

## **Teacher Peer Learning Groups: Contributing factors to cluster sustainability**

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*The purpose of this study is to identify factors that contribute to the development of productive, self-governing, and self-sustaining teacher professional development clusters. In focus group interviews and participatory assessment exercises, RISE's teacher professional development staff explored cluster members' perspectives on the motivational forces underlying their continued participation in these groups after project interventions ceased and the factors that influence their groups' sustainability. Participatory assessment activities conducted with RISE's district-based teaching training staff inform the discussion. From the focus group interviews and exercises with the cluster members and staff, we identify project-wide best practices and lessons learned in the promotion of cluster sustainability. These best practices and lessons learned are shared in this document for future programs that seek to use similar teacher professional development mechanisms.*

## **I. Introduction**

The four-year Revitalizing, Innovating, Strengthening Education (RISE) project, established in Pakistan in July 2006, assisted communities, teachers, and education officials to improve the quality of instruction and educational management of schools in the earthquake-affected areas of Mansehra district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Bagh, Muzaffarabad, and Poonch districts of Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

In its teacher professional development cycle, RISE provided professional development opportunities to primary, middle, and high school teachers in the subjects of math, science, and English. The overall targets were to train 10,000 teachers across the four districts and to establish a sustainable system of instructional support for these teachers. RISE's professional development cycle spanned one academic year. In an initial 12-day training, teachers had the opportunity to experience new active-learning methods while improving content knowledge. Following the training, teachers participated in peer learning groups, received on-the-job support, engaged in experiential learning activities and completed the professional development cycle in a 3-day follow-up workshop.

For the second stage of the professional development cycle, RISE helped teachers form 1,085 peer learning groups, known as clusters. Active support to the last cohort of 39 clusters ended in March 2010. Of the 1,085 clusters, approximately 50 percent of the groups conducted at least one meeting between January and June 2010 without any support from RISE. These include clusters formed between winter 2007 and summer 2009.

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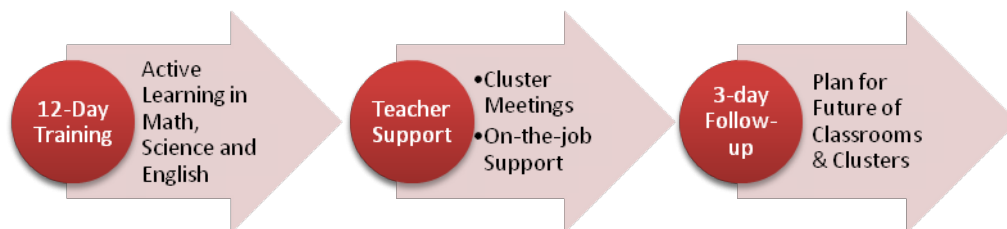
## **II. Background**

Teaching itself is often an isolating profession. Teachers in the areas affected by the October 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan, for the most part, work in rural locations scattered across the districts. Opportunities to participate in professional development activities are rare for the individual teacher. While the government institutions of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) responsible for the education systems are fully cognizant of the importance of teacher pre-service education and in-service professional development, their resources fall far short of meeting needs.

In the areas affected by the earthquake, schools and teachers found that they needed to overcome even greater hurdles than they faced earlier to provide quality instruction in government schools. Teaching in an isolated environment became more difficult as both teachers and students were recovering from the emotional trauma of the earthquake. Most schools were damaged or destroyed in the earthquake. Reconstruction of the schools continues to this day. Five years on, many teachers continue to teach in tents, temporary shelters, or in the open air. Teaching resources are even scarcer now than they were prior to the earthquake. In addition to the difficulties caused by the earthquake, many teachers who received inadequate pre-service education had been using outdated teaching methods that included mostly lecture and rote learning in their classrooms.

RISE's teacher professional development program sought to expose teachers to active learning methods that would improve student learning outcomes and create child-friendly classrooms that encourage students to more fully and meaningfully engage in their own learning. The aim was to improve student learning outcomes. RISE provided professional development opportunities to 10,316 primary, middle, and high school teachers in the subjects of math, science, and English. Approximately 73 percent of the teachers who participated in RISE's professional development cycle teach in primary grades, 18 percent in middle grades, and 10 percent in high school grades. Forty-eight percent of the teachers were women.

RISE sought to provide teachers with a long-term system of instructional support that would help them continue to improve teaching practices and create local networks for peer learning. Given the limited resources available to the education systems for in-service professional development, RISE sought to introduce innovations that would be at a cost low enough to sustain after the project support ended. Importantly, the cluster mechanism was designed so that the teachers could manage the groups on their own.



