

# An exploration into the enablers and barriers that affect teachers' uptake and use of pedagogical best practices

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# Executive Summary

Shifting pedagogical practice and ensuring that high impact teaching strategies (HITS) are used at scale by the median teacher requires a multifaceted approach:

**Balancing Teacher Autonomy with Structured Pedagogy:** Teachers appreciate the guidance provided by structured pedagogy materials, which aid in curriculum alignment and lesson planning, allowing more time for implementing HITS. Adequate training and ongoing support, including effective coaching, are essential for empowering teachers to adapt these approaches. The balance between compliance and autonomy remains a challenge, with teachers needing the flexibility to modify plans to meet diverse classroom needs. However, it is also important to consider the difference between expert and novice practitioners, and their ability to effectively adapt teaching and learning resources. Consulting teachers in the design of structured pedagogy programs can also enhance buy-in and reduce resistance. Additionally, addressing the disconnect between structured guides and classroom realities, ensuring guides are contextually relevant, and improving their visual design and readability through iterative feedback are crucial steps. This all highlights the importance of a supportive, flexible, and inclusive structured pedagogy approach to help embed HITS in classroom practice effectively and sustainably.

**Establishing Positive Teacher Habits:** Tangible student results significantly boost teacher motivation and the adoption of effective practices. Additionally, peer support, such as peer observations and classroom visits, creates space for constructive feedback and in turn fosters development. However, sustaining new teaching habits faces challenges due to insufficient follow-up post-training in addition to budgetary and time constraints. Continuous professional development (CPD) and support mechanisms like coaching and peer collaboration are crucial for equipping teachers with HITS. Effective school leadership also plays a vital role in fostering a positive culture, acknowledging teacher efforts, and providing necessary resources and systemic support. Despite challenges such as scepticism and limited resources, a comprehensive approach that includes targeted training, ongoing support, and strong leadership can significantly enhance teaching practices and ensure the sustainable adoption of HITS.

**Cost-Effective Variations (or Alternative Approaches) to Coaching:** Implementing cost-effective coaching methods is crucial for scalability and sustainability. Internal personalized coaching is a cost-effective variation of traditional coaching that leverages local expertise (e.g., more experienced teachers) to provide tailored and relevant continuous feedback and support that enhances teaching practices. Personalized and adaptable training, including the use of edtech and online resources, can meet diverse teacher needs, while Communities of Practice (CoP) and Professional Learning Communities (PLC) facilitate peer support and shared learning, despite challenges like resource constraints and operational challenges. These approaches also help to ensure that support is accessible to a larger number of teachers. Accountability mechanisms and a clear understanding of the rationale behind HITS are crucial for ensuring consistent application and continuous improvement. However, coaching's resource-intensive nature and variability in quality, along with resistance to change and sustainability issues, necessitate strong leadership and tailored approaches to foster meaningful and lasting pedagogical change.

# Key Takeaways

- 1 Involving Teachers in Structured Pedagogy Design:** Consult teachers in the design of structured pedagogy programs to enhance buy-in and ensure that materials are contextually relevant and adaptable to diverse classroom needs.
- 2 Providing Continuous Support:** Ongoing training with consistent follow up support and coaching can sustain positive teaching habits and ensure the effective adoption of High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS).
- 3 Ensuring Effective School Leadership:** Effective school leadership can help foster a positive culture through acknowledging teacher efforts and provide necessary resources to sustain new pedagogical practices.
- 4 Using Cost-Effective Coaching Models:** Leverage internal coaching and incorporate EdTech to provide personalized support and targeted feedback. Promote peer collaboration through Communities of Practice (CoP) and Professional Learning Communities (PLC).
- 5 Overcoming Challenges in Implementation:** Address potential resistance, resource limitations, and variability in coaching quality with strong leadership, clear accountability mechanisms, and tailored approaches to foster sustainable pedagogical change.
- 6 Driving Outcomes and Continuous Improvement:** Prioritize tangible student results to motivate teachers and drive the adoption of effective practices. Foster a culture of continuous improvement, reflection, and innovation to embed HITS at scale and improve learning outcomes.



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# Context

High-impact teaching strategies (HITS) are core pedagogical practices that help students understand content while also supporting their social-emotional development (Ball & Forzani, 2010). Example HITS include maximising student engagement in learning by providing regular opportunities for students to practice what they have learnt, teachers providing explicit explanations and clear modelling of new skills and concepts, effective questioning to build and deepen student understanding of new content etc. These teaching practices can demonstrably impact student learning outcomes in both literacy and numeracy. Research has resulted in multiple sets of HITS, and some researchers have developed resources and tools to aid teachers in their use of these pedagogical practices (Pushparatman et al., 2021; Danielson, 2022; Victoria State Government, 2020).

