BREAKOUT ROOM 3

Realist Evaluation | Education Sector

Shiksha Pragati Teacher Training Programme, Odisha, India

Evaluation Question

Under what conditions does the teacher training intervention improve classroom practice, and for whom does it work best?

Context for International Participants | This dataset is set in Odisha, a state on India's eastern coast with significant Scheduled Tribe (indigenous) populations — approximately 22% — concentrated in southern and western districts. Government primary schools in India are administered by state education departments and staffed by government-employed teachers. Quality and resourcing vary dramatically between urban, peri-urban, and remote rural schools. SCERT (State Council of Educational Research and Training) is the state body responsible for curriculum development, teacher training, and learning assessments. BEd (Bachelor of Education) and MEd (Master of Education) are professional teaching qualifications; teachers without these hold a Diploma in Elementary Education (D.El.Ed). Para-teachers are contract-based teachers with lower pay and less secure tenure than regular government teachers — a common feature across South and Southeast Asia. Activity-Based Learning (ABL) is a structured pedagogy emphasising hands-on activities, peer learning, and formative assessment; it has been promoted across South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia as an alternative to rote instruction. Realist evaluation, as a method, seeks to identify Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations — the specific conditions under which an intervention triggers particular mechanisms that produce particular outcomes. The evaluation question is deliberately framed to elicit CMO thinking: 'under what conditions' and 'for whom' signal that the evaluators expect the answer to be conditional rather than universal.

SECTION A

Programme Document: Shiksha Pragati Teacher Training Programme

1. Background and Rationale

1.1 The Learning Crisis in Odisha's Primary Schools

Despite near-universal primary enrolment in Odisha — a significant achievement built over two decades through infrastructure expansion, midday meal programmes, and targeted tribal area interventions — learning outcomes remain deeply inadequate. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) consistently finds that a majority of children completing Grade 3 in Odisha cannot read a simple Odia sentence, and a majority completing Grade 5 cannot perform two-digit subtraction. These figures mask enormous variation: urban and peri-urban schools in coastal districts like Khordha perform significantly better than remote tribal schools in southern districts like Koraput and Malkangiri.

The proximate causes of poor learning outcomes are well-established in the research literature: teacher absenteeism (estimated at 20–25% on average across Odisha, with significantly higher rates in remote blocks); multi-grade teaching in single-teacher schools that serve a substantial proportion of tribal area students; a predominantly transmission-based pedagogy in which teachers lecture while students copy — an approach shown to be particularly ineffective with first-generation learners who do not receive academic reinforcement at home; and the medium of instruction problem, in which children from Odia-speaking homes are taught in Odia (a challenge), while children from tribal-language homes are taught in a language they may barely understand in Grade 1 (a crisis).

Teacher quality, as distinct from teacher presence, has received less systematic policy attention than absenteeism. The assumption in most government training systems has been that teachers know their content and need only pedagogical refreshers delivered in periodic 'cascade' training — district trainers train block trainers who train teachers, with each layer diluting and simplifying the original content. The Shiksha Pragati Programme was designed on the premise that this cascade model was producing inadequate pedagogical change, and that a more intensive, school-embedded training and mentoring model could shift actual classroom practice rather than just training attendance records.

1.2 Programme Genesis and Organisational Context

Vidya Cooperative is an education-focused civil society organisation established in 2004, with a track record of school improvement programmes in Odisha and Chhattisgarh. Its prior work — the Shiksha Sahayog programme (2014–2019) in Koraput district — had documented that teachers could change classroom practice when given sustained, school-based mentoring rather than residential training alone. The Shiksha Pragati programme was designed to test whether this finding generalised across three contextually different districts and whether the mentoring model could be made cost-effective at scale.

The programme was funded through a partnership between the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the Tata Education Foundation, providing a total of USD 5.8 million over three years. The State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) was the primary government partner, providing legitimacy, access to schools, and integration with the state's existing teacher professional development architecture. District educational

authorities were secondary partners, responsible for teacher release for residential training and for the posting of resource teachers who would deliver block-level mentoring.

A critical design decision was to deliberately select three districts with different contextual profiles — Khordha (peri-urban, relatively advantaged), Sundargarh (mixed tribal-non-tribal, significant multilingual challenge, high absenteeism), and Koraput (predominantly tribal, remote, high proportion of single-teacher schools) — in order to generate comparative data on which conditions enabled or inhibited the programme's mechanisms. This deliberate contextual variation was unusual in government-partnered programmes and reflected an explicit commitment to realist evaluation design from the outset.

1.3 The Political Economy of Teacher Training in Odisha

Teacher professional development in Odisha operates within a complex political economy that the programme design acknowledged but could not fully address. Government teachers are a politically organised constituency: the Odisha Primary Teachers' Association (OPTA) is a powerful union with close ties to state-level politicians. Any training programme that implies criticism of existing teacher performance risks generating organised resistance. The Shiksha Pragati programme navigated this by framing its training as 'professional development' and 'skill enhancement' rather than 'remediation,' and by ensuring that OPTA representatives were consulted during the design phase and briefed before district-level rollout.

This political accommodation had consequences. The programme's original design included a component of classroom observation data being shared with head teachers and district educational officers as part of a performance accountability loop. After consultation with OPTA, this component was modified: classroom observation data would be used for teacher self-reflection and mentoring feedback only, not for administrative performance assessment. The evaluation team notes that this modification — while politically necessary — removed the accountability mechanism that the programme's theory of change assumed would incentivise sustained practice change beyond the training period.

Para-teachers — contract-based teachers with lower pay and fewer protections than regular government teachers — constitute approximately 18% of the teaching workforce in the three programme districts. Their inclusion in the training programme was contested: OPTA initially argued that including para-teachers alongside regular teachers implied equivalence of status. A compromise was reached: para-teachers were included in training but in separate cohort groups, with shared plenary sessions but separate small-group practice components. The implications of this separation for peer learning across teacher categories are discussed in the transcript data.

2. Theory of Change

2.1 Intervention Design

The Shiksha Pragati programme delivered two complementary intervention components: a residential training module and a school-based mentoring system.

Component 1: Residential Training

A 5-day residential training module was delivered twice per year — in June (pre-monsoon, before the academic year began) and in November (mid-year, allowing reflection on first-semester implementation). Training was conducted at block resource centres — government facilities at the sub-district level — in groups of 25–30 teachers. Each training cycle covered: Activity-Based Learning principles and practice; multilingual instruction strategies (using children's home languages as a bridge to Odia instruction); formative assessment techniques;

classroom management for multi-grade and large-class settings; and reflective practice tools including lesson observation and peer feedback protocols.

Training was designed and delivered by Vidya Cooperative master trainers, with co-facilitation by SCERT district resource persons. A key design principle was that training content would be contextualised to the specific district: Khordha training used examples from peri-urban classrooms with predominantly Odia-speaking students; Sundargarh training foregrounded multilingual strategies; Koraput training devoted significant time to multi-grade teaching management. Despite this intention, field staff reported that the degree of contextualisation varied significantly by trainer rather than by district — some master trainers adapted fluidly; others delivered a largely standardised curriculum regardless of context.

Component 2: School-Based Mentoring

Resource teachers (RTs) — experienced teachers seconded to the block resource centre — were trained by Vidya Cooperative to provide school-based mentoring. Each RT was responsible for 18–22 schools, conducting monthly observation visits during which they observed a classroom lesson, gave structured feedback to the teacher using a standardised observation protocol, and facilitated a 30-minute post-observation discussion. RTs also facilitated monthly cluster-level meetings — bringing together 8–10 teachers from neighbouring schools — for peer observation, collaborative lesson planning, and problem-sharing.