**Figure 1: RISE Teacher Professional Development Program**

RISE and the government education departments of AJK and KPK developed an academic yearlong teacher professional development program. Teachers first participated in a 12-day training in active-learning in math, science, and English. This was followed by one academic year of follow-up support from RISE and included regular teacher peer learning group meetings, on-the-job support, and experiential learning activities in the form of inter-school science project competitions. The final step in the program was a 3-day follow-up workshop where teachers came together once again to celebrate all that they have accomplished with RISE and plan for the future of their classrooms and clusters.

The clusters offered teachers an easily accessible forum to meet with their peers to practice active-learning lessons and find solutions to problems in their classrooms and schools.

Teachers bring their individual strengths to the group and share experiences. Ultimately, cluster meetings are intended to help teachers to further develop the skills they learned during the initial 12-day training.

All primary and middle teachers who participated in the 12-day training formed clusters. Prior to the training, RISE met with education managers to assign teachers to cluster groups. During the training, teachers participated in a cluster formation session. In this session, the groupings were reviewed and revised in collaboration with teachers to make sure that they were assigned to accessible clusters. Once the teachers agreed to the groupings, the newly formed clusters selected a venue, which was usually the most centrally located school. Separate clusters were formed for primary teachers and middle teachers; clusters usually consist of six to 12 teachers from one to five schools. Gender sensitivities were also taken into consideration in the formation of clusters. In Mansehra and Bagh, all clusters were segregated for men and women. In Muzaffarabad and Poonch, the decision to form mixed or separate clusters was taken by RISE and the education department in light of sensitivities of the target communities.

Cluster meetings are held throughout the academic year; they began to meet immediately following the training. RISE supported the clusters for limited amounts of time. Primary clusters met monthly for nine months, while middle clusters met monthly for three months and bi-monthly for six months, for a total of six meetings with RISE support. Clusters that completed the academic year-long teacher professional development program are considered to be “mature” clusters.

For all clusters, meetings are typically held after school and last from 2-3 hours. The agenda typically consists of model lessons presented by teachers, discussion of classroom and school issues, and sometimes conversational practice in English.

RISE facilitators supported clusters by first helping to create a sense of community and trust in the group, and then helping them decide on activities that best help them in the classroom. RISE staff focused on creating self-sufficient clusters. Each cluster selected cluster focal persons and subject leaders. The role of the focal person was to ensure that agendas were set and followed for each meeting, to remind other teachers of upcoming meetings, and to take care of other general administrative tasks. The cluster selected subject leaders based on their content knowledge and teaching skills in a subject. Subject leaders are expected to serve as resource persons to the other teachers in the group as well as to conduct model lessons on topics at the request of their fellow cluster members. Throughout the time the clusters were supported by RISE, the facilitator helped the cluster to identify topics for model lessons and discussion, while fostering a supportive atmosphere where everyone in the group felt comfortable sharing ideas and challenges. Facilitators also gave clusters opportunities to self-conduct meetings during the year to further encourage the clusters’ confidence and sense of responsibility to conduct their own meetings.

RISE’s cluster facilitators consisted of staff of international and local partners. Teacher Training Officers (TTOs) were hired because of their background in education and specialization in math, science, or English. In Mansehra, all cluster facilitators were TTOs. In AJK, the model was different, as the local partner was responsible for supporting primary clusters. Facilitators from the local partner were called Teacher Training Facilitators (TTFs). Therefore in each of the three

districts of AJK, there were three TTOs, one for each subject, who were responsible for supporting middle school grade clusters and assisting TTFs with content. TTFs were responsible to support primary school clusters. TTFs are typically less experienced than TTOs, and many came from a background of social mobilization with little to no experience in education.

The cluster model evolved over time to place more emphasis on the clusters continuing to meet after RISE support ended. The first adaptation was in the cluster formation process. According to the design, education managers and RISE were responsible for mapping out clusters and assigning teachers to the groups. RISE soon learned that teachers needed to become involved in the process. A second adaptation was in the scheduling of cluster meetings. RISE's teacher trainings are held during the long summer and winter breaks, and clusters were originally scheduled to meet over the weekend. At the request of teachers, RISE found a way for teachers to meet in their clusters on school days, either by taking a few hours off during the school day or after school hours. A third major change to the model was in the structure of cluster leadership. Initially, RISE believed it was possible to identify a leader from the cluster group who would take over the job of RISE staff. However, the high transfer rate of teachers made it difficult to maintain stability in leadership. RISE resolved this issue through a change in its approach to cluster leadership. Cluster leadership is now distributed so that if one teacher who serves as a leader is transferred, the group does not lose its institutional memory.

