

Promoting inclusion at scale with school leader network communities supported by open resources: researching participant needs and priorities

Abstract

School Leaders' role in promoting change for equity and inclusion in their schools and communities as pedagogical leaders is underutilised in many contexts. Although leaders may not see themselves as having agency or responsibility for inclusion there is potential to build on their local knowledge to take small actions from the bottom up: they can open or close doors for children marginalised from learning.

Our GPE KIX funded research in Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan explores the potential scalability of strengthening school leaders' capacity for inclusion through collaboration in networked improvement communities with open and blended learning resources.

Despite significant disruptions from covid, regime change and other disruptions, in-country partners conducted research exploring local practices around inclusion, access to ICT, access to professional development, and the policy context related to inclusion in each of these contexts. This involved surveys of over 500 school leaders followed by semi-structured interviews (30) and detailed policy analysis of inclusion, leadership and ICT. In this paper we share findings from this initial research and the implications of findings for supporting the design of the open resources to support localised enquiry-based collaboration to strengthen school leaders' capacity to take action on education inclusion.

Authors

Freda Wolfenden, Deborah Cooper, Saraswati Dawadi (The Open University UK), Zahid Majeed (Allama Iqbal Open University), Sushil Shrestha (Kathmandu University) and Munir Ibrahim (Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan)

Introduction

School inclusion is a global issue: large number of girls and vulnerable children are educationally marginalised from quality learning (UNICEF, 2020). Barriers to education inclusion include family and community issues – household chores, girls' safety, poverty - as well as school practices relating to didactic pedagogies and low levels of understanding on how to adapt teaching to meet the learning needs of different children (GMR, 2020)

Learning levels are particularly low for girls, children with disabilities, internally displaced children, those living in remote communities and children experiencing extreme poverty (GMR, 2020; Nawab & Bissaker, 2021). This lack of equity in public education systems is argued to hold countries back from reaching their human, economic and political development goals. The creation of relevant, safe, and quality learning experiences and ensuring inclusion for all children is a priority for national actors in partnership with the global community.

This education inclusion challenge demands significant scale of action. And change at different levels. Our focus here is school leaders in public education systems in Nepal and Pakistan, and school leaders working with Afghan refugees in the region¹. School leaders are widely recognised as key change agents in a school system (Fullan, 2006), and in the community where partnership with governance groups can promote sustained changes in community attitudes and behaviours (AFK, 2019).

Our research objective is to understand how school leaders' agency to problem solve local issues of equity and inclusion in their schools and communities can be sustainably developed at scale - working across districts, provinces and possibly nations. The innovative mechanism for this is networked communities supported by open learning resources. Our position, drawing on socio-cultural theories (Rogoff, 2008) is that culturally responsive leadership practices to address issues of inclusion need to be understood and developed at local level within national or province level frameworks (policies, expectations, visions and goals): a bottom up approach to change, characterised by decentralised and participatory structures. However, it is important to state upfront

¹ The project planned to work with school leaders in Afghanistan but following the Taliban take over in August 2021, and the policy announcements on girls' education in March 2022, the project has pivoted to work directly with Afghan school leaders in education settings outside the country including refugee camps.

that we recognise the large structural issues faced by school leaders which demand attention from higher level actors.

In our work we draw on positive impacts from school leader networked communities in different geographies in previous work (Wolfenden & Agbaire, 2021). In these communities, school leaders develop heightened awareness, understanding, self-efficacy and capacity to take action at a micro level through collectively testing theories of action about what works and under what conditions, using plan, do, study, act cycles (Byrk et al., 2015). Collaboration adds motivation and value to the inquiry cycles which are proposed here to focus on inclusion and equity issues in schools. In this scaling research, the open resources are planned to offer prompts, activities and examples to guide the work of large numbers of school leader networked communities. This approach harnesses the increasing ubiquity of blended learning approaches for education professionals (Wolfenden, et al. , 2017; Grasseer, et al. , 2019; Wolfenden, 2021).