The RT model was adapted from Vidya Cooperative's earlier Shiksha Sahayog programme, where a ratio of 1 RT to 12 schools had produced strong mentoring outcomes. The Shiksha Pragati model increased this to 1:18–22 to reduce cost. The evaluation midterm found that this ratio was too high for quality mentoring in remote areas: RTs covering remote Koraput schools spent significant time and energy on travel alone, reducing the time available for observation and feedback. In Khordha, where schools were more accessible, the ratio was manageable.

2.2 CMO Framework — Programme Theory

The realist evaluation was organised around a set of initial programme theories — hypothesised CMO configurations — developed collaboratively by Vidya Cooperative and the evaluation team at programme inception. These were refined through the data collection process. The initial CMO configurations were:

CMO 1: Training Quality x Teacher Motivation → Practice Change

Context: Teachers with adequate prior educational qualification (BEd or equivalent) who are posted in accessible schools. Mechanism: High-quality, contextualised training triggers genuine interest and self-efficacy — teachers believe they can implement ABL and see value in doing so. Outcome: Sustained shift in classroom practice toward activity-based approaches, measurable through classroom observation.

This CMO held strongly in Khordha. It held partially in Sundargarh for the subset of teachers with BEd qualifications. It held weakly in Koraput, where remoteness, multi-grade challenges, and low baseline educational qualifications interacted to limit both training absorption and implementation feasibility.

CMO 2: Mentoring Quality x School Leadership Support → Practice Consolidation

Context: Teachers who have received training and are attempting to implement new approaches. Mechanism: Regular, non-threatening observation and feedback from a trusted mentor, combined with visible support from the head teacher, reinforces experimentation and provides solutions to specific implementation problems. Outcome: Practice change that began after training is consolidated, deepened, and maintained over time rather than reverting to prior approaches.

This CMO was the most contextually variable. In schools where head teachers actively observed classes and encouraged new approaches, the mentoring mechanism worked as designed. In schools where head teachers were indifferent or actively sceptical of change, mentoring alone was insufficient to sustain teacher motivation. In remote Koraput, where mentor visit frequency was too low (every 6–7 weeks rather than monthly), the consolidation mechanism was weak even where both teacher motivation and head teacher support were present.

CMO 3: Mother Tongue Instruction x Linguistic Diversity → Early Engagement

Context: Classrooms with significant proportions of children whose home language differs from the medium of instruction (Odia). Mechanism: Teachers who use children's home language for initial concept introduction trigger recognition, familiarity, and participatory response from children who previously sat silent. Outcome: Increased classroom participation, particularly in the first hour of school, leading to better concept retention for non-Odia-speaking children.

This was the most consistently supported CMO across all three districts, including Koraput — where the home-language mechanism worked even in extremely resource-constrained settings. However, it was also the most constrained CMO: its implementation required teachers to speak the relevant home languages, which not all teachers could do, and in classrooms with three or four different home languages, the mechanism was difficult to operationalise.

CMO 4: Accountability Pressure x Professional Identity → Compliance Without Change

Context: Teachers who perceive training as a performance evaluation rather than a professional development opportunity, or who feel their existing practices are being criticised rather than developed. Mechanism: Defensive compliance — attendance at training, surface-level use of ABL vocabulary in post-training observations — without genuine pedagogical shift. Outcome: Training completion data looks positive; classroom observation data shows limited practice change.

This negative CMO — describing a context in which the intervention misfires — was documented most clearly in Sundargarh, among longer-serving teachers with established classroom routines who perceived the training as an implicit critique of their 15-year teaching practice. It was also observed among para-teachers who, excluded from the regular teacher cohort during small-group sessions, felt the programme's implicit message was that they were less valued — reducing their motivation to implement.

2.3 Key Assumptions and Their Status

Assumption 1 — Teachers have adequate time for implementation: The programme assumed that teachers with 5 days of training and monthly mentoring would have sufficient in-school time to experiment with new approaches. This assumption held for single-grade classroom teachers in accessible schools. It did not hold for single-teacher school teachers managing 3–4 grade levels, who reported that the cognitive and organisational demands of multi-grade management left insufficient mental and practical bandwidth for pedagogical experimentation.

Assumption 2 — Mentoring is feasible at the designed frequency: Monthly school visits by RTs were the programme's key consolidation mechanism. In Khordha, where schools were concentrated and accessible, this was achieved 84% of the time. In Sundargarh, 61%. In Koraput, 43%. The assumption did not hold in the most challenging context — precisely the context where sustained mentoring support was most needed.

Assumption 3 — Learning outcomes will respond to practice change within 3 years: The programme's theory of change assumed that measurable improvement in student learning

outcomes would be detectable by endline. The endline data shows significant variation: Khordha shows a 23-percentage-point increase in Grade 3 literacy benchmark achievement; Sundargarh shows 8 points; Koraput shows 5 points. The evaluation cannot determine the proportion of this variation attributable to the programme versus baseline differences, teacher absenteeism variation, and other school quality factors.

Assumption 4 — SCERT integration ensures sustainability: The programme was designed to progressively transfer training delivery responsibility to SCERT resource persons, building state capacity that would outlast the programme. At programme end, SCERT can deliver approximately 60% of the training content independently in Khordha and Sundargarh. In Koraput, SCERT capacity development lagged significantly — partly because SCERT resource persons in Koraput had higher turnover and lower baseline capacity than in the other districts.

3. Implementation

3.1 Trainer Development and Quality Assurance

Vidya Cooperative's master trainer cadre comprised eight trainers — six from Odisha, two from Chhattisgarh with prior ABL experience. Trainers underwent a 10-day development programme before programme launch and participated in monthly reflection meetings throughout. An internal trainer quality review at the 12-month mark found significant variation in facilitation quality: three trainers were rated 'highly effective' across all contextualisation dimensions; three were rated 'effective with limitations'; two were rated 'developing,' with specific gaps in multilingual instruction facilitation and multi-grade teaching management.

The two 'developing' trainers were assigned to districts with relatively lower multilingual complexity — Khordha — during the second training cycle, with the strongest trainers redirected to Koraput and Sundargarh. This was a reasonable adaptation but created an equity concern: the most challenging contexts were assigned more experienced trainers, but by this point the first training cycle had already been delivered with uneven quality in these districts.

3.2 Resource Teacher Preparation and Support

Resource teachers selected for the mentoring programme had an average of 14 years of teaching experience and had been identified through a nomination process involving district educational officers and school principals. Their preparation included a 7-day RT orientation programme focusing on observation protocols, feedback techniques, and facilitation of cluster meetings. A significant gap identified in the midterm evaluation was that RT preparation had not adequately covered how to mentor teachers who were resistant, defensive, or experiencing the observation process as threatening. RTs reported feeling unprepared for these interactions and defaulting to collegial support rather than developmental challenge in such cases.

RT support from Vidya Cooperative comprised monthly video calls with the programme's pedagogical advisor and quarterly in-person RT reflection meetings. Field staff described the video call support as useful for problem-solving but insufficient for developing the nuanced facilitation skills that effective mentoring requires. Several RTs noted that they felt professionally isolated — they had left their regular teaching positions for this secondment and did not always feel connected to either the school system or the programme team.

