



How to Use the Cluster Approach for Capacity Building in Schools

by CRS/India





How-to Guide Series

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Written by CRS/India Education Team

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Letter from CRS Education Technical Advisors

Dear friends and colleagues,

We are pleased to present this latest edition in our CRS education “How-to” series: *Using a Cluster Approach for Capacity Building in Schools*, which was created by CRS/India.

The “How-to” guide series was created as an opportunity for CRS country programs and their local implementing partners to highlight and share an aspect of their work that has been particularly successful. Instead of presenting a detailed description of their program history and accomplishments, however, the focus of the guides is on the practical steps that CRS country programs and partner organizations can take to adopt similar activities. The recommendations will need to be interpreted for each particular context, but the topics addressed in each guide are ones that would strengthen and improve any existing program: how to reduce the number of school drop outs; how to increase child participation in programming; how to use adult literacy to improve rural development.

This guide from CRS/India addresses capacity building at schools, and in particular the ways that peer-to-peer learning networks of teachers and administrators can overcome many of the challenges traditionally associated with in-service training for education professionals. This guide presents a basic methodology for setting up school clusters and describes some of the exciting dynamics that are created within a cluster: appreciation of individual strengths, friendly competition among teachers and schools, and ownership of their own professional development. As the testimonial at the end of this guide shows, this process can be transformational for a teacher, and by extension their school and children who learn there.

Best wishes,

Anne Sellers and Eric Eversmann

Education Technical Advisors

Letter from CRS/India Country Representative

Dear friends and colleagues,

CRS/India is pleased to present this How-to Guide on our cluster approach for capacity building in schools. Despite the many benefits that India's privileged class have secured after a decade of impressive economic growth, India still has twenty-six million children yet to be enrolled in primary schools and poor families often resort to pulling their children out of school for work as a means of supplementing income.

CRS and partners are working with communities to ensure quality primary education in resource-poor schools that serve populations where children are at risk of being pulled out of school early or not having the opportunity to attend school at all. The cluster approach focuses on optimizing locally available resources, engaging the entire communities—including children—in the functioning of their schools and enhancing capacities of education providers. In the CRS supported schools, there is greater interaction between the students themselves and between the children and their teachers. The schools are accountable to the communities they serve and, in return, communities help to ensure a supportive environment for those responsible for teaching their children.

This guide book is an effort to help the planners and implementers of education programs to use the cluster approach to improve the quality of education within resource-poor schools. We hope the guidance provided will help others to engage all stakeholders within target communities in a continuous dialogue and reflection process aimed at achieving overall improved performance and ensuring that all children have the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from a safe, fun and quality learning experience.

Sincerely,

Jennifer George Poidatz

CRS/India Country Representative

“*Motivated by its commitment to reach out to the most marginalized sections of society ... CRS/India has prioritized the building of teacher capacity in its education program.*”

1. Background

For several decades, CRS has provided commodity food aid to some Indian schools, to allow them to serve a nutritious midday meal to students. The goals of this program, funded by USAID under Title II, are to increase student participation, alleviate short-term hunger, and improve children’s learning capacity. The schools are located in remote villages, and serve the poor and marginalized of society. In general they are privately owned institutions, established and run by local organizations.

During monitoring visits, CRS staff noticed that the quality of education in these schools was dismal: teachers relied almost exclusively on rote learning methods in their lessons, students had few or no learning materials, and the classroom environment was generally not stimulating. Attendance dropped off steeply in the afternoon, with many children going back home after the midday meal. Teachers were often local unemployed youth who lacked relevant training and the skills to facilitate classroom learning. And all of this was taking place in a highly resource-poor environment, where schools lacked

the means to invest in infrastructure or pay teachers more than a pittance, and were forced to charge student fees.

Motivated by its commitment to reach out to the most marginalized sections of society—such as members of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes, and especially girls—CRS/India prioritized the building of teacher capacity in its education program. Local training providers were identified to conduct teacher trainings, in the hope of improving instructional quality. An initial round of teacher training took place, followed three months later by field visits to assess their impact. The results were discouraging: not a single teacher was using the techniques taught in the trainings, and the teaching materials provided during the training were abandoned in the school office.

For the CRS/India education team, it was important to analyze why the training effort had failed and to continue to strategize about how to improve classroom quality, as the dire need remained. Discussions were held with selected partners, and the following issues emerged as key factors in the failure of that intervention:

- The training program was not designed with the needs of the students, teachers and school management in mind.
- School management was not involved in the training programs; they were only asked to send one or two teachers from the school for the training.
- Only one or two teachers from selected schools were trained, while the rest of the teachers followed old methods. Therefore, after a few weeks the trained teachers lost interest and went back to using the old methods.
- There was no on-the-job support for teachers at the school level, no support system set up for newly trained teachers to turn to when they encountered difficulties with the new techniques.

