Within this system, the community is expected to provide a safe physical space for the school, maintain the school, and supply material resources; support education and allow girls to attend school; support teachers and collaborate with government school staff when necessary; and actively participate in the school *shura* (MOE, 2012, p. 11-12). Meanwhile, students are directly registered with their respective hub school in order to enable a seamless transition to the public school after year three.

Students within these schools, which were mainly based in rural areas, have demonstrated academic achievement that matches or exceeds that of students in formal schools (Burde & Linden, 2013). Burde and Linden's (2013) randomized control trial of 31 villages and 1,490 children in rural northwestern Afghanistan shows that CBSs have positive outcomes on girls' and boys' enrollment and academic achievement. A school within a village increases the enrollment rate of girls by 52 percentage points and their average test scores by .65 standard deviations. Though boys also benefit from the program, "the benefits accrue much more strongly to girls—so much so, that placing

schools in the villages virtually eliminates the gender gap in enrollment" and significantly decreases differences in test scores (Burde & Linden, 2013, p. 36).

Initially envisioned as a temporary measure to close access gaps in rural communities, community-based education has been extended to semi-urban areas to address demands for education in Afghanistan's burgeoning cities. The revised 2018 MOE guidelines recognize the need for alternative educational models in urban spaces. The dual forces of increasing insecurity in cities as well as migration from rural areas and refugee camps have increased demand for secure educational opportunities to out-of-school children and adolescent girls close to home. It is important to note that the aim of community-based education was not to construct a parallel or shadow system, but one that complements and "strengthen[s] the government system as opposed to competing against it" (Kirk & Winthrop, 2006, p. 2). While ideas regarding the involvement of communities in education have progressed from negative perceptions to more positive perceptions with practical policy implications, there is remarkably little discussion of what community means and how community might interact with education in a setting like Afghanistan. In the next chapter, I shed light on conceptions of community by bringing together various bodies of literature regarding culture, religion, and sociological concepts.

Chapter 3: Conceptual framework

To be a good Muslim: Morality, community, and education

"A thorough study of the concept of ummah suggests that the primary loyalty of Muslims has been not to the ruler, not to the state, but to the ummah and the Shari'ah [Islamic Law], which binds it together." –al-Ahsan, 1986

Adding onto the community-as-asset and community-as-obstacle dichotomy, international development discourse on education identifies advantages in community-centered approaches to address state capacity limitations for the most marginalized populations (Bray, 2000). This discourse also often falls into employing a static conceptualization of community as a product that exists and can be leveraged. Moreover, the benefits of community participation in education are framed in universal terms that undermine contextual nuances. Leveraging community to advance education requires understanding community through a cultural framework that takes into account local realities. Importantly, while some principles and processes of community might be generalizable, community is also culturally specific and shaped by history and geography.

In this chapter, I offer conceptual clarity around several dimensions of culture that are essential to understanding community in Afghanistan, and therefore to my study of education. In particular, this cultural framework examines elements of honor and Islamic ideas around moral character. While the sphere of religion and culture are sometimes distinct, I am more interested in how Islam manifests in the lived-experiences of individuals within a sociocultural context. Therefore, this conceptual framework incorporates facets of an Islamic paradigm under the umbrella of culture.

First, I begin with a discussion of the concept of honor and how it is emblematic of a culture defined by interdependence. Next, I add to this discussion several related concepts in Islamic thought around moral character and their connections to education. Finally, I examine conceptions of community in light of these elements of culture. I focus on the Islamic conception of community and weave in literature from western contexts to further dissect the dynamics of community. Rather than reinforcing a paradigm that creates stark divisions between Islam and western thought (e.g., Huntington, 1993), my work is grounded in a cumulative understanding of knowledge in which various civilizations throughout history add to our collective understanding of the world. This is not to claim homogeneity or undermine diversity. Instead, it represents affirmation of various contributions around the globe and an orientation to carry out inquiry with nuance and complexity.

Living an honorable life

Over centuries of movement marked by interaction with merchants, travelers, and soldiers, Afghans have sustained a unique cultural heritage that has adopted incoming ideas based on shared principles of interdependence, dignity, and morality. While the richness of the ethnic and linguistic mixture of Afghanistan is often at the center of debates regarding lack of social cohesion, national identity, and political stability, this view fails to discern how the cultural composition of Afghanistan also serves as a source of resilience and stability in the midst of insecurity.

Understanding culture is important to understanding human behavior. Moreover, understanding culture in relation to community is critical because as Cohen (1985)

asserts, community is where one learns how to be social, it "is where one acquires 'culture'" (p. 15). And just as a singular culture does not exist within any nation-state, defining what forms Afghan culture is similarly elusive. Each ethnic group consists of sub-groups that might differ in their cultural outlooks depending on economic, political, and geographic circumstances. A Pashtun in a rural community might have more in common with a Tajik in the same vicinity than a co-ethnic in an urban area (Barfield, 2012). Moreover, rather than a static notion, culture is dynamic and changing. Afghan culture today is different than from forty years ago before the wars. With the understanding that culture is varied, influenced by external factors, and continually shifting and changing, I will discuss one of the most central elements of Afghan culture—honor—to show how this concept shapes daily life and elucidates broader facets of a worldview based on interdependence and relationality. The idea of honor is relevant to this dissertation as it explains considerations individuals and families make in their lives and in the process of weighing the benefits and risks of various educational opportunities. Importantly, perceptions regarding a shared understanding of honor are critical preconditions for the development of community within the classroom and outside of school.

Honor is a core component of Afghan culture, illustrated by the range of terms in Dari and Pashto that illuminate multiple dimensions of individual and communal honor as well their intersection. To examine the layers of meaning embedded in the concept of honor in the Afghan context, I rely on the work of Lutz Rzehak, who has conducted extensive linguistic and anthropological fieldwork in Afghanistan over the span of more than two decades. Rzehak (2011) focuses on the cultural practices of Pashtuns according

to their code of honor known as *Pashtunwali* (or the way of the Pashtuns). While Pashtuns constitute only one ethnic group in Afghanistan, I focus on key principles of *Pashtunwali* for two reasons. Firstly, constituting the largest ethnic group with a significant degree of social and political leverage through most of Afghanistan's history, Pashtun culture has greatly influenced the construction of *Afghaniyat* (Afghan-ness), a more broad reaching cultural identity shared across ethnic groups. While in some ways the dominance of Pashtun culture has led to the marginalization of other identities, Pashtun culture is also shaped by other groups through centuries of migration and interaction in the region (Hanifi, 2016). Secondly, southern Kabul, the site of my study, is inhabited largely by Pashtuns. Understanding the educational aspirations and attitudes of this group is critical because the southern and eastern parts of the country, which have significant concentrations of Pashtuns, have borne the brunt of the recent war between the Taliban and US-led NATO and Afghan forces. The marginalization of the largest ethnic group from educational opportunities could potentially have more destabilizing consequences for equitable economic growth and national cohesion.

At the center of *Pashtunwali* is the concept of honor. In Pashto, *nanga* "means to defend one's rights and the rights of one's tribe honorably" (Rzehak, 2011, p. 9). Thus, honor is connected to an individual's dignity as well as the dignity of the broader community within which the individual is embedded because "the honor of an individual and the honor of the lineage or tribe one belongs to are interdependent" (Rzehak, p. 9). Belonging to a community comes with privileges, such as protection, which are distributed equally, conditional upon allegiance to the code of ethics.

Namus signifies another dimension of honor at the intersection of honor and

gender. The honor of a man is dependent on the honor of all females for whom he is responsible (e.g., wife, daughters, unmarried or widowed sisters). In Dari and Pashto *namus* can be translated as "honor, reputation, esteem, conscience, and chasteness, and it can denote all female members of a household as well" (Rzehak, p. 9). Thus, women are the *namus* of men, and defending the honor of women consists of providing shelter and taking care of them. Upholding one's reputation—or how one is perceived—is a key element of honor. Seclusion is often perceived to be the best way to defend a female's reputation, leading to the gendered division of private and public spaces. This division is especially pronounced in some rural areas though in other rural areas women have more freedom of movement.

The functioning of the private space is intricately connected to the overall well-being of the community. Afghan households typically consist of at least three generations, which is more common in rural areas (Dupree, 2004). Women exercise considerable power within the private space through child socialization, information dissemination, and marriage brokering (Dupree, 2004; Rzehak, 2011). This means that it is often women who lead in the socialization and reproduction of honor values. The anthropologist on Afghanistan Nancy Hatch Dupree (2004) explains, "although household responsibilities and labour is gender-based, the interconnectedness of male/ female roles in the economy of these rural kin-oriented, subsistence-oriented households, accord women considerable status." In addition, the status of men and women increase with age. Elders are regarded highly for their wisdom and experience and participate in decision-making processes, such as *shuras*, that affect the livelihood of households and communities.

A sense of honor is important to human identity and experience but manifests differently across various sociocultural contexts. In societies where there is high value placed on individual identity and independence attacks on individual honor, for example masculinity, are experienced more saliently than threats to family or communal honor (Van Osch, Breugelmans, Zeelenberg, & Boluk, 2013). Across societies that share Islamic heritage honor is intricately connected to the family. Van Osch, Breugelmans, Zeelenberg, and Boluk (2013), studying the Turkish diaspora, define *namus* as "sexual honor" that is associated with family honor, public decency, and chastity (p. 335). Threats to *namus* can be actual or perceived. The authors explain, "if the *namus* or purity of one female member is threatened, which can be an actual threat but could also be rumors, the honor of the entire family is at stake" (Van Osch, Breugelmans, Zeelenberg, Boluk, 2013, p. 335). The safeguarding of honor by both male and female members of a family is important because "it is impossible to fully restore the *namus* of a family once it is lost" (p. 335). The loss of honor has a domino effect in a communal society that undermines the position of the individual as well as the position of the family in the wider community.

While the emphasis on honor has remained pivotal in Afghan cultural identity, it is worth noting that the past four decades of war have inserted great pressure on the traditional organizational life of Afghans. Rzehak (2011) calls the procession of foreign aggression and civil war "a wartime experience" that "is almost without precedent in the history of Afghanistan" (p. 20). Families have been disintegrated within and across national borders for security and economic reasons. In addition, the increasing level of education among younger Afghans as well as the proliferation of modern means of

communication have facilitated the emergence of new ideas and values into the country. How lack of security and the breakdown of communal ties impacts attitudes toward and practices related to honor remain under-studied.

More broadly, the position of honor in Afghan culture symbolizes the interconnectedness of social relations. Social relations in Afghan culture are inherently marked by interdependence such that the individual exists in relation to the family and the family exists in relation to community. Every decision he/she makes reflects on his/her family and upbringing. The other major components of *Pashtunwali*, and by extension Afghan culture, such as hospitality and consultation, all connect to the communal nature of social relations. And while *Pashtunwali* represents an *ideal* way of life, reality is more complex, dynamic, and dependent on broader conditions and circumstances (Rzehak, 2011). I offer this analysis of Afghan conceptions of honor to shed light on the social reality of this multifaceted society. Importantly, it is through the prism of interdependence, with preservation of honor at its core, that the production and maintenance of community can be fully appreciated. Decisions about children's education, especially girls' education, are made through considerations regarding the family's position in the community. This dissertation examines the cultivation of community in an educational space through the framework of Afghan culture, taking into consideration the local, national, and global factors at play.

Islam: complementing indigenous culture

The influence of Islam on Afghan cultural identity and social relations is undeniable. While *Pashtunwali* precedes the advent of Islam in Central Asia, distinction

between culture and religion is subtle and difficult to disentangle. Perhaps because Islam began in what ibn Khaldun describes a Bedouin "desert civilization" similar to the lands settled by Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks accounts for why Islamic laws, values, and dispositions lay harmoniously onto the cultural foundations of Afghanistan (Barfield, 2010, p. 56). And though recent political regimes have politicized the role of Islam in Afghanistan, anthropologist Thomas Barfield (2012) contends, "Afghanistan is an example of an older form of Islamic society in which religion is not an ideology but remains an all-encompassing way of life" (p. 40). In this traditional view, government is "composed of good Muslims, not [individuals] empowered to impose a particular religious or political agenda" (Barfield, 2012, p. 41).

Next, I discuss some key principles connected to morality that construct the Islamic paradigm. The Islamic paradigm complements and augments Afghans' honor-based culture. Three interconnected concepts regarding moral disposition and practice—*adab*, *akhlaq*, and *tarbia*—exemplify Islam's orientation to moral character development.

These three Islamic concepts are embedded with layers of meaning that have taken shape over centuries through various Muslim civilizations. For example *adab* "can be defined as etiquette, education, manners, and a conformity to an ideal, that of an honest, worldly man, knowledgeable in all things, a lover of literature with its ethical and moral facets" (Mayeur-Jaouen & Patrizi, 2017, p. 2). More broadly, *adab* is "a system of moral conduct" grounded in Islamic understandings (Abdugafurova, 2018, p. 215). *Akhlaq* refers to character, nature, or disposition. And, *tarbia* refers to proper ethical training (Abdugafurova, 2018). Hence, the fruits of a proper *tarbia* are actualized in outward moral conduct (*adab*) and internal moral character (*akhlaq*). Prophet

Muhammad's actions and teachings serve as the foundations for character development as Muslims believe he was "the only person that possessed the highest character" (Eka, 2017, p. 10). Moral character encompasses everything from praying and charity to sexual propriety, respect towards parents, anger management, ethical business transactions, etc.

Children's *tarbia* is considered a family and communal obligation. *Tarbia* begins early and at home and is carried through into early education. Similar to other Muslim-majority nation-states, in Afghanistan goals that aim to inculcate *tarbia* are integrated into the education system. In fact, primary and secondary education are referred to as *taleem* (education) *wa* (and) *tarbia*. Within this framework, fact-based education (*taleem*) is incomplete without moral refinement. Understood more broadly through a global perspective, *taleem wa tarbia* is the marriage of religious or spiritual training with secular education.

In an effort to re-establish an Islamic paradigm of education to counter western influence against the backdrop of anti-colonial liberation movements in Muslim-majority nations, Malaysian philosopher and Islamic scholar, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, centers the concept of *adab* in this paradigm. Al-Attas (1980) proposes a comprehensive conception of *adab* that encompasses the relational nature of moral character; he argues that *adab* is ultimately about an individual recognizing his/her place in relation to creation and the Creator. He asserts:

> *Adab* is the discipline of body, mind, and soul; the discipline that assures the recognition and acknowledgement of one's proper place in relation to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials; the recognition and acknowledgment of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various levels (*maratib*) and degrees (*darajat*) (p. 11).

At the center of this paradigm exists God, not the state or the tribe. To know one's

proper place means to know the self in relation to "his family, his people, his community, his society" through conduct that is God-conscious (al-Attas, p. 16). The hierarchy that Islam imposes on social structures will be discussed in the section on conceptions of community. While there is potential for tension between religious and cultural views, the frameworks are complementary in that they recognize the relational essence of human experience, with an emphasis on moral behavior. In the context of displacement when extended families separate and tribal allegiances become less relevant, these shared understandings of proper conduct and character grounded in religious and cultural foundations become important filters for community formation. For clarity, in the following section in which I explore community in more depth, I will use the term moral character to encompass all three interconnected concepts—*adab, akhlaq, tarbia*.

The ummah: Community of believers in context

Drawing on elements of Afghan culture and Islam examined above, moral character, honor, interdependence, and family form critical aspects of social life. Just as the Afghan ideal of government is "composed of good Muslims", according to Barfield, community is connected to being good Muslims and building on family ties. These elements are involved in the process of community cultivation as well as community maintenance, that is in both the process and product of community. In this section, I explore how Islam in Afghan culture shapes conceptions of community within Afghanistan and connections to education. Ideas about community in other literature, primarily those situated in western contexts, are weaved into this discussion.

In sum, the conception of community for this study recognizes that community is constructed of many layers. Some of these layers have a long history, while others are in

the making. In a Muslim majority society, inclusion at any layer is done through upholding a strong moral character defined by Islamic principles. Moreover, in an interdependent culture like Afghan culture, moral character is linked to the individual as well as the family. A final element pertains to the role of institutions, primarily the mosque. The mosque embodies community and serves as a center where old relationships are leveraged and new relationships develop, furthering strengthening community.

In Islam, the concept of community, or *ummah*, is best understood as a type of "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983) that transcends constructed geographical borders and centers on a "conception of the good life" (Aristotle, Politics) as the defining and binding quality. First coined by Anderson (1983), "imagined communities" referred to the nation-state as a community in which people relate to others beyond their immediate social networks. Though the nation-state is real, not "imagined," the sense of connection between individuals within this wide geographical unit requires some level of imagination beyond the local setting. The *ummah* is a faith-based community into which every individual across time and space who professes to be Muslim belongs. The *ummah* has a shared purpose: to maintain faith in God, ensure justice and equity among people, and command good and forbid what is evil (Mosher & Marshall, 2015). This conception disrupts pre-Islamic paradigms in the Arabian Peninsula based on tribal lineage wherein individuals were required to maintain strict, bounded tribal allegiances and alliances. Hence, an individual's status in society was predetermined by his/her bloodline.

While the *ummah* is commonly understood as a community that is not bounded in time and space—more abstract than the nation-state—a closer examination of Qur'anic references reveals a comprehensive term that captures both geographically and

temporally bounded and imagined communities of Muslims (al-Ahsan, 1986). Al-Ahsan (1986) explains that the Qur'an establishes the prophethood of Muhammad as the foundations of the Muslim *ummah*, thus, anyone who professes to be Muslim is connected to the *ummah* of the Prophet. The physical community of the Prophet and his companions is described as the "the best *ummah*" and serves as a model for all future communities. Thus, while all Muslims throughout time associate with one *ummah*, Islam also recognizes the importance of local connections and experiences.

Examining the early Muslim community illuminates important aspects of community formation and interaction. In both cities that the Prophet inhabited, in his birth city of Makkah and during migration in Madinah, the mosque was the center of the physical community, a place of gathering for worship, education, and consultation (al-Ahsan, 1986). The *imam* (leader) of the mosque by extension played a role in all three domains: communal worship, education, and consultation. This early model serves as the foundation for community structures in Muslim societies like in Afghanistan. Moreover, while Islam challenges the construction of power hierarchies in accordance with tribe and lineage, it reinforces the social institution of the family as an important building block of community life. Islamic rights are interdependent and relational. That is, parents have rights in relation to each other and their children and vice versa. In this relational culture, one member could make decisions that have implications for the whole family.

Within this foundation that includes family and community, moral character—not tribe—determines rank and relationships between individuals in the *ummah.* In theory, a loose hierarchy in community life is achieved through measures of God consciousness or piety. The Qur'an specifies, "Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the

most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted" [49:13]. This has important implications for the construction and structure of community. Individuals who are perceived to demonstrate higher levels of piety through a combination of knowledge and action play a central role in the process of developing and sustaining community. In Afghanistan, it is no surprise that local *mullahs* serve principal roles in the life of community through knowledge dissemination, community organizing, and conflict resolution. For other members (specifically family units) of the community, connections to the mosque and *mullah* are important to belonging in the community.

These elements—honor, moral character, family, and interdependence—are core to community as a process in Afghanistan in particular and in Muslim societies more broadly. From sociological literature we learn that community does not simply exist. It is "always in the making" and includes processes of inclusion and exclusion, and is defined from within and outside (Hill Collins, p. 25). The notion of community as a process is particularly useful in contexts of migration and instability as community comes under challenge when families become displaced by war. In new places, community is formed through family connections, collaboration in community issues, and embodiment of moral character. The mosque brings together people who are likeminded in their dedication to honor, moral character, family, and interdependence, establishing trust and a sense of safety in the process.

This brings us to the role of place or geography in community. Early conceptions (Tönnies, 2001) envision community as culturally homogenous, geographically bounded, and apolitical entities (Hill Collins, 2010; Kendall, Kaunda & Friedson-Rideneur, 2015). Conceptions formulated in different parts of the world draw a distinction between rural

and urban social structures (Barfield, 2012; Tonnies, 2001). The medieval Arab social historian ibn Khaldun proposes two types of civilizations: desert and sedentary. Desert civilizations are "marked by strong group solidarity based on kinship and descent" (as cited in Barfield, 2012, p. 58); while, sedentary civilizations are identified by residence and class. Similarly, at the turn of the century, German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies categorized social ties as belonging to Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society), "contrasting traditional (pre-capitalist) and modern (capitalist) society" (Adler, 2015, p. 447). In a globalized world marked by movement and unforeseen waves of internal and cross-border migration as well as rapid urbanization, these static and bifurcated understandings of community fail to account for ways individuals and families interact and form relations within dynamic contexts.

More nuanced notions recognize that individuals belong to multiple communities based on their identities (e.g., gender, class, occupation, etc.) (Cohen, 1985; Charles & Aull Davies, 1997), not just geographical location or kinship ties. The construction of community, therefore, is inherently political as members negotiate the boundaries, organization, and values of community (Hill Collins, 2010). Community is composed of many layers—some that are well-established, while others are in process. Advancements in communication technologies enable individuals to connect across geographical boundaries.

As ideas of community become less bounded by place, they have in some ways become more individualistic. Individuals choose which communities to be part of, with technology making it easier to facilitate imagined communities that are less geographically bounded than ever conceived. Today, there is a plethora of imagined

communities beyond the nation-state that connect individuals across the globe. The broader literature on community seems to suggest we are moving away from physical communities and demotes the importance of place. Yet, this view fails to recognize the privilege inherent in access to communication technology and essential infrastructural conditions (e.g., reliable electricity, protection of dissident views). In contexts of displacement and uncertainty, the immediate physical surrounding remains pivotal to community. Moreover, in a culture of interdependence, community institutions—both the mosque and local councils—embody community, and individuals make decisions for the entire family unit. The *ummah* is a more fluid concept and highlights similar principles as the core of community, while still recognizing the importance of place. Importantly, investing in community ensures increased levels of security within otherwise insecure contexts.

On another note, it is important to examine community through the lens of privilege and power. Though community is generally regarded in positive light, some scholars point out how community is utilized by governments to "re-present persistent structural problems as local problems susceptible to local or individual solutions" (Shaw, 2008, p. 28 citing Craig, 1989). In the United States, community is typically associated with "subordinated groups" such as people of color and low-income areas (Hill Collins, 2010, p.). The findings of this study, particularly chapter three, demonstrate how community can be experienced as exclusion from centers of power in global contexts as well. I point this out to steer away from romanticized notions of community, without reducing the sustained importance of community. Rather than proposing an extreme

conception of community as either a form of subjugation or empowerment, a more fruitful framework acknowledges both extremes and the more gray areas in between.

The *ummah,* together with a dynamic understanding of community, serves as a useful paradigm for thinking about social relations in contexts impacted by displacement and insecurity. This paradigm recognizes that community is constructed of many layers, each layer with its own history. Inclusion at any layer is done through upholding a strong moral character defined by Islamic principles. While moral character varies by individuals, it is intimately linked to family in an interdependent society. Although it can be challenged in exceptional cases, the norm is an individual with a high degree of moral character comes from a family who demonstrates the same values. Put another way, how one is perceived in the community is connected to individual attributes as well as their family. Moreover, the mosque is a central place where relationships are strengthened through worship and acts of service to community. The concept of the *ummah* is particularly beneficial in contexts of displacement and insecurity because it enables families to come together without prior relationships but with shared principles, establishing a sense of stability and security.

Examining community through a cultural framework in a study on education is important because it reveals deeply embedded understandings of the purposes of education within a particular sociocultural context. In the past two decades, discourse on Afghanistan often presumes entrenched tensions between the values of Afghans and education. Citing the lack of advancements in primary and secondary education for boys and more so for girls, this discourse positions the problems with education in the culture, rather the content of education and educational structures (Burde & Khan, 2016; Burde,

2014). Meanwhile, aid organizations flooded the country to provide a plethora of educational opportunities through formal educational institutions as well as nonformal pathways. In the midst of this development frenzy (Abirafeh, 2009), there has been little attention to how Afghans understand the purposes of education at the community level as well as the importance of community within education.

Examining educational content and goals through a cultural framework highlights the importance of moral development, concerns about honor, and interdependence. Importantly, moral development or being "a good Muslim" is an all-encompassing orientation in which education is connected to many aspects of life including one's relationship to God, work, family, and community. Principles of honor reveal different considerations for boys and girls; in particular, ensuring the safety and security of girls is a prerequisite for access to education. The gendered division between the private and public space and how it supports community might also indicate some distinct and some subtle differences in the way communities perceive the purposes of education for girls and boys. While to outsiders these divisions might seem problematic, the history of Afghanistan shows that top-down approaches are rarely successful and often create more severe divisions as locals respond to actual or perceived fears of social change (Abirafeh, 2009). To reiterate, a cultural framework does not assume a static approach to understanding values and dispositions. It takes into account shifting dynamics and internal diversity, while recognizing persistent themes.

Chapter 4: Methods

Research Questions

Shifting from static and dichotomous conceptualizations of community, this study recognizes the reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationship between education and community. Within this framework, community is seen as a product *and* a process. The project's research questions, which emerged through an iterative process that involved revisions to the research design while in the field, investigate the process-based relationship between education and community:

- ***How is education cultivated through community in a context of displacement and change?***
- ***How is community cultivated through education in a context of displacement and change?***

By way of foreshadowing some of the findings, "Trust" illuminates how NGOs and teachers work through existing community to strengthen opportunities for education. "Belonging" examines how new dimensions of community develop through shared educational spaces. "Relationships" shows how relationships in the classroom mirror family dynamics. It also explores frustrations that emerge from the lack of connections between the community-based school and the state.

Research design

To examine the perspectives and lived experiences of participants in context, my research design takes an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together ethnography, case study and portraiture. Ethnography's focus on culture and its relation to place enable me

to dive deeply into the Afghanistan milieu, where Islam, tradition, and geography shape social relations and experiences. The case study method, and in particular the embedded case study, complements ethnography in its focus on various layers of context around the unit of analysis and allows researchers to draw much needed boundaries around the research design. For this dissertation, I selected one school with two classrooms embedded in a wider community that capture variation in class, gender, ethnicity, and migration history. The school community, the boundaries of which remained both nebulous and also tightly enveloped around the school, served as the main unit of analysis. The nine-month period I spent in the school community allowed me to record change over time, a critical component to both methodologies (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016).

While ethnography and case study concern some of the technical elements of the methodological process, portraiture represents my orientation to research—the spirit of this project. In particular, portraiture's "search for goodness" aligns well with my study aims (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 141). In an effort to counter the general tendency of social scientists to focus their inquiries on pathology, portraiture begins empirical inquiries from the stance of strength and resilience. The full complexity of goodness is captured in juxtaposition to "ample evidence of vulnerability and weakness" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). Moreover, in the quest for goodness, the portraitist must be keenly aware of and reflect on her positionality. As the daughter of Afghan immigrants who have maintained a relationship with their homeland, the beauty, warmth, and authenticity of Afghanistan and Afghans have always captured my attention and left a significant imprint on my worldview. Afghans hold firmly to their faith and traditions, while welcoming (nonviolent) strangers to their homes, yet outsiders who lack

language skills and have limited interactions with local communities often read these qualities as religious zealotry and hostility. Knowledge of local languages as well as culture and history and local connections are imperative in the process of understanding and inquiry. Portraiture enables me to comfortably and confidently occupy the perch of a witness, employing my existing knowledge of geography, culture, language, and religion, while probing more deeply for understanding.

The public discourse and international policy often overlook the perspectives and lived experiences of people living in extraordinary circumstances that have been created by powerful political, security, and economic forces with national and global reverberations. Yet, the primary aim of my study is not to challenge the deficit-oriented and security-obsessed, western narratives on the country and people. This stance begins from a place of weakness and continues to center and provide legitimacy and power to these narratives, marking the beginning of inquiry in a deficit orientation. It is not my goal to prove the humanity of Afghans for that would question their humanity in the first place—a distant thought as I sat with children and families in their homes and observed them in the school community.

My study begins and is centered in Afghanistan, fully immersed in the cultural and spatial terrain of this diverse, dynamic, and resilient land, where individuals assert their agency in their lives. It is imperative to clarify that I do not intend to minimize the security conditions in Afghanistan. In fact, concerns about security shaped every step of the research process as is described in the remaining sections. I worked closely with Harvard University's Global Support Services to make plans for fieldwork. However, this study does not center security from the perspective of dominant actors. It places security

in a broader context and examines its role in the lives of people as they navigate opportunities and barriers.

My methodological approach is also inspired and grounded in ideas and frameworks developed by indigenous and women scholars. Kim TallBear (2014) describes her approach to inquiry as a "relationship-building process…as an opportunity for conversation and sharing of knowledge, not simply data gathering." This process can also be described as "standing in concert" with participants, in which inquiry begins from the lives and experiences of marginalized communities to inform research questions, methods, and historical accounts and textual interpretations (TallBear, 2014).

For me, the orientation of standing in concert with participants informed decisions made during the research process as well as in development of the written narratives. During the research process, knowledge of boundaries in the Afghan culture became critical to conducting research in a respectful, caring, and safe way. There are multiple layers of boundaries within the Afghan culture based on honor, family, and religion. Boundaries around gender, home, and disclosing information about family shaped decisions about which questions to ask, where to hold interviews, and classroom interactions. My research process involved making space for participants and inviting them to make decisions that felt comfortable for them.

In the written narratives, principles of "ethnographic refusal" shaped the final products (Simpson, 2007; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Ethnographic refusal is a method whereby certain information is withheld in order to protect participants. In this context, it was particularly important to practice refusal as a form of respect. In the narratives, I am careful about the physical description of individuals, particularly women in a culture

where the image is considered private. Another practice of refusal is to examine the individual within broader systems. I weave data from individuals, families, and institutions, showing the interaction between these three levels, while chapter three of the findings in particular examines the lack of national support for community establishments and its implications.

Positionality

While aspects of my positionality are interspersed throughout this chapter to shed light on methodological decisions, here I discuss some elements of my autobiographical, cultural, and intellectual journey that led me to this inquiry. Like millions of Afghans, my family fled rural Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion to Pakistan, where I was born. I lived some of my formative years with my extended family before moving to the United States soon after. In my adolescent years, occasional summer visits to Afghanistan enabled me to map political developments against the experiences of my relatives who over the preceeding two decades returned from Pakistan to Logar then eventually to Kabul for security and better educational and work opportunities. Logar province, which borders Kabul to the south and which many of the participants of this study call home, plus southern Kabul, the site of my study, have been an integral part of my experiences in Afghanistan. While for many years I planned to carry out research in the provincial areas, exposure to southern Kabul challenged my conceptions of rural and urban spaces and opened a window into an incredibly expansive, diverse, and dynamic in-between space, which I discuss further below.

The topic of education in Afghanistan, especially girls' education, was a source of frustration for me in the US as it was entangled in a more encompassing war narrative that obfuscated complex social, economic, and security conditions. However, embarking on graduate studies in the field of education has given me tools and frameworks to understand nuanced experiences and perspectives within and about education and schooling. I have realized through my educational journey that not only can I illuminate the experiences and perspectives of communities at the margins through the access that I have, but that conducting research is also an opportunity for me to more thoroughly understand a complex issue through a systematic process. The process of engaging with Afghans in educational spaces from multiple provinces and diverse experiences has been eye-opening and has given me more appreciation for children and adults' aspirations, hopes, and challenges. Hence, I have embraced both my insider and outsider stata to question and arrive at deeper understanding.

Elaborating more on my educational journey, I have an interdisciplinary background in the social sciences. My higher educational journey began with a degree in linguistics, which attuned me to pay attention to language nuances and the intricate relationship between language, history, and culture. Given the security and political entanglements between my homeland and new home that have shaped my adolescence and adult life, I pursued graduate studies in international political economy (IPE) to understand the global political system that shaped the lives of Afghans. While IPE gave me an appreciation for international policies, frameworks, and discourse, its lack of attention to lived experiences and agency of individuals living within national and global systems was glaring. Never before having considered examining education, I found

inspiration in Logar, where I observed how the construction of military bases near schools obstructed access to education—something that at the time was missing from discussions on education in Afghanistan. In the realm of girls' education, introduction to the opportunities of community-based education through the works of Rebecca Winthrop, Jackie Kirk, and Dana Burde opened new possibilities where learning—not just schooling—was no longer confined to formal structures that seemed to be designed for a particular type of student (urban, middle class) and excluded boys and girls from more traditional backgrounds, like my own relatives. I bring this perspective to this work.

