Review Article

Strengthening Cluster Resource Centre (CRC) As a Forum for Continuous Teacher Development: My Experience in Mayurbhanj District, Odisha, India

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ABSTRACT

To bring about qualitative improvement in education, Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs) were established in each block of every district under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to conduct in-service teacher training and to provide academic support to teachers and schools on a regular basis as well as to help in community mobilization activities. According to the previous researches, it was found that the functioning of these centres were far away from the reality due to lack of physical resources and overloaded administrative responsibilities of the Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators (CRCCs). The situation of these Cluster Resource Centres in Odisha and especially in Mayurbhanj district was also not encouraging. There was hardly any scope for Monthly Sharing Meetings (MSMs) at the clusters. The deteriorating situation of these Cluster Resource Centres and absence of scope for continuous capacity building of teachers prompted CARE India (an International Development Organisation) to intervene in the district. It tested an innovation to revive the Cluster Resource Centres and to convert them in to a continuous teacher development forum. This in turn enhanced the reading skill of the children in the intervened schools. The results mentioned here are clearly reflected in the end-line assessment report conducted by a Delhi based research agency named "KAARAK".

Keywords: Cluster Resource Centre, continuous teacher development forum. Monthly Sharing Meetings (MSMs) CARE India, Sarva *Siksha Abhiyan*, Mayurbhanj

INTRODUCTION

In the year 2014 CARE India started its intervention through START EARLY: READ IN TIME project to improve early grade reading (Grades 1-4) among the most marginalized children in selected government schools of Mayurbhanj district in Odisha. With this aim, it worked in 5 blocks, 48 clusters and 516 schools to reach out to nearly 27000 primary school children. CARE India realised that there was lack of scope for continuous capacity building of CRCCs as well as teachers. The teachers were either imparted pre-service or in-service training. The trainings could not suffice to the needs of the teachers as these were not regular or continuous in nature.

For this reason, they were not well acquainted with the new curriculums and modern teaching techniques. The traditional thoughts and old techniques adopted by teachers could not be beneficial for the current classroom situations. This badly affected the language skill of children in general and the reading skill in particular.

CARE India strongly believed "Teachers are important catalyst to ensure quality education, enhancement in their capacity is an important pathway for ensuring equitable quality education". Therefore, the project strategy on early reading targeted on building teachers capabilities and also creating teacher support structures at the school, cluster and

block level. Teacher support institutions at district and state level were needed to be strengthened in terms of perspectives on key domains of reading and training provisions of teachers and children assessment. It took an initiative to strengthen all the 48 cluster resource centres as continuous teacher development forums. The ultimate aim was to improve the reading skills of early grade children by capacitating teachers through organisation of regular Monthly Sharing Meetings (MSMs).

ACTIONS TAKEN BY CARE INDIATO STRENGTHEN CLUSTER RESOURCE CENTRES:

During the baseline study conducted by "KAARAK", it was found that the Cluster Resource Centres were not functional in the assessed blocks. In order to revive the Cluster Resource Centres and to make them functional, CARE India made a Memorandum of Understanding with the Government of Odisha to intervene in the district for 4 years in the period from 2014-19. The assessment results indicated that only 20 Clusters had physical space, whereas the other 28 cluster centres were either used for classroom or any other official purposes. Some meetings were being conducted by the Clusters with support from the Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA).But, the meetings were not happening on a regular basis. Most of the meetings were for the data collection purposes. There were no academic discussions in the meetings. The Agenda of the meetings were not being followed properly. The very purpose of these Cluster Resource Centres could not be fulfilled. Realising the importance of Cluster Resource Centres, CARE India initiated certain actions to bring about a change in the current practices. The actions taken by CARE India for strengthening the Cluster Resource Centres are given below.

- Consequent upon CARE India's MOU with the State Government, the District project office of Mayurbhanj issued a circular to the Block Education Officers of the 5 intervened Blocks to arrange a permanent space for running the Cluster Resource Centres (CRCs). Subsequently, the 20 unused CRCs were repaired and arrangement was made for physical space for the rest 28 Clusters on a war footing means.

- The Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators were trained on various components of Early Grade Reading and different teaching methodologies to address the issues of teachers relating to "reading".

- All the 48 Cluster Resource centres were provided with resources like Teacher handbook, stationary items, Charts, posters, age and grade specific reading materials both for children and teachers, Registers. Maps and Globes etc.

- Both the Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators (CRCCs) of the Education department and the Cluster Coordinators (CCs) of CARE India decorated the centres and displayed the materials in the 4 corners of the room. Some charts and Teaching Learning Materials were developed to establish library, reading corner and subject walls in the clusters. The 4 walls were named after 4 different sections such as mathematics, Language, EVS and English. The meeting register, Stock register, Library register, Agenda register, resolution register, information charts. School ranking chart. Chidren assessment charts were made available in the Clusters. The objective of arranging them in the Cluster was to fill the centres with plenty of resources.

