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Teacher Motivation and Aspiration for Online Mentoring their Fellow Teachers in the COVID Lockdown Period

Amina Charania  
TISS, Mumbai  
India  
amina.charania@tiss.edu

Freda Wolfenden  
Open University  
United Kingdom  
freda.wolfenden@open.ac.uk

Durba Sarkar  
TISS, Mumbai  
India  
durba.sarkar@tiss.edu

Simon Cross  
Open University  
United Kingdom  
simon.j.cross@open.ac.uk

Sohini Sen  
TISS, Mumbai  
India  
sohini.sen@tiss.edu

Lina Adinolfi  
Open University  
United Kingdom  
lina.adinolfi@open.ac.uk

Abstract: As Continuous Professional Development (CPD) moves to embrace ICTs to improve equity, scale, and quality, there is a need for experienced and motivated mentors to offer online support to teachers. The purpose of the study is to understand the motivation and aspiration of teachers as mentors, and their adaptation of past F2F mentoring experience to support mentoring in an online mode in the COVID period. The study is based on a CPD programme started in 2017, offered by a university in India for 68 government/public secondary school teachers in rural districts of two Eastern Indian states. In January 2021, during the COVID period about 10 of these 68 teachers joined the university team to mentor 500 teachers taking online courses leading to digital badges. The state appreciates the contribution of these teachers turned mentors but there is no formal recognition or career progression plan for them. The findings of this study suggest that teacher mentors are valuable to scale quality professional development in technology integration, and there is a need for building their capacities and recognizing them in the system as mentors.

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. Using peer mentors offers a sustainable way to offer Teacher Professional Development (TPD) (Hudson, 2013) in line with effective TPD being continuous, relevant, practice based, creating good role models (Darling-Hammond, 2017). 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). However, most of the literature on teacher mentors is focused on mentoring new or student teachers. In India, the National Education Policy 2020, suggested a National Mission on Mentoring in Higher Education but in the K-12 context the emphasis is on the importance of mentoring new teachers in the K-12 schools. The CLP has also moved much of the TPD online and CLP brings forth the need for new competence and knowledge, for both old and new teachers struggling to cope with teaching and learning. This calls for a need to develop and strengthen peer teacher mentoring as a core pillar of CPD. 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).

Preparing teachers as mentors is a form of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). 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

This study is based on a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programme on constructivist use of technology 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 Indian states. 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 called Integrated approach to Technology in Education (ITE). 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 teacher mentors supported other teachers with project-based learning with technology with their students. The CPD programme for mentors started in 2017 and involved a four months blended learning certified course on constructivist use of technology in secondary schools with 68 government teachers. As part of the course, one of the practice-based assignments involved training other school teachers in their districts on project-based learning with technology. Training other teachers in F2F training and continuing to mentor them became an important part of the certificate course; these 68 teachers were called Master Trainers (MTs) and they trained about 2500 teachers. For the purpose of this paper these MTs are called mentor teachers. After the certificate course, these 68 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. The earlier blended four months certified course by TISS completed by 68 government teachers was split into three micro courses leading to an award of digital badges instead of a certificate. About nine of the mentor teachers joined the university (TISS) team to mentor a fresh batch of teachers who undertook online courses. These mentor teachers took up mentoring activities on voluntary basis and as an additional activity, on top of their regular teaching in the CLP. The state appreciated the contribution of these mentor teachers but there is no formal recognition or career progression plans for these mentors.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to understand:

- The motivation and aspiration of teachers to continue as mentors
- The teacher mentors adaptation and transfer of experience from the past F2F mentoring for the online digital badge courses in the CLP.
Method

Nine mentor teachers were involved in the digital badge courses. Five out of the nine teacher mentors were selected 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). The interview responses were translated where the responses were in local language, all interviews were transcribed. The following themes in the interview responses were focused for analysis: 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 F2F, and their expectations and aspirations from state.

Analysis

1. Motivation to Continue Mentoring

The responses related to motivation of teachers to continue as mentors revealed themes related to being able to stay connected with ITE and TISS team for the benefit of their students learning with technology, their own professional development and learning new things, and to support mentoring other teachers. Some of the responses from the interviews are stated below.