The first stage of project working has included preliminary research by partners in each country (Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan) to understand the specific environments which shape the inclusion practices of school leaders and the nature of these practices. It is this initial research which we report here along with the implications for the design, modalities and content of the open resources and networked communities.

School leaders, equity and inclusion

School leaders are recognised as crucial to creating conditions conducive to inclusion of all pupils, to guiding and motivating teachers to move to more inclusive and effective pedagogies and to mediation with the communities they serve (Branch et al, 2013; Bush, 2013; Crawford, 2017; OCED, 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Pont et al., 2008, Schwatz & Mehta, 2014;;).

Context responsive leadership is important (Harris, 2020) yet there is limited research conducted with or on school leaders in low-and middle-income countries (Flessa et al., 2021) with very few studies on how the work of school leaders is connected to the delivery of contemporary policies including those on equality and inclusion. There is a noted gap between policy intent – delegating responsibility for implementing reforms to school leaders – and practice (UNESCO, 2015).

Our research interest is strengthening leaders’ capacity to act in response to problems and issues related to education inclusion. Historically, particularly in developing countries, a ‘contractual’ view of their role as primarily concerned with management and administration has prevailed, according them only a limited role in instructional leadership (Hooge, 2020; UNESCO/ UNICEF, 2012). Conditions, prior experiences and expectations for school leaders frequently make it difficult for them to develop agency with respect to equality in learning access, retention and outcomes and they lack easy access to expert support or collaboration as means to develop this agency (Jones, & Ringler, 2021). Furthermore, current global conditions – from conflict to coronavirus – have exacerbated the marginalisation of specific groups of pupils and increased the pressures on school leaders (Fullan, 2020). In response approaches to education leadership are undergoing significant change and more collaborative and flexible approach are being advocated; Fullan, for example, proposes a more data and inquiry driven approach to leadership and introduces the concept of cycles of experimentation.



Figure 1: New school leadership adopted from Fullan 2020, p.141)

In Fullan's model (2020), which resonates with our approach, school leaders need to be continually learning, drawing on data and collaboration to make improvements in school practices. This represents a shift in the use of data, from accountability purposes to a focus on using data to support investigation and change.

The existing literature on school leadership, albeit almost exclusively from high income contexts, highlights the roles of professional networks in supporting school leaders. School leaders engaging in networks increase their own effectiveness and sustainable change in their institutions (Fullan, 2020; Sutchter et al., 2017;). Leithwood et al. (2021) further argue that the most successful school leaders are ready to learn from others. They are open-minded and flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking.

The concepts of education equality, equity and inclusion are complex and linked to the wider social relations of the context of the school and community. We understand education equality as implying the need to promote fairness and justice through treating all learners equally. This focuses attention on structural inequalities but also risks legitimising inequalities of outcome, as these are understood to depend on the effort of the individual. Equity is understood to imply that as educators we need to look at what *learners need* to engage in education so that they can participate fully and develop their capabilities. Equity places the individual learner at the centre of the education process, values their ways of knowing and being and recognises that these experiences mediate learning. We utilise the concept of 'inclusive practice' which extends the idea of inclusion and recognises the need to understand, accommodate and meet the learning needs of each learner.

The initial research

We adopt a sociocultural approach in which what school leaders are able to do in relation to inclusion within their schools and communities and what they see as being possible for them, will depend on a) possibilities offered by the setting (national or provincial context) in which they are practising; b) possibilities within their school— schools vary in their organisation and enduring practices; and c) their experiences and histories as a teacher and school leader. Thus, a first step was to undertake research to understand both the policy and local contexts in which school leaders' actions are embedded and inclusion practices which are being taken up by school leaders. This research aimed to inform the design of the open resources and the networked communities.