Over time, RISE realized that teachers needed a better introduction to the process and dynamics of cluster meetings. RISE decided to move the cluster formation session from the last day of the 12-day training to the sixth day and added activities for the newly formed clusters to complete together during the remainder of the training. The additional six days in the training environment provided them opportunities to work together and build a team and sense of camaraderie. This shift also allowed teachers on the last day of the training to conduct a model cluster meeting in which they conducted model lessons and planned the agenda for the upcoming meetings. A part of this change was the formal selection of focal persons and subject leaders. By shifting the focus from the RISE TTF or TTO as the leader of the cluster to the teachers themselves leading activities, teachers were able to gain the skills required to independently conduct meetings.

RISE also made changes to the cluster agenda. Initially, RISE offered a six-day follow up training, which contained themes like student assessment and joyful learning. Staff realized it would be more helpful to introduce some of the themes in the clusters so they would have a chance to practice the newly introduced techniques in their classrooms and reflect upon these them in the clusters.

In addition to changes in the cluster model, RISE made changes in its approach to staff orientation. In recognition that the staff orientation set the tone for their interactions with clusters, RISE revamped its orientation to include a greater focus on cluster sustainability and strategies that the TTFs and TTOs could take to help one another in providing guidance to clusters.

One of the most important sources of sustained support to teachers is the head teacher. The head teacher can ensure that new teaching methods are implemented in the school and encourage teachers to continue meeting in their clusters. Head teacher training was not in RISE's original

design. A last adaptation to RISE’s design was the introduction of a three-day head teacher training that focused on active-learning methods, provision of instructional support to teachers, and head teacher roles in RISE initiatives.

**III. Methodology**

The New England Literacy Resource Center (NELRC) presents a framework of adult learners’ affective needs, met or unmet by educational programs, that are their “drivers of persistence” (NELRC, 2010).<sup>1</sup> These drivers of persistence were identified in an action research study conducted by 18 adult education programs participating in the New England Learner Persistence Project (NELP) and were adapted for use in this study. RISE staff used this framework because they felt these factors reflect the needs of teachers participating in the clusters and would easily be understood by the RISE cluster facilitators and the teachers themselves. RISE’s teacher training staff identified additional factors relevant to the teachers participating in clusters in the Pakistan context and used these in the study.

The chart below displays the drivers of persistence and the adaptations for the study, where applicable.

Source	Drivers of Persistence	Factors Important for Staff	Factors Important for Teachers
<b>NELP*</b>	Sense of belonging to a community	Sense of community	Cluster members feel comfortable sharing strengths and challenges
	Clarity of Purpose	Understanding of purpose and value; Ability to set goals and plan to achieve those goals	Understanding of purpose and value; Ability to set goals and plan to achieve those goals
	Agency	Members decide together on cluster activities	Members decide together on cluster activities
	Competency	Members contribute skills and knowledge	Members learn from each other
	Relevance	Cluster activities are relevant to the classroom	Cluster activities are relevant to the classroom
	Stability	Regular meetings and attendance	Regular meetings and attendance
<b>RISE</b>	Cluster Leadership	Cluster Leadership	Cluster Leadership
	Access to Venue	Access to cluster venue	Easy access to venue
	Head Teacher Support	Head teacher support	Head teacher support
	Education Manager Support	Education manager support	Education manager support

\*Source: New England Literacy Resource Center. URL <http://www.nelrc.org/persist/drivers.html>

Two activities were undertaken to elicit the perspectives of the RISE cluster facilitators and the teachers continuing to attend cluster meetings. First, workshops for RISE cluster facilitators were held in March 2010. During these workshops, staff identified the factors they felt were

<sup>1</sup> New England Literacy Resource Center. *Drivers of Persistence*. URL <http://www.nelrc.org/persist/drivers.html> accessed on August 2, 2010.

most important to cluster sustainability and the factors that they perceived as strengths or challenges in their clusters.

At the workshops, district teams worked as groups on a pair-wise ranking activity to decide which factors they felt were most important to cluster sustainability. This was done to determine the priorities for each district and the project as a whole. Next, each cluster facilitator was asked to identify three of their mature clusters that were continuing and three that ceased functioning. For each of these six clusters identified, facilitators identified strengths and challenges of these groups for each factor. Then, for the functioning clusters, they identified the two factors that they felt were most influential in each clusters' sustainability. For the clusters that were no longer continuing, facilitators identified the two challenges which they felt most strongly contributed to the discontinuation of the cluster. All responses were written by facilitators and collected by the teacher training coordinator for analysis.

