

Mapping work flows of frontline education administrators: Cluster Resource Centre Coordinators in Bihar

The Cluster Resource Centre (CRC) is viewed as a hub of academic activities wherein the pedagogic issues of teachers must be resolved with the help of the Cluster Resource Centre Coordinator (CRCC). A CRCC in Bihar is “a qualified teacher who is in charge of supervising, observing, monitoring and providing academic support as well as training the teachers posted in primary/elementary schools in her cluster.”

How effectively are CRCCs able to fulfil their job responsibilities? This report presents a summary of the findings from an intensive time-use study conducted between November 2014-15 and April 2015-16 of select CRCCs from East Champaran and Bhojpur in Bihar and CRCCs from three other states to understand the daily functioning of the education bureaucracy at the frontline.

This report also includes recommendations, in light of the study findings, to improve the overall functioning of CRCCs.

TIME-USE STUDY STATE BRIEF: BIHAR

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I. What does a CRCC do on an average work day?

- On an average 7 hour work day, the sampled CRCCs were observed spending 4-5 hours in the field. For 3/4 CRCCs, the average day was spent visiting 2-3 schools. Between 40-60 minutes were spent inside each school. School visits were mostly unplanned and guided by immediate data requirements
- **Activities inside schools:** Once inside schools, these CRCCs prioritised collecting data which was immediately required and/or collected data around MDM, student and teacher attendance, and talking to the HM and teachers. The 4th CRCC was an interesting aberration as he would visit only one school a day, spending up to 3 hours inside the school wherein data collection was the lowest down activity on his priority list.
- **Activities inside classrooms:** 3/4 CRCCs spent less than 21% of the total time spent in schools inside classrooms. This is roughly the same time spent by CRCCs from two other states which were part of the study (Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra). Visits appeared to be random and the CRCCs spent between 10-30 minutes inside classrooms wherein they either asked subject related questions, took over teaching or observed the teacher as they taught. 3/4 CRCCs were not observed providing academic or teaching related feedback to the teachers apart from telling them to “teach the students properly” on a few occasions.
- The 4th CRCC spent 43% of his time in schools inside classrooms. He entered multiple classrooms in a day, spending roughly 45 minutes observing the teacher teach and making notes in his monitoring tool. He was observed complimenting teachers on their teaching skills, giving suggestions on how to teach better, and sharing good practices observed by him from his visits in the monthly cluster meetings.
- **Paperwork:** Net time spent on paperwork was not as high as CRCCs tended to portray (21% of the total time CRCCs were observed). This was within the range of time spent by CRCCs from the other states which were part of the study (Maharashtra,

Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh). But it is important to note that more time was spent talking formally and informally around data and paperwork in general among stakeholders including HMs, block officials. This was, once again, common to all four states. This phenomenon may be adding to the impression that the burden of paperwork is very high. It is also the only concrete activity for which CRCCs are regularly held accountable, hence, giving this perception more weight.

- Data was collected mechanically on all occasions. An incident wherein a CRCC was observed filling the BEO’s monitoring report reflected the seriousness with which the routine data collection exercise was treated. Virtually no time was or is spent understanding the data being collected from schools to use it to support teachers or HMs better at either the cluster or block level.
- **Meetings:** For 3/4 CRCCs, the content of the monthly CRC meetings mostly consisted of giving instructions to the teachers about formats, marking attendance and having tea-snacks. Conversations around academic matters were limited and arbitrary. This is similar to observations from the other states.
- **Relationship with the block and other department officials:** Interactions with block officials are largely one-sided, top down, transactional and almost entirely around data requirements and are often initiated by the seniors – this is common across the states. (This could also be a reason why paperwork is prioritised by CRCCs over their other responsibilities). CRCCs shared closer relations with their BRPs but we did not observe the BRP initiate or discuss matters around teaching-learning with CRCCs.

II. CRCCs’ role perception, role clarity and prioritising responsibilities

- CRCCs viewed themselves primarily as administrative support staff, using terms like “post-men”, “clerk” to describe themselves. (The 4th CRCC sees himself as an “academic support” and consciously prioritises academic activities over data collection. He credited his exceptional

behaviour to intrinsic motivational factors and the relations he shares with his block officials).

This perception has taken hold for two reasons – In their daily experiences, the messages they get from officials at the block and district level is that they need to prioritise data collection and submission. Conversations with school actors tends to revolve around paperwork/data requirements and a disproportionate amount of time is spent by the CRCCs on paperwork compared to providing academic support inside classrooms and in monthly meetings.

