

Structured Pedagogy

GUIDE 6

Teacher Professional Development: Ongoing Teacher Support



INTRODUCTION

Teacher training events for structured pedagogy (SP) programs, as described in [Guide 5](#), are important for introducing new techniques and approaches, familiarizing teachers with new materials, and preparing them to try these new approaches. A one-time training, however—or even a series of isolated training events—typically will not change teacher practice significantly.

After a teacher training event, targeted ongoing teacher support (i.e. external or in-school coaching, communities of practice, remote support via digital technology) helps to ensure that teachers are using the materials appropriately, and it increases fidelity of implementation. Ongoing support also contributes to teachers' motivation to implement, by increasing their confidence in implementing the new practices, because follow-up from the head teacher or education officials signal leadership and expectations for implementation, and because they often feel more connected and enthused as they see their students' improvement.

[Guide 5](#), *Teacher Professional Development: Teacher Training*, focused on teacher training events, where teachers are introduced to new techniques, approaches, or materials. This guide focuses on providing ongoing support to teachers after such an orientation and lays out steps for the design and implementation of an ongoing support model.



STEP 1. DESIGNING THE ONGOING SUPPORT MODEL

Focus on Teacher Needs and ongoing support

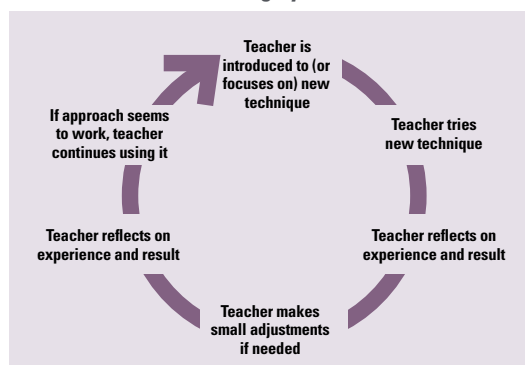
Recognize how teachers learn and change their practice. This learning moves through an iterative cycle of trial and reflection (see Figure 1).¹ Ongoing support can help teachers to:

- **Just try it.** Encourage teachers to try out a new technique (e.g., using a gradual-release model such as “I do, We do, You do” to listen for and identify initial sounds) and ensure that they apply it as per the training manual and teachers' guide.
- **Persist after the first try.** Help teachers to troubleshoot challenges they encounter when trying the practice in their context (e.g., it is harder to do with this big class than I realized. What can I do?).
- **Observe how it works.** Support and guide teachers to reflect on what happens when they use the practice (the children are enthusiastic, the children are getting better at hearing the initial sound, etc.).

- **Decide what's next.** As teachers improve or master a particular technique, help them to decide what to focus on next for improvement (e.g., initial sounds are now going well, but blending and segmenting are still difficult).

When teachers see that the new practice works, they will continue using it. Ongoing teacher support aims at that ultimate goal.

FIGURE 1. Teacher learning cycle





Consider Possible Modalities

Given the type of support needed, as described above, consider modalities for providing it. Common modalities include:

- **Coaching.** This might be within-school coaching, where a designated “coach” (head teacher, senior teacher, etc.) observes the teachers and carries out post-observation discussion. Or it could be external coaching, where a “coach” from outside the school (a pedagogical supervisor for a cluster of schools, or similar) supports multiple schools, visiting schools to observe and have discussions with teachers and head teachers to reflect on their instruction.
- **Community of practice (CoP).** Teachers meet to discuss their practice, troubleshoot, and reflect together. Meetings may take place among teachers within a school, or involve teachers from a cluster of schools.
- **Remote support using digital technology.** Various types of support may be provided at a distance through low- or high-tech means. For example: radio programs that share teacher tips, videos that teachers can view on their own, telephone calls, text messages, or online apps such as Skype or WhatsApp.

Most programs use a combination of modalities, and there is research evidence that combining multiple mechanisms is likely to be most effective.² However, the effectiveness of any modality, or any combination, will depend on the context and the quality of implementation.

