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Mentoring teachers from the middle tier in Delhi

© STiR Education. Teacher development coordinator holds monthly Academic Resource Team meeting in Delhi.

To improve teaching and learning outcomes, teachers and head teachers need whole-system support to build professionalism and enhance their practice. Roles at the middle tier of education systems, or those professionals working between the school and central level, offer unique capacities to facilitate collaboration, broker knowledge, scale innovations, and provide instructional direction to school-level practitioners.

This research, conducted as a collaborative partnership between IIEP-UNESCO and Education Development Trust (EDT), explores how middle-tier instructional leaders can become a nexus for change to improve the quality of education. It focuses on highlighting promising practices globally and is designed to draw out insights and lessons for both policy-makers and practitioners.

IIEP and EDT conducted case studies in five jurisdictions – Delhi (India), Jordan, Rwanda, Shanghai (China), and Wales – where new roles have been created or existing roles re-oriented towards coaching and support. The studies explored the professional practices and perceived impacts of instructional leaders, and the enabling factors present in the systems in which they work.

This country note uncovers how the middle tier structure in Delhi provides a whole system of peer support, collaboration, and feedback to improve teachers' professional development and motivation.

> **BOX 1**
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> ### Methodology
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> Researchers conducted a series of 24 semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions over approximately 2.5 weeks in October and November 2020. The interviews spanned the hierarchy of roles in the TDC programme, from teachers to state-level officials. Since research occurred at the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic, all interviews and focus group discussions occurred via Zoom videoconference.

Developing the Teacher Development Coordinator programme in Delhi

In recent years, the Delhi government has made education reform a priority in terms of both focus and budgetary allocations (Sahoo, 2020; SCERT, 2019). With more than 1.6 million students and 1,000 secondary schools under its jurisdiction, the Delhi government school system has a vast network of students and employees to oversee and support (Del E, 2020).

Country Note / Instructional Leaders
at the Middle Tier No. 1 / 2023

Education
Development
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The [TDC] programme's basic objective is to create conditions and conducive learning environments in schools and to create culture, especially academic culture. (District official)

As part of these reforms in such a large system and in partnership with international non-governmental organization STiR Education, the Teacher Development Coordinator (TDC) programme has attempted to enhance teaching and learning outcomes by creating two new highly supportive roles: mentor teachers (middle tier positions) and Teacher Development Coordinators (TDCs) who act as a relay at school level. The TDC programme aimed to ensure the decisions and plans from the upper echelons of the education structure properly make their way down to individual teachers at classroom level.

Mentor teachers provide guidance and feedback to both TDCs and teachers on best practices and new strategies to improve the teaching–learning process. Each government secondary school selected one teacher to serve as a TDC who acts as a mentor, role model, and collaborative leader for other teachers in their school. A mentor teacher is typically assigned to between four and six schools. Both roles are designed in a supportive fashion, providing opportunities for collaboration and real-time open feedback instead of relying on a summative evaluation. This has acted as a catalyst for teachers to improve both their professional development and motivation. One teacher noted that in the 'last five or six years there has been a paradigm shift in our schools. Now the teachers have developed the practice of discussing academic issues, issues related to the classrooms'.

