Possibilities for Peer Mentoring in Pre-service Teacher Education: Reflections from the Field

[1]Ms. Divya Sharma, [2]Dr. Manisha Subba

[1]Assistant Professor, [2]Assistant professor
[1]Department of Elementary Education
[1]Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract— **Mentoring has been recognized as one of the significant practices in providing professional support and guidance to the novices in almost all the institutional systems. National Education Policy 2020 has reiterated the infusion of mentoring mechanisms across different levels of education. The idea of peer support and collaborative learning also emanates from the various theories of education, including the constructivist approach of learning. The roots of mentoring systems can be traced to indigenous Indian education which was adopted as the Monitorial System in England and other western countries. Taking references from these insights, innovative practices of peer mentoring sessions were introduced in the pre-service elementary teacher education programme running in one of the constituent colleges of University of Delhi. In this paper, the authors have reflected upon their experiences and learnings gained through various peer mentoring initiatives taken up for pre-service elementary teacher educators in their own department. The paper intends to provide meaningful contributions towards existing theoretical bases and exploring mechanisms for implementing mentoring initiatives for teacher education at pre-service level.**

Index Terms—**Mentoring, Peer Mentoring, Teacher Education, Pre-service Teacher Education**

_____

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is the process of facilitating and assisting development of others by persons having more knowledge and experience in the field (Koki, 1997). It has been considered to be an effective mechanism to provide sustained support and professional guidance for novice professionals. It has been widely recognised as a significant practice in various professional as well as academic fields across the globe. In the education system, mentoring is seen as a viable way to assist beginning in-service teachers and support their professional growth while on job. Many schools and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offer a variety of mentoring and peer support programmes to benefit practicing educators. Recently, the Delhi Government has announced the *Desh Ke Mentor* scheme (https://deshkementor.com/) to facilitate professional guidance and mentoring of government school students. Government schools at Delhi have also adopted the teacher mentoring practices catering to the professional needs of in-service teachers where teacher mentors play a pivotal role as peers as well as mentors to their fellow teachers.

National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) has also reiterated the infusion of mentoring mechanisms across the educational levels beginning from early childhood care and education (ECCE), in schools and universities. The policy directs HEIs to institutionalize mentoring programs such as *Cluster Resource Centres*, *National Mission for Mentoring* and robust mentoring arrangements in Teacher Education as a means of facilitating learnings. NEP 2020 suggests for continuous professional development of ECCE teachers/workers through mentoring by Cluster Resource Centres of the School Education Department (para 1.7; p.8). For teacher education, NEP 2020 envisions mentoring to be implemented as a nation wide mission with a large pool of outstanding senior/retired faculty who can provide short-term and long-term mentoring/professional support to teachers (para 15.11; p.43). Following the vision of the policy and significance of supporting teachers as well as students, many institutionalized efforts of mentoring in India, both at the schools and the university level, have been introduced. In a way, mentoring has emerged as one of the significant reforms in teacher education of the present days.

NEED AND CONTEXT FOR MENTORING IN EDUCATION

Various theories of education have contributed to the academic and psychosocial outcomes of mentoring such as Piaget's learning theory of Equilibration wherein learners are presented with new challenges to existing knowledge, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development wherein the peers or mentors scaffold the learning process, and Noddings' Ethic of Care wherein the need of creating a learning environment based on mutual trust and socio-emotional support have been stressed (Tollefson-Hall, 2015, p.31). Historically in India, the practice of mentoring can be seen as an important component of the indigenous education system 'under which the senior pupils were appointed to teach junior ones' (Narullah & Naik, 1962, p.26). The concept of monitors was extensive in this system of education. Later, this practice was adapted and introduced by Dr. Andrew Bell, the Presidency Chaplain at Madras, as the Monitorial or Madras System which contributed immensely to the spread of primary education in early 19th century England (Ghosh, 2009, p.9). Presently, there have been attempts to replicate the practice by teachers who want to move beyond the traditional teaching methods. Here the teaching is based on active and participative pedagogy, with classes organized on the basis

of function and level (Malichecq, CCHE). Various opportunities of interactions provide academic learning and skill building in the learners. In higher education, mentoring relationships exist between the teacher and students based on an apprenticeship model.