## Research background

A community of practice of implementers called the Ped(agogy) Pack Practitioners (PPPs), funded by the Gates Foundation, carried out a small-scale research project within their contexts to gain deeper insights into how HITS can be adopted sustainably. Across diverse educational landscapes, the pursuit of effective pedagogical practices resonates as a common goal. The aim of this research was to understand different perspectives and the enablers and barriers to the adoption of HITS within eight low- and middle-income countries: South Africa, India, Pakistan, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana and Cameroon (Diagram 1). The PPPs carried out semi-structured interviews with a total of 34 education stakeholders across different levels within the system (Table 1).



	Total
Teacher	12
Implementer	9
Researcher	2
Coach (Former teacher)	2
Independent consultant	1
Government officer	1
Curriculum planner / designer	2
Project manager	1
Head of Department	1
Headteacher / Principal	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>

Table 1: Summary of interviewees by job title

The overarching research question was 'How can we shift pedagogical practice and ensure that high impact teaching strategies (HITS) are used at scale by the median teacher through:

- Balancing teacher autonomy with structured pedagogy;
- Establishing positive teacher habits to transform the median teacher's practice; and
- Cost effective variations (or alternative approaches) to coaching as a way of embedding HITS?

Despite the contextual diversity, common themes emerge, offering insights into the structures and approaches required to embed HITS at scale. This document provides a summary of the findings.

# Summary of key findings

## THEME 1: BALANCING TEACHER AUTONOMY WITH STRUCTURED PEDAGOGY

Structured Pedagogy (SP) is broadly defined as a “specifically designed, coherent package of investments that work together to improve classroom teaching” (Piper et al., 2022). Typical structured pedagogy programs consist of key elements which work together to support quality teaching and typically include (but are not limited to):

- Teaching and Learning Materials: teachers’ guides that provide daily lesson plans for teachers at various levels of specificity and student books and materials, typically at a 1:1 ratio. SP is a spectrum ranging from quite prescriptive materials to more adaptive, flexible guides for teachers.
- Teacher training organized to reinforce specific skills in teaching the lessons, and ongoing support to teachers implementing the SP program, typically including coaching and or communities of practice.



Photo credit: The Citizens Foundation

There were specific interview questions on stakeholder’s views and/or experience in utilizing teachers’ guides and structured lesson plans, as well as the tension between teacher autonomy and adherence to these guides. Based on the interview responses, several key themes emerged regarding balancing teacher autonomy with SP:

**Teachers appreciate guidance from structured lesson plans:** Interviewees across various contexts appreciated the guidance provided by teacher guides and structured lesson plans within structured pedagogy programs. The commonality between contexts was that teachers value the support these materials offer in terms of curriculum alignment, session planning, and uniformity within schools and across regions. For example, in South Africa, the interviewees felt that it took away the hard work of having to take the curriculum and plan their own termly objectives from scratch. This could mean that more time could be taken to learn and implement HITS in practice.

**The use of structured lesson plans depend on adequate training and support:** Adequate training and support for teachers are crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of structured pedagogy programs, utilizing teacher guides, and ultimately implementing HITS. Key components such as effective trainers, ongoing professional development, and robust support systems like teacher coaches are essential for empowering teachers to navigate and adapt structured pedagogical approaches. In several contexts (Sierra Leone, Ghana, Liberia, and Cameroon), highly effective teacher coaches who inspire, motivate, and foster strong relationships of trust with teachers have been identified as significant factors in improving teaching practices. However, barriers to adopting new teaching strategies include the teachers’ own educational background and proficiency levels, or when more experienced teachers are more resistant to change. Overcoming these barriers requires a multifaceted

approach that includes tailored training, recognition of teachers' expertise, and consultation with teachers in program design.



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### **Teachers should be allowed to modify plans:**

Teachers across all contexts challenged the extent to which SP allows sufficient autonomy, especially for more skilled teachers. They also emphasized the importance of enabling teachers to modify plans to cater to diverse student needs and classroom dynamics. In Pakistan, teachers often make real-time decisions to modify plans but feel greater pressure to comply, especially when being observed by headteachers / inspectors. Whilst

there is consensus on the importance of teacher autonomy, there is tension between allowing flexibility for teachers to adapt lesson plans based on learner needs and the perceived rigidity of the prescribed content and pacing imposed by some structured pedagogical interventions. In Pakistan, for instance, a principal highlighted the varying levels of autonomy within teacher guides: those for grades IX-X are less scripted and prescriptive, while those for early grades are more prescriptive with higher expectations of fidelity. There is a need to strike a balance between ensuring fidelity to structured pedagogy programs and teacher guides and allowing space for teacher autonomy. While adherence to guidelines is important for maintaining coherence and quality, autonomy is viewed as crucial for adapting teaching strategies to diverse learner needs and classroom contexts. However, it is also important to consider the difference between expert and novice practitioners (Stahnke & Blömeke, 2020) and their ability to effectively adapt teaching and learning resources (Tsui, 2003).

