

TEACHER'S QUALITY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN AFGHANISTAN:
EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS'
STAKEHOLDERS

By

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A thesis submitted to the BRAC Institute of Educational Development in partial
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Ethics Statement

To the best of my knowledge and awareness, I affirm that this study is my original work. This work entitled as “Teacher’s Quality in Public Schools in Afghanistan: Exploring the Perceptions of Public Schools’ Stakeholders” is authentic and findings are reported without any manipulation or misrepresentations. I have consciously and intentionally prevented any kind of bias, personal view and prejudice to keep a completely natural position during the research process.

The thesis was conducted including 8 participants four teachers, two head teachers and two principals both male and female from different public schools in a rural area in the northern part of Afghanistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was held with head teachers and principals. This study has the privilege of maintaining privacy and confidentiality of the research participants and for ethical concerns purposes the written consent was designed and signed by participants.

The thesis is a first-hand paper and is not submitted or published by a third party. The main sources used in this piece of study are appropriately acknowledged following the standard and accurate referencing style. In addition, the soft and hard copies of the gathered data are stored accurately and will only be shared upon reasonable and request through formal procedures.

I also declare that this paper has followed all ethical and legitimate standards and policies of the institution and followed and maintained all possible codes of conduct.

Abstract

Teacher quality appeared to be the main concern not only in developing countries but also in most developed ones. This is because education as the basic human right should be provided for all equally; as the SDGs and Millennium Development Goals established and emphasized by the UN and countries all over the world, however, quality education is a must and matters a lot. Therefore, teacher quality is the key in reaching these important goals and objectives and has been the center of attention in most education systems universally. Teacher quality is a broad and general term which encompasses quite different characteristics and features and everyone's definition will differ from the rest based on his/her education context and practices. This study is conducted to explore teacher quality in public schools in Afghanistan with a main focus on Zebak public schools and their stakeholders' perceptions in this regard. The study relied on qualitative approach and the data were gathered employing semi-structured qualitative interviews and FGD aimed to collect enough in-depth insight about the topic being studied. The thematic analysis has been used to interpret the data and present the result of the study. The key findings of the study are that public schools' stakeholders have a good knowledge of teacher quality compared to the literature review about, however, perceptions are different, and the opportunity is not available to embark on their quality development. In addition, teachers are experiencing and struggling with various challenges including a lack of facilities and resources as well as lack of recognition and support system. Another major finding of the study is that besides all these problems public schools in the rural areas of the country initiated some sort of interventions and innovated some effective ways of improving their quality such as collaborative works and creating educational circles to respond to their needs. As a result, this is the government and educational authorities' responsibility to allocate budget and resources in

education particularly in developing teachers' quality throughout the country to lead the country towards progress and prosperity.

Keywords: Teacher's Quality, Stakeholders' Perceptions, Public Schools, Challenges and Available Supports, Afghanistan Context

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my dear uncle whom I have learned how to be strong in life and to my beloved mother for her unconditional love and her truly affection.

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List of Acronyms

MOE Ministry of Education

NESP National Education Strategic Plan

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

TTC Teacher Training Collage

TIKA Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency

UNICEF United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

FGD Focus Group Discussion

AKES-A Aga Khan Education Service for Afghanistan

AKF Aga Kahn Foundation

EC Education Circle

NCLB No Child Left Behind

EEF Education Endowment Foundation

PDP Professional Development Programs

PLP Professional Learning Programs

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

SDGs Sustainable Development Goals

USD United States Dollars

MHE Ministry of Higher Education

Glossary

Kankor -National Examination and University Entrance Exam

Darakht -e- Danish or Knowledge Tree - (it refers to the name of an online library facilitated by experts to provide contents for teachers in Afghanistan).

Alaqat -e- Hamozoshi or Educational Circle (It is a school-based initiative in public schools in Afghanistan and refers to a collaborative work among school staff to solve teaching/learning problems).

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Chapter one

1.1 Introduction

Teacher quality has become a hotly debated issue across the world. Teachers are the main factors that play a vital role in the lives of students in general and affect society's improvement in particular. There is no single definition of a teacher's quality and different studies provided different definitions of this term. Hanushek (2002), provided a simple definition of teacher quality he states effective teachers are those who help their students make big progress in their learning, while ineffective teachers are the opposites- they do not help students develop much. Similarly, Farr (2010), highlights that qualified teachers have effective instructional expertise, good skills in time management, and are committed to fostering a friendly effective learning environment for all learners to succeed in their lessons. Similar to other developing countries, teacher quality is the main concern in Afghanistan too.

Ministry of Education (2021), in the National Education Strategic Plan for Afghanistan, stated that developing teacher quality will be the highest priority and top of their work for upcoming years, however, less positive results have been seen in this regard. They also mentioned that

about 9% of teachers have lower than 12th grade qualification and this resulted in poor quality teaching in public schools in Afghanistan. In addition, the Ministry of Education (2007), in Afghanistan National Development Strategy highlighted that many factors contributed to low-quality education in Afghanistan and teacher quality is one of them. They also add that teachers with low quality are not able to address the particular educational needs of each student in their classes. They mostly pay close attention to those who are more intelligent and less attention to those who have learning difficulties. Another study conducted by Wilichowski (2020) revealed that Afghan teachers have good capacity in some areas to be teachers and have problems on other sides. For instance, they are effectively capable in classroom culture, however, they show less ability in socioemotional skills. He further adds that teachers in public schools in Afghanistan are good at creating a supportive learning environment, but are less skilled at providing feedback and boosting students' critical thinking. Therefore, the gap in teachers' quality negatively affected students' learning outcomes and resulted in poor-quality education throughout the country.

Many interventions have been taken by the MoE to develop teachers' quality in public schools in Afghanistan. For instance, the Ministry of Education (2021), in the national education strategic plan (NESP) declared that improving teacher and teaching quality is their priority and MoE needs to develop the skills and ability of all teachers despite salary limitations. Moreover, MoE reported that 10% of teachers have a bachelor's degree, 9% are lower than 12 grads, 38% of teachers are 14th-grade graduates and 43% of teachers have 12th-grade graduate certificates. Although the main priority of being a public-school teacher is to have at least a 14th-grade certificate, however, due to different challenges in the country such as war and unstable economy

most school teachers are 12th-grade graduates and are less capable of teaching primary-level subjects effectively.

This research aims to recognize the perceptions of public-school stakeholders (teachers, head teachers, and principals) regarding teacher quality in public schools in the Zebak district of Badakhshan province, Afghanistan. The study is also keen to find out what challenges teachers face what support they need to improve their quality and what else they might in public schools.

1.2 Research Topic and Title

In this study, Teacher Quality in Public Schools in Afghanistan is the topic of research. And Teacher quality in public schools in Afghanistan: exploring the perceptions of Zebak public schools' stakeholders as the title. This research is worth to be conducted on this topic for several reasons. First and foremost, quality education remained a big concern in Afghanistan due to many factors. Three decades of war, lack of proper infrastructure, un-upgraded curriculum, and more importantly shortage of qualified teachers in public schools resulted in poor quality education. Public school teachers received little attention regarding building their quality in urban areas in general and in rural areas in particular. It is clear that teachers with high quality play a pivotal role in the lives of students and enhancing the quality of education. As stated by Mincu (2013), teachers are the main characters in their classrooms and develop the learning process involved in and act collaboratively at the school level and have the potential to transform results by creating bridges between classrooms and departments and being leaders. In addition, it is stated that teachers' quality has a direct relationship with students' achievements. For example, (the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 1996; National Education Goals Panel, 1998) as cited in Darling-Hammond (2000), pointed out that teacher quality has been introduced as a new standard that plays an important role in students'

achievements. Therefore, teacher quality is the most important factor in developing the quality of education and transforming students' learning outcomes. This study aims to find out the perceptions of school teachers and school principals about teacher quality in public schools in Afghanistan and identify their challenges and what support they need to improve their quality.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Teachers in public schools in Afghanistan lack the quality to develop student's learning outcomes and this has appeared to be the main concern in terms of having a quality education system in the country. According to the Ministry of Education (2021), the majority of teachers did not meet the minimum requirement of being teachers in the country. As a result, teachers with lower quality are not able to teach effectively and improve students' learning outcomes. In addition, most of the teachers in public schools did not get the opportunity to attend any university to upgrade their skills and knowledge. Ministry of Education (2021) in the NESP iii for Afghanistan also mentioned that only 10% of teachers have a bachelor's degree in the country and the rest have graduated from either teacher training college or have only a 12th-grade certificate. Therefore, the gap in the quality of teachers affected education negatively. For instance, students from rural areas of the country rarely get admission to higher education in public universities. Worse than that when students get the chance to enter universities, they face quite a lot of difficulties and most of the time leave the universities due to a lack of proper knowledge which its root is the low-quality teaching at public schools. In addition, the gap in teacher quality in public schools led parents to send their children to private schools to prepare them for the national examination (Kankor). However, it is a big concern among families with weak economic conditions. They are not able to provide their children's tuition or pay for their schooling necessities.

Moreover, Khawary (2015), argues that there is a firm relationship between teaching and quality of education as a result of teachers' retention. He further adds that the rate of teacher turnover is directly related to the type of leadership. For example, When the organization's leadership focuses only on the teachers' teaching in the class without paying attention to the teachers' job satisfaction, motivation, and willingness to continue with their teaching profession most qualified teachers will leave their profession and join other sectors that affect the quality of education severely. In addition, the lack of professional development programs and capacity building is a major concern throughout the country. Teachers in most provinces of the country did not receive any professional activities to enhance their capability or develop their pedagogical knowledge. Ministry of Education (2018), as cited in Mohammad Javad Ahmadi (2021), indicates that teachers in the Herat province of Afghanistan complained that they did not receive any training, and even if there was any training the participants were selected unfairly. For example, some teachers attended the training several times, however, some did not attend any. Hence, teachers in public schools in Afghanistan are experiencing different challenges in terms of improving their quality and capacity. If we look at the teacher quality issue from another angle, low salary is among those factors that contributed to a shortage of qualified teachers in the country. A study conducted by Roehrs (2015), highlights that Afghan teachers expect educational authorities to promote them, especially an increase in their monthly salaries. He also stated that low salaries caused most qualified teachers to leave their profession and seek other jobs with better incomes. For instance, a teacher in public schools in Afghanistan has 6,000 AFG equal to 100 US that do not meet their needs and these teachers need to work part-time as a driver in the urban and as a farmer in the rural areas of the country. As a result, they will not get

the opportunity to work on their quality development and improve their capability. So, the economic status of teachers in Afghanistan severely affected their quality and competencies.

1.4 Research Questions

The main purpose of this study was to know more about the perceptions of Zebak public schools' teachers, head teachers, and principals about teacher quality in the region. This was very crucial to understand teachers' perceptions and their understanding regarding a quality teacher. The main goal is to identify how teachers reflect on being quality teachers. Furthermore, I was going to know who is a quality teacher from their perspectives and what features and characteristics he/she should have to be qualified. In addition, I was going to find what challenges these teachers faced in terms of improving their quality and what types of support they needed to enhance their abilities.

Considering the above-mentioned issues this research will try to answer the following questions.

1. How do different stakeholders define and perceive teacher quality within public schools in Afghanistan?
2. What factors do stakeholders believe contribute to or hinder teacher quality improvement in Afghanistan public schools?
3. What specific recommendations do stakeholders have for improving teacher quality in Afghanistan public schools?

1.5 Purpose of the study

This research aimed to examine the perceptions of public-school stakeholders (teachers, head teachers, and principals) in Zebak district, Badakhshan province, Afghanistan, regarding the characteristics of a quality teacher. Additionally, the study sought to identify the existing

supports available and the challenges faced by teachers in improving their quality in the district. By conducting this exploratory study, this was the main objective to gain insight into the specific perceptions of teachers, head teachers, and principals in Zebak district regarding the characteristics of a quality teacher. This understanding will contribute to the existing knowledge on teacher quality in Afghanistan, with a focus on the local context of the Zebak district.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study was worth to be conducted considering the high demand for quality teachers in public schools in Afghanistan. This study was important for the following reasons:

Firstly, it was assumed that the study would lead to educational improvement. This is because exploring the factors related to teacher quality is crucial for improving the overall quality of education in Afghanistan. By identifying the strengths and weaknesses of teachers, policymakers and education stakeholders can develop targeted interventions and strategies to enhance teaching practices, leading to improved students' learning outcomes. Secondly, the findings of the study can inform the design and implementation of effective professional development programs for teachers in public schools. Understanding the areas where teachers may require support and training can help create tailored development opportunities that address their needs, ultimately enhancing their teaching skills and instructional practices. Thirdly, information generated from the findings of the research can contribute to policy formulation. Policymakers can utilize the findings to make informed decisions regarding teacher recruitment, selection, and retention strategies, as well as the allocation of resources for teacher training and support programs. Additionally, the study can shed light on policy gaps and challenges related to teacher quality, prompting necessary reforms and improvements. Finally, the results of this study were expected to fill a crucial gap in the context of public schools in Afghanistan. This is because limited

research has been conducted on this specific topic, making this study more valuable in generating new insights, highlighting areas for further research, and contributing to the existing body of knowledge on teacher quality in the Afghanistan education system.

Chapter Two

2.1 Literature Review

2.2 Teacher Quality

Much researches are conducted about quality teachers in different contexts and every research covers a different aspect of quality teachers and defines teacher quality differently. Hanushek (2002), provided a simple definition of teacher quality. As he states, effective teachers help their students make big progress in their learning, while ineffective teachers are the opposites- they do not help students develop much. Similarly, Farr (2010), highlights that qualified teachers have effective instructional expertise, good skills in time management, and are committed to fostering a friendly effective learning environment for all learners to succeed in their lessons.

Harris (2008), highlights that teacher quality is an important factor in developing primary and secondary education in the US. He also adds that highly qualified teacher is the first goal of the No Child Left Behind Law and that in every classroom there should be qualified teachers. Furthermore, Goe 2007 as cited in Nilsen (2016), presented a framework for understanding the essential aspects of a quality teacher. Based on this framework teacher quality is a combination of both the teacher's knowledge and attitudes that affects the teacher's instructions as well as students' learning outcomes. From this point of view, it can be driven that qualified teachers need

to have a satisfactory level of competency and also be a good educational model for students to impact their learning positively. In addition to that, other research provides different features of a quality teacher. For example, the Education Endowment Foundation (2023), in their report about the quality of teachers revealed that there are different indicators of the quality of teachers. They categorized teacher quality into different parts such as qualification, experience, or teacher pedagogical content knowledge, teacher-student relationship, continuous professional development, and teacher reflections on his/her teaching profession. However, they expressed that they are not the only indicators of the quality of a teacher, some more characteristics indicate the capacity and competency of a qualified teacher. They, for instance, pointed out that, teacher involvement with the community, teacher cultural knowledge, and professionalism are also part of the teachers' quality. Therefore, the notion of teacher quality is different in different countries and every country has specific challenges in a particular part of teacher quality.

Similar to other parts of the world, teacher quality is the main concern in Asia and the Pacific. According to Panth & Jukka Tulivuori (2021), most countries in Asia and the Pacific encounter main challenges in hiring the best candidates for a long-term teaching career. This indicates that finding qualified teachers to stay for a long run in the teaching profession seems difficult. They also claim that to have qualified teachers and to sustain development, governments need to work on enhancing the capacity of teachers. The focus should be on preparing higher secondary students and providing them the best opportunity to become professional teachers in the future not on preparing them for short-term educational projects.