Hobson, et. al. (2012) have defined mentoring as the one-to-one support of a novice or less experienced practitioner (mentee) by a more experienced practitioner (mentor), designed primarily to assist the development of the mentee's expertise and to facilitate their induction into the culture of the profession and into the specific local context. Literature suggests that the mentoring association between less experienced students (mentees) and their seniors (mentors) within the educational institutions facilitates the professional and career growth of the mentees. Apart from providing opportunities for meaningful & focussed interactions, it offers avenues for sustained academic learning and development of mentees. It extends the opportunities and scope of learning beyond the classrooms by establishing peers as co-constructor of knowledge and skills required for the professional and academic world. Petrovska, et. al. (2018) have studied the benefits of the mentoring process on various stakeholders such as novice teachers, mentors and the school. The various positive impacts on the novice teachers could be building confidence and a competent working environment, building interpersonal relationships, acquiring reflective skills, improved planning and overall personal development. The mentors would benefit through feedback on the skills they possess and the need to improve on the ones they lacked, get opportunities to improve on their abilities and competencies, and advance professionally through enriched experiences. The school would benefit with a conducive learning environment with co-operation, interaction, improved skills, knowledge sharing amongst faculty members.

Heirdsfield, et. al., (2008) state that this collaboration not only benefits the mentees but also offers learning opportunities for the mentors by contributing to their confidence and expertise. Studies have suggested that it contributed to greater self-awareness in the mentors wherein they are able to reflect on their skills and build upon their confidence and self-esteem. These experiences have furthered their personal growth which would be a significant contribution to their future professional development. Wallin, et. al., (2017) have discussed the various skills a mentor would develop as a part of the mentoring process. They could be better planners, facilitators, able to gather resources, build their abilities of presentations and communication, develop trusting relationships with peers focussing on interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, work in collaborations, have the capacity to assess requirements, take initiatives, work with an action oriented approach and develop professionally overall. It was found that many of the mentors exhibited characteristics such as being empathetic, accessible and better communication skills which resulted in quick rapport building with mentees.

PEER MENTORING FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: AN INITIATIVE

In education, mentoring is a complex and multi-dimensional process of guiding, teaching, influencing and supporting a beginning or new teacher (Koki, 1997 p.2). Teachers in their beginning of career also need an orientation and support to adjust with the demands of profession and schools. Although pre-service teacher education equips them with sets of basic skills which would be required by them to work efficiently as a full-fledged teacher. However, this is not sufficient for serving life long purposes to them as in-service teachers encounter real issues and challenges from the field for which on the job support is quite necessary. They also need continuous support and guidance from experienced teachers and other experts to keep pace with educational reforms and systemic demands. Well-designed mentoring programs serve this purpose quite well by understanding their needs and providing the right inputs to address them appropriately.

In this section, the major experiences and learnings are presented by the authors while being a part of conducting and collating experiences gained over the peer mentoring initiatives for pre-service teachers enrolled in a college of a central university during the last two academic sessions (2020-2022). Peer mentoring for pre-service teachers was actually a part of the larger initiative taken up at college level that was concerned with introducing peer mentoring as a regular practice for college students. The more experienced senior students would help out junior batches across all the courses being offered there. Peer mentoring is based on an egalitarian approach in which both the mentors and mentees are 'close in age and educational background' (Tollefson-Hall, 2015, p.30).

Previous two academic sessions were unique in certain terms as they were operated through online mode due to ongoing pandemic with minimum field experiences and lesser opportunities of direct peer support for students. It was felt that peer mentoring will enhance their chances of interactive learning and also create an additional support system for them apart from the faculty, to feel better connected being under virtual learning environments. The peer mentors for pre-service teachers were appointed based on their abilities, experience and interests of different learning areas pertaining to certain themes and related skills which were requisite for the teacher education course. All the sessions and meetings were conducted online through Google Meet or Zoom platforms. Mentors performed all expected roles like coaching, role modeling and peer support for their mentees. Major areas in which peer mentoring was offered included- Storytelling Techniques & Children's Literature, Art Integrated Learning, Craft, Use of e-Resources and Apps for teaching, Use of Google tools for teaching-learning and research like Google Classroom, Google Scholar, Google Docs, Google Forms. As a follow up, the experiences and feedback were taken up from both the mentors and mentees using Google forms.

The following Table 1 gives the summary stating the themes, platform of interaction, number of students involved in the initiative as peer mentors and mentees during both the academic years. It is to be noted that multiple sessions were conducted under each broad theme with different junior batches in smaller groups spanning over the two academic years.