3.3 Multilingual Instruction — Implementation Challenges

The multilingual instruction component was, in the programme team's assessment, simultaneously the most theoretically sound and the most practically difficult element of the intervention. The challenge was not conceptual — teachers generally understood and accepted

the principle of using home languages to bridge to Odia instruction — but operational: implementing the principle in classrooms with 3–4 different home languages, when the teacher speaks only one or two of them, required improvisation that the training curriculum did not adequately prepare teachers for.

A specific challenge in Koraput emerged around the Kui and Gondi languages, spoken by substantial proportions of students in remote blocks. Neither the master trainers nor the district resource teachers were fluent in these languages. The training curriculum included basic multilingual teaching strategies but could not include Kui or Gondi-specific materials. Teachers in these classrooms were left to devise their own strategies — some did so creatively and effectively; others reverted to Odia-only instruction and accepted the silence of tribal-language children as an intractable reality.

A curriculum development initiative to produce Kui and Gondi bridge materials was discussed at the programme design stage but was not funded within the programme budget. SCERT had produced some materials but they were not widely distributed. Vidya Cooperative's programme team identified this gap at the midterm and raised it with FCDO; the donor expressed interest but noted that curriculum development was outside the programme's approved scope. The gap remained unaddressed at programme end.

3.4 Classroom Observation System

The programme's classroom observation system used a standardised 20-item observation tool developed by Vidya Cooperative, adapted from the Stallings Observation System used in Sub-Saharan African teacher training programmes. The tool captured time-on-task, student engagement indicators, evidence of ABL techniques, use of teaching-learning materials, and evidence of formative assessment. Observations were conducted by RTs during school visits and by programme staff during quality assurance visits.

The observation data revealed a consistent pattern: teachers performed better on observation days than on unannounced spot-check days. The gap between observed and spot-check performance was smallest in Khordha (approximately 12 percentage points on the overall score) and largest in Koraput (approximately 27 percentage points). This suggests that in Khordha, training had produced internalised practice change; in Koraput, a substantial proportion of the observed change was performance rather than genuine shift. Disentangling these is a core challenge for the realist evaluation.

4. District Profiles and Baseline Context

Khordha District

Khordha is Odisha's most urbanised district, containing the state capital Bhubaneswar. The programme targeted peri-urban and rural blocks within Khordha — not the city itself — but these blocks are more accessible, better-staffed, and more resourced than the programme's other two districts. Baseline teacher qualification levels in programme schools: 78% with BEd or equivalent (state average: 61%). Teacher absenteeism: 11% (state average: ~22%). School infrastructure: 91% with functional toilets, 84% with electricity. Baseline Grade 3 literacy benchmark achievement: 31%.

Sundargarh District

Sundargarh is a mineral-rich district in northwestern Odisha with a significant Scheduled Tribe population (approximately 50%) concentrated in forest and mining-adjacent blocks. The programme targeted three blocks with mixed tribal and non-tribal populations, significant multilingual classrooms (Sadri, Ho, Odia being the primary language groups), and historically

high teacher absenteeism. Baseline teacher qualification: 58% with BEd or equivalent. Teacher absenteeism: 22%. Infrastructure: 74% with functional toilets, 61% with electricity. Baseline Grade 3 literacy benchmark achievement: 21%.

Koraput District

Koraput is one of Odisha's most tribal and most remote districts, bordering Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The programme targeted five blocks in the district's eastern portion, characterised by predominantly Kui and Gondi-speaking communities, significant altitude and terrain challenges limiting school accessibility, and a high proportion of single-teacher schools (34% of programme schools). Baseline teacher qualification: 41% with BEd or equivalent. Teacher absenteeism: 28%. Infrastructure: 52% with functional toilets, 31% with electricity. Baseline Grade 3 literacy benchmark achievement: 16%.

5. Budget Overview

Total programme budget: USD 5.8 million (FCDO: USD 4.2 million; Tata Education Foundation: USD 1.6 million)

Allocation by category:

— Human resources (master trainers, RTs, programme staff, SCERT co-facilitation): 44% (USD 2.55 million)

— Training delivery (residential facilities, materials, transport): 19% (USD 1.1 million)

— Mentoring system (RT travel, cluster meeting facilitation): 12% (USD 0.7 million)

— Learning assessment (endline testing, classroom observation): 9% (USD 0.52 million)

— Multilingual materials development: 4% (USD 0.23 million)

— Realist evaluation: 7% (USD 0.41 million)

— Programme management and overheads: 5% (USD 0.29 million)

Cost per teacher trained (residential training, both cycles): USD 680. Cost per teacher receiving adequate mentoring (12+ visits over programme period): USD 1,840. Cost per student demonstrating Grade 3 literacy improvement attributable to programme (estimated, with wide confidence intervals): USD 290–620.

SECTION B

Interview Transcripts

Eight interviews were conducted between January and March 2025 as part of the realist evaluation's Phase 3 data collection. All interviews were semi-structured, lasting 60–115 minutes. The realist interview approach involved probing for specific examples of practice change and the conditions that enabled or prevented them, rather than soliciting general programme assessments. Interviews were conducted in Odia or Hindi with English translation. Names changed for privacy; school identifiers removed.

Transcript 1: Primary Teacher | Khordha District | 9 years of experience | BEd qualified | Grade 3 class teacher

Interviewee teaches at a peri-urban government primary school with a stable staff complement of five teachers. Her classroom was observed twice during the evaluation period — once on an announced visit and once unannounced. Both observations found consistent use of ABL techniques. Interview conducted at the school, after teaching hours. Interview duration: 95 minutes.

Interviewer: I want to start by asking you to describe your classroom before this programme and after. What's different?

Interviewee: Before: I used to arrive, write the lesson on the board, explain it, ask the children to copy, ask a few questions, give homework, and move to the next subject. I thought this was teaching. My own teachers taught me this way. My training college taught me this way in theory but then showed me how to teach in practice — which was the same. Write, explain, copy. After: it is genuinely different. Not completely — I still do some direct instruction, and I do not think that is wrong. But a class now has more movement, more noise, more mess. I use activity cards that I made from old calendars and magazine pages. I group children — not by sitting arrangement but by what they know. Some groups work on the same concept using different materials. Some work on a simpler version of the concept while others work on extension. I circulate. I listen more than I speak. The first time I tried grouping, the children did not know what to do. They were confused. They looked at me to give instructions. I had to resist giving instructions — which was harder than I expected. My instinct is to solve problems for them. The training had warned me about this — the trainer called it 'the rescue impulse.' I have worked on not rescuing. By the second month, the groups were functioning more independently. Children were helping each other. I heard explanations I would not have thought to give myself — a child explaining a concept to a peer in a way that worked for that peer but would not have occurred to me.

Interviewer: When you think about what enabled this change — what made it possible for you — what comes to mind?

Interviewee: Three things, when I am honest about it. First: the training itself was good. Not just the content — I had read about ABL before. It was the practice. We did the activities ourselves — we were the students for two days. I understood something about how a child feels when they are doing rather than receiving. That embodied understanding is different from reading about it. Second: Rekha didi — my resource teacher. She came every month, mostly. She observed my class and she never made me feel judged. The first observation, I was nervous — I reverted slightly to my old style because someone important was watching. She noticed

and she named it in the feedback session, which was uncomfortable but also exactly right. She said: 'I noticed the children did more listening than usual today.' She did not say I was bad. She said what she observed. And then she asked: 'What would you have done differently if I had not been there?' That question was more useful than any criticism. Third: my head teacher, Suresh sir. He came to my class twice and sat in the back, watching. Afterward he said — in front of two other teachers at the staffroom — 'Interviewee's class is functioning well. You should observe.' That public acknowledgment mattered more than I would have predicted. Teaching is a somewhat isolated profession. We work alone in our rooms. When someone with authority acknowledges your work publicly, it changes how you hold yourself.

