

Evolution of Cluster-level Monthly Meetings as a Forum
for Continuous Professional Development of Teachers

Experiences from Uttarakhand

Research Group | Azim Premji Foundation



FIELD STUDIES IN EDUCATION September 2017



Azim Premji
University

These papers present findings from Azim Premji Foundation's field engagements in trying to improve the quality and equity of school education in India. Our aim is to disseminate our studies to practitioners, academics and policy makers who wish to understand some of the key issues facing school education as observed by educators in the field. The findings of the paper are those of the Research Group and may not reflect the view of the Azim Premji Foundation including Azim Premji University.

Evolution of Cluster-level Monthly Meetings as a Forum for Continuous Professional Development of Teachers

Experiences from Uttarakhand

Research Group | Azim Premji Foundation

Contact : field.research@azimpremjifoundation.org

Evolution of Cluster-level Monthly Meetings as a Forum for Continuous Professional Development of Teachers

Experiences from Uttarakhand

Research Group | Azim Premji Foundation

Executive Summary

Cluster Resource Centres (CRC) and Block Resource Centres (BRC) were first set up under the centrally sponsored District Primary Education Program (DPEP) in 1994, with the primary aim of training teachers in improving their pedagogic practices. Under the aegis of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the vision of these centres was further expanded to include the provision of continuous academic support to teachers. As an integral element of this strategy, the cluster resource centre coordinator (CRCC) is expected to hold monthly meetings; where teachers from the cluster can connect with each other, discuss classroom challenges and collaboratively arrive at solutions. However, since most of them are over-burdened with administrative concerns, these meetings have often been reduced to focusing on purely administrative and transactional issues like data collection.

Azim Premji Foundation (Foundation) has been working towards improving the quality of public education with a central focus on teacher professional development for long. Based on its experience on the ground, the Foundation recognises that platforms that break the isolation of teachers and enable collaboration and peer learning amongst them are important to creating a coherent and integrated approach to teacher professional development. Across several districts of Uttarakhand, the Foundation has worked with cluster-level monthly meetings and has witnessed their transformation from forums for data collection and information exchange to spaces where teachers converge as professionals and collaboratively engage with classroom related challenges and other academic issues; and through this process, further their own professional development.

This paper aims to describe and analyse these experiences in four clusters of Uttarakhand where sustained efforts of the CRCCs, teachers and members of the Foundation have revitalised cluster-level monthly meetings and created a teacher-owned space for academic dialogue.

Key Insights

1. Any initiative to transform cluster-level monthly meetings into collaborative spaces for teacher professional development **will require deep capacity building of the CRCC.**
2. It is important to build a **relationship of mutual trust and respect among all stakeholders through formal and informal interactions.** This relationship is crucial for collaborative learning.
3. **Setting up meaningful processes for organising and conducting cluster meetings is essential.** This includes allocation of sufficient time for discussion, selection of relevant topics and adequate preparation by resource persons.
4. The effectiveness of any such platform ultimately depends on the **quality and depth of the conversations** it facilitates. It is also necessary to **establish backward-forward linkages with classroom processes** to ensure that the platform has direct relevance for the teacher.
5. It is imperative to **involve teachers at different levels of decision making** in matters concerning such meetings-at the level of content as well as processes.
6. It is paramount that a **democratic and non-threatening environment is created** during these meetings.
7. A **conducive physical environment** is crucial to learning. Selecting a convenient location and creating a clean, comfortable space is an acknowledgment of the teachers' needs and attracts them.

1. Context

Collaboration and peer learning among teachers is being increasingly recognised as one of the more effective modes of teacher professional development across the world. Diverse mechanisms have been adopted in different contexts and geographies to facilitate spaces and forums that encourage teachers to engage with each other during the course of their work and use their collective knowledge to reflect upon and improve their practice so that it leads to a more meaningful teaching-learning experience in schools.

In India too, the importance of peer learning and the breaking of the isolation of the teacher finds mention in the National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education 2009 (NCFTE). It cites the following as one of the aims of continuing teacher professional development: *“Break out of intellectual isolation and share experiences and insights with others in the field, both teachers and academics working in the area of specific disciplines as well as intellectuals in the immediate and wider society”*. It explicitly states that *“Professional fora such as meetings in the school and in the cluster to discuss and review one’s practice, to plan for annual work calendars, and on a weekly and monthly basis to plan for one’s teaching as well as to discuss with colleagues, the school academic head and resource persons at the cluster or block level, is an essential aspect of the teaching profession.”*¹

For over a period of 15 years, Azim Premji Foundation has been working at the grassroots level to improve the quality of public education. Given its strong conviction and belief in the centrality of the teacher in providing quality education, the work of the Foundation is primarily focused on teacher professional development. The Foundation works with various modes of teacher professional development depending upon context, need and opportunity. Based on its own experience of working on the ground and current views on teacher professional development, the Foundation is committed to engaging with alternative structures, processes and platforms that enable peer learning. As a result of its engagements in 5 states and nearly 50 districts, among a variety of teacher professional development models, different platforms have evolved for enabling collaboration and peer learning amongst teachers in response to specific local contexts and opportunity.