Related to learning outside of formal structures, a significant part of my learning journey includes Islamic studies in mosques, weekend schools, and online classes and lectures. Learning and practicing principles of Islam is a natural component of an Afghan's upbringing and includes everything from the reality of life and death to manners and discipline. Yet, what began as an organic part of growing up was quickly usurped into a global terrorism narrative post-9/11, putting Muslims on the defense. Seemingly ironic, it was in Afghanistan where I experienced a softer presence of Islam, where it is lived and embodied rather than learned for the purpose of responding to critics.

Drawing on my autobiographical and intellectual backgrounds, I weave together knowledge and insights into the very minute details of language and culture with national and international frameworks and ideas that influence local experiences, with the intention of treating the experiences and perspectives of people living in the margins of power with the sophistication they deserve. As is the case in many contexts, gross generalizations and misunderstandings exist about people who are distant from power in

Afghanistan, everything from assumptions about the lack of value placed on education to extremist propensities. In addition to an education in the social sciences that has pushed me to question power and where narratives originate, without my own experiences in and connections to Logar and southern Kabul, I presume it would have taken me longer to arrive at a place where I center the lives of Afghans in an unapologetic and wholesome manner. In some ways, my own plural identities—American and Afghan, western and eastern/Muslim—position me to bring together ostensible dichotomies for a textured examination of community and education in a part of the world that few outsiders have access to and about which many have distorted assumptions. Finally, here I have only alluded to my training in the field of education. The rest of the methods chapter lays out the specifics of my research process.

Site selection

The school community, which I call Roshan Street, is located in the southern peripheries of Kabul province. This is an in-between space, not quite rural or fully urban, where scores of families increasingly find themselves as the combined forces of security and economic opportunity drive urbanization. It is estimated that the population of Kabul increased six-fold from 2001 to 2014 (Rasmussen, 2014). While the vast majority of research (Burde, 2014; Kirk & Winthrop, 2006, 2008; DeStefano, Moore, Balwanz, Hartwell, 2007) and policies (MOE, 2012; MOE 2018) on community-based education focus on rural spaces, community-based education has increasingly been mobilized in semi-urban spaces to meet demand through a culturally-aware approach that is rooted in community mobilization and leadership. Cultural awareness in educational policy within

Afghanistan might not seem particularly relevant. Afghanistan is often portrayed as a homogenous country rooted in religion and strict cultural practices. The reality is a country with 34 provinces with over a dozen languages, various ethnic groups, and different regional identities. Hence, the meeting of people from rural and urban spaces is also a coming together of different cultures—a critical point that has implications for education, in particular, how families view educational spaces and content. My study sheds light on perceptions and experiences with education more broadly as well as with community-based education.

As urban and rural spaces continue to be shaped by external forces, the boundaries between the two become less defined, urging researchers to redefine conceptualizations and simplistic dichotomies. The culture of Kabul no longer resembles the "urban culture" of the 1960s and 1970s when the city had a smaller population. Terminology changes in Afghanistan's official community-based education policy documents represent some of these demographic changes. Whereas in the 1940s, community-based education was referred to as village schools, today they are called *makatib-e mahali* or local schools. Roshan Street is emblematic of larger global patterns in urbanization and displacement—much of which is understudied (UNFPA, 2020). The site of this study, therefore, is unique and timely, and sheds light on contemporary realities concerning opportunities and entrenched inequalities in the Global South.

Beyond focusing on a growing semi-urban space, I purposefully selected (Maxwell, 2005) this particular community-based school on Roshan Street for several reasons. First, the school meets the definition of community-based school outlined in the MOE guidelines: local teachers, central location, presence of school *shura*, and the

involvement of an NGO and the MOE. By utilizing official demarcations, the study offers implications for policy and practice more generally.

Second, the school captures diversity along several dimensions: gender, ethnicity composition, language, and migration pathways (internal and across-borders)—making it a rich site to explore community within a context of displacement and movement. Third, both teachers were recognized for their strong teaching skills as well as management of the school by the NGO, making the school a somewhat exceptional case from which to draw lessons to inform the development of other schools. Importantly, focusing on a healthy and strong case in a broader context of war, extreme poverty, and displacement aligns with the principle of searching for goodness. Finally, pragmatic security factors also determined the selection of the school. The school's location in a bustling area near a main highway made it relatively safer as there were many paths to enter and exit the neighborhood in case of security threats. In Afghanistan, security—in the valleys, the cities, and the places in between—has always been deeply connected to relationships. The Qari's consent to be part of the study—allowing me to spend considerable time at the school—gave me credibility as a trusted guest in the school community. Through his participation, I was also able to gain access to students, families, and *shura* members.

The community-based school at Roshan Street consists of two classrooms with two teachers, whom I call the Qari and Ustad Yusra. The Qari, a religious scholar and community leader, is a 38 year-old man from Kapisa province with a long family history in the neighborhood. The school is located in his home. He teaches the Pashto instruction class with a total class size of 53 boy and girl students. Ustad Yusra is an 18 year-old college student, also from Kapisa and a distant relative of the Qari's, who lives north of

the school in an area that I consider to be outside of the radius of the school community as none of the students in either class travel that far. Ustad Yusra teaches the Dari instruction class, which consists of 47 girl and boy students. While 2018 was the first year of the school, the Qari has a long history of service in the community, including offering Qur'an and Arabic classes in his home to the neighborhood children.

I relied on my pre-established relationship with an international NGO based in the US to select the research site. NGO, or *mossessa*, is how the locals referred to the international actors; therefore, I have also chosen to adopt this language. The NGO's excellence in teacher training and contextualization of curricular content enabled me to examine local, national, and global forces that shape classroom content and pedagogical practices. Stakeholders from all three levels are present in the Global South where central education systems are in the process of development and depend on international aid (Menashy, 2019). The local staff of the NGO connected me to a number of community-based school teachers in Kabul, including the ones at Roshan Street. I introduced myself as a graduate student who was interested in learning about community involvement in community-based education. At Roshan Street, separating myself from the NGO staff took time and multiple conversations about graduate school and research. There was a noticeable difference in my interactions with teachers and students after the first couple of weeks of classroom observations. Teachers and students were more relaxed and more willing to share their perspectives over time. At one point, I was asked to fill in for a teacher who was absent due to a death in the family.

This study was approved by Harvard's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for meeting the University's strict ethical standards. Given the unstable context of Kabul, I

had to balance personal safety with the safety of participants. As part of this process, the two teachers in the study were informed about my American identity. However, in conversation with others working in Afghanistan and the University's IRB, we came to the decision that disclosing my American identity to other participants would be unnecessary and pose unwarranted risk to myself as well as potentially to participants by virtue of association with me. While I do not believe the members of the school community posed direct risk, crime is widespread in Kabul and therefore I had to take every measure to ensure my safety and ability to conduct in-depth ethnographic research over a long duration of time. To the other members of the community, I introduced myself as a college student. To my surprise, most participants were simply excited to speak with me and did not ask questions about my background. I believe this was possible because of my Afghan identity—my fluency in Dari and understanding of Pashto, physical appearance, and awareness of cultural nuances. I also believe the remarkable access that I had to various members of the community was possible because I am a woman in a professional role. My professional researcher identity enabled me to interact with men in public spaces, while my gender allowed me to enter private spaces to speak with women.

Data collection

I conducted a total of nine months of fieldwork from March to November 2018, which aligns roughly with the academic year in Afghanistan. Typically, schools in the country begin on the Persian New Year in March and final exams take place in the winter. Because 2018 was the first year of the community-based school in Roshan Street,

the first few months of the year focused on community mobilization and establishing the classrooms in the Qari's house. The school began later in the year around April; therefore able to attend almost all teacher training and *shura* training sessions with participants and to observe classroom changes that aligned with these trainings.

In the initial research design, observations were intended to allow me to conduct interviews. I began spending considerable time in classrooms and speaking with teachers and students in between classes as well as reviewing documents. I also introduced myself to the students as a college student who was interested in learning about their educational experiences. Given my own childhood experiences as a refugee as well as a new immigrant in the US, I was particularly keen about paying attention to any signs of discomfort, especially from children. I allowed participants to have a role in determining their level of engagement. My strongest relationships were formed with individuals who expressed openness and curiosity. As I spent more time in the field, I realized that rather than observations enabling richer interviews that observations would become the core of the data. I was able to gain important insights into relationships, pedagogy, and values through interactions in the site more easily than during interviews in which conversations felt stilted. Realizing participants' unfamiliarity and discomfort with one-on-one interviews, I prioritized observational data across classrooms and training sessions.

Being immersed in the field also enabled me to build strong relationships with teachers, which was critical to gaining access to students and the community. To gain their trust, I encouraged teachers to direct me to how I could be involved in their classrooms. Teachers decided where I would sit in their classrooms and whether they would request my assistance at any point in the year. Most of the time, they directed me

to sit in front of the whole class and take notes rather than participate in the lessons. While this might seem like a passive observer, it felt like it was the most appropriate way to participate in this context. As the academic year progressed, my participation changed in the two classes with teacher guidance. In between classes, I had more opportunities to speak with students. There were several points in the school year that indicated that some level of trust had been established and kept growing: being served tea in the classroom like a guest, being invited to visit the Qari's wife and younger children upstairs, being asked to substitute for a teacher. Through my relationship with the Qari and his family, I felt more comfortable to approach families for interviews later in the year. Below, I describe each element of the data collection in the order they occurred: document review, observations, and interviews.

Document review. To gain a deeper understanding of the policy landscape, I began research by visiting MOE and NGO representatives and collecting pertinent documents concerning the country's community-based education policies. In addition to reviewing the official 2012 CBE policy, I was also able to obtain an early draft of the 2018 CBE policy. I also reviewed teacher training materials created by the NGO.

Within the classroom, I had access to textbooks and teachers' lesson plans. The first grade material was straightforward and standardized. While these resources were helpful in becoming oriented to classroom routine, juxtaposing the standardized curriculum with extended observations of classroom teaching and teacher training provides a more nuanced and realistic illustration of classroom practices as well as teacher values and dispositions.

Participant observations. The portraiture methodology hinges on understanding "human behavior and experience in context" through "watching, listening to, and interacting with the actors over a sustained period of time" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, p. 11-12). As part of my interdisciplinary methodological approach, observations are critical to record changes in context, both visible and subtle, and to check and deepen understandings. My research involves observations of four settings connected to the community-based school: classrooms, teacher training seminars, *shura* training seminars, and *shura* meetings.

I spent most of my time in classrooms over the academic year. Within classrooms, I utilized an observation protocol to keep track of number of students, time, classroom configuration, and most importantly, classroom content. Classroom observational notes were supplemented with field notes that included broader happenings in the area outside of the classroom for added contextualization. To collect the type of "thin description" that portraiture demands, I began with "descriptive observations"—detailed documentation of lessons in each classroom, splitting the three-hour school day between the Qari's classroom and Ustad Yusra's (Werner, Schoepfle, Ahern,1987). These notes include written curricular content, teachers' speech, and students' speech and general reactions. As I established relationships with students and could identify most of the students by name, I shifted my focus from broad classroom observations to "focused observations" of individual students in an effort to capture more nuance and specificity (Werner, Schoepfle, Ahern, 1987). I utilized the same observation protocol, still noting curricular and pedagogical content to contextualize responses and interactions of individual students. I varied daily observations in each classroom by focusing on engaged as well as

disengaged students, on boys and girls, and on older and younger students. Lastly, I decided to spend a few full days in each classroom, rather than spending only half of the day in each, to ensure that I documented classroom routine and content for the full three hours. When class timing conflicted with teacher training seminars, I attended most of the seminars with the teachers and visited classrooms on some days to observe instruction by substitutes. These substitutes included a student and the Qari's cousin, a teacher at the adjacent mosque, rendering their relationship with the school pertinent to the study.

Observations of teacher training seminars and *shura* training seminars and meetings were more predictable in structure. Almost all sessions involved NGO instruction and application of new content as well as reflection on training. Observations of these trainings and meetings were critical in laying out the backstory of classroom pedagogy and community engagement. Most of the sessions were in Dari. The *shura* seminars included *shura* members from Roshan Street as well as *shura* members who represented a school a few blocks away. All of the *shura* members were elderly men. The teacher training seminars included around 30 men and women who are community-based school teachers from Kabul province. I observed almost two weeks of seminars spread out throughout the academic year and occasionally participated in seminar activities. Lunch breaks served as a good opportunity to interact with other teachers and compare teacher experiences and perspectives.

It is important to note that while two classrooms form the focus of the study, teacher training seminars as well as *shura* training seminars included participants from other community-based schools in Kabul. These seminars provided an opportunity to understand training across community-based schools as well as to engage with teachers

and *shura* members from other schools to compare experiences. One key learning from both seminars was the role of religious leaders and institutions in community-based schools. Almost half of the *shura* members had some training in Islamic Studies and almost all the male community-based school teachers were *qaris*. Seminars and meetings were regularly held in mosques and *madrassas*, highlighting the centrality of religious institutions in community development. In addition, some community-based classrooms were held in *madrassas* for part of the day (See Burde, Middleton, & Wahl, 2014 for more on mosque schools). The role of religious teaching is touched on in literature on community-based education (Kirk & Winthrop, 2008). This study sheds light on the depth of religious engagement in this type of education.

While there were pragmatic reasons to focus on participant observations, these observations are also substantively important. Careless and stereotypical representations of Afghans and Afghanistan that have provided fodder for the ongoing onslaught on the country would not be as easily facilitated had individuals spent time in Afghanistan to fully understand its linguistic, cultural, and religious contexts. Participant observation demands that researchers become part of the context to whatever extent possible. Indigenous scholars extend this concept and argue that researchers must stand in concert with participants to respect and protect participants and for understanding. This solidarity is not possible when researchers prioritize the goals of political think tanks and policy institutions, as has been the case for some ethnographers (Maximilian, 2011), violating trust of participants and making research on certain populations more difficult in the process. Solidarity or standing in concert with participants takes time, knowledge, and care. When I sat in front of classrooms taking notes, I knew this was not a passive form

of participation. Rather, in a culture that is grounded in hospitality and respect, I was being treated as a guest in the classroom. Thus, for me to participate appropriately in this context meant taking notes in the corner of the room. One of the contributions of this work is to provide rich documentation of people and the places with which they interact—the homes and cultures they continue to defend in the midst of war and displacement.

Interviews. Following initial months of observations of classrooms and training seminars, I conducted all of the interviews for this study in the last two months of fieldwork. As discussed, time in the classrooms was critical to building relationships with students and teachers and enabled me to prepare for one-on-one interviews. As one can imagine, conducting research in a context of extended instability, migration, and war is challenging in part because of the impact of these factors on social relations, and particularly on trust. Anila Daulatzai's (2013) dissertation "War and what remains: Everyday life in contemporary Kabul, Afghanistan" highlights strained relationships in Kabul, describing the city as a "landscape of mistrust and uncertainty" (p. 15). The breakdown of trust in Afghanistan, more so in urban spaces, has a long history, beginning in the 1980s and continuing to date as the population of Kabul has been, to a large extent, displaced and replaced multiple times. Despite decades of betrayal from within and abroad, realizing that trust remains at the local level in Kabul is contingent on close and persistent engagement with the local culture and space. Trust played a critical role in the establishment of the school as well as in my ability to collect interview data, which I discuss in more detail below.

I utilized semi-structured interview protocols with all participants: teachers (n=6), students (n=42), school council members (n=5), and families (n=20). With each of the two teachers, I conducted a total of three interviews based on Seidman's (2013) three interview series, focusing on 1) the life history of the teacher, 2) the details of the teaching experience, and 3) reflections on the meaning of teaching experiences. Interviews two and three followed a responsive interview structure (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), with questions related to patterns observed in classrooms and seminar trainings. For example, in Ustad Yusra's class, emphasis on uniforms and following rules and procedures emerged as salient themes, hence follow-up questions focused on these elements and the meanings Ustad Yusra attached to them. In contrast, focus on manners and faith was more evident in the Qari's classroom. Overall, questions focused on themes across classrooms as well as on unique features within each classroom.

Gender as well as personality and disposition shaped differential interviewing experiences. Ustad Yusra was very open to sharing her ideas from the beginning, which I believe was enabled due to gender norms that make it easier for people of the same gender to interact; whereas, it was more challenging to elicit specific details from the Qari. The Qari is also generally more reserved. Out of respect for the Qari's generous support of my presence in the school as well as understanding of gender norms, I considered other ways to add to my knowledge of him and his classroom. Midway through the fieldwork, I was able to develop a friendly relationship with his wife who was witness to the Qari's life in Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as the trajectory of the school. I took field notes on my discussions with his wife, who was open to sharing, about the school and the broader community.

Interviews took place in a variety of spaces chosen by participants. I interviewed the Qari, students, and all the members of the school *shura* in the meeting room of the school. Ustad Yusra invited me to her house for the interviews. Finally, some of the families chose to come to the school, whereas, others requested to speak in their homes, revealing subtle cultural differences between ethnic groups—all the Pashto speaking families preferred home visits. By encouraging participants to determine aspects of the interview arrangement, I hoped to promote agency and allow participants to make decisions that felt safe and appropriate in an environment where there were still many factors over which we had little control. In almost all cases this meant that there were multiple individuals present during the interviews. In homes, there were children, grandmothers, and other relatives. For example, Ustad Yusra's mother joined us for parts of her interviews. Considering how influential her mother was in her life, adding her mother's voice—which I had not initially planned to do—enhanced my understanding of Ustad Yusra's upbringing, values, and classroom practices. Allowing participants to make decisions about the arrangement of interviews also meant women participants are more represented than men in my data for the same gender norms discussed earlier. This over-representation serves as a strength of the study in many ways. First, while Afghan women have received much media attention since the 2001 US-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan, Afghan women's perspectives, especially those of non-elite women, have been absent (Abirafeh, 2009). Second, like in many cultures, Afghan women play an important role in the education of their children. While men work outside the home, women are at home during the day and make decisions about children's daily schedules, pass on cultural norms, and discuss school content. Moreover, infusing interviews with

family perspectives aligns well with some of the core elements of the conceptual framework. Afghan culture is one that is marked by interdependence so much so that disconnecting the individual from his or her family becomes illogical and problematic within the cultural framework.

A final note about interviews concerns the depth of the data I was able to collect. Many participants responded in what might be understood as surface-level. There are a number of factors that might account for these types of responses. First, understanding the religious context, specifically Islamic frameworks, is vital to interpreting the depth of data. For instance, when I asked a grandmother whether she believes her grandchildren's future will be better, she responded, "That's in the hands of Allah." From an Islamic standpoint, this does not mean that families, communities, or even the state do not bear responsibility for paving a better future for children. My knowledge and practice of Islam as well as other conversations with families confirm this. I did not probe further in some instances because the gravity of the responses was clear in context, even with few words spoken. In my findings, I weave similar statements with religious context as well as conversations from other participants to shed light on the weight of such perspectives. To some readers, this worldview might seem fatalistic and simplistic, even outdated. However, there is nothing simplistic in connecting the temporary life of this world with a spiritual reality that transcends the physical world. There is something in this worldview for all of us to learn.

Second, I believe interviews were less illuminating than I originally thought because of the unfamiliar process interviews were for participants. Given the severe security and economic contexts of the country, to reflect on current situations and share

intimate details with a researcher seemed like a privilege most people did not possess. Often, I was met with confused looks when I asked participants to reflect on classroom activities and relationships. The kinds of organic conversations I was able to have with participants along the way were more comfortable for participants and enabled me to weave different pieces of data from different moments and craft rich narratives. I take it as my responsibility as an observant researcher to do the work to contextualize statements, in order that we may appreciate them. Marrying observational data with interview data was critical to achieve clarity and depth.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this project is based on an ongoing, iterative process that is common in many qualitative research methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During the data collection process, I complemented my observation protocols with field notes, or impressionistic records in portraiture, concerning patterns regarding pedagogy, interactions between individuals, questions, and preliminary hypotheses about the meaning and cultivation of community within and across classrooms. For example, in the first few months, I noted the lack of interaction between classes and the outside community. Parents were almost entirely absent from the school environment. As I spent more time within the classrooms, the role of teachers in the process of community development *within* classrooms as well as the role of community institutions became more resonant. The intense security context as well as gender norms attuned me further to the subtle ways school and the broader community interacted (i.e., Qari's phone calls home). Community was there but emerged in ways I did not expect. These observations

compelled me to revise initial assumptions and pay greater attention to classroom activities and subtle interactions and the history of relationships.

After typing all of my field notes, observational notes, and transcribing all interviews, I utilized Atlas.ti to code the data. I began with a round of open (i.e. grounded) coding to analyze data line-by-line to explore emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout coding, to draw out and build "emergent themes" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), I kept in mind the portraitist's "five modes of synthesis, convergence, and contrast," which encompass: 1) listening for repetitive refrains, and 2) resonant metaphors, 3) identifying cultural and institutional rituals, 4) looking for patterns across multiple forms of data using triangulation, and 5) revealing contrasting or dissonant patterns across perspectives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 193). This approach ensured that analysis was informed by patterns across the data as well as discrepant data. The ecological logic within portraitist methodology is apparent across the findings. For example, in each chapter I examine cultural and institutional influences in addition to individual experiences and perspectives. Resonant metaphors emerged saliently in some sections more than others. For example, "living in light"—a phrase the Qari used to described the purpose of education—aptly described many facets of his orientation to life and work at the family and community levels.

Three broad themes emerged across the data—trust, belonging, and relationships. I conducted "focused coding" to "pinpoint and develop" these themes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). The writing process was also iterative and served as a way to further refine themes, and add nuance and context. In particular, I met with an academic coach who reviewed early drafts of each chapter, to discuss clarity, the narrative arc, as well as remaining

puzzles and questions. After each 90-minute session, I revisited the data, made notes about how themes connect and where to bring in more data, and revised drafts accordingly. My academic advisor reviewed field notes, early memos, and complete drafts of chapters and provided additional feedback on analysis, structure, and content. Given that I was working with multiple sources of data, this iterative and interactive method of analysis through writing was instructive in crafting well-rounded narratives.

Authenticity

Portraiture, in line with other approaches to qualitative research (Willig, 2008), positions authenticity as the standard for validity, seeking resonance with three audiences: the portraitist, the participants, and the readers (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As a researcher in a place I call one of my homes, the "standing in concert with participants" orientation compelled me to ask questions throughout the research process to assess authenticity as a researcher and for participants: Am I asking contextually generative questions? How do participants feel around me? How do I feel around them? Signs that I had "[captured] the essence and resonance of the actors' experience and perspective" emerged when students began chatting with me during breaks, when families shared stories of pain, and when teachers voiced their frustrations with lack of support (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 12). To strengthen authenticity with participants, I relied on oral communication to share observations and findings and check my understanding. As a researcher using the case study method, it was also important for me to capture nuance through multiple sources of data from which I could triangulate. While authenticity requires a rich description of actors within their context, to respect

boundaries in Afghan culture and avoid reinforcing stereotypes, I practice ethnographic refusal in some areas.

Finally, to realize authenticity with readers, I rely on multiple sources of data to compose portraits rich in "thin" description to support the "thoughtful, discerning interpretation" that constitutes "thick" description (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 91). By documenting the complexity of community development, as the portraitist, one of my aims is for readers to "see themselves reflected" in the portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 14). To verify the extent to which resonance has been achieved and to detect remaining gaps, I shared my findings with multiple interpretative communities that include my academic coach, my dissertation committee, and graduate student peers. These measures also support efforts to ensure internal validity.

Language and translation

Dari is my native language. Since most Afghans in Kabul are bilingual in Dari and Pashto, conducting interviews in Dari was possible for most participants. To prepare for the interviews, I translated all of my interview protocols into Dari with a research assistant to ensure clarity. In some cases where participants (families and students) only spoke Pashto, I requested assistance from others to help me translate the questions. My basic understanding of Pashto made it possible to conduct classroom observations and interviews without a translator. Not relying on a third party enabled me to build strong connections with participants. Moreover, for security purposes, I was advised by the NGO not to bring in additional individuals to the site. Since the school was in a private home, there were also cultural reasons to restrict access to outside visitors.

Lastly, I want to note some language and translation choices in my findings. One of the challenges with writing about a context like Afghanistan in English is that English is situated within (western) cultural and historical contexts that, for the most part, vastly differ from the lived experiences of Afghans. Words like traditional, religion, rural, and village conjure cultural references that are antiquated, binary, and, in many cases, understood as the root of violence, oppression, and regressive ideas. Upon reflection on which words to utilize, I believe some of these concepts are unavoidable and critical to understanding Afghans and Afghanistan. Full immersion into Afghanistan as discussed above means seeing these words in the context that is Afghanistan. My findings lace layers of context to give some dichotomies—for instance, modern/traditional, secular/religious, rural/urban—between texture and complexity. Afghan society is built on religion and tradition, yet there are differences and disagreements about the level of influence religion should have and different traditions across the country. Rural has become part of urban in Kabul but ideas connected to rural and urban identities remain salient. As much as possible, I have also tried to employ Dari and Pashto words as these best capture nuance and meaning in context. Yet, readability for a broad audience, as emphasized in portraiture, is also important to me and to the spirit of this work. The openness and generosity that define Afghan culture shape decisions I have made through this entire process.

Chapter 5: Trust

"The nearest of you to me on the Day of Judgment will be the one who is best in character."
Prophet Muhammad

Sitting in Ustad Yusra's cozy living room decorated with soft floor cushions, a blue, floral Turkish rug, and a large flat screen TV mounted on the wall, I ask Yusra about her childhood. Confident and articulate beyond her 18 years, Yusra is a first-year computer science student at a college in the city and a teacher at the community-based school. Her rosy skin accentuates her big, round eyes and thick black eyebrows. Wearing a bright orange tunic and matching loose trousers her aunt brought from Pakistan, in sharp contrast to the subdued, professional attire she wears at school, Yusra says, "My family is from Kapisa, but I was born in Jalalabad." Her family relocated to Kabul after the US-led intervention. While her family has managed to create a stable life where she and her three sisters can pursue higher education—a rare opportunity for many in the country— her mother, a veteran schoolteacher, who joins us occasionally in the living room, asserts that security is the main hindrance to education in Afghanistan. She illuminates how much security weighs over her daily life, "Right now, when they go to college and come back, my heart is worried. Even when I go to school, I don't know if I will come back alive." It's a sentiment many Afghans share with me. Given pervasive experiences with displacement and ongoing, daily risks to security, the development of community seems elusive at first glance, and altogether more remarkable given the conditions.

As the conversation transitions to students, I grapple with how such a diverse group of students is enrolled at the community-based school. Unlike most questions where

Yusra pauses and reflects on her response, this time she says without hesitation, "People's trust in the Qari is good in this environment. People wouldn't allow their children to go to anyone's house." Trust is essential to the cultivation of community. In a context where the lines between urban and rural cultures are more complicated than the past and pervasive experiences with mass migration and multifaceted safety and security concerns, trust is cultivated over time in subtle and unspoken ways through seemingly insignificant moments that signal presence, familiarity, and predictability. In particular, in a context of mass migration where the ties of kinship are fewer, faith and tradition hold people together. In this school community, the head teacher, the Qari, is central to establishing trust as his family history, religious authority and service enable him to connect to multiple segments of the community, both native and displaced families.

"Trust" weaves the experiences and perspectives of the head teacher with those of students and community members. In this chapter, I begin by examining the composition of the community and several students' pathways to the community-based school, exploring the multifaceted risks involved in pursuing an education. Then, I explore one mother's perspective in how these risks are mitigated by the head teacher. This leads to an examination of the Qari's family history of service. Finally, the portrait illuminates the community structures that reinforce trust, ending with new possibilities for further education and community connections that trust opens.

The make-up of community

"In a society where 99 percent of the population prays and fasts, where each person regards themselves a Muslim, why should we have corruption in an Islamic

country? Whether it is in the highest ranks or the middle, or the lowest, we face many types of corruption in our society—economic corruption, or political, or corruption in education, or even religious corruption in some cases." We listen to Mullah Azizullah bemoan the state of affairs in Afghanistan over the radio as cars swerve left and right on the Kabul-Logar highway, making way for a convoy of sand-colored tanks and massive, covered trucks in which the soldiers are not visible to the eye.

Cars come to a stop, but pedestrians, many of whom are students in the nearby schools along the highway as well as in the neighborhoods, continue their trek to their destinations. I wait patiently, not knowing whether to keep the window closed or open it. With the window down, dust and fumes from the generators along the street sting my eyes and create a film of debris on my skin. But with the window closed, the 90-degree temperature feels suffocating. I wonder how the soldiers in the tanks and trucks can endure the heat. Mullah Azizullah, alluding to Afghanistan being labeled the most corrupt country in the world for consecutive years, continues, "Why should we be in a condition where others ridicule and mock us, saying 'you're Muslim.' What's strange is that Afghans probably pray more than anyone else. If someone actually understands the meaning of the prayer would one be engaged in corruption?" The inward-facing criticism of the *mullah* is commendable when the outward aggressions on average citizens, like the many ways life must stop so war can go on, are so evident. Across radio broadcasts and in mosques and *madrassas*, *mullahs* call for moral discipline in a city where the destructive mixture of crime, corruption and war undermines the foundations of society.

Traffic starts moving and we reach the checkpoint with the two police officers armed with AK-47s. I see the silhouettes of the male driver and two male passengers.

One soldier speaks with the driver as the other puts a device with a flat surface underneath their car, perhaps a mirror, and scans the perimeter of the car. The officer with the scanner nods to the other officer and the car is permitted to pass the checkpoint. Our car reaches the checkpoint next. One soldier lowers his head and scans the inside of the car. When he sees me, he waves his hand to the driver, signaling the green light to continue. I see this happen many times on the highway. Cars with women and children inside are rarely stopped for screening. Over time, the pattern of predictability in the officers' actions—grounded in tradition that limits interaction between nonrelated men and women—provides me a sense of relief.

We finally reach Roshan Street, drive past the grocery stalls and construction workers and rows of multi-story houses behind concrete walls. Mullah Azizullah's voice lifts on the radio, with disappointment and gravity in his question, "What does the Qur'an say about corrupt people? Some people think as long as no one sees their corruption they will be safe. In the meantime, the Qur'an says Allah knows what the corrupt people do, He knows what you're doing." The *mullah* implores each listener to reflect on how they trespass the rights of others. As he continues, the car drives around the bend of the street and I see the golden tiles of the three-floor mosque appear. We pass Kaka Qayoom, a petite seventy-year-old man who dons black sunglasses at all times, a member of the school *shura*, or council. The school *shura* is a council that consists of elderly men who participate in community mobilization and school management efforts. Kaka Qayoom smiles, puts his right hand on his heart and tilts his head forward, a silent greeting that welcomes us back to the neighborhood. With a warm toothless grin and wearing a black vest over a khaki *parahan tomban*, Kaka Qayoom can be seen quietly walking up and

down the street throughout the day, chatting with storeowners and neighbors. His presence creates a sense of normalcy in the midst of the ear-splitting sound of cement trucks, children's chatter on their way to school, and cars that bypass the congested highway by taking the back roads.

We park in front of the teal gate of the Qari's home. I slowly and hesitantly walk into the Qari's classroom, nervous that I might be disrupting the class that has already begun. "*Fa, pesh, foo*!" the voices of little children repeat in unison. They are in the midst of a Qur'an Kareem lesson on the diacritical mark, *pesh*, a small round symbol that when placed on top of a letter gives it the "oo" phoneme. As I turn toward the entrance and see the children sitting in rows toward the door, their smiling faces immediately exclaim, each little boy and girl competing to be louder: "Asalaamu alaikum, *ustad*!" It seems every adult here has a title, and the one assigned to me is *ustad*. A more formal term for *malim* or teacher, *ustad* is used in a variety of ways and can be translated to mean "master." An *ustad* is someone who is a master at what they do. Teachers and professors are referred to as *ustad*, as are skilled mechanics and restaurateurs who teach their craft to apprentices. The use of *ustad* conveys respect for individuals' expertise and positional authority. More broadly it epitomizes a culture of formality and respect between students and adults that is fostered within educational spaces in Afghanistan. Adherence to these small practices signals shared regard for tradition, creating a foundation for trust.