Based on this analysis, CRS/India decided to develop a new program design that would address those factors in the initial program's failure. From further discussions with schools and local partners, the cluster approach emerged as a promising strategy, because it achieves results by:

- Providing opportunities for peer learning and support
- Allowing schools of varying capacity to complement each other
- Sharing resources among schools
- Identifying and developing local resources.

This booklet offers a simple, stepwise guide to help education program planners and implementers use a cluster approach to design, implement, and sustain capacity-building programs at resource-poor schools.

Glossary of Organizational Terms

Implementing agency: A local NGO or government agency responsible for direct implementation of the cluster approach.

Cluster coordinators: Staff appointed by the implementing agency to supervise the program at the cluster level—usually one coordinator per cluster.

Resource team: Experts in capacity building for schools, used by the program to build capacity within the clusters.

External resource team: A resource team that is external to the program, such as an NGO that specializes in teacher training.

Internal resource team: A team made up of the cluster coordinator and highly skilled school staff from within the cluster, who assume increased leadership of capacity development in the cluster over time.

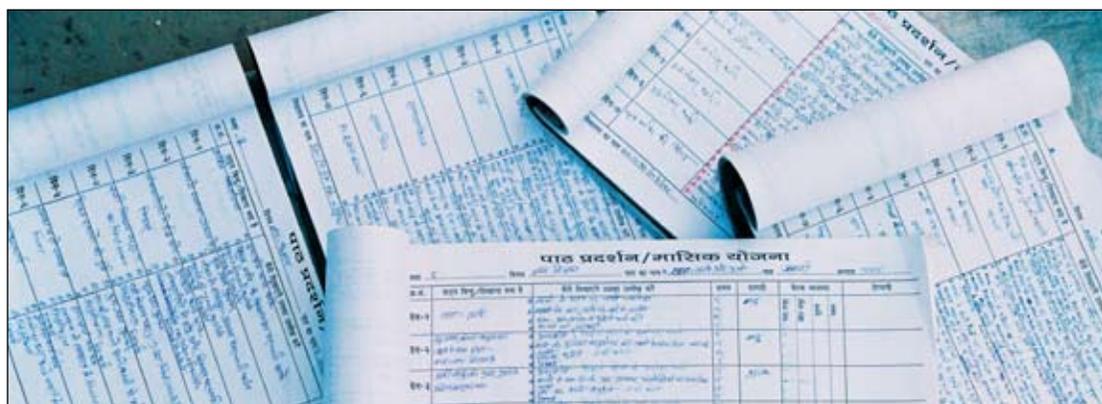
School manager: A school administrator, designated by the school principal, to lead the cluster process at their school.

2. The Cluster Approach

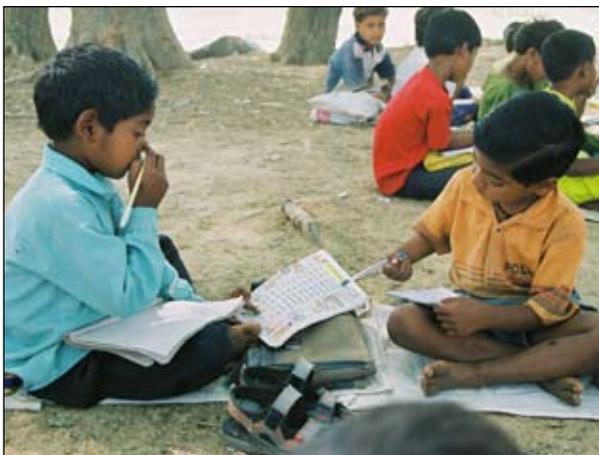
In the context of education programming, a cluster is group of schools located in close proximity to each other whose staffs meet regularly to build their capacity to improve quality at their schools.

What Does a Cluster Look Like?

