

School Leader Vignette:

Sara's Journey addressing Inclusive Education Issues in her School

Throughout her career as school principal, Sara has been a strong advocate for girls' education and for children with disabilities. Like many UNHCR school leaders in Pakistan, Sara is young (under 30 years old) and though she has her master's degree in Islamic studies, she does not hold a formal teacher certification. She has received some professional development over her six years as principal, but only on curriculum. Sara has never participated in a course on inclusive education.

Sara

- School principal, 6 years
- Master's of Islamic Studies
- Professional development on curriculum
- No professional teacher education nor inclusive education training

School

- Peshawar City, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
- UNHCR girls-only school
- 280 students.



Sara's UNHCR school is located in a refugee village in a suburban area of Peshawar City, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. After two years as principal, she managed to convert her school to a girls-only school, providing increased access to girls in the RV. This year, 280 girls are enrolled in Sara's school.

Sara gained digital literacy skills

At baseline, Sara felt slightly anxious but positive about enrolling in an online course. She had basic digital literacy skills, and was using Whatsapp to stay connected to colleagues and friends. Sara quickly learned how to learn and collaborate online. Throughout the eight modules, Sara remained highly engaged with the online content posting almost 70 times. Early in the course, when she had challenges accessing Pashto on the Moodle app, she got timely support from the female facilitator. (Note that during post-project interviews, education facilitators reported that female school leaders were reluctant to ask for technical support on Whatsapp, and preferred real time support, preferably from the female facilitator.)

Sara worked collaboratively in a mixed gender environment

Sara was part of one of four "networked improvement communities (NIC)" in this pilot, and her NIC comprised eight school leaders, including three women. She was the most outspoken of the women in her NIC. In the post-survey, Sara reported that...



During the first day of the meeting [orientation], I was scared to face men, so I sat in the back row. Then at the NIC meetings, I sat with men. It gave me a good feeling and confidence – like they are also like my brothers or father – we all are from the same country and thus, we can work together to improve our school system...

As women, we don't feel right when we stand in front of men and talk. It was useful for us to sit together with men and talk. I gained more experience through meeting and working together with men. This was my first time to sit with men in a meeting.

Sara, Post-Program Interview

Sara explained how to tackle school-level inclusion challenges to other school leaders

Sara had to compete with the most senior male leader (also the president of the Afghan Teachers' Association for Camp Schools.) to share her views. During NIC meetings, the senior leader argued against the 2018 UNHCR Pakistan [directive](#) to deliver a Pakistani curriculum in Afghan refugee schools, a global UNHCR policy, which resulted in excluding many Afghan students (and Afghan teachers) from full school participation. Rather than focusing on the problems of this policy, as other NIC members did, Sara shared the significant changes she's made to help her students succeed in spite of these barriers. She explained that she focuses on strategies she has control over. For example, Sara talked about how teaching techniques, classroom distractions and seating arrangements can all have an effect on students' success. As principal, she makes concessions when students are having difficulties at home. Her practical contributions helped refocus the NIC conversation away from policy-level debates, and back to solvable micro- challenges.

Sara became more focused on solving inclusion challenges over time



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.

Sara, Post Program Interview

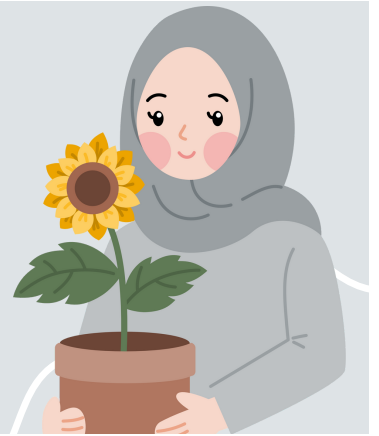
In the third interview, Sara said “the course has benefitted us a lot because before we didn't pay such special attention to anything, so now because of this, we care about everything, we care about the child, the teachers about our relationship with the community, regarding the school”.

Sara took actions to try to improve inclusion in her school

Through the online course, Sara identified a number of inclusion “micro problems”, many of which extended beyond her original observations about disability and gender. By conducting a “school audit”, she became more focused on the high student dropout rate and low attendance at her school. The audit showed that 50% of her students were not attending school regularly.

