

A committed relationship

Edm. Monitoring

By Nyla Daud

“In a nutshell, I have gained a new perspective about how I can communicate with my students and that by getting my word through there are great opportunities within my reach,” says, primary school teacher Shahida Perveen as she recounts the experience of conducting a class the first time to the mentor deputed to observe her work by the Directorate of Staff Development.

Later on, during a one-to-one discussion about it, the mentor pointed out how he could see that the attention of some students was wandering while she taught. “Instead of taking it as interference in my work schedule, I asked him the solution,” says the teacher.

“He then outlined an interesting general lesson plan and suggested I seat my students in a semi circle instead of in the conventional way,” she adds.

“Then, in consultation with the Mentor, I designed low-cost teaching material to communicate concepts like the changes in seasons,” she explains.

“In practice I have discovered that it has become infinitely easier to communicate with my pupils as I work under supervision. If there is a problem I know that I can work out a solution the next time the mentor comes in. It is a two way process in which either I take my problem to him or he makes a note of my weaker points where I can improve as I discharge my duty.”

What Shahida Perveen of the

Government Primary School in 43 North Sargodha has experienced is the sum total of an innovative mentoring programme launched in the state-run schools in some 12 Punjab districts. The programme is gradually being extended to the remaining districts.

It is for the first time in the history of public sector education in Punjab that mentoring has been launched in a concentrated bid to revamp a system that had literally gone to the dogs over the years. With the Directorate of Staff Development spearheading the movement, mentoring is an ambitious plan in collaboration with a number of donor agencies and aims to deliver the goods in a cascade module formatting. So far 210 lead teacher educators

have been trained by resource persons trained themselves by foreign consultants, while 1,455 district teacher educators are in liaison with some 59,855 primary school teachers.

Accordingly, teacher educators impart training to mentors (officially designated as district teacher educators) who in their turn become a conduit for the communication of this training to the teachers themselves. They are trained to sit through classes and observe the teachers and students. Following which, they will take the teacher aside after a lesson and explain how they can communicate better. Thus the teachers at the end of the line become direct target learners who will practice the advice received on their pupils.

Factually speaking, the mentoring methodology stands for a planned pairing of a more-experienced person with a lesser-skilled individual for the purpose of achieving mutually agreed upon outcomes. It is a partnership in which both individuals share in a process of growth and personal development of one another.

Mentoring began around 1200BC in ancient Greek methodology when leaving for the siege of Troy, Odysseus appointed his friend Mentor to be surrogate father to his son. It was through this paired relationship that the boy learned the skills, values and culture to prepare him for manhood. Again, craft guilds founded in the Middle Ages show examples of mentoring as young men were appren-

ticed to master craftsmen working in specific professions.

With society becoming more complex, mentoring is being translated in various professional fields with the education sector taking its due as well. In the context of DSD and its ambitions to reformulate teaching practices and mindsets in the Punjab, mentoring is a complete departure from the past practice of one-off training activities. Now there are regular follow up services being provided, while quality assurance is looked after through regular monitoring, evaluation and documentation for future reference.

Mentoring, however, works best under certain conditions, the most important one being the fact that it takes a few things into account to be a good and effective mentor. For one, the mentor should be committed to his role as a harbinger of change. Then he should himself be a willing learner besides being accepting of the fact that the teachers under his purview have to be encouraged through communication of hope and optimism.

“While there are certain factors that contribute to effective mentoring, the most important is that the mentor should first observe the teacher for lapses and try to pinpoint the areas where improvement is required. This has to be discussed with the teacher concerned after class and a methodology has to be evolved about removing the lapse. On the whole my experience with teachers has shown

that while there might never be cent per cent results, most teachers are keen to improve their skills. I think the reason for this is that successful communication with students brings its own rewards for the teacher,” says Syed Azhar Hussain, a mentor.

Overseeing 22 schools in a 40-kilometres radius within district Muzaffargarh, Hussain claims astounding success in the case of a primary school teacher who was trying to communicate the history of Pakistan movement to class four. “We worked out a methodology of preparing pictorial charts of the movement out of old calendars. In the following mentoring session, I noticed that while the children had a better concept of the historical movement, the teacher expressed greater satisfaction because her students were now keenly answering her questions about the topic.”

In the final analysis then, it is to be hoped that as mentoring practice is extended to the remaining Punjab district schools there will be mentionable change in the end product ... which of course stands for the quality of graduating students as they work their way up the ladder. That the programme is directed at the primary level of the product goes far to prove that all foundations are laid at the very primary stage. Also that once the communication of knowledge at the primary level is straightened out, we can expect better results in the higher classes. ■

