

The formation of mentor teachers and their role in professional development of rural teachers at scale in the COVID lockdown period in India

Amina Charania

TISS, Mumbai, India

amina.charania@tiss.edu

Freda Wolfenden

Open University, United Kingdom

Durba Sarkar

TISS, Mumbai, India

Simon Cross

Open University, United Kingdom

Sohini Sen

TISS, Mumbai

India

sohini.sen@tiss.edu

Sumegh Paltiwale

TISS, Mumbai, India

Lina Adinolfi

Open University, United Kingdom

lina.adinolfi@open.ac.uk

Abstract

The COVID Lockdown Period (CLP) pushed many teachers including rural teachers from India to embrace technology enabled teaching. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of these teachers to improve equity, scale, and quality needed experienced and motivated mentors to offer online support to teachers. The National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) in India suggests a mission for mentoring and various CPD tools for tracking the career progression of teachers. The purpose of the study is to understand the CPD process of teacher turned mentors, and in what ways prior experience of CPD supported their mentoring role and motivation as mentors in the new context. The paper made suggestions on systemic integration of mentor teachers in state machinery, advocate career advancement for the mentor teachers to scale and sustain quality CPD in the system.

Introduction

As Teacher Professional Development moves to embrace ICTs to improve equity and quality at scale, there is a need for experienced tutors/mentors to offer online support to teachers. Literature on mentoring has established its relationship with improving classroom practices (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000). Benefits of mentoring suggest teacher mentors derive personal and professional gains in the process of mentoring (Hobson, 2009; Gills & Wilson, 2004, Hudson, 2010). Peer mentoring offers a sustainable way to offer CPD (Hudson, 2013) in line with effective TPD being continuous, relevant, practice based, and creating good role models (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

The need for teacher mentors is much felt, especially in the country like India where about 3.3 million teachers do not have requisite credentials to teach (DISE, 2016), and less than 20% are trained in using computers (UDISE 2018-19). As per the guidelines of National Education Policy (2020) in India, the National Mentoring Mission in Education was established by the National Council for Teacher Education and developed a conceptual document (Bluebook, 2022) on Mentoring with the help of national and state level educators. This mission laid down that mentoring should aim to bridge the gaps in the current education system by leveraging access to experts beyond geographical boundaries and peers from similar local contexts for teaching support and continuous professional development, and to explore new solutions to unprecedented demands and challenges in the education system and empower each other. The Bluebook also laid down the importance of non-hierarchical relationships between mentor and mentee, prompting it to be a dynamic process that involves dialogues and critical reflection. Also, possibility of switching some of the roles between mentor and mentee based on the objectives of mentoring over time. The COVID-19 Lockdown Period (CLP) has also moved much CPD online and has brought forth the need for new competence and knowledge, for both old and new teachers struggling to cope with teaching and learning in blended and online modes. This calls for a need to develop and strengthen peer teacher mentoring as a core pillar of CPD.

However, undertaking mentoring at scale depends on the availability of experienced mentors. The mentoring process has been found to be helpful in building a robust professional culture of teaching and learning in the school including improving the classroom teaching practices (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2000, Blazer & Hogan, 2016, Kotze et al., 2018). However, most of the literature on teacher mentors and also the NEP 2020 focus on mentoring new or student teachers or from high income contexts. Besides ability and competence to be mentors, willingness to nurture another person is a characteristic of effective mentors (Koki, 1997). Thus, it's important to understand what support peer mentors/ tutors need, what motivates them to enter and continue mentoring. Literature on benefits of mentoring suggests teacher mentors derive personal and professional gains in the process of mentoring. For example, mentors experience critical reflection of their own pedagogical practices, develop leadership and communication skills, increase professional status, confidence, professional courage and an opportunity to engage in career advancement planning (Hobson, 2009; Gills & Wilson, cited in Hudson, 2010).

Context

The study is based on a CPD programme started in 2017, offered by a central university in India (Tata Institute of Social Sciences) initially for 68 government/public secondary school teachers in rural districts of Eastern (West Bengal) and North Eastern (Assam) states of India. The CPD started with a blended certificate course on constructivist use of technology in teaching and learning followed by opportunities to mentor other teachers, engage with other certificate courses, design inquiry-based learning activities for students, etc. In January 2021, during the CLP about 10 of these 68 teachers joined the university team to mentor 500 other teachers taking online courses leading to three digital badges. These digital badges were supported by The Open University UK.

Purpose

This study highlights peer mentoring in CPD for school teachers. The purpose of the study is to understand the CPD process of teacher turned mentors and their roles as mentors for their fellow teachers, and in what ways prior experience of CPD supported their mentoring role and motivation in a new context (online mode in CLP).