Given the scale and depth of its engagements, the Foundation is well positioned to contribute to the body of knowledge that looks at ways in which universally accepted principles of teacher education, such as collaboration and peer learning, could be operationalised in the Indian context. It is, therefore, keen to share such first-hand accounts and insights with other practitioners and this paper is a part of a series of studies addressing the above objective. It focuses on the work done with respect to cluster-level monthly meetings in Uttarakhand over a period of time. Specifically, this study examines the evolution of these meetings in Uttarakhand as an effective platform for in-service teacher professional development. It seeks to document and critically analyse the experiences in four clusters of Uttarakhand with a view to identifying and understanding the efforts and practices which led to this change.

2. The Scope of this Study

Existing literature on block and cluster resource centres focus primarily on the status of their functioning. While these efforts throw very useful light upon the inadequacies within the system such as lack of resources, funding, limited capacity of resource persons and hierarchical power equations which hamper peer learning and mentoring, they do not provide any insight on how existing systems could be revitalised to fulfil their academic purpose.²

For over a decade, the Foundation has been continuously engaging with cluster-level monthly meetings in some of the districts of Uttarakhand. This study describes the journey and the efforts

¹National Curriculum Framework for Teacher Education, National Council for Teacher Education, 2009

²Role of Block and Cluster Resource Centres In Providing Academic Support To Elementary Schools, Research, Evaluation and Studies Unit, Technical Support Group , EdCIL (India) Ltd, 2010

that were undertaken, which led to the gradual transformation of these forums into potential spaces for capacity building. It specifically aims to address the following question:

What are the processes and practices required for cluster-level monthly meetings to function as an effective platform for in-service teacher professional development?

To do so, it analyses the scenario in four clusters of Uttarakhand (Lata and Joshiyara of Uttarkashi district, Nagla of Udham Singh Nagar district and Riyuni of Almora district) where the Foundation has been actively participating in cluster meetings. Here, the meetings have evolved into a structured ongoing mechanisms for providing teaching support. These clusters were chosen based on the Foundation's long-standing engagement with them and the fact that they demonstrate some visible signs of positive change.

Information for the study was collected through the following means:

1. Observation of at least two meetings in each cluster between May 2016 and March 2017, made using a check-list that included parameters such as teacher participation, relevance of content being discussed for participating teachers, alignment between the annual academic calendar and the agenda of the meetings, and linkages across various meetings at the same cluster.
2. In-depth, semi-structured interviews of the cluster coordinators, participating teachers and members of the Foundation who are directly involved in the meetings of the sample clusters.
3. Accessing secondary sources of information such as minutes or proceedings of meetings, preparatory notes and other reflections documented by coordinators, teachers and members of the Foundation.

Table 1: Cluster Profile

Cluster	No. of Schools (Primary)	No. of Teachers (Primary)	No. of Schools (Upper Primary)	No. of Teachers (Upper Primary)
Riyuni (Almora)	10	29	3	9
Nagla (Udham Singh Nagar)	15	55	5	26
Joshiyara (Uttarkashi)	18	31	4	17
Lata (Uttarkashi)	16	26	4	15

3. Cluster-level Monthly Meetings

Globally, 'clustering' has been adopted as a strategy to improve educational and administrative practices. It ensures that teachers can access a common pool of resources, share ideas and experiences with each other, and reflect on classroom practice collectively. Since it is a localised strategy, it is better equipped to respond to remote contexts and demands. From an education management standpoint, clustering helps in improving governance by creating greater economies of scale, facilitating monitoring and supervision, and enabling exchange of information between district authorities and the school.³

In India too, policy makers have recognised this need to link schools together and set up local institutional structures for decentralised decision making and provision of regular academic support to teachers. In 1994, BRCs and CRCs were first mandated under the DPEP. Under the aegis of SSA, BRCs and CRCs were established in each block in every district to provide ongoing academic support to teachers. BRCs are headed by block resource centre coordinators (BRCCs), and CRCs by

³School Clusters and Teacher Resource Centres – Elizabeth A.Giordano. UNESCO: International Institute of Education Planning. Paris 2008. Fundamentals of Educational Planning Series- 86

CRCCs. Typically, senior teachers from the government school system are appointed as the centre coordinators.

The major academic roles of BRCs and CRCs as outlined in the Framework for Implementation of SSA (2008) are⁴:

- Development of the centre as a rich academic resource with ample reference materials for the teachers.
- Development of strong human resource pools (by inviting resource persons) from nearby teacher education institutions, NGOs, Colleges/Universities and resourceful individuals to form Resource Groups in different subject areas for primary and upper primary level.
- Regular school visits for addressing emerging pedagogic issues and issues related to school development.
- Organisation of teacher training and monthly meetings to discuss academic issues and design strategies for better school performance.
- Setting up of performance indicators to track and enhance school performance.
- Consultation with community members and Panchayati Raj Institutions to strive for school improvement.
- Designing a Quality Improvement Plan for the block/cluster as per the SSA goals and striving to achieve that in a time bound manner.
- Monitoring the progress of quality using Quality Monitoring Tools in collaboration with nearby District Institute of Education and Training (DIET).