For the second activity, three clusters from each of the four districts were selected to be interviewed. The clusters were chosen because they were mature and continuing to meet without the regular support of RISE staff. Also, the clusters selected are representative of the different demographic variations of the clusters with which the project worked. These variations include gender, school level, and rural or urban. The table below presents information about the schools of the cluster members who participated in the focus groups.

District	School	Gender	Level	Rural/Urban
<b>Poonch</b>	School #1: GGPS	Female	Primary	Rural
	School #2: GGHS	Female	Middle	Rural
	School #3: GBPS	Male	Primary	Urban
<b>Bagh</b>	School #4: GGHS	Female	Mixed	Urban
	School #5: GGHS	Female	Mixed	Rural
	School #6: GBMS	Male	Mixed	Rural
<b>Muzaffarabad</b>	School #7: GGHS	Female	Mixed	Urban
	School #8: GBHS	Mixed	Mixed	Rural
	School #9: GBHS	Mixed	Mixed	Rural
<b>Mansehra</b>	School #10: GGMS	Female	Middle	Rural
	School #11: GGPS	Female	Primary	Urban
	School #12: GBPS	Male	Primary	Rural

Two Deputy Directors of Teacher Training and the Teacher Training Coordinator conducted sessions with four to eight members of each cluster. There were two parts to the session. The first half was a series of questions which explored the perspectives of cluster members about the benefits and challenges of cluster meetings and the impact of their participation in their classrooms. One or two staff members were designated as interviewers, and one was designated note taker for the focus group discussions. For the second half of the session, teachers participated in a force-field analysis activity. They were asked to decide which factors were forces that encouraged them to continue meeting and which made it difficult for them to meet. In the force field analysis, cluster members discussed the following factors:

- Cluster members feel comfortable sharing strengths and challenges;
- Members decide together on activities;
- Members learn from each other;
- Cluster activities help the classroom;
- Cluster leadership (focal person and subject leaders);
- Head teacher support;
- Education manager support; and
- Easy access to cluster venue.

Each of these eight factors was written on pieces of paper cut in the shape of balloons and rocks. Through group discussion, teachers selected balloons for those factors that were encouraging them to meet and rocks for those that were making it difficult to meet. They then prioritized the factors by placing the balloons higher or the rocks lower than a line drawn across the middle of the page to represent the extent to which that factor encouraged or hindered their meetings.

Notes from the interview and pictures of the activity results were collected along with interviewers' notes regarding the overall impressions of the interview and the cluster. These were all used in the analysis the factors that are most important for cluster sustainability.

#### **IV. Limitations**

This study was small in scale and covered only 12 of the 542 continuing clusters. Therefore, broad generalizations cannot be made. However, there are some patterns that are apparent across all or nearly all interviewed clusters, which may indicate a general pattern.

The interviews were conducted in May and June 2010, only a few months after many clusters finished their year with RISE support and while RISE was still operating. In some cases, RISE staff was still in contact with clusters to monitor their meetings either by phone or through visits. This continued monitoring might have had an influence on teachers' motivation to continue cluster meetings.

Interviews were conducted by senior RISE staff, which may have influenced the teachers' answers to some interview questions. Interviewers did assure teachers that this was not an evaluation and asked them to speak freely.

#### **V. Findings**

**Access to Cluster Venue:** In the areas in which RISE operated, the terrain is hilly and often makes travelling even short distances difficult. In rural areas, transportation is often limited to public transport that runs infrequently or not at all. Teachers must often hire private vehicles that run only at school times. Therefore, cluster venues within walking distance or on public transportation routes for teachers become essential.

In the cluster attendance records for the 12 clusters interviewed, teachers from the venue school have more consistent attendance than do teachers from other schools. This indicates that it is more difficult for teachers who have to travel to attend the meetings.

However, the threshold for distance or time that teachers will travel to their meetings seems to vary based on the motivation of the teachers. If the teachers feel that the cluster meeting is of benefit to them, they will travel further. This is evident in one cluster as some of the cluster members walk an hour to and from the meetings. But, it was clear in the interview that they are very motivated to continue the meetings because of their sense of competition with the local private school.

Another observation is that while RISE formed separate clusters for primary and middle teachers, many clusters opted to reorganize into clusters of primary and middle school teachers from smaller areas, rather than traveling farther to meeting with teachers only from their level. Of the 12 clusters interviewed, six were reorganized into mixed level groups.

