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Design and Elucidation of an Outcome-Based Educational Management Model in the Education System of Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The present study aimed to design and elucidate an indigenous outcome-based educational management model for the education system of Afghanistan by identifying the structural, economic, sociocultural, and educational factors influencing educational effectiveness and institutional performance.

Methods and Materials: This study was conducted using a qualitative grounded theory approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 14 educational experts and practitioners in Afghanistan, including university professors, researchers, school administrators, and educational policymakers selected through purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interview data were analyzed using MAXQDA 2020 software through the three stages of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The analytical process led to the extraction of 543 initial open codes, which were subsequently categorized into conceptual clusters and axial categories. The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking, peer review, and continuous comparative analysis.

Findings: The findings identified three principal categories of challenges affecting the educational system of Afghanistan, including structural-managerial challenges, economic-infrastructure challenges, and educational-content challenges. Structural-managerial challenges included instability in educational policymaking, excessive centralization, weak management systems, politicization of education, and inefficient monitoring structures. Economic-infrastructure challenges consisted of widespread poverty, shortage of sustainable funding, inadequate educational infrastructure, digital inequality, and limited access to technological resources. Educational-content challenges included traditional memorization-oriented instruction, credentialism, low educational quality, shortage of professionally trained teachers, and the weakening of critical and experimental sciences. The selective coding process resulted in the emergence of the core category of a “systematic and deepened gap” between the ideal goals of education and operational realities within Afghanistan’s sociopolitical context. The findings further demonstrated that intelligent decentralization, teacher empowerment, localization of curricula, community participation, and decentralized evaluation systems represent the most important strategies for reducing this gap and improving educational outcomes.

Conclusion: The study concluded that the inefficiency of Afghanistan’s educational system is rooted in interconnected structural, political, economic, and cultural factors that collectively reinforce a systematic gap between educational ideals and

institutional realities. Transition toward an outcome-based educational management system requires moving beyond quantitative educational expansion and prioritizing competency development, learning quality, institutional accountability, and contextual responsiveness. Sustainable educational reform in Afghanistan depends on decentralized governance, professional teacher development, localized educational policies, and the establishment of transparent and data-driven evaluation systems capable of aligning educational outcomes with national development needs.

Keywords: *Outcome-based education, Afghanistan, grounded theory, systematic gap, decentralization*

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognized as one of the most fundamental pillars of sustainable development, human capital formation, social transformation, and economic progress in contemporary societies. Modern educational systems are no longer evaluated solely on the basis of access and enrollment rates; rather, increasing attention has been directed toward educational effectiveness, learning outcomes, competency development, and the alignment of education with labor market and societal needs (Bhattarai, 2020; Leoni, 2025). In this context, outcome-based educational management has emerged as an influential paradigm emphasizing measurable learning achievements, institutional accountability, competency acquisition, and the practical effectiveness of educational processes (Alainati, 2021; Dias & Tenera, 2020). This approach seeks to move beyond traditional input-oriented educational systems by focusing on the actual outcomes of learning and the extent to which educational institutions contribute to the development of productive, capable, and socially responsible citizens (Angrist et al., 2021; Baktymbet et al., 2021). The growing complexity of social, economic, and technological transformations has further intensified the need for educational systems capable of producing adaptable, innovative, and critically minded individuals who can respond effectively to contemporary global challenges (Fung & Hosseini, 2023; Sadovska et al., 2025). Consequently, many countries have attempted to reform their educational management structures through decentralization, quality assurance systems, competency-based curricula, and performance-oriented governance models (Bhattarai, 2020; Sarkka, 2020).

Within this global discourse, Afghanistan represents a unique and highly complex educational context characterized by prolonged conflict, political instability, economic fragility, sociocultural tensions, and institutional discontinuity. Decades of war and social disruption have severely damaged the country's educational infrastructure and weakened institutional capacities across all levels of the education sector (Haghighi, 2021; Kanjo, 2022). Although

significant efforts were undertaken after 2001 to rebuild educational institutions and expand access to schooling, many structural deficiencies remained unresolved (Easar et al., 2023; Welch & Wahidyar, 2020). The Afghan educational system has experienced continuous fluctuations due to changing political regimes, unstable policymaking, dependency on foreign aid, and ideological interventions in educational content and governance (Ahmadi, 2022; Alemi et al., 2025). These conditions have created a substantial gap between the ideal goals of education and the realities of implementation in schools and universities throughout the country.

One of the major challenges facing Afghanistan's educational system concerns the persistent tension between quantitative educational expansion and qualitative educational development. During the past two decades, educational policies frequently prioritized increasing the number of schools, universities, and student enrollments without sufficient attention to learning quality, instructional effectiveness, and competency development (Hashimi, 2020; Welch & Wahidyar, 2020). While access to education expanded in many regions, the educational outcomes associated with this expansion remained highly uneven and often unsatisfactory. The shortage of professionally trained teachers, inadequate infrastructure, limited educational resources, outdated curricula, and weak institutional monitoring systems have significantly constrained educational quality across the country (Amini, 2024; Wardak, 2022). Moreover, many educational institutions continue to rely heavily on traditional memorization-based instructional approaches that emphasize examination performance rather than analytical thinking, creativity, and practical problem-solving skills (Alainati, 2021; Hashimi, 2020). Such conditions have contributed to a system in which formal educational attainment frequently fails to translate into employability, productivity, or meaningful human capital development.

The issue of human capital development is particularly significant in the Afghan context because education plays a central role in economic recovery, institutional stabilization, and long-term national development. Contemporary theories

of human capital emphasize that educational systems contribute to economic growth not merely by increasing literacy rates, but by cultivating competencies, innovation capacities, and workforce adaptability (Baktymbet et al., 2021; Leoni, 2025). Empirical studies have demonstrated that educational quality has a stronger relationship with economic performance than educational quantity alone (Angrist et al., 2021). In Afghanistan, however, unemployment, underemployment, and skills mismatches remain major socioeconomic concerns despite the expansion of educational institutions (Zamani, 2024). This discrepancy reflects the limited alignment between educational outputs and labor market demands. Hashimi's comparative study of higher education systems highlighted the insufficient development of vocational and professional competencies among Afghan graduates, thereby reducing their ability to compete in both domestic and international labor markets (Hashimi, 2020). Similarly, Faqeerzai et al. emphasized the importance of effective human resource practices and organizational competencies in improving institutional performance within Afghan organizations (Faqeerzai et al., 2020). These findings collectively suggest that educational management reforms in Afghanistan must prioritize outcome orientation, competency development, and institutional effectiveness rather than focusing solely on enrollment expansion.