2.3 Teacher Quality Indicator

There are different indicators suggested by researchers and global organizations that indicate the competency and intelligence of a quality teacher. For instance, communication skills,

questioning techniques, time management, assessment, and providing feedback on students learning and other indicators that are vital for both teachers and students in the course of teaching-learnings. Among those studies, Modaser (2014), conducted a comprehensive study on questioning and assessment techniques among public school teachers in Kabul Afghanistan, and found that using the questioning technique had a positive effect on students' learning outcomes and led to improving critical thinking and productivity. However, he points out that some teachers ask fewer questions during lessons and some of them are not familiar with how to ask effective questions to improve students' learning. Furthermore, some studies suggested that having an advanced degree helps teachers to deliver quality lessons in the classrooms. Although, some researchers reject the idea that teachers' degrees sometimes do not improve the quality of students in some schools around the world, but majority of researchers and educators believe that it has a direct impact on students' learning. Goldhaber et al (2003), for example, found that teachers with an advanced degree in Math and Science subject seem to have a positive effect on students' academic achievements. They also stated that other features are considered as the teachers' quality indicators. In addition to having a good degree level, pedagogical and content knowledge, years of teaching experience, and teacher academic proficiency are also factors that have a close link with students' learning outcomes and are also considered to indicate that the teacher is a qualified one. Moreover, Lewis et al. (1999) as cited in Ogunkola & Ramona E. Archer-Bradshaw (2011), view teacher quality in two things: teacher sense of preparedness and academic qualifications, and teaching practices. In addition, Darling-Hammond (2000), argues that teacher quality variables such as academic qualification a major in teaching, or educational level such as B. A degree or master's etc. appeared to be closely related to students'

achievements. He also argued that the quality of teachers has a direct relation to students' learning outcomes especially those with lower achievement benefit more.

2.4 Teacher Quality Reflection in the Classroom

Teachers' quality plays a crucial role in forming students' learning outcomes. Effective teachers have a great impact on students' learning achievements and their instructional practices directly affect the learning environment and students' involvement. Hattie (2012), highlighted that several features indicate how teacher quality can be reflected in the classrooms. He pointed out that effective teachers foster positive and supportive relationships with their students. They build a safe and friendly classroom environment where students feel relaxed to express their opinions and thoughts. He also mentioned that good quality teachers use effective instructional strategies to meet the diverse needs of different students, set clear goals and expectations, provide timely and constructive feedback, and are committed to their professional growth and reflections. Similarly, Brookfield (2015), pointed out that skillful teachers use different techniques, establish trust among students, and pay close attention to their students' needs and they can cultivate an environment that increases student engagement, promotes deep learning, and maximizes the potential for positive outcomes in the classrooms. Moreover, a qualified teacher not only delivers quality lessons for learners but also is more concerned about the learning atmosphere and how to organize a better learning environment for students. Kohn, (2016) as cited in Mohammed & Dr. Abubakar M. Jumare (2020), says that effective teachers design the room in a way that is comfortable for students' activities, organize the furniture to improve interactions as appropriate, and have comfortable areas for working. He also added that a quality teacher considers students' needs in organizing the classroom such as leaving space for wheelchairs to move around and walkways so that students can access learning materials and the teacher should have enough

space to move freely around the classroom. A qualified teacher will consider all aspects of teaching from physical arrangement to content delivery. Besides that, other studies indicate that the characteristics and performance of teachers have a direct relationship with students' learning outcomes and their learnings. Dial (2008) as cited in Gichuru (2016), found that the relation between years of experience and interaction and degree level had a positive effect on students' learning outcomes. In addition, Kimani, Kara & and Njagi (2013) as cited in Gichuru (2016), investigated that the relationship between teachers' characteristics and instructional practices had a close link with students' academic outcomes. Moreover, Lawrence (2011), argued that a teacher's quality reflection in the classroom can be seen through students' learning outcomes and other social factors that can be found in the classroom. He further adds that a teacher's quality can be also predicted by their reflection on their teaching practices and how their decision-making impacts students' learning achievements. As a result, a qualified teacher plays an important role in the lives of students and their academic performance. Some studies have been done in Afghanistan about quality reflection in the classrooms that show qualified teachers and their capability can be seen in a teaching environment. According to Azizi (2015), teacher quality in Afghanistan can be reflected in a way that shows how teachers with good abilities shift from teacher-centered classrooms to more student-centered approaches. He adds that previously teachers were at the center of providing lectures and there was no interaction between students and teachers, however, qualified teachers in Afghanistan bring some vital changes. For instance, teachers focus on students to get the lead and experience their learning by themselves and the teacher only facilitates them. In addition, he mentioned that teaching experience, content knowledge, and teaching methods can be seen in the classrooms which indicates how much teachers are up to date.

2.5 Teacher Quality in Afghanistan Context

Afghanistan as a developing country after experiencing decades of war and conflict has a profound need for qualified teachers and quality education. There have been major efforts to recruit qualified teachers and improve their quality, however, due to existing challenges public schools in Afghanistan lack quality experienced, and effective teachers. According to a report by Strand (n.d), supported by UNICEF only 43% meet the minimum requirement to be teachers in public schools in Afghanistan to teach all levels. He also adds that most of the qualified teachers seek to teach in urban areas where they can have access to good facilities and provide better educational opportunities for their children. Thus, rural areas throughout the country are experiencing more challenges in terms of having qualified teachers in their local schools. He further mentioned that improving the quality of teachers has been the priority of MoE and about 70% have received three rounds of short-term training to improve basic classroom management skills. However, teachers in public schools need more attention and support to develop their capacity and deliver quality education for students. Additionally, the Ministry of Education (2021) in the National Education Strategic Plan 3 for Afghanistan (NESP iii) declared that teacher quality is a matter of concern and a serious issue. Based on their expression majority of teachers did not meet the requirements to be teachers in public schools in Afghanistan and this resulted in poor-quality lessons in the classrooms. From the perspective of MoE low salaries of teachers caused most qualified teachers to leave their profession and join other sectors that provide better pay. For example, teachers in public schools receive an amount of 70 USD which is not enough to respond to their monthly expenditure. Ali (2023), reported that there was a visible increase in the number of teachers by about 222,000 in 2021 compared to 25,000 in 2003, however, only 22% of them had a 14th-degree qualification and there is gender disparity as only

28% of these teachers are female. Therefore, public schools in Afghanistan need more qualified teachers to provide better education for all students. On the other hand, a study conducted by Wilichowski (2020), highlights that teacher quality is difficult to measure and to provide an exact image of who is a qualified teacher, however, based on an observation done for this research examined teacher quality from different perspectives. For example, classroom culture refers to a supportive learning environment that the teacher creates, treating all students respectfully, using positive language, and responding to students' needs. Secondly, positive and friendly behavior, setting clear behavioral expectations, and acknowledging positive students' behavior. Moreover, the study targeted teachers' instruction quality and expressed that teachers instruct in a way that deepens students' learning and develops their critical thinking. The study also looked at the socio-emotional skills of teachers and found that teachers can encourage students to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom. However, the main concern is that all teachers in different areas of the country do not have the same quality and competency. It is also not clear if they are the same in urban and rural areas or not. As a result, a quality teacher in the context of Afghanistan means someone who can provide quality lessons, be effective at management have positive behavior with students, and help people in the public.

2.6 Initiatives

Since 2001 after the first collapse of the Taliban regime, many initiatives have been taken into account to develop the quality of education and to build teachers' capacity. With the help and donations of different NGOs and humanitarian organizations, many schools have been built around the country and a visible number of children have been enrolled into schools. More importantly, teachers received constructive pieces of training to improve their quality. Odin (2003) a consultant for Save the Children in Afghanistan in his report highlighted that quality

education project in Afghanistan aims to build the professional capacity of primary and secondary teachers throughout the country and in each district to enable teachers to deliver quality education for all children. He further mentioned that an important part of the project is to educate teachers and heads to make them reflective practitioners, which will lead to the sustainability of quality and capacity to manage school development.

In another report by the World Bank (2017), in 2001 there were only 21,000 mostly under-educated teachers throughout the country, and over the period the number has increased to 187,000 and mostly capable of teaching different school subjects. In addition, there are other interventions by different organizations that work for teacher quality development. For instance, Education Cannot Wait Facilitated (2021), initiated some important training for teachers to train them how to care for the psychological safety of students in the classrooms. Conducting this training enables teachers to better detect children in need of psychological support in coordination with relevant child protection actors. Additional training will be provided in child safeguarding, basic child protection, and psychological first aid. Moreover, the Ministry of Education (MoE) appeared to put every single effort into supporting teachers and improving their abilities. For instance, several teacher training colleges have been built throughout the country at least one in every single province to prepare teachers for their professions. (MEC 2017) as cited in (Arroje, 2007), expressed that the TTCs provide an in-service program for helping instructors, where those with lower qualifications can join and improve their competencies.

To assist teachers and enhance their capabilities Afghan government with the help of other educational partners tried to facilitate the opportunity and enable teachers to use online resources in their teaching process. Oates (2016), for example, pointed out that the government established

an online library called Darakht-e Danesh (knowledge tree) to develop teacher subject-area knowledge, access, and use of learning materials, and to foster more diverse teaching methodologies to improve learning achievements in Afghan classrooms. In addition, there have also been some other initiatives from universal and worldwide NGOs in cooperation with third-world countries to improve the quality and capacity of teachers throughout the country. As an example, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) (2016-2021), examined the challenges teachers face in Afghanistan and found that they are encountering enormous difficulties in terms of building their capacities. The (TIKA) designed the “*Afghanistan Capacity Building Program for Teachers*” to assist the country in overcoming most of the challenges teachers are facing. They provide training for teachers of all backgrounds and from different parts of the country to equip them with high-quality teaching models both in theory and practice to prepare them for better teaching experiences. As a result, many initiatives have been taken since 2001 to improve the capacity of Afghan teachers to provide quality education to Afghan students throughout the country.

2.7 Teacher Quality Challenges

There are different challenges for teacher quality development. For instance, Ruediger and Strayer (1910) as cited by Letendre (2015), pointed out that there are different factors affecting teacher quality such as years of teaching experience and level of education. This is true in the context of Afghanistan as well. For example, teachers with fewer years of teaching experience seem to be less experts in their teaching profession. For instance, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2017, 2021) in the National Education Strategic Plan iii pointed out that the majority of teachers did not meet the requirement to be teachers and this resulted in poor quality teaching in the classrooms. In addition, he highlights that teachers with less experience are not able to read and

extract factual text and transfer it effectively to students. As a result, teachers face a lack of expertise in the subjects they teach at public schools. Another challenge in terms of the lack of quality teachers in public schools in Afghanistan is the low salary and untimed distribution of it for teachers. This problem caused the attrition of most intellectual teachers from schools. According to Fazel (2023), what teachers receive as their monthly salary is inefficient to afford their lives, and the monthly USD 100 is reduced to USD 70 which is a very low amount. He also adds that this low salary has caused most teacher to leave their profession or do physical work in their free time. Besides that, the lack of teachers' continuous assessment resulted in fewer quality teachers in public schools in Afghanistan. Although it was promised by the Ministry of Education Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2012), that there would be a continuous assessment of teachers during their job and teaching profession, however, it seems that the lack of effective leadership at school and carelessness observation of teachers by MoE had led in lower capable teachers at public schools. Besides this, Roehrs (2015), in his study about the condition of teachers in Afghanistan found that teachers are experiencing numerous challenges and the government has promised them several things, but did not take any action to meet them. For example, a reduction in hours of teaching-especially for elder staff, and an increase in the amount their salary and promotions were among those promised things, however, no one did them in reality. Due to this fragility and careless attention to the situation of teachers in Afghanistan, they protested several times against the government for their rights but their challenges remained just challenges till today. Besides all these challenges, the teacher-student ratio is another problem in public schools in Afghanistan. The number of students in the classroom is more than it would be for a teacher to manage and control. Arne (2015), stated that in 2013, there were approximately 178,000 teachers, with females comprising 32% of the total.

Additionally, around 72,000 students were pursuing teaching careers, with females making up 53% of this group. Consequently, the ratio of students to teachers in 2013 was 45:1, which exceeded the international standard of 40:1. The province exhibited a range of ratios, varying from 35:1 to as high as 54:1. It is worth noting that only 10 out of the 35 provinces met the prescribed norm. As a result, providing quality teaching become difficult in public schools. Teachers are not able to assess all students and/or find it difficult to arrange activities to include all students to take part and enhance their abilities.

2.8 Needs and Supports

Public school teachers in Afghanistan have experienced difficult situations and this is going on currently. For instance, teachers receive a low amount of monthly salary and currently, the situation got worse after regime changes in the country. In this regard, humanitarian and global organizations tried to assist Afghan teachers and pay them a small scale of monthly salary. For instance, Ayaz (2022), reported that UNICEF decided to support Afghan teachers financially with an amount of USD 100 monthly and will cover almost 149,000 teachers throughout the country. In addition, if we look back to past years there have been several projects for supporting school teachers in terms of improving their quality and raising students learning outcomes through offering professional pieces of training for teachers. For example, the Philippines (2010), in addition from a teacher support program funded by USAID, reported that this project aimed to raise the quality of Afghan teachers between 2006 and 2010 by providing training in 11 provinces and also establishing an organizational framework and mechanisms within the ministry of education to facilitate and uphold the provision of exceptional teaching. Projects of this kind have been helpful in the last decade, but teachers in public schools need more help and support to become professional. In addition, a study conducted by Safi (2014), studied the views

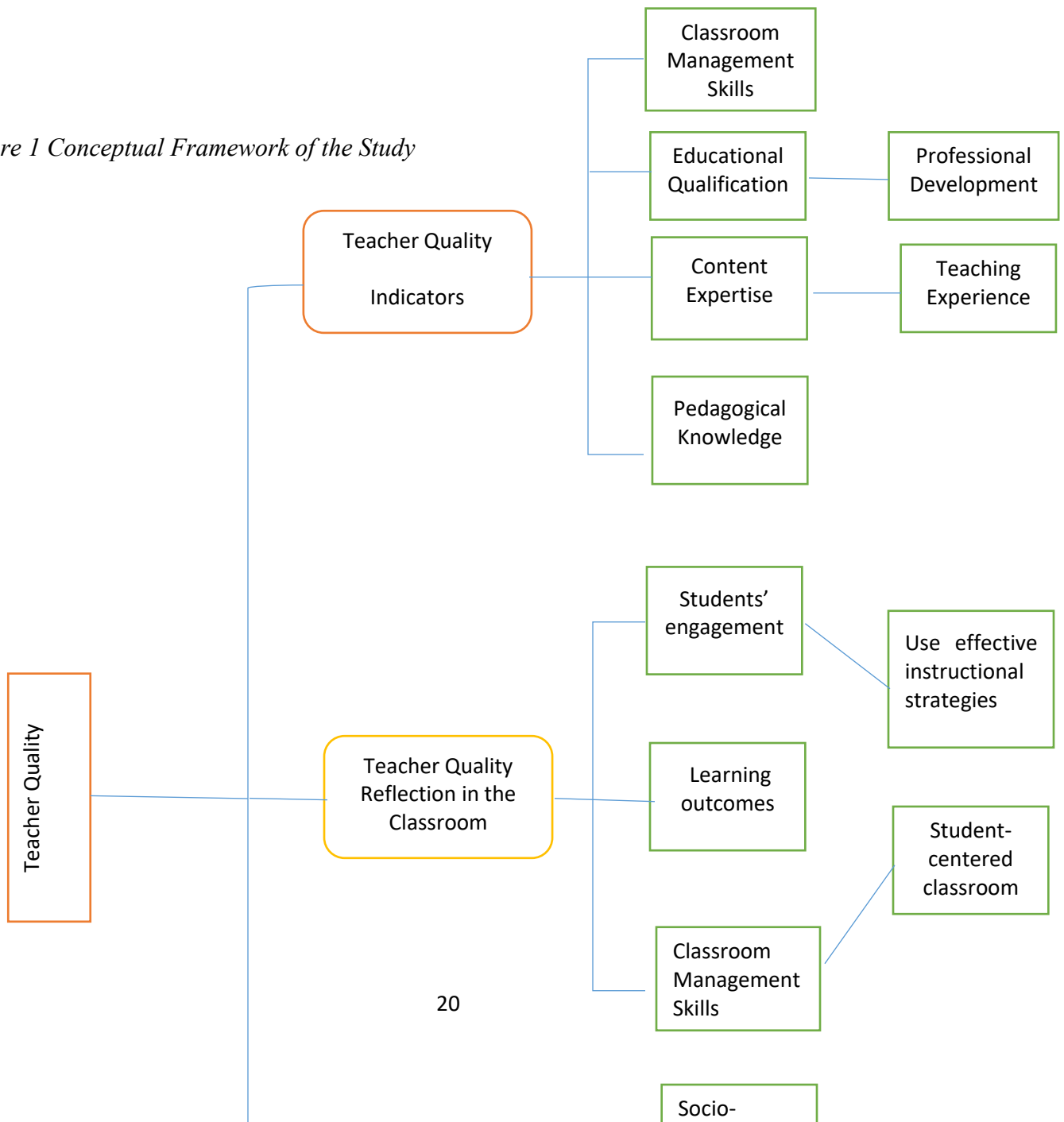
of teachers about the usefulness of a training program in Afghanistan called In-service Training (INEST) found that most teachers had a positive view about the implementation of this program, however, some of them declared that there are problems in conducting this training. For instance, they said that the training should be aligned with the needs of teachers and before conducting the program there should be a need analysis of the teachers. Furthermore, they complained about the qualifications and competency of trainers, the time and duration of the training, and the subjects covered in the program. He also found from the teachers' views that there are no follow-up activities after the training and there is also a lack of continuous assessment of what teachers have learned and how to apply them in the classrooms.