We addressed the following research questions in each country (Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan):

- how are school leaders responding to national and local policies and initiatives linked to equity and inclusion and what actions are they able to take or see themselves able to take?
- in what ways are school leaders' accessing and using digital technologies for professional learning and practice?
- what forms of professional learning and collaboration do school leaders participate in?

Initial exploration covered the wider socio-cultural, political and economic setting in which the school leaders' work - national education policies, conceptions of their role and of inclusion and equity in education. This was followed by fieldwork exploring how these policies are being taken up by school leaders in their schools.

Research methodology

The study employed a mixed methods approach to address the research questions with sufficient depth and breadth. It comprised document analysis, a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews with school leaders and key informants. Firstly, relevant documents/resources, particularly policy documents, available in the three target countries (Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan) were analysed, followed by a questionnaire survey with school leaders and semi-structured interviews with a small sub-sample of survey participants.

Generic instruments (both for the survey and interviews) were generated in English, and the instruments were adapted, including language translation, by each country team. Each country team carried out pre-testing with the instruments to check their validity, practical feasibility including time required by participants to complete, and to surface any difficulties that might arise in the data generation and/or analysis. Following these pilots, changes were made to the instruments and procedures.

Teams aimed to reach a representative sample of school leaders in each country for the survey. To recruit participants, data collection teams sought support from organisations who are prospective users of our research. In Pakistan, the Special Education Department Punjab, and the Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) in Islamabad helped in sampling the population for the research. Similarly, the Nepal team worked with local-level governments and a teacher association (Nepal English Language Teachers' Association) during the data collection phase. In Afghanistan, an external data collector from Nangarhar province contributed to participant selection (and data collection) for the study.

A total of 529 school leaders (134 Afghanistan, 118 Nepal, 277 Pakistan) and 10 key informants (4 each from Afghanistan and Nepal, 2 from Pakistan) took part in this study. In each country, the participants were representative of gender, geographical location (urban/rural) and school type (primary/middle/secondary) and school size. A very small number of participants disclosed that they were differently abled.

Given the pandemic situation online data collection was strongly encouraged by relevant authorities. However, the sole use of online approaches risked excluding school leaders with poor connectivity, limited access to digital devices or low digital skills. Hence, the Nepal team used a blended approach, the Pakistan team leveraged local meetings of school leaders to collect data in person, and the Afghanistan team carried out data generation by phone.

The project was conducted according to the British Educational Research Association's guidelines (BERA, 2018) with permissions from relevant authorities in each country. All data was treated as confidential and promptly anonymised.

Different analytical techniques were used to analyse the data; descriptive statistics were employed for the quantitative data whereas qualitative data was analysed using a framework generated from pilot study data. The framework focused on four key issues: inclusion attitudes and values; leadership actions in relation to inclusion (opportunities and constraints), leadership general behaviours and priorities (including collaboration and CPD), and ICT skills and use. Since equality, equity and gender inclusion issues are central to this project, analysis of the data also involved disaggregation for gender and geographic location.

Findings of the study

We report here high level findings from this initial research relevant to the design of the open resources and networked communities. We start with outlining the social context within which school leaders work in each country.

The former government of Afghanistan, with considerable support from development partners, conceptualised an extensive set of inclusion policies and issues of inclusion are well represented in government priorities and strategies (MoE, 2016). School leaders are given explicit responsibility for ensuring that schools are 'inclusive, safe and conducive to learning and positive social relations with the participation of stakeholders' (MoE, 2016, p.4). The extent to which these commitments will be maintained by the new government is unclear, the Taliban's policy on education remains work in progress (HRW, 2020) but the recent announcement restricting girls' education is not promising.

Recent analysis of school leaders' work emphasised that they see themselves primarily as administrators and managers with responsibility for collecting data and reporting it onwards to the MoE or District Education Directors rather than analysing it themselves, and do not generally view themselves as responsible for student learning outcomes (Molina et al., 2018; World Bank SABER, 2018). Inclusion issues in Afghanistan are diverse but have tended to be dominated by a focus on girls' education.

