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Early career teacher mentoring in England: a case study of compliance and mediation

Lisa Murtagh[a], Louisa. Dawes[a], Elizabeth A.C. Rushton[b,c] and Claire Ball-Smith[d]

[a]Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; [b]Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment, Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK; [c]Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Stirling, Scotland, UK; [d]Department, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings from a small-scale study of ten mentors' experiences of supporting Early Career Teachers (ECTs) in secondary schools in England following the introduction of the Early Career Framework (ECF) in 2021. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with individual mentors based in London, Manchester and York, UK. The findings suggest that mentors experience some challenges supporting ECTs through the use of mandated training materials. The data report the contradictions of being required to support trainees through a programme governed by the statutory requirements of the Department for Education (DfE) in England, whilst also being part of a complex, nuanced school community. The authors examine mentors' experiences as they balance the compliance requirements of the ECF alongside seeking to support ECTs with the realities of classroom life in their own settings. The paper discusses the emergence of a mediated mentor professionalism as mentors seek to navigate competing demands. We argue that this case study illustrates the potential for the international sector to challenge postulated solutions of homogenised mentoring curricula and practices to the recruitment and retention of ECTs.

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Introduction

Entering the teaching profession is one of the most influential stages in a teacher's professional life, with the first few years in particular determining career length and job satisfaction (Ingersoll and Strong 2011). However, research evidence, nationally and internationally, indicates that some countries continue to experience extensive proportions of Early Career Teacher (ECT) attrition within five years of entry. Rates of between thirty and fifty per cent are reported in Australia (Kelly *et al.* 2019), England (Allen and Sims 2018), the United States (Sutcher *et al.* 2019) and Chile (Educar 2021). Research highlights that this attrition can lead to reduced educational quality and wasted invested public resources in teacher education (Watlington *et al.* 2010, Hanushek *et al.* 2016). Notably, high attrition rates found in contexts such as the United States, Australia and Chile also have high levels of accountability and performativity, including in relation to teacher education (Goodwin 2021).

In England, teacher retention is a persistent and seemingly intractable challenge and in response to this concern, the Department for Education (DfE), with jurisdiction in England, published two documents relating to the work of ECTs; The 'Early Career Framework' (ECF) (DfE 2019a) and

CONTACT Lisa Murtagh lisa.murtagh@manchester.ac.uk Manchester Institute of Education, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M139PL UK

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'Reducing workload: supporting teachers in the early stages of their career' (DfE 2019b). The ECF reforms were launched as part of the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy (Hinds 2019) with the intention of supporting ECTs through the provision of a government funded entitlement to a structured 2-year package of professional development. The ECF is designed to support early career teacher development in five core areas – behaviour management, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and professional behaviours, and is aligned to the Teachers' Standards (DfE 2011). The Teachers' Standards in England define the minimum level of practice expected of pre-service and in-service teachers and are used to assess all those working towards achieving Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), and all those completing their statutory induction period.

As part of the ECF, schools can choose from six training providers known as 'lead providers' to access funded training for both mentors and ECTs. Schools who choose to implement their own approach do not have access to funding. Such a focus on mentoring and mentor training is to be welcomed, especially as research underlines the lack of formalised mentoring programmes in schools, which results in inconsistent mentoring opportunities and support for new teachers (Beutel *et al.* 2017, Lofthouse 2018, Authors 2020). Given the anticipated £130 million annual cost of the ECF, it is important to explore the perspectives of those at the heart of the delivery package from the outset, particularly given that Shanks *et al.* (2022, p.761) conclude that: 'whether there is a national teacher induction scheme or not, does not appear to be as important as the infrastructure of support, training and education involved and how support is shared and communicated'. As such, this paper reports the findings of a small-scale qualitative case study designed to consider and foreground the voices of ten mentors who are at the forefront of implementing the ECF in schools. As teacher educators working in higher education institutions during the implementation of the ECF we draw on our own professional experiences of working with mentors during this period of significant and rapid change. We argue that these insights, coupled with the experiences of ten mentors as the sector navigated the first year of the implementation of ECF, allows further reflection as to the support needed for those tasked with the induction of ECTs into the profession.

