Reach Alliance

Teacher Mentorship in India: Improving Pedagogy in Government Schools

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Note: Authors are listed alphabetically with the faculty mentor listed last.

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Contents

Executive Summary 1
The Challenges: Providing Quality Education in Developing Countries...................... 1
Mentorship: Concept and Practice in Haryana, India 7
Our Aims and Methods 8
Results 9
Recommendations..16

Executive Summary

Although India has improved its education infrastructure significantly over the last few decades, it still faces criticism, especially criticism that its education goals require more than just infrastructure to be achieved. We examine one new innovation — a program of mentorship — within larger outcome-oriented education policies and program implementation in the state of Haryana over the last decade and find that mentorship could improve pedagogy in government schools. Specifically, when key figures at the block level — block resource persons (BRPs) and assistant block resource coordinators (ABRCs) — became "mentors" they became critical actors in delivering training and pedagogical support to teachers because they played the roles of auditors and mediators in enabling effective last-mile delivery of education services. However, their effectiveness depends upon the clear definition of their roles, the training offered to them, their qualities, and the relationship between the mentor and mentee (teacher). Key concerns over effective mentorship include the mentors' and teachers' capacity to juggle their primary academic responsibilities and other rotating administrative tasks.

The Challenges: Providing Quality Education in Developing Countries

Over the last decades, student enrolment in formal schools has risen worldwide at a fast pace, with developing countries leading this trend. In 1950, the average adult had two years of schooling, while in 2010 they had 7.2 years. The number of out-of-school children fell by 112 million between 2010 and 2014 and the primary education enrolment gaps between low- and high-income countries are closing.[1] Despite this, a significant proportion of the students are not acquiring the knowledge and skills they are meant to receive in school — they're facing a learning crisis in place of an educational access crisis. In low-income countries, the average student performs worse than 95 per cent of the students in high-income countries.[2] The World Bank lists four reasons for the global learning crisis: student preparation, teacher skills and motivation, resource investment, and school management.[3]

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[1] *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2018), 5, 58.

To improve these aspects is more expensive than expanding access to public education and less politically popular, especially in the context of weak state capacity, as in developing countries.[4] To address the learning crisis, it is essential for countries to develop policies to assess learning, then act based on this gathered evidence and align all actors to make the system work.[5] However, quality educational reforms face three major difficulties: the power of teacher unions, monitoring reform implementation inside classrooms, and the slow social return characteristic of the education process. This means that to implement an education policy it is essential to have teacher support and to build a pro-reform coalition of stakeholders for at least a medium term.[6]

Despite these challenges, the learning crisis is not a universally homogeneous phenomenon. State performance varies regarding the implementation of education policies in developing countries. Akshay Mangla argues that to understand this variation in policy implementation, it is not enough to analyze economic development, geography, formal institutions, and colonial administrative legacies.[7] Considering that formal institutions in many countries are weak and politicized, policies' performance is deeply impacted by informal institutions, including norms about how bureaucrats act. These norms or unwritten rules can influence how officials think and shape the feedback between officials and citizens. By comprehending it, we can better analyze policy implementation and its differences.

In this report, we focus on the Indian education context within the broader framework of developing countries, observing the dynamics of bureaucracy to analyze the last-mile delivery of education in the state of Haryana, India — specifically the concept of mentorship, its implementation, and the role it plays in the education system.

India's Education Context

With 15 per cent of the planet's population, India is home to 37 per cent of the world's illiterate people — a total of 287 million people. The average adult in India completes only 5.4 years of schooling. Despite notable growth in public spending on education over the last few decades, from 1 per cent of the GDP in the 1970s to 4 per cent in the 1990s, many issues remain. For instance, 25 per cent of government teachers are absent from school on a given workday, partly because of the volume of administrative and political responsibilities the teacher has beyond the classroom.[8] Educational quality has suffered even more in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the National Assessment System (NAS), between 2017 and 2021 absolute learning levels dropped in almost all grades and subjects, and the average learning achievement across all grades and subjects dropped from 58 to 54 per cent.[9]

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[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] Ibid., 78.

[4] Naomi Hossain and Sam Hickey, "The Problem of Education Quality in Developing Countries," in *The Politics of Education in Developing Countries: From Schooling to Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2, 8.

[5] *World Development Report 2018*, 16.

[6] Barbara Bruns and Ben R. Schneider, "Managing the Politics of Quality Reforms in Education: Policy Lessons from Global Experience," The Learning Generation Background Paper, April 2016, 5–6.

[7] Akshay Mangla, "Introduction: Bureaucracy and the Politics of Implementing Primary Education," in *Making Bureaucracy Work: Norms, Education and Public Service Delivery in Rural India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 7–17.

[8] Ibid., 12–13; "Global Education Monitoring Report 2022, South Asia: Non-state Actors in Education: Who Chooses? Who Loses?" UNESCO, 2022, 54.

These results reflect people's widespread sense of distrust regarding the government's capacity to deliver education services. According to the UNESCO 2022 South Asia Report, only 46 per cent of Indian adult respondents in a survey agreed that the government should bear primary responsibility for providing school education, the lowest percentage of the South Asian countries in the research.[10] This lack of trust may explain the fact that India has South Asia's highest rates of enrolment in private schools at almost all levels, except for just pre-primary education. In 2014, a survey of parents in India showed that the quality of education, the distance between the school and their houses, and status considerations influenced their decision to enroll their children in private schools. Almost three-quarters (73%) of these parents cited the lack of public schools' quality as their primary motivation for opting for private education, though distance played a more significant role within poor neighbourhoods.