Programme overview

Overall, the programme seeks to create an improved academic environment and culture among schools and teachers to improve student learning outcomes and performance. At its heart, the programme is designed around a key cy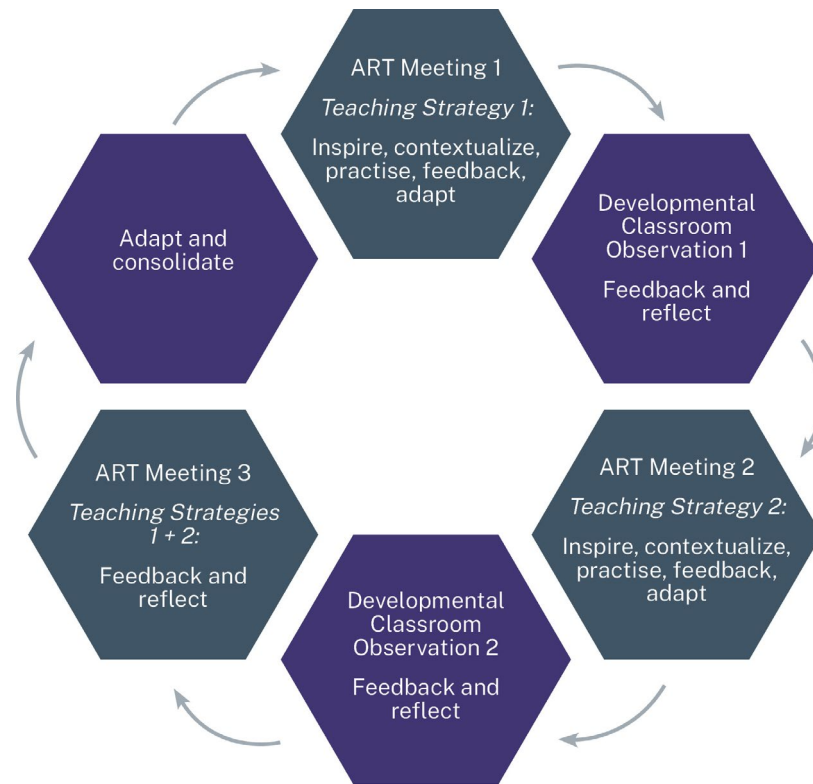clical structure called the Learning Improvement Cycle (LIC). Each LIC lasts approximately three months, with previous programme editions including topics such as building connection, lesson planning, and classroom routines (SCERT, 2019). Aligning with the theme, mentor teachers and TDCs emphasize specific classroom practices or pedagogical techniques during the LIC.

The conceptualization and design of each LIC starts at state level, based on feedback received from the school level, whereafter it is practised and refined in workshops targeted at district officials at Delhi's District Institutes of Education and Training (DIETs). The DIET officials work with STiR Education employees to model and practise the same strategies for mentor teachers and TDCs in co-learning training sessions. This allows for a more practical approach, with one TDC describing how they have 'a "workshop" and not a training. It is not about preaching but about exactly how we should do the work'.

At school level, TDCs have meetings with a group of teachers known as the academic resource team (ART). This group typically represents about 10 per cent of teachers in a school and ideally has at least one representative from each department. They meet once a month and TDCs share the strategies and best practices they gathered in their own co-learning sessions. The ART teachers and TDCs utilize these strategies in their classrooms and invite other teachers to observe them in practice. This allows a no-pressure approach to collaboration and gives all teachers an opportunity to see and discuss new and innovative approaches. Thus, instead of simply telling teachers what to do, TDCs practically demonstrate the very same strategies they promote to other teachers in their own classrooms.
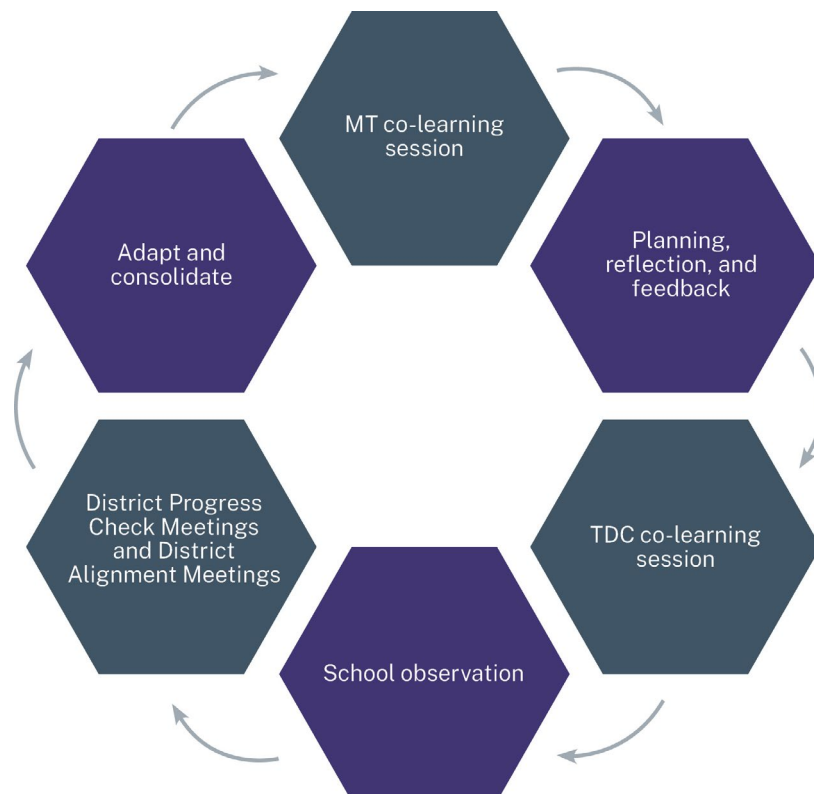
I was selected by [the state and district] to be sent to Singapore and that gave me a lot of joy ... We were given an opportunity to learn and understand what is going on in other parts of the globe and learn how to understand this in our country's context. (TDC)