In the past when a student didn't come to school we [didn't] care about them but now we care and we inquire why a student is absent and we find solutions to student problems and bring them back to school. Now, we are able to solve our problems that even the community couldn't solve them for us. I transferred what I learned about inclusive education to other teachers in my school. Now, they also know what I have learned.

Sara, mid-program interview



Sara experimented with different ways of addressing absenteeism challenges:



I created the reward system in our school. This means the students who have less absenteeism and perform well, they will receive a simple and small reward from the school, which is highly motivating for our students.

Sara, end-program interview

She also became more aware about the quality of instruction and teachers' attitudes about inclusion; and the importance of engaging children with disabilities in the class. Sara increased her focus on serving children with disabilities, and followed up with families of absent students.

When I walk around, I observe children's lessons. I ask a student to read the lesson. If the child reads the lesson well, it's a sign of intelligence. However, if she struggles, I ask her teacher, to practice with her. If there's no improvement, I seat her with a smart student and explain that it's her responsibility to learn the lessons. I go to the same class many times to check on the weak students. My aim is to change weak students and make differences in their learning.

Sara, mid-program interview



She methodically spoke to each family that would not let their daughters come to school and she worked to facilitate students' transition to Government schools, recognizing that this is a vulnerable time when some students may "fall through the cracks" of the system. Overall, she was empowered to build stronger connections with the community.

Sara realized the whole community can support inclusion

At the beginning of the program, Sara saw herself as ultimately responsible for student learning and emotional wellbeing at her school. By the end of the program, Sara would first try to solve the problem herself, but she would not hesitate to consult teachers.

If I couldn't come up with a solution, I'd go to the teachers and consult them. If they had a different and better idea, I would take that....
These plans are not mine to solve. I have to solve them with the rest of the teachers...

Sara, post-program
interview



By the end of the program, Sara had gained confidence to speak more publicly about solving inclusion issues not only in the NIC, but among her teachers and across the broader school community, especially in relation to advocating for the rights of children with disabilities to have the same access to education as all children. Sara explained in the third interview that she believes strongly in all children's right to education and that teachers should spend every minute of their time at school teaching and serving children.

School Leader Vignette

Head Teacher Ali

"Inclusion is the most important issue and topic to be discussed and solved."
(SL 01 interview data)

Profile

Ali's engagement with the course and NIC group #1 illustrates the important influence that an impassioned and highly experienced School Leader can have in the context of the NIC. For 27 years, Ali has been teaching at a 260-student primary school for boys in an Afghan refugee camp in Peshawar, Pakistan. Ali became Head Teacher at the school 21 years ago. He has all of the responsibilities of a school principal while still continuing to teach Geometry and Math. Ali has a Bachelor's degree in Literature and is the senior leader of a Teachers Association for Camp Schools in his region. He has seen the long-term impact of education in his students' lives. In an interview he told a course facilitator, "I am very satisfied that in every house there are my ex-students who ... are now doctors, heads of organisations, educators, etc. It was a proud moment for me when I had an operation from my own student."

Ali's decades of experience and knowledge of Afghan education in Pakistan were catalysts for the other School Leaders in his NIC to engage with the course activities and discussions. Ali's first-hand childhood experience as an Afghan refugee integrating in to Pakistani society over 40 years ago informed his strong stance in support of inclusive language practices. Initially, in the NIC meetings, Local Facilitators observed that Ali was a strong advocate for teaching children in their native tongue, noting his own difficulties integrating as a refugee. He was very concerned with the effects on student learning of the 2016-2018 transition from teaching the Afghan national curriculum in Pashto, to teaching Pakistan's curriculum in Urdu and English. His passion for inclusive education with this issue challenged other School Leaders in NIC #1 to reflect on their own values.