Schools' relationship with social status is evident in the growth of schools with international curricula and English instruction. Between 2013 and 2018 the number of such schools increased by 45 per cent, with student enrolment rising by 70 per cent. Considering households' ability to pay for private school fees, children from the richest quintile were seven times as likely (63%) as children from the poorest quintile (9%) to go to these institutions.[11]

Evolution of Education Policies

India's complex governance structure for education further contributes to the challenges the country faces in implementing policies to tackle inequalities. Since 1976, education has been under a joint legislative jurisdiction between the central and state governments so authority is distributed across multiple entities. The central government oversees most resources while the state implements primary schooling, a process that also relies on the cooperation of front-line bureaucracies. During the 1980s, given the weakness of the local governments, policy reforms happened in a top-down way, including programs such as Operation Blackboard, which provided supplementary resources to the states in 1987.[12] Policy reforms were structured as a mission, such as the National Literacy Mission (NLM), with well-defined objectives and timelines, and directed by senior officers in the Indian Administrative Services (IAS) (i.e., elite civil servants).[13]

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VEGETABLES

Figure 1. Classroom of students in Haryana. This class's teacher is part of the Saksham Haryana program, including teacher mentorship (photo courtesy of Samagra)

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[9] Gaurav Goel, "What the NAS Results Tell Us About School Education in India," *Times of India*, 4 July 2022 (blog).

[10] "Global Education Monitoring Report 2022," 10, 12, 28.

[11] Ibid., 28, 47.

[12] Akshay Mangla, "Elite Strategies and Incremental Policy Change: The Expansion of Primary Education in India," *Governance* 31, no. 2 (2018): 384–86.

[13] Ibid., 385.

During the 1990s, together with the national programs, partnerships with nonstate organizations to improve education increased greatly, especially with the World Bank, which led the District Primary Education Program. This program aimed to increase education access and improve local administrative capacity. It started in 1993 in a few districts, but by 2000, it covered 40 per cent of India's territory — the largest primary education program in the country until that time. Two major educational interventions were then introduced to universalize elementary education via free, compulsory education for all under the age of 14: Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), 2002, and the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. The SSA improved the schools' infrastructure and expanded the number of schools, increasing enrolment of children between six and fourteen years old from 160 million in 2002 to 193 million in 2011.[14] Building on the foundational pillars of access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability, the National Education Policy 2020 came into effect. Its impacts are yet to be seen. Despite huge improvements in access to education, the quality of education is still a big challenge, and India finds itself amidst an ongoing crisis in learning.

Delivering Educational Services-Districts and Blocks

To ensure the effective delivery of educational services across the large geographical and demographic spread of the country, administrative structures in the Indian education system, notably at the elementary and secondary levels, are arranged hierarchically by blocks and districts. A district is a unit of administrative government and the district education officer (DEO) directs and organizes district-wide educational initiatives. This entails everything from building infrastructure to training teachers, observing student performance, and maintaining conformity to national and state education policies. The administrative level below the district is the block, which is sometimes referred to as a *taluka* or *tehsil* in various states. A block is made up of several communities and the schools that serve them. The block education officer (BEO) is in charge of the administrative tasks related to block-level education and makes sure that educational policies and programs are efficiently carried out on the ground.

At the block level, the block resource person (BRP) assists teachers with pedagogical aspects, visits schools frequently, supervises the use of curricula and instructional techniques, and keeps an eye on academic progress. To keep the teachers in the block up to speed with the most recent teaching strategies and resources, BRPs also assist in planning and coordinating training programs for them. They aid in the dissemination and efficient practice of teaching and learning resources.

Other important players at the block level who assist the BRP in their tasks are the assistant block resource coordinators (ABRC), who are responsible for a defined cluster of schools in a block. Although they can be involved in administrative duties, their major role revolves around providing academic support. For the schools in the block, this can entail assisting with data gathering, paperwork, and report preparation. To ensure effective communication and problem solving, the ABRC may also act as a liaison between the BRP, BEO, and the teachers. The ABRC works in tandem with the BRP in many areas, ensuring that schools in a cluster receive continuous academic and administrative support.

An Education Crisis in Haryana

In 2012, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) came as a shock to Haryana administrators. On the whole, pupils in Haryana, a state located to the west of the national capital of New Delhi with 25 million residents, still performed better than the overall national average regarding literacy and numeracy capabilities.[15] For example, 67 per cent of students surveyed in Grades 3 to 5 were able to comprehend reading material for Grade 1 students, compared to the nationwide average of 54.1 per cent. There was also continuous progress in enrolment, with the percentage of out-of-school children among the entire 6-to-14-year-old population dropping to 1.5 per cent. However, the 2012 ASER demonstrated that the pupils in Haryana were experiencing considerable levels of learning poverty. Among all students enrolled in the third grade, just 25.3 per cent could read simple English sentences, among which just 44.8 per cent comprehended the meaning. Similar patterns were replicated in Hindi, where just 34.1 per cent of third graders could read a text meant for a year below, and math, where only 46.1 per cent of third graders could conduct basic subtraction such as 41 minus 13.[16]

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[14] Ibid., 390–91.

Another troubling trend that ASER 2012 revealed was the growing disparity in learning outcomes between students enrolled in private schools and government schools in Haryana. In 2012, 49.2 per cent of pupils in Haryana aged 6 to 14 attended private schools, significantly above the national average of 28.3 per cent.[17] The rapidly expanding share of the school-aged population attending private school attracted scholarly attention to how it exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequalities through unequal learning outcomes.[18] Taking learning in Hindi as an example, 52.4 per cent of third graders in private schools were able to comprehend a sentence at grade level but just 14.7 per cent of their peers in government schools could do the same.[19]

Figure 2. Students participating in class (photo courtesy of Samagra)

Saksham Haryana Program

In response to ASER's findings, the government of Haryana started to implement a series of programs aimed at improving foundational literacy and numeracy. For example, the Quality Improvement Program (2014) and Learning Enhancement Program (2015) targeted government schools to enhance their pupils' learning through activities such as remedial teaching. Even at this stage, the government utilized the personnel resources they had at the district and block levels. For example, BRPs and ABRCs served as "mentors" and became critical in delivering training and pedagogical assistance to teachers in a few districts since around 2013 and 2014.