2.9 Conceptual Framework

After reviewing a majority of literature both in international and local contexts around the topic, I come across the following important themes. The central theme of the study is teacher quality and there are three interlinked themes or variables that have a relationship and affect the quality of teachers in this context. The first one is the teacher quality indicators which refer to several features that are associated with teacher quality teaching experience and pedagogical skills are clear instances of this term of teacher quality. The second main theme is teacher quality reflection in the classroom. This refers to how a qualified teacher expresses him/herself in the classroom. For instance, how to engage students in the lesson and activities and how to manage the classroom effectively. The third main theme of the literature is teacher quality in the context of Afghanistan. However, there is a lack of closely related literature that indicates the quality of teachers in the local context where the research is going to take place. However, considering the country as a whole context; teacher quality seems one of the main educational concerns in the country. The majority of teachers are not qualified enough to be competent in effective teaching

in public schools in Afghanistan. For example, most teachers are 12th-grade graduates or graduated from TTC, but not capable of being effective teachers. Moreover, teachers in public schools in the country encounter many challenges such as a lack of professional training and capacity building. For more clarification, the following represents the conceptual framework of the study that was generated after reviewing many literatures.

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study



Chapter three

3.1 Information and Methodology of the Field Research

3.2 Research Approach

This chapter of the study is dedicated to methodology and design of the study. In this study, the qualitative approach was followed to collect the in-depth data. This approach gave me the ability to collect enough in-depth data as my research dealt with the perception of different stakeholders in the targeted research site on the topic of "Teacher Quality". This was the most appropriate approach for my study. "Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems" (Tenny & Brannan, 2022, p. 1). Therefore, I found that this is the most appropriate research approach through which it can be possible to gather effective, real, and experienced data to enrich the study and to understand the feelings, attitudes, and experiences of research participants.

3.3 Research Site

For my research, I chose two public schools in the rural areas of the country in Zebak District-Badakhshan province in the northern part. I had selected this place as my research site for the following reasons. First and foremost, I have been working in this district for one year as an English Instructor. I knew how people in this area were experiencing educational difficulties, which could help me address the academic needs of these people. Secondly, I could reach my participants easily to collect data. More importantly, I could contact people on this site easily for more information or piloting and other purposes.

3.4 Research Participants

My research participants in this study were people from the Zebak district of Badakhshan province. Specifically, there were 4 teachers from two different schools, preferably one male and one female, aged around 30-45 years old. They mostly had a 12th or 14th-grade certificate of education, and a lower number of them were university graduates. In addition, I targeted 2 principals and two head teachers of those two schools ages 35-50 years old and with a 14th degree of education. Headteachers in this context are those people who closely work with teachers in public schools and are in direct contact with them. The main responsibility of a head teacher is to design students' attendance sheets and provide them for teachers, prepare and publish teaching hours on the school notice board, do regular observation of teachers' classrooms, and assist teachers in providing them with teaching resources, checking teachers' daily attendance and responding to their needs and reporting all improvement and challenges of teachers to school principal. On the other hand, the principal is responsible for checking the head teacher's weekly or monthly report, assigning new missions and responsibilities for the head teacher, taking part in school-related issues meetings, taking part in decision-making with the district education head, and other responsibilities. They were of Tajik ethnicity as there are only Tajik people in the region. The reason I selected these people as my research participants was that they were easily available for conducting interviews or FGD and also, they were the right people for my research because they were part of the academic environment where I have done my study. In addition, they were teachers, principals, and head teachers and knew better about education and teacher quality.

3.5 Field Plan with Dates and Data Collection Activities

For data collection, I conducted one-on-one interviews with all 4 teachers from those 2 different schools and one FGD with the principals and head teachers of those 2 schools. In one-on-one semi-structured interviews with teachers, I was able to collect more in-depth information because I found teachers more comfortable expressing their thoughts freely in a single conversation rather than in a group. In this way, I was able to observe their feelings and expressions and understand what challenges they face as public-school teachers and what they think about other teachers. By the FGD with the second group of research participants who were the school principals and head teachers, I was also able to gain more insights about teacher quality and what initiatives they have taken to improve the quality of their teachers. In addition, I asked for their recommendations to educational authorities for improving teachers' quality throughout the country.

Field Plan

No#	Activities	Date	Participants	Spent Time	Strategy	Remarks
1	Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	16.02.2024	P1	1 hour and 40 minutes	Zoom Meetings and note-keeping	Writing Transcriptions and Thematic Analysis
2			P2			
3			H1			
4			H2			
5	Semi-structured Interview	12.02.2024	T1	1 hour		
6		13.02.2024	T2	1 hour 10 minutes		
7		14.02.2024	T3	55 minutes		
8		15.02.2024	T4	57 minutes		

Table 1 The research field plan for conducting the study

3.6 Data collection method

In this study, I relied on two methods for my data collection. Firstly, I conducted some qualitative interviews with 4 teachers and one FGD with 2 school principals and head teachers to understand their perception of teacher quality in public schools in Afghanistan specifically in their schools. The interviews were conducted one-on-one with each of the participants. For this purpose, I explained the main goal of my study to give them a clear picture of what I am expecting in my research. I did some online interviews with some teachers in one public school in Kabul Providence called Kalid Ibn e Walid High School to see the relevance and accuracy of the questions and to pilot them effectively, and then I conducted the real interviews. Lastly, for each interview, I had considered a maximum of one hour and a half so that participants could effectively provide their points of view and perceptions, however, it took different time slots.

3.7 Data Analysis Process

In this study, I used the *Thematic Analysis approach* to interpret and analyze my data. After collecting data, I began with the initial step that is to transcribe the raw data from the recording with participants and also to rewrite the field notes as they were fresh in my mind. The second step that I followed was to code the data. At this stage, I segregated the data and put them into specific themes to make the analysis easier. Lastly, when the themes of the information were ready, the qualitative data analysis process began. Therefore, I was able to write my final findings or research results.

3.8 Role of the Researcher

The researcher plays a crucial role in the research process as he/she is considered the first instrument in the realm of the study. As stated by Creswell J. W. (2017), the design and planning of the research is the key responsibility of the researcher which involves selecting a research

topic and questions to analyze and whatever is needed in the research process. In conducting this research, I had a central role and plenty of responsibility. Firstly, I was responsible for selecting an important topic that is useful for the context where it is conducted. In addition, designing research questions, clarifying the aim of the study, examining the topic from different angles, collecting enough literature to support the topic, and understanding something similar to this topic have been done in other contexts were my main responsibilities as the researcher.

Secondly, as the researcher, I was responsible for selecting my research site, and participants of the study based on my research topic, developing the research tools, and choosing data collection methods, and more importantly the data coding and data analysis where my crucial responsibilities as the researcher is accountable to analysis participants ideas clearly and honestly. So, to the best of my ability, I avoided any kind of bias and self-interpretation and I just coded the data, created themes, and analyzed the data very honestly.

Thirdly, considering and following the ethics of the research is another main responsibility of the researcher. I tried to avoid asking any kinds of sensitive and offensive questions, and I was not biased against any specific participant of the study – as there were both male and female participants, I respected everyone's ideas even though sometimes they provided me with irrelevant ideas, however, I just listened to them and I tried to bring their attention to the main topic.

Last but not least, monitoring the FGD and interviews, recording both, and note-taking from interviewees and FGD participants were another important aspect of the research and my responsibility.

3.9 Process for Ensuring Trustworthiness and Rigor

Ensuring the trustworthiness of the research is a crucial aspect of well-conducted research. The researcher is highly expected to consider the validity and credibility of his/her research. To make research more trustworthy and valid Merriam (2019), suggests several strategies to be considered during conducting the research such as triangulation, member check, peer review, researcher position, and other elements. Ghafouri (2016), stated that the key idea is that a researcher's creativity and skill in selecting appropriate methods play a crucial role in enhancing the overall quality of a study. The authenticity of research lies in accurately defining the phenomenon being investigated, without any bias, preconceived notions, or personal judgments from the researcher. Therefore, in this research, I considered the mentioned features to add to the trustworthiness of my study. First of all, I explained the purpose of my research clearly to my research participants and got their consent for the research. In collecting, analyzing, and reporting data I avoided any kind of bias or unethical issues. It is also important to be careful about the confidentiality of research participants' information and their identity. To keep the trustworthiness of my study, I collected data from different participants to maintain the triangulation of my data. Triangulation involves utilizing multiple sources of data, methodologies, theories, and/or researchers to portray the findings that constitute the truth or reality (Ghafouri, 2016). Then I went through the member check process to ensure I had interpreted the data exactly what the participants provided me. There is also more emphasis on peer review in qualitative research to ensure the validity of the research. At this stage, to do the peer review I sent a sample of my transcription to my research supervisor to avoid any kinds of misinterpretations.

3.10 Limitation of the Study

As natural to every researcher I also experienced some limitations in conducting my study. First of all, finding enough literature considering the local context of the study was a challenge because less research had been done in this area and my topic was almost something new in the local context. Secondly, I faced a bit problem in the initial communication with my research participants because they didn't have internet access, I emailed some friends who were working in an organization called Aga Khan Education Service for Afghanistan (AKES-A), and in that way, I was able to create the bond with the study participants and to confirm the date and time of the study. However, it was time consuming to find and contact the right participant for the study due to the mentioned issue. Moreover, online data gather was another issue that I faced conducting the study. As obvious face to face interview and discussion is much easier rather than conducting online because in online platform misunderstanding and will happen which will also result in misinterpretations.

Chapter 4

4.1 Result

4.2 Introduction

Before diving into the depth of this chapter which is to present the result of the study, it is worth providing some information about the context of the study where it is conducted. The result of this study will be presented under the topic of Teacher's Quality in Public Schools in Afghanistan: Exploring the Perceptions of Zebak Public Schools' Stakeholders. Zebak is a marginalized and rural district of Badakhshan province located in the northern part of the country. Half of its population is literate and the majority of schools' staff including teachers,

head teachers, and principals are from the district itself. However, the quality of education in this rural area has always been questioned and seems not to be answerable to the needs of students. Among all reasons, the low quality of teachers is the initial factor that directly affected the learning outcomes of students and resulted in poor quality education in the region. Therefore, the study aimed to answer the research question which was understanding the perception of Zebak public schools' stakeholders and how they define the quality of teachers based on their perceptions. Secondly, identifying the factors that schools' stakeholders believe hinder teacher quality improvement in the context and what specifically they recommend to educational authorities/officials to enhance the quality of teachers in their schools. As a result, the research findings are presented based on the data collected from the field through the use of qualitative method. Four individual interviews have been conducted with four teachers of two public schools in February 2024 and one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) has been held with head teachers and principals of the two mentioned schools in another day in the same month in February 2024. To keep the confidentiality of the research participants their identity has been anonymized and a couple of words and numbers have been used to represent their identity and indicate their ideas and perceptions. Letters and numbers such as T1, T2, T3, T4, H1, H2, and P1, P2 have been used to distinguish specific ideas of every individual who provided information whether in interviews or FGD.

The thematic approach has been used to analyze and categorize the data. Firstly, the data were gathered through the mentioned data collection tools and then the initial codes were derived from the whole information based on the relevancy of the codes specific themes were created which made the presentation of the data quite easy. So, after a thorough analysis of the data, the following nine main themes emerged so far which indicate the main finding of this research.

- Key attributes of effective teachers
 - Pedagogical mastery
 - Creating an inclusive learning environment
 - Optimizing student-centered learning environment
 - Attention to students' holistic growth
- Teachers' professional development
- Teachers' Quality and Resource Accessibility in Zebak Public Schools
- Quality development barriers
- Enhancing Teacher Quality through Supportive Policies and Resources

4.3 Key Attributes of Effective Teacher

Participants of the study in both FGD and interviews demonstrated that a quality teacher should have some specific attributes to distinguish him/her from the unqualified ones. For instance, (P1) asserts that "the attributes of a quality teacher are that he/she exhibits professional skills, a strong character, and upholds proper behavior, which is crucial in effective teaching" (FGD 16.02.2024). In addition, another participant (H2) confirms others' points of view and states her position by saying that "confidence and teaching skills are key characteristics and indicators of a high-quality teacher" (FGD, 16, 02, 2024). Teachers of public schools in Zebak who were the participants of the study also expressed their ideas about some positive attributes of a qualified teacher. A 34-year-old science teacher in one of Zebak public schools expressed his ideas about the essential attributes of a quality teacher as follows:

"Well, the characteristics of a quality teacher include a profound mastery of the subject matter, a strong commitment to the tasks at hand, having a consistent and organized

teaching approach, and the ability to effectively impart knowledge to students” (Personal Perceptions T2, 13,02, 2024).

What stands out from his perception of a quality teacher is aligned with the same characteristics shared by most of the researchers in the field of education. To confirm this another participant (T3, interview, 14, 02, 2024), claims that there are two important attributes of a quality teacher based on his understanding, and they are fair and equal treatment or behavior with all students and colleagues and applying effective and constructive teaching methodology during his/her lessons in the classroom. Furthermore, another participant of the research (T4), when he was asked about what are some attributes of a quality teacher, pointed out that:

“Ability to identify diverse needs of students, being attentive to them especially those who have hearing or vision impairment, regularly assess the class, and address individual needs” (T4 individual interview, 15, 02, 2024).

However, another participant of the study in the FGD, firmly emphasized that to call a teacher qualified the following features should be considered, as he states:

“In addition to having an in-depth knowledge of the subject, she/he should have the idea of setting clear educational goals, provide informative and instructive instruction, prioritize students’ needs and understand students’ characteristics, and maintain friendly behavior with all students, and school staff” (H1, FGD, 16, 02, 2024).

He goes further and adds that a qualified teacher should be disciplined and punctual and to have a more interactive and productive classroom he/she needs to know and have the observational and guidance skills to critically observe students' learning and provide them with the necessary guidance they need to succeed in their academic careers (H1, FGD, 16, 02, 2024). Therefore, different participants of the study had different and at some points similar ideas regarding the characteristics of quality teachers.