Another critical dimension influencing educational management in Afghanistan relates to sociocultural structures and educational inequality. Educational opportunities in Afghanistan are deeply affected by regional disparities, gender inequalities, ethnic divisions, and socioeconomic stratification (Naqawi & Sultani, 2025; Saiq, 2023). Girls' education, in particular, has become one of the most controversial and politically sensitive issues in the country's recent history. Restrictions on female education imposed under Taliban governance have intensified concerns regarding educational exclusion, human rights, and social development (Fidelia et al., 2025; Naqawi & Sultani, 2025). Studies have shown that sociocultural norms, patriarchal structures, and conservative interpretations of gender roles significantly influence educational participation and achievement among Afghan girls (Saiq, 2023). Moreover, the politicization and ideologization of education have further complicated educational governance and curriculum development (Sahar, 2025). Sahar argued that educational institutions may become instruments for ideological reproduction and social control when political authorities prioritize ideological conformity over critical

inquiry and intellectual development (Sahar, 2025). Such conditions create substantial obstacles to the development of an educational system capable of promoting creativity, critical thinking, and democratic participation.

Theoretical perspectives within sociology of education also provide important insights into the structural challenges of Afghanistan's educational system. Structural-functional theories emphasize the role of education in maintaining social integration, transmitting cultural values, and preparing individuals for productive participation in society (Imran, 2024; Wasilah, 2023). From this perspective, educational institutions contribute to social stability by promoting shared norms, competencies, and meritocratic opportunities. However, conflict-oriented and critical sociological perspectives argue that educational systems may reproduce social inequalities, reinforce dominant power structures, and perpetuate cultural exclusion (Ershadi, 2025; Jaeger, 2022). Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is especially relevant in understanding educational inequality within Afghanistan, where access to educational resources and cultural advantages remains highly uneven across social groups (Ershadi, 2025; Jaeger, 2022). Educational success is often influenced not only by individual ability, but also by socioeconomic status, cultural resources, linguistic capital, and family background. These structural inequalities become even more pronounced in contexts affected by conflict, displacement, and institutional instability.

The managerial structure of educational institutions in Afghanistan also faces substantial organizational and governance-related challenges. Organizational culture, leadership quality, and knowledge management processes significantly influence educational effectiveness and institutional agility (Ahmadi, 2023). Weak coordination mechanisms, excessive centralization, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and unstable administrative systems frequently limit institutional adaptability and responsiveness. Public sector governance in fragile states often suffers from politicized decision-making, weak accountability systems, and limited strategic planning capacities (Bekmurodov, 2025). Such challenges are particularly visible in Afghanistan's educational administration, where frequent policy changes, inconsistent reforms, and limited stakeholder participation undermine institutional continuity and trust. Outcome-based educational management frameworks therefore offer a potentially valuable alternative because they emphasize measurable performance indicators, institutional accountability, decentralized decision-making, and

continuous evaluation processes (Dias & Tenera, 2020; Sarkka, 2020). However, implementing such frameworks within fragile and conflict-affected contexts requires careful adaptation to local sociopolitical realities.

Technological transformation and digital learning have introduced both opportunities and challenges for Afghanistan's educational system. Mobile learning platforms and digital educational technologies have the potential to improve access to education, especially in remote and conflict-affected regions (Dawodi et al., 2023). Digital learning approaches may partially compensate for infrastructural deficiencies, teacher shortages, and geographical barriers. At the same time, substantial digital inequalities remain due to unstable electricity, limited internet access, high technological costs, and low digital literacy levels. Zeynali emphasized the effectiveness of multimodal and content-based instructional methods in improving learning outcomes and learner engagement (Zeynali, 2025). Such findings suggest that educational modernization in Afghanistan requires not only infrastructural investment but also pedagogical innovation and teacher capacity development. Nevertheless, technological interventions cannot independently resolve deeper structural and managerial deficiencies within the educational system.

The relationship between education, research, and social development further underscores the importance of educational reform in Afghanistan. Research-oriented educational environments contribute to critical thinking, innovation, institutional learning, and social progress (Yar, 2025). However, prolonged instability, brain drain, and weak institutional support have significantly constrained academic research capacities within Afghanistan's educational institutions (Alemi et al., 2025). Migration of educated professionals and experienced academics has reduced the country's intellectual and managerial capacities at a time when educational reconstruction is critically needed. Tutakhil also noted that globalization and cultural transformation have exerted profound influences on Afghanistan's educational system, creating tensions between traditional cultural norms and modern educational expectations (Tutakhil, 2021). These tensions complicate efforts to design educational models that are simultaneously modern, effective, culturally legitimate, and socially sustainable.

Despite the growing body of literature examining Afghanistan's educational challenges, relatively limited research has focused specifically on designing an indigenous

outcome-based educational management model adapted to the Afghan sociopolitical and cultural context. Most previous studies have concentrated either on descriptive analyses of educational problems or on comparative examinations of educational development (Haghighi, 2021; Kanjo, 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights into institutional deficiencies and educational inequalities, fewer investigations have attempted to conceptualize an integrated management framework capable of linking educational governance, institutional performance, competency development, stakeholder participation, and contextual realities within Afghanistan. Given the complex interaction between political instability, sociocultural structures, economic constraints, educational quality, and institutional governance, there is a significant need for a grounded and context-sensitive model capable of improving educational effectiveness and sustainability.

Accordingly, the present study was conducted with the aim of designing and elucidating an indigenous outcome-based educational management model for the education system of Afghanistan.