In 2017 the chief minister, who is the elected head of the state government, launched a holistic education-reform campaign known as Saksham

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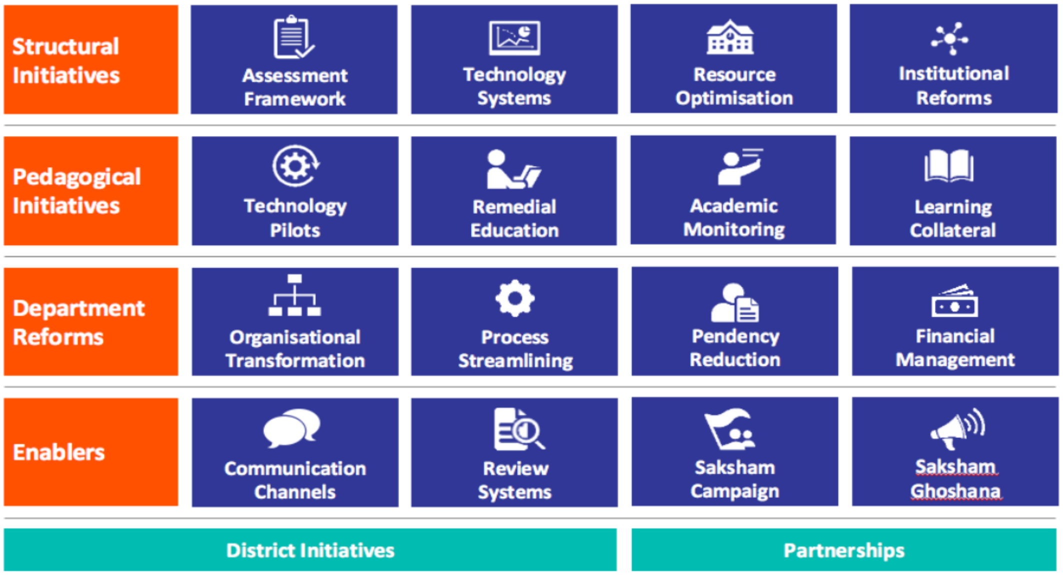
[15] "50th Report of the Commissioner for Linguistic Minorities in India (July 2012 to June 2013)."

[16] "Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2012" (New Delhi: ASER Centre, 2012), 102–103.

[17] Ibid., 65.

[18] Harvinder Singh, Angrej Singh Gill, and Pradeep Kumar Choudhury, "Household Expenditure on Secondary Education in Haryana (India): Levels, Patterns and Determinants," *Millennial Asia* 14, no. 4 (2023): 605–635.

[19] "Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2012," 104.



Structural Initiatives	Assessment Framework	Technology Systems	Resource Optimisation	Institutional Reforms
Pedagogical Initiatives	Technology Pilots	Remedial Education	Academic Monitoring	Learning Collateral
Department Reforms	Organisational Transformation	Process Streamlining	Pendency Reduction	Financial Management
Enablers	Communication Channels	Review Systems	Saksham Campaign	Saksham Ghoshana

District Initiatives

Partnerships

Figure 3. Initiatives included in the Saksham Haryana program, designed and implemented by Samagra and local education authorities (courtesy of Samagra)

Haryana. The program structured the mentorship program and set targets for the block level. Eighty per cent of the students in a block needed to achieve grade-level literacy for the block to be declared *saksham*, meaning "able" in Hindi. Once all blocks in a district were saksham, the entire district would also be declared saksham. The reform ambitiously sought to make all 22 districts in the state saksham by 2019.

The first phase of this reform measure, called Saksham 1.0, saw considerable success in improving foundational numeracy and literacy in the period between 2017 and 2019. According to the program's assessment mechanism known as Ghoshna, 94 blocks, or 80 per cent of all blocks in Haryana, achieved grade level competency by March 2019 based on grade-level competencies in Hindi and mathematics at Grades 3, 5, and 7.[20] In 2019, the government launched Saksham 2.0, which expanded the competencies to include environmental studies and social sciences.

Saksham Haryana embarked on several simultaneous reform measures which were to be implemented concurrently. For example, the Quality Learning Enhancement Program, which involved activity-based group exercises and regular student assessments, was expanded to 8,500 government primary schools. Saksham Haryana emphasized strengthening the capacity of teachers, introducing regular school visits by mentors as a key component, alongside other measures such as new teaching material and remedial learning. The mentors were considered key actors in strengthening teachers' capacity by providing specific pedagogical advice and serving as a bridge between departments and individual instructors.[21]

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[20] Ajay Sura, "80% Haryana Declared 'Saksham' for Achieving Grade-Level Competency," *The Times of India*, 28 February 2019.

[21] "Elementary Mentoring," Saksham Haryana, Samagra Governance, n.d.

Mentorship: Concept and Practice in Haryana, India

Definition and Impact

Mentorship is widely touted as a beneficial process for both mentors and mentees in various practice-based professions, such as medicine and law enforcement as well as teaching. However, there is a widespread lack of agreement about the types of roles that mentors can and should play in practice-based learning. In fact, several terms for mentorship, such as *mentor, assessor, supervisor*, or *preceptor*, are used interchangeably in formal mentorship programs.[22] In education, recent literature attempts to differentiate mentorship from peer-to-peer feedback and coaching.

Kraft and colleagues define mentorship as part of the induction of the teacher in a new school or in a new professional environment.[23] Peer-to-peer feedback, in turn, is understood as generic support not provided by a specialist, while coaching is provided by an expert who helps a teacher to improve a certain set of skills,[24] also implying an extended relationship. All these processes can enhance teacher confidence and school performance by creating an atmosphere of trust and dissemination of good practices.

However, most of the literature on mentorship aims not to define it, but rather to suggest roles, responsibilities, qualities, and processes that create a successful mentor-mentee relationship.[25] Observing the impact of a policy where instructional experts work with teachers to discuss classroom practice, Kraft and colleagues focus on relationships between the mentor and mentee, specifically those that are: individualized, intensive, sustained, context specific, and focused.[26] With this concept framed, their research observed improvements in the quality of teacher instruction and a small, but significant, improvement in student learning. They also observed that the quality of this support was more important than the sessions' number of hours for the policy to have a positive effect and that smaller projects could have more impact owing to the difficulty of finding the necessary number of coaches in a broader context.