Monthly academic meetings have been visualised as one of the elements of this cluster strategy for school improvement. These meetings are intended to be a space where teachers can connect with one another, discuss classroom challenges and collaboratively arrive at solutions. The Framework for Implementation of SSA⁵ notes that the cluster-level meetings should be “*a professional forum for teachers to reflect and plan together in a decentralised and consultative manner.*” It is also connected to and reinforced by other cluster-level strategies. This includes maintaining a resource centre so that teachers visit the space and utilise reference materials, periodic school visits by the coordinator to understand learning challenges and provide direct on-site help, consultations with the community and local bodies on school improvement and the development of a quality improvement plan for the cluster as per policy goals. It is therefore, an essential component of a holistic approach to improve teaching-learning processes.

However, for a combination of reasons not entirely within the control of teachers and functionaries, rarely did these intentions get translated into ground reality. In Uttarakhand too, these cluster-level meetings were infrequent, poorly attended and largely administrative in nature, meant to pass on official communications. They did not address any academic objectives. The meetings were convened through an official order issued by the BRCC or the Deputy Education Officer and the primary aim of these meetings was to communicate instructions from the block or the district education department and collect school statistics from teachers or head teachers. Those who participated in these meetings were mostly head teachers of the cluster who had to receive updates from the department and furnish information about their schools. As the coordinator at Riyuni recounts, “*Every meeting, some teachers would come, sit for a while, sign in the attendance register and leave.*” Given the past history, teachers viewed these meetings as an administrative formality.

Even in instances where the coordinator tried to broaden the scope of the meeting to address classroom subjects, he/she was met with stiff resistance. The coordinator at Riyuni recounts, “*In my*

⁴ Role of Block and Cluster Resource Centres In Providing Academic Support To Elementary Schools, Research, Evaluation and Studies Unit, Technical Support Group, EdCIL (India) Ltd 2010

⁵ Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan - Framework for Implementation, 2011

early days as the CRCC, once, I tried to initiate a discussion on Mathematics but the teachers were unhappy and strongly opposed to this. They also put pressure on me through the teacher union to quell such activities."

Academic activities received the least attention within the portfolio of responsibilities of CRCCs; most of their time was spent in gathering data. A qualitative study⁶ on frontline education administrators in Bihar correlates this point. The study notes that on an average visit to school CRCCs spend only 10-20% of their time inside the classroom or engaging with the teachers while the rest of their attention is focused on collecting data, auditing of infrastructure facilities and delivery of various schemes and incentives. The study further looked at self-perceptions of these administrators. The interviewees referred to themselves as 'post officers' and 'reporting machines', indicating their lack of agency. The study pointed out that the top-down, rule-book driven culture of education management has meant that local administrators are invested with little authority. Additionally, there is a lack of adequate preparation and guidance for CRCCs to function as effective facilitators of learning in schools. The system does not make 'demands' on the CRCC to deliver learning; compliance with orders is sufficient. Given this scenario, there was limited scope for meeting the academic goals of the CRC and utilising cluster-level monthly meetings as a platform for providing meaningful academic support.

4. Foundation's Engagement with the Cluster Monthly Meetings

4.1 The Beginnings

The Foundation's engagement with CRCCs in Uttarakhand began in 2004-05, with the Learning Guarantee Programme (LGP), in which the focus was to improve classroom processes through assessment-led reforms. CRCCs were actively involved in the implementation of the programme by providing the support required to distribute assessment tools to schools, monitoring implementation and collecting student responses. A few CRCCs also participated in some academic activities such as the development of assessment tools, orientation of teachers on assessment and in analysis of student learning levels.

After three years of implementation, when the teams reviewed the programme, it became clear that assessment reforms could not be implemented in isolation. It was deeply interlinked with the question of teacher capacity and the teacher support system. A holistic academic approach was required to improve student learning outcomes. This shift in thinking marked the launch of the second phase with additional focus on building capacity of education functionaries to engage with schools in providing instructional support; encouraging them to take ownership to sustain such change, and developing in them a greater understanding of subject content and pedagogic matters. Thus, in 2008, the Foundation began to engage with CRCCs in Uttarakhand in a direct and focused manner to build their capacity and improve the existing support system. This intervention took shape and grew organically over the years based on evidence and demand from the ground.

Apart from conducting workshops for the CRCCs, the Foundation began participating in the cluster-level monthly meetings in a purposeful and planned manner. The intervention started with requesting a slot in these meetings to introduce teaching-learning related topics. Initially, the time set aside for discussion was limited - ranging from 30 minutes to an hour. The onus of initiating the discussion rested primarily with the members of the Foundation. The time allocated for this was often referred to as "APF ka session", or "APF ki baat rakhne ka time"⁷. Once the administrative matters had been settled, time was allotted to discuss educationally relevant matters. Initially these were restricted to general topics such as an understanding of how children learn, Right to Education Act (RTE), or Comprehensive and Continuous Evaluation (CCE). Often participants were not very forthcoming, reducing the exchange to a one-sided lecture. In other cases, the sessions

⁶ Education reform and frontline administrators: A case study from Bihar - I, Yamini Aiyar, Vincy Davis and Ambrish Dongre, Ideas for India 2015, accessed at http://ideasforindia.in/article.aspx?article_id=1515

⁷ Azim Premji Foundation is referred to as APF by a large number of external stakeholders

unfolded in the read-and-discuss mode; there was only sufficient time to distribute a short paper and ask participants to read and share their responses. It took considerable amount of time to build credibility with the teacher community and refine these engagements so that the discussions resonated with the teachers.