Preparation of mentor teachers through CPD

The Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme on constructivist use of technology was offered by a central university in India, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) for government/public secondary school teachers in rural districts of two Eastern/North Eastern Indian states (Assam and West Bengal). This CPD programme was embedded within a large field implementation of project-based learning with technology initiative by Tata Trusts (philanthropy) in these two states: Integrated approach to Technology in Education (ITE). The first step of the CPD was offering a four-credit certificate course on Education Technology integration using constructivist pedagogies to two cohorts of teachers in two eastern states.

The certificate course started with 4 days of workshop with rigorous engagement with conceptual understanding and practice including micro-teaching sessions in the area of: learning theories and pedagogies, 21st century skills, role of technology, authentic learning with technology, ethical considerations and implementation challenges, TPACK, Open Educational Resources. The teachers were provided with opportunities to design lesson plans integrating project-based learning with technology and implementing these with colleagues (as students). These four days were quite influential and motivating to lead the teachers to sustain and complete the course successfully in the subsequent 11 to 12 weeks of the distance mode. Moodle was used as a course management platform, and Whatsapp groups were used to stay in touch with each other and address their queries.

The assessment of the course was diverse, including multiple choice, reflections, discussions based on readings, designing lesson plans, implementing the same and reflecting on them. One very important component of the course was training or orienting other fellow teachers in the neighborhood schools during the last two weeks of the course. For many teachers this activity initiated their journey as mentors. Not relying on the hierarchical structure of teacher educators in the system, this CPD programme nurtured the potential of secondary school-teachers as mentors for their peer teachers in their states. These 68 teachers were called Master Trainers (MTs) and they trained approximately 2500 teachers. For the purpose of this paper these MTs are called Mentor teachers. After the certificate course, these Mentor teachers were provided opportunities by TISS and their state departments to continue mentoring the fellow teachers they had trained during their certificate courses. This involved supporting the mentor teachers for conducting small district level F2F trainings, undertaking action research, presenting their practice at international conferences and symposiums, designing and implementing student projects and problem-based learning with technology camps for students across states.

Effective CPD can lead to continuation or transfer of the practice in newer contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2017, Charania, et al. 2021). In January 2021 during the COVID Lockdown period (CLP), TISS and Open University UK, launched digital badges for about 500 teachers in these two states. The earlier blended four months certified course was split into two micro courses leading (the 3rd course on OER was newly developed) to award of digital badge. TISSx platform, as a learning management system based on open-ed-X, at the host university, was used to offer the courses. This was accessible through a browser as well as an android app. The courses were offered in English, Assamese and Bengali. Based on a pilot in the year 2019 with the certificate course, and deliberations with OU and TISS core teams, peer assessments were integrated in all the digital badge courses. About nine of the mentor teachers joined the university (TISS) team to mentor these 500 teachers. These mentor teachers took up mentoring as an additional activity on a voluntary basis, on top of their regular teaching in the CLP. These mentors were oriented on digital badges, new content, pedagogies and platform by both the university teams.

Method

Five out of the nine teacher mentors involved in the digital badge course, were selected for this study as they were active throughout the process of mentoring other teachers for the digital badge courses in their states (Assam: January 2020 till June 2020; February to March 2020 in West Bengal). They were each interviewed in-depth by members of the research team; interviews were conducted online and lasted between 45 - 60 mins. The interview responses were translated where they were in local languages, all interviews were transcribed. The following themes in the interview that were related to study purpose were focused for analysis: personal and professional motivation to continue mentoring, role of mentor teachers in the online mentoring of digital badge courses, transfer and adaptation of prior experience of mentoring in the F2F mode into the distance mode in CLP, and their expectations and aspirations as mentors from the state.

In addition to interviews of mentors, post course feedback surveys of the teachers in Assam who took the first digital badge course were also analyzed. A total of 109 teachers took this post course survey (32% of female teachers) mostly rural area of Assam. The majority of the teachers who responded to the survey completed the course in English (60%) and rest in Assamese. The scope of this survey was quite broad, for the purpose of this study we focused on responses to questions relating to teachers' interactions with the teacher mentors, other aspects of the survey are reported elsewhere (Cross et al, 2022).

Findings from Mentor interviews

What motivated mentors to continue Mentoring?

Mentors gave numerous reasons for continuing to engage with the peer mentoring process relating to their own professional development and a contribution to the wider state goal of improving student learning. Following themes emerged:

- ***Learn new things:***

“...Mentoring teaches me new things all the time which could be helpful in my classroom. For example, ITE was new but I learned through mentoring; now digital badge is new but I learn through mentoring. What motivates me is the fact that while I am mentoring ..., I'm learning too and I can use this learning in my work.”