### **Consult teachers on design of structured pedagogy programs to increase buy-in:**

Findings from Kenya draw attention to the lack of consultative processes in the design of structured pedagogy programs and the associated materials, which can impact teacher buy-in. This has several implications. Firstly, teachers may be resistant to change if they do not understand the 'why' and evidence behind adopting new instructional strategies, thereby undermining overall buy-in. Moreover, the exclusion of teachers in the design phase may lead to feelings of resentment and the perception of new strategies as imposed by 'outsiders.' In South Africa, consulting and supporting Subject Advisors on the teaching materials they would use to support teachers enhanced their overall understanding of the materials, their buy-in, and their perceived capability to carry out their roles. Similarly, a suggestion made by interviewees in Kenya is that teachers could be incorporated and consulted at all stages of the structured pedagogy program design and evaluation to reduce resistance and foster greater acceptance and usage, and ultimately improving implementation of HITS.

**Structured lesson plans that haven't consulted teachers on design don't work as well in practice:** Insights from Pakistan suggest that guides are often disconnected from the

context and not reflective of 'classroom realities.' Findings from both Pakistan and India indicate that SP teacher guides and lesson plans do not adequately account for variability in student abilities and classroom conditions, particularly for students lagging behind. Teachers expressed that the number of tasks and the time allocated do not match classroom realities, leading to feelings of racing against time. They perceive that the guides often contain too much content, causing already struggling students to fall further behind. Additionally, the time proposed for independent practice is rarely sufficient, and thoughtful modifications was necessary.

**Make structured lesson plans user-friendly:** The visual design and readability of teacher guides in the Structured Pedagogy package are important factors influencing their usability. Clear organization, graphical elements, and simplicity are essential features that enhance teacher engagement with these materials. For instance, in Pakistan, an interviewee noted that teacher guides that are organized sequentially, with information presented in tables and lesson steps in bullet points, are easier to understand and follow. Incorporating teacher feedback and continually refining the guides are crucial for improving their usability and effectiveness. This iterative process not only enhances the format of the guides, but can also help address alignment with curriculum goals and contextual relevance.

Overall, while there are variations in the specific challenges and perspectives expressed across the different contexts, there's a shared recognition of the importance of balancing structured pedagogy with teacher autonomy to effectively enhance teaching and learning practices, including the implementation of HITS to improve learning outcomes.



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## **THEME 2: ESTABLISHING POSITIVE TEACHING HABITS TO TRANSFORM THE MEDIAN TEACHERS' PRACTICE**

Motivating changes in teaching practices can be influenced by teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which in turn can affect their willingness to participate in teacher professional development (TPD), acquire new skills and knowledge, and apply learnings (such as HITS) in their classrooms (World Bank, 2021a). For instance, a 2004 study in Nigeria found that low teacher motivation is closely linked to their attitude towards work, their desire to engage in pedagogical processes, and their openness to trying new techniques (Ofoegbu, 2004). This underscores the importance of motivating teachers to establish positive teaching habits for sustainable practice transformation, beyond just short-term changes. Based on the interview responses, several key themes emerged regarding establishing positive teaching habits to transform the median teacher's practice:



**Teachers are motivated by tangible student results:** Tangible student results can boost teacher motivation and promote the adoption of effective teaching practices. In Kenya, findings indicate that seeing positive student outcomes encourages teachers to embrace new instructional strategies, such as HITS. Similarly, when students respond well to teaching, it motivates teachers to continue refining their methods. In India, progress toward student learning goals is highlighted as a crucial metric for any sustained change in teaching practices. However, teachers also stress the importance of clear markers of success beyond exam results, such as recognition and peer support. In South Africa and Kenya, the importance of supporting teachers to understand the rationale behind why certain HITS are encouraged, and the potential benefits and impact on learner outcomes, was stressed. When teachers do not have this comprehensive understanding, new strategies or approaches can be viewed as additional and / or cumbersome work.