The results of the data collected by RISE staff support the notion that access is important to clusters having a chance to continue to meet. Mansehra and Bagh staff ranked access higher in importance for cluster sustainability than did Muzaffarabad and Poonch. This may be due to the greater difficulty in forming clusters in these two districts. In Mansehra, schools are more scattered than in AJK, and it became especially difficult to form accessible female clusters because there are few female schools. In Bagh, teachers from one school were often in different training groups and therefore were put into different clusters, which impacted cluster attendance and sustainability. This led to the decision to reorganize nearly all clusters in Bagh to ensure that all teachers from one school were in the same cluster. In Muzaffarabad and Poonch, there were fewer issues with access, and therefore it was not viewed as an important factor to cluster sustainability.

Access is a prerequisite for clusters to have a chance to develop and grow as a group. If access is a problem and it is difficult for teachers to come to the cluster meetings, attendance is irregular and clusters do not have a chance to develop the group dynamics necessary to sustain cluster meetings. Therefore, in most cases, difficult access will negatively impact sustainability.

***Stability (Regular meetings and attendance):*** Clusters were encouraged to hold monthly or bi-monthly meetings when they were receiving support from RISE. This is important in order for participation in cluster meetings to become a part of a teacher's routine. Additionally, when the same teachers regularly attend these meetings, a sense of community is allowed to develop. In every group interview, all said that most people attended regularly. Their attendance records confirm their assertions. Some members stopped coming or never came, but there were groups of teachers who came regularly. This consistency helped to build a sense of community and a routine for them. Without the consistency in meetings or with inconsistent attendance, the development of the sense of community can be stunted.

RISE staff viewed regular meetings as a strength in many of the continuing clusters, and conversely, irregular or infrequent meetings were considered a challenge for many clusters that did not continue.

***Sense of belonging to a community:*** It is important in any peer learning group for participants to feel that they are a part of a community and that they have a safe space to discuss their challenges. Developing a community means that teachers look forward to their cluster meetings as an opportunity to meet with friends and learn from each other.

A sense of community seems to be very important for teachers in the cluster meetings. This sense of community enables teachers to feel comfortable enough to share ideas and to ask questions in areas where they feel that they are weak. As mentioned above, regular meetings and attendance are first required to begin to establish a sense of community among the group. Another aspect that is crucial to developing a sense of community is the supportive atmosphere within the group. In RISE, providing a friendly and supportive atmosphere was a cornerstone of all activities. In the 12-day training, teachers learn and practice positive feedback. The trainers themselves model this practice as well. Once cluster meetings begin, the RISE facilitator must encourage a supportive atmosphere in the initial cluster meetings. They did this through encouraging members to contribute their skills and knowledge and participate in the decision making process. In most cluster interviews, teachers talked about feeling hesitant in the first meetings to ask questions or to present lessons, but over time they developed trust and friendship with the group members and began to feel confident and open to discuss their needs with the group.

In nearly all of the cluster interviews, it was clear that the teachers felt a strong sense of community. Many said they call each other for help and refer to each other as brothers or sisters. Many say that they help each other with personal issues outside of teaching or the school.

RISE staff's perspectives on the importance of a sense of community to cluster continuation varied by district. Of the 11 factors, Poonch staff ranked it as one of the most important factors while the other districts ranked it somewhere in the middle. RISE staff felt that this was a strength in almost all continuing clusters, though few felt it was among the most important factors for cluster continuation.

Developing a sense of community has proven to be essential for teachers to participate meaningfully in cluster meetings and for them to want to continue meeting. If they do not feel comfortable sharing or expressing their opinion or concerns, they will not fully benefit from the skills and knowledge of the group.

***Clarity of Purpose (Understand purpose and value, and ability to set goals and plan to achieve those goals):*** The purpose of a cluster is to give teachers a forum to discuss and practice active-learning methods and to share and solve problems within their classrooms and schools. Many of the clusters interviewed were not able to articulate the purpose of the cluster meetings. When asked what they do in their cluster meetings, most answered with the routine of each meeting, rather than what they accomplish in the meetings. However, nearly every group discussed the positive changes in their classrooms as well the importance of learning from each other. Therefore, while they may not be able to articulate the purpose, they do seem to understand the benefits.