- The number of schools and teachers needs to be considered when forming a cluster. In the CRS/India program, a cluster is usually formed of five or six schools. Having a small number of schools in each cluster helps in terms of monitoring, as each receives more focused attention. Limiting the number of schools also keeps to a manageable size the number of teachers and directors who will be trained together and interact with each other.
- Schools should be located close together or be otherwise easily accessible to one another, to allow for frequent interaction. In the CRS/India program, the distance between schools is limited to 10 kilometers. This simplifies the task of monitoring the schools and facilitates interactions among them, which strengthens the cluster methodology.
- The main participants at the school level are principals, vice-principals or other administrators, and teachers. The implementing agency—a local NGO or local government department—hires a coordinator to support all the schools in a cluster, and this person becomes part of the cluster team as well. The internal resource team, which is formed of selected teachers, principals, and the coordinator, is also part of the cluster program.



Lesson plans made by a teacher



Children find answers by working together

- Schools in each cluster typically have different capacities. This is good. Variation allows each school to have strengths and weaknesses, and creates opportunities for learning.

Who Forms a Cluster?

The selection of schools should be made by the implementing agency responsible for carrying out the activities at the field level. When selecting participating schools, focus on:

Willingness of the principal and school management to improve school quality. This is crucial, especially as the program demands some key changes in the usual practices and methods. Also, teachers and principals have to commit to dedicate time to monthly cluster meetings, and school managers (the principal or other designated school administrator) have to spare two or three days every quarter for program review and planning meetings. Their readiness to participate is a key to making this program successful.

Schools primarily catering to the poor and marginalized sections of the society. It is CRS' mandate to work with these communities, which are often powerless and voiceless, unable or afraid to raise their concerns and insist on being heard. The role of CRS is to support and build the capacity of these populations, and education is a powerful tool for their empowerment.

Willingness to participate. This is the most important selection criterion. Give priority to these schools, even if they have only limited resources. Most of the changes that are expected through a capacity-building program pertain to changes in practice, behavior, attitudes, all of which require willingness rather than resources to bring about positive change.

Quality of Education

Quality is an ambiguous, subjective concept. It is crucial to define it before planning any interventions. The CRS/India cluster program defines quality in terms of positive changes sought in the different active environments of the school. This vision facilitates design and implementation of the capacity-building program through the cluster approach.

For CRS/India, a school's development or quality enhancement can be seen in terms of four environments.

Physical Environment:

- Upkeep/cleanliness of the school
- Ambience
- Attractiveness/Appeal

Cognitive Environment:

- Stimulating learning environment
- Fear-free atmosphere for learning
- Effective use of teaching materials
- Effective facilitation of learning among children at different levels

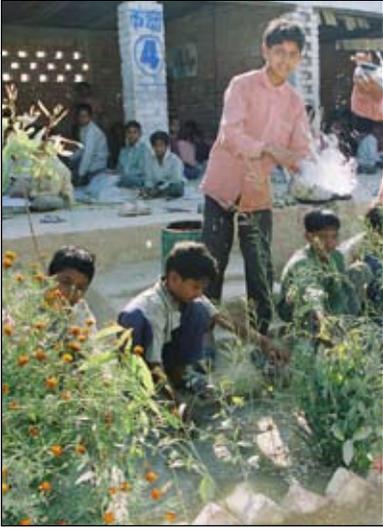
Social Environment:

- Equitable treatment of children from different castes, classes, religions, cultures, and communities
- Relevance of the classroom to the children's social and cultural context (folklore, stories, holidays, language, etc.)

Institutional Environment:

- Participatory decision making processes
- Staff valued and recognized
- Administrative systems in place
- Autonomy for teachers within agreed upon guidelines
- Supportive school management practices

Adapted from Subir Shukla, *Consultancy Report for CRS/India on Improving Education Quality in Schools*, June 2002



School gardening

What are the Advantages of Working through a Cluster?

There are both the short-term and long-term benefits of this approach.

Short-term benefits

- Most or all of the teachers and principals of participating schools are covered.
- Clustering gives teachers and principals opportunities to share their successes and challenges with each other.
- Participants learn in a supportive environment, where others are addressing similar challenges.
- School teachers, principals, and managers discuss and develop the roadmap for their own development and the development of their schools, thus increasing their ownership.

Long-term benefits

- Instills confidence among teachers and schools that they can expand their roles and work as trainers and resource persons for others.
 - Develops a pool of “experts” in poor and marginalized areas.
 - Speeds up the pace of success, as it inculcates healthy competition among schools within a cluster and among clusters within a region.
 - Sustains impact by creating an internal resource team at each school and giving them the opportunity to practice their skills.
-

Characteristics and Benefits of a Good Cluster

Opportunity for peer learning and support

The cluster should provide different schools the opportunity to share their innovations and experiences. Various platforms and events, such as monthly meetings, exposure visits, and orientation programs, can be used for this purpose. It is here that teachers and schools with specialized skills can provide information as well as support to other schools to implement good practices and innovations.