In his first interview, he acknowledged the ethnic diversity among his students and expressed empathy with their needs, especially around language, explaining "There are different ethnic groups, Uzbek, Pashtuns and Dari speaking students in our school as well as children with better economy and poor." During his participation in the NIC, his understanding of the scope of inclusive education expanded beyond his own experiences with language instruction. In an interview he said, "I have attended thousands of trainings and meetings, but I am discussing inclusion for the first time. It should be discussed more and needs to be implemented in our community."

Engagement with the NIC

In the post-course survey he 'Strongly Agreed' that there were productive and inclusive dialogues among the NIC participants and that there was a collaborative and cooperative environment for all the participants. He strongly agreed with the statement "The NIC helped me to develop professional relationships with other school leaders." In general, the facilitators believed that Ali's proactive approach to inclusion problems demonstrated to his NIC colleagues that they too have influence in their schools and communities.

Digital literacy

Prior to taking the course, Ali was using a smartphone for messaging and social media (Facebook), but reported having no other regular contact with computers, the internet, word processing, e-learning or other digital tools. At baseline, Ali reported being slightly anxious but nonetheless very positive about participating in the course. Interestingly, his son was also enrolled in the course and his NIC, and helped him navigate some of the technological demands. By the end of the course, he reported overall comfort with using tablets.

Course materials

Ali was very positive in his post-course responses about the usefulness of the course, both to his career and for building his knowledge of inclusive education. Ali completed 83% of the required course material, including the major assignments, such as conducting a school audit, completing a problem tree analysis, and carrying out two problem-solving (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycles. In the post-course survey he reported that he would download course readings to share what he was learning with other faculty members at his school.

Forum

Ali was consistently active in the course forum, posting 44 times in discussion threads. In the forum he shared scans or photos of his hand-drawn problem trees, inclusion audit and PDSAs. He also engaged with the group via WhatsApp. In the post-course survey he reported that it was easy to navigate the course modules, and reported he frequently downloaded and referred to course readings. He listed no difficulties in accessing the course overall. Local Facilitators considered him the most active SL in overall engagement with the course and NIC. He used his journal frequently to reflect on his learning.

Understanding inclusion issues

At the beginning of the course, Ali was unsure of whether he had any street-involved children at his school, and reported that less than 10% of his students had a cognitive disability, less than 10% had impaired hearing, speech or vision, and 0% had any physical disability.

Ali's understanding of inclusive education for children with disabilities changed during his involvement with the NIC. The pre-course survey revealed that he held the common beliefs that students with disabilities could not thrive in a general education classroom, take too much of the teacher's time, and can demonstrate behaviour problems that are disruptive to classmates' learning. In contrast, in the post-course survey, he 'Strongly Disagreed' with these statements, and 'Agreed' with 'Students with disabilities in the general education classroom develop a better self-concept than those in the self-contained special education classroom.'

Actions to improve education inclusion

In his first interview, Ali rated the school environment as a more important determinant of student success than their home life or the teacher's instruction.

With time, he was able to channel his natural passion for defending students' rights into working more effectively with his school's Shura. During the second interview, Ali described his school's Shura as an inclusion committee that could help address inclusion issues as they come up. He noted the benefit of his committee having representatives of all of the students' ethnic groups. Previously, he had worked with his

school's Shura and the teachers on improving teaching methods, accessing textbooks and purchasing school uniforms, but the course drew his attention to how he could use these structures to solve bigger problems for the school such as chronic student absenteeism and the building's rent increase and lack of electricity.

"We have a Shura with eight members from all tribes. The chair is someone from the community. We discuss and resolve school issues in these meetings, such as electricity. The building is not appropriate for school, but we have paid to fix some problems, like water, toilets etc. I also advocated for adding electricity for other schools in the camp."

(SL 01 interview data)

Ali used the course's audit tool to identify absentee students and then applied the Problem Tree to identify root causes and complete PDSA cycles to address the issue. The conclusion was that due to extreme poverty, children were working in the morning to collect scrap metal. He proposed to the school inclusion committee that these students be allowed to start their school day at 9:00am instead of 8:00am. Previously, these students were turned away for arriving late, but if they could join at 9:00 they were able to participate in classes the rest of the day.