- A partial understanding of their own roles has added to this which is revealed through several instances e.g. through the random style of conducting classroom observations; and confusing being a “mentor” with being a “leader” which is seen in a negative light.
- CRCCs listed the following factors as the main hurdles to good quality teaching-learning - lack of parental involvement, policies like the No-Detention Policy and policy to end corporal punishment. Conversations around teaching capacity of teachers and learning issues faced by students was wholly missing.
- Partial understanding of own roles, poor quality of engagement with school actors could be linked to limited work capacities or lack of good quality trainings which target skill building. “Trainings” are usually orientations around new programmes or instructions around how to fill new formats.
- There appears to be no incentive for the CRCCs in the present system to provide academic support to teachers which forms the core of their duty. The 4th CRCC who was focusing on giving inputs to teachers said he did it out of a sense of duty but is rarely if ever asked about the teaching-learning activities he carries out in schools.

III. Recommendations

Under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan framework the role of CRCC has been envisioned as a mentor to teachers – a peer who provides academic support to both teachers and students. In state government plans to improve the quality of its teachers and the quality of teaching-learning transactions in schools, the CRCC is therefore often central to achieving these objectives. Broadly, CRCCs have three types of responsibilities:

- **Related to providing academic support to teachers** – Assess teachers’ training requirements and HMs leadership capabilities and communicating the same to the BRC/DIET; act as teacher trainer; observe teachers teach and provide academic inputs (in schools, in CRC meetings); help teachers prepare TLM and provide inputs to uplift weaker students; create a pool of subject matter specialists from cluster teachers; and identify and share teachers’ best practices.
- **Related to record maintenance** – Collecting, collating and maintaining data related to the cluster; act as link between block office and the schools; ensuring teaching-learning materials, library, Science and Math kits, sports equipment and other school resources are utilised and utilisation certificates are submitted on time.
- **Related to community involvement** – Ensure PTA, SMC meetings get conducted on time; act as trainer for them; identify and enroll out-of-school kids and motivate community members to send kids to schools.

Close to two decades have passed since CRCCs were institutionalised. Yet CRCCs across states including Bihar appear to struggle to meet the expectations laid down under the SSA framework. Fundamental concepts like “mentoring”, “facilitating” are still misunderstood.

In order for CRCCs to efficiently discharge their responsibilities to the fullest, we are proposing the following recommendations:

- 1.1 **Introduce short-term, target-oriented programmes that are focused on improving teaching-learning in mission mode and implement these through the CRCCs.** For instance, in the case of the Mission Guvvatta programme in Bihar, short-term, focused interventions like summer camps with a clearly set goal to improve reading and arithmetic levels; and providing remedial lessons to students in school for an hour everyday gained popularity amongst teachers,

students and CRCCs.¹ Similarly, in 2016, reading camps were organised successfully by the Government of Delhi wherein an hour was allotted every day in schools to singularly teach students how to read against targets set for them. Interventions should also involve community members to reiterate goals, break the monotony and keep frontline actors motivated.

1.2 Involve CRCCs in learning assessments at the school level.

Administering tests and analysing the collected data is a tried and tested way of getting CRCCs to develop a first-hand understanding of the depth of the learning problem, sensitise CRCCs towards the core of their responsibilities and be more receptive towards programmes which aim to improve teaching-learning practices. In the case of Bihar, CRCCs could be made part of the state-wide NAS assessments due to take place in November but it should be ensured that the involvement extends beyond mere data collation.

1.3 Meetings between block and district officials and CRCCs should focus on discussing teaching-learning related issues and ways to resolve them.

Tangible solutions should be provided to CRCCs to resolve the issues faced by them. There is generally an urgent need to create a less hierarchical and fear-driven culture within the education bureaucracy. Efforts need to be put in to consciously change the focus of meetings between CRCCs-block officials and block officials-district officials from administrative matters to solution-oriented dialogues around teaching-learning practices in their respective areas.

1.4 Articulate and communicate the goal CRCCs need to achieve in a simple, consistent and repeated manner by ensuring that timelines of state level plans are aligned.

By the time information percolates to the cluster and the school level, the intent and goal of the policy or programme tends to get diluted because frontline officials often get caught up in figuring out logistics of implementation including preparing reports

quickly losing sight of the goal. For the state to be able to send across a single, consistent message with respect to the goal to be achieved and to remind CRCCs of their main roles, different branches of the education department at the state level will have to work in close coordination to ensure that the demands placed on the CRCCs and the time-lines for delivering upon tasks are rational.

1.5 CRCCs' trainings should focus on clear, skill developing aspects which contribute directly towards improving teaching-learning.

For example, CRCCs should be trained on how to prepare effective lesson plans, how to observe, record and relay feedback to teachers based on their classroom observations, how to prepare a monthly assessment sheet with teachers. In the initial period, CRCCs should be supported by the Bihar SCERT (and NGOs working in the education space) who could act as mentors to develop teaching-learning materials for CRCCs to share with teachers.

1.6 Provide easy to use resource materials such as flash cards, booklets or pamphlets on innovative teaching methods

which can be easily adapted and applied on ground. Involve CRCCs in developing these resources as part of their organised and regular mentorship provided by SCERT faculty. This will help develop their skills and go on to reiterate CRCCs' job priority.