Mentorship Program in Haryana

The Mentorship Program in Haryana is based on a mentor supporting teachers through school visits. Specifically, the mentor (BRP/ABRC) observes the teacher's performance and students' interaction in the classroom, provides feedback to the teacher, and involves the school head in these conversations. A mentor is intended to guide teachers on both professional and personal goals, through a long-term commitment with meetings arranged based on their necessity. What matters is the relationship between the mentor and the teacher.

A typical mentor's day begins by checking the Mentoring Dashboard, which contains the school coverage of mentoring visits and classroom and school insights that the mentors pointed out on their lasts visits. With this information, mentors make their school visit plan, prioritizing uncovered schools. Upon arrival at the chosen school, the mentor observes the classroom to provide teacher feedback and conducts on-the-spot assessments. Finally, the mentor talks to the school head about their observations and records the visit on the Samiksha app, updating automatically the Mentoring Dashboard, which is also used by officials to gather insights about the implementation rigour of ongoing initiatives.

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[22] Margaret Andrews and Martha Wallis, "Mentorship in Nursing: A Literature Review," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 29, no. 1 (1999): 201–207.

[23] Matthew A. Kraft, David Blazar, and Dylan Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching on Instruction and Achievement: A Meta-analysis of the Causal Evidence," *Review of Educational Research* 88, no. 4 (2018): 547–88.

[24] David Evans, "Teacher Coaching: What We Know," Impact Evaluations, 5 July 2017, World Bank (blog).

[25] Ibid; Norhasni Zainal Abiddin and Aminuddin Hassan, "A Review of Effective Mentoring Practices for Mentees Development," *Journal of Studies in Education* 2, no. 1 (2012): 72–89; Sharan Merriam, "Mentors and Protégés: A Critical Review of the Literature," *Adult Education* 33, no. 3 (1983): 161–17; Carol A. Mullen and Cindy C. Klimaitis. "Defining Mentoring: A Literature Review of Issues, Types, and Applications," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1483, no. 1 (2021): 19–35; Lucille Sanzero Eller, et al. "Key Components of an Effective Mentoring Relationship: A Qualitative Study," *Nurse Education Today* 34, no. 5 (2014): 815–20; Patrick H. Tolan, et al. "Improving Understanding of How Mentoring Works: Measuring Multiple Intervention Processes," *Journal of Community Psychology* 48, no. 6 (2020): 2086–107.

[26] Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan, "The Effect of Teacher Coaching."

Currently, around 14,000 schools are serviced by 1,500 mentors. To properly equip all the mentors to deliver good mentoring, the government partnered with Samagra, a private firm with experience in different policy sectors, from education to service delivery, and work in governance consulting. Samagra supported the mentorship program and the mentors' training sessions.

The mentor takes on the responsibility of cascading the training to the other mentors. The training starts by introducing the framework of Cooperation, Feedback, and Diligence. "Cooperation" involves assessing the classes and supporting the teachers. "Feedback" identifies positive teacher attitudes and offers constructive ways to enhance their performance. "Diligence" encompasses regular school visits and follow-ups. The training also teaches pedagogical techniques for learning languages, how to conduct an effective class observation, and how data should be managed and prepared for action-based reviews.

Our Aims and Methods

Our team set out to collate best practices for teacher mentorship in research-limited settings, which is known to improve education outcomes. We were curious about (1) the extent to which mentors are fulfilling their mentorship role alongside other resource-person duties, and what

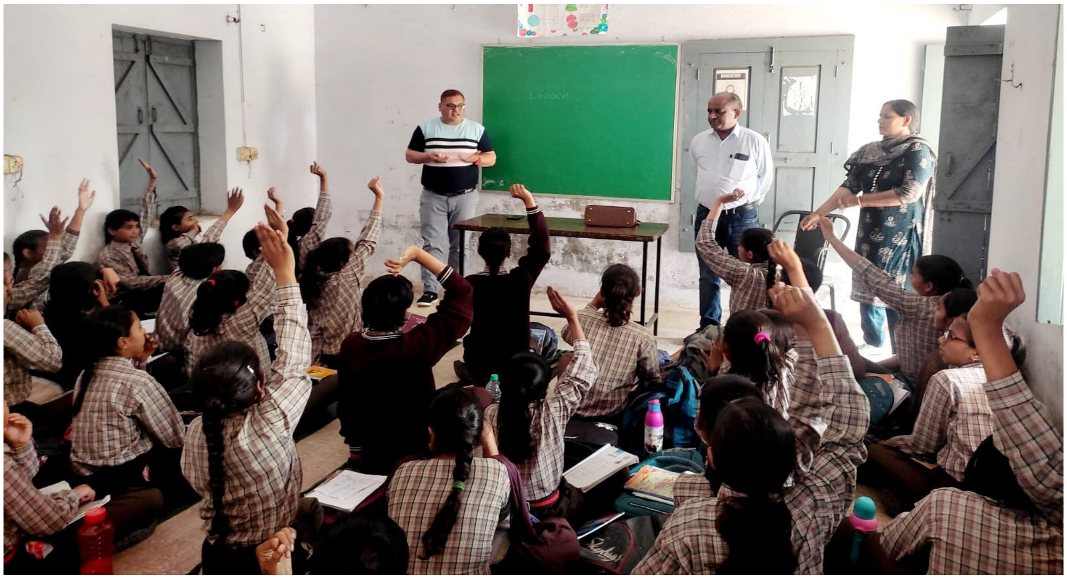

Figure 4. Mentor visit to a classroom in Haryana (photo courtesy of Samagra)

role mentorship plays at schools; and (2) success factors in a mentor-mentee relationship that helped improve pedagogy.

