Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme: Empowering Teachers to be More Effective Mentors

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Abstract

This article showcases the MMP – ‘Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme’ of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Khalsa College, University of Delhi. An initiative of the IQAC, the programme aims to train teachers to become more effective mentors to their students. In today’s dynamic times, the teacher is expected to don many hats, and this programme attempts to make teachers adept at handling the challenges presented in mentoring students. The article traces the origin and purpose of the ‘Mentoring the Mentors’ programme, and highlights the characteristic qualities that make it a unique enterprise. The factors that make it distinct from a typical student mentoring programme are also discussed. The manner in which sessions are conducted and themes decided upon is explained. The article also gives a brief overview of events organised in the past, and the future endeavours of the mentoring team.

Keywords: mentoring, teachers as mentors, best practices, holistic wellness, mentor-mentee relationships

Introduction

While it is common for colleges to have mentor programmes through which teachers play the role of mentors to aid the students with various problems whether academic or personal, the MMP of Sri Guru Nanak Dev Khalsa College, University of Delhi, is unique in its attempt to reach out to mentor the teachers themselves and facilitate the interaction of teachers with students. Through these interactions, the teachers provide an interface where they can help solve those problems faced by the students which are beyond the curriculum. The mentoring
sessions have been envisaged with the intention to develop a closer bond between the teachers and students. The teachers hope to provide a platform where the students can discuss their problems without fear or hesitation. However, sometimes, the teachers themselves feel inadequate in providing the relevant advice or information to students in those circumstances where the students bring up delicate personal, emotional or other issues. The realisation that it is important to train the teacher-mentors in the changing scenario, made the MMP—‘Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme’—come into existence. In order to help the teachers be more effective in their role as mentors, the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of the college have taken the unique initiative to organize ‘Mentoring the Mentors’ sessions wherein the college invites specialists to talk to the teachers on specific themes.

The word ‘mentor’ is derived from Homer’s *The Odyssey*, where Mentor was the tutor of Odysseus’s son, Telemachus. Odysseus had placed his old friend Mentor in his household as his son’s guide while he was away at the Trojan war. It is said that Goddess Athena appeared in the guise of Mentor to support and advise Telemachus. This is the origin of the word mentor, which has since come to mean a ‘wise guide’ (skillsyouneed, n.p.).

Whereas a teacher’s responsibility is to impart skills and knowledge to the students, and a coach can be called a facilitator for the students to further enhance their abilities, it is the mentor who has the greatest responsibility of serving as a guide to the student. Several universities have seen the need for teachers to have a mentor, and an academic mentor is often assigned to new joinees for them to seek support and help from, when needed. Harvard University has an ongoing 6-week course titled ‘Teachers Mentoring Teachers: Practices for Powerful Professional Communities’ which they offer to instil confidence in new teachers to handle the challenges of their profession. The course builds connections between the teachers’ personal experiences and challenges and the positive roles they can play in student development. The mentor guides the new teachers through the rigours of their new work. However, in the absence of such a mentorship programme, most teachers are left grappling with difficult situations and turn to seniors for guidance and help. Most of the time, teachers manage to find a senior colleague who is happy to provide them with advice, but this is informal and irregular. Thus, the need to establish an official platform to provide mentoring to teachers is imperative.
In today’s busy world, the role of teachers has extended from being mere facilitators to being mentors who play varied roles to provide emotional support or career guidance to their students if the need arises. They have to function as a parent, teacher, guru, counsellor and friend, all rolled into one. The question that arises is whether the teachers themselves are capable of providing all the succour that is expected of them. It was to fulfill this requirement for effective mentoring that the MMP programme was conceived. Through this programme, the college invites eminent personalities, who are specialists in their own field, to come and share ideas with the faculty. The mentoring team shortlists some pressing issues which they feel need to be addressed, or have been raised by the students, and then invite a specialist who can provide guidance to the teacher-mentors on these issues. This talk is usually followed by a question-and-answer session, which results in brainstorming. Equipped with this knowledge, the teachers can more confidently provide assistance to their mentees.