In Nepal the Constitution (2015) emphasizes the right to education for all on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth and disability. The 2014 government 'Consolidate Equity Strategy' is very strong on equity in access, participation, retention and learning outcomes in education and the current Education Plan (SSDP 2016 – 2023) mentions differentiated pedagogic practices for diverse needs, local flexibility and recognition of all students' cultural identities. This has led to recent revisions in curricula and textbooks. Key inclusions issues include the low pass out rate of female students and the attendance of students from Dali, Muslim Madesh communities. However, there is little official guidance on how inequalities might be addressed at school level nor expectations of the role that school leaders might play in supporting these aims although Education Regulation 2059 defines the 31 different functions, duties and powers of school leaders.

In Pakistan Article 25 of the Constitution states the right to education for all children (5-16) and the National Education Policy 2017-2025 outlines a series of goals including expanding access to the right to education and meeting learning needs of all learners. National priorities for inclusion are disability, distance and destitution (National Education Policy, 2017) and high attention is being given to children with disabilities and girls.

School leaders have authority to manage teachers through direct supervision but most of their time is spent dealing with internal administrative issues (Mansoor, 2015). Most head teachers have had little preparation for the role and are hired for their seniority and teaching experience.

i) School leader inclusion attitudes and values

Our findings suggest that most respondents have a sound general understanding that inclusive education means the right to education for all, without discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, location, income, ability, etc. and yet there was little awareness of government policies across all three countries:

“I am not aware of any such policy. What I know about inclusion is what I learnt from my seniors and reading” (HT7-Afghanistan).

For many school leaders in all three countries inclusion was seen primarily as concerned with children with disabilities or from different groups who would be attending special schools and therefore not the concern of most school leaders.

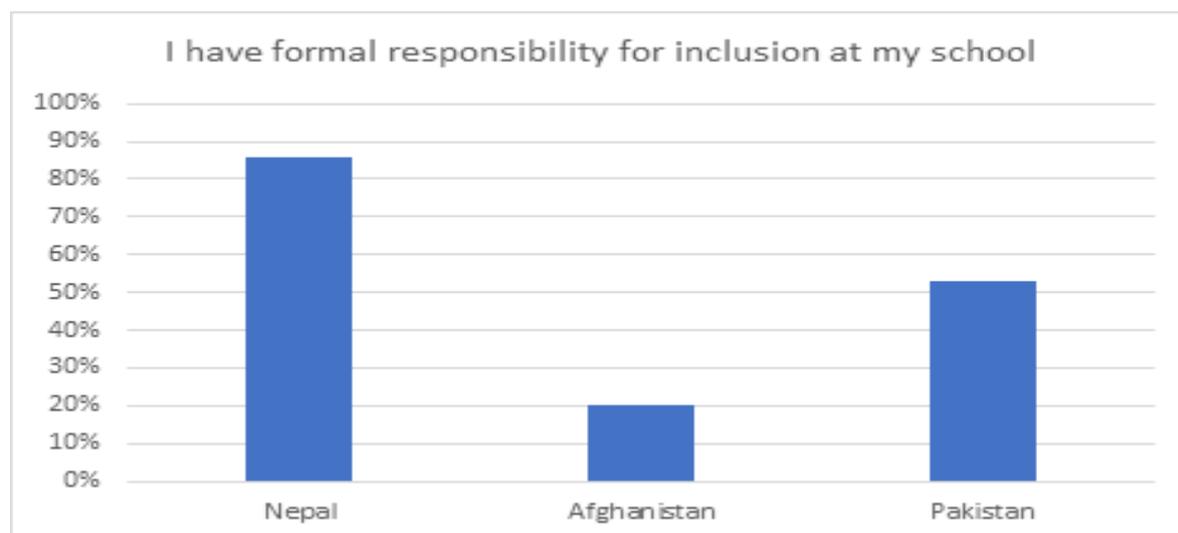
“...it is difficult for us to teach all the groups of students in the same class since those children [street children] are brought up in a different way So in my opinion different schools should be established for those children” (HT1 – Nepal).