“(Being a MT (mentor teacher) ... really changed my journey of teaching and learning and gave a perspective of learners as creators of their own knowledge and teachers' role as a facilitator.

- ***To stay connected with ITE and TISS activities:***

Many responses iterated, continuing as a mentor gave them the opportunity to stay connected with ITE and TISS activities which they perceived as bringing multiple benefits both for themselves - further CPD opportunities, and for their students in schools:

“...Being a MT (mentor teacher) keeps me connected to continued activities of ITE that has transformed students and has potential to impact many hundreds of my students over the years. Students’ confidence, their achievements, their smartness, e.g., how they conduct themselves in WebQuest and Quiz and ask questions to outside experts, seeing shy and introvert students being transformed into confident presenters and improving English speaking.”

“being associated with the ITE core team at TISS, and many opportunities at TISS including taking more courses.”

- ***Supporting the community of teachers:***

Many of the mentors were motivated by the experience of building expertise across the wider teacher community, sharing what they had learnt with other teachers and engaging in joint action to address inequalities in student access to and participation in learning. As one mentor explained, it is both professionally fulfilling and contributes to the larger good in the society.

“...I would love to continue as a facilitator, as a master trainer for my students as well as my fellow colleagues, my teachers. Because I know that this transformation which has come within me, if it is not going to come within the total society it will not bring about the change, which is very much required. So, I would love to continue as a master trainer, as a mentor, as a facilitator.”

What different roles did Mentor Teachers’ play in the Mentoring for Digital Badge Course?

Most of the responses under this theme revolved around supporting teachers in two key areas: technical challenges and assignments. Support was provided through a number of different channels including phone calls and community of practice online groups both in the learning management platform and through instant messaging platforms such as Telegram or WhatsApp. One of the responses even revealed a physical visit by teachers to the mentor’s home.

“...some of the teachers are from nearby and visit my home also for learning this process, which actually gives us some extra energy, because the teachers are very much enthusiastic in learning these new things’.... ... earlier I didn’t even know this (one) teacher... he came to me, and we shared, sat together for one hour, and we discussed, and after that he was very much friendly with me over the phone. Any problem he faces, he directly calls me and asks me, how to do, how to improve.”

One of the responses indicated that since the mentor teachers in the digital badge course had to grade in online mode along with the course team (due to higher number of teachers enrolled) which was new for them, this made them pay more attention to the teachers’ queries and progress in the course.

Mentor Teachers’ Transfer and Adaptation of Prior Experience of Mentoring in F2F to the Online Mode in CLP.

The related data under this topic had two major themes: a. In what ways past experience of mentoring in F2F mode supported mentoring in the online mode. b. new challenges in mentoring in online mode.

- ***Past Experience of CPD in the areas of CTLT (constructive teaching and learning with technology) that involved mentoring supported Mentoring in Online Mode in CLP.***

Most responses indicated that past experience in F2F mode was useful and gave confidence in supporting mentoring in online mode. For example, conceptual understanding of the topics was strong due to prior experience of the certificate course in blended form which also lasted for a long period, which helped in mentoring others in the online

mode. This conceptual understanding also helped MTs to assess and grade teachers in the online digital badge course.

“...both are complementary to each other. It helped me a lot, because what I learnt from previous experience as an ITE instructor, it definitely helped me a lot in assessing in the digital badge course. ... course content also... 21st century skills... a rubric of lesson plan, assessing rubric of e-content... because I have a clear concept of that, I develop a clear concept of how to assess the teachers from that experience.”

“...Prior experience of training teachers in the ITE course in F2F and online experience with students in ITE WebQuests made it easier to mentor teachers in online mode.”

Besides conceptual understanding, some of the responses indicated prior experience of training face to face exposed the mentor teachers to understand technical difficulties faced by the teachers. One of the responses elaborated on this theme:

“... we could physically see them struggling with technical devices and applications, it created greater empathy to understand their problems with technology and their limited digital competence and this empathy helped them better relate to teachers with their technical difficulties in the online mode.”

One of the responses indicated that mentoring in online mode expanded their mentoring experience across other districts and states.

“... (earlier) in my comfort zone it was very easy, right! When I used to... in Nadiya district give f2f training to the teachers, I continued mentoring them, but most of the teachers were known to me, right? So, there was a comfort zone. But coming out from that comfort zone and interacting with (online), maybe sometimes interstate was also there. So, it was a great opportunity, I feel.”