The Foundation's involvement in other school related interventions in the same locations helped in establishing trust and fed into these continuous interventions. For example, an opportunity arose to utilise the forum to further teacher understanding on *Bal Shodh Melas*⁸. To be able to organise this, teachers needed to adopt a certain pedagogical strategy known as the discovery method of teaching to tap into a child's innate curiosity and inquisitiveness about the world around her. Cluster-level meetings were used effectively to develop this understanding through demonstrations and discussions. Efforts were made to enhance the physical environment of the CRCCs and make them more appealing to teachers. Posters and other inspirational literature were put up on the walls. The monthly agenda and profiles of teachers in the cluster were displayed. The libraries were refurbished by ensuring proper cataloguing of books and display of materials.

Even though Foundation's interactions with the CRCCs increased over a period of time, their disproportionate involvement in administrative tasks such as monitoring of school infrastructure, data management, and responding to frequent demands for information from the education department, continued to pose challenges. By 2011-12, the Foundation's organisational strategy underwent a significant change. The Foundation developed a deep rooted conviction from its experiences of working on the ground for almost a decade that continuous and sustained engagement over many decades will be required for any deep-rooted change to happen. Therefore it shifted from working in 'programme or project mode' to working in 'institutional' mode. It was decided that local institutions would be established which would be embedded in the respective contexts and could collaborate with local government structures. Thus, Field Institutes were set up at different locations with central emphasis on building teacher capacity. The CRCC functioned as the administrator who was in direct touch with teachers, while cluster-level monthly meetings were nodal points in the district education system providing direct access to large groups of teachers. The field teams of the Foundation hence, sought to leverage this connection, among others, and utilise existing forums to address continuous professional development needs. This shift in strategy led to an increase in the frequency of interactions with the CRCCs. Along with participating in cluster meetings, the Foundation also worked intensely with strengthening the CRCC's capacity through a range of initiatives.

4.2 The Evolution

As a result of various concerted efforts of the CRCCs and the Foundation, very gradually, the tenor, tone and the quality of the meetings changed. Slowly, the discussions began to move towards academic topics such as sharing of school visit experiences, plans for setting up and improving libraries, assessment of learners, and specific subject and classroom related concerns. A member of the Foundation recalls, *"During a session on 'fraction', the participants, for the first time, were observed showing interest and were willing to sit for extra time. This was a milestone which later transformed into the quality which it is now at."* This is corroborated by the CRCC at Joshiyara who recalls, *"In the beginning, the teachers would attend but would not sit. Slowly, as the discussions began to relate to challenges in the classroom, they were more attracted to the meetings and started becoming regular attendees. All these things did not happen at once – it took time and cooperative efforts."* The nature of discussions evolved from being primarily lecture-like one-sided discussions to participatory activities where teachers shared their experiences and even openly disagreed with each other on professional matters. The forums moved towards being democratic spaces where adequate space and respect were accorded to different perspectives.

⁸*Bal Shodh Mela* is an education fair conceived by the Foundation to bring together education functionaries, teachers, children and the community. Through a voluntary and consultative process, stakeholders decide topics or areas for 'shodh' (research). Children have about a month's time to plan and prepare. Preparations entail making questionnaires, surveying local geography, interacting with community members, recording findings, analysing and categorising all the data and finally putting it all together for a presentation to be made on the day of the 'mela'.

To make these discussions more effective and better aligned with the requirements of teachers, the need for developing an annual academic plan was felt. Starting 2013-14, cluster academic plans were developed by the CRCCs with support from the Foundation. This process of academic plan development also helped in building their capacity to address academic concerns, developing mutual trust among all stakeholders and putting in place, a process for participative decision making.

The table below is a representative example of the types of discussions, based on a broader annual academic plan, which began to take place in these cluster-level meetings.

Table 2: Topics discussed in Riyuni cluster meetings during 2016

Date	Content	Duration (Hours)	Grades	Teachers Attended
3/5/2016	Perspectives of EVS	4	1-5	14
11/6/2016	Patterns; reading of ' <i>ganit se bhay lagta hai</i> '	3	1-5	11
15/7/2016	Map reading	2.5	1-5	15
30/8/2016	Writing and reading	2.5	1-2	9
24/9/2016	Sharing of In-service Teacher Training module; counting	2.5	1-2	19
22/10/2016	Area and perimeter	3	3-5	7
21/10/2016	Teaching counting, angle and time through kit	2.5	1-2	7
26/11/2016	Constitution and democracy; counting; understanding reading	4.5	3-5	14
20/12/2016	Early Literacy - Reading and Writing	4	3-5	17
21/12/2016	Early Literacy - Reading and Writing	4	1-2	15

Though these meetings were implicitly a mandate from the government, specific orders had to be issued by the block coordinator or the Deputy Education Officer to convene and let the teachers participate. However, over time, these meetings began to be held through a mutual agreement between teachers.