**Peer support can encourage teachers to change their habits:** Peer learning opportunities, such as peer observations, can effectively support changes in teacher habits. For example, an interview with a Head of Department (HoD) in South Africa highlighted that promoting peer classroom visits and encouraging visits from HoDs (in a non-threatening manner) can provide a useful and non-judgmental method for facilitating peer support and constructive feedback. This underscores the importance of distributed leadership in fostering teacher development. Expanding this approach to include peer support across different schools, such as implementing an exchange week where teachers share learnings with a host school (not just within the same school), was suggested as beneficial too. Interviewees from Pakistan echoed this finding, noting that pairing teachers for peer support allows them to converse more openly and seek help from peers rather than solely relying on principals.



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**School leaders can support habit formation:** School leaders play a crucial role in bolstering teacher support through coaching, feedback, and creating a positive school culture conducive to change. A program implementer stated that when the leader spends more time in the classroom and coaching and feedback (both formal and

informal) is more frequent, there is a higher likelihood of uptake of good practices. Additionally, when the principal acts as an instructional leader (e.g., conducts demo lessons for teachers), the teachers tend to have more clarity on enacting teacher guides and give better performances in the classroom. Additionally, other factors that drive teacher motivation include school leadership's acknowledgement of teacher efforts, with one interviewee in Pakistan emphasizing the importance of recognition and appreciation. In contrast, in the Kenyan context, one obstacle to changing teacher practices is perceived as the negative attitude or scepticism harbored by some teachers toward new strategies. This highlights the importance of school leaders to modeling a growth mindset and cultivating a

positive school culture. However, leadership approaches may vary across contexts, ranging from collaborative and dialogic to accountability-driven and goal-oriented.

**Insufficient follow-up post-training poses challenges to sustainability:** The importance of continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers is emphasized across all interviews. CPD plays a pivotal role in equipping teachers with HITS and effective instructional practices. Support mechanisms like coaching, peer collaboration, and feedback are seen as effective ways to facilitate practice change. For example, in South Africa, one teacher who had been involved in a coaching programme noted a shift in her skills and mindset. However, findings from South Africa and Kenya revealed that sustaining the adoption of new teaching habits is challenging, primarily due to the lack of follow-up support after initial teacher training. All interviewees agreed that while workshops and training sessions are provided for teachers, there is rarely any subsequent support to aid in the implementation of these practices in the classroom. Specifically, findings from Kenya underscored that the absence of follow-up support after introducing new teaching approaches significantly undermines long-term changes in teacher practice.

**More investment needed in teacher habits:** Findings from both India and Kenya highlight budgetary and time constraints as key limitations to cultivating positive teaching habits. In the Indian context, excessive time spent on non-teaching responsibilities impedes changes in classroom practices. Similarly, in Kenya, scheduling constraints present challenges, as teacher professional development activities are not incorporated into timetables, making it challenging to conduct regular coaching sessions. Moreover, it was observed that although continuous teacher professional development facilitates the acquisition of HITS, funding for teacher capacity building remains inadequate, with a Kenyan interviewee expressing that CPD programs are often characterized as 'erratic and underfunded'. In India, educators emphasized the significance of active participation in professional development activities, viewing organizational investment in such endeavors as indicative of care and support. Financial incentives, such as higher remuneration or performance-based rewards, as well as opportunities for career growth, were also cited as potential extrinsic motivators too.



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Overall, it is important to recognize and address the challenges teachers encounter in effectively shifting pedagogical practices by establishing positive teaching habits through various support mechanisms and motivational incentives along the way. Fostering a meaningful change in teachers' pedagogical approach will help to enhance teaching practices and ensure the sustainable adoption of HITS and ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes.

### THEME 3: COST EFFECTIVE VARIATIONS (OR ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES) TO COACHING AS A WAY OF EMBEDDING HITS

Teacher professional development (TPD) programs that are embedded as part of a larger comprehensive capacity development strategy and include ongoing individualized feedback have shown large positive effects on teachers' instruction, and, subsequently, on student learning outcomes (Kraft et al., 2018). However, effective TPD approaches such as coaching are resource intensive and expensive to scale, requiring substantial time, funding and personnel. Additionally, sustaining coaching programs over the long term can be challenging due to factors like staff turnover, changes in leadership, or shifts in priorities, impacting the continuity and effectiveness of support for teachers. Other alternative approaches need to be considered when embedding HITS, ensuring that these strategies are adopted and sustained at scale by the median teacher in these contexts. Based on the interview responses, several key themes emerged regarding cost-effective variations or alternative approaches to coaching as a way of embedding HITS.