Interviewer: Tell me about a child for whom this approach clearly worked — and one for whom it didn't.

Interviewee: Worked: a boy called Arjun. He has been in Grade 3 for two years — he failed Grade 3 the first time. When I took over this class, he sat in the back and did nothing. Not disruptive — absent, mentally. He had clearly concluded that school had nothing to offer him. In the second month of my ABL approach I introduced a sorting game with number cards. Arjun sorted faster than any other child in the class. He was competitive about it — he kept asking to go again. Something in the kinesthetic, competitive format reached him that the board-and-copy format had not. He is not at grade level yet — he reads at a Grade 1 level and does arithmetic at Grade 2. But he attends regularly now, which he did not before. He engages. His mother came for the parent meeting and asked what I had done differently. She said he talks about school at home now. He had not talked about school in two years. Did not work: a girl called Meena. Her family is seasonal migrants — her parents work in brick kilns in Chhattisgarh from November to February every year. She misses approximately four months of school. When she returns, she is behind. Activity-Based Learning requires cumulative participation — you build on the previous activity, you develop group dynamics, you establish classroom norms together. Meena arrives and the norms are already set. The groups have their internal dynamics. She is outside. I have tried to integrate her. I pair her with a patient child. I give her a 'catch-up' activity set that bridges what she missed. But the structural fact of her absence is something my pedagogy cannot fix. ABL is better for her than the old approach — at least she can participate physically when she is there. But the attendance gap is a constraint that sits outside the classroom.

Interviewer: What has been the hardest part of sustaining the change?

Interviewee: Two things. The first: my own inconsistency. There are days when I am tired — when I have had a difficult morning at home, or I have been asked to complete a government report by the end of the day and I know it will take three hours, or there is a training I have to attend in the afternoon and I am distracted. On those days, I revert. I give a direct lesson. The children are fine — they are used to both modes now, they adapt. But I notice it in myself and I feel it as a failure even when it is just a hard day. The second: the parents who are not sure about this approach. Two parents came to me and said their children were 'playing' in school rather than 'studying.' They had seen their children doing activity cards and groupwork and they interpreted this as the absence of serious learning. I explained. I showed them the children's progress records. One parent was satisfied; one remained unconvinced. He moved his child to a private school — a school where, ironically, the child will sit in rows and copy from the board, which is what this parent associates with serious education. I understand this. If I had been educated this way and my parents were educated this way and we turned out fine, why would I immediately trust a new approach? The programme did not have a significant parent engagement component. That is a gap.

Interviewer: If you could change one thing about how the programme was designed, what would it be?

Interviewee: The multilingual component needed to go much deeper. In my class, most children speak Odia at home — I am fortunate. But I have a colleague in this school whose class has twelve children who speak Santhali at home. She attended the same training I did. The multilingual sessions gave her principles but not tools — not actual Santhali words and phrases, not Santhali-to-Odia bridge materials, not Santhali-speaking support staff. She is improvising. She is doing her best. But she is not equipped for what her classroom actually requires. I think the programme assumed the multilingual challenge was similar across all three districts. It is not. My situation is much easier than my colleague's, which is much easier than a teacher in Koraput facing Kui-speaking children. One curriculum cannot serve all three. It needs to be genuinely contextualised, which means genuinely different content in different places, not the same content delivered with a note saying 'please adapt.'

Transcript 2: Primary Teacher | Koraput District | 4 years of experience | D.El.Ed qualified | Single-teacher school, Grades 1–4

Interviewee is responsible for 41 children across four grade levels in a remote school accessible only by a mud track that becomes impassable in monsoon. He was observed once during the evaluation period — an announced visit. The observation found consistent use of home-language introduction (Kui) for Grade 1 children, with mixed implementation of other ABL techniques. Interview conducted at Interviewee's home (the school was closed that day — the only other teacher who occasionally supports was absent). Interview duration: 80 minutes.

Interviewer: Tell me about your school and what teaching there actually looks like day to day.

Interviewee: My school has 41 children enrolled. On a typical day, 28–34 come. The others are absent — some because they work with their families in the fields, some because the path is difficult in wet weather, some because they are simply not motivated to come. I have four grades. I am one person. A typical morning: I arrive at 9. I put Grade 1 on a self-activity — sorting, drawing, something they can do without me. Grade 2 I give a reading task. Grade 3 and 4 I teach together for mathematics for thirty minutes, because the topics are related and I can differentiate within the lesson. Then I rotate. At any given time I am actively teaching one group and two or three groups are self-managing or on tasks I have set. This is before the training. What the training added: better designed tasks for the self-managing groups, so they are more productively engaged while I am with another group. Better use of peer teaching — older Grade 4 children helping Grade 2 children with a specific task. And the home-language instruction for Grade 1 — using Kui to introduce a concept before the Odia term. That was the most immediately useful thing from the training. But I want to be honest: the training was designed for single-grade classrooms. The examples, the role plays, the practice sessions — all single grade. When I asked the trainer how to apply ABL in a four-grade single-teacher classroom, she thought for a moment and said, 'You will need to adapt.' That is true but it is not guidance. I spent the first three months after training adapting, largely through trial and error, with my children as the experiment.

Interviewer: Tell me about the home-language instruction — how do you use Kui and what difference does it make?

Interviewee: I am Kui-speaking myself — I grew up in a Kui village not far from here. This is why I was posted to this school, I think — the district office tries to match teachers to linguistic communities when possible, though it does not always work. Before the training, I used Odia for all instruction. I had been trained in Odia, my textbooks are in Odia, and I assumed — without really thinking about it — that Odia was the only acceptable medium for school. When I used Kui with children, it was informal, unofficial — like speaking to them in the corridor but switching to Odia in the classroom. After the training, I understood this was pedagogically

wrong. A child who hears a new concept in a language they do not yet understand has no hook to hang it on. If I say 'ekam ekam ek' — one times one equals one — in Odia to a child who has never heard those words, it is sound without meaning. If I first say the Kui equivalent — 'edom edom ekam' — and connect it to something they know, the Odia term has a meaning to attach to. The difference in Grade 1 participation is observable. Before: the first thirty minutes of class were mostly silence from the Kui children — they were waiting to understand. After: they participate from the first few minutes. I see it in their faces. They are present in a different way. What I cannot do: the children whose home language I do not speak. There are seven children in my school who speak Gondi. I have approximately forty words of Gondi. When I reach their concepts in Gondi, I am pointing at objects, using pictures, using Kui as a bridge to Gondi when there is overlap. This is improvisation. The training told me to use home language. The training did not give me tools for a language I do not speak. I am doing my best.

Interviewer: Your resource teacher — how often does she come and what is the quality of the support?