Schools of varied capacities complement each other

Although similar inputs are given to all schools in a cluster, over time they specialize in a particular area. This provides opportunities for each to demonstrate the areas in which it excels and at the same time to learn from others' experiences. This approach promotes mutual growth and learning. No single school is the model, rather each is seen as an example of a particular capacity/ability.

Sharing of resources among schools

While implementing the learning from the capacity-building program, it is observed that various materials and systems are developed in the schools. Some of the materials can be easily shared: children's newspapers, reading materials, teacher resources, and the like. This helps to maximize access to resources, which is crucial to schools that operate in isolated areas.

Local resources are identified, capacitated and recognized

It is good to identify local resources, such as a teacher or school principal who is performing very well and has developed a good understanding of quality issues. These people can be resources in their area of specialization at monthly meetings. Also, they can be asked to support a particular school by demonstration or experience sharing at the school level. They need to be prepared and equipped, as trainers. This will also reduce dependence on outside resources, improving program sustainability.

Dos and Don'ts of a Capacity-Building Program

Good Practice

- Decide on the goal or vision first—what do schools want to achieve? This will guide the design of the capacity building program.
- Base capacity building on the needs of all the stakeholders.
- Involve all key stakeholders beginning with the planning stage itself.
- Assess current capacities so that you know what already exists, where the gaps are.
- Build in mechanisms—monthly meetings at the cluster level, quarterly meetings at the regional level—to support the changes, envisioned.
- Prioritize the skills that will be built through the cluster program and determine the best means (formal trainings, small input sessions during meetings, exposure visits, reading materials, etc.) to provide them.
- Build skills in phases, providing time to apply the knowledge and enhance the skill before moving on to the next level.
- Be flexible so mid-course corrections can be made.
- Focus on expanding the knowledge and role of the internal resource teams so that they can eventually be the primary resource persons.

Things to avoid

- Avoid fragmented approaches to capacity building; each new skill should be introduced keeping in mind the overall picture.
- Do not blindly use “ready to use” packages already developed by other organizations; consider these resources, but always adapt the program to the needs of the area and stakeholders.
- Avoid top-down approaches to planning and implementation; they minimize the ownership by the participants, are difficult to sustain, and most of the time result in failure.
- Avoid inflexible program designs. It is always important to have a flexible design that can accommodate the changes the program comes across throughout the journey.



A cluster school teacher guides students through a learning activity

3. How to Build Capacity of Teachers and Schools

Capacity building is an integral part of creating sustainable development programs, and for education it is a crucial aspect.

To be successful, capacity building must be comprehensive, considering three essential components: the skills to be developed, the systems needed to implement or practice these skills, and the systems required to sustain the impact. Each component must be well thought out at the design stage.

Any initiative that aims to build capacity in schools to implement and lead school improvement plans needs to reflect on the components mentioned here to ensure a comprehensive approach. This analysis will identify gaps in the existing program and can provide some insight regarding future strategies.

When analyzing what capacity-building inputs are needed, the focus should be on training topics identified by teachers, school principals and managers, and relevant program staff. Mechanisms need to be in place at all levels to provide on-the-job support, feedback, and flexibility in training design to accommodate emerging needs.



A cluster school teacher checks in on students' group work

It is also important to note that school principals and implementing agency staff should be trained on the content of teachers' training programs and additional monitoring and evaluation inputs, if they are to successfully support the teachers.

How to Develop a Capacity-Building Program

Identify Stakeholders. Identification of stakeholders is the first step in planning a capacity-building program. Hold discussions with the implementers. Analyze the various groups that would be directly impacted by the program. This analysis may give you the following groups:

- Children
- Community-level groups, including parent teacher associations or school management committees
- Teachers
- School principals

Needs Identification. To design the capacity building program, it is important to know “the vision”—what stakeholders want to achieve through these programs. The next step is to understand the stakeholders' existing capacities. Comparing the existing capacities with the vision will highlight gaps, which will be useful in designing the strategies for capacity building.

SWOT Analysis. A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis workshop is mainly meant for program planners. At first, the participants should list the identified stakeholders that will benefit from this program. This should be followed by small-group work, where each group identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for each of the stakeholder groups. This information is then

Experiences from the field: SWOT analysis

In Uttar Pradesh, the SWOT analysis identified specific barriers to education that the cluster then worked to overcome:

The local dialect was different than the language taught in the school, which made it difficult for children to understand class material, especially in Class 1. It was decided that in Class 1 and Class 2 the teacher had to explain new words in the local dialect alongside the language of instruction, giving children enough space and time to pick up the second language.