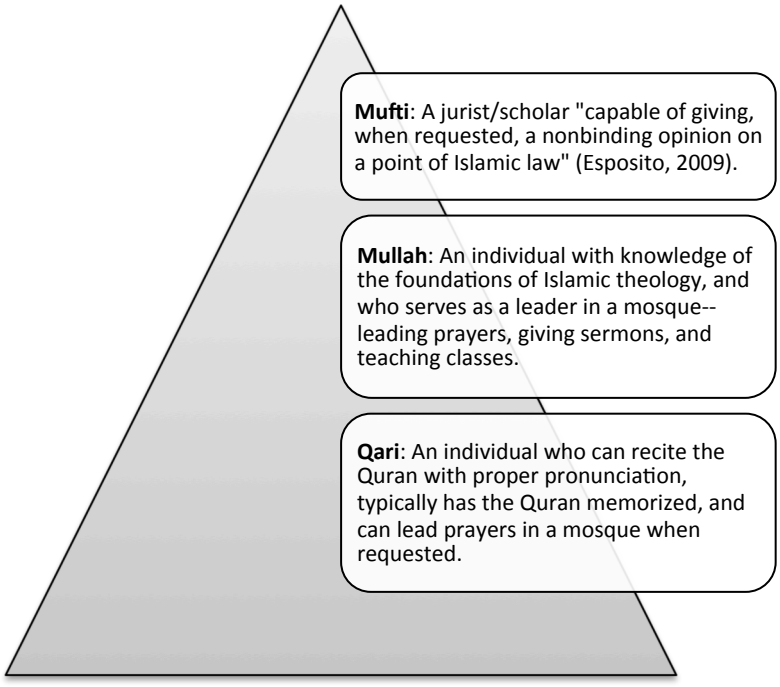
I respond to the class, "walaikumasalaam," and quickly sit in what has become my designated seating, a two feet by two feet space in between the wall and the metal supplies box right in front of the class. While I feel some discomfort facing the whole class, I do not object to the Qari's suggestion, making an effort to respect his authority

and build trust—to be a small part of this community. To my delight, subtle signs emerge that ease my discomfort. The first week there is a small floor cushion that covers the cement floor—a small gesture in a culture where hospitality is extended to any guest. By the second week, I find a navy blue pillow against the wall—an unspoken sign that I am welcome to stay.

The metal box creates a barrier between me and the Qari who stands in front of the board during most of the class. He is a tall, slender man with a slightly protruding belly and a chest-length graying beard that makes him look older than 38. With peachy skin and large silver-rimmed glasses, he wears white *parahan tomban* and a black turban with one wing tucked into the turban and the other resting on his chest. Some of his students call him *ustad*, but most call him Qari, an honorific given to individuals who have memorized the Qur'an with proper recitation (See Figure 1 for hierarchy of religious authority). And, in Afghanistan being a *qari* can be more respectable than an *ustad*. There is a high degree of trust between community members and religious leaders. Staff from NGOs that fund and support community-based education also have an understanding of the important role that religious leaders serve. One NGO representative explains, "CBE teachers should be someone the entire community trusts. Many communities prefer *qaris* and *mullahs*." He emphasizes, "In some communities there are men with bachelor's, but the community prefers *qari*." While men and women with bachelors may fulfill qualifications, particularly from the point of view of the state, that prepare them to teach children, people with bachelor's degrees do not necessarily hold a traditional role within communities the way that faith leaders do. Reasons for trust in faith leaders, like *qaris* and *mullahs*, are multidimensional and have to do with

perceptions of shared values in a context marked by transience, instability, and violence, where faith, often becomes the only constant that binds individuals and provides a sense of presence, familiarity, and reliability—all of which I find to be critical cornerstones of trust in this context. The weaving of these elements together to form trust, however, is not a given. As Mullah Azizullah explicates, people's experiences with corruption are not limited to the economic and political spheres, but also, extend to social interactions. As we learn in this portrait, faith leaders play an intimate role in the happenings of communities, from education to conflict resolution.

Figure 1: Hierarchy of religious authority in Islam



**Note: There are many more levels of religious authority, with interaction between levels and blurred boundaries. The three that are highlighted here are pertinent to this narrative.*

The Qari resumes with the lesson on Arabic alphabet diacritical marks. It is the beginning of August; the summer heat wave is in its second week. The Qari presses the switch to turn on the industrial fan by the door but there is no electricity again. The room is filled to the brim from the entrance to the back bookcases with around 40 children, ages 5 to 13. Standing in front of the white board, he repeats, placing the ruler on each alphabet written on the board, "*Fa, pesh, foo. Ta, pesh, too, ha, pesh, hoo."* The subject of Qur'an Kareem typically consists of learning the Arabic letters in order to prepare children to transition to reading the Qur'an. And while the Arabic script is similar to Pashto and Dari, it includes diacritical marks, which make it possible for someone who does not know Arabic to read the Qur'an.

Sitting in the room, I can hear Ustad Yusra's class across the yard repeating after her. "*SHAM-SHAD*," she enunciates the individual syllables in the word "sunshine." There are fewer students in her Dari-speaking class, around 30 on a typical day with an age range of 5 to 18. While the classes differ in enrollment, language, and the qualifications of their teachers, experiences with displacement shape the make-up of the community. Ustad Yusra thinks "80%" of the population of Roshan Street consists of migrants from the provinces. Many natives, including Kaka Qayoom, who is on the school *shura*, confirm this: "In this area, the only [natives] who are left is my family. There's also Kaka Suleiman. And, there's Habibullah's son." He, however, estimates that less than five percent of the locals are natives. Having lived approximately five decades longer than Ustad Yusra, his understanding of "native" falls along a much longer timeline and therefore includes fewer people. I ask, "Where did they go?" He explains, "The wealthy ones left Afghanistan. They went abroad. The ones that are left are poor." His

new neighbors are business owners, repatriated refugees, and internally displaced families from the provinces of the country, many of whom with children whose education has been disrupted. Given the shifting make up of this space and widespread experiences with displacement, trust is not inherent, as it may have been in villages where kinship ties go back multiple generations. Trust must be built.

Pathways to school

After repeating the lesson several times, the Qari asks for volunteers to come to the board and read the letters, while he sits and takes attendance. Asiya, a foot taller than the shortest children in the class, who sits next to the wall a few rows up from the entrance comes to the board. She has wheat-colored skin, dark almond-shaped eyes, and a warm, wide smile. Wearing a long black dress with black trousers and a white scarf, Asiya has a calm and soft personality. Unlike the other children who take every opportunity to chat with their neighbors when given a chance during arrival and transitions between subjects, Asiya sits in her spot on the cobalt blue mat, with her eyes fixed on the board or one of her subject books. She is clearly bright and advanced for a first grade class, not just evidenced by her performance in a simple Arabic lesson but in all the subjects I observe. She is one of the recent returnees from refuge in Pakistan. Originally from the province of Logar, Asiya's family is also now internally displaced in Kabul. The community-based school is the first formal educational experience for Asiya.

If experiences with displacement were not destabilizing enough, students and their families face daily threats to a sense of safety that undermine trust. When I ask Kaka Qayoom why so many children, especially girls, are still out of school in the area, he

says, “What can I say?” He pauses and adds, “Conditions are bad these days. Conditions have gotten very bad.” “Recently?” I probe. “Yes, after the fighting, conditions have gotten very bad. Because of this some people don’t allow their daughters to go to school.” As I continue to inquire about the history of the place I realize Kaka Qayoom’s conception of “recent fighting” stems four decades to the “*jihad*”—what the locals call the resistance against the Soviets. The country’s “recent” waves of conflict are experienced as a continuous period of war. I also hear in his voice a reluctance to be explicit about what he means by “conditions.” I ask, “Can you say more about these conditions—do you mean security conditions or is there something else as well?” He clarifies, “No, no, there’s something else… for example, when girls go to school there are boys. The boys follow them.” Kaka Qayoom’s clarification reveals important distinctions between safety and security. Security typically involves physical well-being—the external elements, tanks, helicopters, and bombings, over which individuals have little control. Safety, on the other hand, is connected to behavior and attitudes that are deemed culturally appropriate. While the lack of security can be destabilizing and traumatic, the lack of safety can also stand in the way of life progressing in a healthy way. Moreover, while security pertains to external risks that can be mitigated through decisions to walk in groups and take certain paths, establishing a sense of safety is connected to trust in individuals.

Kaka Qayoom, who is involved in the neighborhood *shura* that represents a couple of blocks of houses, in addition to the school *shura*, and has the opportunity to interact with various families, highlights the cultural nuances of the people who make the community. The neighborhood *shura,* which also consists of male representatives from

the locality, engage in consultative processes to resolve disputes and discuss community interests. When speaking about out-of-school children, Kaka Qayoom explains, "A lot of them are Pashto speakers. The Farsi[3] speakers' daughters are all in school. They go to Abdul Hakim and study." The Qari's much larger Pashto class seems to support this argument, however, this binary understanding becomes more complicated when examining different students' experiences and paths to the community-based school.

Maira and her cousins, Laila and Zala, who are all Farsi-speaking natives of the neighborhood, were students at the nearest public school, Abdul Hakim High School, for two years prior to enrolling here. Their educational trajectory was disrupted one cold, gray day in the winter of 2017. Maira, Laila, and Zala, meet at their front door at Roshan Street and walk the one-mile journey to the public school along the Kabul-Logar highway. Wearing their black and white school uniforms, the girls lock hands and walk on the narrow, uneven path along the stalls of groceries and electrical equipment shops that adorn the sides of the street. The path is bumpy and curvy. Some areas in front of the stalls and buildings are paved, while rocks poke out of the hardened earth in other spots. The girls make their way to the school through crowds of men and young boys gathered to buy groceries or fix their cars or electrical equipment. When they finally reach the school, the cousins patiently wait outside of the school walls in a sea of girls until the early shift is dismissed and their shift is permitted to enter through a narrow doorway by the school guard. As they wait, they see tanks driving toward Logar. This is a common sight—military convoys driving along the highway—so they do not read too much into. When the bell rings, the girls make their way through the small door and walk to their

[3] While the name of one of the official languages is Dari, locals often refer to it as Farsi. The names are interchangeable and refer to the same language.

second-grade classroom on the second floor. “We usually sat by the window but that day we decided not to sit there,” Maira tells me.

The girls had become frustrated with the school, not just the long walk along an insecure path, but also chronic teacher absenteeism that, at times, compelled students to become the teachers for their class. Laila recalls, “That wasn’t a good school. The teacher came one day and not one day.” As the girls sit in their new spots in the classroom and eagerly wait for the lesson to begin, a deafening explosion shatters the windows of the school. Billowing smoke fills the surrounding area, seeping into the schoolyard and into the classrooms. “It was dark,” Laila says. Maira describes, “There was so much blood on the street.” Zala adds, “It scared everyone.” The school staff, shocked and unprepared for an attack, keep the children within the confines of the school until the authorities outside signal that it is safe to leave. Later, students learn a magnetic bomb had been attached to one of the military vehicles on the highway and was set off near the school, causing the windows to shatter. While locals are accustomed to seeing military convoys and checkpoints along the highway, bombings and military confrontation are rare. Surprisingly, until very recently, southern Kabul had been relatively safe as it is neither the heart of the city—the target of armed militant groups—nor an isolated, rural area—the site of military campaigns. Unsurprisingly, their families pulled the girls out of school for the remaining of the year.

Whereas Maira and her cousins’ terrifying experience highlights the most extreme case of insecurity in the vicinity, other students share incidents that also disrupted their education and paved their path to the community-based school. Bushra, from the Qari’s class, dropped out of Abdul Hakim because of the distance from her home. Determined to

continue her education, her family enrolled her at another public school on the other side of the town. The journey to this school, however, also came with security challenges as it required crossing a busy street. One day, "she got hit by a car on the way to school." Lying on the street, a kind driver immediately took action and drove her to a hospital. Her family, unaware of their daughter's whereabouts, searched for her, gathering information from witnesses that finally led them to the hospital where Bushra was being treated. Bushra also dropped out of school soon after.

Shahla, the oldest student in the school who is Ustad Yusra's class, also attended Abdul Hakim for several years. Like Maira and her cousins, Shahla also commented on the low quality of teaching at the high school, "[The teachers] just pass time. [They] come and play on their phones." Yet, the quality of the school did not serve as the reason she eventually dropped out after the third grade. Shahla describes threats to safety. She tells me three girls were abducted near the school. There were also rumors that one of the girls ran away with a boy. After this incident, her older brother did not allow her to go to school. In a culture based in honor and communal identity, family reputation is central to the maintenance of connections with the wider community. He had decided it was more important for his family to protect her reputation from similar rumors and accusations than allow her to continue her education at a subpar school. Thus, concerns about her safety explain the family's decision. As Mullah Azizullah's radio sermon illuminates, Afghans are not only concerned with political and economic corruption, but also moral corruption to which an education with Islamic grounding by trusted teachers is perceived to be the antidote, as illustrated later through Bushra's mother.

These girls' education was disrupted by factors that risked their security as well as their sense of safety, in particular their role within the wider community. While the opening of a school in their neighborhood mitigated some of the risks that exist on the long journey along the highway, conversations with parents reveal that cultivation of a school community connect to deeper concerns about moral upbringing. The presence of teachers whose values and practices seem familiar and predictable alleviate concerns about safety and foster trust.

Seeing oneself

Bushra's mother expresses her hopes for her daughter's education: "First we want the protection of their modesty. God forbid our reputation is tainted. Be well-behaved. Listen to parents. Pray, read Qur'an Shareef, go to school, learn something." Bushra lives about half a mile away from the school, in the opposite direction of Kabul-Logar highway where is there is more space between the homes and there are mainly newer developments and fewer trees. Over the span of a few months, I have developed a close relationship with the affectionate, energetic, and bright 10-year-old girl. She invites me to her home when summer transitions to fall—a momentary period when the lack of electricity feels more bearable. She welcomes me to their new rental that they moved into a few weeks ago, a clean, newly constructed house with a concrete-covered courtyard encircled by rooms along the perimeters. Bushra takes my hand and leads me to a room that does not seem to be fully furnished. Her sister-in-law, Zarghuna's mother, and her mother join me. We sit in front of the window in a small area covered by a rug and floor cushions along the walls. Zarghuna's mother brings a plate of purple, autumnal grapes

and places it in front of me. A small charpoy bed is placed directly across where we sit with neatly folded blankets on it. Although the family has not fully unpacked their belongings and furnished their home, the inside is spotless from dust and smoke that create a haze in the horizon. Home is a haven from the harsh environment. Bushra's mother has green eyes and speaks with a subtle lisp like her. Unlike her daughter, however, she doesn't have a Pashto accent in Dari. "We are from Paktia. I was born in Kabul," she says. While Kabul is an ethnically and linguistically diverse province, most of the residents, particularly the natives, speak Dari. Paktia, on the other hand, is inhabited almost entirely by Pashtuns who speak Pashto.

Describing a house in the neighborhood, "[That] was my dad's house. We grew up here. Then my brother sold [that house]. When he sold that we spent seven and a half years in front of the bakery… It has been eight years since we returned [to Kabul]." While she describes Paktia as "*watan*" (homeland) she never lived there herself. Raised in Kabul, her family was first displaced for three years to the eastern city of Jalalabad "when Najib was ousted," sparking the beginning of the civil war between *mujahideen* factions, and then to Peshawar, Pakistan for three years, and then back to Jalalabad for 16 years. Bushra was born in Jalalabad, two years prior to the family's return to Kabul. For families who had lived in the sheltered confines of Kabul, both the city and the wider province, the civil war shattered the relative stability the city experienced during the communist government of Najibullah. Families recount their histories through references to various political transitions and waves of displacement rather than specific dates or educational trajectories, highlighting the imprint of drastic and frequent political changes on the collective memories of citizens. Bushra, unlike her three older sisters whose

education was disrupted through these experiences of displacement within and across the borders of Afghanistan, is one of the lucky ones. She has lived in Kabul for most of her life and her families' economic conditions have improved over the years.

Bushra's mother is "happy" that her daughter has an opportunity to go to school that is close and safe, but she admits her family did not know the Qari prior to their children's enrollment in the school and had serious concerns about their security, prompted by news reports and rumors. She explains that when she enrolled her children, "The women neighbors asked, 'why did you enroll them there? What if they're *Daesh* or a different group? You should ask about it.'" The Arabic acronym for ISIS, which also means "bigot" in Arabic, the term *Daesh* is commonly utilized by Muslims to imply that the group's actions do not represent Islam. Surprised to hear that neighbors are concerned about *Daesh* activity as the group holds a small footprint in remote, eastern regions of the country and not Kabul, I ask if *Daesh* has been a problem here. She responds, "No. But we see it on the news and get scared." One of her neighbors cautioned her about enrolling her children, "You're at home. You don't know if they will put your kids in a car and kidnap them." She had seen reports of *Daesh* using schools as training grounds to indoctrinate children. Another neighbor whose daughter attended the Dari class reassured her, "We gathered information [about the school] and *inshallah* (God willing) it is not bad." For Bushra's mother, having faith in God's will meant first doing her part to ensure her children were secure and safe. She asked her husband to visit the school, but his full time job at a rickshaw business meant that he was not home during school hours in the morning to visit the school and learn more about the teachers. Still alarmed by the neighbors' questions, Bushra's mother finally took matters into her own hands and

visited the school. Pulling a blanket over her legs, she explains, “When I went, the teachers are good. These are the types of teachers we needed. We pray and read the Qur’an. My oldest son is a *qari*. I became happy when I saw the teachers. I don’t have any complaints.” I try to probe more to better understand how she knew these were good teachers. Did she speak with them? “No.” She just knew. She saw in them people who were familiar. She saw alignment between her families’ values and the teachers’—from their outer appearances, their scarves and their beards, and behavior with students. When I ask her to say more about teacher behavior, she instead tells me about behavioral changes in her children since beginning the class—her son tries to eat with his right hand; Bushra doesn’t talk back. I realize her interaction with the Qari was limited and that her impressions of the teacher are also connected to positive changes, grounded in religious and cultural understandings of proper etiquette and manners, she sees in her children. While her trust in the Qari was formed during her visit to the school, it further grew through witnessing changes in her children.

Sensing my bewilderment at how one can transition so quickly from fearing that violent extremists might run the school to trusting the teachers, she stresses, “During our time, these things didn’t exist. Now it’s good. Look you wear a scarf on your head. During our time it was very immodest. Women would wear leggings and walk around without a scarf, the students and the teachers. When our parents looked at them, then they wouldn’t let us go to school. There used to be a school nearby. It was a nice, large school. Boys and girls would go until the 12th grade. We weren’t allowed to go.” To Bushra’s mother, “these things” represent markers of her cultural upbringing, such as a headscarf. Growing up during the height of the communist regime in Kabul, Bushra’s mother and

neighbors who shared her values were excluded from the public education system because of rules and expectations around how a schoolgirl dressed. Living an honorable life, which at core meant abiding by practices of modesty, for her family was more important than an education an exclusionary and seemingly foreign system could offer. Markers of modesty are subtle. For Bushra's mother, what she saw in the Qari and Ustad Yusra not only contrasted with her images of schooling as a child but also the images of insincere and deceptive religiosity that groups like *Daesh* purport to defend.

She reflects more on her education. In addition to questions regarding modesty, the security situation between rival communist factions and rampant harassment closed any possibility of going to school, "There were the Khalqis and Parchami. There was a lot of harassment [against women]. My dad wouldn't let me [go to school]." While the structures and practices around school did not fit her family's values, they were not against investment in education. Some time later after she got married, the communist government distributed literacy books in the peripheries in an effort to increase literacy rates. "When I got married [the government] gave us books. I read them at home with my husband. Now it's good. I can read signs." According to Bushra's mother, educational opportunities have improved in significant ways for her children, "During our time, where were the madrassas? By God, there were none. My older brother, may God have mercy on him, he would go to this *masjid* and try to learn the [Arabic] alphabet."

Bushra's father, who does not know the Qari as well as the neighbors who live closer to the school, occasionally probes his daughter about her new teacher according to her mother, "Her dad sometimes jokes and asks, 'Is your teacher male or female? Do they joke with you?' She says, 'father, he is older than you. His beard is white. He doesn't

laugh and joke with us. He tells us to wash our hands before eating, say your testimony of faith, eat with your right hand, listen to your parents.'" She stresses, "We are content with him. We are content with God. We are content with their teachers." Bushra's mother's decision to visit the school rather than accept one neighbor's suggestion to enroll her daughter shows that trust is not inherent but rather an ongoing process. It is important to highlight that the family was aware the head teacher was a *qari*, but it was not until she saw the physical manifestations of faith that she felt her children and granddaughter would be safe. These physical manifestations—the presence of the Qari—reinforce a pattern of behavior, based in faith and tradition, that is familiar and reliable.

The Qari: history and service

The morning sunlight filters through the window in the meeting room of the Qari's house, warming the chilly autumn air. The Qari takes his seat on the floor cushion perpendicular to the one I sit on so that I have a view of his profile. I'm excited to learn more about the man who seems to have played a pivotal role in cultivating community and trust. A scholar of Islam, he rarely makes eye contact with me. Similar to the physical barrier that the supplies box creates between us in his class, avoidance of eye contact creates a symbolic boundary between genders, which enables a female researcher, like myself, to interact with a nonrelated man. Having grown up around Afghans as well as Muslims from around the world, it is a practice with which I am familiar and comfortable. I ask him about his family history and he begins by positioning his story in relation to his father. They are from the eastern province of Kapisa but have experienced displacement similar to his students. "A long time ago, when my father was young and in

school, they left [Kapisa]" settling in the city of Jalalabad, another regional urban hub that attracts students, scholars, and business people. His father attended university in Jalalabad and then relocated to the outskirts of Kabul, where the Qari and his two brothers and two sisters were born. Before the Soviet war, his father served as a judge in the presidential palace. His father lived a modest life in the outskirts of the city and was deeply involved in the affairs of the community, serving on the community *shura* and inviting opposing sides to his home to resolve disputes—an authority his educational credentials afforded him. Following the footsteps of his brothers and sisters, the Qari attended Abdul Hakim High School for six years.

He continues, "During the [civil] war, when the *mujahideen* took over Kabul and there were fights on the streets, conditions were very bad, we went to Pakistan." I don't probe more about how bad conditions were, as I already know from speaking with Kaka Qayoom and the Qari's wife about the tragedy that forced the family to flee. Kaka Qayoom, who was a young man, then, remembers the exact day. "The *Gilam Jam* killed [his father] near the street. One of the [the Qari's] sister's, maybe six or seven, was ill. He took her to the pharmacy in the evening. The little girl was in his arms. He was killed, his body lying next to a container. The medicine was scattered everywhere with blood." *Gilam Jam* refers to a group of former communists who partook in the civil war over control for Kabul. Kaka Qayoom believes the *Gilam Jam* targeted the Qari's father, while the Qari's wife's retelling suggests he was caught in a firefight between opposing factions. While the chaos of war seems to obscure facts, the impact of his death is clear. Fearing further threats to their security, the family packed their belongings and fled across the border to Pakistan where millions of Afghans found refuge in Peshawar and

the surrounding areas, ending the Qari's education at Abdul Hakim and his elder brother, Qari Omar's, dream of becoming a medical doctor. With sorrow and heaviness in her voice, Khadija, the Qari's wife, shares that Omar's medical school textbooks and notebooks are all downstairs in the bookcases in the Qari's classroom. "He was brilliant, smarter than all his brothers," she tells me. Omar became the sole provider of his family, while the Qari continued his education in Pakistan.

"[In Pakistan] I went to *madrassa*, not school. I started from the beginning and studied until the end," the Qari speaks about his educational trajectory. Even as a young man in Afghanistan, he was committed to following in his father's footsteps of becoming an Islamic scholar. After the sixth grade in Kabul, he applied for a competitive program in Arabic studies in the city and was accepted. While his life took an unexpected turn after his father's death, access to a plethora of *madrassas* in Pakistan enabled him to continue toward achieving his goal. After nine years of studying Islamic sciences at a *madrassa*, the Qari continued to university and reached the status of a *mufti*. As shown in Figure 1, this is one of the highest statuses a scholar of Islam can reach. He is a *qari*, a *mullah* at the adjacent mosque, and a *mufti*, which means he plays various roles in the community. While, some community members, like Kaka Qayoom, call him *mufti*, most still call him *qari*—a title of respect that denotes the least distance to the average person. Moving to Pakistan did not cease his connections to the people of Roshan Street entirely. Many other families also migrated; some reconnected with the Qari's family in Pakistan. One mother tells me, "We grew up here and then moved to Pakistan during the war. We kept in touch with the Qari's family." Others stayed with the Qari's family during short visits to Pakistan to meet family or seek medical care. Shahla explains, "Our families

were close, ever since a long time ago, before his father passed away, his father passed away here, we met with them a lot. When they were in Pakistan, we also stayed in touch with them." This practice continues as part of his extended family is still in Pakistan. Another mother tells me, "When my sister-in-law was sick we went to Pakistan and stayed with the Qari's brother."

After graduation, to support his growing family, he taught at a *madrassa* and worked at a store selling electrical equipment. The Qari reflects positively on his life as a refugee in Pakistan because of abundant educational and work opportunities as well as security. He says, "In Pakistan, in one street there were five to six schools and *madrassas* in each school. *Madrassas* are free." By extension, he thinks recently repatriated refugees are more motivated to learn, "The new immigrants put a lot more effort in. Because where they lived they saw education, *madrassa*, everything." He continues, "People who are here, compared to [immigrants], are more stressed. For one thing, the conditions, the killings are bad here. You hear about these things in the news." Living away from war in Pakistan enabled him to earn a degree in higher education and provide for his family, but after 24 years of life as a refugee, the citizens of his host community were no longer welcoming. "Conditions became bad. For example, at our *masjid* people were saying bad, unnecessary things. 'Get out. Get lost.'" Finally, in 2017 the Qari returned to the home where he grew up, leaving behind Omar and his sisters.

And, home had changed. "This area used to be fields. These houses weren't here before. Before, when you went out you could see the fields. There were no constructions," the Qari reflects. The changes to the landscape mirrored changes in the demographics of the area. "Perhaps a lot of people came from the peripheries because of

the fighting, because security is not good. Or maybe because there is work here." One thing that surprised the Qari was the impact of conflict on peoples' educational aspirations. In particular, the community lacked a free *madrassa* for the local children. The mosque next to his house was in a shoddy condition, lacking water for worshippers to cleanse before praying and enough space for children. Boys and girls idly roamed the streets without purpose. After he found a job in the city selling electrical equipment at a friend's store as well as a teaching position at an all girls' school in the afternoon, he began reconstruction of the mosque with financial support from a relative in Canada and some of the wealthier neighbors. Despite the challenges that forced his family to return, his time in the neighboring country seems to have reinforced the dedication to education and service to community his father instilled in him.

Remodeling the mosque, however, presented challenges and resurfaced tensions that seemed to be brewing in the community over who can have access and the size of the building, particularly amongst families who did not know the Qari prior to his migration to Pakistan. In fact, families who knew the Qari's father, like Shahla and Maira's families, were delighted by his return. They knew his father and trusted his intentions. Laila and Zala's father who was a young boy when the Qari's family lived in the neighborhood reflects, "The Qari's father was a pure man, a learned scholar…because of this I told the girls go [to the school] because the family is learned." As the reconstruction of mosque proceeded and an extra floor was added to the two-story building, rumors swirled amongst some neighbors that the Qari was planning to live in the building himself. Why else would he spend his time and resources on rebuilding the mosque while he lived in a dilapidated house? These speculations reflect the level of distrust that had

developed between neighbors who had few connections amongst each other besides their common search for a secure place to live.

One can see the effect of conflict and displacement on the lack of community in urban Afghanistan. Families in clay houses who struggle to pay the rent and food live next to families in concrete mansions, covered in lush Turkish rugs and intricate, fine curtains, each one trying to create an oasis within the physical confines of their houses, neglecting the development of the neighborhood and shared spaces. This pattern can be observed throughout Kabul. Some families were upset that the new building was so high that congregants on the third floor would be able to see onto their courtyards, impinging on the privacy of women. Yet, there are many three-story mansions in the vicinity and neighbors with smaller houses have had to reconcile with their loss of privacy. The Qari reassured them that he did not intend to live in the building, and the final model had fewer and smaller windows, blocking the view of the courtyards below.

A second challenge arose concerning who could access the mosque. For the Qari, he envisioned the space as a learning center, where congregants could perform the five daily prayers and children and young people could attend a free, multiple-shift madrassa, run by him and his cousin, Ustad Jameel. He also made sure that the mosque would finally have running water where visitors could clean themselves before praying. However, this was met by opposition. Children would make a mess in the mosque, and people could clean themselves at home before entering the mosque, some argued. Slowly, the Qari garnered more support for his vision through relationships he formed as a member of the community *shura* as well as an informal *madrassa* he was running from his home where children learned the foundations of Islam and some Arabic. Like many of

his current students, Laila and Zala attended the *madrassa* that preceded the community-based school in the same space. And, as wells around the city became more polluted and slowly dried up, the availability of clean water became even more important, not just inside the mosque but also the faucet on the exterior corner of the mosque, accessible to the entire public. When I ask the boys about their daily routines, most of them share that bringing water from the mosque is part of their daily chores. Weis, in a calm and serious manner says, "I prepare water for ablution. Then I pray. I eat breakfast. Go to school. After school if there's no water, I bring water from *masjid* and from neighbors." The mutual demand for clean water, a clean prayer area, and educational opportunities over time transformed the mosque into the center of the community, particularly for boys and men. For the old inhabitants, the year reinforced their hope in the Qari's ability to bring about positive change. For the new members, the process established trust between them and Qari. One mother describes the changes in the community, "Our kids go to the *masjid*. They know how to pray. They are busy now. They used to hang out in the streets." A shared space seemed to help ameliorate symbolic boundaries—wealth and place of origin—between community members that had been left unaddressed as families moved in and out by focusing more on their common faith and traditions.

Trusted community institutions

While the Qari's imprint in the community seems to be transformational, the process through which he engages with families is grounded in familiar and reliable traditional community institutions. The most important ones include the mosque and community *shura*. His wife tells me the school downstairs turns into a meeting space in

the evening. “We prepare dinner, sometimes for a dozen men,” says Khadija, whose cuisine is a fusion of Afghan and Pakistani flavors. Sometimes, disputing neighbors share their perspectives with the Qari in hopes that he can help them resolve their disagreements. Like his father, a judge, his status as a *mufti* means that he can provide guidance on legal issues. At other times, the community *shura* visits to discuss the latest development projects in the neighborhood and how oversight responsibilities will be divided. The Qari explains the boundaries of the community *shura*, “[The *shura* is] not just for this street but for the whole area. It’s a large *shura*. It’s the people’s *shura*. I’m also a member of this *shura*.” The head of the community *shura*, Nabeel, is his cousin. *Shuras* are not only productive community institutions, they also symbolize an imagined past where tradition was respected and people were trustworthy. In one school *shura* training seminars, an attendee expresses, “In the past we had *reesh safaid* [white beards] who would say something good. People would listen. In the past, we depended on our tongue. Even today when you go to rural areas people are trustworthy. Here there’s crime, theft every day. In rural areas, people leave their doors open. In the past, people trusted each other’s word. They brought a scholar and everyone listened to him.” “White beards” is a reference to elderly men who take part in *shuras*. *Shuras* represent simpler times when people talked through their problems and came to a consensus that was beneficial for the collective.

