Mentoring as a Tool for Professional Development: ‘Gains’ for Both Mentor and Teacher Researchers

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Abstract
This one-year observation and intervention research aims to demonstrate how mentoring as part of the ARMS (Action Research Mentoring Scheme 2018-19) project has proven to be a successful teacher-driven professional development programme. This article discusses how mentors and teachers improve as researchers by combining different approaches such as collaboration, self-reflection, peer learning, and technological integration. I used a mixed research method with five Teacher Researchers (TRs) whom I supervised for a year. To illustrate the benefits of participation in a mentorship programme, both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. One of the benefits of being a mentor was listening to and understanding how my mentees were feeling. It led to the transformation of my mentees from teachers to teacher-researchers. A snowball effect developed when three TRs were chosen as mentors in the subsequent ARMS 2019-20 cycle.

Keywords: ARMS–Action research mentoring scheme 2018-19, exploratory action research, professional development, teacher-researchers

Introduction and Background
Action research aims to empower teachers in thinking, talking, exploring, and reflecting on the obstacles, puzzles, and successes they encounter in the classroom. This approach uses the action or intervention stage, allowing teachers to work on their problems in depth. Using a combination of these two stages, teachers build and deconstruct their ideas about classroom-based research. Mentoring teachers as part of the British Council-sponsored Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS)
2018 was one of the best Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities I have ever had. I worked with Teacher Researchers (TRs) for about a year, and their enthusiasm for this programme changed our perspectives on professional growth and we are now able to track our continuing professional development. Furthermore, this article offers critical takeaways and future opportunities to enhance Communities of Practice (CoPs) for personal and professional advantage.

According to Zeichner (2003), there are several conditions in which school-based teacher research can positively impact teachers. Smith, Connelly & Rebelled (2014, p. 111) explored that teacher research was the leading component for teacher professional development. Suskind (2016) describes teachers as researchers when they begin to think, question, reflect, create, and constitute a school transformation source and eventually become responsible for their professional development. Johnson (2019) explained that action research is necessary to generate four types of knowledge essential for teacher expertise: improving pedagogical skills, teachers’ abilities, and action research skills, all the professional development components. While numerous studies show a positive relationship between teacher research and professional development, I have referred to the CPD framework for teachers and teacher educators developed by the British Council, which incorporates four levels of practices including ‘Awareness’, ‘Understanding’, ‘Engagement’, and ‘Integration’ (in case of teachers). To sum up, it became more intriguing for me to investigate various professional practices as outlined in the CPD framework.

**Use of the British Council’s CPD Framework**

The initial face-to-face session sought to create a rapport and acquaint each TR with Exploratory Action Research (EAR) and project goals. My project has three parts, all of which will involve teacher-researchers. They investigated methods to accept responsibility for their personal growth in the classroom. As a mentor, it was essential for me to constantly review my strengths and areas of improvement to assist the TRs efficiently and acceptably. Managing, guiding, monitoring, and assessing the project were crucial aspects of my personal, professional development.

**Brief Profile of Teacher-Researchers**

Based on demographics, different levels of teaching and total teaching
experience concerning their school setting, I selected the five teachers below from my network:

1. TR1 | Primary teacher | four years of teaching experience, New Delhi
2. TR2 | Secondary teacher | two years of teaching experience, New Delhi
3. TR3 | Secondary teacher | two years of teaching experience, New Delhi
4. TR4 | Secondary teacher | two years of teaching experience, New Delhi
5. TR5 | Primary teacher | More than 20 years of teaching experience, Hingoli, Maharashtra

I knew all my teacher-researchers in various capacities before the programme commenced and was quite aware of their areas of strength and development. I have taught TR1, 2, 3 and 4 in the pre-service teacher education programme and was involved with TR5 in a teacher training project co-partnered by the British Council.

Research Questions as a Mentor

The following are my research questions as a mentor:

Main question:

How does participation in a mentoring programme shape teachers’ professional practices?

Sub questions:

1. What professional practices do my teacher-researchers need to strengthen through my mentoring?
2. What skills and competencies did I acquire in the process of mentoring my teacher-researchers?
3. What were the lessons learnt, and how do we make classroom-based research an ongoing and sustainable activity?

Stage 1 (June 2018) — At the Beginning of the Programme

As a preliminary step, I used a qualitative approach and conducted a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with my five teacher-researchers to investigate their interest in participating in a mentorship programme. Following a thorough conversation, I classified their responses into four categories, which are detailed below:
Expectations from this Programme and from the Mentor

As a first step, TRs expected support to explore ideas and methods in their classrooms and a desire to help the school, their learners, and the community with EAR.

I gave them an EAR instrument to determine their ability to comprehend classroom research. (Rebolledo, 2018). And they rated themselves on a 0-4 scale (Level 0 - do not currently have this competency & Level 4 - I am applying this competency with strength). As far as the competency results go, four of the teacher-researchers were at level 2, while only one was at level 0. To everyone’s strengths and areas of development, I designed approaches for efficient communication with the TRs.