Understanding of his own leadership and influence

Ali has some oversight of other schools and wants to train other school leaders on inclusive education practices and problem-solving tools. In the future he would like to open a secondary school for students who cannot afford fees.

Throughout the course, Ali drew increasingly on the support of his School's Shura, the wider community (families) and the other teachers to collaborate on solving problems. His creative solutions to inclusion challenges reflected an increased understanding of his scope of influence in the school and broader community.

"After completing this course, we recognized the importance of sharing responsibilities equally among teachers, resulting in greater ease for all of us and a positive impact on the students."

(SL 01 interview data)

School Leader Vignette
Vice Principal Talha

“Speaking of personal development[...]this journey has been immensely motivating for me and has facilitated my learning in various areas, including PDSA, inclusive education, and using a problem tree analysis.”

Profile

Talha is the vice principal at a school in a refugee camp and has a Bachelor’s degree in Computer Science. The school building where he works operates in two shifts, with girls attending for half the day and boys attending for the other half. The girls’ school has their own separate school –community Shura. When he enrolled in the course Talha was already an engaged and dynamic leader. He is the founder of a youth organization that collects donations for children from low –income families who could not attend school or afford school fees. This course built his capacity and influence to address inclusion issues in his school.

Talha was an active participant throughout the six –month-long blended learning course, which was designed to help School Leaders develop agency and skills to identify and address inclusion issues in their schools.

Engagement with the NIC

He was a member of NIC #2, which comprised four women and two men. It was the only group that contained a combination of School Leaders from the camps and from private schools. Talha was most active during the NIC meetings and the debrief session. He was already a dynamic and engaged school leader, and the NIC meetings gave him an opportunity to build his capacity by learning from others about the range of inclusion issues facing Afghan refugee students outside the camps and in private schools. Local facilitators observed that Talha was curious about the experiences of his female counterparts and listened to their explanations of issues of gender inclusion.

He thought of the NIC meetings as a place for collaboration and problem solving, as well as a space for SLs who were less active on the course forums to engage with the subject. Overall, he engaged in-person in the NIC meetings more than he did online.

He told one of the facilitators that the number of NIC meetings should be increased, as the NIC “has a huge positive impact on the progress of the course.” He found the meetings to be a useful space for solving inclusion problems together and troubleshooting technical issues with accessing the online course. “Overall Talha made use of the various avenues to communicate with his NIC, and found the flexibility to be helpful. “It was a new experience. We would meet in NIC meetings. We would meet in WhatsApp groups to keep in touch with each other after the course. We would get different ideas and recommendations on different issues about our school. It was totally a new and useful method of working together.”

Digital literacy

Initially, Talha was ‘Slightly Anxious’ but also ‘Very Positive’ about participating in a blended learning course. He found that using the tablet was a valuable experience, “especially considering that the future

of education is increasingly based online.” He also at the end of the course that valued the opportunity to enhance his digital literacy and understanding of how to use online learning tools.

Course materials

During the group presentation of the PDSA cycle in the second NIC meeting, three SLs including Talha addressed the problem of a lack of middle schools for girls (grade 6 -9). Removing this hurdle for the girls to get further education would reduce the dropout rate.

Forum

Talha was more engaged with the meetings and WhatsApp group than on the course forum. He posted in the discussion forums 29 times, about 30 -40% less than some of the other engaged SLs. He completed 21 of the mandatory assignments (91%), which was a higher rate of engagement than more than half of the SLs who participated.

Understanding inclusion issues

In the first interview he spoke of his own personal experiences as a boy having to sell vegetables and collect recyclables after school to pay for school fees and uniforms. At the start of the course he reported that at least 10% of his students were orphans and 10% came from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Later, while reviewing the inclusion audit he said, "The data we collected was not as expected, we have no disabled students in our school and we only have Pashto speakers in our school."

In the first interview, he explained that he had discussed the students' result sheets with the Education Department at the Afghan Consulate in Peshawar and obtained their signatures to verify their education during the previous government, "This way, we assisted in the enrollment of students in other schools, as some of them returned to schools in Afghanistan, while others may have gone to Qatar or other places and enrolled easily in new schools." He has lost contact with the consulate since that time.