There is strong evidence for the value of coaching; rigorous quantitative research has shown an impact



In the Early Grade Reading Study in South Africa, Cilliers et al. (2018) found that students exposed to two years of the program improved their reading proficiency by 0.12 standard deviations if their teachers received only centralized training, compared to 0.24 if their teachers received in-class coaching.

on students’ learning outcomes when coaching is used.³ Few systematic studies have examined CoPs and their impact on learning outcomes, so there is currently less evidence for relying on them as the primary support mechanism. However, qualitative studies have shown that CoPs are valuable opportunities for teachers to reflect and find ways to resolve challenges,⁴ indicating that CoPs may be valuable as one part of a support model. As explained by a teacher in the Tusome Early Grade Reading Activity in Kenya, CoP meetings allowed them to “discuss the challenges facing the teachers in classrooms, so when you come to class, you improve the teaching methods.”

Whatever combination of modalities you select, **it is essential to ensure that teachers can be observed and given constructive feedback, and that teachers have opportunities to reflect on their experience with new practices.**



In a qualitative study of school cluster teacher meetings in South Africa, Jita and Mokhele (2014) found that these reflection meetings seemed to enhance teachers’ content knowledge and knowledge of instruction. Cluster meetings also offered “process benefits,” which included collaboration, instructional guidance, and teacher leadership.



TABLE 1. Teacher Support Modalities: Pros and Cons

Modality	Pros	Cons
In-school coach	Relatively inexpensive. Allows for frequent observation/feedback. Can help ensure school-level commitment.	School administrators often are too overloaded to handle this role. Difficult to monitor. May involve extra training and support for school staff to take up role.
External coaching visits	Coaches can have higher-level training and can be a conduit for other experts to provide additional information.	Expensive. If coach-to-school ratio is high, or if travel is difficult between schools, teachers may receive few visits.
School-level teacher learning groups	Inexpensive approach. Can create a positive school environment for trying new approaches.	Less effective if only a few teachers per school. Without enough support, meetings can lose focus or reinforce misconceptions.
Cluster-level teacher learning groups	Can be relatively inexpensive and can energize teachers. Can be effective for finding solutions to problems or issues.	Groups need time and a budget for teachers to meet. Also need support and technical input to ensure that joint solutioning is technically sound.
Support via digital technology	Can help to bridge gaps where frequent in-person communication is not possible, or where an expert cannot visit all schools frequently.	Most effective combined with other approaches. Connectivity and access to digital devices must be taken into account.



Consider the Context

Examine the context to determine the following.

- **Existing resources.** Are mechanisms for teacher support already in place, or were some in place previously? Examples might be government system options, or mechanisms implemented by nongovernmental organizations. If the answer is yes, learn what has or has not worked, and build on that knowledge.
- **Logistical considerations.** What are the limiting (or enabling) characteristics of geography, demography, and staffing? For example: Are schools close together, such that a coach could easily travel among them, or does it take days to travel? Do head teachers also have full teaching loads? Does the education system have existing pedagogical support positions

and are they fully budgeted? Would internet or phone connectivity allow for support through digital technology?

In many countries, the responses to these questions will differ by location, so you may need a flexible model. For example, in the Terai (lowland) region of Nepal, schools are many and close together, so external coaching and cluster-level CoPs may make sense. In the Himalayan mountain regions, on the other hand, schools are often far apart and difficult to travel among because of terrain and climate. In such situations, combining in-school coaching with periodic external support visits and virtual communication might be more appropriate.

STEP 2. PLANNING FOR OPERATIONALIZATION

Once you have some idea of possible modalities and a sense of the context, you can turn next to planning the operational details to fill in the design. When doing this, keep sustainability—i.e., the capacity to continue the SP programming over the long term, with government resources only—front and center.