4.3.1 Pedagogical Mastery

The participants of the research have been asked to share their understanding of who is a quality teacher from their perspectives or how they define a quality teacher. A current teacher of a public school in the Zebak district identified a quality teacher as follows “quality teacher gives proper feedback, has a well-structured lesson plan, assesses students’ homework, and has a deep understanding of the subject he/she teaches” (T1, *personal perception*, 12, 2024). In addition, T2, 13, 2024, adds that a quality teacher possesses a strong academic background, excellent skills and has a proper daily, weekly, or monthly lesson plan, and is aware of what he/she is teaching. Moreover, when the participants of the research were asked to demonstrate their understanding of a quality teacher, they provided an extensive number of features and attributes that emphasize the level of excellence and mastery in pedagogy. For instance, when T2, was asked who is a quality teacher from her perspective, she said “To my understanding, a quality teacher is someone who is an expert in pedagogy, who knows how to give instructions, how to prepare a well-structured lesson plan and he/she is well aware of providing effective feedback and practicing different types of assessment in the classroom such as alternative assessment to expand students learning outcomes” (*Interview*, T2, 13, 2024). Another research participant also emphasized about teaching/learning approach and based on her point of view a quality teacher first of all should have good knowledge of pedagogy and be able to use different teaching methods in the classroom as she states:

“Well, a high-quality teacher can be defined as someone who possesses professional expertise, follows a standard lesson plan, creates a conducive learning environment, develops annual teaching plans, employs diverse teaching methods, and prioritizes student-centered approaches in his/her career” (interview 3, T3, 14, 02, 2024).

Furthermore, when head teachers and principals were also asked who is a qualified teacher from their perspectives, interestingly they also urged on the notion of being expert and skillful in the teaching/learning process.

One of the participants (P1) in the FGD, 16, 02, 2024 states that “ *a quality teacher is someone who effectively uses teaching principles to transfer knowledge and skills to students, whether in a collective or individual setting. It involves the skill of utilizing teaching materials while ensuring the proper conveyance of knowledge and expertise to students*”.

Therefore, it can be seen that mastery in pedagogy and being familiar with various types of teaching methods is an important aspect of a teacher's career to deliver quality education to all students. Similarly, another participant (H2) in the FGD, 16, 02, 2024, argued that to be a qualified teacher or to have the appropriate teaching quality a teacher must have a deep understanding of the subject matter and then should be equipped with the necessary pedagogical knowledge to positively affect students’ learning outcomes.

4.3.2 Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment

Another important aspect that emerged from the participants’ perceptions about teacher quality in the context of Afghanistan public schools with a profound focus on Zebak district’s public schools was the idea of creating an inclusive learning environment. Based on an understanding of different stakeholders within Zebak schools a quality teacher besides other skills and knowledge; he/she should be able to form a learning environment where individual students feel included and involved in all learning opportunities. To prove this, (T4) in his interview declared that”

“All students are not the same and there are differences between them and a quality teacher is well aware of his/her students’ needs and preferences”. He provided an example to clarify his points and said “I had a student who constantly made absences during school hours and I noticed that he was not present in three sessions of mine, then I tried and investigated that he was responsible for feeding his family and for that purpose he has to work somewhere to earn

some money and support his family. After understanding this I helped him to both work and study and sometimes I provided him with additional support in his lessons after school hours” (T4, Individual interview, 15, 02, 2024)

Moreover, this participant also referred to students’ needs to be considered by a teacher when he talked about creating an inclusive learning environment with a quality teacher.

He said, “When it comes to defining a qualified teacher it is important to note that he/she is responsible for his/her students’ needs whether they need a comfortable learning environment or they may need special attention, for example, those who are suffering from some sort of mental health issue such as depression or even they may have to hear and seeing problems, so a qualified teacher tries his/her best to creates an inclusive atmosphere in the classroom that all students benefit the same” (T4, interview, perception, 15, 02, 2024).

Another participant of the research was also asked the question of how he perceives a quality teacher considering the current context of their school and education system, besides all other characteristics and indicators of a quality teacher he mentioned that:

“A quality teacher has a good moral and behaves the same with all pupils no matter where are they from or to which class of the society they belong or what is their ethnic and language background”. He further adds that “a good teacher is the facilitator of proactive engagement of less participative students, and can discern the emotional well-being of all students and being capable of motivating and inspiring all learners without any bias or discrimination” (T2, individual interview, 13, 02, 2024).

Therefore, from their perceptions, it can be learned that they think of a quality teacher as someone who provides the same opportunity for all learners or children regardless of their background, ethnicity, language, or any other demographic or special values. In addition, (H1) in the FGD shared the same perspective as those of other participants when they were discussing quality teachers. From his point of view, an inclusive learning environment can be created when the teacher expertly shapes a student-cantered classroom.

He states that: “A student-centered classroom allows all students to actively participate in lessons, which increases their engagement and enhances their learning experience” (H1, FGD, 16, 02, 2024).

Similarly, (H2, FGD, 16, 02, 2024) during a discussion about effective teachers also raised the matter of a friendly and inclusive learning classroom and stated that a classroom must be a place where all are involved in student-led activities, and ensure that students who participate less in the lessons become more engaged and active participants. Moreover, during the interview about quality teachers (T1 individual interview, 12, 02, 2024), expressed that a quality teacher prepares the classroom in a way that all students feel comfortable and are fully engaged in activities, and have the courage to freely express their thoughts and enjoy learning. He also added that teachers should be open to different questions that the students might ask and without any bias should behave all the same. To conclude, what can be learned from the perspectives of different participants of this study is that a quality teacher is not only equipped with essential skills and knowledge needed for successful teaching, however, is also well aware of how to treat students equally and create an inclusive learning environment without any restriction to a specific portion of the classroom.

4.3.3 Optimizing Student-centered Learning Environment

Zebak public schools' stakeholders emphasized that a quality teacher is the one who can create an optimized and student-centered learning environment. They pointed out that optimizing a student-centered learning environment means that the instructor prioritizes and supports the needs of students and empowers students to be the agents of their learning. To illustrate this (H2) a participant of the study in the FGD expressed that:

“A student-centered classroom promoted greater student involvement, encouraged more student-led activities, and ensured that students who are less active in the classroom become more engaged and active participants” (H2, FGD, 16, 02, 2024)

In addition, the participants of the study highlighted that an optimized classroom needs to be facilitated by the proper use of technology and there should be an accurate integration of lessons

and technology use. To build some points up on it, here is the opinion of the research participants. (T3) A computer teacher in one of Zebak's public schools in his interview pointed out that as an effective teacher, you need to know how to integrate technology into your lessons. He specifically added:

“You know I’m a computer teacher and I use PowerPoint slides in my classroom, although, we don’t have any projector in the class I can share the slides with students and they can study them at home as most of the students have a personal computer or a smartphone” (T3, Individual interview, 14, 02, 2024)

He believes that using textbooks in the classroom is more boring compared to specific and summarized PowerPoint slides that he can bring the gist of the lesson in bullet points and make it more interesting for students. They also argued that an optimized learning environment depends on being more student-centric rather than being dominated by the teacher. (H1) A head teacher of one of the public schools in Zebak said:

“By adopting a student-centered approach, students can develop a correct understanding of the subject matter and activate their important skills” (H1, FGD, 16, 02, 2024).

They not only emphasized a student-entered classroom but also underscored the role of the teacher within the learning environment. Based on their discussion teacher is the first and most important factor that plays a crucial role in students’ learning experiences. (P2) The principal of a school in the Zebak district highlighted that:

“The teacher should act as a guide while allowing students to take the lead in all activities within a student-cantered classroom” (P2, FGD, 16, 02, 2024).

In addition, participants of the study believe that a quality teacher is skilful enough and understands what are some important aspects of an optimizing classroom. T3 (individual interview, 14, 02, 2024), stated that it is essential for a quality teacher to know what makes a classroom a more interesting and comfortable place of learning. He further added that a positive

and optimized learning environment is one that the instructor enters with good morals and a positive attitude which will affect students' minds and will encourage them to ask questions, actively participate in class activities, and develop important skills such as critical thinking and learn to respect different ideas of their classmates. He also mentioned that an immoral teacher is less likely to be able to make learning happen and transfer essential knowledge and skills to his/her students.

Similarly, another participant (*T2, Individual interview, 13, 02, 2024*) when talking about positive aspects of a quality teacher underscored that when the learning environment is not physically and psychologically appropriate and arranged the chance is rare that quality learning happens and be practiced. In his perspective, the teacher is the first person to make it available. He also said a good teacher should create a safe and secure learning environment where students can ask questions and share their thoughts. He also highlighted that teachers should link the content of the lesson to students' lives and provide illustrations that are familiar to students to create a deep meaning in students' minds. In his final words, he added that quality lessons will result in qualified learners and weakness in lesson plans and the ratio of problems for lesson preparation will fail to get the desired results and outcomes.

On the other hand, another participant argued that creating an optimizing learning environment is not only the physical arrangement of the class or having good behaviour with students to make them feel happy and engaged. He emphasized that:

“An effective learning environment is beyond class arrangement and there should be an alignment of teaching methods with students' learning styles, the teacher should prioritize students' learning outcomes, monitor classroom activities properly, and be able to identify students' needs then more interactive learning will take place” (T1, Individual interview, 12, 02, 2024).

4.3.4 Attention to Students' Holistic Growth

Participants of the study in Zebak public schools declared that a quality teacher not only delivers the contents of the subject matter in a sophisticated way, but they also pointed out that paying close attention to the holistic growth of learners is part of the main responsibility of a quality teacher. In this regard, participants of the study were asked in individual interviews how they assess whether or not students benefited from teacher's knowledge and expertise, and they provided different ideas. For instance, (T1), in his interview with the researcher said:

"We can evaluate the effectiveness of a teacher's knowledge and skills by analyzing the adaptation of their lesson plan. If necessary, modifications can be made to the lesson plan based on students' results. Additionally, teachers should be flexible in adjusting their teaching methods to cater to the individual learning style of students" (T1, Individual interview, 12, 02, 2024).

Moreover, (T2) a current teacher of a public school in Zebak mentioned that being a quality teacher does not mean only having a higher education degree or having good knowledge of the subjects being taught, it is beyond that. He said:

"Students need not only to acquire a basic understanding of curriculum contents, however, they need to foster life skills such as critical thinking, decision-making skills, problem-solving and developing other important soft-skill that they need in contemporary life. It is also crucial that teachers have the same qualities to assist students in mastering these things. For example, the teacher should be able to simplify complex concepts, create a link between the academic and personal life of students to improve their emotional well-being and prepare them for building a better future" (T2, Individual interview, 13, 02, 2024)

In addition, more or fewer participants of the study have the same ideas about quality teachers and that considering the holistic growth of students or nurturing their minds in the best possible way is the indicator of the quality of a teacher. (H1, FGD, 16, 02, 2024), believes that it is not enough to consider students as learners of the contents of the subjects and the teacher as the one who is responsible for finishing a book by the end of an academic year, rather than the individual

needs, talents and social-emotional well-being of students should be considered and friendly, inclusive and positive learning environment should be created by the teacher. To confirm this (P2, FGD, 16, 02, 2024) in the discussion added that a quality teacher prepares students for a growth mindset, and cultivates an environment where students learn how to embrace difficulties, keep consistency when encountering any obstacles in life, and view the failures as learning opportunities rather losing courage and hopes for a better future. He further added that by doing so, a teacher assists students to develop resilience, perseverance, and the perspective of continuous and lifelong learning.

Moreover, (H2), enriches the discussion by adding that:

“A quality teacher is responsible not only for nurturing good quality students but also shape the future of a country by preparing children and youths of the community. He also mentioned that the holistic growth of students means providing engaging and challenging learning experiences which is far wider than rote memorization of the teaching contents” (H2, FGD, 16, 02, 2024).

Another participant of the study (T4) likewise states that a quality teacher besides being 100 % prepared for teaching and equipping him/herself for better influence on students’ lives, needs to be aware of another requirement that is highly expected from a qualified teacher. He emphasized that:

“We should try our best to create hope for students, especially in the current situation in Afghanistan. We should also be mindful that motivation is another crucial part of one’s life and in the case of students we are obliged to create a bond between education and students’ desire to gain it. We should understand the emotional well-being of students and prepare them for the 21st competitive century to not lag” (T4, Individual interview, 15, 02, 2024).

(T3) Another participant of the study during the qualitative interview about teacher quality underscored that teachers should have a comprehensive understanding of their profession as teachers and that they are responsible for more than just delivering the contents of the textbooks.

He pointed out that:

“We as teachers of the public schools have huge responsibilities regarding our students. we are not only responsible for helping them become literate or learn how to read and write things, but we are also expected to nurture their minds, build their skills, create relationships between their lessons and life, and prepare them for solving upcoming future problems of their societies” (T3, Individual interview, 13, 02, 2024).

Therefore, it can be gained from their perspectives that teaching textbook contents and covering curriculum concepts are not the only things that teachers are responsible for, however, they should pay close attention to different aspects of their students’ lives to prepare them for a more competitive technological and pressurized future.

4.4 Teachers’ professional development

The participants of the study were asked both in interviews and FGD, what factors can contribute to the quality development of teachers in public schools in Afghanistan with specific attention to Zebak public schools. They talked about different elements that can take part in teacher quality improvement. (T1) A teacher of the public school in Zebak expressed that to develop the quality of public-school teachers, this is highly essential to provide them with some quality professional development opportunities which is not a visible and regular practice in our context. He said:

“Unfortunately, professional or career development opportunities are scarce in our school, comprising only a small percentage, approximately 10% of inputs from non-governmental organizations and foreign entities”. He also talked about the effectiveness of these limited opportunities and added that “however, these limited opportunities have proven to be beneficial in enhancing the quality of our teachers. For example, as a mathematics teacher, I was able to address subject-specific challenges through attending these educational programs and seminars organized by NGOs” (T1, individual interview, 12, 02, 2024).

To dive into it, another participant of the study T4 (individual interview, 15, 02, 2024), shared his concerns about quality improvement in their context by highlighting that having a practical experience of teaching can enrich the quality of a teacher which is possible to be gained through some interactive, needs-based seminars and training. He specifically underscored that:

“Both educational qualifications and teaching experience are essential and complement each other. Having a degree alone is insufficient without the practical experience of teaching”.

Participants of the study in the FGD who were principals and head teachers discussed several elements that they think can lead to teachers’ quality enhancement. To illustrate this (P1) current principal at a public school in the Zebak district argued that to have quality education we need to focus on our teachers first to build their capacity and make them ready to deliver effective lessons to their students. As he mentioned:

“Creating an appropriate teaching environment, providing teaching materials, professionalizing teachers, organizing needs-based training by both government and NGOs, as well as offering more social support for school teachers, are crucial for improving the quality of public-school teachers” (P1, FGD, 16, 02, 2024).

Similar to this H2 in FGD, 16.02.2024 confirmed that providing support and professional development (PD) to teachers is a must and should be provided by all means. He also believes that this could be possible to equip them by seeking assistance from both government or educational authorities as well as through encouraging NGOs to invest in education so that teachers could benefit from the opportunity and make a quality education possible throughout the country.

Participants of the study also believe that a wide range of other factors can also have a positive effect on teachers’ professional enhancement. To explore their point of view it is better to illustrate some of their perception here. P1 in the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) states that

collaboration and corporative work can be useful in improving teachers' quality and capacity because teachers can learn from each other's ideas and skills and then can apply them in their classrooms. He posed that:

"We have experienced teachers who can assist. We provide them with sample lessons and utilize the limited facilities available in the school, including teaching materials, to support their professional development. Additionally, we conduct monthly meetings to address and solve any issues they are facing" (FGD, 16.02.2024).

In addition, T1 the other participant in the study of the study emphasized collaboration among teachers and provided a live example of his collaborative work with his colleagues. He states that:

"One day I was teaching some math formulas for grade 10 and during the lesson one of my students raised a question that I could not answer during the class hour and told him to bring his answer by the next class. So, I asked other senior teachers who were teaching grades 11 and 12 and finally, we were able to look at the formula from several mathematics scientists and sorted it out, so I believe collaboration is the key to success" (individual interview, 12.02.2024).