We initiated the research process with exploratory interviews: in-depth discussions with multiple stakeholders, including the experienced members of Samagra, government officials involved in the education sector, and trainers from the educational technology wing of the government. These exploratory interviews helped us gain a comprehensive understanding of the mentorship programs, the roles mentors were playing, and their perceived impacts on the overall educational landscape. Mentors play three roles in the classroom:

1. **Adviser.** Mentors have an impact on teachers' behaviour by providing effective advice and guidance on their pedagogy. Teachers respect their advice and incorporate it into their teaching practices. We expect that mentors who are subject matter experts are more capable of producing good advice, either from prior experience or training, and are likely to have a greater impact.

2. **Auditor.** Mentor visits serve as a monitoring mechanism — a form of accountability and last-mile delivery of services. They also act as feedback messengers if schools and teachers are missing any necessary supplies or teaching materials which ties into their third role.

3. **Mediator.** Mentors act as conduits between the schools and public education authorities and form a channel of two-way communication between them. They play an essential role in connecting these two groups in support of quality education.

Given its extensive local networks and relevant expertise, Samagra played a crucial role in facilitating communication and liaison with potential participants, ensuring we could engage with teachers and mentors. We worked with 20 interviewees: ten teachers, five mentors, and five "star" mentors (or *sahyogis*), selected to represent diverse perspectives within the educational landscape. However, because of the limited time available to complete the study, all mentors we spoke with worked within a few districts. Additionally, because Samagra selected interviewees, there may be selection bias in sampling. To accommodate the geographical spread of participants and enhance accessibility, we conducted interviews over Zoom. While this virtual approach allowed us to overcome logistical barriers, virtual interviewing has its own limitations such as connectivity challenges, barriers to building rapport, and an inability to gain full knowledge of the local context within which people operate.

Interview lengths typically varied between 25 and 60 minutes depending on the interviewee's availability and responses. Most interviews were conducted in Hindi by members of the team who speak Hindi. We recorded the interviews, translated them into English, and then coded them thematically.

Results

Program Design and Implementation

In the early stages of the Saksham Haryana program, Samagra collaborated with the government to streamline and strengthen the mentorship program, focusing on relating reforms to learning outcomes and identifying key areas for improvement. They recognized that successful strategies must connect with the field to translate into impactful changes and they were able to challenge preconceived notions about what an educational program might look like in this context. For example, one Samagra team member noted, "the idea of the program was to really have a goal-oriented program in a state where all the tools can help to improve learning outcomes ... today, this doesn't sound like an absurd statement. But back then it was quite an absurd statement."

While Samagra finds it relatively easy to prioritize objectives, the challenge lies in aligning government stakeholders on the same focus areas and effectively communicating those to mentors and teachers. For example, Samagra endeavours to clarify the role of mentors to block officials and ensure effective communication and understanding of their significance in the program's success: assistant block resource coordinators (ABRCs) and block resource people (BRPs) are currently considered by the education ministry as general resource persons (as their title describes), but it is important for the success of this program that they retain time for mentorship duties.

According to Samagra, a good mentor is an experienced and knowledgeable individual who acts as a role model for teachers. They possess essential skills, thoroughness, and honesty, and foster transparency in their conversations. Mentors play a crucial role in aligning teachers' focus with the education ministry's desired objectives and priorities, especially in the face of numerous non-academic responsibilities that teachers may have. Success for mentors is measured by the number of compliant visits (visits that follow established program procedures) and the effectiveness of activities conducted during these visits, such as giving teachers appropriate feedback.

A successful mentor can introduce new initiatives, effectively communicate and explain concepts to teachers, address teacher grievances, and provide constructive feedback after observing classes. Samagra coordinates regularly with "star" mentors, or sahyogis, who are selected to lead their districts as a result of their good performance as mentors. Sahyogis have the opportunity to attend special trainings and are expected to cascade information to and from mentors in their area. Overall, Samagra envisions a good mentor as someone who not only imparts guidance but also contributes to creating a more effective and impactful education system by engaging and empowering teachers.

Who Mentors Are

In our conversations mentors mentioned joining the program as a BRP or ABRC for several reasons:

- Transition from private to public sector: Some mentors made the switch from private schools to the public sector, seeking different challenges and opportunities to work with government schools and teachers.
- Utilizing talents: Some mentors found that the BRP or ABRC position allowed them to utilize their talents and skills effectively. It provided them with a platform to guide and support teachers in improving their teaching practices.
- Career advancement: Becoming a mentor sometimes served as a pathway to career advancement in the education field. It provided an opportunity to progress from a teaching role to a more influential position with greater responsibilities.
- Government job: The government's involvement in and support of the program made it an attractive option for individuals seeking job stability and benefits associated with a government position. For some this is also the first step in becoming a government-employed teacher, which is a very secure job.
- Learning and growth: Mentors were motivated by the chance to learn and grow in their professional capacity. The mentorship program offered opportunities for further training, skill development, and exposure to new educational initiatives.

- New job opportunity: Some mentors joined the program because it was a newly introduced job opportunity offered by the government. They may not have been aware of mentorship roles initially but were interested in exploring a new avenue in the public education sector.
- Desire to make a difference: Many mentors saw the role as an opportunity to make a positive impact on the education system and contribute to the improvement of schools and teaching practices.
- Interest in education reform: Individuals who were passionate about public education reform and improving the quality of education in their region saw the mentorship program as a means to actively contribute to these efforts.

As part of the mentorship program, on a rotational basis, the "star" mentors or *sahyogis* receive comprehensive training to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively support and guide teachers in their professional growth. These mentors, selected by the program leadership team, undergo training focused on various aspects of mentorship, including providing feedback (both positive and constructive) to teachers using different feedback models like the "sandwich model" (putting constructive feedback between two positive comments) and the ask-describe-ask model. The trainings emphasize activity-based teaching methodologies, promoting experiential learning, and learning by doing. Through role-play and interactive sessions, these star mentors actively engage in the training to understand how to implement these methods effectively in their mentoring practice. They are also trained to stay up-to-date with government priorities and various education initiatives like the Nipun Haryana program (Foundational Literacy and Numeracy [FLN] program). The trainings aim to motivate and empower these star mentors to carry out their roles with dedication and enthusiasm, providing them with periodic refresher trainings to boost their motivation and keep them informed about the latest developments in education and mentoring practices.