2. Methods and Materials

This study was conducted using a qualitative grounded theory approach. Unlike purely descriptive methods, the qualitative approach is founded on the principle that knowledge and understanding are continuously constructed through experience and expertise {Mo et al., 2022}. The focus of the study was not merely on recording the participants' statements, but also on uncovering the underlying layers of meaning and cognitive structures embedded in their experiences and expertise. This approach is highly suitable for examining complex phenomena because it enables the researcher to achieve deep interpretive richness within each experience rather than relying on external generalization.

Data collection in this study was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The target population consisted of university professors and school administrators in Afghanistan who possessed relevant experience and expertise related to the research topic. The data analysis process was conducted in accordance with the standard stages of grounded theory, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, using MAXQDA 2020 software. The research participants were selected through purposive sampling, and the number of participants was determined based on the point of theoretical saturation.

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the research participants.

Table 1

Characteristics of Research Participants

No.	Surname	Educational Qualification	Occupation
1	Norouzi	PhD in Sociology	Researcher
2	Kamaluddin Hamed	PhD in Private Law	Researcher
3	Mohammad Osmani	PhD	High School Principal
4	Aziz Ahmad Hanif	Master's Degree in Islamic Studies	Professor at Kabul University
5	Hejratullah Jebraili	PhD in Qur'anic Interpretation	President of a Private University
6	Kalantari	PhD in Public Administration	University Professor
7	Mozaffari	PhD in Management	University Professor
8	Morteza Hamed	Master's Degree in Public Law	University Professor
9	Roustaei	PhD in Persian Literature	Member of the Afghanistan Academy of Sciences
10	Kamali	PhD in Educational Sciences	University Professor
11	Hojatullah Najih	PhD in Public Administration	Head of the Scientific Assembly of the Ministry of Guidance
12	Naser Watanyar	PhD Candidate in Political Science	University Professor
13	Mohammad Shoaib Sayqal	PhD in Educational Sciences	Director General of Schools in Afghanistan
14	Keramatullah Sediq	PhD in Islamic Studies	University Professor

3. Findings and Results

In the first step and during the open coding stage, the data from all interviews were carefully examined and reviewed sentence by sentence. At this stage, each statement, idea, or key concept containing meaning relevant to the research questions was extracted as an open code. This meticulous and detailed process ultimately led to the identification of 543 initial open codes. These codes, which constitute the most basic units of meaning in the analysis, formed the foundation for all subsequent analytical stages and provided a rich and detailed framework for understanding the experiences and expertise of the participants.

Open coding is the first and most fundamental stage of qualitative data analysis, during which the researcher approaches the raw data (interview texts) with an analytical and assumption-free perspective in order to identify, label, and categorize the underlying concepts. These codes are formed either directly from the participants' statements or through expressions very close to their wording, thereby minimizing the interpretive burden imposed by the researcher. The extraction of 543 open codes in this study reflects the richness of the data, the diversity of participants' experiences, and the depth and rigor of the coding process. These initial codes provided the raw material necessary for the subsequent stages of analysis, particularly the formation of conceptual clusters (axial codes).

During the axial coding stage, the initial open codes (543 codes) identified in the previous phase were subjected to deeper examination and reconsideration. The objective at this stage was to establish connections among seemingly scattered codes and organize them into axial categories. This process was conducted through identifying conceptual relationships, thematic similarities, and causal or contextual sequences among the open codes. Axial coding functioned as a process of reframing and reorganizing the data at a more abstract analytical level, in which each axial category formed a conceptual core around which related open codes were grouped. By specifying the dimensions, causal conditions, strategies, and consequences associated with each category, the analytical richness of the findings was enhanced, thereby laying the foundation for extracting the selective code. The axial codes identified in this study included three principal categories: structural and managerial challenges, economic and infrastructural challenges, and educational and content-related challenges.

Structural and managerial challenges within the education system of Afghanistan represent one of the principal obstacles to improving educational outcomes. These challenges include excessive centralization, instability in educational policymaking, weaknesses in information and monitoring systems, and ineffective management.

Table 2

Axial Code of Structural and Managerial Challenges

Frequency	Open Codes
1	Unequal distribution of resources
1	Expansion of bureaucracy
4	Weak management
1	Reduction of bureaucracy
2	Weak decision-making
4	Centralized education system
3	Lack of management
1	Absence of an integrated information system
3	Absence of an integrated monitoring system
4	Incomplete and unreliable statistics
3	Frequent replacement of curricula
7	Instability in educational policymaking
2	Changes in political priorities
1	Dependence on foreign aid
2	Suspension of international aid

One of the most significant challenges repeatedly emphasized in the interviews was the instability of educational policymaking. According to Norouzi, the Afghan educational system suffers from “severe instability in educational policymaking,” whereby every change in government or ministry results in the replacement of programs, textbooks, and evaluation criteria without providing sufficient time for implementation or assessment of outcomes. Kalantari also emphasized this issue, stating that the repeated governmental changes in Afghanistan have consistently been accompanied by modifications to curricula, the removal or addition of subjects, and a persistent instability that prevents the formation of a sustainable educational system. Morteza Hamed likewise referred to the “politicization and instability of the national education structure,” citing the continuous alteration of curricula and instructional methods without professional evaluation, which creates confusion among teachers and students.

On the other hand, extreme centralization in decision-making and weak management were identified as additional structural challenges. Aminuddin Mozaffari referred to the excessive centralization of decision-making, noting that most decisions are made at the central level without consideration of local differences, thereby reducing policy implementation effectiveness. Kamaluddin Hamed criticized the lack of precise management and noted that, in some elementary schools, children are enrolled without actual attendance merely to inflate enrollment statistics, which reflects managerial weakness. In this regard, Kalantari stated that during the past fifty years, none of the

Ministers of Education had specialized expertise in education or educational management, and senior executive managers were often appointed based on political bargaining or personal relationships, resulting in an inefficient and deteriorated educational system.