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**Experienced teachers can support habit formation through coaching:** Findings across contexts highlight utilizing internal coaches such as experienced teachers, or those specifically trained to support others, can be a cost-effective method for promoting HITS adoption. For example, in Kenya, Champion Teachers serve as coaches, providing targeted support and addressing the unique needs of their colleagues. Government officials can then focus on quality assurance and accountability for sustainability and scale. Similarly, in India, both senior and junior teachers discussed the importance of coaching, noting that structured coaching sessions with regular feedback can drive significant improvements in teaching practices. This continuous feedback loop is essential for reinforcing new strategies and ensuring they are implemented effectively in the classroom. Although findings from India underscored the need for tailored support and strong leadership, there is still some dissatisfaction from teachers on the inconsistency of coaching sessions. Some teachers may resist coaching or feedback, especially if perceived as evaluative rather than supportive, hindering the effectiveness of coaching interventions. Additionally, the effectiveness of coaching depends heavily on the quality of the coach-teacher relationship, the coach's

expertise, and the consistency of support, which can vary significantly and ultimately impact the overall effectiveness.

**Coaching provides accountability as well as support:** Coaches play a crucial role in ensuring teachers implement HITS by setting clear goals, monitoring progress, and providing necessary support. Maintaining consistent support and quality requires ongoing investment and commitment, which can be difficult to ensure. In South Africa, accountability measures such as weekly meetings and classroom observations by peers or heads of departments were referenced as enhancing accountability and sustaining implementation of teaching strategies. These sessions ensure that teachers not only understand the strategies but also consistently apply them, maintaining a cycle of continuous improvement and accountability. In both Kenya and India, monthly internal training sessions were recommended, with the caveat that for sessions to be effective, they need to be scheduled and embedded as part of the teacher's timetable. Teachers should be given sufficient time and resources to build capacity and train others. In South Africa, a teacher shared their experience in having a student teacher for practicum, which allowed for personalized feedback and team-teaching, facilitating the effective adoption of new strategies.

**Incorporate EdTech to provide targeted training and feedback:** Findings from across several contexts (India, Kenya and Pakistan) indicate the necessity for personalized and adaptable support mechanisms to enhance teacher practices effectively. Tailored interventions are essential to meet the diverse needs of individual teachers, though recommendations on how to implement these in practice varied. One Kenyan interviewee emphasized that "the support given to teachers should be targeted to meet every teacher's needs." Similarly, in India and Pakistan, addressing teacher workload and emotional strain is crucial, exemplified by the demand for personalizable and relevant professional development experiences. In Pakistan, there's a recognition of the potential of personalized technology-based learning experiences to improve teacher effectiveness through dynamic professional development and collaborative platforms. Similarly, findings from the Kenyan context suggest that in addition to physical teacher coaching and support, the government should consider having a repository of online resources that teachers can use to improve their pedagogical skills.



*Photo credit: The Citizens Foundation*

**Bring teachers together regularly to prompt habit formation:** In India, the emphasis is on Communities of Practice (CoP) and Professional Learning Communities (PLC) models that offer tailored peer-feedback to improve teaching practices. More informal approaches, such as using WhatsApp CoP groups, are suggested to be useful. These groups allow teachers to seek help from each other, exchange good practices, and divide tasks like designing end-of-unit tests and reinforcing subject matter before a unit. Through approaches such as CoP or

PLCs, teachers can develop a deeper understanding of HITS and acquire the necessary skills to implement them effectively in their classrooms. For example, in Kenya, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were highlighted as a platform where teachers can develop and share effective teaching strategies. However, findings from Kenya and India indicate that while CoPs have the potential to support teachers effectively, implementation challenges such as limited resources, time constraints, and implementation issues affect their overall impact. Respondents from South Africa and Kenya highlight challenges in operationalizing support structures like CoPs, indicating the importance of monitoring and evaluating the impact of such mechanisms as an alternative approach for skill development through shared learning and coaching.



*Photo credit: The Citizens Foundation*

Overall, teacher professional development approaches that are personalised, utilize collaborative dialogue, reflective feedback and distributed accountability, underscore some important components of effective TPD support found across different contexts. To help teachers embed HITS and improve learning outcomes, alternative mechanisms to the traditional coaching approach were leveraged such as internal peer coaching, utilising technology and online resources, communities of practice and professional learning communities.

## Conclusion

To effectively implement high impact teaching strategies (HITS) at scale, a comprehensive and adaptive approach is crucial. While the approaches to implementing HITS may vary across contexts, the overarching goal remains consistent: to empower teachers with the necessary support and resources to enhance their pedagogical practices effectively by sustainably embedding HITS at scale, while addressing common challenges in implementation, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and reflection, and exploring innovative approaches to drive meaningful impact and ultimately improve learning outcomes.



*Photo credit: The Citizens Foundation*

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