By 2015, what had begun as the primary responsibility of the Foundation team, had evolved into a system of shared ownership involving all stakeholders. Teachers would come prepared and take on the responsibility of facilitating the discussion. A teacher from Lata states, *"Whenever I go for the meeting, I go with full preparation and I participate fully. I also share my experiences related to what I do in my math classroom. The suggestions I get from the discussion, I try to incorporate in my classroom and try to make my teaching even better."* Besides an improvement in the quality of dialogue and discussion, the time allocated to discussions, as mentioned earlier, also increased. The duration of these discussions became longer gradually, with some meetings going up to even 4 hours.

While the teachers and coordinators began to see value in these interactions and their direct applicability in a classroom, the CRCCs began to take greater ownership. Now, the Foundation continues to work with the CRCCs and supports them in their efforts to develop these meetings as a space for academic discussions and sharing of experiences.

4.3 Current Scenario

Currently, the platform of cluster-level meetings has reached a certain level of maturity in the clusters identified for this study. The key features are:

- Meetings are more regular and systematic; scheduled on a monthly basis except for exams, vacations and other disruptions such as natural disasters.
- The agenda is discussed and decided through mutual agreement and shared in advance.
- On an average, the meetings have a participation of 10-15 teachers.
- The meetings have a distinct academic purpose and seek to provide inputs to teachers on how to improve their instructional practices.
- The discourse has both backward and forward linkages with classroom practices.

The CRCC is also responsible for inviting participants and may do so, over phone or messaging services such as *WhatsApp*. Teachers participate of their own volition. Typically, the dates for cluster-level meetings for an entire year are decided in the meetings of the block resource centre in advance and are common across a particular block. The dates may change based on teacher availability or to accommodate urgent demands from the department. Sometimes, joint meetings are organised for a group of clusters at a convenient venue. This is typically undertaken when a common concern such as CCE or teacher diary needs to be addressed. The transactions during these meetings conform to collectively defined norms such as adherence to a planned schedule and agenda, active participation of teachers for the entire duration of the meeting, and focus on teaching-learning related topics.

The following table indicates the number of such academic meetings convened and the average teacher attendance between 2013-14 and 2015-16 in these clusters.

Table 3: Number of meetings, attendance

Cluster	Number of Academic Meetings			Attendance (Avg. No. of Teachers)		
	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Riyuni (Almora)	-	4	8	-	10	12
Nagla (Udham Singh Nagar)	7	8	3	13	13	13
Joshiyara (Uttarkashi)	4	7	4	17	20	18
Lata (Uttarkashi)	2	5	5	13	12	14

Usually, one teacher per school is expected to attend the meeting. With a substantial number of single or two teacher schools in the system, hundred percent attendance at these meetings – i.e. a teacher from every school - is rare. However, there has been improvement in attendance since the meetings began focusing on academic matters that were relevant to teachers.

The maximum number of monthly meetings in a year in a cluster can vary from 8-10. Disruptions take place during vacations and examinations. In areas such as Joshiyara and Lata in Uttarkashi, prone to bad weather and difficult terrain, regularity becomes a challenge and invariably, meetings are less frequent or fluctuating from year to year. Transfers of teachers and CRCCs also affect the frequency of the meetings. For instance, in Nagla, as can be seen from the table above, only 3 meetings took place in 2015 -16 when the CRCC was transferred and there was a gap of few months before the new CRCC took over.

5. Lessons learnt

The experiences gained from engaging with cluster-level monthly meetings have revealed insights on how to leverage and sustain this platform for teacher professional development. The following section lays out the processes and practices that have helped to do so.

5.1 Fostering Trust, Rapport and Personal Connect among Stakeholders

It is important to build a relationship of mutual trust, respect and inclusion among all stakeholders (i.e., the CRCCs, teachers and the Foundation in this case). This requires a process of long-term, continuous engagement through both formal and informal means of interaction.

In the education system where formal spaces for interaction tend to be hierarchical, such a relationship is crucial for collaborative learning. Once trust is established and teachers see value in the offering, they are ready to come forward and work on improving their professional practices. They are open to feedback and willing to invest in their own capacity development without any official obligation to do so.

As far as the Foundation was concerned, it helped that CRCCs and teachers had direct experience of the quality and relevance of Foundation's work starting with LGP. The establishment of Field Institutes further conveyed the permanent nature of the Foundation's presence in these districts and the Foundation's long-term commitment to understanding and improving the local school system. Field Institutes invested a significant amount of time and resources in building a thorough understanding of the local circumstances. This helped in refining their ways of engagement based on local needs. Field teams also adopted multiple modes of engagement to build the capacity of teachers and functionaries. This opened up several opportunities to interact with the same target group, build a personal connect with them and recognise their context and challenges. The aim was to build a relationship of mutual respect acknowledging the autonomy of teachers.

