



POLICY BRIEF

How can Networked Improvement Communities help School Leaders address inclusion challenges in their schools?

Evidence from Nepal, Pakistan and Afghan Refugee Schools

KEY TERMS

School Leaders: School personnel who are in leadership positions: school principals, head teachers, deputy head teachers or other educational staff.

Networked Improvement Communities (NICs): Collaborative professional learning groups that bring together school leaders to solve educational problems using a continuous improvement approach.

Continuous improvement approach: A data-driven change process that aims to systematically design, test, implement, and scale change toward systemic improvement. One type of continuous improvement uses repeated Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles.

Open Educational Resources (OER): Teaching, learning and research materials that are freely available for anyone to use, adapt and share. They are sometimes referred to as open resources and usually published under a Creative Commons license.

School leaders who participate in Networked Improvement Communities increase their motivation and skills to address inclusion issues in their schools.

School leaders working with peers in networked improvement communities (NICs) and using continuous improvement tools such as the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle, are empowered to take an active role in identifying and making changes to address local issues of inclusion in their schools. This impact is strengthened when NICs are guided and supported by a facilitator and open digital resources.

Our research shows school leader actions lead to reported improvements in education equity for students; increased enrolment and attendance, reduced attrition and greater participation in lessons.

This form of Networked Improvement Communities is a relatively low-cost system strategy to improve inclusion and inclusive education. However, effective implementation requires commitment from all stakeholders within the education system.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

In Nepal and Pakistan, many school-age children experience limited quality learning opportunities and their school attendance is sporadic. In Pakistan, 26 million children are out of school (Government of Pakistan, 2024). Learning outcomes are generally low and notably lower for girls and children with disabilities. This poses a substantial challenge for policymakers and education leaders striving to integrate marginalized populations into school systems and create relevant, safe and quality learning experiences for all children, including children from refugee communities who face extra challenges due to trauma and social integration issues (UNESCO, 2019).

School leaders can play an important role in fostering inclusive environments, guiding teachers toward more effective classroom practices and engaging with local communities to encourage increased school attendance (Crawford, 2017). They have the potential to be key change agents within educational systems and communities. However, in many low- and middle-income countries, their traditional focus has been predominantly on administrative functions (Hooge, 2020), with limited emphasis on issues such as educational inclusion or encouragement to embrace active experimentation for continuous improvement.

Research carried out at the start of this project indicated that most school leaders are aware of disparities in students' access to education and some take steps to address these through attending to students' basic needs – school uniforms, shoes and books. However, prior to the project, these practices were often *ad hoc*; few school leaders were using data to investigate, analyze and promote inclusion. In all three contexts (public schools in Nepal and Pakistan and Afghan refugee schools in Pakistan), school leaders had previously received limited formal professional development on inclusion.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The continuous improvement approach combined with professional communities – Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) (Bryk et al., 2015) – has shown promise in enhancing school leader agency to tackle localised issues or challenges in low- and medium-income, or fragile contexts (Wolfenden et al., 2023).

To assess the potential value of Networked Improvement Communities (NICs) to improve education inclusion, a consortium of partners¹ undertook applied research with school leaders in Nepal (Bardibas and Sindhuli), Pakistan (Lahore and Islamabad) and Afghan refugee schools (Peshawar, Pakistan), during the period 2021 – 2024.

In each location, small groups of school leaders were brought together in a NIC. Each NIC was allocated a facilitator (local teacher education, teacher trainer, inclusion expert or a representative from the Ministry of Education) and a set of tablets to access structured Open Educational Resources (OER) organized as an open course. These OER guided the school leaders in their use of a continuous improvement approach to identify and address micro-inclusion challenges in their schools. NICs choose how to collaborate; some met virtually, and others met in person. Some met monthly, others more or less frequently throughout the project.

A multi-layered mixed-methods design was used to capture changes in school leaders' behavior and attitudes throughout the project. Data was collected from school leader participants (n=95) at baseline, midline and endline through surveys and semi-structured interviews. Additional data was from facilitators (notes and interviews) and the online platform used to share resources.

KEY FINDINGS

1. The use of continuous improvement approaches enhanced school leaders' agency to identify and tackle micro-inclusion challenges in their schools.

All the school leaders highly appreciated the effectiveness of the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle and problem tree. Utilizing the tools, school leaders were able to address minor inclusion issues, analyze their root causes and try out different solutions. They began to recognize inclusion issues that they had previously overlooked, School leaders developed increased confidence and competence to use student data.

“Before this course, we did not collect data in a very comprehensive and detailed manner [...] Now, we have created individual portfolios for each student. [...] This is really helpful because we can open a portfolio, pinpoint a problem and solve the problem.
(School leader in Pakistan)

School leaders tried out a wide range of small changes to address identified micro-inclusion challenges. Some school leaders focused on improving student attendance through actions such as community engagement, individual counseling to students and making provisions for sanitary pads and other support to adolescent girls. Other school leaders looked at issues such as how tasks and roles were allocated to students, student safety, bullying amongst students and issues of language. Implementing changes for greater equity in learning often involved school leaders in challenging normative behaviors of both students and teachers.

