Beaming talent at the Academic Olympiad 2013

Teach For Pakistan was proud to host an event showcasing the incredible potential of students from underserved communities. Fellow Azma Humayun shares the story here.

Full of nerves, eyes shining in anticipation and excitement, the 36 competitors took their seats on stage and gazed at the crowd. On this stage, background, income and ethnicity all became meaningless. This was a battle of minds – speed, accuracy, team-work, communication and strategy were all that mattered. But what was this battle we have stretched to epic proportions?

It was our Academic Olympiad, held on February 16, 2013, at The Aman Foundation offices. Students of Teach For Pakistan Fellows from some of the most under-resourced schools across Karachi competed for the title of Academic Olympians. These schools lack teachers, have poor infrastructure and a prevailing culture of low expectations and achievement. In a few short months, however, as Fellows we have seen our students overcome these odds and grow tremendously. At the Academic Olympiad, 12 teams of school champions confidently competed against each other in multiple rounds of math, science, English, logic and IQ questions.

The contestants were cheered on by their fellow students, teachers and families throughout the day. The students received great encouragement and applause from chief guests, Mr. Aziz Kabani, Director, Sindh Education Foundation, Mr. Saad Amanullah, CEO of Gillette Pakistan, and Mr. Ahsan Jamil, CEO of The Aman Foundation.

It was a tight contest with much of the audience also getting into the spirit of the game. After a nail-biting finish in a tie-break, the team from The Citizens Foundation - Adamjee Korangi school was awarded the Championship Trophy. Proud parents, teachers and mentors beamed at the winning team, sharing in the victory.

From the CEO’s desk

As I write this, I am filled with hope that we can solve Pakistan’s education crisis. Within Teach For Pakistan, we are on our way to recruiting our third cohort of 55 new Fellows to begin teaching in some of our nation’s toughest schools. Our first cohort of 20 exceptional young men and women will complete their two-year teaching commitment in June this year, and become the pioneers of a powerful alumni movement to provide every Pakistani child an excellent education.

Beyond Teach For Pakistan, our country witnessed the first general elections with education as an important electoral issue. Nearly every political party included education as a priority in its manifesto, and produced policy documents showcasing their education reform roadmap. The needle is finally shifting on our national priorities, and we are grateful that mass education is finally emerging as something we all care about.

With 60 Teach For Pakistan Fellows now teaching across 29 schools in Karachi and Lahore, we are flooded with inspiring stories of change. We have selected a few of those stories to share with you in this first issue of Blackboard Bulletin. I hope you will enjoy these and share them widely within your networks. I look forward to your thoughts and feedback.

Khadija S. Bakhtiar
From the classroom: Our Fellows share stories from their schools

The Malala diaries

When second year Fellow Afrah Qureshi gave her students Malala Yousufzai’s diary to read, she had little idea what a profound impact it would have on the whole school.

The day Malala Yousufzai was shot, I was very disturbed. I had spent the last two years teaching girls her age. Malala could have been one of my students. I shared her story with my class expecting them to express sorrow but received a shocking mix of reactions. Many students in my class said they didn’t like her. They said they had heard Malala had committed blasphemy by saying offensive things about our religion.

I had to set the record straight. I asked them if any had read the diary that had made Malala famous. All of them remained quiet; none of my students had read her diary. I spent the rest of the day making photocopies of Malala’s diary to distribute in their English classes. I wanted to use the diary to catalyse a process of thinking and reflection so that my girls could make up their own minds about Malala rather than accepting what they heard from other people. I wanted to use her diary not only to improve their reading but also to engage each student in a process of thinking and writing one of their own.

In the coming weeks, we would read one page from the diary every day, and follow that with a classroom discussion. Every day, my students would not only gain reading practice from material relevant to them but it helped develop their ability to think critically and analyse themselves and the world around them.

Within no time, the story of Malala’s diary had spread outside the class. Her diary was being read and discussed in all corners of the school. To me, the next step was obvious – it was my students’ turn to write their own diaries. And they could not contain their excitement. It was no surprise that their first entry was about Malala.

Reading their diaries, I was amazed to see how my students had begun to relate to Malala and empathized with her. Over the last few months, I have seen them grown into reflective individuals who are not afraid to express themselves freely. They now talk about tolerance, peace, justice, respect and reason and question why things should or shouldn’t be a certain way in their society. Our class has been transformed into a space where everyone thinks about their actions and words and takes individual responsibility for them. As a teacher, I realized the tremendous power of a Reading-Reflection-Writing cycle. My students were inspired by Malala, and I am inspired by them every day.