Biases existed against girl children in the community and in the classroom. Issues of equality were included in the trainings developed for the cluster program and a session on biases and misconceptions was also brought into the teacher training program.

discussed by the whole group and finalized. The purpose of this analysis is not only to identify relevant stakeholders, but to create appropriate strategies for engaging each group and maximizing its contribution and ownership of the program.

Visioning Workshop. Conduct the visioning workshop with selected stakeholders, such as the officials of the implementing agency and the school principals. Participants should visualize a model or ideal school and list its features, which are later categorized according to the four environments described earlier (Quality of Education box, page 11—physical, cognitive, social, and institutional).

To inform this visioning, it is helpful to have as much information or data about the school and its programs as possible. This can include information about student enrollment and performance, teacher qualifications, and school materials and resources. Making decisions, such as creating a vision and setting priorities, is much more successful if it is done with good data about the actual—not just perceived—strengths and weaknesses of the school.

Finalize the vision with representatives from all stakeholder groups in a plenary meeting. This will help to increase the ownership of all stakeholders in the program.

Experiences from the field: Internal resource teams

When the CRS/India program was first implemented it was decided to hire external consultants to design the training packages. However, this proved difficult to coordinate as the program expanded. After two years, the decision was made to develop the in-house capacity of the schools and create internal resource teams, which have played a crucial role in the last five years.

These teams comprised selected teachers, the principal or other school administrator, and the coordinator assigned to the school by the implementing agency. School personnel who were assigned to an internal resource team had demonstrated mastery of the new skills and leadership in the school. Over time, these internal teams assumed more and more responsibility for the design and implementation of the cluster activities.

We also learned that new challenges have to be given to the internal resource team or it stagnates, which ultimately impacts the quality of the program. Recognition for performance and strategies to address non-performance need to be built into the program mechanism. This helps the members of the internal resource team learn new things and perform their best.

How to Tailor the Capacity-Building Plans to the Different Teams?

Each group targeted through the cluster approach—teachers, principals, other school administrators—will have different areas of competency and needs. Therefore, it is important to analyze the status of each group in terms of their knowledge, attitudes, and practices so that the capacity-building inputs can be decided accordingly. The outcome of the SWOT analysis will be helpful in doing this. By comparing the results of the SWOT analysis with the results of the visioning exercise, it is easy to identify gaps at the level of each stakeholder. Approaching capacity building this way ensures that the program develops strategies specific to each stakeholder, so that the schools are moving towards the desired vision and their capacity building needs are being addressed at the desired pace.

How are the Orientation and Training Packages Developed?

Once the topics for each stakeholder group are mapped out based on the visioning exercise and SWOT analysis, they need to be arranged in a sequential manner. Training should address topics in a logical sequence, with each session building on the previous ones and moving from simpler to more complex content. Also the mode of the capacity building should be decided; for example, whether it will be given through formal trainings or monthly meetings, by giving the reading material or by designing specific supplementary sessions that respond to new needs that emerge through implementation and monitoring.

After the mode and sequence of the inputs to be given in the program are finalized, the internal resource team or an external organization is given the responsibility for developing the initial training package. The design should include the list of topics to be covered in each training, as well as a detailed session plan for each topic. Also, based on the sequence of the training programs, the training team should meet in advance to finalize the topics, content, session plans, and reading material for the training.

It will always be good to decide at the start what strategy the program will use to ensure that the training reaches as many teachers as possible. There are two main options: the “direct training mode,” where teachers are given inputs directly by the resource team; and the “cascade mode,” where the training of trainers is given at the first stage to selected stakeholders, who then provide further field-level trainings.

The cascade approach improves sustainability in the long run, as it develops an internal resource pool within the schools and reduces dependency on external resources. However, cascade models are difficult to implement where overall capacity is very low, as the quality of training tends to decrease rapidly at each level of the cascade.

4. Implementing the Cluster Approach

The implementing agency should appoint one coordinator per cluster, although this can vary depending on the number of schools and their geographic proximity. This staff person is responsible for monitoring the program and providing on-the-job support to teachers. CRS/India has found that it is important that persons with teaching experience be selected for this post. This cadre of coordinators should undergo the capacity-building program designed for teachers, as well as some additional training on monitoring and evaluation. Also, it is recommended to have the coordinators participate in the internal resource team and develop them as trainers as well.