Talha reported being highly engaged with his school and proactive about advocating for student needs in the community. He said he would represent the school in community meetings, and try to influence others in the community about education for all. He worked with parents to address the challenges of children who were failing classes or falling behind. He said, "We have weak students. When they fail in one subject we talk to their parents and work hard with them to be promoted. If they fail in many subjects, they will repeat the same class." He was also working with a committee of teachers, the principal and himself three times a month to address issues like orphan students who can't afford expenses, and to respond to the suggestion box where students make suggestions such as having chairs in the classrooms.

In the second NIC meeting he said, "we have gone through a lot about inclusive education so now during our sleeping we are thinking how to promote inclusive education and how to consider the excluded ones."

Actions to improve education inclusion

In the first interview, Talha described working with committees and systems in the school and community. "We attend workshops and connect with teachers and Vice Principals from other schools. We talk on

WhatsApp, for example on students' admission. We have an education department within the school management. Also, we have the school Shura and meet monthly, and participants are parents, teachers and the principal."

Talha explained that he had personally visited the Afghan consulate and the UNHCR to request that either the camp schools be upgraded to middle schools, or build another school so that girls can get an education. His request was denied as UNHCR only deals with education inside the camps at the primary level. At the consulate he learned that they are only responsible to provide free and compulsory education to refugees until grade 5 under international human rights law and conventions.

The course helped him focus on micro -inclusion problems that he could control, instead of reaching out to large governing agencies to try to fight policies.

He noted in the third interview, "In our society, there is a troubling trend of child marriages. Yet, this inclusion course has shifted our focus towards addressing this issue and empowered us to speak with parents, community leaders, and religious scholars about child marriages and child labor. Through our advocacy and concerns raised with stakeholders, we successfully enrolled more of these vulnerable students in our school."

He said in an interview, "After attending this course, I learned to reorganize the classroom e.g. those who are taller and those who are intelligent should be seated at the back and those who are weak or are disabled should sit in the front. We should also give more time to weak students and students with disabilities... I have created the entrance way for the children with disabilities to ease access to school and it resulted in more enrollment of children with disabilities in school".

Understanding of their own leadership and influence

He told one of the facilitators that he had dreamt that he was giving a training about inclusive education to foreigners. He initiated professional development with his faculty to share what he was learning.

"I am truly motivated to fulfill my responsibility to ensure inclusive education for all. Inclusive education must be the mandatory part of our school curriculum, how can we ignore it?"

School Leader Vignette

Head Teacher Sakeena

“The main impact of the course for me is that I have learned to be patient and tolerant.”

(SL 27 interview data)

Profile

Sakeena is highly dedicated in her role of Head Teacher at an all-girls private school in an urban area of Peshawar. She is under 30 years old and has a Bachelor of Education. She has been an integral part of the school's leadership team since 2016 and has demonstrated exceptional commitment in leveraging limited resources to advance the education of underprivileged students, particularly focusing on promoting girls' education. The privately operated school, which is officially registered with the Afghan consulate, adheres to the Afghan curriculum and uses Dari and Pashto as the primary languages of instruction and communication.

Participation in the course helped her notice inclusion issues that she hadn't been aware of before. She had a strong foundation working on girls' inclusion, and used the problem tree and NIC meetings to identify and address underlying barriers to girls' attendance, such as teaching methods and bullying in the classroom.

Engagement with the NIC

In her third interview she said, “NIC meetings were very useful. We had a lot of absenteeism in our school and I discussed this issue during NIC meetings. Other School Leaders shared their ideas about incorporating fun activities and games in the classrooms to make learning enjoyable for students. Implementing these learning games has resulted in students showing more interest in their studies, and as a positive outcome, the absenteeism rate has significantly decreased.”

She acknowledged the role of the NIC in facilitating interaction with teachers from camps, offering insights into Afghan school operations in those settings.

Digital literacy

Lacking any prior support from external organizations, Sakeena was all the more eager to dedicate her time to improving her digital literacy alongside her knowledge of inclusive education issues. Notably, she had never been granted a tablet through developmental or governmental channels. A facilitator noted that receiving a tablet and training on how to use it has significantly amplified her enthusiasm, interest, and steadfast commitment to successfully finishing the course.