Teacher retention and mentor training

Teacher retention is widely acknowledged as being fundamental to resolving teacher shortage issues yet, as noted earlier, attrition is occurring at all career stages, and appears to be particularly problematic for ECTs. The early stages of a teaching career can be overwhelming and stressful as ECTs navigate the challenges of the realities of classroom life, and they often experience a 'reality shock' (Wang and Odell 2002) or a difficult transition from the relative security of being student teachers (Kelchtermans 2019). Mentoring of ECTs is widely recognised as having a significant role to play in supporting ECTs and securing their retention. Ingersoll and Strong (2011), for example, concluded there is empirical evidence that induction support and, in particular, mentoring are having positive effects. Yet despite the significance of the role of the mentor, Butler *et al.* (2010) argue that mentors are often selected for the role based on the assumption that anyone who has taught can effectively mentor. This 'sink-or-swim' approach to preparing mentors leads to ambiguity about the specific roles and responsibilities required (Butler *et al.* 2010, p. 297). Coupled with this, Hennissen *et al.* (2011) and Wang and Odell (2002) claim that mentoring is not necessarily a 'natural skill' for mentors themselves; not all teachers are predisposed to mentoring. Weak methods of mentor selection can lead to some mentors undertaking the role when they are ill-equipped to do so and as a consequence, Hobson and Malderez (2013) concluded that despite its possibilities, mentoring has yet to reach its full potential.

There is evidence to suggest that mentor training programmes increase the positive impacts that mentoring can have on the growth of both the skills and knowledge of mentees (Evertson and Smithey 2000, Wang and Odell 2002) and such programmes are acknowledged as helpful provisions for mentors as they support ECTs in adjusting to their working environments and in supporting

ECT retention (Shanks *et al.* 2022). Notably, important differences have been reported depending on the quality of the offered training programmes and the skill of the available mentors (Long *et al.* 2012). Beutel *et al.* (2017) note that studies detailing the content and structure of effective mentor training programmes are important in collectively understanding the mentoring skills and resources associated with effective mentoring of beginning teachers. Bullough (2005) for example, suggests that mentor preparation should move beyond solely training and include occasions for collaborative, dialogic spaces to allow mentors to engage with each other to not only reduce mentor isolation, but to facilitate the development of a shared discourse for mentoring and development of mentoring practices and pedagogies (Hobson *et al.* 2009). As Hunzicker (2010, p. 3) notes, mentors are adult learners who 'prefer open ended learning opportunities and a voice in the direction and pace of the learning', which raises concerns about the efficacy of state-mandated mentor training where content and delivery are pre-determined.

Approaches to mentoring

Supporting ECTs during the early stages of their career has been the topic of considerable debate. In the 1980s, a humanistic influence and concerns associated with teacher attrition emphasised the importance of the mentor's emotional support. This resulted in an emphasis on practical reasoning, whereby the mentor's role was to promote reflective practice (Schön 1983) and to provide practical and contextual advice (Peiser *et al.* 2022). Amidst concerns, however, that that mentor modelling of suitable behaviours led to the reproduction of the status quo, the 1990s saw a shift to a more critical constructivist approach whereby mentors and their mentees would act as agents of change, with such a perspective favouring collaborative and educative mentor – mentee relationships (Peiser *et al.* 2022). Despite the contrasting perspectives, research has concluded that ECTs value multiple approaches: valuing role-modelling behaviour, interpersonal skills and the ability to promote reflective discussion, and simultaneously valuing opportunities to develop their teacher voice and identity, suggesting, as Peiser *et al.* (2022, p. 188) conclude 'that the humanistic and educative orientations should operate in tandem'.

Traditionally, literature documents the mentor's approach to the role as being centred on a relationship whereby the experienced teacher inculcates the novice to develop new competences (Murray 2001) through their knowledge, power and status (Ehrich and Hansford 1999). McIntyre and Hagger (1996) document a wide range of benefits for mentees in this mentoring process, which include: reduced feelings of isolation, increased levels of confidence, self-esteem and job satisfaction and professional development. Furthermore, mentors are seen as having a key role to play in the socialisation of their mentees; providing them with the support to adapt to teaching norms, standards and expectations (Hobson *et al.* 2009). Concomitantly, research has demonstrated that ECTs supported by mentors who receive training in how to professionally mentor are more likely to alter and reframe their teaching practices (Evertson and Smithey 2000). Whilst mentor training, as noted earlier, is widely acknowledged as being supportive in maintaining consistency of support the learning and support needs of new teachers are complex. As such, research notes that mentoring is most effective when it is fit for purpose and is driven by the beginning teachers' needs (Hobson *et al.* 2009), where mentors acknowledge that ECTs are adults and therefore employ strategies that build upon ECTs' prior knowledge and current stage of professional development (Hobson *et al.* 2009). Research evidence from a range of contexts including Canada, China, Israel, Jamaica and Sweden also suggests school composition and size, locational and contextual challenges, such as the nature of neighbourhoods, contribute to ECT attrition (Camacho and Parham 2019, Ovenden-Hope and Passy 2020). As such, school-level and community-based support for ECTs plays an important role in mentoring, as mentors support ECTs in successfully navigating school politics, norms and cultures, developing, as Kelchtermans and Vanassche (2017, p. 445) note, 'micropolitical literacy'. This echoes aspects of Hobson's (2016) notion of ONSIDE mentoring. Hobson notes that as vulnerable learners, ECTs need mentors to support their learning, development, well-being, and