5.2 Building Capacity and Confidence of Functionaries

The CRCC plays an anchoring role in enabling cluster-level monthly meetings to function as a platform for teacher professional development. A teacher from Nagla very insightfully acknowledges, *"From 2008-09, these meetings started taking shape when one of the popular teachers in our geography, known for his academic excellence, joined as a coordinator of this cluster"*. The capabilities and motivations of the CRCC are key to the effectiveness of the platform. Given the range of responsibilities they are tasked with, it is necessary to empower, support and build their capacities to accomplish the centre's academic mandate. Capacity building takes time and continuous engagement in multiple ways as is demonstrated from this experience. The CRCC, Riyuni shares *"I was very hesitant about initiating an academic discourse after the initial strong opposition of teachers. When Foundation members shared the idea of starting the discussion along with some motivated teachers, I started gaining some confidence. But I was not sure if this will work."*

The Foundation has engaged intensely with the CRCCs over a considerable period of time (2005 – present) to strengthen their capacity, motivation and confidence. A series of workshops by the Foundation on the CRCC's role and scope of responsibilities helped in bringing a comprehensive understanding of the task at hand. There were also workshops on matters related to perspectives (aims of education, education and society, how children learn, knowledge etc.), content (content areas in subjects such as language, science, mathematics) and pedagogy. These helped in building their academic competence to provide guidance to teachers. Once academic discussions were initiated in the monthly meetings, the Foundation provided and continues to provide, regular support in planning and facilitating sessions through members who help with planning the agenda, doing the pre-work, reaching out to teachers, etc. Initially, members of the Foundation co-facilitated the sessions with CRCCs. Over a period of time, the CRCCs took complete ownership of the space. Thus, a system of support was crucial in helping the CRCC navigate the various aspects of her role.

The recognition and acknowledgement of the efforts of motivated CRCCs in public forums such as the Academic Resource Group⁹ also boosted their morale. Once the forum began to gain some traction among teachers, the word about their 'success' spread. Soon, coordinators received greater visibility in the district set-up and were invited to facilitate sessions in other clusters and share learnings. Peer recognition therefore, helped in enhancing their confidence and motivating them to further such practices.

5.3 Systematising Processes

Setting up processes for organising and conducting cluster-level meetings is essential to ensure that the forum functions in a meaningful and productive manner. Cluster-level monthly meetings are slotted in a pre-decided calendar and this is shared with teachers in advance (almost a year). Teachers can then plan their schedule around this calendar. The dates may change to accommodate last minute contingencies but mostly take place as planned. The coordinator assumes the responsibility of reminding teachers about the meeting date and the topics of discussion, one or two days prior to the meeting over *WhatsApp* or phone.

Dedicated time is allotted to academic discussions. In the three clusters from Almora and Uttarkashi, a single meeting is conducted every month to deal with both academic as well as administrative matters. The first half is dedicated to departmental affairs and the second half to academic discussions. However, in Udham Singh Nagar, two monthly meetings take place - one to exchange information and attend to administrative matters, and the other to facilitate academic discussions.

The academic agenda for the meetings is designed in advance through a co-development exercise involving all stakeholders across a cluster. In order to make peer-learning exercises effective, discussions need to take place in a systematic manner, in alignment with teacher needs, curricular goals and expected student learning outcomes. To achieve this, it is necessary to have a long-term academic plan which acts as a frame of reference. At the start of the academic year, the coordinator, teachers and members of the Foundation come together to arrive at a shared conviction on the professional development goals for the year. This is meant to be a broad framework indicating the subject area which would be discussed in a given month along with the persons responsible for hosting the session. The calendar is developed keeping in mind thematic continuity across meetings and equitable distribution of time and attention across subjects and themes. The topics for individual monthly meetings are derived from the annual academic calendar based on teacher needs.

The specific agenda for a given session is shared one or two days prior to the meeting. In the current scenario, the CRCC, teachers and members of the Foundation discuss and arrive at the agenda through consensus. The process of deciding the agenda in advance has given teachers an opportunity to express their requirements arising from day-to-day classroom situations. A teacher from Nagla shares, *"I requested 2 months ago for a meeting focused on teaching Hindi to grade I students. Other teachers also share topics on which discussion should take place. This gives us a feeling that our concerns are being addressed in the group and our thoughts are being valued"*. Announcing the agenda in advance, also enables teachers to attend sessions which are directly connected with the subjects they teach. Another teacher from Nagla says, *"I have been participating in the meetings right from their inception. In last two-three years I have observed a change in the quality of interactions. I participate in the meetings focused on maths and science as these are the topics which I deal with in classrooms."*

⁹ Academic Resource Groups were instituted with the objective of bringing alignment among various representatives of the government education system through a platform for academic discussions, planning and problem solving. The meetings of the group are conducted twice or thrice a year with the participation of teachers, cluster and block coordinators, block and district education officers and the DIET principal.

Proceedings of the meetings are captured in a detailed, formal report and shared with officials at the block and district level. Documentation helps to establish linkages and coherence across meetings. Coordinators use the meeting reports as a ready reference to recapitulate previous discussions and seek feedback from teachers on the experience of implementing prior learnings in the classroom. It helps in distilling the lessons and insights gained from the transactions into a written, structured format which can be shared with others.

5.4 Ensuring Quality of Discussions

The effectiveness of a teacher peer learning platform ultimately depends on the quality and depth of the conversations that arise from it and their relevance to classroom practices. Ensuring that discussions take place in a constructive manner requires relevant subject matter, resource persons with academic expertise and interactive modes of discussion where teachers are invited to participate in the collective creation of knowledge.