This targeted and supportive training approach has arguably contributed to the success of the mentorship program, with star mentors playing a pivotal role in positively impacting the local education system and supporting the growth of both mentors and teachers in the region. The program's success can largely be seen through the change in pedagogical practice. As one teacher described it "Every time mentor visits, [I] learn something new: some new activities for children, [and reorganized] priorities for [the] teacher."

Figure 5. Fort Cochin, India, 22 January 2015: pupils in classroom (iStock)

Mentor Roles

Mentors in the Haryana education system have multifaceted roles as academic advisers, auditors, and mediators. They support teachers in enhancing their teaching practices, monitor program implementation and compliance, and ensure effective communication between teachers and government officials. One mentor noted that their roles were primarily about being available to teachers. When asked how to become a successful mentor, this ABRC responded, “I make sure I am accessible, play multiple roles. Sometimes I mentor, audit, help, mediate, play with students, motivate teachers and students, and appreciate them. I need to balance all these responsibilities and stay neutral — especially balancing different teacher backgrounds — balance between regular and contractual teachers; male and female; caste/religion, etc. I try to give solutions to any query/grievance. If there is a recurring question I may create a tutorial video so other teachers will benefit.”

These education experts focus on academic matters and student learning outcomes. As one mentor succinctly put it: “The teacher also has multiple jobs but the teacher’s first priority is to teach — similarly academic support is our first priority.” They spend significant time in schools, observing teaching methods, student engagement, and interactive learning techniques. Mentors engage in constructive discussions with teachers, encouraging the optimal use of resources. They also assess student progress by randomly asking questions to students and providing individual feedback and suggestions for improvement after classroom observations. Through mentorship, teachers gain valuable insights into handling different student needs, and weaker students receive specific attention and support to enhance their learning experience. Mentors also take on a personal relationship with teachers — they try to understand the day-to-day challenges teachers face and help them solve their issues in a constructive way. As one mentor notes: “Teachers are also overburdened so I try to empathize. Try not to give ideal solutions which might be good but can’t be implemented.”

Most mentors also serve in at least some capacity as auditors, monitoring various aspects of school functioning. They assess the implementation of specific government initiatives like the Learning Enhancement Program (LEP) and the Saksham Haryana program. They ensure that teachers use initiatives effectively and that teaching methods align with the program’s objectives. Mentors also review infrastructural and administrative aspects such as documentation, records, and the use of digital whiteboards. However, some mentors did not want to be seen this way: “Mentorship, not monitoring. We need to be a helper, not monitor.” Even so, Samagra values the information collected about the reality of teaching. Members of the implementation team said that the information mentors collect on the ground is invaluable. By auditing ongoing activities and reporting back to higher authorities, mentors facilitate timely feedback and help maintain quality standards in education.

Mentors act as mediators, bridging the gap between teachers and government officials at the block level. Both teachers and mentors separately described this role as a “mediator” or a “chain.” By serving as the link between teachers and government officers, mentors ensure that teachers are aware of new activities, timely updates, and key focus areas. They facilitate two-way communication, gathering feedback from teachers and relaying important information, such as regarding broken equipment or widespread infrastructure challenges, to authorities at the block or district levels. This role wasn’t fulfilled as effectively in the previous government structure, and it has been crucial to the schools’ improvement: “They collect all the feedback [on] pertinent issues or feedback from their teachers and then they raise it [with Samagra] and state administrative offices ... Mentors are a huge enabler in just ensuring that quick feedback reaches us.”

This mediation role helps teachers understand the “why” behind various initiatives and supports the smooth implementation of government policies at the school level. As one member of the implementation team at Samagra noted:

> Mentors are a great vehicle to move the system. And what I mean by that is that you take any idea at the headquarters level, and you start to implement it. The first sort of roadblock that you will face, again, is about priorities. So even the teacher has a lot of things on her plate. As government teachers, they get pulled into a lot of non-academic things also. So, the biggest challenge then becomes how do you bring their focus back to things that they are supposed to do or things that you want them to be doing? I think mentors really help unlock that piece.

Mentors typically wanted to spend the majority of their time in the mentorship role. However, this did not happen because of the additional demands on them. As one mentor noted, "While the role is mostly academic, you will understand that academics can be fixed only when all other facilities (like infrastructure, school beautification, digital resources, etc.) are fixed. And a lot of time [must be] spent in reporting, adding photos, filling questionnaires, etc. Therefore, a mentor's role is in all education components, but academic being more important." While mentors prioritized their role of academic support and relationship, they also handled administrative responsibilities related to data management, reporting, and implementing or cascading information around various other programs.

They often faced challenges in managing their time given that a significant portion of their bandwidth was occupied by administrative tasks, which affected their ability to focus on academic priorities. The demand for mentors to undertake additional tasks, such as attending training, addressing teacher grievances, and coordinating district-level initiatives, stretched their time and resources. This often resulted in mentors feeling burdened, making it challenging for them to dedicate 50 per cent of their time solely to mentoring. Additionally, the dynamic education policy environment in Indian schools means there are concurrent programs and priorities that have to be translated to teachers who are already operating in resource- and time-constrained contexts. Mentors had to effectively act as policy conduits on the ground to help prioritize these programs for teachers. Despite these additional responsibilities posing a challenge to their schedules, mentors worked diligently to manage their time, ensuring that school visits and academic priorities remained their primary focus.