Country Note / Instructional Leaders
at the Middle Tier No. 1 / 2023

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Figure 1. Cycle of LIC implementation for Mentor Teachers

ART Meeting 1

Teaching Strategy 1:

Inspire, contextualize, practise, feedback, adapt

Developmental Classroom Observation 1

Feedback and reflect

ART Meeting 2

Teaching Strategy 2:

Inspire, contextualize, practise, feedback, adapt

Developmental Classroom Observation 2

Feedback and reflect

ART Meeting 3

Teaching Strategies 1 + 2:

Feedback and reflect

Adapt and consolidate

Source: adapted from SCERT (2019)

Figure 2. Cycle of LIC implementation for TDCs at school level

MT co-learning session

Planning, reflection, and feedback

TDC co-learning session

School observation

District Progress Check Meetings and District Alignment Meetings

Adapt and consolidate

Source: adapted from an unpublished STiR Education (2020) PowerPoint presentation on programme overview

As a key component of the programme, both TDCs and mentor teachers are recruited and selected from active classroom teachers. This immediately gives both roles some measure of validity and ownership when they seek to collaborate and provide role-modelling or feedback to other teachers. Interviewees discuss several key skills and attributes that candidates for both roles share, including good communication skills, open-mindedness, positivity, and the proper motivation, or 'attitude', as one DIET official put it. Training for both TDCs and mentor teachers is more about exposure to new ideas than actual intensive coursework or certification. Each candidate gets an orientation session, going over responsibilities and general practices for the role, as well as potential site visits to national or international sites to observe best practices.

Impacts on the Delhi system

Even though the TDC programme is still relatively new, it has seemingly had a positive impact on the Delhi government school system. Respondents spoke about the programme having an impact on the following areas:

Increased collaboration. All interviewed teachers highlighted a better collaborative environment, with one saying, 'a very harmonious environment was created between us, through which we could easily discuss our strategies and problems with one another. We also started visiting each other's classes so that our abilities and practices could improve'. While TDCs have fostered collaboration among teachers within schools, mentor teachers have fostered collaborative thought and sharing of new ideas among separate schools.

Shift in culture. By building an open system of collaboration and sharing, teachers began to shift their conversations between classes or in the staff room from general to more academic topics. Along with this rise in collaboration and professionalism, teacher motivation has also started to increase. A TDC noted that 'due to this sharing culture that has started, appreciation and motivation have increased'.

The biggest achievement of this programme, I think, has been building of an academic environment in the school. I won't say it wasn't there previously, but the discussions among the teachers have become much more productive in terms of academic discourse. (Teacher Development Coordinator)

Student and learning outcomes. Many individual examples of improved learning outcomes emerged from interview responses. Specifically, teachers and other stakeholders spoke about increased engagement and connection with students, leading to better classroom environments and student participation. In one example, a group of maths mentors pooled their expertise to help students almost failing their tenth standard maths exam to eventually increase their scores.

Enhanced usage of feedback and data. Monthly meetings allow middle-tier officials to discuss data and trends from standardized feedback forms received from TDCs, principals, and teachers. This approach makes the voices of those at school level heard at higher levels when officials are weighing decisions. It further provides for a tailored, adaptive approach to addressing current trouble spots as well as designing needed trainings or strategies for future cycles.

Strengthened connections to adapt to unforeseen circumstances. With all schools across Delhi forced to close due to COVID-19, the TDC programme provided a pre-established framework for collaboration that proved important during this difficult period. Many

I think we've gotten a platform where we can put our views. If there are some issues with the teachers and I know about them, then I discuss them with my mentor whenever we have meetings and I put forth those opinions. (Teacher Development Coordinator)

Country Note / Instructional Leaders
at the Middle Tier No. 1 / 2023

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respondents shared stories of teachers and TDCs providing technical support and creative ways of using distance learning with one another through their networks. Another key adaptation during the pandemic has been the most recent LIC theme: social and emotional well-being. Worried about more than their students' academic education, teachers and middle-tier officials have employed strategies to check in on the overall health of their students.