Weaknesses in information and monitoring systems were also identified as serious obstacles to outcome-oriented management. Norouzi emphasized the absence of a genuine integrated information and monitoring system, which has disrupted data-driven decision-making. He stated that student statistics, teaching quality indicators, and learning outcomes are often incomplete or unreliable, thereby complicating resource allocation planning. Kamaluddin Hamed similarly referred to the absence of accurate management systems, noting that authentic statistical information is often unavailable and, in some cases, unrealistic statistics are presented merely to demonstrate apparent success.

Dependence on foreign aid and the abrupt suspension of such assistance were also identified as factors contributing to systemic instability. Norouzi referred to numerous teacher training initiatives implemented with the support of international organizations that remained incomplete due to the absence of sustainable funding and shifting political priorities. Faiz Mohammad Osmani also stated that neighboring countries and international communities had previously provided cooperation and support, but that such assistance has now been discontinued.

The expansion of bureaucracy and weaknesses in decision-making were likewise identified as managerial challenges. Kamaluddin Hamed referred to the increase in

administrative burdens and managerial inflation as one of the negative short-term consequences of outcome-based systems. Morteza Hamed also highlighted the inefficient use of resources, citing examples such as constructing schools without professionally qualified teachers or establishing ceremonial libraries as manifestations of poor decision-making and weak management.

Table 3

Axial Code of Economic and Infrastructural Challenges

Frequency	Open Codes
11	Poverty
7	Shortage of educational resources
3	Shortage of schools
3	Lack of electricity
1	Lack of potable water
1	Absence of hygienic environments
4	Non-targeted expenditure
2	Low salaries of teachers
4	Lack of infrastructure
3	Absence of stable internet access
3	Digital divide
4	Absence of sustainable funding

Poverty, as the most pervasive economic challenge, directly affects students' access to and continuity in education. Kamaluddin Hamed referred to the engagement of many school-aged children in labor due to poverty and their parents' economic difficulties. Faiz Mohammad Osmani also identified family poverty as a factor contributing to school dropout and reduced learning motivation. He stated: "The shortage of school funding, low teacher salaries, and lack of equipment have naturally reduced the quality of education." Kalantari likewise described poverty as a major obstacle and explained that, for families struggling to provide food for their children, education becomes a secondary concern, resulting in school dropout or child migration. Aziz Ahmad Hanif also referred to the migration of the younger generation due to economic pressures, which prevents a significant proportion of youth from continuing their education.

The shortage of sustainable funding and the improper allocation of financial resources were also identified as structural problems within the educational system. Norouzi referred to the absence of stable funding for educational initiatives such as teacher training programs and stated that these projects remained unfinished because of changing political priorities. Kalantari noted that educational budgets have consistently been limited or dependent on foreign aid, resulting in inadequate infrastructure, deteriorated school

Economic and infrastructural challenges constitute major obstacles affecting the education system of Afghanistan at all levels. These challenges encompass a wide range of issues, including widespread poverty, insufficient sustainable funding, and the absence of basic infrastructure such as electricity, potable water, school buildings, and access to educational and digital resources.

buildings, and the absence of essential equipment. He explained that, in many provinces, students study under tents or in open sunlight, while education is suspended during winter. Morteza Hamed also emphasized the "inefficient utilization of resources," stating that the absence of a logical relationship between educational budgets and outcomes has led to measures such as constructing schools without professionally qualified teachers or distributing textbooks unrelated to students' academic levels.

Severe weaknesses in physical and educational infrastructure constitute another challenge that substantially reduces learning quality. Kamaluddin Hamed referred to infrastructural deficiencies such as the absence of clean water, electricity, and proper sanitary environments in schools, noting that some schools still operate in tents. Kalantari also identified the shortage of educational equipment, libraries, and laboratories as major problems. Mirza Mohammad Roustaei described the lack of access to appropriate classroom equipment, research resources, and laboratory facilities, particularly in experimental sciences, as a significant obstacle.

The shortage or instability of access to digital and technological infrastructure has also emerged as an increasing challenge in the modern era. Aminuddin Mozaffari referred to the relative expansion of simple technologies such as mobile phones as an opportunity;

however, Hejratullah Jebraili and Abdolqader Kamali identified the absence of reliable electricity, unstable internet access, high data costs, and the digital divide as serious threats limiting equitable use of technology. Abdolqader Kamali emphasized that, in many regions, the absence of permanent internet access, electricity, and digital equipment constitutes a major challenge.

Low salaries and the lack of job security for teachers directly affect teaching motivation and instructional quality. Both Faiz Mohammad Osmani and Morteza Hamed

emphasized that inadequate teacher salaries force educators to seek secondary employment and diminish their social status, which, in turn, severely affects educational productivity.

Educational and content-related challenges lie at the core of the inefficiency of Afghanistan's education system. These challenges primarily revolve around poor educational quality, traditional and memorization-oriented approaches, credentialism, and weaknesses in curricular content.

Table 4

Axial Code of Educational and Content-Related Challenges

Frequency	Open Codes
3	Severe decline in basic skills
1	Examination-oriented education
3	Quantitative orientation
3	Low educational quality
4	Credential orientation
3	Memorization-based evaluation system
1	Neglect of critical thinking skills
1	Weakening of critical sciences
2	Weakening of experimental sciences
10	Traditional approach
3	Families' lack of concern for education
2	Cultural resistance

Norouzi clearly analyzed this issue and noted that the evaluation system is primarily focused on memorization and success in final examinations rather than the acquisition of thinking, analytical, and practical skills. He explained that, in many schools, educational outcomes are interpreted merely as students passing government examinations, even when such success is achieved through rote memorization without deep understanding. Kamaluddin Hamed also emphasized the poor quality of education caused by the shortage of professionally qualified teachers, outdated curricula, and inadequate educational resources. He provided a concrete example, stating that subjects such as mathematics and physics are sometimes taught by religious clerics who neither possess teaching competence nor, in some cases, support the teaching of natural sciences.