integration into the cultures of the organisation in which they are employed as well as the wider profession. This places the onus on the mentor to be cognisant not only of the needs of the mentee, but of the needs of the school or college in which the ECT is employed.

The place of phronesis in professional learning

The mentor role of inculcating the ECT into specific and highly contextual school environments, we assert, is at odds with the current epistemological positioning of professional learning in education. The ECF (DfE 2019), like much of the Continuing Professional Development, (CPD) within the profession in England (e.g. National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) etc.) espouses a one size fits all, 'spectator view of knowledge' that relies on knowledge being static, and independent of the observer's reality (Biesta 2010, p. 495). This representation of teachers' work privileges and values a technical-rational application of scientific, evidence-based knowledge that diminishes what Schön (1983, p. 43) refers to as the professional decision making made in the 'swampy lowlands of practice'. This is supported by Plowright and Barr (2012) whose work has been helpful in outlining the complexities of teachers' thinking and decision-making in the classroom whilst drawing attention to the confines of reducing teacher decision-making to merely cognitive processes that can be 'packaged' and transmitted to practitioners. We argue that the troubling development of evidence-based practice advocated by the likes of Slavin (2002) and Hattie (2009) and advanced by the Education Endowment Foundation (n.d.) has contributed to a new version of teacher professionalism. This approach diminishes the 'effective' teacher into a mere technician who implements pre-ordained techniques (Leaton Gray 2007) and promotes specific, 'authorised' pedagogies (Hayes and Comber 2018, Dawes, 2022) that position teachers to teach in the 'right' way regardless of their context. This new era of teacher professionalism and training, with its high levels of prescription and scrutiny, has therefore shaped teachers' ability to make professional decisions based on their own judgements. This has impacted mentor training in England.

We contend that this has led to authorised mentor training approaches and content knowledge, at the expense of considering the importance of *phronesis*. *Phronesis* is generally defined as practical wisdom or knowledge which informs and improves practice i.e. knowledge that is connected to *praxis* (Dunne 1993), a concept derived from Aristolean logic (Barnes 1984). This sits in opposition to *techne* - a 'technical rationality that can be seen as an attempt to extend the standpoint and the benefits – in terms of detachment, explanatory power, universality and control – of a certain kind of theory' (Dunne 1993, p. 11). Aristotle conceptualised *phronesis* (practical knowledge) as remaining forever experimental in nature. It involves deliberation that is based on values, concerned with practical judgement and informed by reflection, and is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, and oriented towards action (Kinsella and Pitman 2012). Gadamer (2003) warns us that to prioritise knowledge through a guaranteed *techne* method (what Gadamer refers to as 'empirical method') ignores knowledge which is embedded in practice. Such preoccupations with empirical method (*techne*) suggest a standardisation of experience is possible: the ECF is an example of method being placed on the activity of teaching with new professionals. But Gadamer's work would suggest that when human activity is dictated by any empirical method, we lose both 'the inner historicality of experience' (Gadamer 2003, p. 311) and the possibility of a more hermeneutic interpretation of human experience (Gadamer 2001). By virtue of overlooking the significance of *phronesis* in the context of mentoring, the consequence has been a reductive form of mentoring; to what we might call mentoring of the same, rather than mentoring of differences; echoing Lingard's (2007, p. 248) notion of 'pedagogies of the same, rather than pedagogies of difference'.