Around the spring of 2018, before the beginning of the school year on Persian New Year in March 20, the NGO had emergency funding for community-based schools around Roshan Street. A field survey conducted by local NGO staff showed that there was a large number out of school children in the area for two reasons. First, the nearest

public school was under construction, which contributed to an influx of students at Abdul Hakim. And while the high school attempted to absorb as many students as possible, it lacked the capacity to open access for all local children. Second, the area saw an inflow of large numbers of internally displaced peoples and repatriated refugees. While the NGO's concerns do not take into account apprehension about safety, the places and teachers they chose indicate their awareness of local dynamics and the importance of faith institutions and leaders. In conversation with Nabeel, the local NGO staff identified a *madrassa* two blocks from the Qari's house for the first two classrooms. Promising three years of free schooling with material and teacher training support from the NGO, the neighbors agreed to pay for the rent of the space and enroll their children, boys and girls, at the school; the classes were taught by two young *qaris*. One day, after a *shura* meeting, Nabeel shared the work of the NGO with the Qari and asked him if he would be interested in meeting the NGO. The Qari had been searching for a source of additional income and welcomed the opportunity. Nabeel's part in identifying the Qari as a potential teacher highlights the importance of new and old relationships. While life in urban spaces involves different forms of social relations amongst a more heterogeneous group of individuals, the process of establishing the school indicates that familial relations remain important in urban spaces as well.

With approval from the NGO that the home was a suitable space for a school, the Qari leveraged his position at the mosque to disseminate information about the new school and convince parents to enroll their out-of-school children. He explains, "After the evening prayers [at the mosque], I told them all to sit. I need something from you. I told them I will make a *mahali* class. Whichever children who are not going to school because

it is far or there are some families who don't allow their children, especially girls, to go to school, send them to my house. This is a place that is not far and it's safe. There is no problem here for you. Come here for the first grade." In addition, he also invited his students from the informal madrassa at his home to enroll. Yusra, the daughter of a distant relative, was invited to teach the Dari class. Having familial ties made it culturally appropriate for the young woman to teach at his house.

The mosque also became instrumental in forming a school *shura* that would carry out community mobilization efforts, accountability measures—such as student and teacher attendance—and help with the maintenance of the school. He explains the process, "About a month or longer after school started. I don't remember the exact time. [An NGO staff member] said gather a few people and create a *shura*. At the *masjid*, I told people we are creating a *shura* to share in the responsibilities of the school. Then at the *masjid* we sat down a few people. We introduced the members of the *shura* [to the NGO]." When I ask him about whether he knew all the volunteers that constitute the *shura*, he says, "Yes, they came to the *masjid* [regularly]. They are all close neighbors." He continues, "Most of the families know who the *shura* members are because we create the *shuras* in the *masjid* and everyone is there." The school *shura* consists of five men, both natives, like Kaka Qayoom, and migrants. The Qari's emphasis that it is because of the mosque that the neighbors know each other and the organization of the *shura* was easily facilitated highlights the centrality of faith in bringing a diverse group of people together.

Opening of possibilities

As fall transitions to winter and students and teachers prepare for final exams, I sit in Ustad Yusra's class, listening to her read a poem from the last few pages of the Dari book. Two red hens stroll around the metal shelf full of children's shoes in the yard, occasionally lowering their beaks onto the concrete yard when they spot a morsel of food. I hear a knock on the teal gate that is visible from my purview. A little boy from the Qari's class opens the front door to two visitors. It is Kaka Qayoom in his usual khaki clothes with his familiar friend, Kaka Naseem. Kaka Naseem is a suave, warm elderly man with a long snow-white beard and a crisp black and white turban that complements his spotless white *parahan tomban*. After they visit the Qari's class, they walk toward Ustad Yusra's class. "Asalaamu alaikum!" the class greets the two smiling men. Ustad Yusra and I walk to the entrance of the class to greet them. "How is everyone?" Is anyone absent?" Kaka Naseem asks Ustad Yusra. "No, not today." Kaka Qayoom looks at the students and with an encouraging voice tells them, "Study well and don't be absent." The men turn around and walk back toward the teal gate. The visits are always short, rarely lasting for more than five minutes. Yet, their regular presence on the street and in the school creates a sense of connection between the inside and outside—the school becomes an extension of the broader community, while the sense of regularity that is found in the school can momentarily be felt in the chaos of the street outside by the presence of familiar faces.

As the year progresses, the school undergoes some changes. A few students join half way through the year, while some students attend less regularly. Shahla whose education at Abdul Hakim High School ended due to perceived threats to personal safety,

can be seen reading the Qur'an in the courtyard with the Qari's cousin who is a teacher at the *madrassa* in the mosque. She feels she has made enough gains in this community-based school to transition to a higher grade at a public school. "[Before] I couldn't read or write at all, now I can write, now I can read, I can teach my little nephews at home and help them with their books." I see a renewed interest in her educational aspirations where I once saw a young woman who appeared indifferent and irritated amongst her much younger peers. Her aspirations and goals are not only connected to the quality of education at the school but the opportunities a trusting relationship has opened up for her. I ask her if her brother will finally allow her to re-enroll at the Abdul Hakim. She says, "No, there would have to be someone trustworthy [to] go and come with us, because the condition is bad." Confused at where she plans to transition, Shahla explains she will attend the all girls' school where the Qari teaches in the afternoon, "It is good to go with Qari *sahib*[4], and come with Qari *sahib*." Her family's concerns about her safety are alleviated by the Qari's presence on the way to and in the school.

I notice Asiya, who used to demonstrate lessons in front of the class, come to school even less often. One day, I see her wearing public school uniform—white scarf, black dress, and black trousers—on the stairs chatting with two teenage girls from the neighborhood. After spending months at the school and getting to know the Qari's wife who stays upstairs, I feel comfortable walking up the stairs to ask the girls if they're waiting for the Qari's daughters. One girl whom I recognize because I spoke with her grandmother about her younger cousin at this school says, "Yes, we walk together to [Abdul Hakim]." I try to confirm if Asiya is also now enrolled at Abdul Hakim and

[4] A polite title or form of address for a man.

surprised to learn she is enrolled in the sixth grade now with the Qari's two daughters. She tells me she's been studying with her elder brother at home to keep up with her studies. The reserved, respectful girl doesn't say more.

Knowing the Qari must be aware that Asiya is enrolled at Abdul Hakim, I try to seek more information from him. He tells me how he convinced her father to enroll her there, "I told her father at the *masjid* a couple of times that this girl is old [for the first grade]. If you enroll her in school you can enroll her in a higher grade. He said, 'no I will not let her study in [another] school. She can study a couple of years here and that's all.'" Understanding the man's concerns about the long walk to the public school, the Qari explains his attempt to make small inroads, "I told him instead of sending her here for three years, she can go there for three years, because she is smart. He said 'ok do whatever you want.' I enrolled her there myself and I sent her to school with my daughters. I called Ustad Yusra's mother [at Abdul Hakim High School] and asked her to let her into the sixth grade. Now she is in the sixth grade and she is happy. Maybe her father will change his mind and let her complete 12th grade." It is a remarkable transformation for a father who, according to the Qari, "would not let her go to school at all" but would let her seek an education. It highlights the power of trusting relationships in expanding opportunities. While the Qari disagrees with families limiting their daughters' education, this interaction reflects his awareness of families' concerns and ability to connect with them without making judgment. The Qari contacted Ustad Yusra's mother, a veteran teacher at Abdul Hakim, to enroll Asiya toward the end of the school year and reassured Asiya's father that she could walk to school in a group with his daughters and two other girls from the neighborhood. That the daughters of the Qari were

enrolled in the public school provided even some of the most doubtful families that school can be a safe place. If a religious man can send his daughters to school and they were safe and regarded as respectable girls in the community, then maybe the benefits outweighed the potential risks.

The Qari's daughters walk down the stairs, Asiya and the neighborhood girls surrounding them. Asiya smiles as the girls discuss the final exams and how they will prepare for them. From my seat in Ustad Yusra's class, I see Asiya adjust her backpack. She is holding a book in one hand. One girl unlocks the teal gate and the girls walk through.

Chapter 6:

Belonging Part I: Cultivating insanyat

"What we speak becomes the house we live in."
Hafiz

"What do you think is the purpose of education?" I ask Yusra as we sit in her living room, drinking cardamom-infused green tea. Yusra pulls the electric heater closer to herself and smiles at her mother across the room who occasionally joins us, and each time she does, Yusra's presence seems to diminish a little out of respect for and approval from her veteran-teacher mother. Seeing the confident young woman retreat behind the heater and struggle to formulate a response is unexpected. Perhaps due to her age, her array of commitments, or lack of teaching experience, she has not reflected on the question. After all, teaching seems to be a temporary job for Yusra and a stepping-stone to greater possibilities. Her mother chimes in, "When someone is educated they have *insanyat* (civility/humanity)." She continues, "Someone who is educated is informed. They know the value of their life." The full nuance of *insanyat* is challenging to capture in English. Meaning the state of being human (*insan* means human), *insanyat* is a broad-ranging term that involves mannerisms, speech, and interactions. The principles of *insanyat* are grounded in understandings of Afghan culture and Islam, thus it is culturally specific. When Ustad Yusra, who seems tired from a long day of work and timid in front of her mother—a description that is opposite of her classroom persona—finally responds, her ideas expand on the concept of *insanyat*: "Education is important for a person. They are more aware of their speaking and actions. Someone who is educated interacts in a good manner with others." While Yusra's response is difficult to disentangle from her

mother's perspective, coupled with observations of her classroom teaching and character, her emphasis on manners and etiquette aptly reflect her orientation and practices on the purposes of education.

Whether it is in regards to wearing the school uniform or speaking in formal Dari, Yusra repeatedly reminds her classroom of mainly girl students, "You are school girls. There has to be a difference between the girls outside and you." Belonging in school, for Ustad Yusra, is contingent on learning and embodying particular practices that distinguish those who go to school and the large group of children "outside" of the educational system for a multitude of reasons in the burgeoning metropolis of Kabul. These practices create the boundaries of belonging that transcend school. Underlying Yusra's advice to her class is a subtle message about the hierarchy that school creates in society. Schoolgirls and schoolboys are not like other children in the neighborhood. Their status is higher and that must be embodied in their speech and dress. In the three hours she has with her class, in addition to teaching the core subjects, Yusra unveils the cultural practices of the "educated" class, or the dominant culture of Kabul.

Educators are critical in cultivating belonging in school and in the broader school community. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, educators play an important role in galvanizing community around education and other services. Their ideas of belonging, hence, are central to classroom culture and are shaped by their own educational and family experiences.

This chapter is divided into two parts, one dedicated to each teacher, to examine their individual ways of cultivating belonging as well as overlap in their ideas and practices. Each chapter begins with a close examination of a teacher's educational

trajectory, highlighting factors that shape how they approach their teaching. Then, I focus on the classroom setting, bringing in the experiences and perspectives of students as well as NGO staff and families.

In Part I, focused on Ustad Yusra, I document evolution in her ideas and practices of cultivating belonging through NGO training and oversight. She begins the academic year focused on outer appearance and standardized norms and practices as a way to create belonging in the classroom. This approach to belonging is grounded in stark divisions between school and home. As the year progresses and Ustad Yusra's teaching comes under question by the NGO, she shifts her pedagogical practices. The portrait examines a teacher's journey in creating belonging for her and her students through attention to learning and affirming connections to home. I weave in the stories of two seemingly contrasting students, Qais and Farhana, as examples of experiences of belonging.

Part II, concentrated on the Qari, demonstrates a different orientation to belonging with connections between school, home, and community as a starting point. I also highlight similarities and subtle differences in these two approaches to cultivating belonging.

Privileges and equalizers

When Yusra finishes teaching around noon, Maira and her cousins wait for her in the classroom as she packs her teacher's guidebooks in her bag. Wearing a long black overcoat and a lime green scarf with a feather border, she puts on her black shoes at the entrance of the classroom door and then takes one corner of her scarf and neatly wraps it around her face and we all know she is ready to leave. On a typical day, Maira, Laila and

Zala accompany Yusra to her home one-mile north through a maze of alleys and then walk back home closer to the community-based school. Today, however, when we approach the students' brown, clay homes closer to the school, Yusra tells them they can go home as we're walking together.

We walk past the grand mulberry trees that have turned beige from the dust. In the midst of narrow, paved alleys between rows of walled courtyards, the mulberry trees, which are found in abundance in the villages, are a symbol of the place's past. The expanding population has pushed the boundaries of the city to the edges of the province. Through my visits to her classroom and the long commutes to the teacher training seminars in the west of the city, I have spent considerably more time with Yusra than the Qari, something that is possible because of gendered norms that make interaction between the people of the same gender easier. She shares about her home preoccupations and her educational struggles, "I have no time to rest. I wake up before the sun rises to go to college. Then I come here. I spend the rest of the day helping at home and studying for exams."

The alleys are eerily quiet as people in the city shelter inside from the harsh afternoon sun. Even the honks and screeches of the cars and trucks on the highway die down. So when we are joined by a group of three schoolboys in their blue and black attire and backpacks, chatting on their way home, their sight and sound are comforting. The pathway gets wider on our trek north and we reach an area where the houses are painted colorful hues of yellow and pink and the alleys are straighter and cleaner. Even the exterior of the courtyard walls are painted in shades of white. Yusra takes out her keys as we get closer to a glossy, emerald green gate and unlocks it. We enter a lush courtyard

with a single pomegranate tree with small, red fruit hanging like a chandelier in the middle and rose bushes along the perimeter of the yard. The center of the yard is covered with grass. I have been to many student homes during my time in the area—marble tiled mansions and cozy, clay homes—but this is the first time I see grass in a courtyard. The green courtyard, her coordinated clothes, and her busy schedule seem to suggest some level of cultural distance in addition to the one-mile physical distance between Yusra's house and the center of the school community around the Qari's house.

Before Yusra sits down to talk about her education, she changes into her home clothes—a bright orange *parahan tomban*. For Yusra these small changes represent important boundaries between home and school, between the informality of home and the formal structures of school. She begins by talking about the eastern city of Jalalabad where she was born. "I went to kindergarten in Jalalabad while my mom was teaching." Her mother, an experienced Dari teacher, has taught for over twenty years in Jalalabad and Kabul, including Abdul Hakim High School. She is a tall, elegant woman who seems to have taken lead in supporting her three daughters in their educational trajectories and cultivation of *insanyat*. Though understated and humble, the family's privilege is not concealed. If painted neighborhood walls or the grass-covered courtyard is not indicative of the family's privilege relative to the students of varying ages at the community-based school, then attending kindergarten—an uncommon experience—certainly symbolizes the family's privilege.

Yusra continues, "Then we moved [to Kabul] and I went to Abdul Hakim from the first grade until twelfth grade. I also took some courses here and there." Yusra took courses in math and English throughout high school. Now, in college in the northeast,

closer to the city, she continues to attend English courses in the afternoon. “I can help you practice English,” I suggest when I first find out that Yusra is trying to improve her English language skills. For Yusra, like for so many young Afghans, English fluency widens educational and employment opportunities in a country flooded with international aid organizations and local agencies that tap into the same pool of global funding. And, while this pool slowly dwindles as international involvement recedes, working for an aid organization is still attractive for many. “I want to work for a *mossessa*, in their office one day,” Yusra tells me. A nebulous term, *mossessa* means establishment and encompasses an array of organizations connected to the aid industry. In colloquial use, it commonly refers to NGOs. For middle-class, educated women in particular, these offices, housed in the center of the city, have opened new work opportunities.

While Yusra seems to be well on her way to a career that will open new horizons within and perhaps outside the borders of Afghanistan, security conditions—a common denominator for people from all walks of life—have constrained her educational aspirations. When I first met her, she had declared her concentration in computer science at an English-instruction college. However, later in the year when an NGO visitor to her class asked her what she was studying in college, I was surprised to hear “Religious studies.” Neither of these concentrations represents her original educational and career goals. “I wanted to go to medical school but conditions are bad.” For her to go to medical school she would have to travel further north to the city, where the lack of security is heightened—a risk her family did not feel was worth the end goal. In her first year of college she has been navigating what her opportunities realistically are. It seems she has

succumbed to committing to the pathway of her mother and older sister—teaching—at least for now.

Yusra began teaching at the community-based school fresh out of high school in the spring of 2018. After passing a qualifications exam, she went through a six-day training workshop required by the NGO for all incoming teachers. She explains, "The training started after I became a teacher. The first training was orientation to teaching—how to teach to students, which methods to use, how do we help students pay attention and focus." For the fledgling teacher, training seminars have been critical in her ability to plan lessons and manage a large classroom. "At first I thought [preparing a lesson plan] wasn't that important but when I went to the seminar I learned a lot of things. In ten days when they taught us about single lesson plan I learned a lot. When you first enter the class what you do. When you first enter the class you should say salaam, then check the rows, take attendance, cleanliness, ask students how they are, then review the previous lesson." Following this strict structure is clearly evident in her classroom as will be shown below, creating a sense of routine and stability.

In addition to NGO training, her mother has been instrumental in her ability to teach a first-grade classroom of children with varying levels of academic competence and developmental stages. When I ask Yusra, "Were there other people or resources that were helpful to you when you first started teaching at the community-based school?" she responds affirmatively, "First, before everyone was my mother. My mother is a teacher. My mother helped me with everything. I didn't have problems in school [her own education] but she guided me [in teaching]." She provides an example, "I asked her how do I teach Dari so they will understand and pay attention? She said, *bachem*, first tell

them the alphabets, then they should learn to read, write, and know the alphabet. Then there's the lesson topic. She told me to show the students the illustrations so they pay attention to the book. Then write it on the board and read it. Then do group work. The lesson will stick in the student's mind. Divide the students into groups of four and name each one—team grapes, peaches—because students like these things. After that they will learn your lesson better." Her mother's influence demonstrates the fluidity of ideas between formal educational structures and community-based schooling. Teachers enter community-based schools with their own set of experiences, bringing ideas connected to engagement in the material and ability to learn that are shaped by their education and family backgrounds that, at times, support, and other times, undermine NGO training designed for community-centered models.

With her mother by her side and abundant resources at hand, belonging in the formal education system seems to have come naturally for Yusra. She is the model student in urban Kabul whose home culture—from dress and speech to more subtle norms—complements school culture. Hence, it is not surprising that Yusra's ideas of belonging in school are shaped by her own educational experiences, rarely challenging normative expectations and practices without outside training provided by the NGO. This overall educational trajectory and outlook contrasts vastly with the Qari's, but before delving into a comparative analysis in Part II, the next sections illuminate Yusra's expectations and practices and highlights the influence of NGO oversight.

Cultivating norms and practices

Most of Yusra's students arrive before her at 8am when school starts. On a typical

day, around 35 students (47 enrolled) arrive and sit in their designated spots on the cobalt blue plastic mat, facing the small white board opposite the entrance, creating several rows with an aisle in the center for the teacher to walk through. Roughly 25 percent of the students in the class are older children (11-18), while 70 percent are younger (5-10). With their colorful backpacks—some emblazoned with flowers, some with cartoon characters and others with the UNICEF logo—placed on their laps, most of the students sit quietly and wait for their teacher. Younger students sit at the front of the classroom, while older students sit in the back so that smaller children's views are not obstructed. As advised in the NGO training, classroom arrangement is critical to enabling a learning environment for all. Farhana, a bright seven-year old girl with plump cheeks and ocean blue eyes in a white scarf and black dress and trousers—the formal school uniform—sits next to her sister, Zara also in the same attire and cousin, Yasir in a blue dress shirt and black pants on the second row on the right side. Little Farhana straightens her sister's scarf and then sits quietly in her place, ready for class to start. The Qari's two sons—shy five-year old Hamza and the energetic six-year old Isa, each wearing a white dress shirt and black pants—sit in the front row on the right side. "I went to school and *madrassa* for a year in Pakistan," the precocious Isa tells me. Wondering why they are not in the Pashto class, their mother explains, "They know Pashto well. We wanted them to improve their Dari so we put them in Ustad Yusra's class." She tells me for her sons to thrive in Kabul, they must be able to communicate well in Dari.

The older girls like Maira, her cousins, and Shahla sit in the back near the large window with a white lace curtain on the left side of the room. On the right side of the room in front of the door sit three older boys, brothers Farhad and Faheem, and freckled-

face Qais, the oldest boy in the class and the only one in *parahan tomban*, a bright yellow that matches his joyful personality. I look closer at Qais and notice his sun-kissed, freckled face is covered in a layer of white specks. "What's on your face, Qais?" I ask the smiling boy. "It's paint. My dad is a painter and sometimes me and my brothers help him [with painting] when he finds work." It seems Qais is the only student in the class who works after school. While Qais visibly stands apart from his classmates, the ease with which he behaves in the classroom seems to indicate a sense of belonging. The longer I observe the classroom, I question whether the comfort he exudes can be attributed to Ustad Yusra's teaching or only his personal disposition.

"It's very hot today," I say as I take my seat at the front of the class on the supplies' box and loosen my headscarf to breathe better in the humid room. Qais stands up and presses the switch for the ceiling fan next to the door and we anxiously wait to see whether there's power this morning—often disappointed, but this time the fan turns on, generating applause from the students, even the most studious ones, like Farhana, who sits with a textbook on her lap. The air from the ceiling fan swings the student artwork hung from the beams over the white board and disperses the flies out of the center of the room. "Asalaam alaikum, Ustad!" the students greet Ustad Yusra as she enters the room. Ustad Yusra returns the greeting and walks toward me. "Salaam Ustad. How are you? How's your family?" Ustad Yusra begins with the customary greeting, linking the well-being of the individual with the well-being of their family. Wearing a lemon-green light overcoat, white socks, and white scarf embellished with pearls, Yusra begins her classroom routine by opening the metal supplies box: she takes out a lace tablecloth that she drapes over the metal supplies box, takes out her books and supplies and places them

over the supplies box, leaving enough room for me, and then in beautiful, clear Dari script, she carefully writes the date and schedule for the class on top of the white board in a meticulously straight line—Dari, Writing, *Deenyat (religious studies)*, Math. "What day of the week is it?" "Sunday!" the class responds in unison. "*Afareen*! (good job)."

She proceeds in a similar manner each day by beginning with a routine cleanliness check. "Put your hands on top of your backpacks. I will come around and check your hands." Yusra's straight posture and strong, articulate voice gives her five foot two petite frame a big presence. She walks in the center aisle and stops to inspect each set of rows, fixing the uneven buttoning of Hamza's shirt, re-arranging a girl's scarf so that it frames her face, and telling another girl student to remove her bangles. When she reaches the last rows of older students, she stops and asks ten-year-old Nasreen, Qais' younger sister, "What is that on your fingers?" Nasreen puts her head down and tries to hide her pink tips under her backpack. Ustad Yusra demands: "Remove your nail polish before tomorrow's class."

"*Bismillahi rahman rahim*," in the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate, Ustad Yusra returns to the front of the board and begins the Dari lesson. "Turn to page 3 of your Dari books." On the board, she writes the lesson for the day.

Alif—anar (first letter of Dari alphabet—pomegranate)
Pomegranates have seeds.
Father brought pomegranates.

"What is the title of the lesson?" The class responds, "*Alif-anar*." In an audible voice that can be heard across the yard, Ustad Yusra instructs students to "listen first, then repeat." As she walks down the aisle with a ruler in hand to check that each student is paying attention, she reads the sentences. Students repeat in unison, "ALIF—ANAR!" After,

when she asks for volunteers, hands across the room shoot up with excitement. Ustad Yusra hands the ruler to Isa. Little Isa stands in front of the board with a stern expression on his face and places the ruler on each word to help his classmates follow. "*Afareen*!" Well-done, Ustad Yusra approves. A few more younger students demonstrate in front of the class before Ustad Yusra moves to the older students in the back. Ustad Yusra asks Qais who has been chatting with his friends at the back of the class to come to the board. He reluctantly gets up as he smiles at his friends. Before he begins reading the sentences, Ustad Yusra demands, "Don't wear *parahan tomban* again. Wear a shirt with trousers." While Ustad Yusra's command makes me feel uncomfortable and more conscious about my own appearance—especially not wearing socks, an item of clothing I would not consider wearing in the summer heat—Qais does not seem to be equally unsettled. Body pressed against the white board, he struggles as he reads the sentences. Farhana and her brother offer him hints as Ustad Yusra waits. Finally, he walks back to his spot on the floor, giving a sly smile to his neighbors, Farhad and Faheem, who also appear disengaged from the lesson at the back of the class.

Dressing like a student

Ustad Yusra stresses strict expectations regarding dress and conduct on a daily basis in front of the whole class. She insists that all students wear a uniform. Girls must wear a black dress with a white scarf and no accessories, including nail polish or henna. Slightly more flexible with the colors of boys' uniform, she expects all boys to wear trousers with a shirt-dress—attire that is associated with the west and professionalism, the upper class of Kabul. Along with the seating arrangement and strict classroom routine, it

creates a sense of order for the novice teacher. She explains the importance of wearing formal school uniforms and how she instituted this expectation, "Students would come in whatever clothes they wished, their hair disheveled. I told them *bachem*, you have to wash your face and hands. There has to be a difference between the girls outside and yourself. Now they wear uniforms everyday. When they don't I get mad." Because there are more girls in her class than boys, she typically speaks about the girls in the interview, but in class the expectation to wear uniforms is for both boys and girls. Wanting to check my understanding I ask, "Why do you think it is important for students to wear uniform in school?" She shares, "One to have a sense of responsibility, to be clean, they look good in that. Children were wearing every color. I didn't like this. They should also understand the value of school. There should be a difference between school and home. When they come to school they should wear uniform." Hence, outer appearance is connected to belonging to the school space. In some ways it allows anyone, despite where they come from, how long they have lived in Kabul, or their prior educational experiences, to fit into school. In a diverse and fluctuating context, enabling ways to fit in seems rather useful, particularly in the formation of community.

Back in the classroom, Ustad Yusra reads a story from a hefty Dari teacher's guide as she paces up and down the aisle. "Teachers are like parents. They are nice and caring." The story then transitions to characteristics of well-behaved students. Ustad Yusra summarizes: "A well-behaved student comes to class clean and greets his/her[5] teacher when he/she enters the classroom. A well-behaved student studies her lessons." Ustad Yusra closes her book and poses a question to the class, "What are the qualities of

[5] There is no gender in Dari pronouns so I have chosen an inclusive translation.

a well-behaved student?" Little Farhana stands up straight and states, clearly and loudly, "A well-behaved student studies, is clean, says salaam." Community-based schools use the national curriculum of the formal education system, and the similarities between the curriculum and Ustad Yusra's messages—greetings, cleanliness—represent adherence to a standardized curriculum with standardized messages about belonging in school. As will be shown, this narrative falls short in acknowledging disparities in social and economic backgrounds that are clearly evident in the neighborhood and within the classroom.

Ustad Yusra then calls on Nasreen, Qais' sister, whose face is also covered in light freckles. Nasreen often comes to class wearing a bright tunic with jeans, with her dirty blonde hair poking out of the sides of her messily wrapped white scarf, causing her to stand out in the sea of girls in black and white. Ustad Yusra doesn't comment on Nasreen's yellow shirt today. She repeats, "What are the qualities of a well-behaved student?" Unlike her cheerful and unfazed brother, Nasreen appears timid and self-conscious. With her head slightly lowered, she responds in a shaky voice, "You have to be clean. You have to say salaam." In Dari, she uses the informal you ("*tu*") instead of the formal "*shoma*." Ustad Yusra corrects her, "Say *shoma*, not *tu*. Students should be different from street children. You should dress differently and speak differently. Don't say tu. Say *shoma*. Don't say *aa* [yes, informal]. Say *bale* [yes, formal]." Nasreen lowers her head and sits back down, with an expression on her face that seems to indicate a mixture of relief and disappointment. Here Ustad Yusra makes the hidden curriculum of formal schooling transparent to students, perhaps too directly. What is subtle about these norms and practices is not simply what it implies about children but also what is conveys about the space. Yusra emphasizes, "we should be a *real* school." To her students in a

"real school" wear uniforms and speak formal Dari. Her students' behavior reflects on her teaching, her own sense of belonging in a profession her mother has mastered. Yusra tells me she has discussed the issue of uniforms with the Qari as well but he does not seem as committed to it, evidenced by his lack reminders to his class to wear uniforms.

When Farhana's hand goes up again, Ustad Yusra calls on her. Again, she stands up as straight as a soldier, looks directly at the board with a firm and serious expression, and responds again to the question. "Don't walk into homes without knocking. Don't take things without permission. Before leaving for home, pack things up." "*Afareen*!" Ustad Yusra exclaims. Like Maira and her cousins, Farhana and her brother and sister seem to exemplify model students, not only in their academic competence but also their cultural stock, enabling a greater sense of belonging in school. While she clearly makes an effort to cultivate particular practices and dispositions in her students, Ustad Yusra is aware of family influence. She praises Farhana's family, "in terms of cleanliness, clothes, uniform, studying, doing homework." "Everyday they come clean. They speak well with their fellow students," she notes. "This is all dependent on the family. Her grandmother also comes to the school." In contrast, she argues students whose families are less attentive to them struggle more, "Teachers struggle with these types of students. The student also struggles. For example, Qais no matter how much you tell his family—nothing. I have tried every method I learned in the trainings but nothing has changed." The fact that Farhana's family is native to Kabul, whereas Qais' family has been displaced from Logar does not seem to be taken into consideration. There are also are also stark economic disparities between families. Qais seems to be the only student in the class who works to help his family make ends meet. Yet, so often rather than acknowledging disparities and

how it might impact belonging, the approach seems to be to create a sense of uniformity at a superficial level, sometimes undermining learning in the process.

Ustad Yusra, however, is not the only teacher in the classroom. In addition to the *shura*, the NGO field staff regularly visit the community-based school to check classroom conditions and assist with teaching methodologies. And while the *shura*—a body consisting of mainly elderly, local men—have a stronger relationship with the Qari, in part explained by local gender norms, NGO visitors spend considerable more time in Ustad Yusra's classroom. As I've learned through my role as a researcher, professional relationships override gender norms, enabling courteous interaction for the purposes of productivity and learning.

Attention to learning

On a typical day, classroom activity fizzles out as the clock inches closer to noon and the energy derived from breakfast wears off. Farhana and her sister and cousin sit quietly and draw a variety of fruits in their art notebooks, trying diligently to replicate the fruits Ustad Yusra drew on the board—a pear, an apple, a slice of watermelon. Isa draws tiny versions of the fruit and then turns around and looks at what his classmate, a little girl, behind him drew. "[The watermelon] should be red," Isa insists, disappointed at his classmate's color choices. The little girl pulls her notebook away and ignores Isa's suggestion. In the back of the classroom, Qais and his friends seem to be sharing a bag of sunflower seeds and spitting the shells on the blue plastic mat when Ustad Yusra is not looking. Meanwhile, Ustad Yusra takes out a large English learning textbook and her notebook and walks over and sits next to me. She has taken my offer to assist her with

English. She shows me a page of her notebook with English vocabulary: BINARY, ABSTRACT, PROCESSOR. Realizing these are specific computer science terminology, I quickly take out my phone, turn on the data, and look up the English words that are as foreign to me as they are to Yusra.

When there's a knock on the front gate, we wait for one of Qari's students to open it, as they are closer, anxiously waiting to see who is behind the teal gate. Soon enough, a little boy in *parahan tomban* unlocks the gate and pulls the panel. Three members of the NGO field staff enter the school. First, is the master trainer, Fatima, a petite woman in all black who wears high heels throughout the year. She is followed by two men: the community mobilizer, Maiwand, a large man with a protruding belly and midnight black, chest-length beard that contrasts with his bleached, straight teeth, like a lively character in an action-packed Bollywood movie. Standing next to him is Salim, the leader of the field team, a tall, slender man. While the Qari comes out of his classroom to greet the team in the yard, Yusra quickly puts away her books and ask her students to straighten the rows. These visits happen in a predictable pattern: the NGO staff greet the Qari in the yard, ask him a few questions about how things are going and then walk straight to Yusra's class to observe her teaching. She is, after all, a new teacher who has not been to a teacher's college like teachers in the formal system or has had prior teaching experience like the Qari.