Nevertheless, many of them believe changing teaching methods to incorporate disadvantaged students is important. They hold similar beliefs in welcoming parents from all community members to school and perceive a need to improve attendance of specific student groups. Furthermore, since most HTs collect student/teacher attendance record and student test results there is further potential in the networked communities to use this data to promote inclusion in their schools.

ii) school leader responses to issues of inclusion and equity (actions and constraints)

Across the three countries school leaders had very different perceptions of their roles in promoting inclusion in their schools, see figure 2:

Figure 2: HTs’ perceptions of their responsibility for inclusion



In Afghanistan, the majority of school leaders (64%) believe that SMC heads are responsible for promoting inclusion in their schools and a small number reported that no one is responsible for inclusion in their schools or that they didn't know who was responsible. In Pakistan many school leaders' felt unable to take action on inclusion issues unless there was an explicit government instruction to do so:

“As far as inclusion is concerned, I do understand what is needed for inclusion of CwDs due to my prior knowledge on the subject. But I am unable to implement anything due to lack of orders from higher ups and no resources at place” (HT8- Pakistan)

But deeper investigations indicated that we needed to take a more nuanced approach to this data (figure 2) and pay attention to collaborative actions:

“I don’t have the ability to suggest changes alone (by myself) but I have contributed to suggest changes to school environment together with other teachers” (HT1-Afghanistan);

“There are very limited actions that I can perform on my own. I make a plan and let it discuss in our SMC meeting and teachers’ meeting” (HT10-Nepal)

Whilst recognising that parents of disadvantaged students are not members of the School Management Committee / School Council in most schools in our sample (Pakistan, 63%; Nepal, 69%; Afghanistan, 75%) and this may influence the priorities of these groups.

Furthermore, our data indicated that many headteachers are taking some actions within resource constraints to support disadvantaged students:

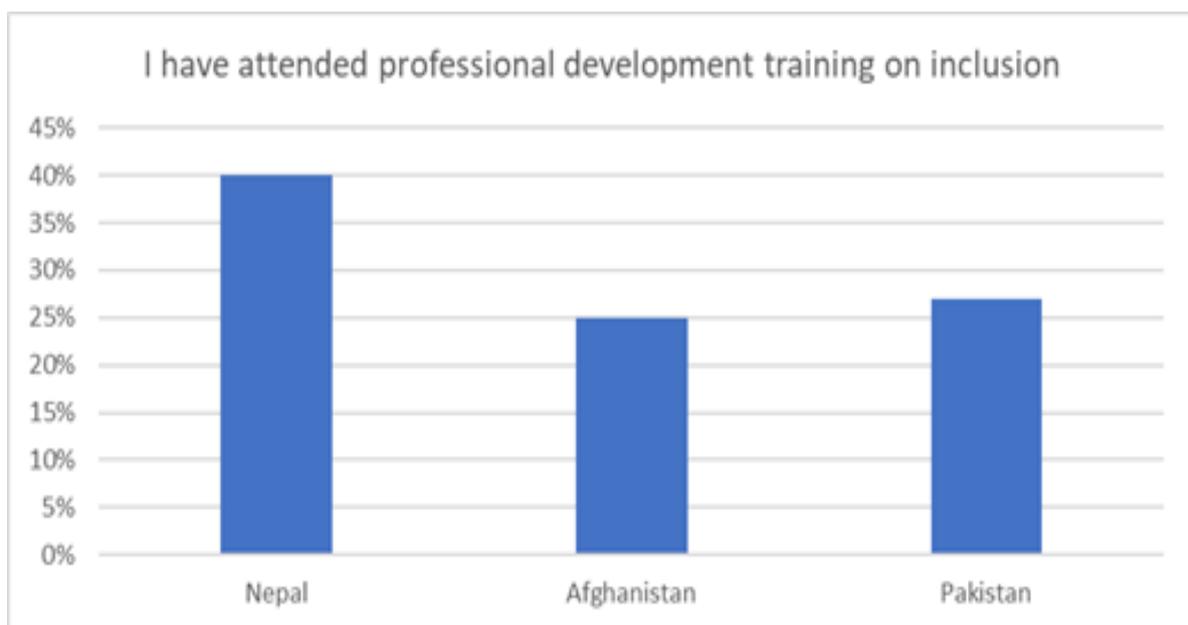
“We have provided scholarships to needy students. We provide them free school uniforms, stationery items, free daily meals’ (HT10-Nepal).