Interviewee: Rekha didi — not my Rekha didi, a different one from the Koraput cluster — comes approximately every six or seven weeks. The monthly target is not achieved because the road to my school is a problem. In monsoon, the track to my school is mud. A motorcycle can sometimes get through; sometimes not. She has sent a message twice to say she could not come because the road was impassable. I understand. I do not blame her. When she does come, the visit is useful. She observes. Her feedback is honest. She told me once that my Grade 3-4 combined mathematics lesson was confusing — that I was pitching it at Grade 4 and losing the Grade 3 children. She was right. I had not noticed because I was managing so many things simultaneously. She suggested a specific modification — start with a Grade 3 concept that Grade 4 children can approach differently. I tried it. It worked better. But between visits, I am on my own. I have a colleague in the next village — she is also in the programme — and we talk when we meet at the cluster meeting. The cluster meeting is useful: we share problems, we observe each other once every two months. That peer support is the thing I rely on most. More than the RT visits, honestly, because it is more frequent and my colleague understands my context — she also has a multi-grade school.

Interviewer: What are your honest reflections on whether this programme has made a difference — to you, to your students?

Interviewee: To me: yes. I am a better teacher than I was three years ago. I think about my practice more deliberately. I reflect after a bad lesson instead of just moving on. I know what I am trying to do and why, not just following the textbook chapter by chapter. The training did this. The RT did this. The cluster meetings did this. That is real. To my students: some. The Grade 1 children who benefit from home-language instruction — yes, I believe the programme improved their experience and probably their learning. The Grade 2 and 3 children who use the better-designed self-activity materials — some improvement. The Grade 4 children who are the peer teachers for younger grades — I think this responsibility has developed their understanding in ways that conventional instruction would not. But I want to name something that the programme cannot change: twelve of my children come to school having eaten only minimally or not at all. The midday meal happens at one o'clock. By eleven, I can see some of them losing concentration. Learning requires energy. A child who is hungry learns less — not because they are less capable but because their body is working against them. I teach better now. Their stomachs are still the same. Also: school attendance. My attendance rate is around 72% on average. ABL, home-language instruction, peer learning — all of this requires the children to be there. The 28% who are regularly absent are missing the entire intervention. I cannot reach them through improved pedagogy. That requires something the programme does not provide.

Interviewer: What would you want a policy maker or programme designer to understand about your context?

Interviewee: That a single-teacher multi-grade school is not a version of a regular school — it is a fundamentally different teaching environment that requires fundamentally different training. The training I received was adapted at the margins for my context. It was not designed for it. I spent months translating general principles into multi-grade practice. A training specifically designed for single-teacher schools — which exist across tribal India, across Sub-Saharan Africa, across Southeast Asia — would have been immediately applicable rather than requiring months of translation. Also: the infrastructure matters. When I have no electricity, I cannot use audio materials. When the path is impassable, my children do not come and my mentor does not come. When there is no toilet, my older girl students sometimes do not come for specific days of the month. The programme can improve my pedagogy within the constraints of my infrastructure. It cannot substitute for infrastructure. These need to happen together, not in sequence.

Transcript 3: Resource Teacher (Mentor) | Sundargarh District | 18 years of teaching experience | Currently seconded to block resource centre

Interviewee covers 21 schools across two blocks in Sundargarh. Her school visit records were reviewed before the interview — her actual visit frequency averaged 5.4 visits per school per year against the target of 12, primarily due to one remote cluster of schools accessible only by motorcycle on unpaved tracks. She was candid about the gap and its causes. Interview duration: 100 minutes.

Interviewer: Describe what your work as a resource teacher actually looks like — not the plan, the reality.

Interviewee: The plan: I visit each of my 21 schools once a month, observe one lesson, give structured feedback, facilitate a 30-minute discussion, and connect the teacher to the cluster meeting the following week. The reality: I visit my accessible schools — twelve of them — approximately monthly. I visit my five remote schools every six to eight weeks, depending on road conditions. My four most remote schools — one cluster in Bonai — I visit every 8–10 weeks. The road to those schools is a mud track for the last 6 kilometres. On my motorcycle in dry season, it takes 90 minutes each way. In the rainy season it is sometimes not passable at all. When I do visit, the visit is almost always valuable — for me and for the teacher. But the gap between visits is too long. A teacher trying something new needs feedback within days, not weeks. When I come six weeks after they tried something and it failed, the moment has passed. They have either found their own solution or reverted. The mentoring research says frequency matters. I cannot achieve adequate frequency with 21 schools and this geography.

Interviewer: Tell me about the teachers who changed most significantly — what distinguished them?

Interviewee: The common factor in teachers who changed significantly: curiosity before the programme started. This sounds circular but I do not think it is. When I look back at the teachers in my cluster who made the most durable changes — four or five of them — all of them were already doing something non-standard in their classrooms before I arrived. One was using local stories to contextualise mathematical problems. One was doing a weekly 'question time' where children could ask anything. One was already grouping children, roughly, by what they observed about their understanding. The training validated and extended what they were already doing. It gave them a vocabulary — 'formative assessment,' 'differentiation,' 'scaffolding' — for practices they had invented. It gave them more techniques. It gave them the confidence that their instincts were pedagogically sound. The teachers who did not change, or changed only superficially: they came to training, they participated, they went back. The training was something that happened to them, not something they engaged with. In the first

few visits I could see they were using ABL vocabulary — they would say 'now we do a group activity' — but the activity was the same as the old task, just relabelled. The form changed, not the function. I spent more time with these teachers than with the already-curious ones, because the already-curious ones needed less from me. Whether this was the right allocation of my energy, I am genuinely uncertain.

Interviewer: What did you find hardest to mentor around?

Interviewee: Resistance from experienced teachers. There is a teacher in my cluster — I will call him Ravi sir — 22 years of service. He attended all the training. He is polite in the feedback sessions. He has never been impolite to me directly. But when I observe his class, I see: he stands at the front, he lectures, he calls on individual children to recite. Nothing has changed. When I probe — gently, with genuine curiosity, not accusation — he says: 'My children are learning. My results are fine.' And he is not wrong. His children do learn — he is a competent teacher by the old standard. But the children who are being left behind by his approach — the ones who cannot keep up with the pace of a lecture, who do not answer when called on because they are terrified of being wrong, who have stopped raising their hands — those children are not in his account of what is happening. I cannot force Ravi sir to change. The programme removed the accountability mechanism — the observation data does not go to his head teacher or district officer. All I have is persuasion and demonstration. Some teachers respond to this. Ravi sir does not. I have come to a kind of peace with this — he is not harming his children, he is just not changing his practice. But it sits in me as an unresolved question: what would it take, really, to shift a teacher whose worldview does not include the possibility that he might be wrong?

Interviewer: Tell me about the multilingual challenge in your specific context.

Interviewee: Sundargarh is complicated linguistically in a specific way. Sadri is spoken by a large proportion of the tribal population and is also used as a lingua franca across communities — it bridges Odia and various tribal languages. Some teachers speak Sadri. Some speak Ho. Very few speak both. The training gave us principles: use the home language as a bridge. But which home language? In one class I observed, I counted children whose home languages were Sadri, Ho, and Odia. The teacher speaks Odia and some Sadri. For the Ho-speaking children — three of them — she has no bridge. She has found a creative solution: she pairs Ho-speaking children with older students who speak some Ho and some Odia, asking the older children to translate. This is not in any training manual. It works imperfectly — the older children's translations are sometimes simplified or incorrect. But it is something. She invented it herself. I did not suggest this approach. When I observed it and asked about it, she explained it hesitantly — as if it might be wrong because it was not from the training. I told her it was a good adaptation. She seemed relieved. This tells me something about how the training positioned itself: as authoritative, as having answers. Teachers who deviated from the training's approach — even productively — were uncertain whether their deviation was permitted. That is not the spirit of reflective practice the programme was trying to build.