Table 1: Number of Peer Mentors and Mentees engaged during series of sessions done under different themes

Sl. No.	Major theme of the sessions conducted by peers	Online platform	No. of mentors	No. of mentees
1	Storytelling techniques & children's literature	Google meet, Zoom	09	125
2	Introduction to Google tools for teaching-learning	Google Meet	09	105
3	e-Resources and Apps for teaching-learning	Google meet, Zoom	11	120
4.	Art Integrated Learning and Craft work	Google meet	07	210
		Total	36	560

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Responses of the mentees and mentors received through feedback forms have been taken into consideration while conceptualizing this paper. Though the authors had initially collated the experiences and reflections of the 36 peer mentors. However, experiences of mentees are also worth mentioning so these have been discussed first. Mentees considered the peer mentoring a unique experience as it served them dual purpose of learning concerned skills as well as get consistent peer support for helping them refine those skills as well. Specific sessions conducted by peer mentors were appreciated by all mentees. Following are some of the feedbacks shared by mentees through google form meant for them-

- *"I have got many ideas to be as creative as you all. Through these storytelling workshops we come to know many things about children which are very important. Thank u all for all your hard work & efforts that you have done for providing us such beautiful and interesting sessions. Hope we will also do as best as you did."*
- *"I like how our seniors explained everything and told us about the e-resources that we can use in our own classrooms or for our studies. The suggestions and the experiences they shared with us are definitely going to help us in future."*
- *"I loved how the sessions were so interactive and how our seniors explained to us all that was needed and even took up various questions and shared their own experiences. It helped us relate and imagine how it would be for us as well and it was all very engaging and fun."*
- *"We got to learn a lot! The sessions were very informative. Being the first year students we got to learn about how we can make lessons interesting for the students. Sessions were very informative. Looking forward to attending more such sessions."*

The feedback reflected that being mentored by their own seniors put them at a comfort level as they could find them more approachable as well as relatable. They were overwhelmed by the efforts put up by their own seniors. Mentees were also found to be quite motivated to perform the followup tasks of the peer mentoring sessions with more zeal and sincerity.

Similarly, if we consider the learnings gained by peer mentors through their experiences through the mentoring process, then it can be said that they gained both personally as well as professionally. Their responses reflected that they could acquire different cognitive, psychosocial and metacognitive skills required for being a teacher-mentor. Following are some the responses which highlights the ways in which they considered themselves to have benefitted as mentors-

- *"It gave me a wonderful opportunity to apply my knowledge in practical situations. Also, I could build onto my own understanding of my mentees- their age group, their needs, challenges and so on. And I was then able to adapt my content accordingly. I was able to create a bond with my peers and got a wonderful experience by staying connected."*

- *"It has helped me reflect on my practices and understand my learners through a lens of a third person. Mentoring has helped me boost my self-confidence as well as provided me with insights on how to tackle participants as well. It has also provided me an opportunity to work in a team with different people and learned how to work with them as well."*
- *"Mentoring, for me professionally, really helped me not only in building confidence but also to present my lived experiences and knowledge to my peers. Also, I could gain a perspective of a teacher too while he/she plans the same activities or gives information. Mentoring others really helped me in building a connection between the concepts as while the audience was questioning or asking doubts, I could express my idea and information in a way that not only their doubts get cleared, I could also connect as many concepts as possible which was definitely beneficial for me as well."*
- *"I individually got to understand the problems that we face as a new-comer to that field and by being a peer mentor I learnt to deal with the doubts and issues. I also had a practical experience of storytelling that helped me during the school internship. I myself learnt various factors that one needs to focus upon while narrating the story and also how the selection of the literature is required."*
- *"It kept me updated about new resources and increased my leadership skills. It increased my self awareness and fostered personal growth."*

As reported by some of the mentors, they also found the task challenging and hence strategized to address those challenges over the process in a variety of ways-

- *"There were various questions that came over that were a little difficult to answer but when they were faced we could answer it by breaking it down as we were provided with guidance beforehand."*
- *"I was at first hesitant if I would be able to present the vague ideas floating in my head as the information I was about to deliver online was also gained online by me. So I just had to make sure that all the information was correct and useful for mentees. This was challenging for me."*
- *"collecting the sources all together was quite difficult, so I managed to show my own personal resources that I have used and some clips of my recorded classes of using these tools during the sessions."*
- *"Earlier it was a challenge to find the resources but with constant guidance of my own colleagues I was able to do so."*

All of them also shared what all helped them to transform themselves as peer mentors of their junior batches as reflected in some of their responses quoted below-