Operational Research and Monitoring

Understanding what has worked in the past is a good place to start. Monitoring during roll-out of the new teacher support model will help you find out where implementation needs to be strengthened. For example, if monitoring data shows that coaches are not observing lessons regularly, you can then identify obstacles and address them so that observations take place. Operational research can help you to identify ways in which you may need to revise the model to ensure sustainability.

Budget Considerations

Be realistic about the budget but also technically sound. Many externally funded programs have extensive support built in. Even if they show good results, however, such options may be too expensive for governments to take on later. In other words, these support models may be technically sound but budgetarily unrealistic. Vice versa, government systems often undercut the budget for teacher support to the point of being ineffective. These options may be budgetarily realistic but not technically sound.

You can work with the government to identify cost-effective approaches—such as efficient approaches for travel reimbursement—that still allow for sufficient support to teachers. During this process, also try to balance planning for sustainability with injecting funds for start-up and proof-of concept. As the program rolls out, try to have ongoing dialogue with the government to advocate for safeguarding sufficient budget for teacher support. Working closely with the government on the teacher support model and having them see positive results will contribute to that dialogue.

Human Resources

As much as possible, the teacher support model should use existing government positions. When external programs directly hire new coaches, those coaching positions, and the personnel who fill them, rarely transfer later into the government system. **At the same time, many government systems have positions that originally were meant to provide pedagogical support but have become more administrative and overburdened with other responsibilities.**

To re-envision these positions for providing teacher support, consult with government counterparts to encourage them to revise or develop new job descriptions (see [Guide 1](#) on government leadership and teacher adoption). Or if the system has coaches, assess whether it would be feasible to reduce the number of schools for which each coach is responsible. Finally, sometimes staff in such

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positions see themselves and as seen by school-based staff, as “inspectors” rather than as coaches or mentors. If this is the case, they will need strong training and support to shift their focus.

Accountability and Incentives

As discussed in [Guide 7](#) on data, systems, and accountability, you will need to work with the government to ensure that the teacher support system is tied to accountability mechanisms. In

that way, you can monitor coaching and CoPs, lines of responsibility are clear, and you can provide targeted support if implementation falters. Ensure incentives for the actors in the support system are in place, as they do the hard work of changing instruction. This can include, for example, credit for training, promotion or recognition for becoming a coach or CoP facilitator, and awards or letters of recognition.

STEP 3. FILLING IN THE TECHNICAL DETAILS

Once the basic teacher support design is iterated, you can fill in the details. This section focuses on coaching/mentoring, CoPs, and incorporating digital technology. Many of the instructions suggested here stem from a 2018 study that RTI International undertook of ongoing teacher support in large-scale SP programs internationally, which resulted in guidelines for implementing coaching and CoPs.⁵

Coaching/Mentoring

- **Train and support coaches.** Coaches need training and support on both instructional methods and coaching skills. Train the coaches to develop a relationship with teachers that is based on mentorship, rather than on evaluation or inspection. Guide them not to tell teachers what to do, but instead to listen and let teachers think about their own practices. This needs to be a frequent target of training and support to coaches.
- **Use observation tools that are short, simple, and centered on key instructional elements.** Design the tools to focus on the most essential aspects of the lessons and to target key instructional practices. Make these tools simple, direct and easy for coaches to use and focused on constructive support rather than inspection or evaluation.
- **Prioritize instructional behaviors in a phased manner.** Begin with skills that will be easier for teachers to master and move to more difficult ones over time – such as starting with routines for introducing letters, eventually building to how to create good comprehension questions (as per the teacher learning cycle, Figure 1). Whenever possible, focus on improvement areas that teachers themselves have also noted.
- **Ensure that coaches’ post-observation debriefing sessions include teacher reflection and discussion about what worked well and**

what to focus attention on. Coaches should first give teachers a chance to reflect on their lesson. Then, coaches should share positive feedback. Finally, coaches, with teachers, identify two or three areas for improvement that are clear, specific, and actionable.