Fellow Spotlight

2011 Fellow Mehjabeen Zameer talks about her journey to date on the Atlantic Council’s South Asia Centre Emerging Leaders of Pakistan fellowship.

The Emerging Leaders of Pakistan Fellowship seeks to establish a network of Pakistani youth who will work together on issues affecting the future of Pakistan. The program provides opportunities for participants to learn from organizations in the US, and a platform for Pakistani youth to voice their opinions on the issues that matter most.

For the first part of the Fellowship, I went with 14 other youth leaders on an exposure visit to the United States. The tour included a series of meetings with policymakers, community leaders and regional experts in New York, Washington DC, Atlanta and San Francisco. I have had incredible learnings so far through meetings with Senator Chuck Hagel, White House officials, US Department of State and US Department of Defence, the Foreign Desk Editor at the New York Times and even executives from PepsiCo and Google.

My proudest moment was in Washington DC, when the Atlantic Council invited officials from organizations such as the World Bank and UN to hear our views on Pakistan’s challenges. I represented Teach For Pakistan and shared some insights I had gained from a year of working closely with students, teachers and parents at a government school in Karachi, Pakistan. I realized what a long way I had come in my understanding of the problems plaguing our education system, and also the possible solutions that could lead to enduring reform.
The Mechanics of Change

Teach For Pakistan recently had the pleasure of hosting Skoll Awardee and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Dr. Quratulain Bakhteari. In a two-hour interactive session with Fellows and staff, Dr. Bakhteari shared her experiences of working with communities on everything from sanitation to education. Speaking about a career spanning decades, Dr. Bakhteari shared how her journey to improve lives was also a personal journey involving much self-reflection, sacrifice and love.

As the Founding Director of the Institute of Development Studies and Practices, Dr. Bakhteari has worked with communities in the most remote areas across Pakistan. She shared key learnings from her work, speaking about the importance of deeply understanding and connecting with the people we are serving, and the distinction between empowering communities to improve their circumstances rather than changing their values. She shattered the myth that parents in rural areas do not want to educate their children, especially girls, and challenged Fellows to look beyond the obvious to seek out ways to win the trust and affection of their students and their parents.

The most inspiring moments from her session were when she spoke about the mechanics of change – how difficult it is to achieve, and how much perseverance and passion it requires. “Changemakers have never had it easy,” Dr Bakhteari said, “look at Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Nelson Mandela... they struggled through their lives to make the change they wanted to see happen and there were many who did not believe in them or their mission along the way. You have to pay a price to get to change. But it is a beautiful price to pay.”

She also emphasized to Fellows that it was the youth who must carry the burden of creating change. “Through this Fellowship, you receive exposure unknown to most people,” she said, “never forget this.” This message resonated deeply with Fellows and staff, and prompted very honest reflection on our responsibility as citizens who have been given the opportunity to serve this country. Dr. Bakhteari is indeed an icon for anyone working to transform lives. We hope to welcome her back as a mentor to the Teach For Pakistan community.

For more information about Dr. Bakhteari and her work, visit www.idsp.org.pk

Fellow Zohra Nasir with her students at an Activity Day held by Standard Chartered Bank employees in Karachi in March.
Fellows 2011, Tooba Akhtar and Jawad Asghar, have been selected for a Teach For All Fellowship to explore what transformation looks like in a classroom, and how teachers can strive to achieve it.

The Transformational Teaching Fellowship 2013 is a ten-month research project investigating characteristics that make a classroom transformational, i.e., one that enables its students to embark on an altered life trajectory. The Fellowship brings together 13 participants from Teach For All partners across the world to develop and test hypotheses about critical character traits that teachers can develop in students to ensure long-term success.

In the first phase of the Fellowship, Tooba and Jawad conducted primary and secondary research to create a holistic picture of the educational landscape in Pakistan. In particular, they identified key indicators, e.g., levels of academic achievement and character traits that would predict a students’ long-term success. In the next phase, participants selected from around the world met in San Jose, USA for a workshop on Transformational Teaching.

Participants created a framework for research they will be conducting in their classrooms to identify character traits that have the potential to transform lives, and teaching methodologies that can foster such traits in students. The results from these studies will allow Teach For All programs everywhere to focus on student outcomes and teacher actions that can truly change the life paths of students.

For more information on the Teach For All network, please visit www.teachforall.org

Fellows Samreen Anwer and Fatima Tufail also attended a Teach For All Synergies conference hosted by Teach For India in New Delhi, exploring transformational teaching in low-performing schools.