Credential orientation instead of skill orientation was identified as another cultural-educational pathology. Morteza Hamed explicitly referred to the culture of credentialism replacing skill-based education and explained that, in recent developments, young people seek secondary school certificates merely to secure employment opportunities, even if these certificates are obtained through rapid examinations without genuine learning. Faiz

Mohammad Osmani also noted that, during the past two decades, greater attention has been devoted to the quantity of schools and students rather than to educational outcomes and student achievements. This perspective has caused quantitative orientation to prevail over quality-oriented education.

The traditional approach dominating teaching and learning processes, alongside the weakening of critical and experimental sciences, represents another fundamental challenge. Hejratullah Jebraili strongly criticized this issue and stated that the educational system has been transformed into an ideological instrument in which intellectual conformity is prioritized over genuine learning. He noted that subjects related to human rights and civil society have been removed and replaced by the promotion of specific ideological perspectives. Kamaluddin Hamed also referred to the elimination of human rights and civil society subjects under the pretext of conflict with religion as a political-ideological decision. Aziz Ahmad Hanif described instructional methods in schools as predominantly lecture-based, where students function merely as passive listeners and active methods such as discussion, questioning, and group work are not utilized.

These educational and content-related challenges are directly connected to human resource and teacher-related issues. The most central problem in this domain is the shortage of trained and professionally qualified teachers. Kalantari explicitly stated that a large proportion of the country's teachers either lack higher education qualifications or have not received professional training, while in rural areas a single teacher with only mosque-based education often teaches several major subjects. Aziz Ahmad Hanif also criticized the low educational level of many instructors, explaining that a considerable proportion of teachers in remote areas have only completed up to the fourteenth grade and have not participated in pedagogical training seminars. Faiz Mohammad Osmani regarded the shortage of professionally trained teachers familiar with modern educational methods as one of the structural problems contributing to the continuation of traditional memorization-based instruction.

Weak teacher selection systems and recruitment based on personal relationships rather than expertise further intensify this problem. Hejratullah Jebrailli stated that the ruling regime attempts to remove knowledgeable and critical teachers while selecting weaker teachers who merely endorse the system. Morteza Hamed also emphasized weaknesses in management and meritocracy, noting that professionally qualified teachers are frequently dismissed and replaced by unqualified individuals.

All of these factors contribute to teacher demotivation and increased pressure on both teachers and students. Naser Watanyar and Aminuddin Mozaffari both referred to increased workload and psychological pressure on teachers as one of the negative consequences of implementing outcome-based models without adequate support. Faiz Mohammad Osmani also regarded low teacher salaries as a factor depriving teachers of sufficient motivation and productivity. This dysfunctional cycle ultimately leads to a severe decline in students' and graduates' basic skills. According to Aziz Ahmad Hanif, many twelfth-grade graduates are unable even to write a simple leave request, while Hejratullah Jebrailli noted that students may memorize formulas but still fail in practical examinations.

A systematic and deepened gap between the ideal objectives of education and operational reality in the sociopolitical context of Afghanistan refers to a profound and historically rooted condition in which the education system has not only distanced itself from its core mission—namely, cultivating informed, creative, and skilled citizens—but has also widened this distance through a

vicious cycle of structural, political, and cultural factors. This is not a simple gap; rather, it is an institutionalized rupture in which the formal and informal rules governing the system, from the selection of administrators to the development of content, operate not in the service of learning but in the service of preserving power structures, promoting the dominant ideology, or theatrically managing crises. As a result, the school becomes a place alienated from students' real lives, the teacher becomes a passive executor of top-down directives that do not correspond to classroom realities, and the family becomes a distrustful institution, or even an obstacle, toward an education whose tangible benefit for the child's future is not perceived. This gap explains why material and human investments, even when made, rarely lead to desirable and sustainable educational outcomes, because superficial and technical reforms are destined to fail in the face of this fundamental fault line.

Contextual Conditions

This gap is embedded in Afghanistan's specific historical and sociocultural context, which surrounds education. These conditions include decades of war and chronic instability, which have not only destroyed infrastructure but also institutionalized collective trauma and deep distrust toward any long-term program. Ethnic structures and conservative social norms, especially regarding gender and traditional roles, create a context in which girls' education or the teaching of critical skills may be perceived as a threat to the existing order. On the other hand, widespread poverty and a weak economy have transformed education from a right and long-term investment into a luxury or inaccessible good for many families, forcing them to make difficult choices between economic survival and their children's schooling. At the same time, as Mirza Mohammad Roustaei and others noted, the tradition of respect for teachers and the cultural value attached to learning in Afghan society constitute a positive cultural capital that provides an internal potential for reducing this gap; however, this potential is largely overwhelmed by stronger contextual conditions.

Causal Conditions

The causal conditions, or direct causes of the creation and deepening of this systematic gap, are primarily rooted in political and managerial decision-making. The central cause, as Hejratullah Jebrailli, Kamaluddin Hamed, and Norouzi clearly stated, is the politicization and ideologization of education. When the education system becomes an instrument for promoting and consolidating the ideology of the ruling group, objectives such as quality, creativity, and equity are replaced by the goals of intellectual control and

the production of obedience. This directly leads to the removal of critical sciences, the distortion of history and curricular content, and the weakening of experimental sciences. A parallel and reinforcing cause is centralized, inefficient, and corrupt management. Excessive centralization, as Aminuddin Mozaffari and Kalantari noted, causes decisions to be made in Kabul without an understanding of diverse local realities. This form of management is not based on meritocracy, but on ethnic, partisan, and ideological relationships, resulting in the appointment of inefficient and demotivated administrators and teachers. Another factor is a short-term and unstable planning system in which, with every change of government or minister, unfinished projects are abandoned and previous policy directions are reversed. This instability makes any accumulation of experience and organizational learning impossible.