- **Consider including brief student assessments during coaching visits.** Plan for coaches to assess a small sample of students after each classroom observation visit, taking not more than five minutes total, such as choosing three grade one students and asking them to read five random words from the lesson. These interactions will give the coaches an idea of student progress, which they use to help teachers make instructional decisions.

Communities of Practice (COP)

- **Provide training and support for COP facilitation.** Train CoP leaders or facilitators on key instructional practices as well as setting CoP agendas, and running effective COP sessions. **It is easy for CoP meetings to lose focus, to allow logistical and administration concerns to overtake pedagogical ones, or to be conflated with staff meetings.** Monitoring and follow up is needed to help avoid this, or redirect both the leaders and the meetings if these distractions start to happen.
- **Ensure cluster meetings are well structured.** Guidance provided to CoPs should provide enough structure to facilitate constructive meetings, while allowing some flexibility and choice by participants. An agenda framework could include examples of activities, as well as suggestions for topics. Activities might include:
 - Lead a conversation for reflection and discussion (with sample reflection questions)
 - Identify a common challenge and brainstorm solutions – such as how to assess students in a large class, or how to make

I HAD LEARNED THE SKILLS IN THE TRAINING, BUT IT IS [COACHING] THAT MADE ME CONFIDENT IN APPLYING THEM. I WAS LOST AT FIRST BUT THE [COACH] GUIDED ME.” - TEACHER IN NEPAL DISCUSSING THE NEGRP TEACHER SUPPORT SYSTEM





sure all students participate

- Demonstrate teaching a lesson, and give feedback
- View and discuss model (or teacher-recorded) videos
- **Provide access to additional technical support if/as needed.** Teachers gain a lot from sharing experiences among themselves, but they also need access to an individual with more expertise in targeted instructional practices, to whom they can turn for help. This advisor also can ensure that teacher-developed solutions are technically sound. This person might not attend CoP meetings but would be a resource to call upon as needed, or to touch base with the CoP periodically. If your program's design will combine CoPs with coaching, a coach/mentor could serve in this capacity.

Promising Digital Technology Approaches

Digital technology may offer cost-effective ways to enhance support. Some promising examples are:



- Coaches use **SMS** (text messaging) to send reminders and tips and to answer teacher questions.
- Teachers hold CoP conversations virtually, through **platforms such as WhatsApp, Viber, or Skype.**
- Teachers access learning modules and interactive dashboards, according to their needs and interests, through **interactive voice response** and **online learning platforms.**

CONCLUSION

Will teachers try and then continue to use the instructional practices that are integrated into materials and introduced during training? The answer to this question lies at the heart of implementation. If most teachers do not try using the structured pedagogy materials, or they give up after one or two tries of a new technique from the training, the program will not have the intended impacts on students' literacy and numeracy.

Ongoing teacher support will help to ensure that this key piece of the structured pedagogy puzzle falls into place. Although there is not one magic teacher-support formula that will work everywhere, as this guide has discussed, you can learn enough from experience and research to make good decisions about what is likely to be feasible and technically sound in a given context. Then plan to introduce monitoring and operational research to verify that teachers receive the ongoing support they need to be successful, and to make the SP program impactful.

About the symbols in this guide:



Indicates "Red Alert": Something to be aware of and alert to, because it is a common problem



Indicates "Non-negotiable": a must-have



RESOURCES

Craig, Kraft and du Plessis provide an overview, with examples, of best practices in teacher training and support: https://people.umass.edu/educ870/teacher_education/Documents/Craig-book.pdf

Global Reading Network resource providing recommendations for and discussing examples of strong coaching programs: https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TXZ9.pdf

Volume, edited by Pouezevara, of research case-studies covering a variety of ongoing support models: <https://www.rti.org/rti-press-publication/cultivating-dynamic-educators>

Piper, Mejia, and Betts present on a cross-country research study on coaching and CoPs. *Do's and Don'ts of Improving Teaching Through Instructional Support: Findings from a Multi-Country Study of Coaching and Communities of Practice*. Paper prepared for the annual meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society.