Ustad Yusra first greets Ustad Fatima with three kisses on every other cheek, then says "Salaam" to Ustad Maiwand and Ustad Salim. "Walaikumasalaam, my daughter. How are you? How is your mother?" replies Ustad Maiwand. The field staff know Yusra's mother is a teacher at the hub school. The students quietly watch as this

customary exchange is done between adults. We all know the responses to their questions, “She is well, may you live long. How are you?” One never complains.

When the greetings are done and questions about health and wellness have been asked and answered, the three members come inside the classroom. Salim takes the lead. “Salaam children.” “Walaikumasalaam Ustad!” “How is everyone? I see you are doing art. We are visiting today to ask you some questions.” Ustad Salim walks to the board and takes the dry erase marker and writes a couple of simple addition equations. “Who can solve this?” Ustad Salim says in a kind and encouraging manner. Several hands go up. He scans the room and patiently waits for more hands. He calls on Yasir, Farhana’s cousin. Yasir stands up and confidently states the answer. “*Afareen, bachem*!” He writes another equation on the board, again waiting a minute to allow the students to solve it. This time he selects a student whose hand is not raised. Qais’ neighbor, Farhad, slowly gets up, hands clenched across his waist. The boy doesn’t answer. Ustad Salim repeats, “What is 28+7?” Farhad stands silently in front of the door, with everyone’s eyes fixed on him. Ustad Yusra, Maiwand, and Fatima stand by the window. Ustad Yusra finally says, “He knows, Ustad. I think he feels under pressure.” Ustad Salim responds in a soft tone, “Your students are shy.” He proceeds to show how the equation is solved on the board. “They aren’t usually this quiet,” Ustad Yusra asserts. As Ustad Fatima checks Ustad Yusra’s lesson planner, Maiwand and Salim continue speaking with children, asking them their names and age.

The short fifteen-minute interaction seems significant for Ustad Yusra. For several days, she confides in me about feeling frustrated that her students do not perform well in front of visitors. Referring to one student, she says, “His mom is a doctor but he

doesn't study. They make the teachers look bad," she states boldly. Ustad Yusra seems to have understood the short exchange as an assessment of her teaching, one that does not appear promising. As the sting of public criticism slowly heals, I witness Ustad Yusra modify her pedagogy to focus more on disengaged students, creating a more inclusive environment where belonging is focused more on attention to learning. It's a change that is facilitated by introspection as well as specific training seminars required by the NGO for all community-based schoolteachers, highlighting the importance of external oversight and training, particularly for novice teachers.

A couple of days later, she writes several subtraction equations on the white board and calls on various students to solve the questions. Then, she asks Farhad to stand up. The boy hesitates, perhaps aware of Ustad Yusra's disappointment at his performance during the NGO visit. However, she does not bring it up. Instead, Ustad Yusra says in a calm and encouraging voice, "Don't ever get scared of standing up. Even if you don't know. Be confident." She invites him to the board and encourages him to solve the problem by drawing small strokes on the board to help count numbers. When Farhad sits back down, she says to the class, "He did great! He had the confidence to get up." Her emphasis on "getting up" and caring method of guiding students invites other students to take a chance without fear of rebuke, creating a more inclusive environment. At the end of the lesson, Ustad Yusra stands in front of the board and asks, "How many of you have learned?" Only seven hands go up, a testament to being more open to more help. She writes a few more equations on the board and calls on more students before assigning five equations for homework.

In addition to the NGO oversight, recent seminars centering on socio-emotional learning and development have had an impact on Ustad Yusra's approach. She explains, "The teacher's mannerisms is very important. When a student is speaking, you should speak with them with respect and love and sincerity. And, the value of attendance. A student should know the value of attendance, come everyday, and know the value of time." She continues, "They taught us how to engage all students. Their attention is lacking because of their family, maybe because of economic circumstances, how do we encourage them to study. They are kids so active learning can draw their attention." It is not that Ustad Yusra lacked respect for her students, rather discussions with other teachers seem to have enabled her to reflect more deeply on environmental stressors and their effect on her students' ability to engage and absorb information. Ustad Yusra continues her emphasis on cultivating *insanyat*, but in a manner that is gentler, more inclusive, and engaging. The NGO's pedagogical practices are informed by Afghan culture, which becomes clearer in the next section on the Qari, as well as best practices in education. Efforts to contextualize all professional development materials mean that the NGO straddles the line between inside and outside influence. I examine the benefits and ongoing tensions of the role of the NGO in the school in the "Relationships" chapter.

At the end of the class, Ustad Yusra incorporates activities that include everyone. "Everyone stand up, stand in a circle, and hold hands," Ustad Yusra instructs. Then she selects two students, "Qais and Zara, come to the center." She gives Qais a small, soft ball and instructs them to count to one hundred, throwing the ball to each other. "One," Qais smiles and gently throws the ball to his classmate, fully engaged and cooperative.

Then Ustad Yusra does the same for the Dari alphabet, which seems more challenging for the students.

Her initial description of school as a space entirely removed from home seems to have been disrupted by her training and increased interaction with families, as the trainings encourage. “There is one student I told her many times that you have to wear a uniform. You’re a school student. Don’t come in these clothes again. I didn’t know there were financial issues. I told her to bring her mother the next day. She didn’t bring her the first day but when her family finally came I asked her why she didn’t wear a uniform. She said because of financial reasons.” “How did you respond?” I inquire. “I asked her if I can help. She said no, I will try my best [to buy her clothes]. Then I told her she should wear a uniform and know its value. She used to send her in any clothes. A few days later she wore a uniform. She sewed clothes for her.” While Ustad Yusra maintains her perspective on the importance of wearing uniforms, her interaction reflects openness to understanding individual family circumstances.

Belonging in school

Ustad Yusra wraps up Qur’an Kareem subject and spends the remaining time doing something she has created on her own. She allows students to come to the board and share stories and sing songs.

Farhana comes up and sings a song about mothers that she has composed herself.

Ay madar, tu ra dost daram. (Oh mother, I love you.)
Ay madar-e mehrabanam. (Oh my kind mother.)
Ay padar, tu ra dost daram. (Oh dad, I love you.)
Ay malim qalbam (Oh the teacher of my heart.)

Next, twin sisters come forward and sing a patriotic song, reminding us about the state of

the country:

Man askaram. Man askaram. (I am a soldier. I am a soldier.)
Man askari deen wa watan. (I am a soldier of the religion and the homeland.)

Their classmates listen with excitement; even Qais has put away his bag of sunflower seeds, watching the twin sisters pretend they are miniature soldiers. When some students join in and the class gets rowdy, Ustad Yusra commands, "Pay attention!" She has not compromised her emphasis on manners, on cultivating *insanyat*. But this is no longer a space where belonging seems confined. While the student's varying backgrounds—socioeconomic status, native or displaced—might separate them outside, for Ustad Yusra they all belong here and they must all learn the norms and practices of school. And as the academic year progresses, there is a shift in this confined idea of belonging to an emphasis on learning and connection to home. NGO training around socio-emotional learning and active pedagogies as well as active NGO oversight seems to have had an important impact in facilitating this shift.

As I speak with mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and older sisters from different backgrounds, they all express their appreciation for Ustad Yusra's efforts—both in academic learning and character development. I ask Zala and Laila's father talks about the changes he sees in his daughters, "May Allah reward her, she puts in more effort than us. Because I have noticed in the past two to three months a lot of changes. They didn't even know how to write the alphabet. Now they know how to write the entire alphabet. They can also read most things I show them. The teacher has this expectation…they are her students and she wants them to reach a place [succeed]." He also stresses character development, "When they used to be at home, they used to fight a lot. When their mother said something, they would speak back. Now they are…when they first come here

whether it is their mother at home or someone young or old…yesterday my older daughter there was a funeral she came, and we had many guests she spoke with the guests and gave them her condolences. This is all the blessings of the teacher." For this father and families across the board, academic learning and character development are integrally connected. Both prepare their children for a place in society.

Ustad Yusra stresses that teaching manners and character begins at home. Families agree, but emphasize the effectiveness of respected teachers in this shared effort between home and school. Farhana's grandmother, a beautiful woman wearing a large white headscarf that covers her shoulders, explains in a kind voice, "They learn better at school. I know this and tested it. I tried to teach my grandchild how to read Qur'an at home, but she didn't learn so she went to *madrassa*…. If the teacher is nice they will learn fast. If the teacher is mean students struggle more." Farhana's grandmother seems to place importance on the structure that learning environments provide, but this structure is only effective when teachers demonstrate care.

Over the semester, I watch as Ustad Yusra's interaction becomes gentler with her students, including Qais, whom we both learn has had a tough life from birth. Qais' frail but joyful mother shares with me, "When I was pregnant with him, I was sick a lot. I think he was born with mental health issues." She emphasizes that Qais is happy to be in school but lacks interpersonal skills: "Qais went to [Abdul Hakim] but would get into fights and leave school. The teachers beat him there. He is learning a lot here but is scared of getting hit."

When I sit with Ustad Yusra for our final conversation, she reflects on her growth, "My methods have improved. And when I went into class and assessed the students on

what I had taught they knew it all." When I ask about her hopes for the future, she responds, "I want to be a good *ustad*." It seems a year of teaching has convinced her to pursue it more long-term although she still reminisces, "I wanted to be a doctor but…." Her voice falls with a look of disappointment on her face. I ask, "What do you think makes a good *ustad*?" "A good *ustad* is one who is not absent from class, one who is attentive to their teaching, interacts in a good manner with children."

Her mother chimes in, "It is a sacred profession. A teacher works hard. Teachers are the builders of the future. It is because of teachers that someone becomes a president or minister." Ustad Yusra doesn't seem fully convinced it is the profession for her, but for now she is staying and shaping a sense of belonging in the classroom for her and her students. While her evolution as a teacher is worth commending especially given her age, lack of teaching experience, and distance from the community-based school, I wonder how things would have unfolded without NGO oversight and training. I also wonder if the connections between school and home could be deeper particularly when comparing it to the Qari's practices and disposition. In the next section, I explore the Qari's orientation to a sense of belonging that is more holistic and comprehensive.

Chapter 6:

Belonging Part II: Living in light

"You think of yourself
as a citizen of the universe.
You think you belong
to this world of dust and matter.
Out of this dust
you have created a personal image,
and have forgotten
about the essence of your true origin."
Mawlana Rumi

The hums of children from the two classrooms seep into the meeting room where the Qari and I sit. It's a quiet autumn day. The most visible sign of movement appears in the sky where the clouds swoop in from opposing directions to conceal the bright morning sunlight. The triumphant sun disperses its rays in all directions, blanketing the chilly air with warmth. It seems like a fitting metaphor for Afghanistan, this land as heavenly as the skies where life seems to be a constant battle of resilience. I place the recording device on the red Afghan rug as little Isa brings in a tray with tea and sweets. Curious about what is happening, Isa sits by the door after he places the teacups in front us but his father disapproves. "Go back to your class," he says. Isa gets up, without a complaint or sigh, and returns to Ustad Yusra's class. A man of few words, the Qari commands respect through a blend of gentleness and directness—a balance that seems to work well at home and in school, the physical and symbolic boundaries of which are not always apparent.

As we approach the end of our conversation, I ask the Qari, "What do you think is the purpose of education?" With a slight Eastern Pashto accent in Dari, he responds, "The goal of education is to live our lives in light, to build a future life, and to educate others.

The benefits are a lot. If someone doesn't have knowledge…it says in the Qur'an Al-Kareem [The Noble Qur'an], someone who doesn't have knowledge is blind. Someone who has knowledge is someone who can see. Whoever has knowledge becomes acquainted with everything. Someone who does not have knowledge cannot be aware of anything." I probe further, "What does a life of light look like?" He explains, "If someone has knowledge, he/she[6] does actions that have [spiritual] reward. The other benefit is he/she can work somewhere, receive a salary and can live their life in ease. If they are not educated they cannot work, the money they earn will be with hardship." As an individual who has dedicated his life to Islamic knowledge and practice, the purpose of education is connected to doing good in light of Islamic principles—a subtle point that I grasp from my Islamic education in Sunday schools in the US. All actions have the potential to be good if the intention is good. Understood through this framework, his second point about financial well-being is not divorced from spiritual reward, rather it is intimately connected to living a "life of light." Living in light is marked by connectedness, where values fostered at school, home or in the mosque transcend to all spheres of life.

In this portrait, I focus on messages of belonging in the Qari's classroom while comparing it to Ustad Yusra's approach. I explore the Qari's educational trajectory to illuminate how his learning has shaped his teaching and ideas of belonging in his classroom. I argue that his ideas of belonging bridge belonging in the classroom to belonging in community, something that is just beginning to be established in Ustad Yusra's classroom.

[6] There is no gender in Dari pronouns, hence, I have chosen an inclusive translation.

Instability and displacement

Two decades older than Yusra, the Qari's early educational trajectory spans a seemingly more tumultuous time in Kabul's history, marked by disruptions to daily life and education. Sitting in the meeting room adjacent to Ustad Yusra's classroom while his cousin, Qari Jaleel, teaches his class, the Qari takes me through his educational history, "I went to Abdul Hakim from grade one until six. At that time, it had a different name. Now it is a high school." As a young boy the Qari knew he wanted to concentrate on Islamic Studies like his father so he took a step back from the standard public school trajectory and began to forge a path toward specialization—something that is possible in a country where there are multiple educational pathways available: public schooling, *madrassa* system, and vocational education. As the morning sun streams into the small room, the Qari explains in his usual calm, monotone voice, "For seventh grade, I took an exam to enroll in Arabic Studies at Kabul. I was accepted." Passing the competitive exam felt like an achievement, a step toward realizing his dreams and following in his father's steps. It was a bittersweet moment of joy in the country more broadly, albeit, momentarily. The Soviets were defeated, their last troops departing in humiliation as the Soviet empire began to crumble. Families slowly returned to their homes in the villages from refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran and internally displaced camps. The feeling of victory, however, was short-lived when internal struggles for power plunged Kabul into a civil war, disrupting lives once more. Adjusting his black turban—the color he wears in the cooler months—the Qari recalls, "When the [Arabic Studies] school began, the *mujahideen* came and the fighting started. My education was stopped for two to three years. There was fighting." During these years while his formal education ceased, the

Qari studied under his father, a judge and community leader. When his father's death prompted the family to flee across the border to Pakistan, he and his siblings continued their education in a new country as refugees.

In Pakistan, the Qari restarted his education in the *madrassa* system, which aligned with his goals of becoming an Islamic scholar. "There I went to *madrassa*, not school [*maktab*]. I started from the beginning and studied until the end." Within *madrassas*, learning in the early years focuses on memorizing the Qur'an, understanding early Islamic history to contextualize Islamic knowledge, and acquiring Arabic language skills. When I ask the Qari to describe the pedagogy, he replies, "It's simple. We sit on the floor and repeat after the teacher." As the topics become more advanced, students study individually or in small groups with specialized scholars. It is important to note that the Qari makes a distinction between school and *madrassa*. The content and methods of school are seemingly broader and evolving relative to *madrassas,* marked by spirituality and tradition. By extension, messages of belonging differ between *madrassas* and schools, the former focusing on a spiritual framework that transcends borders and boundaries, the latter on a collective identity that is connected to the nation-state. He continues, "After nine years, I graduated from *madrassa*. Then I entered the Court of Islamic Justice and studied there for three years [in Pakistan]. Then I returned here [to Afghanistan]." The Qari also began teaching lower classes in the *madrassa*, "I have been a teacher at the *madrassa* for a long time, more than ten years." For the Qari, teaching at a *madrassa* is a service to community and not as a way to earn income. His higher education credentials qualify him to teach at the university-level, however, displacement and state policies have limited his options.

Upon returning to his homeland, the Qari hoped his educational credentials and teaching experience would enable him to teach at one of Kabul's Islamic Studies university programs. To his dismay, his credentials from Pakistani institutions are not accepted in Afghanistan. His life seems to be marked by exclusion and unnecessary repetition due to conflict and state policies. Just as he had to restart his education in the *madrassa* system as a refugee in Pakistan, he is repeating college in his homeland to achieve the proper certificates that will enable him to teach and practice at higher levels. In so many ways, his educational trajectory, with its cycles of bumps and stops, resembles the experiences of the older children in his classroom who have attended multiple schools and faced similar challenges. Maintaining his usual calm and muted demeanor, the Qari recounts his educational trajectory in a straightforward manner, not dwelling on the setbacks and challenges. I sense that his living in light orientation has enabled him to adapt to disruptions and exclusion, focus on bigger goals, and continue on his path with little complaint. It seems to have provided a sense of inner stability in an otherwise volatile external environment. I learn the details of the situation from his wife who does not hold back about the absurdity of the circumstances: "He knows more than his professors. When they don't know something they ask [the Qari]." She references the rows of bookcases along the walls of his classroom, "He has read all of them."

The harsh reality as well as the financial impact of not having a stable job, however, has not discouraged him from continuing in his father's footsteps of service to the kids [in this neighborhood]. When I came, people said themselves, 'it's good that you came. From the time you left, no one has taught here. Now that you're here, teach our children.' At first, a few people came and gradually more and more people came. At first,

I started teaching them at this house. I freed up these two rooms in my home. When we reached 100 children, there was no more space. Then I started teaching at the *masjid*." Meanwhile, he also accepted a teaching position in Islamic Studies for grades eight and nine at an all-girls' school closer to the city of Kabul upon his arrival conditional on one request—that he be allowed to wear his traditional clothes, turban included. Though it might seem like a small request, most public school teachers, particularly in the cities, are expected to wear western attire, which is perceived to be important for some, like Yusra, in creating boundaries between home and school, between informal and formal spheres. However, this division is less sustainable in a Kabul that is more diverse than in an imagined past wherein these boundaries were created. In some minor but meaningful way, the Qari's choice represents an effort to negotiate belonging in an educational space. For living in light is an orientation, a way of being, that outshines barriers like the rays of the sun on a cloudy day. Belonging is thus not conditional on external realities. It is an internal state, a deep conviction that everything else will fall in place when one lives by his/her principles.

Despite his teaching experience, for the Qari the six-day NGO training was useful: "The first [training seminar] one was beneficial because I wasn't very familiar with [first grade] teaching before that. Lesson planning, keeping track of attendance, plans for classroom management were new to me and because of that it was very useful." As illustrated through these two sections on belonging, both Yusra and the Qari employ specific techniques from these training seminars. And though their own educational experiences seem to sharply differ, shared NGO training plays an important role in similar pedagogical techniques and attention to socio-emotional learning. Without

undermining the importance of external training, I also highlight teacher agency by paying particular attention to how and when teachers extend the curriculum, how they spend extra time, and their interactions with students.

These two teachers represent generational differences in experiences with displacement, exclusion, and education. Yusra's educational trajectory appears to be more stable within the formal *maktab* system, further supported by guidance from her veteran-teacher mother. In contrast, the Qari's educational pathway is marked by disruptions and delays and illuminates learning outside the formal education system in the *madrassa* system, which as he confirms has a different orientation to content and pedagogy. In examining the relationship between belonging and the cultivation of community, understanding these teachers' lived experiences, the influence of mothers and fathers, and their educational experiences are critical. Whereas Yusra seems to have experienced a stable sense of belonging in the formal public education system and continues to be connected to the public system through her mother, the Qari's journey is marked by a holistic learning experience that connects home and school and spirituality.

One might rightfully argue that *insanyat* is also a holistic orientation. There are certainly many similarities between *insanyat* and a spiritual framework, and within Afghanistan Islam and centuries of a culture cultivated in arid valleys where connectivity is key to well-being give both frameworks substance. Yet, classroom observations over a span of time reveal subtle and important differences in practice that have implications for belonging and community. Juxtaposing these two classrooms, trends emerge regarding tradition and modernity, religion and secularism, and rural and urban. To examine these trends, in addition to classroom observations, I focus on how one student, Bibi Hawa,

embodies some of these nuances. And while these classrooms consist of two representations of culture, community, and belonging, they reflect larger social realities, replete with adaptations and ongoing tensions. In the next section, I capture the Qari's classroom culture and explore how it gives shape to differing messages of belonging than in Yusra's classroom. I begin by examining culture through the example of Bibi Hawa and her mother.

Bridging boundaries

When I arrive early, Bibi Hawa grabs my hand and insists on going to her house before class begins, "You have to speak with my mother, Ustad. You spoke with all the other mothers." She's ten years old and speaks with me in a blend of Dari and Pashto. She is wearing a knee-length blue dress with a full skirt with beading on the edges, matching pants, and a white scarf with sparkling, sequins flowers on the side of her head. Her almond-shaped eyes are lined with black kohl and a small diamond stud adorns her nose. Bibi Hawa is feisty, bright as the beads on her clothes, and demands inclusion. So when I begin interviewing families, she makes sure I speak with her mother. One clear difference between the Dari- and Pashto-speaking families is that none of the Pashto-speakers visit the school for the interview, as I encouraged for safety reasons. Recognizing the stricter attitudes towards women in the public space, I begin visiting homes—an experience that allowed me to better understand the contours of the community. We walk across the street from the Qari's house and down a maze of alleys. Not too far from the school, Bibi Hawa stops at a blue gate and pushes it open. We walk into a dark corridor next to a staircase. My eyes catch a glimpse of two sheep lying snug

in a pile of hay under the staircase. It reminds me of my grandmother's old house in Logar where the livestock are kept at the entrance of the house, the furthest point from the living areas. Apparently this configuration also keeps the house and courtyard warmer in the cooler seasons. I try to wait for someone to allow us in but Bibi Hawa pulls my hand and reassures me, "My mother is inside."

In the courtyard, a group of women, around five, come out to greet us. "This is my mother," Bibi Hawa proudly introduces me to a tall woman wearing a burgundy dress embroidered with delicate beads with bright green, glass bangles on her hands. Her large black cotton scarf, laced with beaded flowers, lays softly around her lean face, decorated with green dot tattoos on her forehead and chin. She reminds me of Bedouin women who live in different encampments throughout the year, imposing but inviting, humble, and full of stories. "Come in, Ustad," she tells me in Pashto. She leads me to a room with a large hand-woven red rug and floor cushions along the wall. The lower third of the white walls are painted glossy emerald green.

"We've lived in Jadai Roshan for ten years. The men in our family are drivers so we moved here as business is better." I'm surprised to learn the family has been in Kabul for a decade as none of them speak fluent Dari, even Bibi Hawa who goes to school and presumably interacts with her mostly Dari-speaking neighbors. I learn that Bibi Hawa has never been to a formal public school. She began attending the Qari's Qur'an classes in his home and in the mosque, which paved a path to her enrollment into the community-based school. It seems that across Kabul exists small enclaves of displaced families and language minorities that are primarily bridged to the world outside through mosques and religious leaders. She continues sharing as she parts the curtain to let in the light, "Life in

Kabul is better. We worked all day in Paktia. Here our clothes are clean, we eat well and pray five times a day. The biggest problem is the water shortage. We bring 60 buckets of clean water from Logar every week." As Bibi Hawa's mother lays a hand-made cloth on the ground on which she places a pot of tea, sugar, fresh bread, and a jar of honey, she points to the honey, "This is from Paktia." I ask her about her educational journey. She laughs, "I didn't go to school." "Why?" I ask not realizing her laughter should have signaled the silliness of my inquiry. "There were no schools in our *watan*. *[homeland]* I went to the *masjid* to learn Qur'an." She scoops a spoon of honey and puts it on my plate. I continue, "How did your family decide to enroll your daughter into the community-based school?" She responds in Pashto, maintaining eye contact to make sure I understand everything, "I enrolled my daughter so she can learn how to pray and learn *hadees*, Qur'an, and become a good Muslim. I want her to learn how to write and read." She looks at her daughter, "Translate for her." Her Pashto dialect is slightly unfamiliar to me so Bibi Hawa fills in my understanding. It is worth noting that Bibi Hawa's mother emphasizes the value of religious knowledge and connects it to literacy. The two are not disconnected for her but enable her daughter to be a good Muslim.

Bibi Hawa's mother's perspective is important because it is rarely recognized in an urban setting. It demonstrates differential experiences with education and the meeting of rural and urban backgrounds. The students in the Qari's class are all Pashto-speaking; most of the students are originally from the neighboring provinces of Paktia and Khost, with a third group from Logar. These provinces are further away from Kabul and almost entirely Pashto-speaking—two factors that contribute to marginalization of migrants in the country's capital. The Qari, himself being a Pashto-speaker, and having grown up in a

more traditional family relative to the Yusra's seems to share cultural dispositions with his students. Many of his students are in school primarily because the school is within his house. Prior to the community-based school, a large number of these students were either in his home-school classes or in the *masjid* classes. That Dari is the main language of instruction in most public schools demonstrates the relative exclusion of migrants from the south of the country. Eleven-year-old Seelai, originally from Paktia and a recent returnee from Pakistan, is the top performing student in the Qari's class. Like many of her classmates, she explains she does not go to Abdul Hakim because the "it is in Dari." Belonging, thus is connected to pragmatic factors such as language of instruction as well as more underlying dispositions and attitudes regarding safe and culturally-appropriate school culture.

While I enjoy being in the presence of Bibi Hawa's mother, I am aware that school will start soon. As we get up to leave, her mother brings a bag of walnuts and places it in my hands. "They're from Paktia, my *watan*. Take them." Even though life seems to have been significantly more difficult in Paktia, she mentions her *watan* with pride, exemplifying the deep-rooted nature of connections to home—both new and old. Bibi Hawa and I walk back to her class. The class is larger than Ustad Yusra's (around 45 students per day and 53 total enrolled) and older (approximately 40 percent of students are between 11-13). There is designated seating in this class as well influenced by NGO training, with younger children at the front and center, and older children on the perimeter and back of the class, however, given the size of the class, the lines and the center aisle merge very quickly after class begins. Unlike Ustad Yusra who walks up and down the aisle, the Qari tends to stand or sit at the front for most of the three hours. The

classroom culture is also different. Bibi Hawa takes her seat behind Bushra who is wearing a lavender dress and lavender lace scarf with bright red stones. “How are you Ustad? Why didn’t you come to our class yesterday?” Bushra whispers, “Come to our class first!” Where Yusra’s prominent presence is more saliently felt and seen in her classroom with her strong voice and pacing up and down the aisle, in this class the students’ personalities fill the space. I don’t doubt, however, that one teacher is regarded with less respect and admiration.

The class is colorful and energetic even in the hot, arid summer days when the power is on for short periods of time. Every inch of the four walls is plastered with student artwork—a flag of Afghanistan in black, green, and red, the Pashto alphabet, cartoon coloring pages. Students’ clothes and accessories are equally vibrant. Little Rashid with big, round brown eyes in the center of the first row is in a terracotta *parahan tomban;* his little cousins in lime green. There are only a few boys in shirtdresses and pants; most wear *parahan tomban*. On the wall opposite of where Bushra and I sit, next to the window with the upside down San Francisco 49ers curtain is a group of pre-teen teenage girls, including Asiya, in long dresses and white scarves, several with nose-rings, bangles and henna on their hands—accessories that would not be tolerated in Ustad Yusra’s class.

Before class starts, one can find the Qari in the yard or in the class by the time the first students enter. As the class settles down, he writes *Bismillah* (in the name of Allah) on the top center of the board in red marker. He greets the class with the long, formal Muslim greeting, “*Asalam alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatu*.” And the class responds with the full, formal greeting, “WALAIKUMASALAAM

WARAHMATULLAHI WA BARAKATU!" "Who wants to start with *tilawat (Qur'an recitation)*?" While the Qari requests volunteers, by now I know he will select little Aisha. Aisha, a five-year old girl with beautiful dark eyes and dimples on her round, wheat-toned face attends the *madrassa* in the mosque next door and has memorized many short chapters of the Qur'an. She is wearing a hand-sewn, coordinated red dress and *tomban* set with a green scarf tightly wrapped around her small face. When the Qari calls on her, she smiles and lowers her head. Then she stands up and confidently walks from the second row to front of the class with a calm and serious expression—a delightful expression for a child—and begins reciting *Surah (chapter) At-tein* ("The Fig"), projecting her small voice to fill the room (translation below).

By the fig and the olive
And [by] Mount Sinai
And [by] this secure city [Makkah],
We have certainly created man in the best of stature;
Then We return him to the lowest of the low,
Except for those who believe and do righteous deeds, for they will have a reward uninterrupted.
So what yet causes you to deny the Recompense?
Is not Allah the most just of judges?

Like the poem by Mawlana Rumi that opens this chapter, the verses serve as a reminder of the origins of humans, that true belonging transcends the material world and connects all humans to one source. Rashid and his cousins, as well as Bushra and Bibi Hawa, who had been chatting, look at Aisha and listen in respect with their class. Looking at Aisha's straight posture and calm face, I sense that beginning the class with the Qur'an recitation feels like an honor for her. When she finishes and sits back down the Qari instructs the class to open their math books. There is no cleanliness check like in Ustad Yusra's class. In fact, the lack of structure in the class stands in contrast with the Dari-instruction class.

After opening the day with Qur'an recitation, the first subject is math. The lesson is on place values—ones, tens, hundreds (*yaweez, laseez, seleez*). The Qari writes a simple addition problem on the board: 12 plus 1 and explains, "You have to add ones with ones, tens with tens. If you add ones with tens, what happens?" Students respond in unison, "It's wrong!"

As he writes another problem, his eight-year-old daughter, who goes to the Abdul Hakim High School later in the morning, comes in with a tray carrying a tea thermos, three cups, and two small saucers with hard candy. She pours me a cup of green tea and places it and the saucer on the metal supplies box next to me. She also pours a cup for her father and takes the other cup and saucer to Ustad Yusra. Struck by the first time this happens after a week of visiting the community-based school, the boundaries between home and school are not clear-cut in this classroom. After all, the school is in the teacher's home; his family is upstairs and during the breaks he occasionally goes upstairs to play with his one-year-old son. From the students' colorful clothes and accessories, informal chatter with each other, and warm welcome, belonging in this classroom is less bounded, mirroring home practices and to some extent the practices of *madrassas*—particularly the wearing of traditional clothes and opening with the Qur'an—that have defined the Qari's educational experiences. Importantly, the Qari's classroom culture and expectations demonstrate the lack of distance between home and school. His home has served as an educational space for multiple generations dating back to his father. Hence, home and school are not distinct places. They are mutually reinforcing places defined by faith and practice.

The Qari sits on the ground and calls for volunteers as he takes a sip of the tea. He calls on Bushra's niece, Zarghuna to solve 12 plus 3. To assist her, he gives her twelve popsicle sticks in one hand and holds three in his hand. Then he hands her the remaining three and asks, "How many do you have now?" The little girl with piercing green eyes, counts each popsicle stick as the Qari patiently waits. She quietly answers, "15." "*Afareen*!" the Qari exclaims, bringing a smile to Zarghuna's face. As a few more younger students demonstrate in front of the class, the chitchat between some students begins again. The Qari calls on a boy in the back of the class who has not been paying attention to solve an addition problem on the board. When he struggles to count, he stands up and gives him popsicle sticks to count one by one.

Across Ustad Yusra's and the Qari's classrooms care is evident in their teaching and attention to each child's learning. From Ustad Yusra's checking on learning and review of lessons to the Qari's patient guidance in solving a math problem, teachers convey a message that everyone belongs in the learning process. Moreover, similar to the parents of students in Ustad Yusra's class, parents with children in the Qari's class also emphasize the importance of care and attention in the learning process. Zarghuna's mother's remarks illustrate how well acquainted some parents are with teacher practices: "This school puts in more effort. They have students do work at the board. We asked the children what they learned. The girls said we go to the board to solve questions. We become very happy. They tell us about their lessons. Some people tell their kids to go to school and they don't ask about what they learned. But these girls tell us about what they learned." While the differences between the classes might stand out at first glance—one

marked by rules and procedures and one marked by faith and practice—both teachers are committed to supporting their students' learning.

Beginning with salaam

A rumbling helicopter flies over the school, sending vibrations through the classroom walls. I'm not familiar with their names—maybe an Apache or Blackhawk—names inspired by Native Americans, people who, I believe, have more in common with the people of Afghanistan than the manufacturers of the planes. These palpable signs of war have become too common to stop anyone from work or school. Looking across the class to faces smiling, serious, in thought, I feel an overwhelming storm of emotions, a wave of hope followed closely with a wave of hopelessness, submerging and re-emerging into each other.