Strengthening of Professional Practices

All the TRs anticipated the mentoring programme as a goldmine opportunity and were hoping to become accomplished researchers in classroom-based study. One of the teacher-researchers who works in a tribal school observed: “ARMS is an exceptional programme because of which a teacher like me with 20 years of experience will now get a chance to transform myself from a teacher to a researcher.” The following were
the focus practices from the British Council’s CPD framework and all of them believed that EAR would increase their teaching and research skills to become more independent. Planning lessons and courses, taking responsibility for professional development, using multilingual approaches and promoting 21st century skills.

**Systemic and Classroom Challenges Faced by Teacher-Researchers:**
The following are some of the challenges faced by the TRs:

- Less exposure of English to learners
- Lack of awareness and knowledge about the latest ELT methodology
- Multilingual classrooms
- Classroom management problems
- Less community participation
- Less support from the district administration
- Lack of opportunities for teamwork, peer observation and collaborative learning

Owing to time constraints, the TRs identified the most significant obstacle as integrating innovative techniques into the curriculum. Three of the TRs were initially barred from taking photos, recording movies, or using student data to be shared with the larger audience for confidentiality purposes. Therefore, for them to select the data gathering methodologies was a challenge. A ‘WhatsApp’ and a ‘Google group’ was also created for easy and smooth communication.

**From Stage 1 to Stage 2**

When it came to determining the next steps in our journey, I asked my TRs to reflect on and share a memoir of an activity, strategy, or approach they used in their classroom once a week in a ‘WhatsApp’ or ‘Google group’ that was created. Leveraging technology to meet the different needs of pupils helped in keeping their attention focused. Meeting face-to-face during July 2020 and conducting fortnightly meetings through zoom to communicate ideas, issues, and progress from their classrooms was a vital stage in the process. They figured out how to study learner-centred pedagogies while also figuring out how to be a better teacher and what they can do to improve their effectiveness.
Stage 2 (November 2018): During the Middle of the Programme

Continuous monitoring and assessment are necessary for a mentorship programme to monitor and evaluate the process as it progresses. Throughout the programme, I monitored and interacted with TRs to ensure they implemented their action plans. A self-designed questionnaire was sent to the TRs, and the following responses were captured:

They said that performing classroom-based research is both personally and professionally rewarding. The study has impacted the educators and built a strong relationship with their learners. When asked how their mentor assisted them in overcoming challenges and developing research questions, all TRs responded that group interactions aided them in developing fresh perspectives and generating research ideas. They were able to examine previously unconsidered issues after confronting their assumptions. One of the TRs responded: “My mentor first understood my learners’ multilingual context deeply and then allowed brainstorming independently about my classroom issues as per my context. Further, asked me to use MUSE (Manageable, Urgent, Significant & Engaging) criteria for narrowing down classroom issues.”

The most outstanding concept in terms of teacher development was incorporating ICT into classroom instruction and communication. We (my TRs and I) looked at how many internet platforms may help students improve their learning and communication. My TRs used e-platforms such as zoom, google folders, YouTube Videos, TED Talks, Character Analysis through a Movie, and Polls to instil joy and excitement in the learner’s eyes, ears, and head. TRs developed the ability to self-learn and acquire various experiences rapidly and effectively through interactive technology as a teaching medium.

Creating a snowball effect within my group and demonstrating skills to become future mentors was one of my goals. When asked whether they could learn any mentorship skills from me, they shared that they could provide constructive feedback and be empathic listeners, they had learnt to be a guide, critical friend, and motivator and not a dictator.

Mentoring, in my opinion, should extend to one’s personal life as well. When questioned, all respondents agreed that the blended model, which included face-to-face and online mentoring through peer coaching, reciprocal learning, classroom observations, and feedback sessions, helped individuals develop their communication skills, acquire
leadership roles (problem-solving and capacity building), and advance their pedagogical knowledge.

The last question was, “What part(s) of the research process did your mentor help you with?” They all agreed that I, as a mentor, was supportive of teachers as reflective practitioners. Those TRs inspired their colleagues in the same way as they helped them generate knowledge about learners, the schooling environment, and instructional contexts. I could assess that my TRs had acquired, developed, and improved many professional skills. This questionnaire also directed me towards exploring my enhanced skills and competencies as given below:

- Project management for smooth delivery of the programme
- Skill of questioning
- Enhancement of ICT skills
- Monitoring and evaluation for tracking the individual and project progress
- Line management as I had to manage five TRs.