Research design

Creswell (2013, p. 296) refers to the importance of a theoretical case study. Adopting a theoretical perspective provides an overall orienting lens that: '.becomes an advocacy

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Pseudonym	Location	Date of Interview	Years as a Mentor	Subject Specialism
Ali	London	October 2021	2	Geography
Beth	Manchester	November 2021	4	Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)
Carl	Manchester	November 2021	1	Business Studies
Jack	London	November 2021	1	Science
Yolanda	York	June 2022	5	Physics
Vini	York	June 2022	1	Geography
Wendy	York	Sep 2022	30+	English BUT ECT mentor for Modern Foreign Languages (MFL)
Jenny	London	March 2022	7	Geography
Maria	London	October 2021	1	English
Diane	London	March 2022	7	Mathematics

perspective that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analysed, and provides a call for action or change.' The research underpinning this paper is premised on a case study whose theoretical lens is that of *phronesis*, the active recognition of the practical wisdom that underpins professional development. In the field of qualitative research methodology, case study is discussed as a significant qualitative strategy or tradition. It is considered a robust research method, particularly in providing holistic and in-depth explanations of the social and behavioural problems in question (Creswell 2013). A case study approach was therefore chosen for its appropriateness in exploring the perceptions of mentors working to support ECTs based in secondary schools (pupils aged 11–18 years) during their statutory induction period in England. This paper reports on data collected from an opportunity sample of ten ECT mentors aligned with Initial Teacher Education provision across three Higher Education Institutions located in three distinct geographical areas in England: London, York and Manchester. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, each lasting 30–40 min during October 2021–September 2022 (Table 1.)

The questions guiding the interview were:

- Can you tell us about your planned ECT induction or support for September 2021 onwards?
- What plans do you have in place to deliver the Early Career Framework from September 2021?
- Do you feel the ECF will meet the development needs of ECTs?
- Do you feel the ECF will meet the subject development needs of teachers?
- What additional support (if any) would you like to give the teachers you work with?
- What additional support (if any) would you like to receive in your role?

Due to the geographical locations of the participants, the interviews were conducted online and were audio and video-recorded. The participants in the interviews were from secondary school settings. Data were collected by the four members of the research team and transcribed by an independent transcriber.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by author 3's university Ethics Committee on 6 August 2020. Respondents participated on a voluntary basis and in line with British Education Research Association ethical guidelines (BERA 2018). Informed consent serves to make sure that respondents comprehend what they agree to so they can make an informed and voluntary decision as to whether they want to participate or not (Keller and Lee 2003). It was made explicit to participants the purpose of the study and that in participating they were free to opt out at any time Participants were also informed about the retention, sharing and uses of the research data.

Analysis

Data from the interviews were analysed through the use of Braun and Clarke's (2020) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach to locate the most common and salient themes and patterns of meaning within the data. Key stages included:

(1) Familiarisation with the data
(2) Coding of the data to generate brief labels for important features
(3) Searching for themes
(4) Reviewing themes
(5) Defining and naming themes
(6) Writing up

The transcribed interviews were distributed to the four researchers for independent analysis. The researchers then met and discussed the preliminary data analysis and refined the identified themes categories collaboratively. Once the preliminary analysis was completed, the researchers all discussed and finalised the coding, using direct quotes from the data to refine the emergent themes (Schreier 2014). Our approach to analysis was predominantly inductive (constructivist and data-driven), where meanings in the data were emphasised; however, deductive (essentialist and theory-drive) coding was also used to ensure the analysis remained relevant to the overarching theoretical framework, including that of phronesis. As authors of this paper, and as teacher educators, we believe that it is important to note that our position is not impartial with regard to the development of the ECF. As providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) we acknowledge that we have a vested interest in supporting mentors and our alumni ECTs. However, our analyses were shaped and enriched by our knowledge and beliefs (Fox 2008) and our expertise and positionality as teacher educators and researchers should be understood as a resource on which to draw throughout the analytical process, rather than inhibiting knowledge production (Braun and Clarke 2019). For example, our analysis was situated within our long-standing knowledge of teacher education, the work of mentors and effective partnerships between schools and higher education institutions.

Results

The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of mentors of ECTs in England, and whilst the purpose was broadly an open inquiry into their experiences, what the analysis uncovered were conflicting issues associated with *phronesis* and the significant impact of mentors' 'practical wisdom' in supporting pre-service teachers. Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the data resulted in the emergence of three central themes: (1) Authorised Content Knowledge, (2) Authorised Mentor Training Methods and (3) Compliance and Mediation (Table 2).