Under the mentor programme of the college, students meet their teacher mentors in small groups. They feel free to approach the teacher in this time regarding any issues they are facing, whether related to their college or their personal life. A core group of teachers, led by the coordinator of the IQAC are responsible for the planning and organization of the mentoring sessions, while all other members of the faculty are allotted groups of mentees. The mentoring team consisting of the core group of teachers is headed by Dr. Neeta Dhingra, Associate Professor in the Department of Commerce and the current Coordinator of the IQAC in the college. The team conducts regular feedback polls with the students to determine on what themes or issues they would like to have sessions conducted. The sessions are planned with the idea to introduce the students to different aspects of individual wellness. Some of the themes that were initially shortlisted in the meetings of the core group were health and wellness, the connection of physical health to mental health, significance of meditation, importance of physical activity, diet and nutrition and the increasing cases of depression among students. Once themes are shortlisted, and possible resource persons identified, and based on the availability of the specialist, the MMP session is conducted first for the teachers, who can then take forward the material to the student-mentees. As Dr. Dhingra opines, the aim of the sessions was “to enhance our existing knowledge and experience and to ensure uniformity
in our understanding of the subject” (Dhingra, personal communication, August 7, 2021). In the past, sessions have been conducted on mental health, physical health and wellness, mindfulness, and career options after graduation. During the lockdown, joint sessions, with both teachers and students have also been conducted.

Conception of the MMP

The ‘Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme’ was initially conceptualized by Dr. Deepak Sharma, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, in January 2020, when as the Coordinator of IQAC, he saw the gap in the understanding and varying capabilities of the mentors in dealing with the issues that confronted the students. Even though the college teachers are trained in their subjects, they are often ill-equipped in the face of some of the challenges presented by the students’ genuine problems. The idea was to prepare the teacher-mentors to handle the various issues that the students may need help with. The college already had a mentoring programme, under which groups of students are allotted as mentees to a teacher, so Dr. Sharma proposed to augment the programme by creating a platform which enabled the teachers to hone their skills and abilities. He also posited the programme as one of the ‘Best Practices’ of the college. As part of the accreditation process of the NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council), Institutional Best Practices are described as those initiatives which add value to the lives of people of the institution. They can include acts of social responsibility or encourage the development of new ideas and innovations. Best Practices typically represent the institution’s attempts to effect change in their work environment, which may extend to society at large.

The idea of ‘Mentoring the Mentors’ was further developed under the guidance of Dr. Neeta Dhingra, when she introduced changes in the structure and regularity of the sessions. The first step taken was to establish a permanent spot in the regular college timetable for the mentoring sessions. This could be used for the engagement of the students, as well as for sessions to be conducted for the teachers. This allotment gave a seriousness to the entire process and streamlined the activities of the MMP. Several meetings were held to deliberate over allocation of duties to various members of the core team. The responsibility of the core team was to facilitate the smooth interaction
of the mentors with their groups. The student body was divided into groups and allotted to teachers. It was decided that the teachers allotted would be from a different branch of study than the ones the students pursued. This would give exposure of the students to diverse teachers rather than restricting them to mentors from their own subject areas, and perhaps similar outlooks.

In Dr. Dhingra’s opinion, there are two strong implications of the MMP. Firstly, teachers are able to learn about all aspects of the themes being discussed in the mentoring session. This prepares them to handle unexpected or offbeat queries from the students adeptly. Secondly, since the teachers have been mentored themselves by a professional expert, the system ensures that, by and large, the same content would be transmitted to all the student groups. Dr. Dhingra says, “The commonality of the content that is delivered to the student makes the feedback relevant for the college to determine what sessions or themes have been effective” (Dhingra, personal communication, August 7, 2021).

An additional advantage of training the teacher-mentees is that it facilitates an outreach across all the students in a structured and informed manner. Dr. Gita Lakhanpal, Associate Professor in the Department of English in the college, and a founding member of the MMP, points out that, “As mentors, when teachers reach out to students giving the same advice, it generates confidence and trust” (Lakhanpal, personal communication, August 8, 2021).