Besides that, the availability of further educational opportunities that teachers could attend to get a higher degree was another focus point of participants in both interviews and FGD. T4 in her interview overemphasized the provision of higher education opportunities especially for women. As she argued *"I think our teachers cannot be successful in their teaching careers even if they collaborate closely with each other, until they attend university and improve their content knowledge. Currently there is no opportunity specifically for women to attend two years or more education to get expertise in their profession" (individual interview, 15.02.2024).*

Other participants of the study had almost the same ideas and were more concerned about enhancing their qualifications. For instance, T1 during the interview when answering the

question of which factors can play a pivotal role in improving the quality of teachers said that every public-school teacher within Afghanistan especially in our schools' context needs to attend two or more years of university to get ready for providing better education so that students spend their times learning something effective in their lives. He also pointed out that:

“It’s very disappointing because, after the collapse of the previous government, we did not hear about any educational opportunities to be provided for teachers. During the ex-government educational authorities decided to select some teachers from every school and send them to university and by following this procedure all teachers will get their B. A degree within some years, but currently there is no news about that” (Individual interview, 12.02.2024).

Moreover, research participants highlighted that higher education degrees and the availability of professional development programs can have invaluable roles and effects in building teachers' quality; however, responsible evaluation and monitoring systems can have a more profound impact on teachers' professional careers. Regarding this T4 participant of the research confirmed that training and workshops over teacher development can have inevitable roles, but it is also important to note that there should be room for effective evaluation as he declared:

“In my opinion, seminars can be effective, but regular and continuous evaluation is vital. It is crucial to have experts and knowledgeable trainers present seminars tailored to meet the needs of teachers” (T4, individual interview, 15.02.2024).

However, teachers who were the research participants claimed that they had not been evaluated for a long time by educational authorities such as the Ministry of Education (MoE), or district-level responsible people such as the Education Administrative Office (EAO). They said that all evaluation and monitoring we receive is from our school side either by the school principal or school head teacher. Meanwhile, participants of the study proposed some basic solutions that they think can be helpful and some of the measurements that they have at their disposal can be an alternative. For example, T2 one of those participants proclaimed that in case of limited access to

seminars and lack of government or institutional support, the only way we have at hand is to measure by ourselves. As he firmly states:

“In such circumstances, the only way to improve teacher quality is through self-study and finding constructive solutions to bridge academic gaps. Teachers must take the initiative to enhance their knowledge and skills independently” (T2, individual interview, 13.02.2024).

In addition to that, H2 another participant of the study also mentioned that in case of lack of support from educational offices whether at the district level, provincial, or national level, they need to think of some possible measurement by themselves. He said that they have already begun to practice a program which they call in Persian “Alaqat Hamozoshi” which can be translated into English as “Educational Circles” (EC) to provide support for teachers and school staff with a whole school collaboration. He said: *“Our only available option is the educational circles to assist each other due to a lack of support from educational authorities’ sides” (individual interview, 13.02.2024).*

Last but not least the research participants considered pedagogical knowledge, classroom management skills, and subject matter mastery as additional factors that can play a vital role in teacher quality improvement which in turn will result in effective and quality education. In this regard, T2 stated that:

“The quality of a teacher is reflected in the classroom through various indicators. These include a strong command of the subject matter, proactive engagement of less participative students, the ability to discern the emotional well-being of students, and the capacity to motivate and inspire all students. These qualities collectively demonstrate the teacher’s excellence” (individual interview, 13.02.2024).

As a result, what emerged from the participants’ perspective about factors that contribute to the quality development of teachers are essential factors that are also emphasized and practiced in other contexts as well.

4.5 Teachers' quality and Resource Accessibility in Zebak Public schools

The participants of the study were asked regarding the availability of resources in their school context that have helped promote teachers' quality. They came up with different perspectives and how these available resources have helped or can help improve teachers' quality. P1 in the FGD argued that they have little support resources to develop their teachers' capacity and currently they are experiencing a shortage of support programs such as training sessions or professional development opportunities that were previously conducted by some NGOs such as Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) within their schools. However, he pointed out that they are utilizing some effective techniques that proved to be helpful. For example, he talked about some initiatives that they have recently practiced at their school such as collaborative sessions held by senior teachers or regular evaluation of teachers from each other classes. As he states in the discussion *“Besides training sessions, we can support newly hired teachers or those facing teaching difficulties by providing sample lessons. We can pair them with experienced teachers to observe their teaching methods, and later, experienced teachers can evaluate them by presenting sample lessons and then focus on areas for improvement, fostering a friendly environment”* (P1, FGD, 16.02.2024).

H1 in the FGD confirmed this and added that:

“Our only available option is educational circles, and we need a well-equipped library to address teaching problems. Preparation for teaching materials and laboratory resources for teachers is necessary, but we currently lack the budget for this aspect within the school” (FGD, 16.02.2024).

H2 (FGD, 16.02.2024), during the discussion upon available resources within their school for teachers' support, raised this point that there are some good resources at hand such as non-textbook materials which are provided by AKF for teachers to do some self-study and enrich their general and content knowledge, however, he was concerned about less effective use of those resources. In this regard, he suggested that reading extra-curricular materials and self-

preparation should be included in objectives for teachers and then there should be some evaluation of how effectively teachers used those materials.

In the Focus Group Discussion (FGD), participants were asked what strategies they would use to manage the available resources within their schools to improve the quality of their teachers. P1 the principal of a public school in Zebak said:

“We conduct regular and monthly meetings to ask teachers about their challenges and concerns and then to equip them with necessary teaching/learning materials”. He also mentioned we evaluate their classes twice a month and then regular feedback will be given to them for better improvement in their profession. Besides that, if there is any training we try our best to fairly identify who needs most to attend these informative trainings and usually we have sent science teachers to upgrade their knowledge through those provided trainings” (P1, 16.02.2024).

Moreover, H2 confirmed what others mentioned in the discussion about some techniques on how to manage the available resources and added that:

“As the head teacher, my primary responsibility is to create a comprehensive and detailed plan with guidance from the school principal about resources we have at our disposal and then we develop checklists and evaluate teachers’ lessons accordingly. If any issue arises, we identify their strengths and weakness and seek solutions in coordination with all school staff and then we apply essential actions to assist our teachers” (H2, FGD, 16.02.2024).

Additionally, participants of the study believe that community engagement and NGO support are other constructive resources that can assist schools in reaching their main goals and objectives.

T4 in his interview pointed out that community engagement and support also play a key role in developing teachers’ quality. As he states *“the relationship between school and society significantly influences the quality of a teacher. For instance, at our school, we have the parents’ committee that collaborates closely with teachers to address any issues they face”*. He further adds that *sometimes some students are absent which is difficult for a teacher to find out what their problem is, therefore, this parents’ committee can easily solve the problem and even sometimes they request in coordination with other school relevant committees from education*

administrative office (EAO) in written letters to provide training for teachers” (individual interview, 15.02.2024). another participant of the study (T3) also underscored the effectiveness of the relationship between school and community. *“Our school has the parents’ committee which holds regular meetings and discuss teachers or students’ related issues and assist us at any issues we face”* (individual interview, 14.02.2024). In addition, (T2) a public-school teacher also confirmed that relationship between school and community is pivotal and constructive. He expressed that *“community evaluation and visit to the school can motivate teachers and hold them accountable for their teaching”* (T2, Individual interview, 13.02.2024). on the other hand, (T1) another school teacher in a public school in Zebak talked about the importance of community and school relationships and brought a personal experience of himself. He was very concerned about this relationship and said that if society fails to appreciate a teacher’s knowledge, efforts, and the challenges he/she faces, the teacher will struggle to improve his/her quality and competence. He shared a story that the parent of one of his students motivated and encouraged him to work harder than before.

He said, *“Last year, one of the parents of a student expressed their gratitude to me, even though I had no prior acquaintance with them. They acknowledged my consistent evaluation of their child’s homework and class activities, which motivated me a lot to do even my best for my students”* (T1, individual interview, 12.02.2024).

Based on research participants’ ideas teachers’ collaboration and a school-initiated program called “Education Circles” (EC), are other additional resources available at their schools which proved to be effective in the quality development of teachers. (H1) A participant of the study who is the current principal of (X) school at Zebak district argued that close collaboration between teachers and school staff had a considerable impact on the quality development of teachers at their schools. He specifies that *“We have experienced teachers who can assist other teachers, especially those who are newly recruited and have less teaching experience”* (FGD,

16.02.2024). He further explained and provided an example of how they assist those who are encountering challenges in their teaching.

“We provide them with sample lessons first and then we place one of the experienced teachers in their classroom to evaluate his teaching and write down their strengths and weaknesses. After the class ends, they can sit together and the evaluator can provide his/her feedback starting from strengths and mentioning weakness as improvement areas in a very friendly manner” (FGD, 16.02.2024).

In addition, participants of the study talked about another initiative that they have taken into account and they call it “Alaqat e Hamozoshi” or Educational Circles” They believe it is a free discussion forum where everyone can freely express his/her ideas and call out his/her problems.

In this regard (H2) participant of the research states that:

“We have created a collaborative and inclusive forum discussion that we call educational circles where teachers of different grades, head teachers and school principal come to gather and talk about different issues such as teacher’s difficulty in their classroom-related matters” (FGD, 16.02.2024).

To understand the effectiveness of this initiative individual teachers who were the participants of the study were asked to share their experience of this collaborative action, they all said it was effective and helped them during teachings. (T1) regarding this said:

“Once I was teaching biology which is not related to my field of education because I graduated from the Math department, so I faced a challenge explaining the difference between chromosomes of male and female, therefore I referred to this educational circle and another teacher who was more experienced provide me with the essential details about and I was able to solve my problem and this is only one example and every one of us referred to this educational circle and found out his/her answer questions they had” (individual interview, 12.02.2024).

All in all, it was investigated that these available resources that public schools in Zebak district have at their disposal seem to be effective, although, they are basic opportunities that schools of the rural areas rely on to solve some of their simple problems and issues, however, these are what all rural school can survive based on as participants of the study argued.

4.6 Challenges in Advancing Teacher Quality

Besides the basic opportunities and resources available in Zebak public schools, numerous challenges impede teachers' quality improvement there. As part of the aim of the study participants were asked about challenges they experienced or others are encountering in terms of their quality and qualifications enhancement and they examined their context and shared their experiences and understandings. (T1), as one of the participants of the study was asked in this regard mentioned that teachers are facing different problems and one evident one is their low salary and income as he states:

“Teachers in public schools encounter numerous obstacles, notably the income disparity when compared to their counterparts worldwide. With a monthly salary equivalent to just 85 American Dollars, their basic needs remain unmet. This dire financial situation has a direct and indirect impact on their work, hindering lesson preparations and impeding their ability to enhance their teaching through further education and professional development. To elevate their quality of instruction, these teachers must pursue ongoing educational courses or attend universities to enhance their skills” (individual interview, 12.02,2024).

Another participant of the study (T2) answered almost the same way, mentioning some extra points about teachers' challenges. He said, *“Teachers in Zebak public schools face significant challenges, including a lack of teaching materials and textbooks, inadequate salaries, insufficient evaluation systems, and a lack of consistent and constructive feedback” (individual interview, 13.02.2024).* The participant was asked how a salary increase can help teachers develop their quality and he states that *“It has a direct impact on the teacher's well-being. When they receive adequate compensation, they can better focus on their work and professional development, leading to improved teaching quality” (individual interview, 13.02.2024).*

In addition, (T3) another participant in the study and a current teacher of the school (X) in Zebak also talked about the challenges she and her colleagues faced. As she argued:

“One of the challenges we faced in the past was the lack of security in schools, which has now been solved. However, we still lack suitable spaces for conducting scientific experiments in subjects like the laboratory. In terms of teaching computers, we require classrooms equipped with computers. Additionally, the lack of laboratory materials, and textbooks in science subjects, inadequate facilities like an equipped library, limited access to internet networks, and insufficient basic infrastructures pose numerous problems and challenges for teachers in public schools (individual interview, 14.02.2024).

Similarly, (T4) another participant of the research revealed that lack of salary and the absence of a consistent evaluation process is not only the case but also the mental and emotional well-being of students matter. He pointed out that, *“There are several challenges, including the economic situation of teachers, the lack of a conducive mental and emotional environment, insufficient teaching facilities for effective lesson delivery, and problems with basic facilities such as access to drinking water in school” (individual interview, 15.02.2024).* In terms of qualification, this participant expressed that most teachers are experiencing a tough situation handling class management skills. He illustrated that teachers cannot use effective pedagogical skills to manage classrooms and activate less participative students. He said:

“One essential skill for teachers to know is student-centered teaching. This approach encourages the active participation of those students who are less engaged and fosters motivation and active learning in the classroom. By employing this method students will find themselves responsible and accountable for their education and the teacher's role will be a facilitator or guide” (individual interview, 15.02.2024).

Additionally, participants of the study raised other factors that hinder teachers' quality improvement in their contexts. (H1) The principal of (X) school at Zebak district shared that lack of sufficient resources and specifically technological access stand out among most barriers and created problems for our teachers and school leadership as well. He stated, *“In my view, lack of seminars, professional development opportunities, limited study resources such as internet, equipped libraries, and insufficient support system hindered teachers' quality growths” (FGD, 16.02.2024).* To confirm this (H1) head teacher of the (X) school states that, *“Teachers' salaries and financial resources, along with the absence of textbooks and laboratory materials aligned*

with the teachers' field of study, pose challenges to their professional development" (FGD, 16.02.2024). in the focus group discussion (H2), confirmed what others posed and added that:

"Poverty, personal problems, inadequate income, lack of seminars in various subjects, insufficient teaching resources, and limited support from educational officials impede the improvement of teacher quality in Zebak public schools" (FGD, 16.02.2024).

Besides that, the participants of the study were more concerned about the shortage of qualified teachers in their schools. Based on what they shared there is not only the issue of quality teachers but also a shortage of teachers. Due to this shortage, most of the teachers teach irrelevant subjects to their field of study. According to their points, this created a dissatisfaction of profession among teachers and less quality lessons for the students on the other hand. (H2) The head teacher of the school (X) as well as the research participant complained about the shortage of teachers at their school. He stated that:

"In our school, we face the issue of teacher shortage. For instance, in a high school with 18 different subjects being taught, we only have 16 teachers. This presents a challenge in distributing the subjects, often, resulting in teachers covering subjects out of their expertise and field of studies" (FGD, 16.02.2024).

In response to the question of how this issue could be solved, (H1), principal of (X) school at Zebak said *"The solution to this problem lies in having professional teachers who possess the necessary knowledge in the subject they teach and are aligned with their field of studies" (FGD, 16.02.2024).*

Additionally, participants of the study claimed that most of the teachers at public schools are lagging soft skills and abilities needed for the 21st-century requirements. (T3) One of the teachers and study participants believed that being incapable of management skills caused most of the teachers to lose their courage and motivation and lose their profession. She said, *"Another challenge is the high number of students in classrooms, exceeding the capacity of 30 students. In classrooms we often have more than 60 students, requiring teachers to possess classroom*

management skills and expertise to handle the classroom well” (Individual interview, 14.02.2024).

Similar to other participants of the study (T1), another teacher in the Zebak district was very concerned about the quality growth of teachers and according to him all challenges have financial and economic roots. He talked in detail and stated that:

“One of the primary obstacles to the growth and educational development of teachers in Zebak public schools is the lack of financial means to sustain their livelihoods and the low salaries they receive. Additionally, the lack of cooperation and support from educational authorities, such as the Department of Education and the Ministry of Education, has hindered efforts to improve education quality and enhance teacher skills. Furthermore, limited access to the internet and information has contributed to hinder the academic improvement of teachers” (individual interview, 12.02.2024).

This participant also emphasized that irrelevant teaching subjects are another main issue that almost all public schools in Afghanistan are experiencing especially public schools in the Zebak district. When he was asked about his teaching experiences and what specific challenges, he is dealing with he mentioned that:

“There are numerous challenges I have encountered. For instance, being assigned to teach a subject outside my field of study poses a significant problem. As a mathematics graduate, I may be required to teach chemistry or biology, which presents a major challenge since I lack sufficient knowledge in those subjects. Moreover, subjects like chemistry involve conducting practical experiments in the laboratory, which can be hazardous and can potentially endanger students’ lives if you do not have expertise in your teaching subjects” (T1, Individual interview, 12.02.2024).