- *"Orientation done by the department while switching from offline to online mode helped us. In which the teachers shared some sites and resources we can explore such as ICT, DIKSHA, ePathshala. Beside these from our seniors we came to know about the eklavya, Kahoot and Geogebra kind of sites where we can get different activities and information. Then self exploration of some from Google and some we know like story weaver, eklavya website and national museum (3D online gallery exploration). So. all these information and experiences played a crucial role in conducting the mentoring sessions."*
- *"Firstly, the knowledge base I received from the faculty helped me prepare the content. And at the same time, the various opportunities we got in B.El.Ed to express ourselves gave me the confidence to face my audience. Also, my own prior experiences of doing internships and attending various story telling sessions also helped me prepare for it."*
- *"My own experience in facilitating online mode of teaching, using e-resources myself, and getting productive and positive feedback from my teachers and team members and also reflecting on what worked with my particular age group students with a given resource. All this helped me reflect on my own teaching and hence I was able to give the same feedback, pros and cons in the workshop."*
- *"Knowledge base built from theory and experience from classroom contact, various sessions and workshops conducted by our faculty members and resource persons. All these contributed to my own expertise so that I could mentor my junior batches."*

Above stated responses from peer mentors also indicate how the teacher education programme itself empowered them to be mentors to their junior batches. They got opportunities to practice and reflect on the knowledge and skills gained through their course curriculum. Apart from this, various interactions and workshops with invited resource persons and faculty members helped them immensely to polish their own skills which they could efficiently use while mentoring their mentees.

CONCLUSION

The planning and conduction of these peer mentoring sessions of pre-service teachers by their seniors was an attempt to better understand the practicality of mentoring as a concept. The learnings gained from the experience have helped us reflect on how the

practice can be improved further. It was a challenge for the department and the faculty associated with organizing the sessions in terms of selecting meaningful topics, identifying and guiding the mentors, ensuring the smooth conduction of the sessions, and keeping in focus that the mentees would eventually be putting the learnings from the peer mentoring sessions into use. The objective of this paper is to present experiences from the fields so that we are able to engage towards a learners-centric approach in mentoring which is beneficial for both freshers and senior batch students. As discussed in the analysis, the interventions seemed to benefit immensely both the mentors and mentees which shows that mentoring as a practice is workable if planned meaningfully. Further reflection is required to build a strong framework for mentoring and peer mentoring for pre-service and in-service teacher educators. This can be a starting point for educators to plan a robust mentoring mechanism that would be beneficial to learners at all levels.

REFERENCES

1. Ghosh, S. C. (2009). *The History of Education in Modern India 1757-2007* (3rd ed.). New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan
2. Heirdsfield, A. M., Walker, S., Walsh, K., & Wills, L. (2008). Peer mentoring for first-year teacher education students: The mentors' experience. *Mentoring & Tutoring: partnership in learning*, *16*(2), 109-124. DOI: 10.1080/13611260801916135 https://eprints.qut.edu.au/224384/1/12988.pdf
3. Hobson, L. D., Harris, D., Buckner-Manley, K., & Smith, P. (2012). The importance of mentoring novice and pre-service teachers: Findings from a HBCU student teaching program. *Educational Foundations*, *26*, 67-80. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1000231.pdf
4. Koki, S. (1997). *The role of teacher mentoring in educational reform* (pp. 1-6). PREL Briefing Paper. Honolulu, HI: Pacific Resources for Education and Learning. https://www.nmu.edu/Webb/ArchivedHTML/UPCED/mentoring/docs/Role-mentor.pdf
5. Malichecq, C. *The Monitorial System: Active and Participative Learning*, Canadian Centre for Home Education. CCHE | The Monitorial System: active and participative teaching - CCHE
6. MHRD (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. New Delhi: GOI nep_2020.pdf (niepid.nic.in)
7. Narullah, S., & Naik, J. P. (1962). *A Students' History of Education in India (1800-1961)*. India: Macmillan and Company Limited
8. Petrovska, S., Sivevska, D., Popeska, B., & Runcheva, J. (2018). Mentoring in teaching profession. *International Journal of Cognitive Research in Science, Engineering and Education*, *6*(2). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327195880
9. Tollefson-Hall, K. (2015). Building a Teaching Community Through Peer Mentoring, *Art Education*, 68(4), pp. 30-33. https://www.jstor.org/stable/45239847
10. Wallin, D., DeLathouwer, E., Adilman, J., Hoffart, J., & Prior-Hildebrandt, K. (2017). Undergraduate Peer Mentors as Teacher Leaders: Successful Starts. *International Journal of Teacher Leadership*, *8*(1), 56-75. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1146808.pdf