Personal Thoughts on the First mEducation Alliance Afghan Youth Math Games Ambassador Workshop

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For the better part of twenty years, our country carried out a very challenging war in Afghanistan. Some of you have posted pictures - with both pride and worry - of your sons and daughters who have served. I know others have served through the military, State Department, and even non-profit organizations. Since the decision to finally withdraw from the country and the heart wrenching scenes of desperate Afghans trying to leave the country at the Kabul airport, we have heard very little.

Roughly 76,000 Afghans, many of them young children, have been brought to the U.S., where refugee resettlement officials are helping them find homes, apply for jobs and enroll their children in school. Many are heading to regions with existing Afghan communities, particularly in the San Francisco Bay area, the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, and Dallas. Others are being settled wherever the refugee resettlement agencies have room for them, from Florida to Oklahoma and North Dakota.

I have been working with a fairly new non-profit, the mEducation Alliance, that is researching and promoting edtech learning materials in low-resource countries/context. For example, with Save the Children and Viamo and some support from the Cisco Foundation, we are piloting the use of cell phones as a vehicle for delivering games and activities that improve math skills among kids in Rwanda. Given our work with marginalized populations, the mEducation Alliance expanded its focus to embrace supporting Afghani and other refugee populations in the U.S. An initial product is the Afghan Kids Support Hub site with collations of educational materials and other reference materials populated by mEducation Alliance members and other partners. We then approached the U.S. Department of State and leading refugee resettlement organizations to explore how we might additionally provide learning resources to the Afghan children as they resettle and enroll in local U.S. schools.

To this end, we piloted small efforts last week as part of our broader Youth Math Game Ambassadors program to train youth to support bringing the joy of math to their peers and younger kids via introduction to a variety of low-cost, non-tech math games (e.g, dice, card sets, chess, other manipulables). This included a webinar with mentors and mentees of refugee serving organizations (e.g, Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area) – and conducting a face-to-face training in collaboration with Migration and Refugee Services of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The latter occurred at a location in MD where about 200 refugee families have been staying. Many of these refugees were hurt physically or psychologically from the airport bombings. Imagine the journey they survived to get here. With the support of the Rotary Club Washington Global, we purchased a series of low-cost, non-tech math and problem-solving games (i.e., Math Dice, SET, and Chess) and held a workshop for 25 children between 10 and 15 years old.

The experience was very powerful. We started with Math Dice. The children were so excited to be engaged in learning. The younger children were using the dice to count, add, and share their knowledge of numbers – and use their evolving English! The older children were successfully identifying the "target number" and devising workable equations using numbers on the dice to reach the target. If you do not know the game, I can tell you these kids were using higher level math knowledge to play the game and having fun doing so!

When we asked the kids, how many knew how to play chess, several hats shot up! "Did they have their own chess sets?" "No!". (Our hearts swelled when we heard afterwards that a father played chess with his kids on their newly acquired chess set).

I was so moved by the children.   They are so smart. They are so determined. Reflecting on the day, I had a couple of take-aways to share. First, as I looked into the eyes of these children, I could only imagine the emotional toll of their journey. Yet here they were engaged in learning. Second, these kids were so very bright. If they were left in Afghanistan, however, most of them would not be in school – especially the girls. They are a true gift to our country. Finally, I was imagining 15 years out and the chances of encountering one of these kids as a healthcare professional in my senior years.   Bottomline - we cannot afford to lose a single one of these minds!

Where do we go from here? We were able to initially work with 25 children, a drop in the bucket of the thousands that are now in many communities across the U.S. How do we replicate, expand, and support efforts to work with these children, particularly Afghan refugee girls? As you might imagine, being enrolled in school and even receiving supplemental services from refugee organizations will not be enough to meet the educational and social needs of these children. So, the Alliance is working to scale its Afghan Youth Math Game Ambassadors and

[Math Power!](#) initiative globally? Can we raise necessary resources to purchase games, conduct training of trainers, and provide follow-up? Can we galvanize a cadre of volunteers and leaders to support the effort across the country and globally? I don't have the answers, and therefore, welcome any ideas. But here are a few ideas:

1) Make a donation - $50 will provide games and training for 5 children. $500 will provide support for 50 kids, and $1,000 - you can do the math:-)
2) Host a fundraiser – Host a dinner for friends, ask them to contribute the cost of eating out at a restaurant, and make a collective donation.
3) Volunteer – Send a request to possibly serve as a "virtual mentor" to a child, serve as a "trainer of trainers."

If you are interested in supporting this effort, please visit our [sponsorship page](#) to donate or purchase items off our [Amazon Wishlist](#).