And many work with parents or the local community to try to improve attendance of learners who are frequently absent. A few headteachers went beyond attendance and physical needs to suggest that they were aware of disadvantage in classroom teaching and learning practices:

“We support disable students with stationary, uniform and shoes so they look like same as other students. Teachers are instructed to have special focus on the learning of disabled” (HT5- Afghanistan)

However perhaps this lack of awareness of inclusive classroom practices is not surprising: professional development opportunities for school leaders are patchy in the target countries and few school leaders recollect participating in professional learning on inclusion (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Professional development training on inclusion



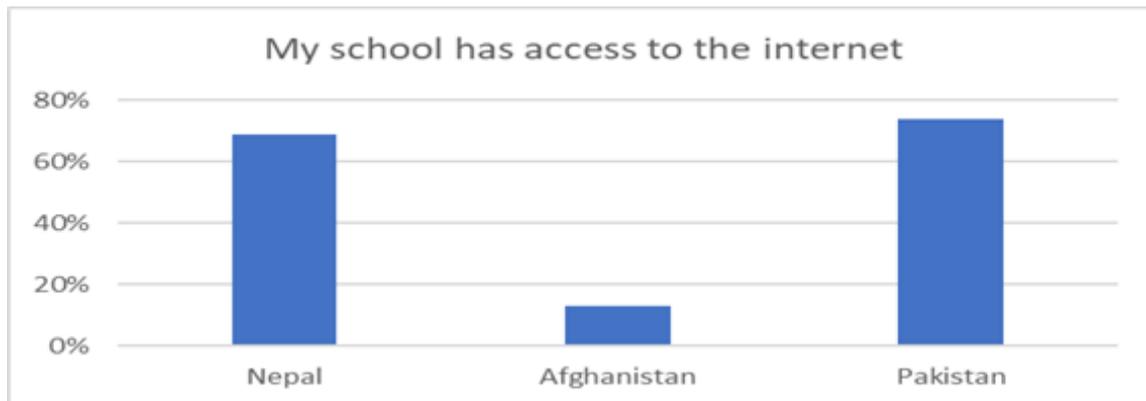
Most HTs use only student/teacher attendance and students’ exam results to look at student participation and a minority use data which is disaggregated by student characteristics.

These findings suggest that the networked communities and open learning resources design needs to build up the potential for leaders to see themselves as having influence and agency in classroom instruction, school vision and in community issues. We propose addressing this with activities where headteachers can widen their agency through small scale actions of problem analysis and trying out potential solutions building on local knowledge of issues and prior actions. Through these activities school leaders may expand their confidence and skills in using multiple forms of data to assess their potential solutions.

iii) Matching school leaders with appropriate technology (ICT skills and use)

A considerable number of school leaders, particularly in Afghanistan, do not have access to the internet in their school (Figure 3).