Support Systems

School level. At the school level, the principal or an administrator chosen by the principal is designated to be the school manager, with overall responsibility for the implementation of the program. This person should have some skill in pedagogy, as his/her role is also to provide the support to teachers. Weekly meetings should be conducted by this person to help teachers reflect on their work. These meetings should help teachers to clarify any questions and to share their difficulties and challenges. Weekly meetings should also be an opportunity for teachers to share their progress, ideas, and innovations. The school manager's role is crucial here, as they have to guide their team and build opportunities at the school level for cross learning—for example, through demonstrations and classroom observations. They need to identify resource persons among their teachers in the various subject and training topics who can help others to grow and excel.

Also supporting the school is the cluster coordinator from the implementing agency. This person should visit each school in their cluster as often as possible, up to once a week depending on the number of schools in the cluster. In addition to observing teachers and working directly with the school manager, the coordinator should also hold a general meeting with school staff after each visit. Direct feedback helps the school to understand the areas of excellence and challenges, and provides suggestions for improvement as well. These meetings create an opportunity to address certain issues right away; other issues can be brought to the monthly meeting or quarterly meeting depending on their complexity.

Cluster level. At the cluster level, the cluster coordinators play a crucial role in the smooth implementation of the program. They identify hurdles and provide solutions, either themselves or with help of the resource team. They play the pivotal role in

promoting learning across schools through monthly cluster meetings, exposure visits, pairing of schools for support, and pairing of teachers/principals for support. They have to analyze the progress made by each school in their cluster and identify the staff within the team that can be further developed as trainers.

Managing agency level. At the CRS or managing agency level there should be a project manager and support team. This team should review the quarterly accomplishment reports that are prepared by the cluster coordinators on the performance of their schools and clusters, and validate and triangulate during field visits. This will help them to analyze the performance of the coordinators appointed by the implementing agency also.

During quarterly meetings the project manager should explore the role cluster level personnel have played in the monthly cluster meetings addressing school and cluster needs. They should also bring up any issues they have observed during their monitoring visits that the coordinators have failed to identify or adequately address. Further, at quarterly meetings CRS staff should help coordinators identify opportunities for learning across clusters through exposure visits, demonstrations, and pairing of the cluster level staff. Finally, the project manager and his/her team should take responsibility for identifying new capacity-building needs among cluster-level staff and planning accordingly.

It is also at the managing agency level that plans for the development of internal resource teams should be developed and overseen. As was mentioned earlier, the development of these teams is essential to the long-term sustainability of the program.



Children busy studying

Processes

The capacity-building program starts with the foundation course for teachers, principals, and coordinators. This is followed by monthly, cluster-level meetings and quarterly, project-level meetings throughout the year. Then the annual training takes place and the cycle continues again.

In addition to formal trainings, it is also essential to develop systems to assess the impact and quality of these formal trainings. The cluster approach provides a structured way for schools to monitor, reflect on, and evaluate the impact of the activities, and particularly the training, that are designed to improve the school. It also strengthens the on-the-job support role of teachers, principals, and the implementing agency. certain gaps are filled, remaining gaps are then raised at the next level of monitoring and evaluation.

The following are the suggested processes and systems in this regard.

Monthly meetings. Each cluster should hold a monthly meeting. The monthly meeting provides an opportunity to teachers and principals from every school in the cluster to analyze their accomplishments and challenges and to plan their next steps. These meetings need to be carefully designed so that this platform can be used for peer learning. Initially these meetings should be facilitated by an external resource person and the cluster coordinator, then over time gradually turned over completely to the coordinator.

The data from the coordinator's regular monitoring visits should to be presented at this meeting, and additional activities may be planned based on the analysis of this data. The trends from the monitoring visits should be analyzed, and the better-performing teachers and schools in the cluster should be given the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skill. The gaps visible in all schools should be taken up in small sessions during this meeting.

Based on the outcome of the monthly meeting, each school in the cluster should prepare a plan for the next month and identify the additional steps that they will take in the interim to move toward their vision.

It is advisable to rotate these meetings among the schools in the cluster. This gives teachers, principals and school managers the opportunity to visit one

Suggested sequence of formal trainings

1. Foundation course

- Perceptions about children
- Biases, prejudices
- Teacher's role as facilitator
- Introduction of activity-based teaching
- Introduction of the cluster approach
- Deciding the steps for first month

2. Subject teaching

- Teaching each subject
- Learning evaluation—subject specific
- Equity and equality issues in classes

3. Training on cognitive aspects

- Activity-based teaching in detail
- Classroom planning
- Lesson planning
- Learning evaluation

4. Detailed training on language teaching

5. Detailed training on math teaching

6. Detailed training on teaching environment studies, science and social studies

another's schools and learn from one another. They also get to see the teaching and learning materials developed by the other schools and observe their physical environments—general cleanliness, level of upkeep, landscaping, and so on.