Another aspect of the feedback derived from the mentoring sessions is that it enables an individual teacher’s efficacy as a mentor to come forth. This allows the mentoring team to address any gaps in the teacher’s own understanding. The teachers need to be trained to be non-judgemental in their dealings with the students. This encourages students to freely express their views and present their queries. However, it is experienced that often the teacher-mentor is not equipped to handle such situations adeptly. The MMP wishes to address this lack, and prepare the mentor to be a counsellor, guide and friend at the same time, to ensure that a healthy and fruitful interaction takes place. In the event that the teacher is found ineffective or unhelpful as a mentor, the team chooses to either advise the mentor, or in the extreme case, replace them for the best interest of the students. Dr. Gita Lakhanpal, explains why the Mentoring the Mentor Programme was first conceived.
Growing concerns with the behaviour of the youth in society directed our attention towards the students in our college and their need for guidance and motivation. The college started mentoring sessions but we very soon realized that we as teachers were not adequately equipped to answer all the queries and concerns of students. This gave rise to the MMP—‘Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme’. (G. Lakhanpal, personal communication, August 8, 2021)

Dr. Lakhanpal sees additional benefits of the programme in not just helping students but influencing individual teachers as well. She feels that the MMPs have personally positively impacted faculty in their individual capacities as individuals and parents as well.

**Resounding Success of the Initial Sessions**

The ‘Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme’ was inaugurated on February 4, 2020 by the Principal Dr. Gurmohinder Singh. The first MMP session to be organized was a session on Health and Wellness by Dr. Jasjeet Wasir, Associate Director, Diabetic and Metabolic Diseases, Medanta Hospital, Medicity. Dr. Wasir introduced the teachers to the concept of wellness and its physical, professional, social, emotional and spiritual aspects. He emphasized the alarming impact of the current lifestyle and environmental degradation on our wellness, which leads to increased occurrence of diabetes, hormonal disorders and heart-related diseases. He encouraged the teachers to discuss the need to focus on physical activity, control social media addiction, and pay attention to the quality and quantity of food intake. He concluded his talk by drawing a connection between physical health and emotional and spiritual health and our social interactions. This made the perfect backdrop for the next ‘Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme’ session which had been planned on Personal Relationships.

The IQAC and Mentoring Group held the second session of its ‘Mentoring the Mentors’ programme on February 27, 2020. The focus of the session was on Relationship Management, and was successfully conducted by Dr. Renu Kishore, retired Associate Professor, Daulat Ram College. Dr. Renu Kishore was given a shortlist of themes which the teachers felt required to be discussed. These included:

- Regard and respect for relationships
Parents: What ties you to them? Love and respect, or the source of your finances?

Teachers: teachers feel let down by the increasing disrespect shown to them. Is that real, or a sign of ‘millennial’ callousness?

Behaviour with strangers: increasing sense of alienation, more instances of rudeness.

Relationships with the opposite sex.

Dr. Renu Kishore spoke about social interactions with parents, peers, and the opposite sex. She addressed the teachers’ apprehensions about the students and trained them to handle delicate situations stemming from an increasing sense of alienation in the students, which the teachers may interpret as instances of rudeness or millennial callousness. Her presentation stressed on how teachers can cope with the different yardsticks of ‘morality’ they may face. She also addressed the lack of emotional connect, a general lack of patience and the increased use of cellphones and addiction to social media.

The success of these sessions was dampened by the sudden lockdown due to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. However, even as the college shifted to online mode, the teachers were encouraged to be interactive and participative in the entire process of the mentoring sessions with students online. They were counselled to encourage openness and trust in their interactions with the students. The mentoring programme has helped students through the lockdown as well. Some joint sessions were conducted on online platforms, which had both teachers and students, to extend an assurance to the students that the college stood by them during this time.

The MMP played an important role during the lockdown in providing emotional support to both students and the teachers. Not having faced such unusual circumstances before, many were at their wits’ end. Being isolated at home was not a pleasant experience for everyone.