One of the major aspects to understanding the purpose and value of cluster meetings is that the cluster evolves to meet the needs of the participants. A few clusters, who seemed to be among those that would continue to meet over a longer period of time, displayed this attribute. For example, one cluster reorganized from a primary and a middle cluster into a single cluster that included all teachers from the venue school and from other schools in the area. As a cluster, they decided to take on long-term goals, including creating a science lab with the teaching kit provided by RISE. They are also now working with the School Management Committee to

develop a library. Other clusters have decided to work on topics that are of use to them. Some clusters are using their meetings to discuss larger educational issues, including exam formats and curriculum, and have brought their concerns to the education department.

Forming goals and planning was the weakest skill among the clusters interviewed. Only the cluster described above seemed to have a goal towards which they were working to achieve. All other clusters said they did not plan further ahead than the next month's meeting. However, when the idea was suggested to them, they agreed that it would be useful to them. Additionally, in the activities with the RISE staff, many agreed that it was important for clusters, but it was not considered a strength of many of the continuing clusters. This indicates that the concept of goal setting and planning was not emphasized during the facilitation of RISE. There was no formal mechanism to guide clusters on goal setting and long-term planning.

Although clusters did not have long-term goals, they did use their meetings as a forum to discuss and resolve their most immediate needs, which helped them see results and feel the benefits of the cluster meetings. Including long-term planning in addition to time spent on immediate needs could encourage teachers to work together to achieve a goal and potentially keep them engaged for a longer time in the cluster and meet some larger needs.

**Agency (Members contribute to decisions):** Cluster members should feel that they are contributing to the decisions and the direction of cluster meetings, so it is meeting their needs and they are an important part of the group. In every cluster, teachers said that they all contribute to the decision making process. All groups say that they decide together on the agenda for the next meeting. However, when asked how they then decide who will do the model lesson or lead discussions, many groups stated that they revert to the focal person or the RISE facilitator to make the decision. Also, in the interviews with some clusters, it became clear that some members were more dominant in the discussion, while others were passive. This suggests that this same dynamic may occur during cluster meetings, which would indicate that some members are not participating fully in the decision making process.

RISE staff did not rank agency as an important factor for cluster sustainability. However, it was considered a strength in most continuing clusters and a challenge in most not continuing clusters, which shows that it is an indicator of sustainability.

Agency is closely tied to both sense of community and leadership. If there is a true community and everyone is engaged and feels free to share their challenges, they will be contributing to the agenda and other decisions. Cluster leaders can also affect agency by including all members in the decision making process.

**Competency (Members contribute skills and knowledge, and members learn from each other):** Similar to agency, teachers who feel a sense of competency feel that they are contributing to the group and that their skills are important. This seems to be an important aspect to the continuation of clusters. In all interviews, teachers referenced learning from each other when asked what they felt was most beneficial about cluster meetings or when asked why they continue to meet. When teachers are able to help each other, it builds their own confidence. Learning something new from others that they can then take back and use in the classroom with good results makes the cluster activity relevant to their work. Again, there needs to be a sense of community in order

for this to work because people need to feel comfortable asking for help and comfortable enough to offer help.

District staff did not rank this factor particularly high and in Mansehra and Poonch it was among the factors they felt were least important to cluster sustainability. They felt that if a sense of community was developed, teachers' belief in their own competency would follow and so focused on the importance of a sense of community.

**Relevancy (Activities relevant to the classroom):** When cluster activities are relevant to the classroom, teachers begin to see the visible results of the meetings. During the interviews, all teachers were excited to discuss the changes they had seen in their classrooms. This included how students are learning differently and how teachers teach differently. Most teachers cited the biggest difference in children as 'they are engaged' and even the weak students in their classes have become engaged. Many said that students do not hesitate to ask questions anymore and come to school happily. Teachers say that they are friendlier with the students, and try to do activities that the children enjoy. Many also discussed not using corporal punishment or using it less often since they started with RISE. Both the teaching training and community participation in school management teams dealt with the elimination of corporal punishment in their program activities. The community participation team introduced the concept of healing schools to communities and teachers, and RISE's teacher training program included activities on teacher-student interaction. In AJK, an organization unaffiliated with RISE is raising public awareness about corporal punishment in the classroom through a media campaign. This additional input might have impacted teachers' behavior in the classroom as well.

In some clusters, teachers talked about the increase in enrollment and improved exam results due to the changes they are making in their classrooms. Seeing visible and measurable results, including changes in the way that students engage, changes in students' behavior, increased enrollment, and improved exam results, are all very important for teachers. These successes in the classroom encourage teachers to continue their meetings and feel more confident.