Sakeena stressed the importance of sustaining the inclusive education NIC project and involving teachers in future digital literacy programs, stating, “The advantage of digital literacy cannot be overstated. It allowed us to access the course materials from anywhere and at any time. This flexibility empowered us to engage with the course content, participate in posting forums, and seek guidance through WhatsApp groups whenever we needed it.”

She said that as a school leader she wouldn't have been able to engage in a wholly in-person course due to time constraints. The flexibility to choose when to access and complete course sections was pivotal for her.

Course materials

Sakeena participated enthusiastically in all aspects of the course and completed 96% of the required actions and assignments. Moreover, in a testimonial video, Sakeena emphasized the usefulness of the program's systematic approach and the role of interactive NIC meetings and the forum. She found these aspects engaging and effective for addressing intricate challenges.

Describing her experience with the course, she highlighted its practical application in addressing inclusion concerns. She mentioned forming new committees and using the tools provided in the course such as problem trees, Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles, data collection, and observation. She appreciated the feedback from fellow school leaders about her assignments. She said that the cyclical approach of the course, repeating PDSA cycles and having periodic meetings, instilled patience and confidence in her, enabling her to manage micro-level inclusion issues and other challenges adeptly, in collaboration with her peers.

Forum

Sakeena found the forum valuable and advocated for the continued use of platforms like WhatsApp groups for networking with her fellow School Leaders in future.

Understanding inclusion issues

At the start of the course, Sakeena was sensitive to girls' inclusion issues stemming from poverty. She noted that in her school they have students who come from underprivileged backgrounds.

"Given that our school is exclusively for girls and faces challenges related to parents' disinterest in girls' education, our mission is to support these girls by either reducing their tuition fees or providing additional teacher support. Our goal is to ensure that they have the opportunity to pursue their education and achieve a brighter future."

"I am proud to share that we have been supporting two sisters whose father sells tea in the market. They were at risk of discontinuing their education, but starting from grade 7, we provided them with all the necessary educational support, including books and uniforms. Today, one of them is in grade 12, and the other is in 11th grade, continuing their education with our support."

She noted in the second interview that there was "a lot of prejudice among the students" and "we are very concerned about a student who misses 2 or 3 classes a month, so we inform his family about how and what he is busy with, and why he is absent".

Actions to improve education inclusion

During the course debrief workshop, Sakeena shared a specific example of fostering inclusion in the face of sectarian divisions. She recounted how she addressed bullying of a student from the Shia sect by peers from the Sunni sect by forming a committee and employing the PDSA approach and guidance from fellow teachers in her NIC group to successfully resolve the issue with constructive dialogue. She thus fostered an environment of acceptance and respect among students from different backgrounds. "Today, these students not only receive their education together but also engage in friendly interactions, marking a significant transformation in their relationships."

The course helped her approach her leadership role more methodically and significantly reduced her stress, which allowed her to deal with inclusion challenges more effectively. In the final interview she told the facilitator, "In the past, I used to expel challenging students, particularly those who caused conflicts over language, ethnicity, etc. We faced numerous issues related to language, ethnicity, and the provinces from which the students hailed. At times, teachers would take sides. However, through the implementation of the inclusion course, we have successfully addressed 100% of these issues. This marks a positive outcome and a testament to the effectiveness of the inclusion program."

Understanding of their own leadership and influence

She added, “In the past, I tended to become emotional and escalate minor issues unnecessarily, causing needless unnecessary stress. Now the course and interactions in the NIC have instilled in me a sense of patience and confidence that help me, enabling me to tackle challenges more effectively.”

Reflecting on her growth as a leader she said she saw improvements in her patience, whereas she used to be quick to anger and her thinking was sometimes obscured by her frustration.

“Since starting this course, I have learned to be patient and have tolerance, which is crucial for a school leader. The course has given me a positive morale boost. Now, I respond to everyone with a smile and carefully consider my reactions before responding.”

(SL 27 interview data)