It is time for Writing in the Qari's class. The Qari asks students to take out their blackboards and rulers from their backpacks. I see Bibi Hawa take out a flimsy piece of metal that pops when pressed with chalk. With disappointment in her face, she raises her voice, "Why can't we write in our notebook? It's more beautiful." The Qari, however, continues with the lesson. He writes several Pashto letters on the board and says, "Write each letter on a separate line." Students, some with excitement and others, like Bibi Hawa, with reluctance, use their rulers to draw straight lines on their boards and start sketching the smooth curves of the Pashto alphabet. The main purpose of this subject is to improve handwriting. Bibi Hawa and Bushra show each other their boards, proudly displaying their penmanship. Some of the little boys in the center of the room press their boards to make them pop. Soon the room erupts in raucous noise, with popping sounds

and chit-chat; one student throws his chalk at his friend. The Qari unsuccessfully demands, “Don’t throw things. Sit quietly.” Sensing the children’s boredom, he finally gives in and moves on before the 45-minute slot for writing is to be complete.

Standing in front of the class, the Qari grabs their attention by posing a question, “Do you know how to properly say salaam?” Students start to say “Asalaam…” The Qari stops them, “No, just answer the question. Weis come here,” says the Qari waving his hand toward the entrance. “This is your house. You just came from school. How do you come in and sit?” Weis, an eight-year-old, stern boy enters the room, says salaam as he enters, and sits quietly in his place. The Qari doesn’t say anything. No *afareen*. No indication of disappointment. The Qari’s face is expression-less, no sign of approval or disapproval. It seems to puzzle the students who are now fully paying attention, trying to figure out what they are missing. He calls on another boy who plays out the same pattern of actions. Then he calls on little Aisha, who, as is typical of her character, lowers her head in shyness initially, then stands up and confidently saunters to the front of the class. The bashful smile on her face is replaced with seriousness. With her head held high, slightly tilted back, she stands at the door and says, “Asalaamu alaikum” then she enters and sits down. Qari: “Yes! When you come in say salaam. Stand at the entrance and say salaam loud and slowly and then walk in.”

Another girl demonstrates. While she’s at the door, she asks “*Ajaza ast*?” “Do I have permission to enter?” in Dari. While all of the students are Pashto speakers they attempt to speak Dari when I’m in the room to make me feel included, whether it is in broken or fluent Dari. When students make a mistake in Dari the class erupts in laughter. The Qari approves, “Yes, this is also part of *adab* [manners]. Say the full salaam

(asalaamu alaikum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatu).” Then he changes the position of the one who is greeting, “Now you’re at home and someone comes in and says salaam. How do you respond?” Two new students demonstrate. The Qari continues, “You also have backpacks. Where do you put it? Do you throw it?” Students: “No!” Bushra exclaims, “Put it away nicely.”

Remarkably, throughout the entire role-play all of the students pay attention. As the clock inches closer to the end of the school day, the Qari advises students, “When you arrive home clean your face and hands with soap. If there’s no soap, don’t say why. Just use water. Then make ablution.” While the Qari’s class routine doesn’t begin with a cleanliness check, he teaches the importance of cleanliness through a faith-based framework, one that is connected to daily rituals rather than classroom routine. He continues, “You finish school early so you have time to sleep when you go home. When you wake up you can eat and then pray around 1:30 [in the afternoon] and then go to *madrassa*. When you’re at home, help your mom with everything, cleaning. If you help your parents you will go to heaven. Do you like heaven?” The students exclaim in unison, “YES!” The Qari continues, “Allah will be pleased with you if you help your parents.”

A similar lesson plays out in Ustad Yusra’s class at a later point in the semester, not as spontaneously but in conjunction with the formal curriculum. It is the final hour of the school day and the subject is Life Skills. Ustad Yusra instructs students to open their books to a page that presents three drawings: one where a child is putting away her shoes, one that shows clothes scattered on the floor, and one that shows a child organizing his clothes in the closet. A teacher training seminar guided teachers in how to effectively

teach through visual representations. The master trainer explains, “Every subject has its own methodology. First you must outline the goal of a lesson and then plan activities accordingly.” She then gives an example of how methods might be customized through using the Life Skills book. She turns to a page with four illustrations and demonstrates how to teach a lesson: “Look at the drawings. What do you see? Talk about drawings in your own words…for homework you can have students talk with their family members about the drawings.” The master trainer also encourages teachers to be creative and find different ways to engage all students.

In her classroom, Ustad Yusra asks Qais to stand up, “Pretend you’re coming home, where do you put your bag?” He says, “in the closet.” Yusra asks his sister, who’s also in the class: “What does he do at home?” She replies, “He throws his bag on the floor and I put it away.” Qais grins mischievously. Ustad Yusra looks disappointed. Then Ustad Yusra calls on Farhana, “What do you do when you first arrive home?” Farhana stands up straight and proclaims, “I say salaam to my parents.” Ustad Yusra approves, “Good job! First knock on the door, then greet them and put away your bag.”

What is understated but key is the centrality of home in the scenarios that Ustad Yusra and the Qari construct. While students also greet each other and their teachers at the beginning of the school day—something that is embodied in their everyday practices— the activity guides students to imagine they are coming home in order to role-play the proper etiquette of salaam. When I later ask the Qari to explain the importance of teaching the etiquettes of greeting with salaam, he responds in his usual terse and pragmatic way, “I thought students need to learn how to say salaam to each other and how to hold hands.” I try to probe further but my questions don’t seem to generate much

reflection from the Qari. I suspect they might seem odd and irrelevant coming from me, an Afghan who dresses like locals, speaks Dari, and greets him and his class in the manner he teaches each day. Ustad Yusra, on the other hand, explains the activity from a pedagogical stance. She explains, "They're more engaged during these [role-play] activities, requiring less time on classroom management." As demonstrated in Part I, Ustad Yusra connects saying salaam to embodying the proper character of a student. The Qari, on the other hand, does not frame character development as something inherent solely in a school student, but as important *adab,* more generally.

While he doesn't explain the significance of saying salaam to his class, his actions illuminate it. The focus is on practice and grounded in the assumption that the significance is understood. As I sit in classrooms, teacher trainings, and *shura* meetings, the significance of greeting with salaam is stressed across age groups and community members. In one *shura* meeting, an NGO trainer explains, "When you enter your home say salaam. How often do we say salaam to our families? It forms love and respect…if we solve our families' problems we will solve societies' problems…if we live our lives according to Islam, we will live peacefully, love our lives." Here, the trainer is more explicit about the role of saying salaam in cultivating love and respect, spreading light within the home, which when present in each home, uplifts society. Saying salaam is the first exchange between family members in the morning or after school or work and between complete strangers—it forms the groundwork for community. The emphasis on salaam in the classroom also connects students with family and the broader community. Often messages of belonging, rather than highlighting how to be a proper student and therefore belonging in school as in Ustad Yusra's classroom, focus on belonging in

school and in the broader community. Examining the Qari's class through a lens that positions the classroom within the layers of context that are relevant to this space illuminates the Qari's orientation. His home, as a school and a gathering place for the school and community *shuras*, in so many ways represents a center of community. It is adjacent to the mosque, the other major place that connects neighbors with varying socio-economic backgrounds and migration experiences. To some extent this message—that you belong to community—is received by all of the students in the school, even those in Ustad Yusra's classroom, because the Qari interacts with families from both classrooms. Some of Ustad Yusra's students were in the Qari's Qur'an classes; some see him in the madrassa in the afternoon. Moreover, it is the Qari who calls and checks on absent students each day. Though it might seem insignificant, parents across both classes perceive phone calls as a sign of care and attention. One parent explains, "Qari calls home if they're absent. Other people don't care."

Parents also stress the importance of saying salaam and its connection to community and their children's growth. Zarghuna's mother praises the Qari's efforts, "They've learned the lessons well. When they come home, they respect us. In the past, they would learn what other kids were doing. Ustad said respect your mother and father, elders. They didn't say salaam before when they went out. Now when they go outside and see adults, they greet them with salaam. This makes us very happy. We used to tell them to say salaam but they said no. They were embarrassed. The teacher told them say salaam. It is a good deed and adults will be happy. Now when they see adults outside they say salaam. They are respectful. If we're holding something they will carry it."

Later in the semester, I note another example of how the Qari extends the curriculum to focus on community. The Qari instructs students to open their Deniat, religious studies, textbook to the lesson on "The rights of neighbors." He reads the three short sentences that comprise the lesson: "We should have good relations with our neighbors. In Islam, treating neighbors with goodness is obligatory. Harming neighbors is sinful." After reading the text three times, he selects a few older students to read in front of the class. First Bushra, then Asiya, then Weis. Then, abruptly, he commands, "Close your books," in a dejected tone that seems to suggest dissatisfaction with the vague sentences. He calls on Weis again, "How should you treat your neighbors?" Weis answers, "Be nice, don't fight." He asks another boy, "How should you treat your neighbors?" He repeats the previous response, "Be nice. Don't fight." The students' responses also seem to be generic and unsatisfactory; the Qari slows down, looks straight at the class and in a calm tone explains, "Talk with them, go to their house, check on them. If your neighbor gives you money to bring something from the market, do you bring it?" "YES!" students reply in unison.

Standing by the board, he places the textbook on the supplies box and continues to emphasize the lesson, connecting the individual to the community, "One day we will be in need. [During the Prophet's time] someone died. The body was carried to the graveyard. [When it passed the Prophet] the Prophet said this person will go to hell. The companions were surprised as they thought this was a good person. 'He prayed,' they said. The Prophet said it's because his neighbors were not happy with him. Another body passed and the Prophet said this person will go to heaven because his neighbors were pleased with him." Throughout my time in this school community, I take note of

moments when teachers extend the standardized curriculum to make connections between school and the wider community, bridging belonging in this space to belonging in the layers of community that wrap around the school. Belonging is a way of being and interacting with a sense of connection between the various elements of life, between the individual, family, and community. Whereas Ustad Yusra tends to spend extra time on poetry recitation, songs, and imparting knowledge about the practices and norms of being a school student, the Qari passes on messages that connect the school with the community. These messages are not necessarily polar opposite or in tension with each other and I don't believe the Qari thinks so either. That his two sons are in Ustad Yusra's class and wear white button-up shirts and formal trousers shows his outlook toward formal school practices. His sons are learning Dari and there's no question that they will one day join their sisters at Abdul Hakim High School. Perhaps, he recognizes that for his children as well as all the children in the school to succeed in the future they will have to adapt to the dominant culture, that they will need to navigate Kabul and the only way to do that is to feel a sense of belonging in the city culture while remaining connected to the mosque and community.

At the end of the semester as the students prepare for final exams, I ask the Qari in the meeting room, "What are your future goals? What are your goals for students and the community?" Looking out the window as the muted, autumn sunrays stream in, he says, "My hope is to continue my education for as long as I'm alive. Teaching *tarbia* to students is also [spiritually] rewarding. Educating our children is a service. These are the children of the *watan*. I hope they go far."

Chapter 7: Relationships

"The best of you is the best to his family,
and I am the best amongst you to my family."
Prophet Muhammad

Trust and belonging rely on strong and healthy relationships. The previous two chapters weave in elements of relationships between students, teachers, and community members to illustrate a broader story about trust and belonging. How the Qari leverages existing relationships built on trust and community engagement through the mosque is central to access and sustaining of educational opportunities for boys and girls. In the belonging sections, we see the emphasis on care and learning in relationships between students and teachers. While relationships are integral to establishing trust and belonging, to creating and sustaining community, the previous chapters do not focus explicitly on relationships. A focused and explicit examination of relationships is important in understanding how relationships cultivate community and strengthen educational experiences.

The presence of many stakeholders in the school community—teachers, students, families, *shura* members, NGO staff, MOE—means a plethora of relationships exist at various community, national, and international levels. I focus on two levels that are most salient in the lived experiences of teachers and students and that capture connections between education and community—relationships within the classrooms, between teachers and between teachers and students, and relationships between the school and the NGO. Woven within these two overarching threads are discussions of other stakeholders, their lack of participation, and the implications of this absence at the school level.

The chapter begins with a focus on relationships within the school. I show how relationships are grounded in culture, specifically how age and gender determine roles and responsibilities. The first section highlights how family serves as a metaphor to capture relationships between students as well as between students and teachers. The second section examines how relationships within the school are based on shared responsibility in the learning process. The third section transitions to relationships between the school and the main institution active within the community-based school landscape—the NGO, and to some extent, the nation. This section examines tensions, experiences of exclusion, and teachers' assertions of authority.

Foundations of family

"The boys are like my brothers. The girls are like my sisters," Bushra exclaims as Bibi Hawa wraps her arm around her. The two girls join me in the conference room before school starts. And though the morning is young, the room is submerged in sunlight, our faces shining from moisture. The heat does not seem to affect the girls as much as me. Bushra takes out gold and pink glittery tape from her pencil pouch and starts decorating the front of my notebook in which I take fieldnotes. Bibi Hawa helps her with the design—a border around the notebook, an X down the middle. Bushra finds some stickers in her pencil bag and places them on my notebook. When Bushra first describes the relationships in the school in the language of family, I do not fully grasp the profoundness of the ten year old's statement. Family in the community-based school manifests in multiple ways—both kinship ties as well as new relationships. The

institution of family is so strong in Afghanistan that all other relationships reflect this foundational model.

Before the Qari comes downstairs for the 8am class, students trickle in through the open gate into the courtyard. In the Qari's class, little Rashid playfully wrestles with his two cousins. The boys climb on each other, giggling, pulling, and pushing. Isa walks into the classroom and looks at the boys with his usual stern gaze. Disappointed, he turns around, and walks to his classroom. Maira is already outside with a short broom in her hand, sweeping the concrete floors in front of Ustad Yusra's class as her cousins, Laila and Zala, place students' shoes in the new iron shelves outside their classroom. A pile of dust and debris from yesterday's class is clustered at the entrance of the class. Zala gathers it into a bin.

Almost every student in the school is related to at least one other student—siblings, cousins, even nieces and nephews and by extension little aunts and uncles. In Afghanistan, family is not limited to the nuclear family, consisting of parents and children. Family extends to multiple generations of the father's lineage under one roof. Even in urban spaces, it is not unusual for extended families to live in one house or multiple units that are connected by a shared courtyard. In most extended families, parents live their entire lives with their sons. When a daughter gets married, she joins her in-laws. As families become larger with multiple nuclear family sets, these smaller sets split into separate living quarters, restarting the process. Depending on when nuclear families split, extended family structures look different. For example, Maira and her cousins (all from her paternal uncles) live in a maze of modest, clay, adjacent buildings. Bushra lives in one house with her parents, unmarried sisters, and unmarried and married

brothers. Zarghoona is her brother's daughter. Even Ustad Yusra, whose family has lived in cities most of their lives, lives in a spacious house with her uncles' families. The Qari, in contrast, is somewhat of an anomaly living with his wife and kids. This decision is shaped by the realities of displacement rather than his personal preference. His brothers and their families are still in Pakistan. Meanwhile, one of his cousins, Ustad Jameel, lives downstairs in the room that is used for meetings during the day. And, as we will see, everyone in the house serves a role in the school.

As Maira sweeps the dust on the concrete to the teal gate, Seelai walks in, drops her backpack in the classroom, and returns outside to assist with preparations for the day without direction. She picks up the orange water cooler at the corner of the courtyard and fills it with fresh water from the faucet. Her sister, Zarmina, brings in a tan bar of soap and places it on the soap tray next to the faucet so they are ready in case students need to wash their hands before beginning class. The girls work together quietly, cleaning the school grounds as they would their home.

Besides the family relations—sisters, brothers, cousins—that connect students in the school, the school routine resembles home dynamics and routines. When I ask Bushra to describe her daily routine, she responds similarly to most students: "When I wake up, my mom tells me to warm up water for ablution. Then I wake up my brother and sister. My parents read Qur'an. I give my brother and sister the Qur'an Kareem. Then I sweep the rooms, the kitchen, I do all my chores early." Daily routines are somewhat different for boys and girls, with girls doing more of the housework and boys helping with chores that involve going outside, for instance fetching water or buying groceries. As mentioned earlier, Weis, Seelai's cousin, describes his daily routine, "I prepare water for ablution.

Then I pray. I eat breakfast. Go to school. After school if there's no water, I bring water from the mosque and from neighbors." Similarly, in the school it is mainly girls who voluntarily keep the classrooms clean, while boys open the gates for guests or make home visits to absent classmates. This arrangement seems to function smoothly but as discussed below, outside involvement by the NGO sometimes challenges organic relationships grounded in culture within the community-based school.

A little after 8am, the Qari walks down the stairs in a white *parahan tomban* and a pastel yellow turban and joins his students in the packed, humid room. Recently, class has begun slightly later than usual, as the Qari's three sisters are visiting from Pakistan and Jalalabad. "Asalaamu alaikum!" the class exclaims as he steps into the room. The Qari returns their greeting and presses the fan switch without any success. Power availability is so unpredictable in Kabul that you never know if it has returned in between the time it takes one to walk down a flight of stairs. "There is no electricity, Qari sahib," says Bibi Hawa. Not giving up, the Qari asks a couple of boys to bring the large industrial fan from the back of the room to the front in case power returns.

The Qari calls on Aisha to recite a short surah as he retrieves his lesson materials from the supplies box. Aisha steps forward and captures our attention,

> *"Read, [Oh Prophet] in the name of your Lord Who created,*
> *Created humans from a clinging clot.*
> *Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous,*
> *Who taught by the pen"* [Surah Al-Alaq, 1-4].

Meanwhile, the Qari crosses his legs on the floor and takes out his textbooks. When Aisha finishes, Rashid raises his hand and asks, "Ustad, can I get a drink of water?" opening up a parade of requests for water. The brief journey to the water cooler outside provides a short yet much-needed relief from the humid room, which seems to

increase in heat as more students enter and the sun rises in the horizon. The Qari allows each person to leave individually.

"Take out your math books," he instructs, still sitting on the floor. Bushra takes her book out and looks over at her niece and brother to make sure their books are out too. Zarghoona, who has already taken out her book, sits upright and looks directly at the board. Yusuf, on the other hand, peaks into his backpack and stares back at Bushra. "I don't have it." "You can look at Zarghoona's," Bushra whispers, flustered by her brother's lack of preparation. I peak at Bushra's textbook and see they are on a page with two random objects of varying weights—three cows and a car, a teacup and a kettle, a book and a computer. Showing a picture of a watermelon and an apple, the Qari asks "Which one is heavier?" Students respond in unison, "The watermelon is bigger!" "No, how do we say it [completely]?" the Qari looks at Zarghoona, "The watermelon is heavier than apples." "Great job!"

Through the window, I see Shahla, from Ustad Yusra's class, walk through the gates, arms wrapped around a pink bundle, with a couple of older neighborhood girls around her. She comes into the Qari's class and hands the pink blanket to the Qari. "Asalaamu alaikum Qari sahib. This is Abdullah's baby. Can you say *azan* in her ear?" It's her brother's newborn baby girl. The Qari cradles the baby in his arms and sits back down on the floor, reciting the call to prayer in her right ear. "God is the greatest. I testify that there is no god but Allah. I testify that Muhammad is Allah's Prophet. Come to prayer. Come to salvation." The students and I watch as the Qari performs a tradition that each of us has experienced. When a baby is born in Muslim cultures, it is tradition to welcome the child to the world with the call to prayer, welcoming the child to a life

where success is connected to worship. Having grown up in the US, I assumed this honor was bestowed on the father of the child. I had witnessed my dad perform the practice for my younger siblings. Here, the practice is performed by fathers and religious community leaders, such as the Qari. Religious leaders are a natural extension of the family, serving important roles throughout key milestones in a family's life trajectory from birth to marriage to death.

The salience of family relations is also embedded in the official curriculum. The most direct references come from the *Deenyat* [Islamic studies] material. One day, Ustad Yusra teaches a lesson on the rights of families. She prefaces, "What does *walidayn* mean?" Typically meaning parents, Ustad Yusra extends this understanding to the entire family, "It includes everyone living in your home whom you consider family. This includes parents, siblings, and grandparents." Asking students to turn to the page on family rights, Ustad Yusra begins, "Bismillahi Rahman-e Rahim. I love my parents." Students repeat. She explains, "One of the rights of parents is loving them…God will be pleased with you if your parents are." She looks at Nasreen and asks her to stand up. "Do you listen to your parents?" asks Yusra. Nasreen timidly answers, "Yes."

Teacher training content similarly incorporates family as an essential foundational paradigm of culture. During one session about resolving disputes that might arise within the classroom, one of the teacher trainers, Ustad Asad, a young man with black hair and eloquent speech, a graduate of English literature, speaks about assisting students who might be acting up in class. "We say we shouldn't be involved in students' personal lives but teachers are like parents. If there's a problem, sit them alone, and ask them or ask their friends what's wrong." Many moments demonstrate Ustad Yusra's and the Qari's

attention to how students feel and engage in the classroom. One example that stands out concerns Nasreen. When Nasreen misses several classes, Ustad Yusra inquires about her absence to her brother, Qais, who explains that his family has concerns about her safety on the way to school. Ustad Yusra proceeds to share the information with the Qari, knowing that he can speak with Nasreen's older brother at the mosque. Later, Nasreen's mother visits the school and agrees to walk her daughter to school.

Returning to Ustad Asad's discussion of how teachers are like parents, the curriculum highlights connections between teachers and parents in multiple ways. In the Life Skills curriculum, one lesson includes, "Teachers are like parents. They are nice and caring." Hence, the importance of family is threaded throughout interactions between students and between students and teachers, the official curriculum, and NGO teacher training. Though family has always been important in Afghan culture, it is arguably even more salient in situations of displacement as family relations are connected to establishing trust, helping each other, and enhancing safety—thus to cultivating community. For example, many families' source of motivation for sending their children to the community-based school was determined by trust in the Qari through relationships at the mosque or with his family. Finally, more broadly, relationships between these three levels—school, public education system, and NGO—often appear in harmony, emphasizing shared core principles. However, later sections examine some nuances and tensions.

Shared responsibility

The early spring heat intensifies by mid-summer. With the rising temperature

comes an array of local fruits and vegetables from Kabul and the surrounding provinces. Local vendors on the way to the school spritz water on crates of beautifully arranged champagne grapes from Logar, peaches from Paghman, and apples from Kunar to keep the fruit fresh and clean from dust. At the curve of the road, I see Weis and his cousins collecting water in large yellow buckets from the faucet at the corner of the mosque. Recently the school start time was modified to begin half an hour later to accommodate Ustad Yusra's morning college courses with permission from the NGO.

Inside, the Qari sits on the floor with a group of girls around a pile of small white paper squares and a bundle of jute. Etched on each square is a letter of the Pashto alphabet in black ink. An assembly line is in process around the mound of pieces of paper. The Qari hands each letter to one student. The paper is hole punched, then it is placed on the jute twine, finally another student ties a knot to hold the paper in place before moving onto the next letter. When the Qari sees me walk through the door, he instructs the students, "Let's put away the materials. We'll finish tomorrow." Still, these brief moments are a reminder of my outsider status as a guest.

Ustad Yusra follows me into the class, "Qari sahib, when do the seminars begin?" "Next week," the Qari replies. The second round of teacher training seminars consists of day-long workshops that run during school hours and conflict with Ustad Yusra's college classes. The first round occurred several weeks after the academic year began in the spring, focusing on orientation to teaching, classroom management, and introduction to lesson planning. I join Ustad Yusra in the yard where she advises me, "You should call Ustad Fatima in advance to see if you can sit in on the seminars." As the master trainer, Ustad Fatima is responsible for supporting community-based teachers in the vicinity. As

per her instructions, I call Ustad Fatima who agrees that I can attend the sessions but will have to take extra safety precautions to commute to the other side of the city for these seminars.

Frustrated about the lack of notice from the NGO about the trainings and how she will acquire permission to skip college classes for a week, Ustad Yusra takes a deep breath and walks into her classroom. “Is there power today?” Qais responds, “No, Ustad.” She loosens her lime green scarf which matches flawlessly with her pistachio-colored robe and cream dress underneath. Yusra begins by reviewing yesterday’s lesson on subtraction and then proceeds to write three double-digit equations on the board. “Sit silently and solve these problems. You can ask your neighbor for help. When you’re done, I will check your answers.” As her students quietly follow her instructions, Ustad Yusra proceeds to shuffle through her bulging purse, holding her college textbooks. Farhana and her sister and brother get straight to work with their heads down, concentrated on the equations. Across from them, Isa purses his lips and writes in his notebook. Next to him, little Hamza stares at the equations on the board with a look of bewilderment on his face. He pokes his brother with his pencil without saying a word, but Isa is fully concentrated on his work. I hear tiny squeaks from Hamza as the poking increases. Finally, Isa turns to his brother and helps him with the problems. At the back of the room, Zala quietly helps Nasreen, and Maryam attempts to help Qais. Typically thought of as a role for teachers, in these classrooms students at times guide each other through lessons.

The foundation of family is also instrumental in the learning process. The seating arrangement in both classes is intentionally organized to group “stronger students” with

"weaker students" in Ustad Yusra's words, with older students seated around the perimeters of the classroom and the back to enable access to the white board at the front for all. The arrangement reflects *madrassa* practices where more advanced students tutor groups of other students. In most cases, siblings or other family members sit next to each other. The Qari explains, "The first days, some students were very weak. Some of the girls who are older they knew more. I created this strategy where one student who knows more is paired with two other students. I wrote their names and created a list that is displayed on the wall. The students who understand well have to pay attention to the two other students. For example, when one subject is finished I start on a new book, tell them to take out your books, show them the page number. If during the lesson, they are talking or not paying attention, I make them pay attention to the lesson." While the origins of the strategy are unknown—whether it's the Qari's idea, a strategy promoted in teacher training, or a widespread practice in schools—it is applied in both classrooms and reinforced in the NGO seminars. Both teachers call the arrangement "Ustad-Shahgird" or "Teacher-Student" pairs. The title "Ustad" is perceived as an honor by older students. While sitting in the Qari's classroom, Bushra points to her brother and niece and exclaims, "They are my students!" Bibi Hawa, sitting cross-legged behind her, jumps in, and points to two little boys next to her, "They are my students! I'm the *ustad*." From a developmental standpoint, the strategy enables older students to take on more responsibility and engage in the learning process at a deeper level. It also fosters relationships based on helping each other—something they would be doing at home as well with younger siblings. While teachers possess and enact great authority within the classroom, this arrangement demonstrates fluidity in teacher-student relationships.

Students become teachers, while teachers openly request assistance as they relinquish some of their role without compromising respect and authority. Similarly, in Afghan family arrangements, older children partake in child rearing, cleaning, cooking, and shopping. In education, fluid relationships are in part facilitated by the structure of community-based schools. Teachers within these schools—schools without an administration or staff, discussed in more detail later—arguably bear greater responsibilities than formal public school teachers as they manage attendance, take on administrative duties, and juggle ongoing professional development.

Returning to Ustad Yusra's classroom, she turns to me and sighs, "My professors won't give me permission to miss class for a week. These trainings are required." I fail to offer any relief. "Who will teach while you're away?" I ask. "Shahla. She has done it before." As I begin to ask whether Shahla is prepared to teach, Ustad Yusra tells me to watch the class, while she goes outside to make a quick phone call to one of her professors. Qais and the boys in the back begin chatting. Other students follow. I attempt to redirect their attention back to the lesson, "I can check your work while your teacher is outside. Please come one by one." My words fall on deaf ears. Zala and Laila promptly stand up and walk around with a ruler in hand. Zala lightly taps Qais, "Get back to work!" Both girls walk around the room and the noise subsides. This is another way older students participate in classroom management, which at times can create tensions in the classroom. Attention to age and academic level promotes a community where teachers adapt their expectations and practices to meet students where they are. Ustad Yusra returns. The news doesn't look good. "I must get a written note from Ustad Fatima."

Substituting for teachers

The training seminars begin on a Monday and continue for six days with Friday off because it is the national weekend and Saturday off as international organizations recognize a two-day weekend, even for their local staff in different country settings. While Ustad Yusra and the Qari attend the seminars, school community members pitch in as substitutes—Shahla for Ustad Yusra and Qari Jameel for the Qari.

Soft-spoken and gentle, Qari Jameel begins reading from the Pashto textbook. "Gaf-mangay [ceramic container]. Water stays cold and clean in a ceramic container." He repeats the sentence twice then students follow. Most of us are familiar with Qari Jameel. He occasionally sits in the sun-soaked yard, reading a book or talking with one of the visitors. He is a young man, younger than the Qari, in his early 30s, with a short black beard and shaven mustache. Wearing a crisp sky-blue *parahan tomban*, a black vest, and a white mesh hat, like the ones the *madrassa* students wear, Qari Jameel is a teacher at the *madrassa* in the mosque and lives in the meeting room of the Qari's house outside of the school hours. Most days, he leaves the house before students arrive and returns at noon, without disrupting anyone's routine. Like almost everyone in Afghanistan, his circumstances are impacted by displacement, war, and economic opportunity. Once every couple of weeks, Qari Jameel commutes to the eastern city of Jalalabad to spend the short weekend with his wife and baby son. He returns to Kabul for work. Though unassuming, his presence envelops the school in warmth. Qari Jameel gives his full attention to children, treating them like little adults. Perhaps because his own family lives in another city, he interactions with students seem especially gentle and caring.

He calls on Bibi Hawa's younger cousin to read the one line from the Pashto

lesson. She struggles. “Bibi Hawa, practice with your uncle’s daughter at home.” His awareness of family relations in the classroom demonstrates his engagement with the school community. Qari Jameel looks around the room and selects younger students to come to the board, patiently listening to almost every student in the room. The students are less patient. Slowly, side chatter begins and Seelai stands up with a ruler in hand and walks around the room, gently tapping students on the shoulder. Qari Jameel continues to invite more students to the front. When the class gets rowdy again, he stops and looks directly at the students and says, “When someone talks, listen. Respect your teacher and the guest,” gesturing at me when he says guest. When a student hits another student, he says, “At both the *madrassa* and the school don’t hit and push each other. If you do, people will think bad of the student and the teacher.”

Qari Jameel transitions to *Deenyat*. Before he reads from the textbook, he poses some questions. “How many prophets did Allah send?” The class quiets down. “Who was the first prophet?” Seelai answers, “Adam.” “Who was the last prophet?” The class responds, “Prophet Muhammad peace and blessings be upon him.” “How many books did Allah reveal?” The class is silent again. Qari Jameel begins talking about the first revelation of the Qur’an. Teaching children Islamic theology and history is his comfort zone. It continues to impress me how often students calm down and listen during religious lessons. Whether it is out of respect or sheer interest or both, everyone’s eyes are on the Qari. “The Prophet was in the cave of Hira in Makkah when the angel Jibreel came down with the first verse of the Qur’an, ‘Read!’ he ordered the Prophet. You see the first commandment in our religion is to read.” He continues by emphasizing the importance of education in Islam. He references the well-known guidance of the Prophet,

"Seek knowledge even if you have to go as far as China, for seeking knowledge is a duty on every Muslim."

On the other side of the yard, Shahla looks more like an *ustad* today. She is wearing a black knee-length dress, black pants, and a navy scarf. Her freckled face shines in the warm room. She writes the Dari lesson for the day—a lesson that has been covered before:

Alif—anar (first letter of Dari alphabet—pomegranate)
Pomegranates have seeds.
Father brought pomegranates.