- ***New challenges in mentoring in online mode***

Although the past experience of F2F mentoring was helpful in mentoring online, the online mentoring brought a new set of challenges such as difficulties in supporting teachers to get accustomed to digital devices and platforms, encouraging teachers to interact online and, understanding their needs better - this was found to be much more difficult working virtually as this mentor teacher explained:

“...In the past, F2F mentoring allowed understanding teachers from their facial expressions, now on zoom due to network connectivity video is not always possible so it is difficult to gauge what they are thinking.”

“...In online mode we had to learn how to make teachers speak in the training so that the sessions are interactive, for e.g., give turns in online platforms to speak, use breakout rooms, it was easier to do this in the F2F mode earlier.”

- ***Teachers' Aspirations and Expectations from the State for Mentoring***

Most of the mentor teacher responses indicated that they expect the state to recognize their efforts and status of being mentors in the form of appreciation and acknowledgement, giving them a recognized status in the state system, and to link their mentorship with promotion.

“... I want recognition. I want the State to recognize me as a mentor, as an ITE mentor and digital badge....”

“...if the government has taken some initiative, it gives us actually energy... to continue the services with full dedication...with new ideas...new engagements...”

Findings from the post course survey with teachers (mentees) taking 1st digital badge course

The findings highlighted and confirmed the value of the support teachers received from MentorTeachers in their journey of completing the digital badge course. Out of 109 participants, a majority (more than 60%) of the teacher participants reported that they frequently contacted MentorTeachers directly (one to one through calls or separate

chats on WhatsApp or Telegram groups) for help or advice, and another 20% reported that they contacted mentors at least once during the course.

Besides one to one mentoring, the mentor teachers were also very active on Telegram or WhatsApp groups (Instant Messaging Applications) supporting teachers' queries and motivating them in the course. The survey also asked them what was most helpful support in the course (multiple responses permitted), about 70% of the responses indicated WhatsApp, Telegram groups, and 30% indicated Mentors (directly). In another study, where a sociogram was created depicting nodes of communication, it was found that master trainers were most active participants communicating with the teachers in the course group after the university faculty/facilitators (Paltiwale, et al. 2021).

It was noteworthy that in an open-ended question that asked how to improve peer assessment on lesson plans, two of the teachers mentioned that they would prefer Mentor Teachers in addition to their teacher peers in the course to grade their lesson plans. These responses indicated a sense of trust in Mentors to assess them on practice assignments.

"I noticed that some peers have given poor marks, less than what we deserve. So, I would suggest that if with the peers, the master trainers also give marks (points) on our lesson plans, then it will be better for us."

Discussion

The journey of mentor teachers in this study of becoming and continuing their role as mentors can be attributed to a sustained process of CPD that involved certification, opportunities to prepare and influence other teachers, engage in professional development at interstate and inter/national platforms with support from their state administration and academic institutions. Both the data from interview responses of mentors and survey responses of teachers (mentees) indicated that mentoring in digital badge courses provided useful support for teachers to engage with their courses in the online mode in CLP. It was quite remarkable that even without a formal mandate by the state, a few mentor teachers sustained their motivation and engagement as mentors over a period of five years. Prior studies on mentoring suggest teacher mentors derive personal and professional gains in the process of mentoring (Hobson, 2009; Gills & Wilson, 2004, Hudson, 2010). Some of the reasons for this sustained motivation as stated by the mentor teachers were related to their interest in continuing their professional development and related opportunities with a reputed academic institute and being able to improve their practice with project based learning with technology, and continue to impact the learning and growth in their students. In addition, being mentors enabled these expert teachers to contribute more widely to the development of their communities and state - the common good.

The interviews also indicated past experience of the course curriculum (constructivist use of technology) and mentoring in the F2F mode developed confidence and empathy to mentor fellow teachers in the online mode. Being able to transfer their skills of mentoring with empathy and confidence from F2F to online mode also signals the characteristics of effective CPD that also leads to continuation or transfer of the practice in newer contexts - in this case the practice is mentoring (Darling-Hammond, 2017, Charania, et al., 2021).

The state appreciates the contribution of these teachers turned mentors but there is no formal recognition or career progression plans for them. The teacher mentors here did not hold any designation of mentors or teacher educators but they mentored their peer teachers in integrating technology in constructivist pedagogy. Such a non-hierarchical relationship is also emphasized in the bluebook of mentoring by the NMM. However, the mentors did mention that going forward they would want the state to officially designate them as mentors or master trainers. Such an acknowledgment may be intended for career mobility or progression in professional development as teachers and leaders. The NEP, 2020 does highlight CPD leading to career progression, the learning of this study also suggests systemic integration of designating peer teachers as mentors can be a meaningful strategy for CPD scale and

sustainability. Also, CPD over the years that included diverse opportunities was critical in developing teachers as mentors, short term courses on mentoring should be critically reviewed and supplemented with CPD.

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