Interviewer: What is your assessment of whether the programme will have lasting impact in your cluster?

Interviewee: In Khordha: probably lasting. The programme there worked well and the SCERT there has the capacity to continue the training. The teachers who changed will largely maintain the change — it is now part of their professional identity. In my cluster in Sundargarh: mixed. The teachers who changed significantly will maintain it. The teachers who changed superficially will revert when the external pressure — the RT visits, the cluster meetings — stops. And it will stop. My secondment ends in June. The new RT who replaces me — if someone is posted — will need to rebuild relationships that took me 18 months to establish. The relational dimension of mentoring is not transferable. It starts from zero each time. For Koraput: I am genuinely

worried. The changes documented there are thinner, the SCERT capacity is lower, the RT coverage has been inadequate throughout. When the programme ends, those schools will return to the condition they were in before — not because the teachers are bad, but because the enabling conditions that the programme partially created will dissolve.

Transcript 4: Primary Teacher | Sundargarh District | 17 years of experience | No BEd (D.El.Ed only) | Resistant to programme approach

Interviewee was identified by the resource teacher as a 'resistant case' and was specifically sought out for this interview to capture the perspective of a teacher for whom the intervention did not produce visible practice change. He agreed to the interview and was candid, though initially defensive. His classroom observation score at endline (announced visit) was 41/100 — below the programme average of 62, and showing limited evidence of ABL adoption. Unannounced spot-check score: 28/100. Interview duration: 70 minutes.

Interviewer: Tell me about your experience of the Shiksha Pragati training.

Interviewee: I attended all the training. Both cycles, both years. I sat, I listened, I participated when asked. The trainers were professional. The content was — some of it was interesting. Some of it I had heard before in different forms. Some of it I thought was not realistic for my classroom. My classroom has 58 children. Fifty-eight children in a room designed for perhaps forty. I have children from Grade 3 and Grade 4 because the Grade 4 teacher was transferred two years ago and has not been replaced. The district says a replacement is coming. This has been the situation for two years. So I have 58 children, two grades, one room. The training showed me how to do Activity-Based Learning in a class of 30. Thirty children in a room with adequate space, with materials, with children who attend regularly. I asked the trainer: what do I do with 58 children, two grades, not enough materials, in a room where groupwork means children are physically on top of each other? She said: 'Scale appropriately.' I did not know what that meant in practice and she did not have time to explain further.

Interviewer: You've been teaching for 17 years. How do you understand what good teaching is?

Interviewee: I understand that my approach is not fashionable now. The fashionable thing is to say children must discover and explore and work in groups. I have been hearing this since my D.El.Ed in 2008. My understanding of good teaching: consistent, clear, patient explanation. Checking whether children have understood. Giving them enough practice to make the knowledge automatic. Following up on children who fall behind. I am in my classroom by 8:50, ten minutes before school starts. I know my children's names and something about their families. When a child was absent for a week last November with a fever, I sent a note through their sibling asking after them. I do these things consistently, every day, for seventeen years. The new training says all of this is not enough — that I need to change my delivery method. Maybe that is true for some teachers. I am not convinced it is true for me, with my children, in my classroom. The evidence they showed us — that ABL improves learning outcomes — came from studies in Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan. Is that evidence applicable to 58 children in Sundargarh, half of whom speak Sadri at home? I do not know. Nobody could tell me.

Interviewer: Tell me about the mentoring — your interactions with the resource teacher.

Interviewee: Priya didi is a competent person and she is genuinely well-intentioned. I want to say that clearly. My issue is not with her. When she comes to observe, I know she is looking for ABL. So I do some ABL. This is not dishonest — it is what the programme requires and I am a professional. I do what is required. When she gives feedback, I listen. I make notes. Some of her suggestions I have tried — two or three things I have kept because they genuinely helped with specific problems. One idea for managing a mixed Grade 3–4 mathematics lesson that she suggested: I use it now. So the mentoring is not useless. But the fundamental premise — that

my 17 years of practice was wrong and needs to be replaced — I have not accepted this. Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps my children would learn more with a fully ABL classroom. I do not know how to know this. The children who were in my class five years ago, before the training — some of them passed Grade 8 examinations at good rates. I do not have a clear sense that my teaching was systematically failing them. What I feel, when I am honest, is that this programme was not designed for someone like me. It was designed for young teachers starting fresh, or for teachers who had already identified problems in their practice and wanted help. I am neither. I am a mid-career teacher who has developed a working system. The programme wanted to change my system. It partially succeeded. It would have succeeded more if it had started from understanding my system rather than assuming it was wrong.

Interviewer: What would have made the programme more useful to you specifically?

Interviewee: Start by watching me teach before the training. Not to evaluate — to understand. Ask me what I find difficult, what I find works, what I have tried and abandoned. Then design the training around what I actually need, not what the manual says I need. Also: address my actual problem — 58 children, two grades, missing teacher. The programme improved my pedagogy by some amount. My fundamental problem — class size, multi-grade, vacancy — is unaddressed. If the government filled the vacancy tomorrow, my class would be 29 children, one grade. My existing approach and the ABL additions together would probably produce excellent results. The problem is not my teaching. The problem is the staffing. Nobody is working on the staffing.

Transcript 5: SCERT District Resource Person | Khordha District | Age 44 | Responsible for programme integration into state systems

Interviewee has been the SCERT liaison for the Shiksha Pragati programme in Khordha since year 1. She has progressively taken over facilitation responsibilities from Vidya Cooperative master trainers and is now co-facilitating training cycles independently. She was candid about what SCERT can and cannot sustain. Interview duration: 85 minutes.

Interviewer: What is SCERT's role in this programme and how has it evolved?

Interviewee: When the programme started, Vidya Cooperative was designing and delivering everything. SCERT resource persons — myself and two colleagues in Khordha — were co-present in the training but we were assisting, not leading. We did not fully understand the curriculum rationale. We knew what to do in each session but not always why. Over two years, through regular joint planning meetings with Vidya Cooperative's master trainers, I have come to understand the full curriculum and its rationale. I can now facilitate about 70% of the content independently. The 30% I am still less confident on: the multilingual instruction sessions (I have theoretical knowledge but limited practice implementing in diverse classrooms) and the formative assessment design sessions (the design thinking process takes facilitation skills I am still developing). The question of sustainability is often posed to me as: 'Can SCERT take over when Vidya Cooperative leaves?' My honest answer: in Khordha, yes, with some support. In Sundargarh and Koraput, I cannot speak for my colleagues there — their capacity development has been more limited because the programme's attention was also more limited in those districts, which is ironic given that they need the most support.

Interviewer: What in the SCERT system will support sustainability — and what will work against it?

Interviewee: For: the training has been incorporated into SCERT's annual calendar for the next two years. The observation tool has been officially adopted by the Khordha district education office. Three of the resource teachers who participated as mentors have been identified for integration into SCERT's permanent RT cadre. These are institutional anchors that will persist.

Against: SCERT transfers. I have been posted in Khordha for four years, which is unusually stable. SCERT resource persons are typically transferred every two to three years. When I am transferred — which could happen at any time — my successor will not have my understanding of this programme or my relationships with the teachers and RTs. Institutional knowledge in Indian government systems is stored in people, not systems. When the people move, the knowledge moves with them. Also against: the accountability gap. The programme's original design included classroom observation data feeding into teacher performance records. That was removed after the OPTA negotiation. Without accountability, the training is a professional development experience that some teachers will use and others will ignore. There is no consequence for ignoring it. In Khordha where teacher motivation is relatively high, this matters less. In Sundargarh and Koraput where motivation is more variable, the absence of accountability is a significant problem.

