

Mentors

“Pratham has learned that changing instructional practice requires instructional leaders—people who guide and provide academic support, who can consistently do hand holding, demonstration, mentoring and monitoring of teachers. This role is best undertaken by those who have carried out activities themselves in actual classroom settings and have experienced first-hand the progress that children can make.”

Banerji and Chavan 2016, 465-6



Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) mentors provide consistent support to instructors throughout TaRL implementation. Mentors support instructors by visiting classrooms to observe TaRL classes, stepping in to demonstrate activities, noting successes as well as areas for improvement, and giving instructors feedback on how well they are using TaRL activities and materials. Mentors keep track of whether or not instructors are focusing on foundational skills, grouping children by level, using level-appropriate activities, and fully engaging children in the classroom. They leverage their training and monitoring tools to help instructors address challenges they face with TaRL implementation.

1. Why is Mentoring Important?

Mentorship as a continuation of instructor training. Training is the first step in building the capacity of instructors to conduct effective TaRL classes. However, training is not enough. J-PAL affiliated researchers found that teaching and learning materials and instructor training alone do not lead to improved learning outcomes (Banerjee et al. 2016). A second and crucial step is mentoring support in the classroom that allows instructors to hone their skills in a safe and supportive environment. A body of rigorous evidence suggests that TaRL programmes with a strong mentoring system keep instructors on track, helping them to consistently implement TaRL and strengthen their classroom practice (Banerjee et al. 2016).

2. What do TaRL mentors do?

Once identified and equipped with the necessary tools, TaRL mentors support implementation at every stage: training instructors, overseeing the assessment process, and providing ongoing guidance throughout implementation. An important aspect of TaRL mentorship is providing active support to instructors. Mentors observe classes and actively participate by demonstrating activities and assisting the instructor where appropriate. In many cases, mentors also play a monitoring role, collecting data at each stage of implementation and tracking instructors' improvements and learner progress. Mentors also develop built-in feedback mechanisms for instructors in the form of review meetings and reports, which inform TaRL design decisions (including specific sessions in future TaRL trainings, ensuring more support is offered to instructors facing implementation challenges, etc.).

TaRL mentors:

- Help instructors gain a thorough understanding of TaRL;
- Build the confidence of instructors;
- Collect and incorporate feedback into trainings;
- Strengthen implementation by reinforcing key components of the approach;
- Understand key challenges to inform course correction and review.

Based on Pratham's many years of implementation experience and evidence from randomised evaluations, Pratham and J-PAL have found that monitoring and mentoring systems are most effective when mentors adhere to the following best practices:

- a. **Strong academic support.** TaRL mentors have a deep understanding of the TaRL approach and are able to provide academic support to instructors throughout the implementation of TaRL. Mentors observe the assessment process and TaRL classes to ensure that TaRL is being correctly implemented. They note if children are grouped by level rather than grade, whether the instructor focuses on foundational skills, and whether the instructor connects with the children through engaging activities.
- b. **Consistency.** Mentors visit schools regularly to ensure a high-quality implementation of the TaRL approach. Governments and organisations determine the best frequency for their particular contexts, depending on the number of mentors available and the specific needs of the schools. When mentors regularly visit schools, they are able to notice changes in instructor practice, and can track whether instructors implement their suggestions.
- c. **Active Coaching.** Mentors are active participants in the classroom. If instructors feel unsure about some activities, the mentor offers to demonstrate the activity in class. The mentor is

careful not to take over the class, instead working collaboratively with the instructor in the classroom. Mentors help the instructor during small group and individual activities, assisting groups and individual children during the class. Seeing the mentor in action helps the instructor to improve or refresh their understanding of TaRL practices.

- d. **Problem Solving.** Mentors are encouraged to problem-solve. If mentors notice that many instructors use the same activities over and over, they hold meetings with instructors to equip them with the skills and confidence to try different activities. In this way, mentors add value by noting shortcomings and offering on-site refresher trainings as necessary.

3. How is an effective TaRL mentorship team created?

Over decades of implementing TaRL programmes across India, Pratham has learned that an integral part of the intervention is empowering a team of mentors with a deep appreciation for the importance of foundational skills and an understanding that, in order to improve these skills, classes should be targeted to the needs of the children. This is done through a training, followed by substantial time for practice.

Equip mentors with relevant skills through training. Once the mentorship team is identified, their roles and responsibilities as trainers and mentor-monitors are defined. Trainers provide mentors with guidance on how best to carry out their assigned tasks. The mentorship team is trained in each aspect of the TaRL approach from assessing foundational skills to classroom methodology. Mentors are also taught how to support instructors, collect useful data, and accurately report on TaRL activities. Training is interactive and includes discussions, demonstrations, and hands-on practice. Trainers model TaRL classroom practices for mentors, driving home the importance of lively, varied activities.

Provide adequate time for practice. Pratham emphasises that hands-on practice implementing TaRL is the most important aspect of training mentors to support and monitor instructors. Directly after training, mentors spend 15 to 20 days assessing children, grouping them according to level, and focusing on foundational skills (Banerji and Chavan 2016, 466). During this practice time, TaRL trainers provide ongoing support to mentors, answer questions that arise, and guide them to learn from the experience. This period of practice helps to gain buy-in and strengthens mentors' understanding of the TaRL approach.

- Through assessing children one-on-one, mentors discover the depth of the foundational skills problem.
- By grouping children and targeting instruction to the level of the child, they solidify their knowledge of the TaRL methodology and begin to understand the challenges that instructors face.
- Once mentors begin to see improvements in the children they teach over the course of a few weeks, they become convinced by the efficacy of the TaRL approach.

Mentors need to have a strong foundation in the TaRL approach if they are to train and support instructors and regularly evaluate and tweak TaRL design throughout implementation. Through this process of intensive training and learning-by-doing, mentors become experts in TaRL practice and champions of the importance of working on foundational skills.

References

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