1.7 Create more incentives for CRCCs and other frontline officials to develop local and economical solutions

to meet their goals. Sharing innovative solutions developed by CRCCs in monthly meetings, rewarding CRCCs on various platforms will motivate them to strive harder.

Other important recommendations:

1. Create a competency framework for CRCCs –

Identify the core skills required to discharge the responsibilities assigned to CRCCs in order to develop a competency framework. This framework should be

¹AI carried out an in-depth study into the classroom focused reform efforts under Mission Guvvatta in 2014-15. The detailed report on Mission Guvvatta's implementation titled "Education reforms, bureaucracy and the puzzles of implementation: A case study from Bihar (2015) can be accessed on AI's website – accountabilityindia.org

used to guide recruitments, performance appraisals and providing targeted capacity building training programmes for CRCCs.

2. New recruits should undergo a probationary period

– This period could range from 30 days to 3 months. This will help the supervisor (the BRP, in this case) to assess their skills, style of working and other aspects of the new recruits. This will also keep BRPs accountable towards their core functions. On the basis of the report prepared by the BRP, the competent authority could confirm or terminate the appointment, therefore, weeding out ineffective CRCCs from the system.

3. Take stock of the data being collected and remove unnecessary data points

– Since data collection is a big part of the CRCCs' day-to-day functioning, it is important to assess everything that the CRCCs are collecting in a routine and non-routine manner. This should be done in order to:

3.1 Eliminate data points that are not being used

by the state or by offices at the sub-state levels. This will reduce the perception of paperwork being the most time-consuming task for CRCCs.

3.2 Simplify and reduce the data collection formats

issued to districts, blocks and clusters to reduce focus on data collection and free up officials' and school actors' time which could be used to focus on core teaching-learning related matters.

4. Introduce digital technology to streamline data collection and data management

– CRCCs and block officials have on several occasions shared that they tend to collect the same data multiple times, sometimes on slightly different formats. This can be attributed to the following reasons – there is a lack of collaboration among education branches at the state level which results in generation of data collection formats which collect similar or the same data points; data is being poorly managed at the sub-state level because of infrastructure and capacity constraints which results in CRCCs feeling swamped with data demands coming from different levels at odd times which may derail CRCCs' plans for the day.

4.1 Providing tablets, laptops to CRCCs would enable them to collect, maintain and retrieve data more

efficiently. Right now data is collected repeatedly because it is maintained on paper. Retrieving information recorded on paper, manually, takes up longer. At times the required information has to be written up again in case photocopying is not possible. Digitising the data collection process will also save costs on printing and photocopying.

4.2 Appoint permanent data operators at block and district offices since the bulk of data collation and management work takes place at these levels. Having permanent data operators will also ensure that work continues unhindered at all times and the district or block officers will be free to focus on analysing relevant data to make better plans for their district/block.

5. On trainings – Trainings in the current scenario are not taken seriously by CRCCs. Firstly, most 'trainings' are orientations regarding new programmes or formats to be filled. Trainings which aim to build CRCCs' capacities tend to be theoretical which is often deemed impractical by CRCCs because of the conditions in which they work. Their resistance is fuelled by the fact that there's virtually no follow-up by relevant officials or the trainers to check whether CRCCs are applying what they have learnt or help CRCCs resolve issues they might be facing. Without this support, CRCCs tend to go back to their old routine.

5.1 Following up on trainings is essential to ensure CRCCs are applying the lessons learnt in training sessions. This will also give CRCCs the confidence that their seniors are supporting them and will keep them motivated.

5.2 Activating BRPs/DIET faculty to follow up with CRCCs could be a sustainable way to ensure CRCCs remain active. This will also help create a more conducive environment for lively discussions around teaching-learning in the system.

5.3 Organise more skill-building trainings/workshops based on the actual capacity requirements of CRCCs. Based on a short needs-assessment carried out by AI with a group of CRCCs from Bihar and the other states it was felt that the following workshops could be organised for CRCCs:

- 5.3.1 Workshop on improving facilitation skills
- 5.3.2 Time-management and multi-tasking
- 5.3.3 How to conduct classroom observations and effectively communicate feedback to teachers
- 5.3.4 Data analysis and planning related workshop
- 5.3.5 Creating subject-specific resources

Organising such workshops and then keeping a tab on the CRCCs' experiences to help them improve will go a long way in transforming CRCCs' perception of themselves from "post-men" to "mentors".

Conclusion

The current manner by which CRCCs are functioning is a symptom and a reflection of the larger ecosystem within which they are embedded. While these recommendations have been made keeping in mind the need to reform all major aspects of CRCCs' work conditions, it must be noted that the success of CRCCs is intimately tied to the larger functioning of the frontline administration which includes schools, block and district offices. To this end, several recommendations listed above also encompass and apply to the larger frontline education bureaucracy.