Intervening Conditions

Intervening conditions are factors that increase or reduce the intensity of the impact of causal conditions and, in effect, influence the depth and speed of the expansion of the gap. The most important negative intervening condition is severe economic poverty and the shortage of sustainable resources. Poverty imposes objective and psychological pressure on families and substantially lowers the priority of education. Moreover, the widespread migration of elites and experienced teachers, as Faiz Mohammad Osmani and Hojatullah Najih noted, further deprives the system of its remaining human capital and intensifies the cycle of specialist shortages. The digital divide and weak technological infrastructure also function as negative intervening conditions by limiting the possibility of using alternative and innovative solutions. Conversely, positive intervening conditions may include social capital and local networks. As observed in successful experiences in Bamyan, cited by Norouzi, or in the role of local councils, noted by Abdolqader Kamali, when local communities assume ownership of education, they can act as a shield against central dysfunction and preserve a space for genuine learning. The relative expansion of access to simple communication technologies, such as mobile phones, also provides a limited potential for creating parallel educational channels and bypassing centralized control.

Strategies

The possible strategies for reducing this gap are the same corrective actions proposed by the interviewees based on their understanding of these complex conditions. These strategies are not idealistic prescriptions, but realistic and

adaptive responses to the Afghan context. The key strategy is intelligent decentralization and the delegation of authority to schools and local communities. Establishing educational quality improvement committees composed of teachers, parents, and local leaders, as suggested by Norouzi, or granting limited authority to school principals to adapt programs to local needs, as suggested by Aminuddin Mozaffari, represents an attempt to bring operational reality closer to actual needs. The second strategy is teacher empowerment and support as the core of change. This includes not only continuous and practical professional training, but also ensuring teachers' livelihoods, job security, and social status so that they can move from being passive implementers to active educational designers within their local contexts. The third strategy is the localization of content and methods and a focus on basic and life skills instead of the accumulation of abstract and ideological information. The fourth strategy is the establishment of a decentralized, transparent monitoring and evaluation system based on authentic learning data, aimed at facilitating the exchange of experience and organizational learning rather than punishment. The fifth strategy is the creative and low-cost use of technology as a supplement, rather than a substitute, to compensate for some deficiencies and create access to high-quality content.

Consequences

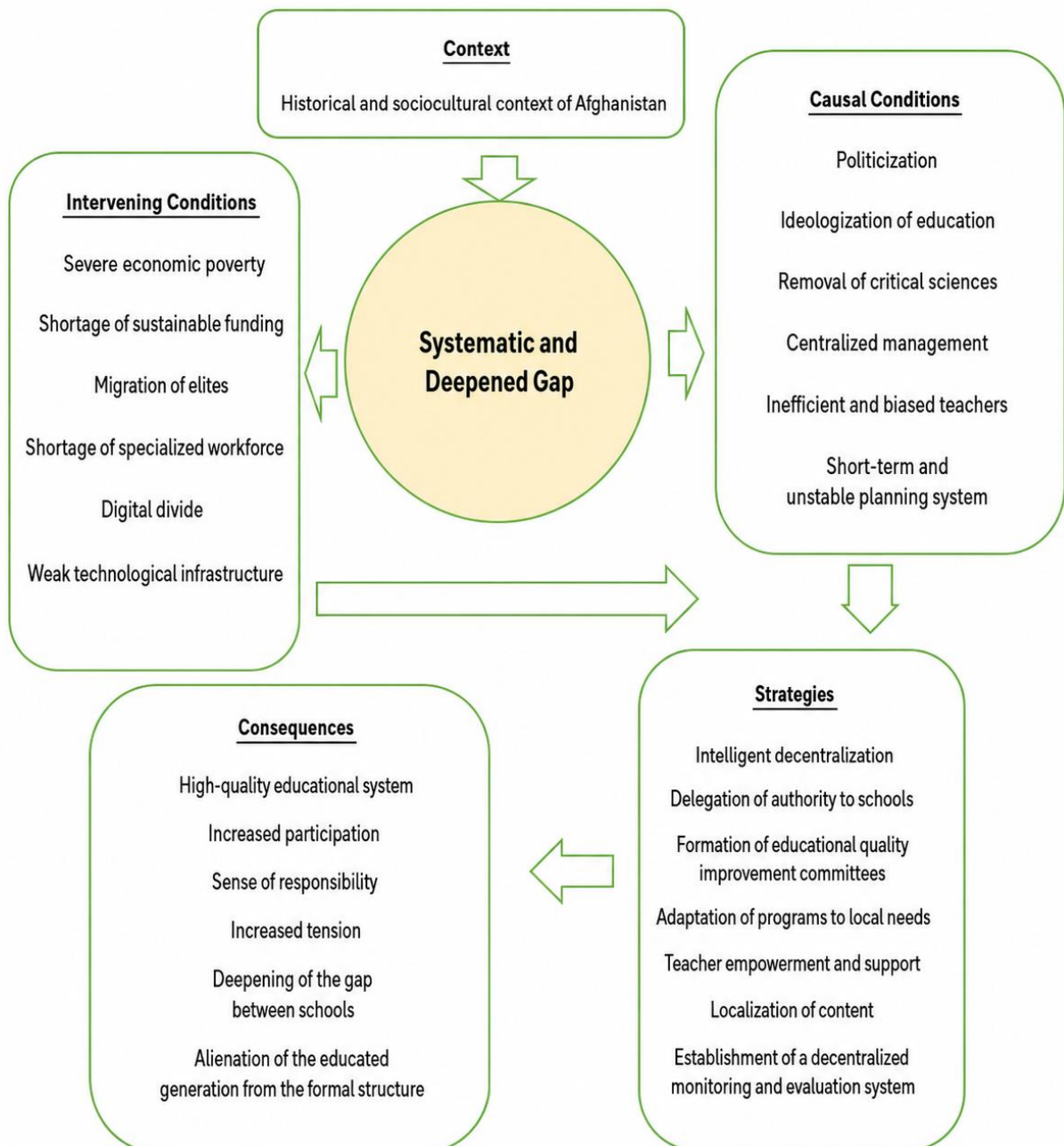
The consequences of adopting or failing to adopt these strategies for reducing the gap can be understood as a spectrum of positive and negative outcomes in the short and long term. In the short term, if participatory and decentralizing strategies are implemented with relative success in some locations, the positive consequence may be the creation of a high-quality educational system and the restoration of local trust. As observed in successful private schools or specific participatory projects, this can halt the decline of quality in those settings and increase participation and a sense of responsibility among local stakeholders. However, the negative short-term consequence may be increased tension with the centralized governing structure and a deeper divide between progressive schools and deprived schools, because resources and attention may be directed toward successful cases, thereby making existing inequalities more visible. In the long term, if these strategies continue and expand, the ideal positive consequence may be a gradual transformation of educational culture from memorization orientation to competency orientation and the formation of a generation equipped with critical thinking and self-directed learning skills, which may even exert reformist