- Regularisation of cluster meetings was an issue in all the clusters. The mere availability of resources in the clusters alone could not make the centres functional. The Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators did not agree to conduct the meetings every month due to lack of time. The Cluster Coordinators of CARE India faced many difficulties to organise the meetings. Keeping this in view, CARE India convinced the District level officials about the importance of the meetings and got a

letter issued to the Block level education officials to regularise the meetings with support from Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Mayurbhanj. In pursuant to the letter of SSA, the Block level officials also issued a circular to the intervened schools regarding the venue and meeting dates. As a result, the meetings became regular in course of time.
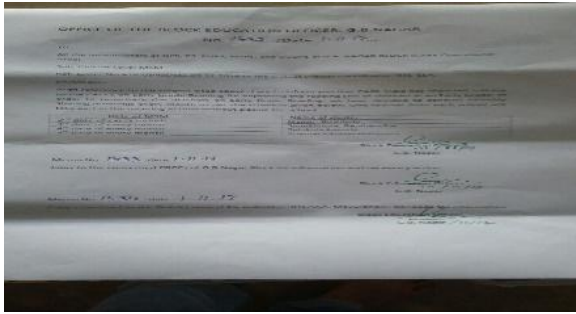
Govt. letter issued for regularisation of MSM

- The Cluster Coordinators (CCs) of CARE India followed a certain procedure to organise the cluster meetings. Before the Cluster meetings, the CRCCs and the CCs used to prepare a plan and Agenda every month based on the pedagogical issues faced by the teachers in the classroom.
- Initially, the Cluster Coordinators of CARE India facilitated the meetings, but in due course the CRCCs were capacitated to lead the meetings.
- Cluster Resource Groups were formed and strengthened to lessen the work pressure of the CRCCs and to provide them support in the Cluster meetings and during the monitoring visits. Each cluster group consisted of 4 competent teachers from the subjects like language, mathematics, English and EVS.
- Out of the 48 intervened clusters, 20 cluster resource centres were provided with ICT materials (Laptop, projector, camera and speaker etc). The purpose of providing the materials was to convert the clusters into IT enabled clusters. The IT materials were used by the CRCCs in handling the school data, preparing

PPTs, analysing school results, showing different teaching methodologies to teachers and capturing the best practices of schools etc. The use of these materials had a positive impact on the capacity building of the teachers.

- The dedicated language instruction teachers for early grade in a cluster were targeted through the forums. Each forum had a group of 20-25 teachers from all the primary schools in a cluster. The forums had a specific agenda that was focused on the early grade language instruction.

REGULARISATION OF CLUSTER MEETINGS (MSMs) THROUGH SPECIFIC AGENDA:

Decision was taken to prepare a common Agenda template for the reference of the CRCCs. They were advised to prepare their own Agenda as per the need of the teachers. The Agenda was divided into 5 important sessions. All the sessions were designed sequentially and logically to get a definite outcome. There was a time limit for each session. The designed sessions were as follows.

- Morning Assembly(storytelling, action song)
- Review of the activities(based on last month plan)
- Technical session(for conceptual clarity on any topic)
- Resource generation(development of charts, big books etc)
- Issue solving session(pedagogical issues)
- Planning session(for the next month)
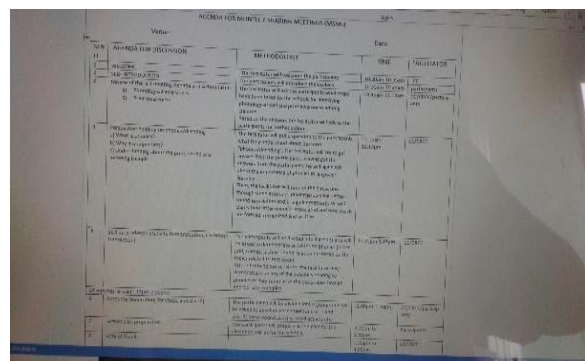
Cluster meeting Agenda template

Morning Assembly:

In the morning assembly session, the teachers used to organise the activities like action song, storytelling, mute play, role play and quizzes etc.The purpose of organising these activities was to let the teachers know about their benefits for language development (listening, speaking, vocabulary and phonemic skills etc) of children and to replicate them in the schools for a greater benefit.

Review of the last month plan:

The second session was meant for reviewing the last month plan. The objective was to know the actions taken (Target vs. Achievement) by Individual schools as per the previous month plan. Basically, the plans were divided into two categories, the first plan was related to creation of a conducive school environment and the second plan was to bring about a change in the classroom process. The first plan included everyday activities like morning assembly, library period, establishment of school library, reading corner and print rich environment in schools. The second plan directly focussed on classroom management, teaching methodologies and use of Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs) in the classroom. Both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the activities were being discussed to make them better in the next plan.