Initial challenges faced in implementation

Though all participants praised the programme and its overall impacts, challenges and difficulties in implementation still emerged. Initially, many teachers were reluctant to participate, not wanting to let outside observers into their classrooms or be forced to learn new techniques. Additionally, many teachers already felt overburdened by their required tasks and were hesitant to take on any new meetings or responsibilities. Finally, issues with communication between different levels and sections of the education system proved problematic at the early stages of implementation. While all of these challenges remain to some degree, respondents spoke about how teachers and principals are starting to buy in as the programme became more established and gained momentum. For example, a 1.5-hour meeting once a month that seemed like a burden before suddenly became an important opportunity for collaboration and professional growth.

> I used to invite only one or two teachers to attend our meeting … Now I don't just have meetings with my ART members but with the whole staff.
> (Teacher Development Coordinator)

Takeaways

Providing more than simply the outcomes and impact on the Delhi system, this programme enables insights into how middle tiers can operate in other education systems. Keeping in mind that all systems and contexts are unique, the following highlight some potentially universal takeaways for planners and policy-makers:

1. Designing roles to focus on support and positivity
Within a fully supportive system outside the classroom teachers' evaluative chain of command, both mentors and teachers can focus solely on best practices and improving teaching practice. While monitoring and oversight certainly have their place and importance, the approach of separating those two processes has seemed to allow teachers a greater sense of freedom and openness. Teachers have appeared to respond well to this modality, with many describing how beneficial this positive approach has been for their work.

2. Enhancing learning outcomes without directly targeting students
While the central goal of this programme seeks to improve student and learning outcomes, the structure and design require a long-term view in trying to achieve this goal. This speaks to building a more fully functional education system rather than simply trying to assign more programming or work to students or teachers. While targeting rote memorization for a standardized test or cascade training may offer short-term solutions, building complex networks of support and collaboration for teachers can enhance learning outcomes in deeper ways.

3. Bridging the gap between theory and practice
Through its core design and implementation, the entire process embodies the philosophy of providing practical guidance and support to teachers instead of highly theorized lectures. With so much of this programme's structure built on role-modelling, demonstration, collaboration, and peer interaction, it heavily leans into this philosophy. This dynamic, participatory process allows for a more engaging approach than a simple speech on pedagogical techniques.

Country Note / Instructional Leaders
at the Middle Tier No. 1 / 2023

Education
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4. Developing need-based training for teachers
Through a process of robust feedback and data collection, the middle tier can better engage teachers for new capacity and professional development opportunities and directly address the most pressing needs, challenges, and opportunities at school and classroom levels. Utilizing more targeted professional development can shift teachers' perceptions of in-service training from a burden to a growth opportunity.

The training for teachers used to be like an outside resource person would come with one thought and based on that, the training was given for all the teachers. But now it's need-based training, it's a workshop-based training … The teachers themselves sit down and decide what they should be trained on. (State official)

5. Adapting to personnel and contextual needs
The ability to adapt was built into the very essence of the programme's structure by designing a different theme every three months with a new LIC. More recently, pro-gramming and strategies have come about to try and adapt to the new realities brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic. Any new educational programming needs to have some form of adaptability to meet unforeseen circumstances since such dynamism allows for both growth and ability to meet unexpected challenges in creative ways.

6. Supporting the supporters
While the support that teachers receive through this programme stands out, there is depth and layering of support all the way through the system. TDCs and mentor teachers themselves receive support from DIET officials, STiR staff, and their own colleagues. A state official spoke to the close nature of this supportive relationship throughout the entire system, relating all stakeholders to 'family members'. Once again, this takeaway of providing support for the supporters highlights the need for a whole-system approach.

7. Utilizing the middle tier to scale programming
To realize such a lofty goal of changing the overall culture of schools and teachers, it has taken all levels of the education structure working to this end. Middle-tier officials have provided support, guidance, training facilitation, data collection and analysis, communication, and coordination as the TDC programme grew. Though this case study has highlighted the importance of the middle tier for Delhi, these types of role could also help scale other reforms in differing contexts. No matter the type of reform being implemented, having that middle-tier official providing support, data analysis, and feedback will contribute to reforms growing and spreading through entire systems.

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