The first of the online initiatives of the MMP was to hold a webinar for the faculty on how to ensure the mental health of the students, especially in Covid times. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown took everyone by surprise, and the MMP strove to provide some support to the teachers to be better mentors to those students who reached out to them in this time.
Highlights of Some Successes of the MMP Programme During the Lockdown/Pandemic:

1. On May 2, 2020, the MMP, under the aegis of the IQAC, held their first webinar on the topic, ‘Role of Teachers in Ensuring Mental Health of Students during the Lockdown’. The webinar was conducted by Dr. Renu Kishore, a resource person the teachers had interacted with previously. She quickly established a great rapport with the teachers. In her presentation on the role of teachers in the psychological well-being of students Dr. Kishore spoke of how, in the present unprecedented scenario, with complete disruption of routines, every individual is impacted, and the lockdown has led to psycho-social upheavals, stress, frustration and mental health concerns. Students face multiple challenges such as uncertainty about the future, mood swings, lack of motivation to study, lack of privacy at home, peer relationship issues, lack of exercise and excessive screen usage. Dr. Kishore advised teachers to avoid preaching, moralizing, or criticizing and try to listen to students with empathy and a non-judgemental attitude. Teachers should guide students to follow a daily schedule which includes adequate time for studies, housework, exercise, entertainment, and bonding with family. She later discussed a few real-life examples which the teachers could easily relate to.

After Dr. Kishore’s talk, due to the challenges of the further onslaught of the pandemic, and the ensuing staggered academic sessions, the Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme took a back seat, as the teachers grappled with individual issues of the students. The mentoring slot was dedicated to solving personal issues—some delicate, some less weighty— of the students. Even in the pandemic, common feedback received from students was that they needed guidance and career counselling on higher education in India and abroad. It was therefore decided that the next session of the Mentoring the Mentors’ Programme would be by Ms. Anubha Vaid, an overseas higher education counsellor, to advise students on career/further study options after graduation.

2. On February 1, 2021, the MMP successfully organized a webinar on educational prospects abroad, with Ms. Anubha Vaid, a well-known education counsellor. Since the session was on Zoom, the team decided to include the students in the session as well. It was interesting to see the enthusiasm and genuine engagement the
students had with the speaker. Again, this was an issue, where the mentor does not possess as much practical and new information about the subject. With new ways of applying to universities, and the world of opportunities available to the graduate student, it was a session which enlightened not just the students but also the teachers who would further carry this information to their mentees in future sessions.

3. On further studying the feedback of the students, a session entitled ‘Managing the Self’ was planned on March 8, 2021, with Ms. Avneet Kaur, a lifestyle coach. She talked to the teachers about management of stress, ideas about social and material goals and managing expectations. Ms. Avneet Kaur conducted a self-introspection exercise where the participants analysed their satisfaction levels in life and their long-term goals. She spoke about the increasing stress levels among all age groups, and how it is important to find ways to keep calm and create self-awareness. The main thrust of her session was to encourage the teachers to learn not taking undue stress for social and material goals but understanding that one does not need much to be happy and content. The aim of the exercise was to make the teachers aware of this simple improvement in their life in order that they could take this forward to their students.

4. On August 2, 2021, the session entitled ‘Awareness and Usage of Online Library Facilities’ was the most recent session of the MMP to be conducted. This was an interactive session conducted by Dr. Gurmeet Singh, the librarian-in-charge of Bhai Gurdas Library of the college. The library has several facilities for students and faculty. However, often, students do not take the opportunity to make use of all the facilities that are available to them. With classes functioning online, the online library resources were suddenly in demand. However, the challenge we faced was that the teachers were as clueless about the online facilities, and how to use them, as the students. It was imperative to instruct and educate the teachers on the wide range of facilities available through the college library. This session was organized for the teachers as a reference point for them to become familiar with the library resources, and thereby be capable of passing on this information to the students. It was an enriching interaction as the teachers gained as much from the exercise as the students would.
Conclusion

The Mentoring Programme has provided effective support to the teachers as well as the students, especially in the troubled times of the pandemic. Even so, there is a realization that the core group needs to provide constant quality control to ensure that the teachers are able to gain value from the MMP sessions and be able to transmit that value to the students. To safeguard the worth of these sessions, regular feedback from the students records the level of interest of both the students and the mentors in the exercise. They are given anonymous surveys so that there is transparency in their expression. Students are also asked for suggestions to improve the sessions, as well as ideas for the topics of future sessions. This ensures a check on the value of their takeaways from the sessions. The MMP is committed to provide a holistic environment to the teachers and students alike. Keeping in mind the suggestions received, the sessions planned in the near future include some on Time Management, Work Life Balance, How to Avoid Procrastination and the Importance of a To-Do list.

References


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