She reads it once and calls on students to demonstrate at the board. One student raises her hand, as she begins speaking, "*Ustad*-" Shahla corrects her, "Don't call me *ustad*." After only a few students come up, she instructs them to write the sentences in their notebooks as she sits on the floor. Noticing that some students might need more support, I offer my help. Shahla is confident. "Thank you, *ustad*. I'm fine now." "How did you prepare for class today? Did you get any help?" I gently inquire. "I speak with Ustad Yusra every night," Shahla responds. Shahla is not like the other students. At 18, she's the oldest student in the class. She also grew up in the neighborhood, close to the Qari's family for multiple generations. She speaks fondly about the Qari and Ustad Yusra. "The way the teacher is with the other students, she is not like that with me, she is nicer. She has given me a much greater responsibility. The teacher is a teacher after all, but for her I am more than a student. This is at least how I feel. I am very happy about that." She explains her responsibilities while the teacher is away, "My responsibility is that when my teacher goes to seminar, the responsibility of the class is mine, the teaching, controlling the behavior of the students, the noisiness, the organization of the

class. These are under my responsibilities. Even I would take attendance, that's also my responsibility." While Shahla certainly has more responsibilities than other students because of her age and ability, Shahla's statements seems to capture the authority of teachers more than actual practices in the classroom. Classroom practices across both classes, on the other hand, demonstrate that teaching and learning is a shared responsibility in which teachers and students partake.

On the northeastern edges of Kabul, past the mausoleum of Nadir Shah on the hill, past the grand outdoor bazaar, past several security checkpoints, amongst makeshift settlements of families who fled the war in the south and lofty developments in the burgeoning peripheries of the city, the Qari and Ustad Yusra join around 30 of their colleagues from community-based schools throughout Kabul province in a classroom at an all girls' high school. As the teacher trainers set up their equipment, I look outside where dozens of schoolgirls dressed in the black and white uniform stand in straight rows in the courtyard of the school. A woman, whom I presume to be the principal, welcomes them using a loudspeaker. Other teachers stand around the yard, some at the entrance of the school, others at the entrance of the principal's office at the other end of the courtyard. Then a chorus of voices begins singing the national anthem. I imagine this scene is more reflective of some community-based teachers' experiences, like that of Ustad Yusra, who graduated from the formal public school system.

Inside the stuffy, lime-green room, teachers gather for a week to engage in workshops on lesson planning as well as general topics like classroom management. The issue of a school principal emerges one day when teachers discuss challenges with student absenteeism. One of the master trainers explains, "The *shura* is like the school

principal. If you have a problem go to the *shura* and they will reach out to parents." I inquire about the roles and responsibilities of the *shura* during interviews with Ustad Yusra and the Qari. Their perspectives about the role and effectiveness of the *shura* seem vague and unenthusiastic. I ask the Qari about what he thinks their responsibilities are, "Their responsibility is, for example, to speak with families, make sure students are not absent, if someone is absent, tell them they have been absent, be in connection with their families, find out why their child is not coming, what is their problem. This is their responsibility." When I ask about whether they are effective, he sounds doubtful, "Yes, they are beneficial." Then he clarifies, "But when the kids are absent, without asking for help, I call their parents, I know them and they come. But they are good." One day, when some students are absent in Ustad Yusra's class, she becomes frustrated about the lack of support, "What's the point of having a *shura*? They don't come anyway. If I complain, the Qari might not like it." Observations are more revealing about the tenuous relationship between teachers and the *shura*. *Shura* members make brief classroom visits where they stand at the door without meaningful interaction with students and teachers. And with all the *shura* members being men, Ustad Yusra's interactions with them are also limited. While the institution of the *shura* is foundational to Afghan society, the role of the *shura* does not seem to be fully developed in the community-based school structure beyond their initial involvement in the establishment of the school.

Observations of *shura* training sessions offer some insights into why relationships between *shura* members and teachers are not optimized. The vast majority of *shura* training across a week focuses on community conflict management and community perceptions of gender. On the first day, Ustad Maiwand asks, "What is conflict?" One

shura member responds, "Problems between two people." Ustad Maiwand confirms, "Yes, problems between two people, families, *qawm*, and countries." He continues explaining that not all conflict is problematic and transitions to discussing ways to resolve conflict. "When you know the root of the conflict, it's easier to solve." The men in the room list factors that exacerbate conflict and ways to resolve conflict. Like everyone in Afghanistan, each individual in the room has experienced their share of conflict. The men share stories about various types of conflicts, including their experiences during the Soviet war. One shares with sadness, "When Americans came to train us to use stinger missiles, I was one of them. The Russians offered $1 million to give them one to see what kind of weapon hit their planes. America used us." Throughout the discussions, however, there are few connections to the classrooms. A couple days later, the *shura* trainer presents examples of conflict within the classrooms—students taking each other's supplies, bullying, degrading comments. Ustad Maiwand exclaims, "Muhammad was a teacher. Nothing is a higher profession." Yet, again, there is little discussion or explanation of the *shura's* role in classroom conflict management or guidance around relationships between the *shura* and teachers and students.

The remaining sessions focus on gender, specifically the right of girls to an education. "Islam says education is for men and women," Ustad Maiwand expresses as he stands in front of the room of elderly men with approving faces. He continues, "Some people say women can do anything that men can. Look at nomadic women. They can do more physical work than us." He poses a question to the group, "Do your daughters love you more or your sons?" They all respond with a mixture of conviction and disappointment (in their sons), "Daughters." As I wonder how these discussions relate to

supporting teachers within the classroom, the next day discussions cover everything from the importance of women working in various professions to biology to women's rights in Islam. Ustad Maiwand then says something that is more puzzling, "You all have events, share this information. Tell stories of how the school was established. There are some places in Kabul where they don't even allow boys to go to school. Don't say to someone 'why don't you send your daughter to school?' Talk about your daughters, don't your daughters respect you more than your sons? Try to make an effort to send your daughters to school. So that at least they go to a hospital and read the signs… I still ask Allah for help in my children's education." It's unexpected advice as the *shura* serves a school where girls outnumber boys, where barriers to access seem to have been addressed for the ones enrolled in the school. And, there is no plan to establish another school in the area with new students (though the community requests it). The content of the training focuses on perceptions and culture—on broader social change grounded in many assumptions—rather than the pragmatics of supporting teachers. What is most troubling is that teachers and *shura* members receive different messages about the role of the *shura*, leading to confusion, frustration, and ineffectiveness—factors that undermine healthy and productive relationships in the learning process. As Ustad Yusra alludes, teachers want more support from the *shura* in the school, in particular, by making regular classroom visits, reaching out to absent students, and being in touch with families when issues arise with students.

The next day when I return to Jadai Roshan, Qari Jameel is in Ustad Yusra's classroom writing the new lesson on the board: "Cleanliness is part of faith." He looks relieved when he sees me. "Ustad, Shahla is not here today. Can you help with this

class?" I reluctantly agree. After all, I have observed Ustad Yusra's pedagogy long enough to feel prepared to teach simple lessons in Dari. I also feel obligated to share in the responsibility of teaching and learning. There is an expectation here that we are all here to play a role, even when these roles shift in the face of new challenges and opportunities. Moreover, accepting a teacher's request is intricately connected to expressing respect for a teacher's authority. While flexibility is embedded in the school structure, the role of the teacher, like a parent, is critical to the individuals within the school in negotiating relationships with outside actors. In the next section, I examine how teachers assert authority in the midst of experiences of exclusion.

Experiences of exclusion and assertion of authority

There are two exam cycles in Afghanistan, midterms in the summer and final exams in the winter. Today, the midterm results are in. The Qari takes out the *parchas* or report cards and starts handing them out in the order students ranked, from highest to lowest. "Everyone passed! Good job." He continues, "First place, Seelai!" Seelai's sister and little brother congratulate her as she stands up to receive her *parcha*. For the rest of the semester, she is known as "*Awal numra*" or "first place." One by one, students joyously take their report cards. The Qari asks students to review their grades and then return the report cards because they have to be authorized by the formal public school before they can be sent home for parents to sign. With big smiles on their faces, students look at their report cards. Some can read the details, others, especially the younger kids, look confused and search for someone to help them decipher the pieces of paper in front of them. Bushra helps her niece and little brother read their reports. The same event plays out in Ustad Yusra's classroom. She, on the other hand, has covered each *parcha* in thin

pink and white floral folders. “They’re little. They like these things.” Students enjoy momentary excitement about their passing grades, however, the next few weeks become a series of frustration and setbacks as the teachers attempt to authorize the report cards. Meanwhile, the lack of electricity and the rising temperatures become unbearable and there are talks of a short break.

Ustad Yusra explains, “Each *parcha* must be stamped at Abdul Hakim High School.” In accordance with national policy, the community-based school at Jadai Roshan is a satellite of Abdul Hakim, which means all students and teachers are registered officially at the formal public school. Ustad Yusra steps out of her classroom, “I want to ask the Qari if we can send the *parchas* home for parents to sign.” The order of the process is unclear. She returns quickly with a bigger pile of report cards, “The Qari said they must be stamped first.” Ustad Yusra will take them to the school where her mother teaches and where she spent 12 years. “The Qari liked the folders. He asked me to cover his class’s *parchas* as well,” Ustad Yusra says with a slight chuckle. Ustad Yusra’s knowledge of and relationship with public school formalities becomes useful for both teachers. The teachers work together by leveraging their own individual strengthens and relationships. While the Qari takes on the responsibility of meeting with the *shura* and other school visitors, Ustad Yusra handles administrative duties connected to the public school.

Ustad Yusra invites me to walk with her to the public school to get the report cards stamped. I happily accept. After school, we walk with Maira and a group of students, the group shrinking as we reach each student’s home along the street. By the time we reach the Kabul-Logar highway, it is just me and Yusra. We walk along the

shoddy sidewalk on the highway, past the produce vendors, bakeries, electricians, tutoring centers, and the mechanics until we reach a crowd of girls dressed in black and white, huddled outside the entrance of the Abdul Hakim. Recalling Maira and her cousins' experience at the school last year when a magnetic bomb was set off on the highway, the lack of security around the school is alarming. The door of the school is absurdly small for a two-story building—a one panel, old wooden door that is smaller than the Qari's gates. Following Ustad Yusra's lead, we push through the crowd and miraculously make it inside the courtyard of the school without any questioning. Everyone in the teachers' lounge greets Ustad Yusra by name. Ustad Yusra asks one teacher, "Where is the principal?" "She is outside. You can wait for her. She will come to you." After the customary greetings, Ustad Yusra hands her the final list of enrolled students and the report cards. The principal asks her to get the list of enrolled students stamped by the NGO. It turns out the enrollment process has not been completed. Ustad Yusra looks speechless. "Is there anything you can do?" she asks the principal who seems distracted and disinterested in her pleas. Exhausted from the summer heat wave, we turn around and leave the school grounds. These brief encounters are a reminder of the community-based schools' marginalization from the central education system. While Ustad Yusra has no option but to leave, teachers do not always hold back from asserting their authority within the school.

A few days later, one of my cousins excitedly announces, "Schools are off for two weeks!" The news was broadcasted on TV and radio. Apparently, the closure was announced because of the heat wave. Others conjecture it might also be because schools have been closed in many of the bordering provinces because of heavy fighting and this

is the Ministry's method of buying some time as they try to re-open all schools. I decide to visit Jadai Roshan as I haven't heard if the news applies to them as well. Ustad Yusra meets me in the yard with the announcement on her mind. In a country with a frail infrastructure at almost every level, news reaches far and wide at an unbelievable speed. "I called Fatima to ask about the break but she didn't give me a clear answer. My mother said the Ministry made the decision so it applies to all schools. The break begins today." Ustad Yusra looks at me for clarification but I'm as puzzled. "We are part of the public school," Ustad Yusra emphasizes. Yet, beyond the use of the national curriculum, there are few reminders that the school is part of the public system. The MOE has not visited the classrooms all year as the national community-based school policy outlines. When I asked other teachers at the teacher training seminars about whether the MOE had visited their classrooms, they all shared similar experiences—only the NGO visits. In the absence of MOE guidance, teachers look to NGOs to make decisions, yet NGOs don't always have the authority to make decisions that conflict with the MOE. These tensions raise questions about where decision-making power is located. While power is situated at different levels, teachers exercise great authority that directly impacts students.

When the Qari comes out, Ustad Yusra asks him if he has heard anything. "Last night I called the *mossessa* to see if the school closure applies to us. They said it does not." Ustad Yusra becomes more frustrated. These small instances bring into question the relationship between the community-based school and the Ministry as well as the agency of the NGO. But the two teachers don't give up. Ustad Yusra begins calling other community-based school teachers across the province and urges them to call the NGO for clarification. They're all in agreement that the school should be closed. The teachers

continue to call the NGO and demand an explanation. Ustad Yusra makes one last call and returns to her classroom.

There are other moments in the year when teachers exercise their authority. For example, teachers often make decisions about enrolling additional students. Yusra comes into the room and says to the Qari that Maiwand, the community mobilizer, is upset that they have added more students, "He asked why did you add students? Who is Fatima?" The Qari responds nonchalantly, "It's ok. Don't mind him." As teachers are closest to their students and the community, their decisions directly impact the community. Sometimes, however, there is pressure from the NGO to make small changes. As discussed in the first section, the maintenance of the school seems to be organic, with older girls helping to keep the place clean. Over time, Ustad Yusra institutionalized some roles, including assigning Maira as the "classroom representative." Maira created a list of students who would sweep the floors. When Ustad Maiwand notices the list during one of his classroom visits, he says, "This is not good. It should say students who keep the classroom." Ustad Yusra explains, "The classroom representative created the list." "Who's that?" Ustad Maiwand asks, Ustad Yusra gestures to Maira. "If the position doesn't exist, no one can hold it," Ustad Maiwand says dismissively, implying that the position cannot exist because it is not approved by the NGO. While Ustad Yusra removes the list, the actual practices do not change. Maira continues to hold more responsibility and the other girls help with cleaning. It is important to note that overall relationships between teachers and the NGO seem productive and positive. The NGO's flexibility enables teachers to exercise authority within their classrooms. For example, with permission from the NGO, teachers decided to push forward the school start time half an

hour to accommodate Ustad Yusra's college courses. This decision was made without input from the MOE.

At other times, the absence of the MOE exacerbates tensions and brings about questions of the NGO's authority. As students in her class demonstrate the Dari lesson, the Qari comes in with the phone and hands it to Yusra who goes to the yard with the phone. It seems that the NGO finally yielded. Though sometimes relationships between the school and the NGO might be in tension, national policy can be helpful in easing them. Ustad Yusra and the Qari looked relieved when the NGO recognizes the break. There seems to be some confusion about the dates, but they agree it's two weeks. Yusra returns and before her class packs up, she assigns them Dari and math homework. For Dari, they're asked to write their names and fill a page. For math, they're instructed to write 1-70. Her students leave in pairs, hand in hand. The two weeks give her time to catch up on her college studies. The Qari also dismisses his class and gets on his bike in the courtyard and heads out. Later in the year, celebrating Teacher's Day becomes emblematic of both teacher authority in relation to the NGO and the MOE.

Teacher's Day

A tall teenage girl in a flowing, lilac, floral dress catches our attention along the Kabul-Logar highway. She is holding a red plastic rose in one hand and a covered plate in the other. "What could she be carrying?" I ask the driver. "Food for her teachers," he replies. The brisk autumn breeze gently blows her matching silk, lilac scarf, revealing pink chandelier earrings. Only the backpack on her back indicates she is a student. Other boys and girls walking along the edges of the highway also carry plastic roses and food,

dressed in colorful hues of yellow, green, and blue. While the cool autumn air masks the sunlight, the highway looks a little more cheerful and bright today as students of all ages move along with a little more spring in their steps. Posters for the upcoming Parliamentary Elections featuring pictures of men and women and their respective symbols—one bicycle, two baskets, three cups—flutter in the breeze. Today is National Teacher's Day in Afghanistan. It is a day of celebration and gratitude at all levels of the education system. Morning TV shows invite students to share stories of inspiration and support to honor their favorite educators. Students from across grade levels gather in schoolyards to share poetry recitations and songs that express appreciation for their teachers' commitment and support. It is a day of celebrating the people who are central in their educational journey, a day as Ustad Yusra's mother emphasizes that celebrates "the builders of the future." As a national day of celebration that is highlighted in the media, it connects school communities across the nation, creating a sense of belonging that transcends the boundaries of neighborhoods, villages, and provinces and connects schools to the broader community—the nation.

As we reach the teal gate of the Qari's house, the sound of *tarana*—songs without music—then Qur'an recitation envelope the street. I enter through the side door into the concrete courtyard that has been turned into an assembly area. Students in embellished scarves and freshly ironed clothes sit on the concrete floor covered by a black, plastic mat. Colorful balloons hang from the walls of the two classrooms, bringing life to the concrete courtyard. In front of Ustad Yusra's classroom a large speaker transitions from Qur'an recitation to the national anthem. Ustad Yusra and the Qari greet me more enthusiastically than usual. "Come sit here, ustad" Ustad Yusra points to a floor mattress

that has been placed near the speaker for the teachers. Her long, bright peach and blue striped cardigan and a matching floral scarf and the Qari's pastel yellow silk turban evoke a sense of celebration. Some of the students hold red, plastic roses in their hands.

The Qari stands by the speaker and picks up the microphone that is attached by a long wire to the speaker. He welcomes everyone and hands the microphone to Shahla, who serves as the morning celebration's MC. Clinching a clipboard with her notes attached, Shahla, who on a typical day exudes confidence, looks a little flushed and tense in front of the crowd of students. She reads from her notes, "Asalaam alaikum. Today is Teacher's Day. We thank our two teachers for their hard work and dedication. We will have groups of students come to the front and perform." First she calls on a group of five girls from the Qari's class that includes Bibi Hawa and Bushra. The five girls wearing scarves with sparkling stones stand in front of their classmates and teachers and begin by sending salaam on the Prophet in a rhythmic hymn.

Allahuma salli ala Muhammad
Oh Allah, send prayers upon Muhammad and upon the family of Muhammad,
As You sent prayers upon Ibraheem and the family of Ibraheem,
You are indeed worthy of praise, full of glory.

Standing upright, shoulder-to-shoulder, they transition to singing the Afghan national anthem.

Da watan Afghanistan dai
This land is Afghanistan,
It is the pride of every Afghan.
The land of peace, the land of sword,
Each of its sons is brave.
This is the country of every tribe,
The land of Balochs, and Uzbeks, Pashtuns and Hazaras, Turkmens and Tajiks…
This land will shine forever,
Like the sun in the blue sky.
In the chest of Asia,

It will remain as the heart forever.
We will follow the one God.
We all say, "Allah is the greatest."

While formal public schools start their day singing the national anthem, this is the first time I hear it in the community-based school. I can't help but wonder if the teacher training seminar in the girls' high school might have influenced the teachers. When the students finish, their classmates clap as the girls go back to their seats. Shahla, who now looks more comfortable in her public speaking role, introduces Farhana. The little girl, in a blue and pink floral dress, recites a poem she has written for her teachers.

I love my teachers.
They are like our parents.
We respect them.

To show respect and appreciation to this community that has welcomed me with open arms, I put my pen down before capturing the whole poem, and enjoy the coming together of these two classes. It is a surprisingly rare occurrence. Aside from the short breaks during lessons, there is limited opportunity for shared experiences. It demonstrates that like trust and belonging, relationships also evolve and often strengthen over time. And, while the celebration does not include observers from the community outside the school, broadcasting the hymns, songs, and poems by microphone enables community members to participate, even in a tangential way, in the celebration. It is reminiscent of loudspeakers that mosques use for Friday sermons that make it possible for women and children who remain in their homes to also listen to the messages.

Ustad Yusra turns to me and says, "I'm glad it's Saturday. The NGO doesn't work on Saturday so they can't visit." She seems to be under the impression that the NGO would not be in favor of shortening the school day and dedicating the time to

gathering and celebration as the public schools do. That international NGOs take off two days of the week—Friday and Saturday—represents, albeit in some small way, the disconnect between national and international influence. While both teachers believe that NGO training and support is instrumental, in practice, the NGO can get in the way of connecting with national education structures. The teachers who practiced the songs and poems with their students for weeks to prepare for the celebration seem to have circumvented messages from the NGO that the school cannot take the day off from their regular schedule by recognizing that the NGO staff does not make classroom visits on Saturdays. This small challenge highlights the importance of teachers in asserting their authority and connection to the national education landscape.

When the performances finish the Qari takes the microphone, "Thank you all for your performances. This is a very special day and we are happy. We will try to plan to do this at the end of the year also." The students stand up and flock to their teachers, stretching their hands toward the Qari and Ustad Yusra, offering their red roses.

Chapter 8: Pulling the currents together: Discussion, analysis & theory building

Qatra qatra darya mesha.
Drop by drop, a river is formed.
Afghan proverb

In this chapter, I review the aims of the study, synthesize the findings, and discuss implications for theory and practice.

Aims of the study

This study sets out to understand the relationship between community and education in a context of displacement, instability, and war. Foremost in this dissertation is an orientation towards in-depth engagement with one context—Afghanistan—that includes its geographical, social, cultural, and political terrains. I aimed to foreground the experiences and perspectives of teachers, students, and families as they interact with community, the state, and international actors. Principles of portraiture capture the salience of small-scale, ethnographic research. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argue that "*in the particular resides the general*" (p. 14). That is, "The more specific, the more subtle the description, the more likely it is to evoke identification [for the audience]" (p. 14). This level of engagement is particularly lacking in studies of settings affected by war and displacement due to restrictions in access, security concerns, lack of necessary skills (e.g., language), and entrenched biases. My study responds to this gap. Each chapter is fully embedded in the context of Afghanistan, weaving in literature where relevant as secondary sources of knowledge to seek further illumination. It is important to

note that the iterative process of qualitative research means that the various elements of this dissertation took shape and evolved during data collection and then during data analysis to achieve resonance and coherence.

The focus on community and education emerges from a number of contextual considerations at the national and international levels. In the international education literature, community participation in education is heralded as a best practice to widen and sustain access for marginalized populations, particularly in contexts with unpredictable security situations where community involvement increases safety (Burde, 2014; Rose, 2007; Balwanz, 2006). However, this literature often falls short from a rich interrogation of community, what it is, how it is developed, and its relationship to education. By focusing on the peripheries of Kabul, a semi-urban, in-between space, that pulls Afghans from around the country, my site provides a fruitful opportunity to investigate community and connections to education in a dynamic context. Afghanistan is known for being a "communal" society, yet we know little about what this means and the impact of protracted war on community as well as on education.

In sociological literature, community is conceptualized as a process, something that is in the making, is composed of layers, and contains tensions (Hill Collins, 2010). To analyze perspectives and experiences of individuals in community, I propose a cultural framework. A conception of culture that recognizes shifting ideas as well as salient themes across time and space enables a more dynamic and complex understanding of social relations. This cultural framework highlights the importance of interdependence in Afghan social relations where the individual is intimately connected to family and community. Maintaining practices of honor and moral character, as defined by Islamic

principles, position individuals within community. Taken together this cultural framework is also generative in a study on education as decisions made regarding education are determined by cultural considerations. While acknowledging the continuing salience of honor, the impact of war, displacement, as well as international involvement and connections, raise questions about how honor manifests in a changing environment.

The aims of this study challenge static conceptualizations of community as either product or process, obstacle or asset. A more dynamic approach to community recognizes community is composed of many layers, involves opportunities and challenges, and is continually in the making. Understood this way, I approached the study with a hypothesis that the relationship between community and education can be reciprocal and mutually reinforcing. Thus, this study asked the following questions:

- *How is education cultivated through community in a context of displacement and change?*
- *How is community cultivated through education in a context of displacement and change?*

Findings

My findings indicate that three elements—trust, belonging, and relationships—explain the reciprocal connections between community and education. Moreover, the relationship between community and education is transformational, that is, as educational opportunities open and develop, new layers of community emerge and develop, and vice versa. In the beginning phases of the school, NGOs in partnership with teachers leverage the existing community—which involves trust—to widen access to education. As

interactions evolve and build, a new layer of community—through messages of belonging and relationships—emerges through education, particularly through learning in the classroom. This new layer of community enhances quality and sustainability of educational opportunities.

Trust

Trust is, arguably, the most vital element in community. The chapter by this name serves as an introduction to the community by weaving data from a number of community members, including *shura* members and families, to understand the contours of the community, the daily security subtleties, experiences with displacement, family histories, and relationships to place. It examines various challenges in the community to show the breakdown of trust and the lack of community, before documenting the remarkable restoration of trust through education.

The chapter highlights the composition of the community. Who is here and how did they get here? It shows the prevalence of experiences with displacement and conflict and how these factors shape educational opportunities. Like the families of the teachers and students like Bushra, displacement within the country as well as beyond the borders of Afghanistan is commonplace. Roshan Street, similar to many neighborhoods in the peripheries of Kabul, is composed of families from across the country, particularly the southern provinces, with varying socioeconomic statuses, linguistics backgrounds, and cultures, raising questions about the meaning of community. While displacement comes with disruption, for some, it also increases exposure to different educational opportunities. The Qari, who had various prospects in Kabul, reminisces about the

number of schools and *madrassas* in Pakistan and his desire to work on making comparable opportunities happen in Afghanistan. Similarly, in the next chapter, through the thread of Bibi Hawa, we learn from her mother that there were no schools in her village in Paktia—a theme that others shared. These stories are illustrative of problems with narratives that place blame on the lack of educational progress on families. A structural analysis is more fruitful in understanding family experiences and decision-making—with culture providing nuance.

In addition to shared migration experiences, students' stories demonstrate existing security dangers in Kabul—a city that served as an initial place of refuge but where security is deteriorating. A large number of older girl students attended other schools before the community-based school. Concerns for security compelled families to pull their children out of school until the community-based school was established. Through the stories of Maira and her cousins and Shahla, nuances between two types of concerns emerge—security and safety. Maira and her cousins dropped out of school after a bombing near their school; whereas Shahla dropped out after rumors of missing girls began. While security relates to physical security, concerns about safety are connected to the maintenance of honor and reputation in a burgeoning urban space. These concerns are not new, but span at least four decades as the country has witnessed external invasions and internal strife.

The impact of past conflicts and educational policies are fresh in the collective memory. In particular, many family stories stemmed back to the Soviet invasion and communist regime when social change policies were widely enforced. Bushra's mother's childhood experiences of missing out on the opportunity to go to school because of the

lack of compatibility between her family's principles and education is illustrative of broader trends. Past experiences have implications for perceptions of education in the present. The lack of trust in public institutions in the past has reverberations for today. The findings indicate many families turned to local institutions, especially the mosque and *madrassa*, to compensate for the lack of state presence within the country as well as in refugee camps. A duality exists in the relationship between security and community. While shared experiences with displacement and security and safety concerns explain some of the challenges to cultivating community, similar motivations to migrate regarding concerns about protection (both physical and cultural), are also grounds for shared principles upon which trust can be built.

Weaving history, migration, and security trends is critical to understanding the context within which the community-based school is situated. The role of the Qari in building trust emerged from the data. As Ustad Yusra says, "People's trust in the Qari is good in this environment. People wouldn't allow their children to go to anyone's house." While family data demonstrate reverence for religious leaders and religious education, it also shows that trust is not inherent. It is earned through sustained action. In a community of native locals and new migrants (some for two decades), the cultivation of trust can be explained by different processes. Trust in the Qari for the native locals, like Maira and her cousins' families, came easily because of relationships with the Qari's father. Yet, even in this case, trust is not intrinsic. The Qari's father's engagement in the community as well as the Qari's and his brother's continued connections with the community at Roshan Street during migration in Pakistan cultivated and sustained foundations of trust. The post-civil war newcomers exhibited greater anxiety about the Qari's presence in the

community, particularly around the expansion of the old mosque. Rather than leveraging his old connections against the newcomers, the Qari actively tried to alleviate concerns about privacy through modifications to the building. With the mosque remodeled, it served as a core space to strengthen old relationships and create new ones and address community concerns. Beyond the mosque, Qur'an and Arabic classes for the neighborhood children in his home as well as his participation in the community *shura* further demonstrated the Qari's service to the community. Taken together, by the time the NGO considered establishing a school in the area, trust in the Qari was much stronger than when he returned from Pakistan a year prior.

The case of Bushra's mother further shows how trust is an ongoing process. Bushra's mother and their neighbors, who lived relatively far from the center of the school community—with the school and the mosque at the center—had inhibitions about sending their children to the school due to security concerns. Bushra's mother's concerns were alleviated upon visiting the school and meeting the teachers because of what their outer appearances suggested. In the modest clothing of Ustad Yusra and the Qari's beard, she identified shared principles regarding honor. While this deduction might seem superficial, when understood through a historical lens, it becomes more complex. These identity markers were not only excluded from educational spaces during Bushra's mother's childhood in the communist era, they were also actively targeted. These markers, however, are preserved in community spaces and especially within homes. As Bushra's mother confirms, "These are the types of teachers we needed. We pray and read the Qur'an. My oldest son is a *qari*. I became happy when I saw the teachers. I don't have any complaints."

Overall, the findings suggest that one individual connected to local institutions can have a remarkable impact on community and education. The connection between religious authority and serving in community institutions forms the foundation of trust. Through the story of Asiya, we see the possibilities of expanding educational opportunities when these factors are in place. It didn't take much for the Qari to convince Asiya's father to allow her to attend the public school as the foundations of trust were established through interactions at the mosque and later his daughter's attendance at the community-based school. These examples also demonstrate the changing nature of community. The community at Roshan Street prior to the Qari's return looked very different than by the time the school was established. The examples of Asiya and Bushra demonstrate that there is much room for change when trust is cultivated. A girl like Asiya might be completely excluded from educational opportunities without a healthy and safe community where honor is preserved. Imagine how far she might be able to get with continued support and how community might look when more girls like her complete their education.

It is important to note the gendered aspect of trust that is formed through the connection between an individual and local institutions. Community institutions like the mosque, *madrassa*, and *shura* all require engagement with the public sphere, which is still quite limited to men. Trust for women, therefore, is likely to be explained by other factors. My assumption is that trust could be more inherent in women as long as women abide by cultural norms, based on two reasons. One, community-based schools are typically situated in private spaces, for instance, homes, a space that is considered safe and where women exercise much power. Two, the likelihood of women violating the

honor of children is less likely; maintaining honor is as important for women teachers as it is for young girls.

Belonging

After situating the school in the broader community in the previous chapter, this chapter delves more deeply into the classroom environment in search of what makes community. This shift in focus from outside in is motivated by observations in the field. Upon seeing little apparent engagement between the classrooms and the community, my attention drew to the classrooms themselves, where connections between education and home or community surfaced in subtle but important ways. This shift is logical in light of the public-private division of society. Typically situated within homes, community-based education can be associated with the private space; thus, outside interaction, for example with the *shura*, is limited. This is one of the reasons that might explain why so many families prefer to enroll their daughters in community-based schools. Meanwhile, varying messages about belonging materialized in the two classrooms. Belonging is critical in the development and maintenance of community because it shapes the boundaries of community. These boundaries determine students' relationships with education as well as more broadly in society.

The chapter is divided into two parts to enable detailed engagement with each classroom and to draw out the differences and similarities. This chapter further highlights the importance of teachers in the process of community cultivation. Their socioeconomic backgrounds, family influences, and educational experiences (of inclusion and exclusion), and age directly impact the messages they impart on their students. The

influence of mothers (in Ustad Yusra's case) and fathers (the Qari) is illustrative of dynamics in an interdependent culture where decisions about education and career are made with consideration for family. Since the last chapter examined the Qari's family history, this chapter begins with Ustad Yusra. Ustad Yusra, unlike the Qari, thrived in the formal education systems with few disruptions. With her mother as a veteran teacher at Abdul Hakim High School, ideas of belonging for Ustad Yusra in school and at home are reciprocal, each complementing the other. Underlying this symmetry is the role of class. Markers of class are evident in Ustad Yusra's speech, her coordinated and professional clothes, as well as the physical distance between her home and school. She lives more north, closer to the city center, in a spacious and freshly painted house. Ustad Yusra's dispositions and attitude toward culture and education are affirmed within formal educational spaces. Hence, the boundaries between school and home are in many cases less severe than they might be for some of her students. The Qari, in contrast, lives in an old, dilapidated house and achieved most of his early education outside of the formal education system within *madrassas* in Pakistan. As a teacher, he pushes against formal school norms, as demonstrated by agreeing to teach at a girls' school only if he is permitted to dress in traditional clothes and turban—something that is uncommon, especially in urban formal schools. Not only does the Qari's story reflect the disruptions to education caused by the civil war and cross-border migration, the lack of representation of his dispositions and attitudes demonstrate broader and continuing experiences of exclusion.