Quarterly meetings. In the quarterly meetings, cluster-level staff—school principals and the cluster coordinators—from various clusters meet to share their accomplishments, learn from experiences of the previous quarter, and develop plans for the next quarter. For quarterly meetings, clusters can be grouped based on their physical proximity or the time when they began their involvement in the program.

These quarterly meetings are a forum where immense capacity building can take place through peer learning and input sessions. The agenda of the meeting should be developed based on the monitoring visits and the progress report shared by the implementing partners. In creating the agenda, it is important to analyze the trends at each cluster and across clusters to identify challenges occurring across clusters. For areas where particular clusters or schools are doing well, they can facilitate a session at the meeting. Encourage learning across clusters, and appreciate and recognize the efforts made by schools and clusters—it helps to boost the motivation level among schools and clusters. It was often observed that healthy competition among clusters accelerated the pace of progress.

Experiences from the field: Monthly meeting

In one case, most of the teachers in the cluster schools were having difficulty developing lesson plans. To respond to this need, the cluster level staff organized a session for all the teachers during the monthly meeting.

In another case, the lesson plans in a school were well made. This school was then given the responsibility during the monthly meeting for explaining to the other schools the process of developing a lesson plan.

Experiences from the field: Quarterly meetings

The quarterly meetings can be a venue for the internal resource teams to develop and practice their skills. In Uttar Pradesh quarterly meetings were such a platform. Over time the internal resource teams were given the opportunity to design the quarterly meetings, plan the sessions, and conduct the meetings. These were quite useful in building the confidence of these new trainers, who were later also given the opportunity to design and conduct trainings for the overall cluster program.

As with the monthly meetings, it is advisable for the meetings to be hosted by the clusters on a rotating basis; it is useful as well to plan for a one-day field trip during each meeting. The field trip should be planned for the first day of the meeting. Afterward, observations from the field trip should be discussed to understand the progress the cluster has made, including innovations observed and group needs. If the number of participants is large, it may be helpful to divide into four or five groups, so that each can visit one school in the cluster during the field visit. The same set of instructions and guidelines should be given to each group to guide their field visit.

Annual trainings. The formal, annual trainings are predesigned inputs based on the assessed and felt needs of the target groups. In CRS/India these training programs were conducted once a year for six to eight days. The regular visits conducted by the coordinators and the monthly and quarterly meetings described above all help to

provide the necessary, complementary on-the-job support at all levels—to teachers, principals and coordinators—to implement the methods taught in the training.

Several rounds of formal trainings are required to fully equip teachers and principals to move toward the school of their vision. Training should be spaced out evenly and given in a sequential manner, based on the gaps identified and the steps that must be taken to achieve the vision. It is advisable to hold these trainings during vacations, so that routine classes are not affected.

The sequence of annual trainings should be decided during the initial planning. If there is a need to change that initial sequence, then the resource team should discuss and revise the training schedule. The monthly meetings and quarterly meetings create the opportunity to assess the impact of these trainings and to provide additional specific inputs so that one does not have to wait until the end of the academic year for the annual trainings to resolve the challenges schools are facing.

5. Overcoming Challenges

Based on the CRS/India experience, the following are key challenges that may be encountered while implementing the capacity-building programs through clusters.

Challenge: How to bring desired change in attitude, behavior and practice? If teachers in the school have been taught through rote learning methods, it is very difficult for them to even imagine that children can play a greater role in the teaching and learning process and that they have to pay attention to, and make time in the classroom for, children's past experiences.



Group work during teacher's training



Children get the opportunity to become the teacher



Material-based teaching

Recommendation: Start

small. Activity-based learning can be introduced at a small scale (in one or two subjects). Introducing group work in classes also gives the confidence to teachers that children can contribute to a greater extent in the teaching and learning process. “Seeing is believing.” Once teachers introduce an activity in one or two subjects in some classes they experience the difference and then the scaling up of activity-based learning takes place.

Challenge: How to ensure that theories are transformed into action?

If the implementing partners are unable to hire cluster coordinators who are already experienced in more active teaching and learning methodologies, the program may encounter the problem where the cluster coordinators are very good at the conceptual

level but lack practical experience with the new methods the program is promoting. Since the expectation of the coordinators is to provide on-the-job support, problems will arise when, due to this lack of practical experience, they are unable to give workable solutions to the teachers.