Therefore, it was found that different factors play a negative role as challenges in academic life and teaching profession of teachers at Zebak public schools and hinder their quality development and progressions.

4.7 Rigorous Need for supportive policies and Effective Resources in Public Schools in Afghanistan

The participants of the study were asked about how teachers' quality can be developed within their context considering the availability of resources and the education system practiced in the country. Participants of both interviews and FGD proposed and recommended different ideas to educational authorities that they thought could be some possible alternatives and to facilitate teachers throughout the country to improve their quality and expertise. (P1) The principal of (X) school proposed that:

“To improve the quality of teachers in Afghanistan schools, especially our own, I recommend focusing on the professionalization of teachers. It is crucial to recruit competent individuals who have graduated from specific fields to work in public schools. Additionally, revising the educational curriculum to meet the needs of today's students is essential” (FGD, 16.02.2024).

To confirm this (P2) the principal of (X) school also suggested that:

“I urge the education authorities to prioritize the provision of scientific and educational seminars for school teachers. It is also important to ensure the availability of teaching materials and establish well-equipped libraries. By taking these fundamental steps, we can enhance the quality of our teachers” (FGD, 16.02.2024).

In addition, it has been seen that participants of the study mainly focus on the professionalization and quality development of teachers throughout the country. As (H1) the current head teacher of the (X) school in Zebak suggested that:

“Our demands from the education authorities include the professionalization of teachers and the organization of professional development seminars by educational institutions such as the Department of Education and the Ministry of Education. Additionally, conducting educational courses would greatly benefit our teachers” (FGD, 16.02.2024).

Similarly, another participant of the study confirmed what others suggested and he said that besides training and workshops for teachers, a well-equipped library that all school staff even people outside the school can benefit from it is also highly essential. He said:

“We call upon the education authorities to establish well-equipped libraries and laboratories in our schools for the benefit of our teachers. Furthermore, providing access to internet networks would greatly contribute to addressing the quality-related challenges faced by teachers in public schools” (FGD, 16.02.2024).

On the other hand, participants of the study in their interviews also shared their recommendations and were hopeful that there would be some positive changes in the future of schools and teachers in Afghanistan. In this regard (T4, individual interview, 15.02.2024), states that he hopes that the government prioritizes the economic well-being of teachers by increasing their salaries. He further added that *“most of our colleagues including myself, are too far from school and it takes 2 hours each day to come and go back home which for sure can affect our well-being and most of the time when I get home I am so tired and I can’t take preparation for my classes and also do some additional work for my capacity development, in this case, I suggest to educational authorities to provide us with transportation so that we can keep a balance between our personal and professional life”*.

It was explored that all research participants want the government, educational authorities, and policymakers to keep an eye out to improve the opportunities and facilitate teachers throughout the country. (T2) Another participant said, *“I recommend educational officials to prioritize improving teachers' livelihoods. This includes creating well-equipped libraries, providing access to networks and the internet, which are essential needs for teachers in these schools” (Individual interview, 13.02.2024)*. Moreover, participants of the study were concerned about the types of training the government provides them. They emphasized that the trainers should be professional and the contents of the training should be selected carefully. (T3) of the participant states that:

“The government and educational authorities should prioritize the selection of trainers who specialize in specific fields of study for Afghanistan's public schools. For instance, chemistry and physics teachers should have access to well-equipped laboratories to conduct scientific experiments, while subjects like English language and computer studies require trainers who can address the challenges faced by teachers in these areas.

These trainers can play a vital role in nurturing the talent and professional development of teachers, benefiting both educators and society as a whole.

Alternatively, during the three-month winter break when schools are closed, dedicated educational and training programs should be provided in a designated location. This period can be utilized to enhance teachers' skills and knowledge in their respective subjects. Additionally, it is crucial to implement continuous monitoring and evaluation of teachers' instructional practices. This ensures that teachers effectively apply what they have learned during the training sessions, enabling them to deliver high-quality instruction in their classrooms” (Individual interview, 14.02.2024).

It was urged by the participants that MoE and other related education offices should act responsibly to improve the quality of teachers by supporting them financially to academically and solving their problems to have an effective, prosperous, and well-educated society. Similarly, (T1) a science teacher in (X) public school in the Zebak district also underscored the transparency in the recruitment process and it was explored that most of the times the hiring process follow nepotism rather than meritocracy based on participant’s expressions and way of talk. However, this participant also recommended that the best quality university graduates should be hired as public-school teachers to improve the quality of education.

He said, “I suggest that educational authorities appoint highly qualified professors, similar to practices in other countries. The best graduates with excellent scores should be recruited into schools and provided with competitive salaries. Additionally, in the lower grades, particularly from first to sixth grade or elementary school, it would be beneficial to have predominantly female teachers. Women possess unique skills that can greatly contribute to the learning environment compared to their male counterparts” (T1, individual interview, 12.02.2024).

As a result, the participants of the study were more concerned about their quality development and precisely emphasized that educational authorities and government officials should consider it and try to provide the best educational opportunities for public school teachers in Afghanistan to transform low-quality public education.

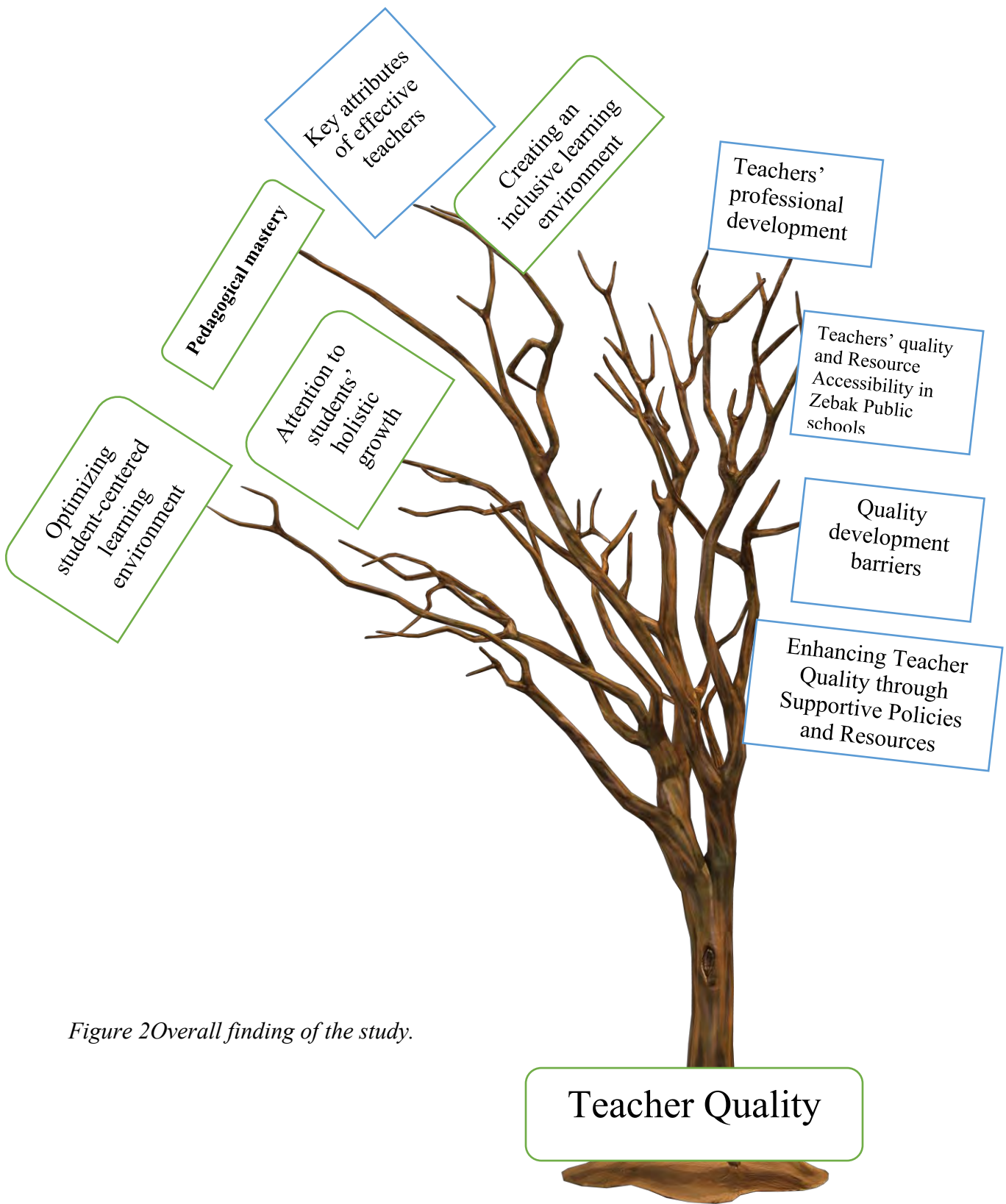


Figure 2 Overall finding of the study.

Chapter 5

5.1 Discussion and Conclusion

5.2 Introduction

This chapter of the study discusses and analyses the findings of the study in alignment with the literature and studies done in other contexts to identify the similarities and differences between the study itself and that of others. As mentioned before this study was conducted to explore the perceptions of Afghanistan public school stakeholders (teachers, head teachers, and principals) with a concrete focus on Zebak public schools' contexts using the qualitative approach for gathering, analysing, and reporting the data.

The main points to focus on in this study were the perceptions of schools' stakeholders on teacher quality in public schools in Afghanistan – how they perceive and characterize a quality teacher in their schools' contexts. what sort of challenges they face to enhance their quality what support is available what else should be provided to assist them in their quality development, and finally what are some of their recommendations for the educational authorities to facilitate the situation to bring essential and needed changes in public schools in Afghanistan and with particular focus in Zebak schools. Therefore, this chapter is dedicated to discussing and interpreting the findings of the study which were presented in the “Result Chapter” in chapter four in light of some effective literature related to the study and conducted in other contexts similar to the topic. At the end of the chapter, some recommendations are proposed on how to discuss other areas of quality teaching that were out of the capacity of this present study to encompass at least some important areas of the topic to help identify the needs of teachers in public school contexts.

5.3 Discussion

The term ‘teacher quality’ is a broad notion that appeared to be difficult to provide a clear and exact definition of. As (Barnes & Cross, 2018; Scholes et al., 2017), cited in Bradford (2021), stated that despite the wide use of the term teacher quality in the field and literature there seems not to exist a clear and consistent definition of teacher quality. In addition, it is also mentionable that the concept of teacher quality and quality teaching seem so interlinked. “The term teacher quality usually used interchangeably with teaching quality a concept more aligned with ‘what’ and ‘how’ of practice rather than the ‘who’” (Bradford, 2021, p. 3).

Moreover, Liston et al, (2008) stated that defining the term ‘teacher quality’ is both challenging and intangible. He further highlights that when it comes to defining teacher quality three terms are usually heard when discussing and they are *highly qualified teachers, effective teachers, and good teachers*. He claims that these terms carry the meaning such as attributes or credentials of the teacher, educational result or achievement, and instructional methods or approaches respectively. Besides that, the federal law, No Child Left Behind (2001) as cited by Bradford et al, (2021), the *high-quality teacher* is characterized by possessing specific qualifications, which include holding a bachelor’s degree, obtaining state teaching certification, or achieving a satisfactory score on the state teacher licensing examination (Hess & Petrilli, 2006).

Similarly, Blanton et al, (2006), bring the idea of teacher quality from (Hess, 2001; Walsh, 2001) perspectives as they referenced the No Child Left Behind Act that challenged the traditional notion of effective teaching by emphasizing sophistication in content knowledge and verbal ability and minimizing the significance of pedagogy. This means that they consider a quality teacher someone who has a good knowledge of the subject matter and they put less

attention on pedagogical skills. However, the belief that pedagogy is not that powerful in students' achievements, policymakers proposed some alternatives to teacher traditional preparation. Therefore, NCLB encourages the state to find ways that move teachers into the classroom on a 'fast-track Basis' and be highly prepared to lead the classroom in the best way. On the other hand, Semedli (2019), in his study of the Azerbaijan pupils' results, brings in the perspectives of Linda Darling-Hammond (2017) about teacher quality as she argued that teacher quality can be described as a combination of an individual's characteristics, abilities, and knowledge and expertise that they contribute to the process of teaching.

However, perspectives about defining teacher quality vary according to different studies. This is because the concept of teacher quality is not easy to narrow down into a specific aspect as it covers a wide range of characteristics and features that a teacher holds. Recently well-known researchers such as (Berliner, 2005; Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005) cited in Blanton et al (2006), examined teacher quality from a wider perspective and focused on its multi-dimensions. They mainly focused on two parts: firstly, effective instruction; indicating that the educator fulfils the important requirements for the position (e.g., possessing qualifications, employing suitable methods for different age groups, maintaining the standard of the field, and exhibiting additional qualities and methodologies), and secondly, efficient and successful teaching which means measuring the effectiveness of teaching on students learning outcomes and achievements. Therefore, they claim that these two important aspects should be there to complete the definition of teacher quality.

The finding of the study indicates that stakeholders of Zebak public schools have different perceptions of teacher quality quite similar to what has been found in other contexts and what other researchers revealed about this concept. Participants of the study provided a wide

range of characteristics and features as indicators of teacher quality based on their personal and professional understandings. For instance, they underscored that a quality teacher has a profound mastery of pedagogy- he/she gives proper feedback, has a well-structured lesson plan, assesses students' homework, and has a deep understanding of the subject he/she teaches. As Amaliah et al (2024), argued that mastery of pedagogical knowledge plays a significant role in effective learning, it develops not only students' learning but also the quality of education as a whole. "One of the crucial aspects that support teachers' success in providing quality education is their mastery of pedagogical competence" Amaliah et al (2024). They also stated that teacher performance is considered to be a measure of a successful education system and for this to happen the teacher's ability and competency are the core and can be shown through various functions and indicators. Similarly, the findings suggest that participants of the study believe that educational proficiency and professional expertise are also attributes of a quality teacher. It was explored that an education degree particularly a university graduation certificate is one of the important elements that Zebak schools' stakeholders consider as characteristics of a quality teacher. The reason behind this perception was that fewer teachers graduated from university and they mostly graduated from Teacher Training College (TTC) and currently are in the teaching profession. It was also found in some literature that qualification, content knowledge, and expertise that come from attending higher education are those features that are associated with a quality teacher. Education Endowment Foundation (2023) for example, in their report about the quality of teachers revealed that there are different indicators of quality teachers. They categorized teacher quality into different parts such as qualification, experience, or teacher pedagogical content knowledge, teacher-student relationship, continuous professional development, and teacher reflections on his/her teaching profession.

Furthermore, the findings of the study came out with the idea that participants of the study consider education degree and teaching experience as two important and inseparable aspects of a quality teacher. As one of the participants of the study pointed out that degree alone does not demonstrate quality, both teaching experience and content knowledge are interdependent and essential. It is also confirmed by some studies that teacher qualification and/or holding a higher education degree can have a profound impact on the lives of students as they will be educated under the guidance of an experienced and skillful teacher. Goldhaber et al (2003), for example, found that teachers with an advanced degree in Math and Science subject seem to have a positive effect on students' academic achievements.

However, there are some disagreements regarding the idea that holding a higher education degree alone cannot guarantee that the teacher is qualified enough and well-prepared to take action properly in teaching practices. To illustrate this, Guerriero (n.d), on how to recognize a quality teacher states that there is a huge amount of literature that highlights different features to characterize an expert teacher such as a profound knowledge of pedagogy, being equipped with the necessary skills to handle problems, having the patience to encounter various learners with different perspectives, being skilled enough to make proper decisions, ability to manage classroom-related issues, a sense of respect to a different context and honoring students' values and prestige are also counts as teacher quality elements. Therefore, it can be seen that quality teaching does not necessarily mean only holding a higher education degree, but having a wider range of knowledge and skills to nurture students holistically is essential and mandatory. The majority of study participants insist on having both an education degree and teaching experience as an important part of a teacher's profession. As one of them said it is essential to

have a higher education degree, but being experienced enough and familiar with teaching is more vital.