The subtle differences that manifest in the classrooms can be summarized in each teacher's own understanding of the purposes of education—cultivation of *insanyat* for

Ustad Yusra and living in light for the Qari. *Insanyat* is about manners. One who embodies *insanyat* is "more aware of their speaking and actions" as Ustad Yusra explains. Her classroom practices from daily cleanliness checks to sitting upright in orderly lines and correcting usage of colloquial language are oriented towards raising students' consciousness regarding speech and behavior in the classroom. Along with an emphasis on wearing uniforms, we see how Ustad Yusra teaches the norms of the educated class. Belonging in educational spaces is contingent on adherence to certain norms that are more reflective of the educated class. It is about fitting in. Ustad Yusra makes this clear—school girls must be different from other girls. This message, however, does not only apply to the school environment. It also has implications for belonging in community. While this orientation might seem problematic and superficial, scholars of education acknowledge the importance of learning the norms and practices of the upper class to enable upward mobility (Paris, 2012). Moreover, one of the goals of community-based schools is to provide a pathway to broader education and upward mobility, not only a stop-gap measure to bridge access. That the Qari's sons are in her class indicates the Qari's openness to learning these norms. For Ustad Yusra, problems arise when emphasis on rules and norms surpass a focus on learning. Attention to individual trajectories requires a move away from standardization to understanding individual experiences at school and at home. I will return to this idea after discussing the Qari's orientation.

The Qari's classroom contrasts visually and substantively. Compared to Ustad Yusra's orderly class, his class looks in disarray but exudes warmth and excitement. Students dress in colorful traditional clothes and accessories. It's louder and there are no clear rows. While these differences might seem surface-level, they are illustrative of

deeper differences and the intertwining of rural and urban cultures. Through the thread of Bibi Hawa and her mother, my aim was to show some of the stark differences between families from rural (represented more in the Qari's class) and urban backgrounds. She is not the type of student one would see in many schools in Kabul. Kohl-lined eyes, henna on hands, wearing velvet clothes, Bibi Hawa is confident and proud. A visit to her home further illustrates differences between families from rural backgrounds and ones who've lived longer in Kabul. The sheep at the entrance and a house full of multiple generations of women is more common in rural areas. While Bibi Hawa came to class with excitement, the findings suggest Pashto-speaking students from rural backgrounds face many barriers to access to formal public schools in Kabul. The lack of Pashto instruction classes closed access for many older girls to Abdul Hakim High School. Witnessing this vibrant classroom illuminates the importance of local teachers who create a sense of belonging that are reflective of local cultures and rural areas.

Living in light is a holistic orientation to belonging that connects the many spheres with which individuals engage. This stance is less concerned about norms and practices of school and the boundaries between home and school and more about principles of goodness in Islamic spirituality. Within this orientation, principles remain constant across the contexts of home, school, and community. Lessons about cleanliness, interaction with individuals, and the importance of manners are taught holistically, connecting the school with community. Hence the boundaries of community are not as stark and are not defined by adherence to norms and practices. Of course, there is some overlap between cultivating *insanyat* and living in light—both place an emphasis on manners and behavior. In particular, teaching norms around the etiquettes of greeting

others are practiced in each classroom. Parents expressed appreciation of character development and explained that they noticed positive behavioral changes in their children. Hence, learning in school has implications for engagement with family and community. Yet, the way *insanyat* and living in light manifest signals undercurrents of persisting dichotomies and tensions in Afghan society—modernity and tradition, secularism and religion, and urban and rural, respectively. These dichotomies draw the subtle boundaries of belonging in education and in community, not entirely pushing individuals out but rendering it more difficult to stay. Furthermore, while these subtle differences might not be deterring forces in the early years of school, tensions might surface more as children grow older and differences between learning at school and values at home surface. Given that the expressed purpose of community-based schools is to pave a pathway to formal public schools, attention to ideas around belonging are critical as families consider whether or not to support transition.

Beyond a focus on manners, data from across the classrooms suggest that shared attention to learning creates inclusive messages of belonging. The role of NGO training and oversight is key in pedagogical development. When Ustad Yusra witnesses her students freeze in front of NGO field visitors, she changes her pedagogy, paying attention to socio-emotional factors and student-centered learning. This shift also compels Ustad Yusra to make connections to home, to learn about varying conditions at home that hinder engagement in the classroom, and to create lessons that connect learning with home. The Qari's pedagogy, on the other hand, is influenced by NGO training and experiences in the *madrassa* system. He combines student-centered learning with lessons on Islamic principles to motivate engagement. Attention to learning conveys a message

that children, despite their diverse backgrounds and levels of academic competency, belong in school. Families of students in both classes not only praised each teacher's teaching of manners but also attention to academics. Almost all parents discussed the importance of character development and academics together, without putting more weight on one over the other. The interconnectedness between academics and character development, between *taleem* and *tarbia*, is understood and valued by families of varying backgrounds. Even for Bibi Hawa's mother who herself had never stepped into a school, the ability to be a good Muslim rests on being able to read and learn. Alignment between the national curriculum and collective principles further enables a cohesive message of belonging. The chapter contextualizes these messages, showing how teacher's attitudes, experiences, and practices also impact belonging. Again, these differences might surface more as children enter the formal public education system and progress in school, where divisions in class, regional identities, and religious devotion might be starker.

It is also important to consider how gender differences in this cultural and religious context play a role in shaping teachers' enactments of belonging. The gender differences are somewhat unexpected. Whereas the Qari's interactions with students appear nurturing and warm, Ustad Yusra is straightforward and matter-of-fact. Her approach is to learn the rules of society in order to advance. The many times she changed educational aspirations, from medicine to computer science to teaching, reflect the impact of outside forces, including her family and security, on her decisions. The Qari, in contrast, challenges social norms and practices. Some of these dichotomies can be explained by the position of men and women in relation to society. There is arguably more room for men than women to challenge social norms. For women to achieve similar

advancements, there is more pressure to follow the rules of the upper class. Of course, this picture becomes more complicated as certain cultural dispositions practiced by men and women are often sidelined in educational and professional environments. It is important for future studies to examine some of these nuances and tensions.

Relationships

Community is essentially about relationships, connections between individuals and, by extension, family. An explicit examination of relationships illuminates dynamics within the classroom community as well as between the school and national and international stakeholders. "Trust" begins broadly to document elements, old and new, that form the foundation of community in a context of instability and insecurity; "Belonging*"* looks closely at the classroom space to document how a new community forms through education and its messages about connection to society. This final chapter focuses on both the local and beyond the local—it illuminates relationships in the school community as well as relationships between the community-based school and the state and international actors. Furthermore, while "Belonging*"* examines subtle differences, this chapter highlights collaboration, similarities, and shared challenges.

Both classrooms reflect familial relationships grounded in working together. Family is important literally as well as metaphorically. Most of students have at least one member of their extended family at the community-based school. This enhances safety and security as students walk together to school and have support in school, which in turn cultivates trust. Metaphorically, relationships between the students and their teachers also reflect family dynamics. Girls sweep the classrooms and schoolyard; while, boys

welcome guests and run errands—this private-public division of responsibilities mirrors cultural norms. Familial relationships are also critical in the learning process as older students are often paired with younger students for additional guidance. This arrangement fosters collaboration in the learning process and meets children at various developmental stages. Similarly, at home older children take on more responsibilities, including caring for younger siblings. Older students also regularly assist in classroom management, especially while teachers are absent (for training) or preoccupied with additional responsibilities. By building the foundations of relationships in education around family dynamics, a community emerges where roles and responsibilities seem familiar and organic.

With a foundation in collaboration, teaching and learning in the community-based school becomes a shared responsibility. This orientation is particularly helpful as teachers within community-based schools take on a number of responsibilities, including administrative duties, teaching, and arranging for substitutes. Shahla and Ustad Jameel's substitute roles while the Qari and Ustad Yusra attend teacher training sessions for a week demonstrate the extent to which teaching and learning is shared for the individuals in the community-based school environment. Moreover, making decisions about substitutes illustrates deep-seated trust in teachers to make decisions as well as in students and community members to take on greater responsibility. Those closest to the community-based school space, like students and Qari Jameel, are recruited to fill in roles, rather than the *shura* or other community members, as these individuals are familiar with the students and structure of school. While the lack of administration might

enable a deeper level of engagement in teaching and learning for students, it is not removed from tensions and experiences of exclusion.

Before delving into tensions and exclusion, it is important to discuss what the findings suggest about the school *shura*. There is a lack of consistency about the role of the *shura* between the MOE policy guidelines, teacher training, and *shura* training. The national policy outlines the initial participation of the *shura* in the establishment of the community-based school. Beyond this, the guidelines are vague about the role of the *shura* in the maintenance of the school. For the NGO, there is internal misalignment between guidance from community mobilizers and teacher trainers. Community mobilizers who train the *shura* members focus on changing community attitudes toward education, particularly girls' education. The findings suggest that this is insufficient in addressing concerns about access to education. Security and safety weigh heavier in parents' decision-making process than whether girls have a right to education. Meanwhile, teacher trainers stress the administrative role of the *shura*. The lack of clarity around the role of the *shura* produces inefficiency and tensions in relationships between teachers and the *shura*.

Returning to the topic of exclusion, the data shows a lack of state presence in community-based schools. This absence sends mixed messages about the relationship between the community-based school and the public education system. Administrative tasks become more difficult for teachers in the process. Getting the report cards stamped and approved took several weeks for teachers to arrange by working with the NGO and the public school. Often, the process of authorization is unclear for teachers on the ground, both at the community-based school and the formal public school. The presence

of the NGO often compensates for the lack of MOE guidance, especially around teacher training and classroom pedagogical support, as demonstrated throughout the findings. Yet, confusion about the relationship between the community-based school and the education system can produce tensions between teachers and the NGO. The announcement of the unplanned summer break raised concerns about the place of the community-based schools in the public education system.

Uncertainty around the role of the MOE and the NGO also raises questions about where decision-making power lies at the community-based school. Extending the family metaphor, we see how those closest to the students, teachers, like parents, exercise great authority within their classrooms, sometimes circumventing the NGO altogether. During the school break confusion, teachers from across community-based schools continued to call the NGO to remind them they are part of the public education system and therefore must follow the MOE policies. Later in the year, on the national Teacher's Day, the Qari and Ustad Yusra coordinate to celebrate the occasion on a day when the NGO is on break. Overall, the findings illustrate the key role of teachers in the lives of children: advocating for the school, forming relationships, and gaining and sustaining community trust. The NGO represents one of their strongest allies in developing their skills, but can become a hindrance when the NGO makes decisions that are beyond their purpose.

The way gender operates in relationships between school community actors is varied. Relationships between students reflect gendered divisions within the home as well as the public-private division of social relations. Girls help with cleaning the classrooms, while boys open doors for guests or check on absent students. However, attention to these practices alone misses more nuanced relationships that form through the learning process.

The majority of the older students—therefore, the advanced students—in the classrooms are girls. These girls exercise more agency in the classrooms as they assist with classroom management and help younger students learn. Here girls have an opportunity to develop leadership skills and occupy positions of relative power that challenge assumptions about gendered divisions; sustained participation in educational spaces has the potential to be transformative. In regards to interaction between teachers, we see how teachers complement each other by relying on their individual strengths and relationships more than gender. For example, Ustad Yusra leverages her relationships at the public school to enroll students. Finally, the NGO's primary focus on addressing gendered divisions through the *shura* is misplaced as *shura* members are minimally involved in the school after the initial phase of community mobilization when compared to teachers who interact with students daily.

Implications for theory

This study engages with a number of conceptual and theoretical ideas. Informed by sociological literature, I took a process approach in this study of community, that is, with the understanding that community "is always in the making" (Hill Collins, p. 25). This approach is generative in a more dynamic analysis of community and enables connections between community and education, something that few studies on community have done. Most studies on community and education assume community is something that simply exists and can be leveraged to support education through more participation of community members in educational spaces. While this level is important

and useful, it overlooks the dynamic nature of community and the possibilities of new layers of community forming through education.

The sociological literature posits that individuals belong to multiple communities depending on identity markers such as gender, class, and occupation (Hill Collins, 2010; Cohen, 1985; Charles & Aull Davies, 1997). The construction of community is political as members negotiate the boundaries, organization, and values of community. Within this notion of community, mainly associated with countries in the Global North, community is less geographically bounded and more open to possibilities with advancements in communication technologies that enable transnational connections. Central in this conception is the individual and individual choice. Individuals choose to engage in a particular community and determine their level of interaction and influence. Individuals can participate in multiple communities that taken together might construct the whole identity. The idealized practice of community involves the participation of many individuals within a unit. In this paradigm, elements of community that emerged from this study, such as trust and belonging, might be formed through different processes. For example, trust is likely to be cultivated through individual relationships. Belonging might look different for each member of community.

My study, which adds a cultural framework to the process approach, shows how community can be connected to family rather than individual elements of identification. With family at the center of community, decisions are made in relation to the social and physical well-being of the entire family unit, rather than individual preferences and experiences. Islamic principles and cultural norms often shape decisions made by families, rather than class. At Roshan Street we see students from varying socioeconomic

backgrounds and provinces whose families share similar principles. This coming together is facilitated by local institutions, such as community-based schools and mosques. Community is often about enhancing collective safety and security—about maintaining honor—rather than advancing individual interests.

Within this conception of community, participation from all individuals who constitute the community is uncommon and is not necessary. Since trust is established through families, representatives of community make decisions on behalf of the collective. This explains the importance of one individual, the Qari, in community. The Qari is connected to other members of the community through multiple community institutions—the mosque, the community *shura*, the community-based school, and the *madrassa*. His connections facilitate trust between different members of the school community.

Culture is important in understanding norms and practices through which community is formed. I want to highlight the role of gender in this context. In the family conception of community, community is not gendered. That is, community is not established separately for boys and girls or for men and women. Rather, *practices* within community are divided along gender. They work together in a complementary and interdependent fashion within the family organization.

The geographical boundaries of community are critical in establishing safety and security as well as enabling collaboration and productivity. This applies to the existing community as well as the community within the school. Relationships between members of a community enable trust. Outsiders can easily be identified. In the school, there's an implicit understanding that whoever the Qari lets in is trustworthy and will not violate

safety. Collaboration and productivity is also enhanced within the boundaries of a community. In the neighborhood, members of the community *shura* convene to address community tensions and oversee public construction projects. In the school, students and teachers participate in the teaching and learning process. Collaboration allows members of a community to get work done without outside assistance.

This conception of boundedness and interdependence in community, however, does not mean community is static. Through education, we see the emergence of a different type of community while still maintaining fundamental aspects of community in Afghanistan around family, gender norms, and religion. In this community, learning enhances character development, as attested by families. While character and morality are shared values, participants asserted that the school facilitated development in these areas more than home practices. Moreover, the nature of interactions, particularly between boys and girls, also change. It is not as limited because concerns about safety are not as heightened as they are in more public spaces. We see the development of professional relationships where boys and girls learn side-by-side and collaborate with each other.

Additionally, while the boundaries of community might be limited to its members, these members interact in multiple communities and bring in new ideas. Exposure to educational opportunities during migration, including in cities, has an overwhelming positive impact on attitudes toward education. Literature emphasizes the role of communication technologies in facilitating change. While this is important, experiential learning through migration seems to be more widespread and perhaps more impactful. In the Afghanistan context in particular, exposure to Islamic knowledge and

different ideas of being good Muslims facilitates change and openness to education. This openness along with trust in teachers can remedy negative past experiences with the public education system.

Another contribution this study makes to theory is the connection between community and sustainability in education. Current understandings of the role of community in educational sustainability are one-dimensional. Implicit in this conception is that the participation of the existing community fosters educational sustainability. My findings demonstrate that educational quality and the new community that is built through education together foster a deeper level of sustainability. Elements of trust, belonging, and relationships contribute to these dimensions of quality and community.

On a related point, community cannot be understood in isolation or through romanticized narratives of self-sufficiency. The role of national actors and international actors is critical. NGOs, in particular, play a vital role in teacher training and classroom oversight, which enhance quality of learning. Their respectful interactions with teachers and openness to flexibility create space for community-based school teachers as professionals. NGOs also often pay for the cost of repairs to schools and provide school supplies to teachers and students. In contrast, the lack of state presence is palpable. While community is important for safety and collaboration, it does not substitute the role of the state. Teachers and families want reassurance that the education of students is fully accredited, even if students do not transition to formal public schools. The ability for teachers to be successful at their job requires more support from state representatives, including formal public schools. Contrary to some ideas, communities are not against state involvement. There is a role for the state in supporting community-based education,

while allowing teachers some level of autonomy to incorporate their understandings of community values to alleviate concerns about safety and security.

Implications for Practice

This study offers a number of implications for practice. Specifically, I discuss some implications for NGOs and national education systems. These implications demonstrate the importance of long-term, ethnographic research in capturing opportunities for improvement through a holistic lens that seeks trends and change.

It's clear from the data that in practice there is some confusion about the role of the *shura*. *Shura* members receive training around attitudes towards girls' education; by contrast, during teacher trainings, teachers are informed that the *shura* should assist with administrative duties. Beyond the initial involvement of the *shura* to mobilize the community to enroll children in the community-based school, the *shura* is not fully utilized. Since teachers are key to the success of community-based education, both in the learning process and in engagement with community, it seems best to consult teachers around how to optimize the role of the *shura*. The data show that teachers need assistance in administrative duties; however, if the *shura* is not trained to do this then teachers are reluctant to reach out for support.

Some community-based school *shuras* in Kabul have women participants, while others, like at Roshan Street, don't. My findings show that grandmothers of some students are some of the most active community members, making regular school visits and chatting with Ustad Yusra. It is important to remember that gender roles change with age. The public-private division is less strict. Policymakers might consider ways to

expand the *shura* as active members are identified after the initial phase when schools are established. Policymakers also need to reflect on appropriate ways women *shura* members can participate. Women teachers are positioned well to offer suggestions. One recommendation is to pair teachers with *shura* members who can offer direct assistance to teachers.

Relatedly, considering the recent history of politically charged social change agendas, it does not seem wise or effective to incorporate social change measures through *shura* training. *Shura* members seemed unsure what to do with information regarding gender differences and the importance of education for boys and girls. Teachers are far more effective in changing attitudes through commitment to learning and character development. Policymakers should consider ways to involve the *shura* within the classrooms by consulting teachers. Moreover, across the board, families shared that security and safety presented the most significant barriers to access to education. In particular, distance to schools increased concerns regarding security and safety. Policymakers might consider how the *shura* can be involved in alleviating these concerns, particularly when children transition to formal public schools. One suggestion is to have *shura* members accompany students to school.

The lack of MOE oversight and involvement sends troubling signals to teachers and community members. Questions arose about whether community-based schools are part of the public education system and whether children would therefore be able to progress to the next grade. Direct MOE involvement and assistance with specific bureaucratic requirements would alleviate some of these concerns. Moreover,

collaboration between partnering NGOs and the MOE would result in more consistent messages and practices.

In addition, as the formal public school partner is the main connection between the community-based school and the central education system, improvements could be made to the relationship to address concerns about the lack of MOE presence. Teachers at Roshan Street relied on pre-existing relationships with teachers at the formal public school to get work done; however, these relationships might not always exist and, in the cases when they do, they could be strengthened. According to the MOE community-based school policy, Teacher Learning Circles (TLCs) bring together teachers from both schools to collaborate and address pedagogical and classroom management issues within their classes. Yet, in practice, TLCs rarely convene. When they do, it has to do with testing or administrative issues not classroom practices. Discussions with NGO members in the field suggest that NGOs are considering including formal public school teachers in their teacher training seminars. My findings show that this would be beneficial because it would enhance relationships between partnering schools, enable collaboration, and improve pedagogical skills for all teachers. Since many students and families complained about the lack of quality at the public school, additional professional development for formal public school teachers seems important.

The final implication for practice is connected to sustainability. Time and resources from teachers, communities, and NGOs go into the establishment and maintenance of community-based schools. Unfortunately, this system is too reliant on outside funding from international organizations. NGOs are aware of this weakness; yet, they cannot address this challenge on their own. We must think about sustainability

beyond funding. How can the achievements of community-based schools, especially regarding trust, belonging, and relationships, be leveraged to sustain support for education? Addressing this question requires a system's approach, not just one concerned with funding. It involves expanding connections between community-based schools and formal public schools so that teachers and students can transition more smoothly. If so much of the success in community-based education can be attributed to teachers then the educational progress of students must be understood with teachers in mind. It might be more likely for students to stay in the education system if their teachers followed them. Moreover, stronger relationships between community-based schoolteachers and formal public school teachers might enhance community trust in formal public schools.

Sustainability requires adapting to contextual conditions and making changes as the academic year progresses with educational progress as the driving force. It might be worthwhile to scale up some of the practices of teachers at the community-based school. For example, when the Qari realized Asiya's level of competence was higher than first grade, he reached out to her father at the mosque and helped Asiya transition to Abdul Hakim High School. It's unclear whether the NGO was aware of this decision. This practice could be enacted on a larger scale by encouraging teachers to identify students who can transition earlier. The data shows enrollment rates at the community-based school would not be impacted as a result, because there is continuing demand from community members who want to send their children to the school, especially once they hear its praises from neighbors. In all, just as community must be understood from a more dynamic lens, so does sustainability.

It is also important to acknowledge that it is unlikely that some families will allow their daughters to transition to formal public schools, especially as they reach adolescence and due to distance barriers and cultural attitudes. My findings show that displaced, Pashto-speaking families might be less prone to support this transition than families who have lived in Roshan Street longer. However, Pashto-speaking families, similar to other families, expressed that they would allow their children to go to the Qari's house as long as the school existed. When security situations are precarious, there will be a demand for ongoing and expanded community-based educational opportunities for many more years. To sustain the progress students make, national educational policymakers should consider a more long-term policy around community-based education for girls with less dependence on international funding. In addition to government funding, some community members might be able to make financial contributions.

Methodological implications

In addition to implications for theory and practice, some lessons can be drawn from this study in terms of redefining the researcher's role, methods, and tools to be more improvisational and adaptive to the context. I will explain some key takeaways through the metaphor of a river and a weaver. As researchers, prior to entering the field we make an effort to understand our site and ask relevant questions that are informed by research and gaps in our understanding, yet complexities in the field continually challenge us to be adaptive and flexible. We can imagine the field as a river that is constantly flowing,

dynamic, with bumps and turns. It has a history and a life of its own. We must adjust expectations, exercise patience, and look ahead for in-depth, meaningful engagement.

One of the expectations I had to quickly adjust in the field was my understanding of relationship building with participants. Qualitative researchers place great importance on building relationships with participants before delving deep into research to garner trust, respect, and authenticity. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explain that "productive and benign" relationships between the researcher and participants that are "dynamic, evolving, and fluid" are key to nuanced, textured inquiry (p. 135). Observing the currents of Afghan society, I learned to prioritize some relationships in order to access other relationships. It became evident that teachers exercised great power in the community. I prioritized building relationships with teachers who in many ways served as gatekeepers to the rest of the community. Cultivating trust between the researcher and participants in this context is reflective of the ways trust is cultivated between educational institutions and community—it often happens through one person who is connected in a network of relationships. Hence, one lesson that can be drawn is being intentional about the sequential nature of relationship building. Which relationships open pathways to other relationships?

All rivers have some boundaries, but boundaries are not static. Similarly, my research process revealed the importance of recognizing social boundaries and opportunities for crossing boundaries. Boundaries are defined by participants. The onus is on the researcher to recognize boundaries in context as well as when boundary crossing is permitted. The standing in concert (TallBear, 2014) orientation attuned me to different types of boundaries in context around gender, disclosing personal information, and

voicing criticism. As a researcher, we must simultaneously be cognizant of boundaries to build trust and aware of our positionality in relation to participants and when possibilities exist for researchers to traverse boundaries. Beyond the gender divide, my researcher identity enabled me to occupy a third category where—as a professional—I could interact with men and women (although still in different ways). The insider/outsider dichotomy is useful in navigating boundaries. As an insider, we can express solidarity with the communities we spend time understanding and with which we interact. As an outsider, there is awareness that we are always learning from our participants who are the experts. Perhaps this is one area where the standing in concert position might be misapplied. In most cases, it is impossible to be completely part of the communities we study and conduct research. Through recognizing and maintaining boundaries, we can build more authentic relationships and protect participants from over-exposure and misplaced expectations (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Even when we come prepared to navigate a river, we must modify our tools to fit each ecosystem. While the researcher enters the field prepared with a cohesive methodological rationale and tools to carry out research, my experience in the field shows that it is also important to adjust methods to the context. I entered the field with semi-structured interview protocols for each stakeholder as well as less detailed observational protocols. My assumption that most of my data would be obtained through one-on-one interviews was flawed for a number of reasons. First, participants were unfamiliar with the research process. Second, being alone in a private space with one individual was not culturally appropriate. Third, individuals were reluctant to express any frustration or critique. Rather than going ahead with my initial plan and trying my best to explain my

process to participants, I made modifications to my study that felt more natural and culturally informed. In addition to building relationships, my strategy was to make space for participants to determine some aspects of the data collection process. Meanwhile, observations were more fruitful in capturing nuance in regards to successes and challenges. As researchers, if we are to stand in concert with participants, we must exercise flexibility in methods and determine which strategies fit the context. It is important to note that one of the reasons I was able to make adjustments and feel confident about my choices was due to guidance and support from my academic advisor. Especially for novice scholars, the support of an experienced mentor is critical in not only being comfortable in adapting strategies, but also in thinking through how some adaptations change other aspects of the methodology (e.g., data analysis, validity, etc.), so that the study remains rigorous and strategic.

As researchers, we are also expected to pull the currents together, to make sense of a slice of this dynamic ecosystem. This is where the weaving metaphor is pertinent. As a weaver, I searched for opportunities to contextualize and layer classroom observations and interviews with observations of professional development opportunities, *shura* meetings and trainings, and observations of the community. I also paid close attention to implicit and explicit messages about community, religion, and the nation that shaped the environment. As a weaver, the responsibility of explaining the salience of statements, practices, and observations is on the researcher. I understood the importance of religion in Afghanistan; however, the deeply embedded ways religion seeps into every aspect of identity and community were new. It compelled me to pay more attention to religious symbols and messages. Hence, as a writer, I found it my responsibility to layer my

analysis with ideas and practices associated with Islam to achieve authenticity with participants and guide my audience to understand the salience of statements referencing religion. The researcher as a weaver seeks to portray the experiences of their participants in nuanced ways that centers in their worldviews, while confronting our own inhibitions. For example, connecting back to Islam, as an Afghan American who grew up in the post-9/11 United States, I found myself trying at times to minimize the role of Islam and at other times making an effort to justify certain practices. Standing in concert with participants requires that we examine our own biases and inhibitions. Particularly for researchers from marginalized and minoritized groups, this process can be challenging and liberating, liberating in that we learn to adjust our focus from addressing assumptions to portraying authentic narratives, from the gaze of outsiders to life of the river.

Limitations

I exercised many strategies to ensure validity throughout the research process; however, as with any study, it is also important to recognize some limitations regarding internal and external validity. Beginning with internal validity, lack of student perspectives impacted analysis of the "Belonging" chapter. I relied more on teacher interviews and classroom observations for a rich examination of belonging and the relationship between community and education. Eliciting student perspectives in this context was challenging because of a lack of familiarity and comfort with interviews. Future research should consider more creative ways to engage young children to prompt their perspectives on education and community. For example, researchers could accompany children on their walk home and ask questions about the school day.

Interaction with children depends on a researcher's ability to build strong relationships grounded in trust. Additionally, while this study integrates data on how community participants perceive and, in some cases, interact with the MOE, the "Relationships" chapter would be strengthened further with more data from the MOE. I interviewed a number of MOE representatives at the beginning of data collection to better understand CBE policy. In hindsight, it would be productive to interview MOE representatives at the beginning and during the data collection process to understand both policy and practice. Finally, as explained in the methods chapter, though I understand basic Pashto, there is a possibility that I missed important linguistic nuances. In particular, parent interviews might have been richer with Pashto speakers with better Pashto language fluency.

I have discussed ways this study contributes to theory regarding the relationship between community and education. External validity is limited because the study focuses on one school community. My initial plan to conduct comparative case studies that include cases from different areas of Kabul was not possible due to security conditions. The teacher trainings particularly illuminated the diversity of community-based schools in regards to gender and community participation in school. For example, some schools only had female teachers, while others had only male teachers. Some schools also had active female *shura* members. The various locations of schools—*madrassas*, homes, and community spaces—might also have implications for community engagement. In addition to some of these variables, comparative case studies might capture regional differences along ethnic lines. Southern Kabul is largely inhabited by people from the southern provinces who are primarily Pashtun. Although almost every area of Kabul is ethnically diverse, the northern region represents larger groups of minority ethnic groups.

The methodology and findings of this study could form the basis for conducting similar studies in other community-based schools. Meanwhile, there are a number of ways to enhance the external validity of future studies. For example, interviews with teachers at professional development seminars would bring in more teacher perspectives, although, observational data might still be limited.

Future research

The findings point toward a number of areas where prospective research would be productive. This discussion considers both methodological and substantive recommendations. Beginning with methodology, as discussed in the limitations, comparative case studies that reflect regional diversity and different types of community-based schools (e.g., based on teacher gender, location of the school, etc.) might illuminate further nuances in the relationship between education and community and in particular how trust, belonging, and relationships are enacted. Applying insights from this study's methodological process drawn from portraiture and ethnography, including researcher positionality, data collection, and data analysis, might accelerate the research process and enable rich engagement with multiple sites. These insights pay attention to culture and security conditions, which could be transferred to other contexts with similar conditions. It is important to clarify that I am not necessarily recommending a bigger sample size. The depth of relationships between the researcher and participations is vital to the richness of data. Close relationships with key stakeholders (while maintaining respectful interactions with everyone) at different sites that represent community diversity have potential to be as revelatory as large-scale studies.

Class and gender emerged as salient themes in the findings; however, more data is needed to inspect how these factors might explain the three mechanisms—trust, belonging, relationships—that capture the relationship between community and education. Substantive themes intersect with methodological decisions. For example, regarding trust, how is trust cultivated in a school with only female teachers? Is trust more inherent in female teachers? How is trust preserved? How does it evolve? In the "Belonging" chapter, class and gender seemed to intersect, raising questions about how various messages of belonging in school emerge. In this study, Ustad Yusra's messages of belonging aligned more with messages that are espoused in the standardized education system. How do class and gender account for various messages of belonging in school?

I did not center gender in the findings as too often misguided assumptions about gender in Afghan culture lead to inaccurate conclusions and reinforcement of stereotypes. My goal was to analyze community and education from a more grounded methodological stance and determine which themes emerge organically. Future research that begins with consideration for gender in sample selection as well as interview questions would be productive. It is critical that a gender analysis is done through a conceptual framework that is embedded in an understanding of Afghan culture. Importantly, as explicated in the conceptual framework, Afghan culture is defined by interdependence with family at the center of social dynamics. Given this, researchers must pay attention to how men and women interact and complement each other's work in education. Lina Abirafeh's book, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan*, offers illuminating perspectives from men and women, and provides a solid foundation into gender and culture.

Finally, the "Relationships" chapter raises questions about community and the nation and more broadly, albeit subtly, questions about sustainability. Here it would be productive to bring in the perspectives of policymakers to better understand the MOE's role, both perceived and actual. In regards to community-based education, formal public schools signify the closest representatives of the central education system. Future studies should consider including the perspectives of formal public schools. How do administrators understand their role in community-based schools? Moreover, a comparative analysis of community in formal public schools and community-based schools might offer important insights into what community means in each space. How do parents and other community members interact with each type of school? Connecting many themes, such as community and sustainability, a worthwhile topic for future studies includes examining the transition process for students, teachers, and families from community-based education to the formal public system. How do participants' experiences with and relationships in community differ in each system? What factors contribute to a successful transition? What factors impede transition?

"The wound is where the light enters you."
Mawlana Rumi

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