

The SPARKS Academy Kabul

The SPARKS Academy Kabul (known in Dari as *Omid-e-Afghanistan* – “*The Hope of Afghanistan*”) opened its doors to 48 Kindergarten students in November of 2003. The program has since grown considerably and is currently limited largely by the size of the facility it operates in. The Academy now has students ranging from age three to eight, and is working to become a full-fledged Early Childhood Development centre with programs directed at children and their caregivers from birth to age eight.

Early Childhood Development

Early Childhood Development (ECD) describes a window of opportunity where a human’s intellectual, physical, emotional, and psychological development potential is at its prime. Studies have shown that in many cases, development which does not take place during these early years (e.g. the laying of neural networks in the brain) will never take place later in life, irrespective of the resources invested.

If Afghanistan’s goal is to ensure its students succeed later in life, it must ensure that they succeed early in life.

In any education system, decisions must be made about how to allocate scarce resources – both human and financial. The SPARKS Academy has identified four major areas of need:

1. Teacher Training

ECD programs are driven more by the capacity of individual teachers than any other factor. The quality of teachers alone can determine whether an average student ends up in the top 10th percentile or the bottom 40th percentile three years later. The SPARKS Academy would like to develop a training program for teachers (potentially using a cascade model of expert trainers) in ECD.

These trainings would initially be focused on providing hands-on experiences at the SPARKS Academy in Kabul, but later may take the form of large conventional workshops in districts or towns, or be supplemented by more innovative approaches such as radio and television education programs.

2. Parent Education

ECD is a process of continual learning and development. Children will benefit most when they are challenged and supported throughout their day. The most effective way to achieve this is to engage their families in ECD. In particular, this would mean engaging mothers and other caregivers and sharing with them ECD best practices from across the globe. Current practices of child care have no basis in Afghan tradition and show a deep misunderstanding of appropriate childcare methods. Mothers in the SPARKS community have requested training so that they

may better care for their children's health, educational and developmental needs.

In the short term, this could be done through trainings at the SPARKS Academy facility.

3. Oral History Project

The SPARKS Academy faces many challenges in Afghanistan, but one of the most tragic is the lack of children's literature in Dari, Afghanistan's official language.

The SPARKS Academy has started to collect local stories through the oral story-telling tradition from Afghan community elders who come to the Academy and tell their stories to our students, which are recorded and then made into books.

In order to make quality Dari books, quality resources are necessary. The SPARKS Academy would like to create a high-quality library of audio, visual and written stories that can then be used by community members as well as SPARKS students. This project will not only encourage literacy in all community members, but will also serve to strengthen and maintain local customs.

4. Resource Development

The SPARKS Academy uses a hands-on approach to learning – our students are encouraged to explore their world using their senses. In particular, materials that encourage students to use their critical thinking and problem solving skills are very important.

SPARKS would like to create a Resource Center in the SPARKS Academy facility that teachers, parents and other community members may use to borrow resources, and learn how to make their own. This center will necessarily have to provide the basic resources (glue, buttons, etc.) required to develop educational toys as the families in our community are some of the poorest in Kabul. This centre currently does not exist – basic infrastructure materials as well as ECD resources will be needed to create an appropriate facility.

Expected Outcomes and Future Impact

By improving any one of these four areas of need, the quality of ECD education available in Kabul will be improved, albeit on a small scale. The value of ECD programs is well-established in a body of research which spans countries, cultures and traditions. ECD alone is not the answer to Afghanistan's education challenges, but it should be an integral part of a more comprehensive solution that addresses everything from access to quality. With sufficient financial and human resources, the SPARKS Academy Kabul can develop a highly effective ECD program which will enable young boys and girls in Afghanistan to look to their futures with hope and optimism.