

Book Reviews

Smith, R. (2020). *Mentoring Teachers to Research Their Classrooms: A Practical Handbook*. New Delhi: British Council, 88 pp. www.britishcouncil.org

Reviewed by Indrani Das Gupta

R. Smith's *Mentoring teachers to research their classrooms: A practical handbook* (2020) is a much-needed intervention in the field of ELT, which brings the practices and energies of teacher-research and the concept of mentoring together. Recent studies have shown that research-based classroom practices have had a profound influence on the professional growth of teachers, in effecting positive changes to the classroom environment and in smoothening the coordination between various research activities and programmes. Likewise, the idea of mentoring has also been acknowledged in educational institutions as a positive conceptual practice in enhancing communication networks across different organization levels and providing greater accessibility for development to teachers and students alike.

Smith's book is the first such effort in ELT that has effectively combined the skills and the activities of both—mentoring and teacher-research “to enable mentors to play what can be a pivotal role in supporting teacher-research” (p. 1). Drawn from Smith's experiences with the British Council's Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) conducted in India and Nepal from 2017 onwards and following in the footsteps of Smith's earlier revolutionary pedagogical work—exploratory action research (2018), this book provides hands-on illustrations and techniques to address complex problems faced by schoolteachers in the field of mentoring teacher-researchers.

Divided into two parts—‘mentoring foundations’ and the ‘process of teacher-research,’ Smith's book displays various approaches that make this resource immensely suitable for all kinds of pedagogical situations and for all school levels. The flexible nature of this book allows the mentors to either use this resource as a “step-by-step guide” or to use specific tasks/activities as “stand-alone resources” for a particular topic

illumination (p. 2). Smith's book is easily downloadable for free usage from the internet and can be used in either "low or relatively high-resource classroom contexts" (p. 1) in developing skills for a more synergistic approach of mentoring teachers in classroom-based research activities.

Through its six carefully crafted chapters (Unit I-VI), Part I of the book clarifies a few theoretical issues about research and mentoring. In Unit 1, research is demystified, and jargon free examples on related terminology and rooted in ordinary teaching/mentoring experiences are provided. In its down-to-earth approach of outlining the stages of exploratory action research, this Unit requires no prior experience or knowledge of mentoring and teacher-research. Unit II specifies what research is vis-à-vis advising or telling someone about research. This unit enumerates specific qualities required in a mentor, cataloguing ways of communicating with teachers and exemplifying the value of "co-mentoring" (p. 16). Unit III suggests the ways and means to tide over initial hiccups in this collaborative venture and to make teachers more conscious about the value of research and, thus, "being able to make evidence-informed changes to improve the quality of students' learning" (p. 19). Informed by the practice of "scaffolding" (p. 20), this unit encourages independent plans of action by teachers in tune with their classroom and pedagogical requirements. Unit IV provides a structured guideline on what one can expect from this project and reflect on academic issues of the viability of this partnership. Unit V offers detailed parameters on how to mentor and guide teachers in researching their classrooms. From charting timelines, setting up deadlines to maintaining effective communication channels, this unit enables the mentors and teachers to keep track of their progress and thus, reflect on their research practices. Unit VI exemplifies the significance of documentation for mentors, highlighting the need for a continual evaluation and examination of one's practices. This cross-examination enables a more fulfilling and ethical mentoring system to emerge.

Part II of this book, comprising of Units 7-12, provides a more robust approach for mentors to guide teachers in various research areas. From the selection of research topic and posing of critical research questions to data collection and the interpretation of data, engaging in transformative action, and reflection on the critical methods and findings of the research undertaken—Part II of Smith's book engages in illuminating through concrete examples, tasks, and activities, the theoretical underpinnings of Part I. The first unit of Part II of Smith's book—Unit VII, guides

teachers in selecting their research topics, focusing on “concern areas” highlighted in classroom experiences (p. 39). The mentoring of teachers in selecting research questions documents the importance of narrowing the vision to address their research significance effectively. Unit VIII deals with the mentoring of teachers to pose relevant research questions as this can lead to “new understanding and solutions” (p. 43).

With its emphasis on data collection and data analysis, Unit IX is an expected follow-up to the first two units of Part II. From enumerating the value and usage of various data resources—“exploring one’s perception, exploring others’ perceptions, and exploring behaviour” (p. 50)—mentoring teachers for data collection develops as a critical element in providing key insights on the classroom teaching environment. Unit X highlights the next step, that of the post-data collection—data interpretation and analysis. As this Unit clarifies, the critical element is not merely to share the research findings with others but “to focus on the enhancement of the teacher’s own understanding and practice in a particular context” (p. 55). Unit XI discusses the key ideas involved in ‘action research.’ Explaining action research as geared towards change and possibilities, this unit capitalizes on “not only the action but also the evaluation of the action” (p. 60). Unit XII foregrounds teacher-research presentations, oral talks, and sharing of other related teacher-research perspectives as participating in the broader professional community for the “consolidation of learning and gaining useful feedback” (p. 64).

From delineating several theoretical and methodological concerns to explicating a range of ideas, activities, techniques, and specific suggestions—Smith’s book enables a more research-based pedagogical environment to flourish. The shared alignment of mentoring and teacher-research activities foregrounded in this book introduces revolutionary mentoring, researching, and classroom teaching techniques, maximizes teachers’ productivity, and enhances employment prospects. This is a must-have resource for teachers, educators, and mentors.

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