Stage 3 (March 2019): At the End of the Project

Teachers identified four professional activities that needed attention during stage 1, and to track their progress, I sent them a questionnaire that included a rating scale and descriptive questions. The following are the findings:

Rating Scale Analysis

There were 27 statements categorized into five topics and rated on a scale of 1 to 5. (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest score). As per the scale, the average and highest scores obtained from the questionnaire were 78 and 130, as illustrated in graph one below:

Graph 1 Quantitative Analysis—Rating Scale Analysis
The scale was constructed around five professional practices (concerning the CPD framework for teachers) relating to understanding learners, assessing learners, integrating ICT, enhancing CPD, and promoting 21st century skills. One question was left open-ended for teachers to reflect on their journey to become TRs. On a scale of 5 to 1, the former indicated ‘strongly agree’, and 4 referred to ‘agree’, with 3 being neither agree nor disagree and 2 referred to ‘disagree’ and 1 ‘strongly disagree’. Each practice was followed by a few ‘can do’ phrases (source: British Council’s CPD framework for teachers), and the following data demonstrate their response to various practices.

Q1. “Do I know my learners now?”:
   87 per cent of sub-statements to this question were either agreed or strongly agreed by all the five TRs.

Q2. “Can I assess my learners in a better way?”:
   88 per cent of sub-statements to this question were either agreed or strongly agreed by all the five TRs.

Q3. “Am I able to integrate ICT into the teaching-learning process?”
   72 per cent of sub-statements to this question were either agreed or strongly agreed by all the five TRs.

Q4. “Can I think about different ways to enhance my professional development?”
   80 per cent of sub-statements to this question were either agreed or strongly agreed by all the five TRs.

Q5. “Am I able to promote 21st century skills in my classroom?”
   96 per cent of sub-statements to this question were either agreed or strongly agreed by all the five TRs.

**Findings from Part 1 (Rating Scale)**

- Teachers were well-informed about the diverse requirements of their pupils. One of the TRs said: “After EAR, I could see pupils at various levels and develop strategies accordingly. Instructions were given to accommodate varied learning styles”.
- They were aware of using alternative assessment techniques and ‘why’ and ‘how’. One teacher-researcher shared: “I could plan alternative assessments like oral presentations, role plays, exit slips, observations and portfolios in my classroom. These assessments helped in moving away from monotony and fear of assessments.”
TRs could integrate ICT into the teaching-learning process, making it enjoyable, effective, and more communicative. One of the TRs remarked, “My learners liked my blended approach of using technology-based timers and traditional reminders. It helped them in planning and completing the task in time.”

All the teacher-researchers, in a nutshell, had an above-average score (refer to Graph 1 above), with two of them near to the maximum reflecting the positive effect of the mentoring programme and at the same time how being reflective practitioners (on the part of teachers) changed their classroom practices and showed a positive impact on making students curious and independent learners.

**Qualitative analysis:** Teacher-researchers shared the following responses to the open-ended questions:

- **Areas of mentor support for classroom issues/puzzles:** Most TRs felt that as a mentor, I assisted them in developing research questions as well as sub-questions. Face-to-face workshops were of great benefit to them because of their conceptual comprehension of the complete EAR process. In addition, the resource material helped them get aware and acquire skills about new methodologies in ELT.

- **Choosing issues/puzzles to formulating research questions:** Almost all the TRs agreed that I constantly asked questions throughout the research process to help them focus intensely on their classroom concerns. They chose their trusted confidant from the group and discussed their struggles and solutions with each other.

- **Personal and professional issues of TRs:** Most of the TRs felt that I was able to address some of their personal and professional issues by giving constructive feedback through emails, on the phone, and by discussing good practices on the WhatsApp group. One of the TRs shared: I became an autonomous teacher because of this project, which prompted me to introspect and better understand myself and my teaching.

- **Skills acquired to become a potential mentor:** All the TRs agreed that planning, time management, reflection, and teamwork were the abilities they had learned from me throughout the project. Additionally, three of the TRs became mentors in 2019-20, which helped them systematically organise their mentoring project, deepen their practices, and focus on personal and professional development.
• Professional practices TRs have gained/ acquired through my mentoring: The three most critical professional practices for teachers are: Assessing learners, promoting 21st century skills, and taking responsibility for their professional development. Everyone felt that they had developed these skills, but they did not mention the areas of growth they needed to concentrate on.

Lessons Learnt

I feel that the lessons learned during the journey better prepare us for the next voyage. The insights learned below were beneficial to my TRs, who meticulously and diligently planned their mentoring assignment.

• I had not anticipated that TRs would withdraw from the project for personal and professional reasons before its start. In August 2018, one of the projects TRs resigned. Dropouts should have been considered by the mentor, as project activities were disrupted, and a quick replacement was made.
• Before the project’s start, the mentor should have engaged school officials to obtain learners’ data, photographs, and videos of school leaders.
• I should have been better structured in terms of material selection and distribution to my TRs.

Conclusion and Way Forward

We believe classroom-based research and CPD can coexist and help teachers to analyse classroom challenges from diverse views. Thus, sustaining classroom-based research will require a wide range of support from school administration, a well-structured plan involving CPD for teachers, provisions of resources, education on teacher research to a broader community, constructive peer feedback, reflective dialogues, as well as constant motivation and encouragement to empower teachers professionally and personally. In order to make the process of classroom-based research productive, a mentor must first play a significant role.

References


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