Authorised content knowledge

Evidence from the data highlights a gap in the ECF framework and consequent training sessions ECTs and mentors undertake. There was consensus that subject specific ECF training is notably absent, and training does not always meet the specific needs of trainees, with mentors questioning whether any aspect would support the development of subject knowledge (Table 2). As Diane reflected,

> 'it was very hard to focus on the process of planning a scheme of work, when all of the content that they were using was not focused on our subject'.

Coupled with this, concerns were raised that the training and support materials seem to be weighted much more towards the Primary phase of education (Table 2). As well as a lack of subject and age-

Table 2. Themes, sub-themes and indicative quotes.

Themes	Sub-themes	Indicative quotes
Authorised Content Knowledge	Lack of subject specificity	It's all about the teaching rather than subject specific teaching. (Ali)
		The fact is that the research is often not based on MFL [Modern Foreign Languages]. (Yolanda)
	Lack of age-phase specificity	It's so generic because it's primary. . .the videos . . . a lot of it is primary . . . about how to shape letters . . . [ECTs] want more subject specific [content]. (Yolanda)
	Deficit model of mentors and ECTs	I've attended a few [ECT mentor training sessions], but I didn't really find them helpful. There wasn't any anything that I didn't know. . .they're quite lengthy sessions . . .I didn't feel like it was benefiting me. (Jenny)
	Lack of autonomy and personalisation	The subject needs are being addressed more by mentor meetings rather than by the provided content. . .Obviously if they're having a problem you sit and have a conversation with them you know. I'm not going to be like 'Sorry that's actually not on the agenda for this week. I'm so sorry behaviour's a problem but we're talking about marking policies this week' . . . you need to be more responsive. (Ali)
Authorised Mentor Training Approaches	Online support and structure have affordances for mentoring.	I find it beneficial to have a bit more of a structure. . .both the ECT and myself – we're quite organised people. (Wendy)
	Mentoring approaches limits ipsative support and establishing communities of practice.	If you've got somebody that's really struggling you're sort of . . . . I mean you can revisit steps, but you would get stuck [in the prescribed order of delivery] so I think it comes back again . . . It's that lack of differentiation isn't it what do you do? (Vini)
		We have to upload documentation, fill out modules, do extra reading, which most of the time seems quite cryptic. I think we're losing ourselves in terminology. (James)
	Prescribed approach increases workload and presents logistical demands.	The challenge of the repetitiveness of the programme has obviously increased as we've moved through. (Diane)
		The other thing that is interesting is that you get to go and observe, and then you're in for the wrong 15 minutes . . . I turned up this week to see [name of ECT] supposed to be seeing some more examples of cold-calling but . . . she . . . did not do that. (Yolanda)
Compliance and Mediation		I do . . . feel like I have to tick off in the handbook . . . yes, I've asked this question, yes I've asked this question. I feel like it's so structured and I feel like if I deviate away from that am I going to be doing our ECT a disservice somewhere along the line. (Ali)
		We've both lost a little bit of motivation from it. We're still doing it. But actually, we find I come in, I do the observation, I have that strand focus. But then we end up talking, and doing other things which are much more beneficial for her that are actually focused on how she's going to improve as a teacher. (Diane)

phase specificity, the sequencing of the ECF curriculum also presented challenges as it was experienced as a rigid rather than response or fluid framework. Maria, for example stated:

> There doesn't seem to be . . . any flexibility so if something did come up like a behaviour management issue, there's no option . . . unless we pause everything for that week and [we have to] focus on this week's. [ECF content]

In an effort to address the inadequacies of the ECF training materials, mentors provided ECTs with additional unpaid training to meet their subject needs, and to provide more responsive and contextually based support, as Jenny reflected:

> I . . . completely understand . . . the rationale that you need to have . . . consistency of training for ECTs, but . . . I think, it has been proved to be an extra burden . . . and the feedback I've had from some of the ECTs is that

> they have got more out of the contextual sessions that we run in school than the [ECF] sessions that they've been attending. (Jenny)

Mentors discussed that historically they had provided bespoke support for ECTs according to their development needs, and involved a number of colleagues rather than solely the nominated mentor:

> In previous years there would have been. . .our own . . . CPD with the [ECTs]. It would have [included] a weekly meeting, [involving] different members of staff. . .we don't do that anymore because of the ECF . . . that's all . . . planned out for us. (Carl)

Further issues arose regarding the prescribed content, which mentors described as being lacking consideration of ECTs' prior experiences, including their initial teacher education. As Wendy highlighted, the ECTs she was working with have, 'passed all the standards so . . . it is not that they don't know what teaching requires'. Yolanda agreed, reflecting that the ECF materials did not build on ECTs' previous phase of initial teacher education:

> There was no sense that . . . she [the ECT] had just done a . . . big assignment. . .on speaking and listening . . . we're going back to 'Oh, scan the room- do this'. . .in that respect it's really basic and embarrassing.

