[**Mentoring in school**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1773939/mentoring-in-school)

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WALKING past a noisy classroom where a teacher was screaming to get her students’ attention, the principal turned around and said: “This teacher needs help.” She was spot on. In the absence of policies and mentoring programmes, teachers use a variety of methods to control their classes, mostly guiding only those students who are easy to communicate with.

Professional development of teachers is not just about upgrading teaching skills. There are many fantastic teachers, with expert subject knowledge, who struggle in other aspects of their work lives. There are avenues of growth that require focused attention, such as teacher motivation, relationship management with colleagues, and collaboration with the school management. While informal approaches to mentoring are prevalent in schools, structured programmes are lacking in most schools.

Ad hoc ways of colleagues gathering together to resolve issues over a cup of tea may be an excellent way of improving camaraderie among staff members, but carry the dangers of momentary firefighting. Often, these informal routes result in setting up cliques of school staff that stick together due to common struggles. It perpetuates a ‘culture of complaining’ that can become an obstacle to their enjoyment and appreciation of work life. Many narratives abound, ranging from discontent with the management to a lack of agency in decision-making, perceived absence of autonomy and general inertia. Sustainable mentoring programmes can be a positive intervention.

While mentoring programmes cannot re­­solve every issue that arises — and cert­ai­n­­ly not eradicate conflict from the school en­­vironment — there are many benefits to ini­­tiating systematic intervention by trained school leaders. Sustained conversations over a period of time, with members of the school’s senior management, can do wonders to bridge the gap between hierarchies and give teachers an opportunity to be heard and feel valued. These conversations must follow a framework with clearly identifiable goals, a two-way exchange of ideas and a solution-focused goal.

Teachers feel the need to be recognised.

When teachers complain about a ‘thankless’ job, the feeling is usually born out of a need to be recognised individually for their efforts and a desire to be included as contributors to school policies, ethos and day-to-day operations. Very few teachers change jobs due to low remuneration; most switch in search of an institution where their efforts are regarded as more than just a drop in the ocean.

A school-wide programme that offers guidance, advice, feedback and support can help early-career teachers develop confidence in their ability to have a positive impact on students and colleagues. It also helps their relationship management with parents, who are a vital cog in the school support system. Besides developing trust and confidence amongst colleagues, a mentoring programme can provide the tools for resilience, adaptability to changes within the school context and self-reflection. Many teachers face common problems, such as students’ unruly behaviour, and usually apply tools that come intuitively to them. In many cases, the differences between teachers’ own behaviour and attitudes is enough to confuse children. This is why we see students behaving well with one or two teachers and not others.

Consistent policies for addressing student attitudes and parental concerns can help schools establish a culture of positivity where students and teachers alike are encouraged to seek help. Many schools send a student handbook at the start of a new academic year, but very few have such a handbook for teachers.

In a classroom, every teacher is a leader, a shepherd and a mentor. How­ever, they cannot do justice to this lea­dership role in isolation. When they collaborate throu­­gh a teacher-mentoring programme, they often find that many others are in the same boat, and consistent communication and ways to address challenges create a positive climate for teachers and students alike. Change often starts at the top, and the impact of great leadership trickles through the echelons of a school system, right down to students, school support staff and externally to the parents and society at large.

The teacher who screams in a noisy classroom to get her students’ attention also uses a few choice words that sound like dire warnings. She believes that ‘tough love’ is what the children of today need and haven’t been accustomed to. In her mind, she is ‘helping’ — not hindering — their ability to regulate their own behaviour. She clearly needs pastoral care from her own leadership and mentors that may steer her in the direction of using a positive approach to make a positive impact. After all, students often mirror their teachers. Eventually, society reflects what’s happening in the classrooms, and vice versa.

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