pressure on the political structures of society. However, the negative long-term consequences in the event of failure or distortion of these strategies would be highly dangerous: the consolidation of a divided educational system consisting of a small elite-producing private or online sector and a large low-quality and ideological public sector, leading to intensified class and social gaps; the complete alienation of the educated generation from the country's formal structure

and increased migration tendencies; and, in the worst-case scenario, the capture and distortion of any reform model by power structures in order to redefine outcomes within the framework of the dominant ideology and produce obedience. The success of any strategy depends on a precise understanding of these possible consequences and the design of mechanisms to strengthen positive outcomes and contain negative risks.

Figure 1

Paradigmatic Diagram of the Study



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of the present study demonstrated that the education system of Afghanistan is affected by a multidimensional and deeply institutionalized gap between the ideal objectives of education and the operational realities governing educational institutions. The grounded theory analysis revealed that this gap is rooted in three major categories of challenges, namely structural-managerial challenges, economic-infrastructure challenges, and educational-content challenges, all of which interact dynamically within the broader sociopolitical context of Afghanistan. The extraction of the central category of a “systematic and deepened gap” indicates that educational inefficiency in Afghanistan cannot be understood merely as a technical or administrative problem, but rather as the outcome of interconnected political, cultural, economic, and institutional processes. This finding aligns strongly with previous studies emphasizing that educational systems in fragile and conflict-affected states are shaped not only by resource limitations but also by governance instability, ideological intervention, and institutional fragmentation (Alemi et al., 2025; Easar et al., 2023; Haghghi, 2021).

One of the most significant findings of the study concerned the instability of educational policymaking and the excessive centralization of educational governance. Participants repeatedly emphasized that frequent political transitions and ideological shifts have led to continuous curriculum changes, inconsistent educational priorities, and disruptions in long-term planning. This finding is consistent with the observations of Ahmadi regarding the vulnerability of Afghanistan’s educational institutions under changing political regimes and the resulting institutional uncertainty (Ahmadi, 2022). Similarly, Welch and Wahidyar argued that sustainable quality assurance in Afghan higher education remains difficult because educational governance structures are highly dependent on unstable political conditions and external influences (Welch & Wahidyar, 2020). The findings also correspond with Sarkka’s discussion of performance management systems, which emphasized that educational effectiveness requires continuity, accountability, and institutional stability in governance structures (Sarkka, 2020). In the Afghan context, however, educational policymaking appears to function within short-term political cycles rather than long-term developmental frameworks, thereby preventing the accumulation of organizational learning and institutional memory.

Another important finding was the role of politicization and ideologization in weakening educational quality and limiting critical thinking. Participants described the educational system as increasingly shaped by ideological priorities rather than pedagogical or developmental goals. The removal of critical sciences, restrictions on intellectual diversity, and prioritization of ideological conformity over analytical competence were identified as central contributors to educational decline. These findings strongly align with Sahar’s critical inquiry into radicalization through education in Afghanistan, which demonstrated how educational systems can become instruments of ideological reproduction and political control (Sahar, 2025). Similarly, Ershadi’s analysis of Bourdieu’s theory of educational reproduction supports the argument that educational institutions may reinforce dominant power structures and reproduce social inequalities when educational content and institutional practices are politically controlled (Ershadi, 2025). The present findings therefore suggest that educational management reforms in Afghanistan cannot succeed unless educational institutions regain a degree of professional autonomy and intellectual independence.

The findings further revealed that structural inefficiencies in educational administration significantly contribute to poor educational outcomes. Participants highlighted weak management systems, non-meritocratic appointments, bureaucratic inefficiency, and the absence of reliable monitoring and information systems. This finding is supported by Ahmadi’s study on organizational culture and knowledge management in educational institutions, which demonstrated that ineffective organizational cultures reduce institutional agility and weaken educational responsiveness (Ahmadi, 2023). Bekmurodov likewise emphasized that public institutions operating under politically influenced administrative systems frequently suffer from weak legitimacy, limited professionalism, and reduced effectiveness (Bekmurodov, 2025). The present findings indicate that centralized administrative structures in Afghanistan often fail to account for regional diversity and local educational needs, thereby reducing policy implementation effectiveness and increasing institutional rigidity. In this regard, the participants’ emphasis on intelligent decentralization and community-based educational governance reflects a growing recognition that local participation and contextual flexibility are necessary for improving educational outcomes.

Economic and infrastructural challenges emerged as another central dimension of educational inefficiency.

Poverty, unstable funding, inadequate school infrastructure, and limited access to digital technologies were repeatedly identified as barriers to effective learning. These findings are consistent with Haghghi's analysis of the obstacles to development in Afghanistan, which emphasized that poverty and infrastructural destruction severely limit educational accessibility and sustainability (Haghghi, 2021). The findings also support Angrist et al.'s argument that human capital development depends not only on school attendance but also on the quality of learning environments and educational resources (Angrist et al., 2021). In Afghanistan, many schools continue to operate without adequate buildings, electricity, clean water, laboratories, or educational materials, thereby reducing both educational quality and student motivation. Furthermore, the study revealed that unstable international aid and dependency on external financial support have intensified institutional vulnerability. This finding corresponds with Fidelia et al.'s discussion of Afghanistan's struggle to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 under conditions of state fragility and institutional collapse (Fidelia et al., 2025).

