

Mentoring of Teachers: The Much-Needed Change in the National Education Policy 2020

Gitanjali Chawla | gchawla@mac.du.ac.in

Gitanjali Chawla is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi, with more than twenty-five years of teaching experience. She has a keen interest in folklore, cultural studies and innovative practices in teaching, mainly in the virtual mode.

Key Words: Mentoring, Teachers, Higher education institutions, National Education Policy 2020

Abstract

Mentoring teachers is the foundation on which the edifice of education stands. Though armed with subject competencies, novice faculty need nurturing and guidance in methodologies to deal with classroom engagements and exigencies. As compared to the West, India lags in formulating formalized well-structured mentoring programs to capitalize on the nuanced relationship between a mentor and mentee, which if utilized optimally, reaps several benefits both for teachers and students. This paper brings to the fore the lack of attention given to mentoring programs for faculty under the National Education Policy 2020, particularly in higher education institutions, and argues for remedial measures to improve classroom practices.

Introduction

The much-awaited National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) talks of inter and multidisciplinary, inclusive and holistic education to meet the target of 100 per cent gross enrolment ratio in school education by 2030, and an increase of 50 per cent in higher education by 2035. The NEP, with its focus on skill and vocational training with multiple entry and exit point is the need of the hour, and the academic bank of transferable credits is in keeping with global practices. Inclusiveness and standardization are its underlying principles, as is evident in the proposal to set up the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), with its key verticals that will govern the regulation, the setting of standards, funding and accreditation of academic institutions. Furthermore, to foster student-driven research and to augment research competencies, the National Research Foundation has been envisaged. What is also appreciable is the promotion of local and first languages in the primary years. Additionally, the NEP has factored in the critical component of mentoring of students and teachers in schools, right from Anganwadi workers to school teachers.

The mentoring of teachers in Higher Education, is, however, not adequately delineated in NEP 2020. This is a fault line that will have far-reaching implications and will end up destabilizing the promised goals and do more harm than good, if not taken seriously. The pre-service training of teachers in schools as mentors is inherent in the curricula of Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.); this needs to be strengthened in their in-service continuous professional development as well. The training component is entirely missing in faculty engaged in teaching

students in colleges and universities. Bryant-Shanklin and Brumage (2011), argue for the refocusing of traditional pre-service/postgraduate education programs using the concept of mentoring. Mentoring, as a concept in India, has never been formalized into a structured programme. A loosely interpreted term and concept, mentoring has always been associated with guiding students, which includes remedial measures to augment classroom pedagogy as well as imparting life skills when needed.

Mentoring in West

Mentoring programs for faculty have received considerable attention in the West. The increased attention is evident from the fact that teacher mentoring programs have nearly doubled in most states in the United States of America in the last two decades (Furlow, 2019, n.p.). The attention is mostly due to a very high attrition rate, as new and inexperienced teachers who had neither training nor support in actual classroom engagements chose to leave their teaching careers in the initial years. The tasks expected from them as Furlow asserts, are 'monumental', and include: a thorough understanding and implementation of learning outcomes as prescribed by state standards, management of the classroom, development of strategies to balance varying needs of students and different learning styles, amongst a host of other challenges. He rightly states that novice teachers enter their first class and is expected to deal with different competencies and sensitivities like a 'seasoned veteran' (Furlow, 2019, n.p.).

In the West, as part of the mentoring programmes, novice teachers are paired with experienced teachers, who help the former understand the nuances of

classroom engagements and exigencies. Not only does this help in the professional development of both the mentor and mentee teachers (Danielson, 1999), but it also lowers the attrition rate of new teachers (Boyer, 1999). According to Boyer, there was a decrease of 20 per cent in the attrition rate of new teachers had the much-needed support in the beginning. Her report was backed by other studies (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1992; Gold, 1996; Scott, 1999; Hegstad, 1999). These studies also show that mentoring benefits both, the mentee and the mentor. Furlow concludes, 'the experienced teachers were particularly enthusiastic because they believed that mentoring allowed them to help others, improve themselves, receive respect, develop collegiality, and profit from the novice teachers' fresh ideas and energy' (2019, n.p.). Such mentoring programmes bear fruit only if the mentors are trained to foster the right elements in mentees, which include managing diversity, understanding deep-rooted biases and prejudices, promoting inclusivity, cultivating equity and stimulating understanding and empathy. The focus of this mutually beneficial relationship is far more on strengthening emotional intelligence than on augmenting the curricula to be taught.

Mentoring, Modelling and Coaching-Relationship

The mentor-mentee relationship in teaching is a complicated and a nuanced one, which is influential, and creates a positive impact between novice teachers and students. Backed with the support of experience and wisdom, novice teachers are no longer intimidated by the challenges of classroom experiences.

Koki (1997) explains the term 'mentoring' as a concept distinct from 'modelling' or 'coaching'. According to him, modelling is 'the process of serving as a model. A model is a tangible embodiment of an idea or ideal (a product) (p. 2)'; coaching is 'assistance that one teacher provides to another in the development of teaching skills, strategies, or techniques generally within a formal three-part structure: peer-conference, lesson observation, and post-conference' (p. 2). For Koki, mentoring includes modelling and coaching, as the mentor serves as a model of the teacher's role in education. Koki sees mentoring as a comparatively more comprehensive concept. The three-part mentoring process includes coaching as an instructional technique. He further adds that mentoring includes 'cognitive coaching', a term that is gaining currency as a significant part of mentoring. His argument is based on a study by Gay (1995): 'to be effective, the mentor must be able to demonstrate a range of cognitive coaching competencies, such as posing carefully constructed questions to stimulate reflection, paraphrasing, probing, using wait-time, and collecting and using data to improve teaching and learning. Mentoring, like coaching, is a collaborative process' (Koki, 1997, p. 3).