It is also important to highlight that the study explored different perspectives of the study participants about teacher quality as discussed in the result chapter, and of their extensive views one is the broad term “*key attributes of effective or quality teacher*” which encompasses several subcomponents including pedagogical expertise, forming an inclusive learning environment, optimizing student-centered learning environment, and attention to student’s holistic growth. About this Guerriero (n.d), argued that teacher professionalism is more than only overemphasizing teacher knowledge. It involves skills, behaviors, and motivating factors that contribute to professional teaching and learning. Blömeke and Delaney (2012) cited also in Guerriero (n.d), developed a model that identifies “*cognitive abilities*” and “*affective motivational characteristics*” which are considered the two important components of teacher quality. Based on this model “cognitive abilities” include professional knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. On the other hand, “affective motivational characteristics” contain elements such as motivation, self-regulation, professional beliefs about teaching and learning, and the subject content. As a result, teacher quality is a broad and difficult term to define what exactly is and it seems that it is beyond the claims which say having enough subject knowledge or holding a higher education degree can indicate whether a teacher is qualified or not.

Furthermore, the findings of the study indicate that Zebak public schools’ stakeholders are aware of essential components of teacher quality, however, due to contextual problems and systematic challenges they are not able to practice whatever they know about being a qualified teacher. For instance, participants of the study underscored that a quality teacher is someone who

has a great knowledge of pedagogy or in other words, he/she is well aware of how to conduct an effective lesson and what to teach students to respond to their lives needs, but as consequences of many barriers including a lack of professional trainings and lack of proper teaching materials and facilities a positive outcome of students' learning or a quality education in general have not been seen. In addition, they emphasized creating an inclusive learning environment which also comes under the umbrella of teacher quality attributes. As one of the participants claims that teacher quality can be reflected in the classroom and can be measured through the strategies, he/she uses in his teaching. As an example, a quality teacher is well aware of his/her students' well-being, engages whole students in the lessons and activities with specific attention to less active students, and motivates students all the time to share their ideas and thoughts easily and without any fear or hesitations. Hattie (2012), highlighted that several features indicate how teacher quality can be reflected in the classrooms. He pointed out that effective teachers foster positive and supportive relationships with their students. They build a safe and friendly classroom environment where students feel relaxed to express their opinions and thoughts. Furthermore, Mammadov (2019), argued that teacher quality brings many positiveness not only to school but to the overall society. He further pointed out that teacher quality became the center of focus, particularly when it comes to enhancing the performance of low-attainment students.

Similarly, the finding of the study suggests that creating a student-centered learning environment where students are the center of learning is expected to be part of a quality teacher's responsibility. Participants of the study were on the belief that only a quality teacher can facilitate and optimize a classroom in which students can take responsibility for their learning and the teacher will act as a facilitator. One of the research participants stated that a student-centered classroom promotes greater student involvement, encourages more student-led

activities, and ensures that students who are less active in the classroom become more engaged and active participants. According to Karin et al (2014), student-centered learning is founded on learning theories that view learning as an interactive, contextualized, and collaborative process. Likewise, Cannon and Newble (2000: 16) as cited in Karin et al (2014) identify student-centered learning as approaches to thinking regarding teaching and learning that emphasize students' accountability for their learning rather than what the teacher is doing and what contents he/she prescribes them to acquire. To build upon previous points the findings of the study indicate that students' holistic growth is also associated with teacher quality. In other words, a quality teacher is considered to be the one who can shape the lives of learners not only by teaching them the contents of the subject matter but also by preparing them for encountering a real-life scenario. In this regard, one of the participants provided a clear picture of what a learner needs to acquire and what the teacher should provide. He states that students need not only to acquire a basic understanding of curriculum contents, but they also need to foster life skills such as critical thinking, decision-making skills, problem-solving, and developing other important soft-skill that they need in contemporary life. It is also crucial that teachers have the same qualities to assist students in mastering these things. For example, teachers should be able to simplify complex concepts, and create a link between the academic and personal lives of students to improve their emotional well-being and prepare them for building a better future research conducted by Hollins (2011), highly emphasized that an essential prospect of teaching/learning is the teacher's ability on how he/she perceive and understand the learners. This set the idea that a quality teacher needs to have this important skill of identifying students' needs as they come from various socio-economic, geographic, and maybe different cultural backgrounds. Interestingly, Zebak schools' stakeholders (teachers, head teachers, and principals), shared the same understanding and urge to

provide the opportunity for public school teachers to prepare them for such a unique teaching/learning process to bring a positive change in the education system in the context of Afghanistan.

The findings of the study also show that there is a concrete need for professional development opportunities to assist Afghan public school teachers in boosting their ability and enhancing their quality. It was explored that Zebak schools experience a lack of continuous capacity-building programs and rarely occurs that some NGOs conduct some trainings and workshops to help them. It has been proven that public schools are mainly dependent on professional development programs to assist teachers in getting a sense of new methods to accomplish their teaching tasks properly. Literature also supports this claim as Pharis et al (n.d), stated that historically public schools have relied on professional development programs to facilitate educational enhancement. Hassel (1999) as cited in Pharis et al (n.d), characterized professional development in public schools as a means of enhancing teachers' abilities and expertise to generate exceptional educational outcomes for students. The findings of the study indicate that the same thing is true in the case of Afghanistan public schools, especially in rural areas of the country such as this research site- Zebak district of Badakhshan province. As mentioned earlier Zebak public schools experienced a scarcity of educational enhancement or better to say professional development opportunities due to several contextual and systematic reasons. For instance, decades of devastating internal and external war, low and unstable economic indexes, a traditional outlook on education, lack of facilities and basic infrastructures, gender disparities, and quite other impeding factors set education growth back and prevent it from prosperity and improvements. To illustrate this, participants of the study in Zebak public schools revealed that they are struggling with providing quality lessons and nurturing future

generations as they are not fully familiar with the contemporary needs and wants of teenage students. A study participant highlights that professional or career development opportunities are scarce in our school, comprising only a small percentage, approximately 10% of inputs from non-governmental organizations and foreign entities. Therefore, it was found that as a consequence of governmental and educational lack of support teachers remained at their previous level and no profound changes had been seen in terms of their quality and capability. In addition, researchers emphasized the importance of integrating professional development programs and educational enhancement measurement into the education system particularly to assist teachers in marginalized and most deprived areas of the country. Guskey (2000) as also cited in Pharis et al (n.d), argued that “One constant finding in the research literature is that notable improvements in education rarely take place in the absence of professional development” (p. 4). Moreover, Kedzior et al (2004), in an education policy brief at Delaware University about the effect of professional teacher development reference (Kennedy, 1998, p. 9), pointed out that contents covered in some types of developing programs seem to be ineffective, but programs that focus on a good command of the subject matter appeared to have a better positive result on students’ learning outcomes.

On the other hand, the findings of the study revealed that implemented professional development programs and teacher training were not as effective as they could be. It was argued by the participants that besides a limited amount of training facilities which decreased the effectiveness of programs, teacher trainers and seminar conductors appeared to be less qualified and expert in presenting essential and required knowledge. As one of them said the effectiveness of professional development programs (PDP) depends on the quality of trainers, availability of training materials, and the practicality of the sessions, however, it seems that due to limited PDP

and an issue in trainers' knowledge, there was very less positive impact in teachers' pedagogical and content knowledge. Study shows that this is a common problem even in developed countries such as America it has been seen that PDP has little impact on teachers' careers as a result of less quality and surface-level attention in conducting these programs. DeMonte (2013), claimed that PDP in education did not get a good reputation and everyone on the education side agrees that teachers' experience of PDP was not beneficial, effective, and valuable, but instead of little positive effect when it comes to education improvement. Harvard University Professor Heather C. Hill mentioned in DeMonte's (2013) research, also believes that the professional development system for teachers is severely fragmented and lost its positivity. One reason DeMonte (2013) thinks this is the reliance on short-period episodic and disconnected capacity-building programs for teachers. This means that in most contexts there is a lack of sequence and connection in PDP programs that appeared to have less positive effect on teachers' professional lives. In this study, it was also found that Afghanistan public schools- Zebak schools for example, are experiencing the same problem and there is no standard PDP or professional learning designed programs for teachers to enhance their quality and capability. One of the participants pointed out that currently there is no such program to assist them in their teaching practices, however, in previous years he claimed there was no timely and effective training for teachers only some NGOs conducted it once a year with a focus on science subjects only.

In addition, the findings of the study illustrate that resource availability in Zebak public schools to assist teachers' quality development is a major issue like everything else. The respondents of the study highlighted that due to inadequate resources in their school contexts, even experienced and qualified teachers are not able to provide students with the expected level of education. They firmly believe that the shortage of PDP and professional learning programs

(PLP) severely affected the quality of education in public schools in Afghanistan as well. In addition to a shortage of PDP and training, the study explored that teachers in public schools of Zebak district suffer from a lack of recognition and support from the educational authorities' side which can be considered as a shortage of human resource' support. Olisaemeka (2011), argued that school climate proved to have a distinct relationship with students' learning outcomes and teachers' performance. He further explains what he means by school climate is human resources and physical materials. He goes further and elaborates that the overall environment of a school can be described as a collective assessment of its qualities, including the interactions among parents, teachers, and administrators, as well as the existing physical infrastructure. Therefore, when all these facilities and resources are not available, it is less likely that quality education take place. As clear UNESCO (2016), documented the SDGs of which SDG 4 indicates and emphasizes quality education for all without considering their background, ethnicity, gender, or any other personal characteristics. However, in developing contexts where they are struggling with the lack of basic facilities and infrastructures, it is less likely to meet the 2030 agenda set by the United Nations. In the meantime, the findings of the study also indicate that Zebak public schools receive little attention in the capacity buildings of their teachers. As mentioned earlier, some NGOs provide some sort of training and workshops which is not sufficient enough to respond to teachers' needs. Therefore, the findings suggest that due to a lack of enough resources in Zebak public schools' teachers are not able to work on their quality or deliver quality education to their students.

The findings of the study came up with some initiatives that public schools in Zebak district implemented to assist teachers and to some limited extent improve their quality. Participants of the study elaborated that due to limited support from educational authorities

and/or NGOs, they initiated a collaborative work called “education circle” in Persian they call it “Halaqat-e-Hamozoshi”. This education circle appeared to be effective and to some extent solve teachers’ problems. This circle includes the whole school teachers, head teachers, and principals and when a teacher encounters any challenge in his/her teaching, will refer to this circle and they together share their knowledge and understanding to resolve the problem. In addition, findings suggest that other initiatives have been taken by Zebak schools’ stakeholders senior and experienced teachers conduct some training and workshops to assist other teachers, especially newly recruited ones. One of the participants stated about newly recruited teachers that we provide them with sample lessons first and then we place one of the experienced teachers in their classroom to evaluate his teaching and write down their strengths and weaknesses. After the class ends, they can sit together and the evaluator can provide his/her feedback starting from strengths and mentioning weaknesses as improvement areas in a very friendly manner. These senior teachers play the teachers’ educators role. Liston et al (2008), pointed out that teacher educators have a significant role to play in fostering the establishment of a holistic framework for improving teacher quality. In addition, Brownell et al (2006), highlight that teacher collaboration to achieve common objectives is considered by many scholars to be a main component of school reform. He further adds that the presumption is that when the teacher works together to reach a collective vision, they will find the ability to evolve their instructional practices in essential ways. Furthermore, (Pugach & Johnson, 2002) as cited in, Brownell et al (2006), about the importance of collective and collaborative work mentioned that in a collaborative work setting, teachers have the opportunity to foster a shared ability to continuously enhance their professional skills. By doing so, they ensure that every pupil they teach receives the utmost level of education excellence.

The findings of the study suggest that the relationship between school and community seems to be effective and motivational for teachers to work on their quality improvements. Zebak public schools' stakeholders underscored that a positive relationship between their local community and schools helped to somehow improve their quality. One of the participants highlighted that since the school leadership created the school-parents committee, we have witnessed some positive effects on our school and teachers' work. He further pointed out that this committee is allowed to evaluate how teachers and school personnel are working and if needed they can conduct meetings with school leadership and teachers to discuss the essential issues related to school or teachers. Other participants of the study underscored that when this committee regularly comes to school and evaluates our teaching directly or indirectly, that affects our teaching. For instance, he said teachers will not make an absence when they do not have any urgent work because this committee will ask the reason for their absence before creating this committee some teachers come late or do not come to school because of their purposes. Regarding the importance and effectiveness of community-school relationships Blank et al (2012), emphasized that a community school is a place that connects schools, families, and the community. It focuses on academics, youth development, family support, health services, and community development. By involving students, families, and residents, community schools help students become educated citizens who give back to their communities. In addition, the findings suggest that community-school relationships appeared to have a noticeable role in students' engagement and also motivating teachers to pay attention to their professional improvement. Stefanski et al (2016), state that school-community alliance has long been considered as an auspicious way to help struggling students, parents, and the neighborhood. To illustrate this a respondent of the study exemplified that once a student of him made constantly absent and he

strived to investigate the reason behind his absence, however, he was not able to do so successfully so he sought assistance from the school parents committee and they talked to students' parents and found a reasonable solution to the created problem. Jones (2012) also claims that in the past 20 years, there has been a great emphasis on the importance of relations between families, communities, and schools to foster better learning achievements for pupils in school. He further adds that Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), is one of those perspectives that assist researchers in identifying the family and community as an important influence on the improvement of children.

The participants of the study also brought to the fore that the school-community relationship acts as a positive influencing and motivational factor in encouraging teachers to keep consistency and commitment in their teaching profession. Researches indicate that motivation is one of the most important elements of a teacher's career because without this no one will do his/her job enthusiastically and eagerly. Yıldız & Kılıç (2021), stated that teacher motivation is the center of focus in the education process, and knowing and expanding this essential concept can add to the quality of education and attain objectives sufficiently along with the proposed and set vision. Moreover, the participants of the study argued that they have experienced differently how community support and relationships helped them to stay focused and energetic in their jobs. For instance, one respondent of the research in his interview stated that I always tried to pay attention to my students in every aspect, and once a student's family member came to me and expressed his appreciation that I assessed his son homework and provided him with my feedback that he thought was the most effective in their child learning journey. He also highlighted that this appreciation gave him a sense of satisfaction and since then I promised to try harder and do my best for my students and society. However, it is important to

mention that there are two main types of motivation which are “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” or internal and external motivations. The finding of the study can claim that a mixture of both types has been noticed among teachers of public schools in the Zebak district some came to the profession to have income and afford a life, and others came in addition to having income to serve people and share their knowledge and skills with their fellow students. Aligned with the previous points some theories identify different factors as sources of motivation such as human needs as an example. In addition, these theories identify physiological and psychological needs as the source of motivation. According to Börü (2018) in his study about motivation brought to the fore various motivational theories of which he mentioned Abraham Maslow's basic needs theory, which discusses human basic needs as the source of motivation for instance, eating, drinking, and whatever a human need to live and survive with. On the other hand, he brought another theory called McClelland's human motivation theory which focuses on human wants and desires for success, being powerful other wider range of willingness. Therefore, it can be argued that the theory of Abraham Maslow's basic needs is more aligned and truer considering the situations of teachers in most public schools in Afghanistan, however, it has been seen that with their little facilities and resources, they always did their best.