Coupled with prescribed content in relation to the ECT training materials, mentors discussed the prescription of the mentor training sessions and the lack of appreciation for the wealth of experiences, knowledge and expertise that mentors already bring to the role (Table 2). Yolanda for example stated:

> I found that the training is a little bit too much and a little bit too repetitive. So we did the coaching stuff, and that was fine. And then you have . . . another meeting to talk about the coaching, and then I had to coach somebody. Then we had another meeting and our task was that we had to pretend to coach the coach, and she observed . . . it is too much.

Mentors found the content prescriptive and highlighted a lack of autonomy with regard to addressing their own individual professional needs and the needs of the teachers they were working with. Ali captured this 'impersonal process' as, 'the more content they want to add for the training for both ECTs and mentors, the more generic and useless it becomes'.

Authorised mentor training approaches

Broadly speaking, mentors welcomed the introduction of the ECF in that it formalised their roles in schools, and some saw the benefit of a structured programme with access to online resources. For example:

> I think because it's all online . . . [with] videos and reading material for the ECT to be doing each week, I think all of that . . . is good and it's all evidence based and it's research driven so, you know, I think it's really valuable . . . (Carl)

However, mentors highlighted the prescriptive nature of the training. For example, the way the training set expectations as to how mentors should engage with their ECTs:

> We're delivery partners with the X version and we've got a . . . training programme for the mentors and a training programme for the ECTs and they do it kind of in parallel. . .the mentors are getting lots of training about how to do . . . deliberate practice and certain types of coaching rather than mentoring. . .we've got to deliver it at certain points. (Maria)

For some mentors, this training came at the expense of having opportunities to adopt more ipsative approaches to working with their ECTs both individually, and networking with other mentors:

> Rather than us spending time and doing courses and attending CPDs during the week, we should rather have two mentor meetings a week. . .. There's no kind of forum for the mentors, it's purely about provision of materials and the training bits like the seminars that we have to attend. It's not a resource for mentors or a place for us to chat to each other. (Ali)

A common feature is that mentors are required to observe ECTs during class lessons with a focus on specific aspects of training according to the sequence of the ECT curriculum. This level of prescription presents inevitable logistical challenges which become demotivating for both mentors and ECTs. As Wendy reflected:

> It's supposed to be [a] spiral curriculum, but it doesn't feel like that, it feels like we're doing this again . . . I totally buy into the 'I do -we do- you do' model, but there's only so many times you can talk about it and watch it and so, it is 'Oh, it's that again, I thought we'd done that last week'. (Wendy)

Echoing Wendy's concern, Vini also notes potential issues with the prescribed model of instructional coaching:

> It's all this instructional coaching, so you're supposed to live model things e.g. how do you calm a class down. And we do try it out . . . as 'I'm going to treat you like you're my year 10 now'. . .it can feel really embarrassing when it's just one person [ECT] in an empty classroom.

In addition, it is expected that mentors set targets for ECTs and record and report evidence online to the relevant ECF provider. However, the targets are required to be linked to the sequenced ECT curriculum in a way which is problematic and, as Yolanda described, leaves some mentors looking to 'get the targets to fit what you've seen'.

Compliance and mediation

As we have seen from the first two themes, when seeking to navigate the challenges of a prescribed ECF curriculum and approach to mentoring which appear seemingly flawed, mentors demonstrate compliance. Mentors in this study outlined how they are broadly compliant with an approach to mentoring – that presents logistical demands, reduces mentor autonomy and increases workload – partly because of concerns that this will otherwise cause a 'dis-service' to the ECTs they are working with. Driven by the Early Career Framework's focus on the Teachers' Standards, mentors' compliance is frequently aligned to the requirement that mentors enable the ECTs to demonstrate evidence against the Teachers' Standards through 'specific things' and specific actions' (Carl). At the same time, mentors noted how repetitive this feels for the ECTs who have already demonstrated this through the award of qualified teacher status (the prerequisite before beginning the two year phase as an ECT). Even though the mentors are clear that this approach can lead to 'tick box professionalism' (Goepel 2012, p.489) they frequently defaulted to this approach both in the sequencing of the curriculum and the use of online resources.