Figure 3: internet access at schools (percentage of survey respondents)



Furthermore, nearly one fifth of school leaders in Afghanistan (18%) and 10% in Pakistan reported no electricity in their schools.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of school leaders in all the three countries (87% in Nepal, 60% in Afghanistan) have access to smartphones; a substantial number have access to laptops, desktop computers and tablets as well:

“We have around 10 computers in a computer lab among which 6 are working properly. The computers were donated by one of the Korean projects” (HT5- Nepal).

In Pakistan leaders reported considerable personal use of technology but were not allowed to bring phones to school;

“We use our own personal 4G connections at school. Government’s officially policy bans teachers and students alike from using mobile devices in the school” (HT 9- Pakistan).

The vast majority of school leaders use social media platforms for personal and professional purposes: 78% school leaders in Nepal and 91% in Pakistan report using Facebook and WhatsApp daily. The numbers are lower in Afghanistan (WhatsApp (43%) and Facebook (36%)) reflecting weaker infrastructure.

“We usually communicate through Facebook messenger group for virtual meet up sharing school activities & problems including education depart staff of municipality” (HT4-Nepal).

School leaders familiarity and confidence with digital applications such as Excel, was low although in Nepal, nearly half of the sample (41%) reported receiving digital skills development training:

“I have also attended different ICT training, those training have helped me a lot” (HT9-Nepal).

Use of technology to keep records of student learning achievement/test results and communicate with local governments, teachers, and parents was common but not universal:

“We have been keeping the records in a traditional way in a register” (HT7-Nepal).

The findings indicate the open resources need to be accessible on mobile devices and in offline forms to enable all school leaders to participate and that the communities should be encouraged to utilise social messaging platforms.

(iv) School leader collaboration

We explored whether school leaders were in contact with other headteachers in or had participated in collaborative learning in online or blended formats.

Our findings suggest that the vast majority of our sample in Afghanistan (92%) and Nepal (75%) have never enrolled in any online or blended professional development courses before:

'No [I have not taken any online course before], I don't have access to internet and any resources to use internet; (HT6-Afghanistan)

There are several indications that school leaders met regularly with their peers, either virtually or in person and that this has continued through the covid period:

"We use WhatsApp groups and chats and sometimes stories to communicate with others. Sometimes we use Microsoft Teams but that's rare now" (HT10- Pakistan)

Many reported interest in online learning, but lacked awareness of e-courses and are concerned about costs and language barriers. Additionally, they highlight that workload pressure and connectivity issues (lack of access to reliable internet and technology including the cost of internet) might prevent them from participating in online courses.

Concluding remarks

We conducted the initial study as means to audit leadership practices in each context and from this to design a resource framework relevant for local enquiry by communities of school leaders. There are several implications of the research for this design process:

- a. **MEDIATING POLICY:** Most HTs are not aware of any Ministry of Education inclusion policies, but all understand the concept of right to education for all. Most school leaders are comfortable with ideas of equality – providing the same equipment to all learner for example, but much less familiar with the concept of equity.
- b. **ACCESS:** Most school leaders have access to smartphones but there are issues of connectivity and cost. Resources need to be mobile friendly, in local languages and with downloadable options.
- c. **COLLABORATION:** School leaders make use of social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook. The platforms can be used to support their collaboration in the networked communities.
- d. **TIME:** Most school leaders identify workload pressure as a main barrier to their participation in an open learning activities, so careful attention needs to be given to the demands on them through participation in the activities of the networked communities.
- e. **CHANGING AGENCY:** Many HTs think that they are not responsible for promoting inclusion in their schools. Our resources need to start from this perspective and develop distributed ownership of local inclusion issues.

The initial study has been a valuable audit for design by bringing together inclusion practice from the field with policies and goals across the three countries. There is potential to strengthen school leaders' capacity through a different approach which sees them as initiators of solutions. The design of our open resources needs to acknowledge different understandings of inclusion, differential capacities to take action and the problems of ICT access and low digital competencies. Major structural issues in equity can seem insurmountable yet by building on local actions through collaborative enquiry there is potential for sustainable system change.

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