Mentor-mentee Relationship (or Mentor-teacher Relationship)

Initially, some teachers might have been hesitant about the mentorship process, feeling uneasy about someone new coming to provide guidance. One mentor told us: "In the early phases there was no acceptance from teachers as they were habituated to not doing work. During my visits I used to ask them 'you are not using blackboard, and other teaching learning material' — and they thought of me as a big officer who just came there to show them or show off. As it was a new intervention that disturbed [their] comfort, there was no acceptance." However, over time, as the mentors prove to be genuinely helpful and their suggestions lead to positive outcomes, the relationship strengthens. Teachers appreciate the constructive feedback, which is delivered in a supportive and encouraging manner, and grow to trust them over time. As the mentors and teachers work together, the mentees become more receptive to the mentorship, understanding its value in improving teaching practices. Both mentors and mentees appreciate when a mentor can visit the same school multiple times and form a relationship during the visit. "The relationship between mentor and mentee for me was built over time. It doesn't happen in the first few meetings, and it's also our duty to make sure we give time to understand each other and not jump to conclusions about how they are. So time, patience, and an open mind are critical."

Another relationship element to consider is power dynamics due to social circumstances. For example, we heard how female teachers might sometimes feel constrained by social norms while participating in discussions, if all mentors were male: "It might be better if they speak to all staff at once. I am the only female teacher, so I might be less comfortable."

Qualities of Good Mentors

The mentors emphasize several key qualities that they believe make a good mentor. A good mentor approaches their role with a positive attitude. They understand the importance of providing positive feedback to teachers and focus on constructive and succinct feedback to help them improve their teaching practices. Good mentors also understand the value of building relationships and trust with teachers. They approach mentorship as an opportunity to assist and support teachers, considering it noble and "godly" work that serves society by nurturing and supporting students' learning. Additionally, they recognize the challenges that teachers face, such as being overburdened with responsibilities. They empathize with teachers' situations and try to understand their perspectives, offering practical solutions that can be implemented effectively within the constraints of the classroom.

According to the teachers in Haryana, a good mentor is a "reliable and trustworthy advisor" who plays a pivotal role in supporting and guiding them to improve their teaching practices. As one teacher noted: "He/she who shows our shortcomings, tells us how to overcome it, and helps find solutions for our problems. How to work better with children, improve morality among young kids who are like saplings today and will grow to become trees later." Teachers appreciate mentors who observe their classrooms regularly and provide constructive feedback on their progress and teaching methods. Similar to the qualities mentors mentioned, they highly value a positive attitude — good mentors focus on highlighting strengths and suggesting ways to overcome weaknesses, rather than merely pointing out shortcomings.

Many teachers said they feel motivated and inspired when mentors appreciate their efforts and offer practical solutions to enhance the learning environment, and they believe that a good mentor works collaboratively with them, building a strong teacher-mentor relationship that resembles a supportive and respectful partnership. In our interviews we heard how it's beneficial for teachers when mentors encourage them to participate in workshops, training sessions, and competitions, fostering professional growth and inspiring them to excel in their teaching practices. Teachers see mentors as valuable resources for sharing best practices and facilitating cross-pollination of ideas between schools and educators.

Both mentors and teachers stressed that a good mentor is both knowledgeable and up-to-date with the latest teaching techniques, bringing new ideas and approaches to the classroom. Teachers find it beneficial when mentors assist them in reprioritizing administrative matters in order to maintain a strong emphasis on academic priorities. They value mentors who are accessible and approachable, willing to listen to their concerns and provide timely assistance whenever it's needed.

Good Mentees

According to the teachers we interviewed, being a good mentee involves having a positive attitude, a willingness to learn, and a commitment to continuous improvement in their teaching practices. They value the guidance and support that mentors provide, acknowledging that mentors play a crucial role in helping them see the progress of their students and identifying areas of improvement in their teaching methods. A good mentee understands that they may not know everything and is open to learning from their mentor's feedback and suggestions.

Of course, mentors also have received mixed feedback during visits: "those (teachers) who are receptive are positive. And they look forward to our visits. Some others might be more rigid. They all listen to us since they have to, and since it is all department work anyway. And department policies are quite strict now and changes have to be implemented. Our role is to help them."

Teachers also emphasized the importance of accepting shortcomings and being receptive to constructive criticism because this motivates them to strive for better results in the classroom. They recognize the significance of the teacher-mentor relationship, where both parties collaborate to enhance the learning environment and implement new education priorities set by the government. A good mentee is self-motivated, dedicated to their students' learning, and committed to their own professional growth. They actively participate in seminars and trainings, not only to enhance their own skills but also to become trainers themselves and support other mentors in foundational literacy and numeracy programs.

Teachers perceive their role as integral to their students' and schools' success. They understand that their efforts have a positive impact on their students' learning outcomes and the overall reputation of the school in the community. Being a good mentee, for them, is about taking ownership of their responsibilities, remaining loyal and sincere in their teaching, and continuously striving to improve their teaching practices for the betterment of their students' education. They see the mentorship program as an opportunity to learn, grow, and become more effective educators, which, in turn, benefits their students and themselves in various ways.

A few teachers did mention initial hesitation toward mentors as they felt that their experience was being questioned by foreign elements without any context. However, many teachers mentioned that depending on the mentor's skills, over time they opened up to the symbiotic

Figure 6. Schoolgirl in classroom, English language class, Rajasthan, India (iStock)

nature of the mentor-teacher relationship. As one teacher mentioned, “I think the mentor-mentee relationship is very dependent on how the mentee takes it. I’m sure some people might take it negatively. But my relationship with my mentor is positive because I take it positively. At the end of the day we’re both doing our jobs and that is something that needs to be kept in mind.” The growth of this relationship is also often hampered by the multiple roles and responsibilities that the teacher and the mentor take up, thereby resulting in limited bandwidth to invest in the relationship. So in essence the teacher’s ability and willingness to be “a good mentee” is very much tied to their bandwidth and the performance of the mentor themselves.