“(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 her role as a facilitator.”

1a. To stay connected for the benefit of students' learning. Many responses iterated continuing as a mentor gave them opportunity to stay connected with ITE and TISS activities. One of the responses elaborated staying connected for the purpose of impact on students' learning.

“…Being an 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.”

“…ITE is very much needed for the students, because without ITE, I can say students can score good marks, but for actual real-life authentic teaching, ITE is the main source I can say.”

1b. Learn new things. Many responses indicated that mentoring exposes mentor teachers to learning new things in technology and pedagogy, to know recent technology, which is useful for teachers especially in the COVID period, to learn about new digital badge courses and share the same with the community of teachers, “being associated with the ITE core team at TISS, and many opportunities at TISS including taking more courses.”

“…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 these learning in my work.”

2. Mentor Teachers’ Role in Mentoring for Digital Badge Course

Most of the responses under this theme revolved around supporting teachers by providing technical support, answering their queries, and helping with assignments.

- Provide technical support to teachers such as guiding them to operate required applications like zoom for video conferencing, TISSx platform.
• Provide support to teachers in the practice assignments, discussions on the platform; explain theoretical concepts such as 21st century skills, inquiry-based learning, etc.
• Answering their queries through phone calls, community of practice (CoP) online groups.
• Provide support in grading and feedback on practice assignments.

One of the responses also revealed physical visit by teachers to 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.”

3. Mentor Teachers’ Transfer and Adaptation of Prior Experience of Mentoring in F2F to Support and Mitigate Challenges of Teachers Taking Digital Badge Courses in an Online Mode in the 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.

3a. Past Experience of Mentoring Supported Mentoring in Online Mode

Most responses indicated that past experience in F2F mode was useful and gave confidence in supporting mentoring in online mode. For example, conceptual understanding 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 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:

“... as they (MTs) 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.”

3b. 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 like difficulty in supporting teachers to get accustomed to digital devices and platforms, make them interactive online, understand their needs better, etc.

“...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.”

Although not related to the mode of teaching, one of the responses indicated that since the mentor teachers in the digital badge course had to grade in online mode (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.

4. 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 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 State Govt. bring us to conduct such trainings or anything for...because we have been a part of Master Trainer, and we have achieved it...but without any practicing in future, then we...actually becomes...ultimately, we can say...being a Master Trainer is nothing to do...It’s just that we have attended a course and we have certified...But if the government has taken some initiative, it gives us actually energy... to continue the services with full dedication...with new ideas...new engagements...”

A few responses also indicated that the state should make digital badge courses compulsory for all teachers, one of the responses also stated that digital badge can be used for assessment of teachers in the state.

“...if a system is built in the future that every teacher should collect 10 or 20 digital badges within their teaching span, then the teachers will be given a big award. I think teachers will be motivated to nurture themselves. If I don't nurture myself, I can’t nurture my students.”

Lastly, one of the responses stated that the mentor teacher would like to continue mentoring as it’s quite 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.”

Conclusion

Although the data in this study are from a very small number of mentor teachers, it highlights some important insights related to mentoring in the context of integrating technology in the government school system in India. Firstly, it lays down the important role that mentor teachers played in the professional development of fellow teachers making quality scaffolding at scale possible. Although there is no formal recognition for their mentoring, what motivated the ITE mentor teachers was being associated with the ITE initiative to impact student learning, maintain university connect to learn new and enhance their own and the other teachers’ professional growth. The mentor teachers were exposed to a continued professional development by the university in the form of continuous guidance, courses, opportunities of research and international exposure to technology and pedagogy. The mentor teachers appreciated these efforts and wished to sustain this connection for their professional development as teachers and mentors. Past experience of the course curriculum (constructivist use of technology) and mentoring in the F2F mode prepared them to mentor teachers with confidence and empathy in the online mode. Most of the responses indicated that they expect their states to recognize them as mentors and link it to their career progress trajectory. One of the responses also suggested that digital badges could be a good tool to track teachers’ progress over time.

References


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