Funda Wande: teaching videos that might be used during CoP meetings for discussion, as well as videos that show teachers discussing their practice with each other: <https://fundawande.org/video-resources>

Video from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), describing the effective use of combined in-person and virtual coaching in the Global South, and showing some of this coaching in action. <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/videos/coaching-teachers-south-africa-produces-results>

Complete Series of Structured Pedagogy How-To Guides: <https://scienceofteaching.site/how-to-guides/>



TECHNICAL EXPERTISE NEEDED

Experts in the target instructional practices and in teacher professional support—for the design phase and then again for development of tools and training.

REFERENCES

- 1 The model in Figure 1 is based on models presented in: Guskey, Thomas R. 1986. "Staff Development and the Process of Teacher Change." *Educational Researcher* 15, no. 5: 5–12; Kolb, David. 1984. *Experiential Learning: Experiences as the Source of Learning and Development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall; and Smith, Margaret Schwan. 2001. *Practice-Based Professional Development for Teachers of Mathematics*. Reston, VA: National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.
- 2 See, for example: Craig, Helen J., Richard J. Kraft, and Joy du Plessis. 1998. *Teacher Development: Making an impact*. Produced for USAID under the Advancing Basic Education and Literacy Project; and for the World Bank by the Human Development Network, Effective Schools and Teachers. Washington, DC: Academy for Educational Development (AED) and World Bank. https://people.umass.edu/educ870/teacher_education/Documents/Craig-book.pdf; Darling-Hammond, Linda E., Maria E. Hylar, and Madelyn Gardner. 2017. *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_REPORT.pdf; Westbrook, Jo, Naureen Durrani, Rhona Brown, David Orr, John Pryor, Janet Boddy, and Francesca Salvi. 2013. *Pedagogy, Curriculum, Teaching Practices and Teacher Education in Developing Countries*. Final Report. Education Rigorous Literature Review. Prepared by the Centre for International Education, University of Sussex. London: UK Department for International Development. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a13ed915d622c00054f/Pedagogy-curriculum-teaching-practices-education.pdf>
- 3 Examples of such studies include: Cilliers, Jacobus, Brahm Fleisch, Cas Prinsloo, and Stephen Taylor. 2018. *How to Improve Teaching Practice? Experimental Comparison of Centralized Training and In-Classroom Coaching*. RISE Working Paper. https://riseprogramme.org/sites/default/files/publications/RISE_WP-024_Cilliers_TeachingPractice.pdf; Piper, Benjamin, Stephanie Simmons Zuilkowski, Margaret M. Dubeck, Evelyn Jekemei, and Simon J. King. 2018. "Identifying the Essential Ingredients to Literacy and Numeracy Improvement: Teacher Professional Development and Coaching, Student Textbooks, and Structured Teachers' Guides." *World Development* 106, June: 324–336. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.01.018>.
- 4 For examples see: Pouezevara, Sarah R., ed. 2018. *Cultivating Dynamic Educators: Case Studies in Teacher Behavior Change in Africa and Asia*. RTI Press Publication No. BK-0022-1809. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI Press; Jita, Loyiso C., and Matseliso L. Mokhele. 2014. "When Teacher Clusters Work: Selected Experiences of South African Teachers with the Cluster Approach to Professional Development." *South African Journal of Education* 34, no. 2: 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.15700/201412071132>; Foundation for Educational Change (FEDUC). 2020. *Study on Effectiveness of Teacher Professional Support System in Early Grades*. Final Report. Prepared for USAID under the Early Grade Reading Program in Nepal, Contract No. AID-367-T0-15-00002. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International.
- 5 Piper, Benjamin L., Jessica Mejia, and Kellie Betts. 2020. *Do's and Don'ts of Improving Teaching Through Instructional Support: Findings from a Multi-Country Study of Coaching and Communities of Practice*. Paper prepared for the annual meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society.



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