Recommendations

Considering the baseline of education provision and learning outcomes in the state of Haryana, Samagra’s bespoke interventions — including reorienting mentorship — has helped to spur improvement in the system. We found that mentors play a host of functions, making them critical in program implementation and furthering the state’s educational goals. Along with direct interventions in classrooms to support teaching and learning, mentors add value to the (educational) state capacity of Haryana which is beset with resource and other constraints. In this regard, we have the following recommendations to strengthen mentorship in Haryana’s educational ecosystem, while also signalling to other Indian states the benefits of a similar reorientation of their educational resource cadre:

1. A deeper understanding of the roles that mentors play in and out of the classroom is required to maximize their impact on teaching pedagogy. SSA guidelines posit mentor (ABRC/BRP) roles to be largely confined to providing academic support and guidance. However, what we see in practice is that mentors perform different roles and manage multiple goals, making them closer to generalist bureaucrats than education specialists. Assistant block resource coordinators’ and block resource people’s (ABRC and BRP) roles in Haryana have evolved over time especially with Saksham Haryana and other statewide campaigns. Apart from providing required pedagogical guidance to teachers in classrooms, mentors act as auditors on educational infrastructure, programs, compliance, etc., as well as a link between teachers and local public education authorities — at once mentoring, monitoring, and mediating. Our first recommezndation hinges on an accurate understanding of their dynamic, multifaceted role in order to streamline and strengthen mentorship. What can emerge is a new and clear definition of both their responsibilities as the state prioritizes mentorship in the educational ecosystem. Mentors must be provided with adequate resources, training, and time to fulfill these responsibilities. This will involve considering other recommendations in tandem.

2. Training should be mandatory for all mentors. Training seems to have played a pivotal role in the development of good mentors. Many respondents told us how what they learned during the training conducted by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) and facilitated by the District Institute for Education and Training (DIET), has strengthened their mentorship capabilities, enabled cross-learning, and kept them motivated. We therefore recommend making such training regular and mandatory, taking into account mentors’ schedule and bandwidth.

3. Because mentors need adequate time and resources to deliver on mentorship activities, their capacity must be considered when adding new tasks. Mentors undertake periodic school visits, document observation and feedback, perform administrative work and reporting, and undergo training, among other continuously evolving tasks. Given the multifaceted nature of their role, mentors are operating under time pressures and limited bandwidth, which risks overburdening them and causing efficiency loss. Both mentors and teachers want mentors to be able to spend more time in classrooms, aiding pedagogy and student learning. One interviewee clearly stated that real mentorship can effectively happen only when all else — including educational infrastructure — is in place. This highlights the need to restructure mentor time and efforts to better support teachers and enrich the educational ecosystem.

Reform must consider mentor bandwidth and reduce/reorient their roles. In a context where educational policies and programs are layered, mentors are further subject to ever-changing policy prioritization and sometimes unclear implementation. Reform must therefore consider a thorough evaluation of mentor tasks — related especially to auditing and compliance, innovative reorganization, and/or redirecting certain tasks to other administrative cadres. Since the monitoring and mediating aspects of mentorship seem to be just as crucial for the efficient functioning of the government machinery, further recruitment could be taken up in these roles to ensure that all aspects of mentorship are done effectively.

4. Because of the importance of the mentor-mentee relationship, continued visits by the same mentor over longer periods may strengthen mentorship results. Mentorship's success as a multifaceted program is built on an evolving trust relationship between mentors and mentees (teachers). Authorities might assign the same mentor for school visits and classroom observation over longer periods of time to foster relationship building. Providing detailed school-specific context prior to the first visit will ensure a smoother uptake of the mentor-mentee relationship in the case of a new mentor, and ensure greater effectiveness. Training for mentors might also include softer aspects such as gaining trust, listening, and problem-solving — metaphorically breaking the ice with teachers. Considerations must also be given to assigning mentors to schools based on gender and other social norms such as age and caste so that educators (teachers, school authorities) are able to function optimally.

5. In the future, governments should consider regularizing mentors in order to improve the program. In the dynamic context of implementing Indian education, mentors appear to also fulfill the critical role of policy conduits, translating the quickly evolving policy priorities of governments (both state and centre) on the ground. This is demanding and indispensable: governments need to not just streamline tasks, restructure bandwidth, and strengthen capacity but also to provide job security to assuage existing concerns. Mentors were concerned about the contractual nature of their role while operating at the lower rungs of the educational hierarchy and attempted to gain (other) permanent government jobs including teaching. Designating mentors as full government employees, or at least strengthening job security and provision of benefits, must therefore be considered.

6. Teachers' capacity should refocus on teaching. A final and critical piece of educational reform remains centred on teachers. States need to build other administrative capacities and allow teachers to focus on teaching. While the literature suggests that public school teachers in India are burdened with a range of academic, administrative, and allied/non-educational tasks in an already time- and resource-constrained environment, both teachers and mentors reinforced that. For example, a nontrivial issue is travel to school. Many teachers we interviewed travel over 50 kilometres each day by public transport to go to their school and back. Any policy intervention for improving teacher performance and student learning outcomes will have to take these factors into consideration. One of the interviewees likened teachers to multipurpose social workers, suggesting heavy burdens and time constraints impacting their core role. We recommend that teachers' non-academic responsibilities must be reduced, if not altogether removed, and this capacity should be shifted to other administrative bodies in the public education system.

Research Team

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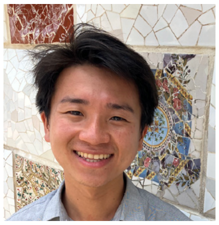

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Reach Alliance

Founded at the University of Toronto in 2015, with support from the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, the Reach Alliance has since scaled to seven other leading universities around the world. As a student-led, faculty-mentored, research and leadership initiative, Reach's unique approach uncovers how and why certain programs are successful (or not) in getting to some of the world's hardly reached populations. Research teams, comprised of top students and faculty from across disciplines, spend nine to twelve months investigating each case study. Once the data collection process is complete, teams write case reports that are published and disseminated across the Reach Alliance's diverse network of policymakers, practitioners, academics, and business leaders.

Inspired by the United Nations' call to eliminate global poverty by 2030 as part of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), our mission is to pursue the full achievement of the SDGs by equipping and empowering the next generation of global leaders to create knowledge and inspire action on reaching the hardest to reach.

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