Interviewer: Tell me about the para-teacher situation — they were separated in training. What was the impact of that?

Interviewee: The para-teacher separation was a compromise I personally was uncomfortable with from the beginning. Para-teachers are 18% of the workforce in these districts. They are typically younger, less experienced, and — because of their precarious contract status — often more motivated to demonstrate competence. Several studies have found that well-supported para-teachers can be highly effective. The separation sent a message that contradicted the programme's stated values around inclusive professional development. In practice: the para-teachers who attended the separate cohort sessions reported feeling stigmatised. Two para-teachers in Khordha told me they had expected to learn alongside colleagues and felt the separation was a statement about their status. One of them — she is actually one of the most effective teachers I have observed in the programme — told me: 'I kept thinking, why am I in the other room? Is my learning different?' It is not a question with a satisfying answer. The programme team was aware of this. It was raised at the midterm. The compromise — shared plenaries but separate small groups — was presented as addressing the concern. I do not think it addressed the concern. It addressed the political constraint while leaving the symbolic problem in place.

Transcript 6: Para-Teacher | Koraput District | Age 26 | 3 years of service | Kui and Odia speaking

Interviewee is on a contract basis with significantly lower pay than regular government teachers (approximately 40% of a regular teacher salary). He was not seeking interview and was identified through a cluster meeting the evaluation team attended. He agreed when told his perspective on para-teacher experience was important to the evaluation. Interview conducted in Odia. Interview duration: 65 minutes.

Interviewer: Tell me about your work and your experience in the programme.

Interviewee: I have been teaching for three years. I teach Grade 1 and 2 in a school that has two regular teachers and me. The regular teachers have their grades — Grade 3, 4, 5. I have the youngest children. This is typical for para-teachers — we get the classes that are considered less important or that the regular teachers do not want. I am Kui-speaking. This was why I was placed here — my village is nearby and I can communicate with the tribal children. This is useful. It is also the entirety of why I was selected. Nobody asked whether I had any teaching ability. I speak Kui, I passed 12th standard, there was a vacancy. That was the selection. When Vidya Cooperative came and said there was training, I was interested. I had never received any formal teaching training. My first year of teaching I was learning by watching the regular teachers and by doing. I made many mistakes. The training — even the modified version we received as para-teachers — gave me the first systematic thinking about what I was doing and why.

Interviewer: What was your experience of being in the separate para-teacher cohort?

Interviewee: I will tell you exactly. The first training day, we were all together in the morning — plenary session. The trainer explained about learning by doing, about respecting all learners, about how every child deserves to be treated as a capable person. I agreed with every word. In the afternoon, they divided us. The regular teachers went to one room. The para-teachers went to another room. I sat in the other room and thought about the morning session — about treating every learner as capable, about not creating hierarchies among students. And I thought: am I not a learner right now? Am I not being placed in a separate room because of my status, not my ability? I did not say this out loud. I am a contract worker. My contract is renewed every year. The district education officer decides whether to renew it. I do not have the same freedom to speak as a regular teacher. The content in our room was simpler. The trainer spent more time on basics. I had already understood the basics from the morning plenary. I felt I was not being stretched. The regular teachers in the other room were, from what colleagues told me, having more complex discussions. I would have benefited from those discussions. I was not in them.

Interviewer: Despite that, what did you take from the training?

Interviewee: The home-language instruction. This I understood immediately and I applied from the first week back. I am Kui-speaking. My Grade 1 children are mostly Kui-speaking. For three years I had been teaching them in Odia because that is the textbook language. I did not know I was allowed to use Kui. The training told me this was not just allowed but recommended. The first week I used Kui to introduce the letters — the Odia letters, but explained first in Kui what each one represents. The children were different. They were loud. They were asking questions. One child — a girl who had been silent for her entire first month — asked me a question in Kui. I answered in Kui. She understood. She asked another question. It was the most productive teaching interaction I had experienced. I think this single change — using the home language — may have done more good than anything else in the programme. And it required almost no resources. Just permission and a small shift in how I understood my role.

Interviewer: What are your concerns about your future in teaching?

Interviewee: My contract. I have been renewed every year for three years. But contract para-teachers are not guaranteed renewal. The state has a programme to regularise para-teachers — to convert them to regular government teacher status — but the process is slow and the eligibility criteria change. Some of my colleagues who have been para-teachers for 8 or 9 years are still on contract. I want to become a regular teacher. I want the salary — it is four times what I earn now, for doing the same work. I want the job security. I want to be treated as an equal to my colleagues. The Shiksha Pragati programme improved my teaching. It did not change my contract status. Those are two separate problems. Only the government can fix the second one. My worry: if I am not renewed next year, the children in my Grade 1 class lose the teacher who speaks their language. My school has two other regular teachers, neither of whom speaks Kui. What happens to the home-language instruction I have built? It stops. The next para-teacher posted might not speak Kui. Or there might not be a next para-teacher. The school's functioning depends on people like me in a way that is not acknowledged in how people like me are paid or treated.

Transcript 7: SCERT State Director | Bhubaneswar | Age 54 | IAS officer responsible for teacher training across Odisha

Interviewee Agreed to an interview after the evaluation team submitted a formal request through the FCDO country office. She was prepared, spoke from notes, and was measured in her assessment. She requested a copy of the evaluation's preliminary findings before the interview — this was provided as a summary only, per evaluation protocols. Interview duration: 55 minutes.

Interviewer: From a state systems perspective, how do you assess the Shiksha Pragati Programme?

Interviewee: I will give you a structured answer because this is a complex question. On design: the programme made a serious attempt to address a real problem — the inadequacy of cascade training models — with an evidence-based alternative. The residential plus school-based mentoring combination is theoretically sound and empirically supported by the international literature. The deliberate contextual variation across three districts was unusual and evaluatively valuable. The realist evaluation design was a sophisticated choice that I wish more programmes in this sector adopted. On implementation: strong in Khordha, adequate in Sundargarh, weak in Koraput. This is a familiar pattern in Odisha. Programmes that work well in more accessible, better-resourced districts do not automatically translate to remote tribal areas. The programme's design acknowledged this risk — the deliberate district selection was partly intended to generate comparative data on this question. The data it has generated confirms what experienced practitioners already knew: the same intervention, delivered differently and received differently, produces different outcomes. The value is in understanding why.

Interviewer: What is SCERT's plan for sustaining what the programme has built?

Interviewee: We have incorporated the training curriculum into SCERT's own professional development calendar for the next two academic years in all three districts. We are integrating the classroom observation tool into our quality assurance system. We are working to regularise the resource teacher model — to make it a permanent feature of the block resource centre system rather than a programme-specific intervention. But I want to be honest with you about what SCERT can and cannot sustain. SCERT's training capacity is good in coastal and semi-urban districts. In Koraput, we have a SCERT presence but the resource person cadre has high turnover and limited capacity in the more specialised modules — particularly multilingual instruction and formative assessment design. Vidya Cooperative has offered a six-month capacity building support package for SCERT Koraput staff. We are in discussion about this. I am supportive. I am not certain it will be funded within existing budget lines. The observation data sharing question: the original programme design included accountability linkages that were removed after OPTA negotiations. I understand why the programme made that compromise — you cannot implement a programme without teacher cooperation, and OPTA can make implementation very difficult when it chooses to. But from my perspective as the state's chief teacher development officer, accountability is the missing piece. Professional development without accountability produces change in some teachers and no change in others. The proportions in this programme — my estimate is 40% genuine change, 40% partial change, 20% minimal change — would shift significantly if there were consequences for the 20%.