Interestingly however, the data also reveals how some mentors at certain points subvert both the authorised curriculum and approach to mentoring in an effort to provide a more bespoke and personalised experience for the ECTs they work with, whilst remaining compliant with the overall requirements of the ECF. For example, Wendy reflected the challenges of this mediated approach, whilst Jenny highlighted that deviating from that which is authorised required confidence:

> So that's been a challenge. . .tension between doing what we have to do for the programme, but also doing what's best for her. . .we ended up being a bit more flexible with how we do things. We're still following the programme, we're ticking the boxes. (Wendy)

> I think I've got the confidence to say actually you're doing fine. Forget doing your, you know, going online and doing all of the things this week. . .You know, treat it lightly. You know you've got to do these sessions and see them as a bonus, but if you fall behind, don't worry. (Jenny)

Discussion

This paper demonstrates the challenges presented to mentors as they navigate the provision of nationally mandated training provision for ECTs. The introduction of the ECF (DfE 2019) was seen

as a key strategy to resolve the recruitment and retention crisis in England, and in many ways the spirit in which it was offered to the sector was laudable. Research in the field notes the difficulties ECTs often face (Ingersoll and Strong 2011), and the potential value of mentors in supporting them (Beutel *et al.* 2017, Lofthouse 2018, Authors 2020). It is very difficult, therefore, to challenge the offer of funded training to support ECTs, coupled with recognition of the role mentors play, particularly given there is research in the field to suggest that mentor training programmes are potentially efficacious (Evertson and Smithey 2000, Wang and Odell 2002, Shanks *et al.* 2022).

However, this paper has underlined a series of related concerns associated with a one-size fits all approach to mentoring ECTs premised on espoused best practice (Lingard 2007, Biesta 2010) and devoid of age phase or subject-specific content. Mentoring ECTs in such a manner assumes that knowledge is static and independent of reality (Biesta 2010), yet it evidently is not. Mentors and ECTs are working together in schools that are complex, where teaching and learning is contextualised, and such packaged training models reduce professional mentoring practices to merely cognitive processes that are transmitted to their mentees (Leaton Gray 2007). The current packaged ECF model fails to acknowledge the complexities and nuances of supporting the development of ECTs' practical wisdom, seeing ECTs' learning as linear and sequential, with training delivered in strands irrespective of individual needs and experiences. The requirement for ECF mentors to adhere to authorised practices, and its impact on individuals' expertise (as illustrated in Figure 1) whereby authorised content and mentoring approaches are seen to work together create a specific presentation of mentor professionalism.

Evidence from this paper suggests that mentors working within the confines of mandated programmes seek ways to work 'outside of the box' which acknowledge their practical wisdom, and make use of their enacted *phronesis* skills. They seek to provide their ECTs with the very best experience; they are cognisant of their ECTs' needs as developing professionals; and as mentors often have a wealth of expertise and experience, and rich sources of practical knowledge, on which to draw. They work within the parameters of the requirements and offer additional enrichment opportunities when mandated training falls short. However, the requirement to attend to authorised content and approaches sees mentors presenting specific presentations of themselves.

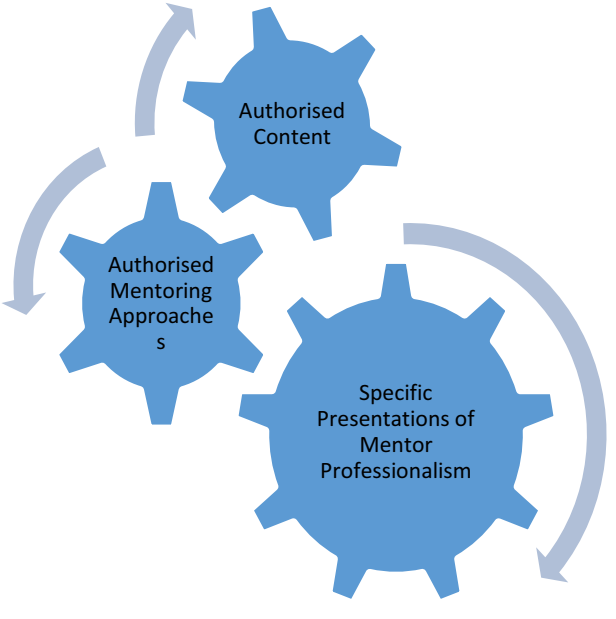

Figure 1. Authorised approaches working to create a specific presentation of mentor professionalism.