“[...] Like this while choosing the monitor of the class, we used to say to the boy, "Hey, you be the monitor". But now, with the

responsibilities assigned, it is also given to girls. If the disabled person is capable, it is also given to the disabled person. Even if someone is left behind for some other reason, or left behind linguistically, it has been started to say, "Speak in his language too, who knows?"
(School leader, Nepal)

These actions led to reported outcomes that included higher student enrolment and attendance, changes in teaching methods and teacher behavior, and greater school leader task efficiency

“This is what PDSA is about. It's about taking responsibility for solving the problem you see yourself, and it's not as difficult as it seems when you start researching it.
(School leader, Nepal)

2. Participation in NICs (supported peer communities) strengthened school leaders' motivation to engage with inclusion challenges and provided opportunities for joint problem solving.

NICs offered school leaders a platform to exchange knowledge, support one another, and engage in activities that would have been challenging for an individual to accomplish alone.

Over 90% of the school leaders reported that the NICs helped them to develop professional relationships with other school leaders in their community.

They openly acknowledged that their involvement significantly enhanced their communication and leadership skills, and the experience gave them a newfound sense of confidence.

“Interactions in the NIC have instilled in me a sense of patience and confidence that help me, enabling me to tackle challenges more effectively.
(School leader, Afghan refugee school)

This has empowered school leaders to approach challenges with greater agency and effectiveness. In Pakistan, local education officials were members of each NIC. This helped both to legitimize the small change actions of the school leaders, and to build more productive relationships between the schools and the local authorities – for example, local officials became more aware of the resource constraints experienced by school leaders.

Impressed by the benefits of participation, many school leaders expressed their willingness to continue meetings and networking. They also recommended expanding NICs to school leaders from other locations.

3. Structured practice-based activities are effective in supporting school leaders to deepen their understandings of inclusion in their setting.

The design of the OER was central to the success of this project. The OER challenged school leaders to make observations of different groups of students around their school, talk to teachers, collect and analyze data and engage with community leaders. Through this practice-based approach school leaders developed their capacity to notice, identify and monitor issues of inclusion and exclusion in their school. This broadened and deepened their understanding of different forms of inclusion; many started to identify micro inclusion problems that extended beyond their initial focus on disability and girls.

“The best thing I understood in this course was that every person has the right to education, regardless of language, religion, race, or any minority and the school gate should be open to all.
(School leader, Afghan Refugee School)

School leaders appreciated that the OER activities acknowledge the contextual and contingent aspects of their roles.

“This has helped me in having... increasing knowledge about inclusion and equality and I think this was a big challenge for me because it includes many children who were not from the same social background. This course also has big positive changes in me because now I become a better teacher. I understand the problems of my student and I understand the cause of this problem. [...] I have become more communicative and effective through this.
(School leader, Pakistan)

Facilitators were critical in supporting school leaders to engage with the activities and to develop their digital skills in the initial stages of the project. This impact was particularly strong in Pakistan and amongst the school leaders working in Afghan Refugee Schools in Pakistan

ENDNOTE

- 1 Foundation for Information Technology Education and Development (FIT-ED); The Open University, UK; Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan; Kathmandu University, Nepal; Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan)



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. Allow school leaders autonomy to experiment with small changes in their schools

School leaders are familiar with their schools and many have extensive connections in the local community. Using continuous improvement approach tools such as the Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle in NICs, they can implement locally driven small changes based on local circumstances and resources. However, for this to succeed, there must be trust and flexibility within the system to enable school leaders to experiment and make small changes, and acknowledgment from policymakers and stakeholders of the crucial role school leaders play in implementing these changes.

2. Create opportunities for school leaders to network and collaborate with each other

School leaders highly value the opportunity to come together and discuss problems, insights and challenges. This research project's findings demonstrate that by exchanging knowledge, supporting each other and working together on tasks, they can achieve more than they would on their own. However, for this collaboration to positively impact school improvement, school leaders need dedicated time to participate in peer communities and the presence of a facilitator to coordinate and structure the collaboration.

3. Utilize the power of digital technologies for professional development

School leaders are increasingly using digital platforms and resources in their work. This research project demonstrated that even in very low resource conditions, school leaders can benefit from professional development that uses digital technologies with Open Educational Resources. However, it is important to combine digital approaches with traditional in-person sessions in a way that is appropriate to the context.

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The TPD@Scale Coalition for the Global South is a collaborative effort of education and technology stakeholders who are engaged in teacher professional development. The Coalition aims to contribute to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4—ensure inclusive and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all—by promoting quality, equitable, and sustainable large-scale, ICT-mediated TPD through collaboration, research, and implementation support.