A typical meeting lasts 2 to 4 hours depending on the nature of the subject and the time required to transact ideas related to it. Sessions are often focused on discrete subject related topics such as how to teach English grammar, how to use a globe in the classroom or how to use a specific TLM such as a mathematics kit. Sessions may also focus on larger issues or policies in education such as CCE or on organising events such as the *Bal Shodh Mela*. Some of the sessions are also devoted to following up on modules covered during subject-wise in-service teacher training conducted by the education department once in a year. The cluster academic plan jointly developed by teachers and CRCCs forms the overarching thematic basis for the discussions. Sessions are planned so that each meeting is complete in itself and teachers who attend even one such meeting can benefit from it, take valuable insights and thus fuelling their motivation to attending further meetings.

Cluster meetings are facilitated by coordinators, teachers or members of the Foundation. The responsibility for each session is assigned to individual(s) in advance. The resource person does extensive preparation for the session – plans the meeting content, does the necessary groundwork and leads the discussion on the meeting day. Facilitators are often supported by faculty members of DIET, block coordinators and Foundation teams in researching and presenting the topic. They also tap into a resource archive of reference material maintained by cluster coordinators. An effort is made to employ a variety of techniques like playing videos, organising group presentations and activities to make the sessions lively and interactive and sustain the interest of the participants. External resource persons, particularly lecturers from intermediate colleges, are invited to address topics where they can share specialised expertise. This helps in creating a buzz about the platform. Additionally, coordinators from other clusters are invited to facilitate sessions. This mutual sharing of experiences and acknowledgement of their challenges and expertise also facilitates building of confidence and trust among the stakeholders. A participating teacher declares, *“We feel confident after we facilitate the sessions in the meetings and it also helps in building a trust and special bond between each other.”*

The sessions are increasingly teacher-centric and resource persons encourage teachers to pose questions, articulate experiences and actively participate in the construction of knowledge. The forums focus on foregrounding the teacher’s experiences and observations and investing teachers with the agency to create and refine their own teaching-learning practices. An earlier discussion on maintaining teacher diaries, at one of the cluster meetings, illustrates this better. Maintaining a teacher diary is a mandate as per the education department guidelines. However, teachers lacked clarity with respect to writing daily reflections and in their function of aiding the teachers’ own professional development. In a joint meeting involving 4 neighbouring clusters, the teachers sought to address this concern. Through debate and discussion, they arrived at a shared understanding on how to write and utilise a teacher diary. Similarly, other such challenges related to CCE, self-evaluation, and report cards continue to be addressed through these meetings. Cluster-level meetings, thus, afford an opportunity to clarify doubts and concerns with respect to new initiatives and practices.

5.5 Making Connections to the Classroom

Teachers like other adult learners are interested in subjects which have direct relevance to their lives so, professional development opportunities need to be deeply contextual. School visits are crucial to establishing and sustaining relevance since they highlight the teacher's experiences and teaching-learning challenges. Hence, it is important that the coordinator makes school visits to understand teacher concerns and build a personal rapport with them. These become means to interact with teachers on a one-on-one basis and persuade them to participate in cluster level meetings. The CRCC from Riyuni immersed herself in school-level events such as *Sapno ki Udaan* and *School Chalo Abhiyaan*¹⁰ which helped in establishing bonds of trust, respect and cooperation with the teachers. Often, the absence of a personal connect between teachers and the teacher educators means that the teachers are guarded and reticent during discussions and concerned that if they open up about classroom challenges it will be held against them. So, school visits help in creating informal bonding and familiarity between the teachers and the CRCC.

School visits also provide CRCCs with a direct experience of the complexities of the teacher's context. These observations inform their academic agenda and dialogue during cluster-level meetings. Furthermore, issues encountered during school visits are discussed in the monthly meetings where participants share their feedback and take insights back to their classroom. The CRCC of Nagla cluster says, *"We always try to connect the topics with the classroom so that teachers can derive something useful from these discussions. When there was discussion on how children can learn science better, we looked at the importance of using a microscope. This helped upper primary teachers to demonstrate the use of a microscope in their classrooms."* Teachers also come back and share their experiences of applying learnings from the meetings in the classroom. This creates backward and forward linkage with classroom transactions and enhances the relevance of the platform to the teacher.

5.6 Creating a Space of Shared Ownership and Free Dialogue

Teachers need to be given ownership of their professional development. When involved in the planning and delivery of learning, teachers can and do assume responsibility for their own professional development.

The structure of the cluster-level meetings is marked by shared decision making and distributed leadership. Teachers are involved both at the level of content (deciding the agenda) as well as processes (pre-planning, facilitation). This has not only resulted in increased participation from teachers but they have also accepted greater responsibility with regard to various aspects of the meetings such as deciding the annual academic plan, the agenda, facilitating sessions, actively participating in the discussions etc. This is in sharp contrast to the system of hierarchy and orders that prevailed in earlier meetings, where teachers were disinterested, unresponsive and resented academic interventions. One of the participating teachers from Nagla cites this very reason as a contributory cause for bringing about this change, *"Factors that contributed to making the meetings regular were openness to participants, and discussion on classroom related content and practices."*

Collective decision making has instilled a sense of ownership and allowed participants to open up about their classroom experiences. As CRCC of Nagla cluster points out, *"Ownership has evolved by recognising and respecting the ideas and practices of teachers and giving them the space to express themselves in meetings."*

While the CRCC may take responsibility for informing participants of the meeting and agenda, and anchor the sessions, the discussion unfolds in a democratic manner. Teachers have a space for open, honest and constructive dialogue without hierarchical barriers. The CRCC at Nagla explains, *"We have often seen that whenever a teacher shares her experiences, it is important to listen and use her points to build a discussion. This helps in establishing trust and sustaining the interest of teachers in*

¹⁰ Sapno ki Udaan and School Chalo Abhiyaan are community mobilisation drives for enrolling out-of-school children.

their own capacity building". When a history of being heard and acknowledged is created, teachers feel valued and respected and begin to express themselves freely. This ensures that they are internally motivated and participate in the forums.