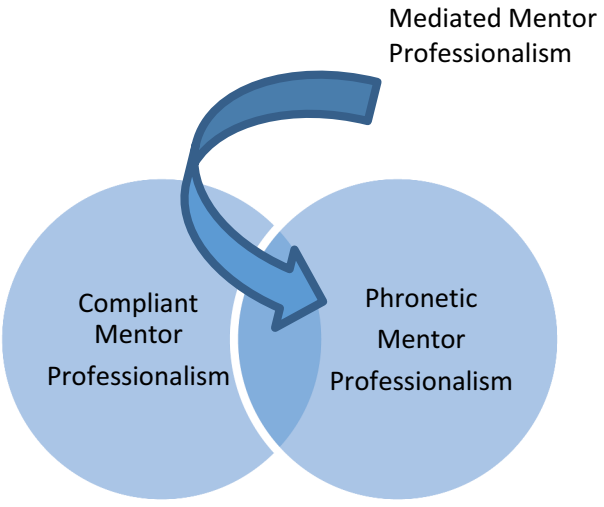

Figure 2. Mediated mentor professionalism.

Mentors are currently acting as compliant mentor professionals. They comply with attendance requirements, and encourage their ECTs to do so too, albeit at times superficially. They comply with the requirement to submit evidence confirming ECTs have met the specified benchmarks, despite seeing this as a 'tick box' exercise and often having observed ECTs delivering lessons/parts of lesson outside the weekly 'strands'. They conform to notions of evidencing of the Teachers' Standards, despite claiming ECTs have already met these and the training is often a repeat of ITE programmes. However, they also remain phronetic professionals. They draw on their practical wisdom and their tacit personal reflections of how best to support ECTs in their contexts, and they offer pragmatic, context-based opportunities to meet the needs of individuals (Kinsella and Pitman 2012). In doing so, these mentors present a mediated form of mentor professionalism (See Figure 2), demonstrating a 'professionally compliant' dimension to mentoring coupled with a professionalism drawing on the continued importance of practical wisdom from lived experience (i.e. *phronesis*).

Conclusion

It is acknowledged that this was a small-scale study, drawing on data gathered from ten mentors based in secondary-schools during the first year of implementation of the ECF and, in the wider context of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic still apparent in schools. As such, we do not argue that it presents a complete picture of ECT mentors' experiences. However, the findings, such as the apparent inherent need to present a mediated version of professional mentoring warrants serious consideration.

This paper has outlined the contradictions facing ECT mentors when they are required to deliver mandated training that is not sufficiently flexible in responding to either the context of the school community, or related to specific subject or age phase matters. It has highlighted that the development of evidence-based and authorised approaches to mentoring have contributed to a new version of mentor professionalism, whereby they comply with the procedural requirements of the mere technician mentor (demonstrating *techne*), confirming their positions as mentors mentoring in the 'right' way regardless of their context. Concomitantly, they draw on their contexts and experiences, which reveals an affinity between understanding, practical wisdom and lived experience (demonstrating *phronesis*).

In doing so, this paper invites the possibility for centralised agencies such as the DfE in England to consider how they can better support mentors in being able to capitalise on their expertise,

knowledge and better draw on contextualised experiences to support ECTs. There has been significant financial investment in England to support ECTs and mentors, but this seems to support practices requiring compliance and technical-rational approaches at the expense of mentors' own expertise and professional learning. As Hunzicker (2010) notes, mentors are adult learners, as such they should have a voice in how they support mentees with regard to content, structure and pace.

Whilst demands on mentors are commonplace across the world, the extensive nature and pace of change to the provision for ECTs and their mentors in England (as exemplified by ECF) highlights the challenges of centralisation when proposing mentor development initiatives in other global contexts. As authors of this paper, we hope that the findings provide an understanding of the importance of prioritising contextualised practice to support mentors as they navigate the challenges of supporting ECTs rather than introducing prescriptive mentoring cultures.

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ORCID

Elizabeth A.C. Rushton http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6981-8797

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