**Cluster Leadership:** The role of the cluster focal persons and subject leaders is important in creating a stable, supportive, and productive environment for all cluster members. However, this leadership has taken many forms which greatly affect the dynamics of the cluster. The styles of leadership of the clusters varied by cluster and interestingly, there were similarities in leadership styles by district. In Poonch for example, of the three clusters interviewed, none had dominating leaders. In two of these clusters, they were unsure of who the cluster leaders were. But the sense of community in all three of the clusters was very apparent. This seems to have lessened the need for a dominating leader. On the other hand, in Muzaffarabad, there was a dominating leader in all three clusters interviewed. In two cases this was the focal person, but in the third it was the head teacher of the venue school. In Mansehra, in two of the three clusters, the focal person seemed to take on the mentor role by providing input to the other members regarding instructional skills. Bagh was the only district where there was not a pattern in the types of leaders.

The patterns in leadership seem to be closely tied to the type of leadership provided by the RISE facilitators. In Poonch, the staff said that they focused more on creating a community and ensuring that all cluster members participate and understand the purpose and administrative

aspects of the meetings, rather than focusing on developing the skills of only the cluster leaders in these areas. In Muzaffarabad, emphasis was often placed on leadership in the clusters as a means to ensure attendance. In Mansehra, where all cluster facilitators were Teacher Training Officers who had much experience in education, they themselves served as mentors in the cluster meetings. Although three of the districts seemed to have different focuses for cluster leadership, all have successful clusters, which may indicate that while positive leadership is important, the style can vary by group.

**Head Teacher Support:** As RISE's cluster program evolved over the life of the project, one issue that was consistently viewed as a shortcoming was the lack of support of head teachers for cluster meetings. Many staff members felt that the head teacher needed to play a stronger role in cluster meetings, either through participation or facilitation and support. However, in the interviews, most teachers felt that their head teachers provided at least minimum support by giving them permission to attend the meetings and space to conduct the meetings. Few head teachers provided guidance, follow-up, or attended or visited meetings.

Only two middle clusters had strong support of their head teachers, and in these two cases, this seemed to negatively impact the productivity of the cluster meetings. In one cluster in Muzaffarabad, the head teacher was very involved with the cluster and required that all the teachers attend the meetings. However, the teachers of that cluster seemed unclear of the purpose of the meetings and did not seem motivated. In another cluster where the head teacher was monitoring meetings, the teachers also did not seem to be motivated by their own needs to attend the meetings.

However, there seemed to be a different case for one primary cluster in Mansehra. The teacher in charge was a part of the cluster and other teachers noted how the cluster has helped them all become more comfortable working together. The difference between the middle and primary cluster responses may be due to the fact that in middle and high schools, head teachers are supervisors to the teachers while in primary schools, the teacher in charge simply plays the role of senior teacher.

Although RISE staff have been advocating for more involvement of head teachers in clusters, they did not rank it as very important for cluster sustainability compared to the more internal motivation factors like clarity of purpose and relevancy. Head teacher support was considered a strength for few continuing clusters and even fewer not continuing clusters.

**Education Department Support:** Overwhelmingly, clusters did not feel that they were supported by the education department. Responses ranged from indifference on the part of the education manager to an education manager marking one cluster absent from school when they were in their meeting. Most clusters acknowledged that the education department did not stop them from meeting. Others said the education managers had never visited their clusters or had visited but did not come to the cluster meeting. On the other hand, one cluster in Poonch had been visited twice by the District Education Officer (DEO) for a few minutes, and they felt that showed her support for the cluster. This was the only cluster that gave education managers a balloon in the force field activity. When asked what the education department could do to support clusters, teachers suggested ideas that implied a need for teachers to be recognized for their work. The responses to the question of education managers' support indicated that the feelings of not being

supported or recognized relate to their overall relationship with the education department, beyond the context of the cluster meetings.

RISE staff had varying views of the importance of education managers' support to clusters. Mansehra and Poonch ranked this as the most important factor to cluster sustainability. They attributed this to the fact that if the education department supports and requires teachers to conduct cluster meetings, teachers would be compelled to attend. Conversely, Bagh and Muzaffarabad staff thought that education department support was not very important. They felt that if teachers understood the purpose and value of the cluster meetings and had a sense of community, they would be motivated to meet.

Although their opinions varied regarding what they felt should be important, no RISE staff member cited education department support as a strength that contributed most to cluster sustainability.

The results of the cluster interviews and the staff activities clearly indicate that education managers are not actively supporting clusters. This situation proves that it is possible for teachers to continue to meet without active support from the education department, assuming they are not forbidden to attend. However, education department's recognition of the work that is being done in the cluster meetings could be a motivating factor for cluster sustainability. And certainly if a system were developed to require cluster meetings, with monitoring mechanisms in place, more teachers would be compelled to attend meetings.