There is also a positive pressure on the teachers by their peer group to share what they actually do in the classrooms and submit it for scrutiny in the group. So, teachers not only recount their experiences, but also bring evidence in the form of student notebooks, charts, video clips and photos, etc. to validate their points.

5.7 Offering a Coherent Set of Professional Development Experiences

Engaging with teachers in a holistic manner through multiple modes and over a sustained period of time seems to pay dividends. Any well-designed engagement, exposure or forum for interaction with teachers for their professional development gathers strength when it is one amongst a coherent set of engagements. The same criteria is applicable with the cluster-level monthly meetings.

The original conceptualisation of the cluster-level monthly meeting saw it as an integral element of a more holistic cluster improvement strategy. In-school support and a vibrant well-resourced CRC are the other elements of the conceptualisation. The members of the Foundation as well as the CRCCs engage with teachers in a variety of ways such as in-service teacher trainings and school visits. School visits, even if short, ensure a personal connect as well as enable a deeper understanding of the teachers' challenges. Additionally, there are rich portfolios of other professional development modes facilitated by the Foundation such as workshops and Voluntary Teacher Forums¹¹ in which many teachers may participate. Therefore, it has been possible to ensure that the cluster-level monthly meetings are a part of a coherent and consistent set of professional development experiences that the teachers have access to. This has also resulted in improving their efficacy and usefulness.

5.8 Improving the Ambience

A conducive physical environment might seem like a small detail as compared to the larger focus of these cluster meetings. However, it is an important factor since choosing a convenient location and creating a clean, comfortable space attracts teachers to the platform. It essentially suggests that their needs are acknowledged and respected. As mentioned earlier, one of the early efforts undertaken in Uttarakhand was to revamp the look and feel of the CRC and make it a space that teachers would like to visit. When the Foundation began getting involved in cluster-level meetings, members working with the CRCCs made efforts in improving the ambience of the space. They also started paying attention to the comfort of the teachers and ensuring that there were comfortable seating arrangements. All these factors made the space more inviting to the teachers.

Similarly, the meeting venue came to be a fixed indoor location such as the CRC or a school where serious academic discussions could take place without any distractions. Across the four clusters, it has been observed that the meetings now often take place in schools making it easier for the teachers to attend and thereby, increasing their commitment to the platform. When joint meetings of multiple clusters are organised, efforts are again made to select a venue which is centrally located and easily accessible to all. In the mountainous geography of Uttarakhand, this can present quite a challenge.

¹¹ Voluntary Teacher Forums are voluntary meetings facilitated by the Foundation for teachers, usually of different subject groups, to meet, discuss and share classroom related experiences and be able to do joint problem solving. These are held in the evening after school hours or on holidays. For a more detailed description of these forums please see 'Starting and sustaining Voluntary Teacher Forums; experience from Tonk, Rajasthan, Oct 2016' - <http://azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/SitePages/pdf/Field-Studies-In-Education-Starting-and-sustaining-VTFs-Oct-2016.pdf>

6. Conclusion

CRCs and BRCs were conceived as local institutional structures to provide ongoing professional support to teachers. However, for various reasons, they have served as another layer of decentralisation between schools and the district management without adequately achieving their mandated objectives.

Members of the Foundation working in Uttarakhand saw the potential to use the CRC and the cluster-level meetings to help teachers in the cluster to connect with each other and build a forum for academic exchange which would address specific teacher concerns and lead to improved teaching learning practices. Over time and through a range of efforts from all concerned stakeholders, the meetings in these clusters are evolving into vibrant professional development platforms with clear academic purpose and direct linkages with classroom practice. Challenges such as being able to cater to a mixed group of teachers - for example, getting teachers from lower and upper primary to attend a single meeting, teachers from single teacher schools owing to their circumstances being unable to attend meetings and a difficult geographic terrain in some areas, continue to remain.

Developing cluster meetings into effective platforms for teacher development is a continuous process. It takes time, patience, and sustained, multi-pronged efforts on the ground. The ultimate vision for these meetings is to make teachers take complete charge of the platform and operate as participants, facilitators and owners. Even in these clusters, there is still a long way ahead if one has to realise this vision in full measure.

At a broad level, this journey has, however, demonstrated that working to renew and strengthen such an existing system even with its constraints is a rewarding exercise. There are over 1 lakh cluster resource centres serving over 8 lakh government elementary schools¹² in the country. Given that these institutional bodies are already in place, staffed with people and resources, it is important to leverage this pre-existing space to improve teacher capacity. Foundation's experience with cluster-level monthly meetings has shown that existing structures can be reinvigorated through deep-rooted contextual efforts, respecting the autonomy of teachers and working in collaborative modes to realise their mandated objectives.

¹² District Information System for Education (DISE) Database 2015 - 2016

