

Title: Capacity building of school leaders on equity and inclusion in developing countries

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Equity and inclusion in education are policy priorities in most countries. However, there are often discrepancies between the governments' policies on combating/managing educational inequality and marginalisation, and their implementation. There is frequently a lack of comprehensive educational inclusion management plans at the government level. As a result, combating educational inequality is a patchwork of initiatives, is largely donor-driven in most developing countries, and produces no major sustained impact on managing/combating educational inequality. Hence, many vulnerable children including girls and children with disabilities (CWDs) are excluded from quality education. The quality of the educational experience that washes over such children is affected by a multiplicity of factors including poor family background, rural context, linguistics and ethnic minority, disability, and gender. This lack of equity in public education systems holds countries back from reaching their human, economic and political development goals. Given these contexts, school reformers are advised to rethink the school improvement model from the perspective of equity and inclusion.

School leadership has been positioned as integral to school reform as it can play a significant role in securing and sustaining school improvement. School leaders (SLs) have a key role in change for equity and inclusion – they are potentially important change agents. As change agents, they can open or close doors for vulnerable learners including girls and CWDs. Despite this, professional development opportunities for SLs are patchy in most developing countries, and the challenges they face in interpreting and implementing education policies relating to equity and inclusion are often overlooked, leading to many SLs lacking knowledge and skills to develop agency and power to act on educational inclusion.

This project, funded by the Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Information Exchange (GPE KIX), aims to create a professional development opportunity for SLs from developing countries. In targeting SLs, a 'bottom up' approach is necessary to respond to local inequalities and inclusion needs. In the project, SLs will be supported by local experts and resources from an open course to take action in their school. The open course being developed has been informed by the research activities of the project. This research sought to understand SLs' professional development practices including their autonomy and agency to act, and the national policy framework within which they work.

The data collection methods in the study comprised a questionnaire survey from 529 SLs (134 Afghanistan, 118 Nepal, 277 Pakistan), semi-structured interviews with the SLs (n=52, a sub-sample of the survey participants), interviews with key informants (n=12), and document analysis of policies relating to inclusion and to school leadership in Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan.

Findings show that the Nepal and Pakistan share similar issues regarding policy implementation. Although their governments have strong policies on equity in education

access, participation, retention and learning outcomes, there remains a lack of comprehensive strategies and guidance on how policies can be implemented. In Afghanistan on the other hand, there was an extensive set of inclusion policies under the previous Afghan regime, where SLs were given explicit responsibilities for creating inclusive learning environments. However, the extent to which those policies and practices continue under the Taliban is unclear.

Our data indicates that that most SLs are fully aware of the principle of 'education for all' but have little knowledge of inclusion policies in their country. They shared very few examples of actions to promote inclusive practices within their schools. Monitoring the learning of specific groups of learners, representing schools in community meetings, working with communities to encourage more inclusion, and running awareness programmes in the community, were reported by only a minority of SLs. Female SLs provided fewer examples of such actions ($p < 0.05$) than male SLs did, particularly in the context of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Most SLs seem to place their main emphasis on routine management and administration rather than leadership or development of better teaching and learning practices. Many of them also seem to lack autonomy and agency to take action to improve inclusion and equity in learning. A few even mentioned that they need an order from their government to promote inclusion within their schools:

Interviewer: Do you conduct any activities to promote inclusion in your school? If yes, please share your experience.

SL: We haven't really since we haven't gotten any orders from the government. It's just to improve enrolment. That is a huge priority for the government.

Nearly one fifth of the participants further reported that no inclusion work takes place in their schools. Additionally, many SLs particularly from Afghanistan expressed the view that the school management committee and/or the governments (not the school heads) should be responsible for the promotion of inclusion in schools. The researchers suggest that these findings are very concerning, and that the open resources will attempt to challenge these attitudes and develop relevant skills for improving equity in learning.

Another key finding of the study is that most SLs rarely use a data-driven approach to promote inclusion in their schools (possibly because they lack the skills and knowledge to use data to improve their school). In all the three countries, student attendance records and student test results are used as a primary indicator of school effectiveness. Very few SLs described making use of disaggregated student *r* data to promote inclusion.

Major constraints on SLs' actions towards inclusion are a lack of professional development opportunities in this area (as over 70% reported not receiving any training on inclusion and nearly 80% reported not attending any online training), and structural issues such as a shortage of resources, poor infrastructure, and insufficient numbers of teachers. Furthermore, workload pressure, poor connectivity, lack of resources, and a constrained budget are clearly other major challenges for most SLs, along with greater political interference in the day-to-day running of their schools.

Findings of the study are being drawn on to design and build the first iteration of the online course. The localised version of the course will be released in early December in all the three countries. The course aims to develop the capabilities of SLs to work with other SLs in their community, move beyond administrative roles and towards strengthened agency, particularly to identify barriers to equity and inclusion, and enact data-driven solutions towards sustainable change in access and learning of girls, CWDs and other marginalised learners.

The research findings will be presented on the 15th of September at the [Tenth Pan-Commonwealth Forum on Open Learning](#) in Calgary, Canada.