## **VI. Conclusions**

All of the above factors contribute to cluster sustainability. However, the sense of belonging to a community and meetings in which members learn from each other seem to play the biggest role in teachers' motivation to attend the meetings. In the isolating context in which teachers are working, these two factors give them an opportunity to share experiences and connect with others who are doing the same work.

Access alone does not motivate teachers to continue to meet. However, it is essential to creating a foundation on which clusters can develop a sense of community and work together to begin to see changes in their classrooms. Therefore, appropriate and sensible mapping of clusters is vital. If the schools of the cluster members are too scattered, difficult access will impact attendance. Also, ensuring that all the teachers working in a school are in the same cluster is important. Many clusters chose to combine middle and primary teachers into one cluster and keep the number of schools to a minimum. This proved to work well in most cases, as middle teachers are able to provide subject support to primary teachers and it creates a community of practice within the school. Once the clusters are formed, it is important that the meetings are held regularly without frequent changes in dates, so that teachers can begin to feel that it is a part of their routine.

Outside support to clusters from the head teachers and education managers is minimal. Yet, clusters are continuing to meet. If head teachers and education managers do not stop teachers from attending meetings, then teachers who are motivated will meet. Despite this, all clusters expressed an interest in support from these groups. They would like head teachers to serve as

resources in their meetings and for education managers to recognize the work they are doing. By improving this support, the motivation levels of teachers might increase, and a greater number of clusters will continue.

Seeing measurable results in their classrooms motivates teachers to continue to work with their clusters to improve their teaching. Clusters that are most successful have evolved to meet their needs. This means that they might end up addressing larger issues at the school level or even at the level of educational issues (like the exam system). Ensuring that clusters realize that the cluster is a venue where they can address their own needs is essential.

RISE's cluster model seemed especially effective in creating a positive environment where teachers felt comfortable sharing their challenges in the classroom and built on each others' strengths. Teachers often expressed the change in their attitude towards sharing as their cluster meetings progressed. Many teachers said they were hesitant to speak about their challenges, but as they became more comfortable, they began to open up and found that it was helpful to them. An interesting observation is that this seems to be paralleled in the classroom. Teachers used almost the same language to talk about the changes in their students. For example, students used to be hesitant to ask questions but they are now frequently asking questions. This means that the modeling of positive and friendly behavior beginning in the 12-day training and throughout the cluster meetings is impacting the way teachers manage their classrooms. Teachers are able to experience the feelings associated with this type of learning atmosphere, and can understand the benefits, so they are more likely to transfer it to the classroom.

The extent to which teachers could productively apply active-learning techniques in their classrooms varied greatly and was limited among most clusters. In many of the clusters interviewed, teachers cited activities that they had done in the 12-day training when asked in what ways they were using active-learning in their classrooms. Additionally, many clusters felt that active-learning added time to the lessons. These responses indicate that the teachers had not reached a point in their ability to creatively apply active-learning techniques that meet the objectives of new lessons. In other clusters, teachers seemed more clear and offered examples that were unique. These teachers also mentioned that students learned faster and remembered more with active-learning than they did with more traditional learning. This indicates that these teachers are more properly using the new methods in their classrooms.

Clusters that had RISE facilitators who were skilled in teaching seemed to be those clusters who had better understanding of active-learning. These facilitators also tended to serve as mentors to the cluster by conducting model lessons and giving suggestions for lesson planning. In clusters where the RISE facilitator did not have a background in teaching, the focus was more on creating a sense of community and relying more on the existing skills of the group members.

Overall, RISE created a system of peer learning that has helped teachers to create a network of support in their often isolated work. Clusters that are continuing are doing so because of the motivation that comes from their own need to improve themselves as professionals. The cluster groups have empowered teachers to find resources amongst themselves to meet the needs of their classrooms and schools.

## **VII. Recommendations for Future Projects**

Recommendations for future projects are:

- Include all teachers from a school in one cluster, even mixing primary and middle school teachers.
- Identify the role of the education department in clusters to encourage support, monitoring, and recognition of clusters.
- Ensure head teachers' understanding and support to clusters, but do not encourage them to become regular cluster members because an authority figure in the group might discourage open discussion and sharing of challenges.
- Develop a long term planning mechanism for clusters, but keep time in meetings for teachers to deal with immediate needs as well.
- Ensure more consistency in the way clusters are facilitated through more targeted staff training and cluster guides to ensure the development of cluster administration skills and teaching skills.