Recommendation: From knowledge to practice. Cluster coordinators need to participate in all the training programs meant for teachers and school managers. Also, they need to be given the opportunity to implement the knowledge they have gained in these trainings, which may mean they need to teach in the schools on certain days of the week. CRS/India successfully negotiated with schools to allow

the cluster coordinators to teach in classes. This proved very helpful in the Uttar Pradesh program, where supervisors were provided the opportunity to directly practice the theories. The experience helped them to help teachers in more meaningful manner.

Challenge: How to equip a new teacher to become part of the program?

If a new teacher joins a school where the quality improvement program is taking place, it is a challenge for both the program and that teacher. For the program, it is difficult to conduct training for just one teacher. Without this training, it is difficult for the teacher to understand what is expected from him/her and as a result the new teacher often feels completely lost in using the new methods in the classroom.

Recommendation: Orientation package.

It is important that school management develops an orientation package and briefs teachers on the cluster program before they join the school. Classroom observation could be the method followed for the first few days, complemented by an introduction by the cluster coordinator to the theories and concepts taught in the training program. The orientation package should as best as possible equip the teacher to follow the new methodologies.



Extracurricular activities in school

Challenge: How to ensure community participation in the program? In India, schools usually limit the interaction with parents in the community to annual, formal parent-teacher meetings. Most of the time, these interactions are limited to discussing the child's progress. The participation of the community at large in school activities is missing and thus negatively impacts the ownership of the community over schools.

Recommendation: Provide space to community members in school activities. Every effort should be made to include parents and community members in the cluster process. In some contexts, schools may be very open to parent and community participation and parents can be included as stakeholders and participants in the cluster program. If, however, the environment is still very restrictive with regard to parent participation, smaller efforts may be more successful at bringing parents into the school. For example, special events can be arranged to bring parents and community members into the school, such as organizing a special celebration to which they are invited, or inviting people from different professions into the school to talk about the roles and responsibilities of their work.

Challenge: How to ensure sustainability? The experience of CRS/India is that capacity-building interventions that are dependent on external resources—especially technical resources—become difficult to coordinate over time.

Recommendation: Build internal capacity to provide support. Develop an internal resource team and empower this team to step in as trainers as external support is withdrawn. The internal resource team should consist of the coordinators, cluster school principals, and the personnel appointed by the implementing agency. Training of trainers (TOT) should be given to the core team in which the participants develop session plans. Training rehearsals are highly recommended during the TOT. Developing core teams at the cluster level is vital in steering the program. It also addresses the problem of teachers quitting, which can be chronic at times. It has been the experience in Uttar Pradesh that once a teacher leaves the quality of teaching rolls back to pre-program levels. In these circumstances the core team is a boon, as one of its members can substitute until a new teacher's capacities have been brought up to the desired level.

Field Story: The Successful Journey of a Teacher

The first of July was my first day at school. After I reached school, I participated in the school prayers. The children were staring at me. After prayers I was introduced to the school principal and was then led to Class 3 to teach math. I was being tested. I stood in front of the children, who rushed to get me a chair.

I was confused; I did not know what to do. I hesitated while speaking, scared that I might make a mistake and fail this test. From the second day onwards I began to speak slowly and tentatively until the fear and hesitation inside me disappeared. A thought that was always on my mind: “I have to become a successful teacher.” But there was no one to show me the way.

Around this time the school where I had begun to teach became a partner of the Jeevan Dhara Marg Darshak Society, a partner of CRS in Salempur, which runs programs that improve the quality of primary schools. Their activities include training teachers and I participated in them.

Before joining this program, my outlook on children was limited. I believed children were like a clean slate on which the teacher had to write. Through the cluster program, and during monthly meetings and trainings, I learned about active learning methods and how to make lesson plans. We learned how to develop teaching and learning materials and use them appropriately.

With my concepts regarding these teaching methods getting better, the realization came that I was headed for success and I started making more efforts on my own. I experienced my greatest professional happiness when I was selected to represent my school as trainer for mathematics. Through the training of trainers I was given chance to show my skill, which I did, and I earned the support of my peers. My confidence grew and eventually I passed the test for “core group.”

Today, I am a much more confident teacher; I can develop a lesson plan and teaching and learning materials and use active learning techniques to help children learn.

—Shri Jai Prakash Kushwaha, Village Karmtar, District Deoria
(translated from the Hindi)

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