Interviewer: What is your view on the para-teacher situation within this programme?

Interviewee: The para-teacher separation was a mistake and I said so at the design stage. My view was overruled because of OPTA concerns. I understand the political reality — OPTA has influence over teacher cooperation in ways that affect not just this programme but our entire quality improvement agenda. But I believe we made the wrong trade-off. Para-teachers are

the teaching workforce in many of our most remote schools. If we do not invest in their professional development at the same level as regular teachers, we are accepting inferior education for children in remote tribal schools — which are already the most disadvantaged schools in the state. That is an equity problem I am not comfortable accepting as a political necessity. I am pushing for a follow-on programme that specifically targets para-teacher professional development, without the OPTA constraint, in schools where para-teachers are the primary or only teacher. Vidya Cooperative has expressed interest. Funding is uncertain.

Transcript 8: Programme Director | Vidya Cooperative | Age 42 | Based in Bhubaneswar

Interviewee has led Vidya Cooperative's Odisha work since 2018 and designed the Shiksha Pragati programme from inception. She was extensively involved in the realist evaluation design and has been a close collaborator with the evaluation team. She is reflective, analytically rigorous, and candid about failure — including in areas she feels personally responsible for. Interview duration: 110 minutes.

Interviewer: Looking back across three years — what do you understand differently now than when you designed this programme?

Interviewee: Several things that I think are genuinely important. First: I underestimated the role of school leadership. The CMO framework we developed at inception included school leadership as a context variable, but we weighted it less than I would now. The data across all three districts shows that head teacher engagement is among the strongest predictors of whether training produces sustained practice change. In schools where the head teacher observed classes, encouraged experimentation, and acknowledged teachers publicly — regardless of district, regardless of teacher qualification — change was more durable. In schools where head teachers were indifferent, even highly motivated teachers showed more reversion over time. The implication: teacher training programmes that do not invest substantially in school leadership development are working with one hand tied. We had a small head teacher component — four hours in year 2. It should have been a whole programme strand from day one. Second: I underestimated the complexity of mentoring as a skill. We prepared resource teachers for the mechanics of observation and feedback. We underprepared them for the relational and psychological dimensions — how to work with a resistant teacher, how to give feedback that challenges without threatening, how to maintain a developmental stance when you are also expected to collect data for programme M&E purposes. Several RTs told me in reflection sessions that they felt caught between their mentoring role and their data collection role. When they were collecting data for the programme, they were in an evaluative position. When they were mentoring, they were supposed to be in a developmental position. Teachers noticed this dual role and it made some of them less open in the feedback sessions. Third: the sustainability plan was optimistic. I designed a programme that would 'build SCERT capacity' in three years. That was always ambitious. What we actually built: strong capacity in Khordha, moderate capacity in Sundargarh, fragile capacity in Koraput. The design assumed SCERT's baseline capacity was similar across districts. It was not. That assumption should have been tested before design, not discovered during implementation.

Interviewer: Tell me about the Koraput experience specifically. What went wrong?

Interviewee: Several things compounded. The RT caseload was too high for the geography. I knew this at the design stage — our earlier Shiksha Sahayog programme used a 1:12 ratio. The Shiksha Pragati design used 1:18–22 to reduce cost. The donors wanted to maximise coverage. I should have pushed back harder. In Koraput, with its terrain and remote schools, the difference between 1:12 and 1:20 is not linear — it is the difference between functional mentoring and tokenistic visits. The SCERT Koraput resource persons had higher turnover

than projected. We trained three SCERT resource persons in year 1; two transferred by year 2. Their replacements required re-training that we had not budgeted time or money for. This created a programme management fire that consumed attention that should have gone to quality. The multilingual curriculum gap — Kui and Gondi. I tried to address this through a curriculum development sub-grant in year 2. The sub-grant was approved for Odia-language bridge materials only. Kui and Gondi were out of scope per the donor's approved work plan. I escalated to FCDO. The response was sympathetic and slow. By the time any curriculum development could have been commissioned, we were in year 3 with insufficient time to develop, pilot, and integrate materials. And the single-teacher school problem. Thirty-four percent of Koraput programme schools are single-teacher schools. Our training was designed for single-grade classrooms. I knew this mismatch existed. I did not find a satisfactory solution. The adaptations we made — additional multi-grade sessions, supplementary materials — were helpful at the margin. They did not solve the fundamental design mismatch. Teachers like Mahendra are doing extraordinary things with inadequate preparation, and the programme should take responsibility for that inadequacy.

Interviewer: How do you think about the teachers who didn't change — the Dilip Mohantys — within the programme's theory of change?

Interviewee: This is something I have thought about a great deal. My initial instinct is to say: some teachers will not change regardless of what the programme does, and the programme's responsibility is to the teachers who can change and the children they teach. Dilip is not a bad teacher. His children are not failing catastrophically. The programme cannot and should not try to overcome all professional inertia in a three-year intervention. But then I think about what Dilip actually said — and I read the transcript from his interview — and I think he is right about something important. He asked why the training started from the assumption that his practice was wrong, rather than from understanding his practice and building on it. That is a design criticism I cannot easily dismiss. Adult learning theory says exactly what he said: start from existing knowledge and practice. The programme's design paid attention to the content of what to teach but less attention to how to teach experienced practitioners who have built professional identities around their existing approaches. If I were redesigning the programme, I would start with a 'teaching practice inventory' — a session at the beginning of the first training where teachers share what they already do and why, what they find effective, what they find difficult. The training would then be explicitly framed as building on and extending existing practice, not replacing it. This is a small framing change with significant implications for teacher engagement, particularly for experienced mid-career teachers.

Interviewer: Final question — what would you want evaluators, using the data from this programme, to understand about what realist evaluation can and cannot tell you?

Interviewee: Realist evaluation is the right method for this programme and I believe it has generated more useful knowledge than a conventional pre-post evaluation would have. But I want to name its limitations honestly. It is resource intensive. The three rounds of qualitative data collection, the CMO framework development and refinement, the analytical work of constructing explanatory accounts — this requires skilled evaluators with significant time. We budgeted 7% of the programme for evaluation, which is above average. Some programmes cannot afford this. For them, realist evaluation is theoretical aspiration rather than practical possibility. It produces findings that are harder to communicate to decision-makers than simple 'this worked / this did not work' conclusions. The answer 'teacher training improves practice under conditions X, Y, and Z but not under conditions A, B, and C' is accurate. It is also harder to act on than 'teacher training improved learning outcomes by X percentage points.' I have had to work hard to help FCDO understand why the realist findings are more useful than a counterfactual impact evaluation would have been — even though the realist findings are less amenable to the kind of simple, scalable policy conclusions that donor agencies often want.

And finally: realist evaluation tells you what worked in the contexts you studied. The CMO configurations we have identified are generative — they suggest mechanisms that might work in other contexts. But they are not universal laws. A teacher training programme in Uganda or Bangladesh would be working with different teachers, different school systems, different political economies of teacher unions, different languages. The CMO framework is a hypothesis generator for those contexts, not a prescription. The honest use of this data is to say: here is what we found, here is why we think it worked or did not work, here is what you should test in your own context. The dishonest use is to say: this worked in Odisha, therefore do it everywhere.