Mentoring as Continuous Professional Development

For continuous professional development, the young faculty should be associated with an experienced and proficient senior as a mentee. The right mentor will make a huge difference and go a long way in nurturing a much more impactful educator. The attributes of a good mentor

include experience in pedagogy, good communication and interpersonal skills, open-mindedness, higher levels of emotional intelligence and besides, as Koki suggests the mentor should be '... people-oriented, open minded, flexible, empathetic, and collaborative' (p. 4). The relationship though bounded within a hierarchy of senior-junior and experienced-novice, should not be treated at par with that of a teacher-student. The mentor is neither a supervisor nor an evaluator, but a guide, who aids the transition of a new teacher in crossing over from one side of the desk to the other. Koki supports the views of mentoring of mentors for an effective mentor-mentee relationship. The trainer is effective only if they have had the right training too. So, mentors should also be trained. 'Mentors should be enrolled in an ongoing mentoring training program. Training in communication and active listening techniques, relationship skills, effective teaching, models of supervision and coaching, conflict resolution, and problem-solving are often included in training opportunities for mentors' (p. 4).

Need for Mentoring Programs in India

What India lacks is a systematic, formalized, structured mentoring programme for teachers to help them deal with the increasing heterogeneity in classrooms and also where the student-teacher ratio is abysmal. Teaching for more than twenty-five years in several constituent colleges of the University of Delhi has shown me that ad hoc faculty, after completing their Master's degrees and the National Eligibility Test (NET) for lecturer's certificate, have the requisite subject competencies. They are however at a loss when it comes to dealing with classroom issues. They do not know how

to deal with issues such as varying language proficiencies and learning abilities, and more significantly with multitudinous emotional problems including low self-esteem, lack of confidence, higher anxiety levels and/or attention deficits. The general apathy towards gender, class and caste compounds the problems. The lack of required understanding of the potency of the spoken word which may reflect biases or entrenched prejudices also needs to be addressed. A good mentoring programme not only helps new faculty deal with the classroom issues, but also helps to increase their confidence levels (Holloway,2001). To give an example, very often, novice teachers are subject to covert derision by students, because their pronunciation may be different from conventional pronunciation as they come from different parts of a very diverse India. This derision undermines their confidence, and they enter the classroom with a greater degree of trepidation. Backed by the support of an experienced faculty as a mentor, an inexperienced teacher can ignore their trepidation and instead, gain confidence from their subject knowledge. They will also understand that this situation can be used to convert the students' immaturity into a deeper understanding of diversity.

While it has been established that the advantages of a mentoring programme for teachers far outweigh the effort, time and the cost involved, the lack of it in colleges and universities in India is mitigated somewhat by the orientation programmes offered by the Academic Staff Colleges of central universities. However, these are limited to those teaching in a permanent capacity and are not accessible to adhoc faculty, who, in their initial years of teaching are often deprived of the right guidance. These extensive four-week-long programmes should be made available to

ad hoc or contractual teachers, or even to those teaching as guest faculty, although the nature of these programmes needs to change substantially. Detailed analysis of case studies and simulated classroom interactions can be included in the programmes to augment the expected learning outcomes, while discussions on pedagogical strategies and methodologies should find space along with discussions on the NEP 2020. Additionally, sessions with psychologists and other communication experts will help new initiates prepare for the dynamics of a classroom. This is an essential part of pre-service training, as much if not more than the green flag of NET certification.

The Indian education system has hitherto not paid much attention to developing an effective, well-structured mentoring programme for teachers, who were left to swim in the deep waters of the classroom on their own. While some learnt from their own mistakes, in contrast, others moved to other less daunting pastures. It is clear though that the framers of the New Education Policy 2020 have taken cognizance of its import and impact.

A National Mission for Mentoring shall be established, with a large pool of outstanding senior/retired faculty—including those with the ability to teach in Indian languages—who would be willing to provide short and long-term

mentoring/professional support to university/college teachers (NEP 2020, p. 43).

Unlike other aspects of reforms in the education system which have been detailed to a large extent, mentoring of teachers has found mention in a single sentence (see above) in a 66-page document. The promise and hope are that this National Mission will take care of the fault lines inherent in our system, which are yet to transform thousands of graduates into a generation of skilled future-ready workforce.

Conclusion

Mentoring teachers lies at the core of the education system, as it has immense transformative potential. It is not about passing on the torch of knowledge from the mentor to the mentee but a belief in 'commitment to education, hope for its future, and a respect for those who enter into its community' (Shadiow 1996, p. 277). Head, Reiman and Thies-Sprinthall (1992), add that mentoring values the person. Mentoring is a promise that the NEP 2020 has made, and we hope it is for keeps both in letter and spirit. We also hope that it does not remain a crevice, a fault line that will only widen the gaps in the foundation on which the entire edifice of education stands

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