The study also demonstrated that digital inequality and technological limitations constitute emerging barriers within Afghanistan's educational system. Although mobile technologies and online learning platforms provide new opportunities for educational access, participants noted that unstable internet access, lack of electricity, high data costs, and insufficient technological infrastructure significantly restrict equitable educational participation. These findings align with Dawodi et al.'s study on mobile learning platforms, which emphasized the potential of digital technologies for bridging educational gaps in Afghanistan while simultaneously recognizing infrastructural limitations (Dawodi et al., 2023). Likewise, Zeynali highlighted the importance of innovative and multimodal instructional approaches for improving learning outcomes, particularly in contexts characterized by limited traditional educational resources (Zeynali, 2025). The present findings suggest that technological solutions may support educational development in Afghanistan, but only if accompanied by broader infrastructural investments and institutional reforms.

Another major finding concerned the prevalence of traditional, memorization-oriented educational approaches and the resulting decline in critical thinking and practical competencies. Participants repeatedly criticized the dominance of examination-oriented instruction and credentialism over competency development and

meaningful learning. This finding corresponds closely with Alainati's competency-based educational framework, which argues that modern educational systems must prioritize applied competencies, critical thinking, and practical problem-solving skills rather than rote memorization (Alainati, 2021). Similarly, Hashimi's comparative study of Afghan and Malaysian higher education systems emphasized the inadequacy of traditional instructional approaches in preparing graduates for labor market demands (Hashimi, 2020). The present study therefore reinforces the argument that outcome-based educational management requires a fundamental transformation in instructional philosophy, curriculum design, and assessment systems.

Teacher-related challenges also emerged as one of the most influential factors affecting educational effectiveness. Participants emphasized the shortage of professionally trained teachers, low salaries, weak professional development systems, and non-meritocratic recruitment practices. These findings strongly support Amini's study regarding stakeholder perceptions of teacher quality in Afghanistan's public schools, which identified inadequate teacher preparation and limited pedagogical training as major obstacles to educational quality (Amini, 2024). Wardak likewise highlighted the central role of teacher education and leadership development in educational reconstruction within post-conflict Afghanistan (Wardak, 2022). The present findings indicate that teachers frequently operate under severe psychological, economic, and institutional pressures that undermine motivation and instructional effectiveness. Consequently, teacher empowerment emerged in the proposed model as a central strategy for reducing the gap between educational ideals and operational realities.

The findings additionally revealed the strong influence of sociocultural and gender-related factors on educational participation and outcomes. Participants referred to cultural resistance, traditional norms, and family-related barriers that particularly affect girls' education and critical educational practices. These findings are highly consistent with Saiq's analysis of gender inequality in Afghan education and Naqawi and Sultani's examination of the challenges facing women's education under contemporary Afghan conditions (Naqawi & Sultani, 2025; Saiq, 2023). The findings also correspond with Tutakhil's argument that globalization and sociocultural transformation have created tensions between traditional structures and modern educational expectations within Afghanistan (Tutakhil, 2021). Such sociocultural conditions complicate educational reform because they

influence not only access to education but also perceptions regarding the legitimacy and purpose of schooling.

An important theoretical implication of the study concerns the interaction between structural-functional and critical perspectives on education. From a structural-functional perspective, education should contribute to social integration, human capital development, and national stability (Imran, 2024; Wasilah, 2023). However, the findings suggest that Afghanistan's educational system often fails to perform these integrative functions because structural inequalities, political interventions, and institutional weaknesses undermine educational effectiveness. From a critical perspective, the findings support the argument that educational systems may reproduce social inequality and ideological domination when educational governance is disconnected from meritocracy, social justice, and professional autonomy (Ershadi, 2025; Jaeger, 2022). The proposed outcome-based educational management model therefore attempts to reconcile these perspectives by emphasizing both institutional effectiveness and contextual sensitivity.

The proposed strategies identified in the study—including intelligent decentralization, community participation, teacher empowerment, localized curriculum development, and decentralized monitoring systems—reflect adaptive responses to Afghanistan's complex educational realities. These strategies are compatible with contemporary approaches to results-based management emphasizing accountability, stakeholder participation, contextual responsiveness, and continuous evaluation (Bhattarai, 2020; Dias & Tenera, 2020). Furthermore, the emphasis on local participation and educational ownership corresponds with Sadvoska et al.'s findings regarding the importance of stakeholder engagement in sustainable educational development (Sadvoska et al., 2025). The findings also resonate with Floiger et al.'s argument that supportive educational environments and institutional flexibility can facilitate educational advancement even among disadvantaged populations (Floiger et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings suggest that educational reform in Afghanistan requires not only technical improvements but also broader institutional, sociocultural, and governance transformations.

The limitations of the present study should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted using a qualitative grounded theory approach with a relatively limited number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to all educational contexts

within Afghanistan. Second, the participants were primarily university professors, researchers, and school administrators, while the perspectives of students, parents, and policymakers were not directly included. Third, the sociopolitical sensitivity of educational issues in Afghanistan may have influenced participants' willingness to fully express critical perspectives during interviews. Fourth, the rapidly changing political and institutional conditions in Afghanistan may affect the long-term stability and applicability of some findings over time.

Future research could expand the present study by employing mixed-methods or quantitative approaches to examine the effectiveness of outcome-based educational management models across different regions and educational levels in Afghanistan. Comparative studies between public, private, urban, and rural educational institutions could provide deeper insight into contextual variations in educational management and performance. Further studies may also investigate the role of digital technologies, community participation, gender-sensitive educational policies, and teacher professional development in improving educational outcomes within fragile and conflict-affected societies. Longitudinal investigations examining the long-term effects of educational reforms on competency development, employability, and social cohesion would also contribute significantly to the literature.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that policymakers and educational administrators in Afghanistan should prioritize long-term institutional stability, merit-based educational governance, and localized decision-making processes. Educational reforms should move beyond quantitative expansion and focus on improving learning quality, critical thinking skills, and competency development. Greater investment is needed in teacher training, educational infrastructure, technological accessibility, and decentralized monitoring systems. Furthermore, community participation and stakeholder engagement should be strengthened in order to enhance local educational ownership and institutional trust. Finally, educational policies should be designed in ways that balance cultural sensitivity with the promotion of educational equity, intellectual freedom, and sustainable national development.

Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were under the ethical standards of the institutional and, or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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