The findings of the study suggest that teachers of public schools in Zebak district are dealing with quite massive challenges and barriers which they argued impede the opportunity to work on their quality. Respondents of the study stated that there are different impeding factors of which they mainly underscored the low amount of their salaries. Based on their beliefs if they had better salaries, they could focus on building their capacities and one participant of the study explained how. He claimed that we receive an amount of \$75 almost 6,000 AFG per month which does not afford our life necessities and we need to be busy at another part-time job such as

taxi driving or shop assistant or seller after school hours. By doing so we do not get enough opportunity to focus on our professional development even sometimes due to high exhaustion I cannot prepare a good lesson plan. This challenge is aligned with the literature as discussed before for example, according to Fazel (2023), what teachers receive as their monthly salary is inefficient to afford their lives, and the monthly USD 100 is reduced to USD 70 which is a very low amount. He also adds that this low salary has caused the most teacher to leave their profession or do physical work after school official hours. In addition, the lack of educational opportunities as an example to uplift their degree/attend university and the limited professional development resulted in educational problems. Ruediger and Strayer (1910) as cited by Letendre (2015), pointed out that there are different factors affecting teacher quality such as years of teaching experience and level of education. However, this problem has been evident to educational authorities and policymakers for instance, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2017, 2021) in the National Education Strategic Plan iii pointed out that the majority of teachers did not meet the requirement to be teachers and this resulted in poor quality teaching in the classrooms, but there have not been any measurement or intervention to change the situation and bring a positive change. Besides that, teachers in this context are suffering from a lack of recognition and regular assessment from their jobs. As they mentioned there is no promotion demotion or evaluation and finding solutions accordingly and teachers are just responsible for finishing the books they teach to the extent of their capability. Although it was promised by the Ministry of Education Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2012), that there would be a continuous assessment of teachers during their job and teaching profession, however, it seems that the lack of effective leadership at school and carelessness observation of teachers by MoE had led in lower capable teachers at public schools. Long teaching hours and the excessive number of

students within every single classroom are other challenges that teachers are experiencing and need to learn new methods of how to manage a large classroom. In this regard the literature shows that there also had been this promise by Afghan MoE that they would reduce long teaching hours mainly for elderly teachers and they would develop the infrastructures to solve the classroom size problem Roehrs (2015), says that these were left unmet. The finding of the study also indicates that teachers in public schools in Zebak struggle with the lack of enough resources as mentioned earlier to improve their quality. For instance, they do not have access to the internet and libraries to expand their knowledge or prepare profoundly for their lessons. As a result, numerous challenges need special attention to rescue the fragile education system throughout the country and to lead it towards progress and prosperity.

The finding of the study also puts forward teacher quality development needs supportive policies and resources to obtain this important objective. Participants of the study had several recommendations of which they mainly the professionalization of teachers was the first and most essential aspect of their recommendations. As one participant highlighted it is crucial to recruit competent individuals who have graduated from specific fields to work in public schools. In addition, they proposed that close attention to providing training and capacity-building workshops should be on the MoE to-do list and need to allocate enough budget and hire expert trainers to improve teachers' quality. Moreover, respondents of the study argued that lack of proper facilities such as internet access and equipped libraries are other barriers to promoting their quality and they urged the educational authorities at different levels of the education system to consider it and make some required interventions. Last but not least the finding of the study implies that in Zebak public schools' long distance between home and school created a massive challenge for teachers and teachers request for MoE and Ministry of Higher Education MHE plus

NGOs and educational partners and state and non-state actors to provide them with the transportation or the equivalent amount for taxifare to prevent exhaustion and tiredness during the class hours and teaching period.

Overall, the study shows that Zebak public schools' teachers as the representatives of the whole public-school teachers throughout the country mainly in the rural and marginalized areas need urgent attention to develop their quality and teaching practices. Although, it was found that they have a clear understanding of who a quality teacher is, what characteristics they have, and how they can become a qualified teacher, the challenges and barrier in their way impeded their progression, and the available resources at their disposal are not enough to support them. It was also found that there are some useful interventions and measurements that can assist teachers in teaching such as the education circle and the collaborative culture they created in their school contexts. Incidentally, they recommend for better quality education they need to improve their quality first. They want the government and educational practitioners to build some new and effective strategies to assist them with the essential knowledge and skills they need for the current competitive era of technology and innovation.

5.4 Conclusion

This study explored the perceptions of Zebak public schools' stakeholders (teachers, head teachers, and principals) regarding teacher quality, placing particular importance on challenges teachers are experiencing, the support available at their disposal, and what extra support they need. In reference to the findings of the study it was investigated that participants of the study had a good understanding of teacher quality compared to literatures and studies done in other contexts and the definitions they provided, and the features and characteristics they associated with the term teacher quality were almost similar to other literatures. However, the vast body of

the literature reviewed about the topic of the study provided various assumptions and a wide range of definitions and it seems difficult to stake with one specific definition of this term. Therefore, participants of the study have had different perspectives defining teacher quality. Zebak public schools' stakeholders' perspectives of teacher quality covers several aspects. Being sophisticated at pedagogy and having a great knowledge of the subject matter was one angle that they consider as one characteristic of a teacher quality. They believed without a proper knowledge of pedagogy it is quite challenging for a teacher to teach properly and will not be considered as qualified teacher. Secondly, they underscored that teacher quality encompasses the ability of teacher in perceiving the emotional and psychological wellbeing of his/her students and providing an equal, friendly class atmosphere where all learners can freely express their thoughts and proposes their inquires without any hesitation and fear of being criticized either by the teacher or fellow classmates. Similar to the previous points, they emphasized the inclusivity of teaching environment where the teacher they argued is the first person to make this possible and all pupils should be treated the same and receive the same attention and education, regardless of their backgrounds and differences. Moreover, it was scrutinized from their perspectives that a quality teacher is more of a guide and facilitator rather than as someone holding a dictator or multitasking person position to perform everything in the classroom and keep students passive and unprovoked. They place a great emphasize on student-centered classroom where students are the agent and accountable of most of their learning.

On the other hand, it was explored in depth that, based on participants' point of views professional development opportunities- providing enough training and workshops, educational authorities and NGOs' support are the options that can improve the quality of teacher in their context and even they have claimed to the overall parts of the country. It was also examined

closely that, in their context less professional improvement opportunities are available and those take place rarely seemed not to carry the best possible effect on teachers' profession and skills. On the contrary, it was probed that stakeholders of the public schools in Zebak district of Badakhshan province use the available resources wisely and effectively. As an instance, they have used from the knowledge, experience and expertise of their senior teachers in a very positive way from conducting training within the school to co-teaching and class observation plus providing sample lessons and feedback. Collaboration and a sense of support were the other important characteristics of these schools' personnel that visibly played a good role in developing the quality of teachers there. In addition, it was found that in Zebak schools, staff including teachers from different grades and subject created a collaborative work and call it "Educational Circle" or in Persian namely as "Halaqat -e- Hamozoshi" through which teachers can solve their teaching/learning related issues. Additionally, it was discovered that, public schools' teachers in Afghanistan in general and in the rural areas in particular are struggling with a lack of teaching/learning and capacity building resources which impeded their progress and growth. In the research cite it was found that there is no library to get access to necessary teaching materials or to solve an issue whenever a teacher encounter in his teaching. Besides that, internet access was another main challenge according to the research participants of the study as they stated that they do not feel in the era of technology and progression, but their situation is more similar to people of decades ago in their region.

Furthermore, it was also explored that, albeit there are the basic facilities accessible as discussed earlier, however, teachers are experiencing a lot of quality development barriers. It was investigated that lack of professional development programs, disqualified trainers and teacher educators, lack of enough teaching/learning and self-improvement materials, a lack of proper and

equipped libraries, lack of support and recognition system, last but not the least the issue of getting access to the internet and other means of acquiring knowledge and information such as YouTube, are the main barriers that prevent teachers' improvement in these areas of the country. Lastly, it was also found that, for better improvements of teacher quality in Afghanistan it is essential- based on participants recommendations that, the government, educational responsible people, policymakers, and educational partners in the state and non-state level should rethink about teachers' situation and the quality of education and bring essential reforms to improve the situation. A change in curriculum, increasing the percentage of professional development programs (PDP), providing further educational opportunities (attending a university degree), hiring expert trainers and teacher educators throughout the country, establishing equipped libraries and providing access to the internet were of the recommendations that Zebak public school stakeholders proposed for the MoE and other educational partners to transform existed miserable situation of teacher and public schools in Afghanistan.

5.5 Recommendations

This study indicate that teacher quality is a big concern in public schools in Afghanistan and to address this the following points are recommended.

1. Educational officials and policy makers need to pay their close attention to teacher quality improvement in public schools in Afghanistan.
2. More budgets need to be allocated to education in the country and a special attention is required into rural schools of the country.
3. Providing professional development programs and capacity building opportunities should be prioritize by educational authorities to improve quality education in the country.

4. Educational opportunities such as degree uplift programs or admission to universities should be provided for public school teachers to enhance the quality and capabilities.

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Appendix A

Consent Letter

Name: Mohammad Hussain Amini

Address: Dhaka, Bangladesh

Date: 12th February 2024

Participant Name:

Participant address:

City/state zip code:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Subject: consent of participation

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to request your consent for participation in a research study under the title of “Teacher Quality in Public Schools in Afghanistan: An Exploratory Study. I am conducting this study as a student of Master’s degree in Educational Leadership and School Improvement with Brac University of Bangladesh.

I want to provide you with essential information about my research before seeking your consent. The purpose of this research is to explore the perception of public-schools’ stakeholders about teacher quality in public schools in Afghanistan particularly in three schools in Zebak district of Badakhshan province where you are one of those school staff. This study is only for academic purposes and my thesis to be eligible to graduate from my university. If you agree to participate, the following will be involved in the study. You are expected to do a one-on-one interview with me about the topic I have earlier mentioned and this will take a total of one hour and a half to complete this interview. You are kindly expected to answer all the questions to enable me to understand your perception of my research topic. There is nothing harmful or risky for you as it is academic research and the information is used only for academic purposes. I can assure you that, this study is much important for our local schools to know the challenges and support that our teachers need to develop their quality. Your privacy is of utmost importance to me. All information collected during the study will be confidential. Your identity will be kept anonymous, and any data shared or published will be presented in a manner that ensures your

anonymity. You are allowed to withdraw from the interview at any time without giving any reasons.

If you have any questions, or concerns, or require further clarification about the study do not hesitate to contact me at +93 797 59 2021 or you can send me an e-mail through h.amini2023@gmail.com

By signing below or agreeing to participate in this research study, you confirm that:

- You have understood the purpose of the study.
- You voluntarily agree to participate in the study
- You have the right to withdraw at any time without providing any reason.
- You understand that all data will be collected for research purposes and your information will remain confidential.

Kindly sign below and show your agreement to be part of this study

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Thank you for your participation in this interview and we appreciate your time and dedication for this purpose.

Sincerely yours,

Mohammad Hussain Amini

Master of Education in Education Leadership and School Improvement

Brac-IED- Brac University-Bangladesh

Appendix B

Interview Guide for Teachers

This is Mohammad Hussain Amini, a student of Master of Education in Education Leadership and School Improvement at Brec-IED, Brac University-Bangladesh. Thank you for your time and dedication to participate in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to collect information about teachers' quality in public schools in Afghanistan, mainly the perceptions of Zebak district public schools' stakeholders including teachers, head teachers, and principals. All your ideas and information will remain confidential and will only be used for research purposes.

#No	Name	Position	Years of Experience	School Name	Field of study	Subject of thought	Date of interview
1	T1	Teacher	8 years	X1	Education	Biology	Feb/12/24
2	T2	Teacher	10 years	X1	Education	Math	Feb/13/24
3	T3	Teacher	12 years	X2	Education	History	Feb/14/24
4	T4	Teacher	9 years	X2	Education	Computer	Feb/15/24

Table 2 Details of Participants of the Study

Perception

1. How would you define teacher quality in the context of public schools in Afghanistan?
2. What characteristics do you consider when defining teacher quality?
3. What are some indicators of teacher quality in your opinion?
4. In your point of view, is there any link between teacher quality and students' learning outcomes? How?
5. In your perspective, what role can teacher quality play in improving the quality of students' learning outcomes?
6. Can you elaborate more on your point about the positive role of teachers in developing students' learning outcomes?

Support

1. What qualifications and certifications do you believe are essential for a teacher to be qualified?
2. What specific qualifications and certifications do you think are currently lacking among teachers in public schools in Afghanistan?
3. Do you believe that impacts the quality of education?
4. What skills and competencies does a qualified teacher need to improve students' learning outcomes?
5. Can you provide examples of how these skills and competencies directly impact students' achievements?
6. How can teacher quality be reflected in the classroom?
7. Can you provide examples of observable behaviors or indicators that demonstrate the presence of teacher quality in the classroom?
8. How do you examine teacher quality in the context of Zebak public schools?
9. What specific methods or criteria do you employ to examine and measure their performance and effectiveness?
10. What do you think about professional development training? Are they effective in developing teachers' quality and competency? How?

Challenges

1. As a school teacher, what are the severe challenges that impact the quality of teachers in Afghanistan, particularly in Zebak public schools?
2. Could you elaborate on the specific challenges that teachers in Zebak public schools in Afghanistan face, which significantly impact their quality?

3. To your understanding, what motivational factors can encourage public school teachers to work on their competency and enhance students' learning outcomes?
4. Can you provide examples of how these motivational factors have positively influenced teacher performance and students' achievements?

Recommendations

1. What are some of your recommendations to educational authorities to take into account and develop public school teachers' quality in Afghanistan?
2. How do you envision these recommendations positively impacting teacher development and ultimately?

Appendix C

Focus Discussion Group (FGD) with Head Teachers and Principals

This is Mohammad Hussain Amini, master of education in Education Leadership and School Improvement at Brac-IED Brac University of Bangladesh. This FGD aims to collect essential information about teacher quality in the context of Afghanistan with a main focus on public schools in the Zebak district of Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. The main purpose behind this FGD is to gather information from your perspective and understanding of teacher quality in your local context. I appreciate your time and dedication to our collective discussion and I assure you that your information will only be used for research purposes and your identity and ideas will remain confidential with us.

#No	Name	Position	Years of Experience	School Name	Field of study	Date of FGD
1	P1	Principle	12 years	X1	Management	Feb/16/24

2	P2	Principle	10 years	X2	Public Policy	Feb/16/24
3	H3	Head Teacher	11 years	X1	Education	Feb/16/24
4	H4	Head Teacher	9 years	X2	Education	Feb/16/24

Table 3 Details of participants of the Study

Perceptions

1. What is teacher quality from your perspective?
2. Could you elaborate on your definition and understanding of teacher quality?
3. How do you analyze the quality of teachers in the context of Afghanistan public schools, especially in Zebak district schools?
4. What are the characteristics of a qualified teacher?
5. Can you give an example of how these characteristics affect students' learning outcomes?
6. What are some indicators of teacher quality in your opinion?
7. How do you think the effectiveness of a teacher be measured or assessed in the classroom?
8. What important changes a qualified teacher can bring to in professional life of students?

Challenges

9. What are some factors that contribute to or hinder teacher quality improvement in Zebak public schools?
10. What systematic or contextual factors, in your view, have the greatest impact on either facilitating or impeding efforts to enhance teacher quality in Zebak public schools?

11. What are the main reasons behind the lack of qualified teachers in public schools in Afghanistan particularly in Zebak public schools?
12. How these problems can be mitigated to increase the number of qualified teachers within the schools?
13. What are some major challenges that teachers face in your school in terms of their quality?
14. What are some possible solutions you think are available to solve the problems of teachers in your school?

Support

15. what initiatives does the Ministry of Education have taken to improve the quality of teachers in your schools?
16. How these initiatives were effective in developing the capacity of teachers?
17. Do you conduct any annual professional development training to develop teacher quality within your schools?
18. Could you describe the types of annual professional development training programs you currently offer to support the ongoing development of teacher quality within your schools?
19. How do you usually implement teacher training in your schools' contexts?
20. What type of support do teachers need from your perspectives as the head teachers and principals of schools?
21. What are some of your recommendations to develop and boost teacher quality in Afghanistan public schools with a main focus on your schools?

22. Do you think your proposed recommendations are effective change agents in your school context?