Technical session (building conceptual clarity):

This was an important session to build the perspective of the teachers on any of the concepts on language, reading, child psychology, Gender and Safety & Security etc. The CRCCs and some members of the Cluster resource group were responsible to lead this session. The methods adopted in this session included literature reading, video presentation, power point presentation, group discussion, large group discussion or demonstration etc.

Resource Generation (Development of materials):

In this session, some materials useful or relevant to the topics meant for classroom transaction were being developed, which included bi-lingual dictionaries, picture charts, word charts, story charts, big books, sentence cards etc. The purpose of developing them was to display them in the clusters to demonstrate it as a model cluster. Another purpose was to take them as samples to the schools for using in the classroom transaction.

Issue solving session (Pedagogical Issues):

This session was designed to avoid the discussions on operational issues and to attract the teachers towards bringing a solution to pedagogical issues. The objective of this session was to persuade the teachers to raise their classroom issues openly. The issues relating to multi-lingual situation, classroom management and teaching practices were being discussed one by one. The CRCCs prioritised the issues according to the gravity of the situation. The methodologies adopted for solution were mutual discussion, group discussion and classroom demonstration.

Planning session (for next month):

In this session, the teachers' prepared Individual plans for their respective schools for the next month. The teachers used teacher hand book, assessment register and text book for developing classroom plans. Based on the assessment indicators, the teachers selected activities from the teacher handbook aligning with the textbooks. The purpose of the plan was to practise the activities in the classroom for a healthy classroom environment.

Cluster Forum meeting/Monthly Sharing Meeting (MSMs)

ADVANTAGES OF CLUSTER FORUM MONTHLY SHARING MEETINGS (MSMs):

Cluster Forum was conceptualized as a self-help commune, a group, which undertook responsibility for its own professional development. The cluster forum mainly focused on using learner centred and inclusive teaching methods, epistemology of language, with focus on early grade reading, instructional strategies &classroom management strategies. These forums acted as continuous capacity building platforms for teachers having linkage between each forum. These meetings were used as a medium to reinforce the principles already discussed in training as well insights coming from field visit. The forum served as platform for sharing feedback and observations about ongoing classroom practices. Consequently, this forum progressively built the perspective of teachers on educational and equity issues, developed enabling schools, developed conceptual understanding on subject specific competencies and content, improved clarity on instruction methods relevant to the discipline and level of the learner, helped in adopting child centric pedagogical methods and classroom management techniques, developed understanding on assessment indicators and approaches, developed idea on creation of resources, encouraged the teachers to establish linkage between school and community, capacitated the teachers to develop actionable plan. Apart from these above benefits, it also helped the CRCCs and the CCs in monitoring the school activities and providing onsite support to the teachers as per need.

Observation of cluster meeting by BRCCs& District Education officials

REPLICATION OF CLUSTER FORUMS:

CARE India with support from the District Education officials arranged two day's meeting with all the26 Block Resource Centre Coordinators (BRCCs) of the district. On the first day of the meeting, the BRCCs had an exposure visit to an intervened cluster named "Jaypore", where they witnessed a live cluster meeting led by the CRCC of the concerned cluster.16 teachers from different schools of the said cluster participated in the meeting. The Agenda of the meeting was rolled out as per the designed sessions. Information & technology (IT) materials were used during the technical session to build the perspectives of the teachers on a particular concept. The BRCCs were apprised about the importance of a cluster meeting in a nutshell. They also visited an adjacent school to see the changes in the schools environment and classroom processes as a result of regular cluster meetings. The second day meeting was organised in the presence of the District Education officer, District Project coordinator and Pedagogy Coordinators of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, Mayurbhanj. The teacher educators from DIET also were present on the occasion. Some suggestions and feedbacks were sought from the BRCCs. They elaborated their first day's experiences and feedbacks comprehensively. Considering the importance of the cluster forums, the district officials unanimously decided to replicate the model cluster approach in all the 26 blocks in the district.

CONCLUSION

In order to strengthen the cluster resource centres, CARE India left no stone unturned. It worked at the school level, cluster level, block level and district level to materialise this prime objective of the project. In the conclusion, it can be said that Cluster Resource Centre (CRC) was a platform where teachers met up and conversed on the experiences, problems, successes and triumphs they encountered in

their everyday classrooms. The central assumption behind the forum was that "there is no absolute expert who can provide solutions and address to the needs of the group. Instead every member should work together to seek collective solutions". Here the problems encountered were not theoretical or hypothetical in nature, these were burning problems, which every practitioner wanted to address to make their classroom processes more effective and inclusive in nature. The Teachers' Forum was a flat democratic platform, where there was no hierarchy between different participants. Everyone had the same stake over the issues and their strength to influence a discussion or dialogue was based on their logic and reasoning strength rather than their power or position. These ongoing actions of the forums capacitated

the teachers to their fullest extent. This was reflected in the school environment and classroom processes too. Strengthening cluster forums through regular monthly sharing meetings (MSMs) bore fruit at last. The decision of the district administration for replication of the cluster forums in the entire district proved its success to a larger extent.

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