

Research evidence-based toolkit for
**Enhancing Mentorship Practices
for Early Career Teachers**

Funding Support

Society for Educational Studies

Faculty of Social Sciences Impact Fund, University of Southampton

Funding statement

We are grateful to the Society for Educational Studies (under their 2023 Small Grants award) and the University of Southampton (under their 2023 Impact Fund scheme) for funding the research project which led to the publication of this report.

Ethics statement

The research project that informed the material in this toolkit received ethical approval from the University of Southampton (ERGO reference number: 86340).

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all the participants of this research project — Early Career Teachers and their mentors, and ECT programme coordinators in partner schools in Hampshire—for their time and for sharing with us their insights.

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About this report

Published in 2024.

Citation

If referring to or quoting from this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is as follows:

Gupta, A. & Newman, R. (2024). Research evidence-based toolkit for enhancing mentorship practices for Early Career Teachers. Southampton: University of Southampton.

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Research context

At a time when teacher recruitment and retention are key issues for schools, it is increasingly important to provide high quality, meaningful professional development for Early Career Teachers (ECTs) to stem the flow of teachers from the profession in the initial years of their professional lives.

The Early Career Framework (ECF) published in 2019 and revised framework (ITTECF) in 2024 outline the core knowledge and pedagogical understanding that teachers in the early stages of their career should master. This project aimed to explore the experiences of stakeholders in ECT provision to capture key insights into the nature and effectiveness of mentorship provisions for ECTs..

The project was carried out by Dr Achala Gupta (Principal investigator and lead) and Rachele Newman (co-investigator) and included ECTs, Mentors and ECT coordinators from four different types of school in Hampshire:

- Local Authority
- Faith School
- Multi Academy Trust
- Independent

Drawing on data produced in 2023-24, through 36 semi-structured, hour long interviews, followed by three 2-hour long focus groups, one for each group of school leaders (ECT Coordinators), those who receive this support (ECTs or teacher mentees) and those who provide it (ECT mentors) in selected schools, this project produced novel insights into issues concerning teachers' professional practices, career progression and retention in the profession.

The recommendations provided here draw primarily on data produced through focus group discussions with key stakeholders. These discussions were based on the suggestions the research participants had made during interviews regarding the ways in which mentorship provisions can be improved to enhance professional growth, career progression and retention of early-career teachers in England.



In a nutshell

The three Cs! We recommend the following three ways in which mentorship provisions in schools can be enhanced:



Fostering and leading a school culture of professional learning



Creating the right conditions for effective mentorship



Carefully curated, personalised and flexible plan for teachers' professional development

The contents capture the voices of the stakeholders and their views on how to achieve a high quality ECT mentorship programme with a view to maximizing retention of early career teachers and their mentors.

These recommendations should be read alongside existing mentorship provisions to further enhance the scope of these provisions for schools leaders, ECT Coordinators and ECT mentors and indeed ECTs themselves.



Fostering and leading a school culture of professional learning



This section provides advice for school leaders around the importance of developing a school culture which values professional learning and how to achieve this.



1

Build the knowledge base of mentors: subject, disciplinary, pedagogical, contextual and relational



Key takeaway

Mentors play a pivotal role in the development of ECTs. The role is demanding and requires a high level of subject and pedagogical expertise. ‘Teaching is a challenging, complex, intellectual and ethical endeavour’ (UCET 2020) which requires a significant and nuanced knowledge base. Our findings suggest it is important for mentors to possess and use strong subject and disciplinary knowledge and not simply draw on their additional classroom experience.

As such schools could:

- Invest in the knowledge base of mentors. Quality mentor development should make use of a knowledge base which includes subject/disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, which is largely absent in current mentor training and development programmes.
- This can be facilitated through strengthening mentor engagement with national or local subject associations and through prioritizing subject specific mentor CPD.
- Mentor training should make use of models of mentoring and teacher professional learning which explore how beginner and early career teachers learn and develop. A research informed approach is beneficial here.



“avoid surface level learning which ‘is developing us for the kids rather than developing us in the profession”

Focus group with ECTs

2

Increase the visible value of being a mentor



Key takeaway

Retention of teachers in the workforce is currently particularly challenging and results in loss of potential mentors. The perception from some mentors that mentoring is something that is a ‘bolt on’ to their already very busy day is unhelpful in light of challenging teacher retention. It is therefore important that this role is aspirational and attracts skilled, expert practitioners. Provision for mentors could be strengthened by drawing upon an evidence-informed developmental programme for mentors that recognises a breadth of valuable mentoring models thereby increasing their professional knowledge and status. Protecting mentor resources, both time and financial, will support them in their important work and make mentoring an attractive and aspirational role in schools.

This could be accomplished by:

- Positioning mentoring as an aspirational, rich pursuit that is skillful and knowledgeable.
- Presenting mentoring as a privilege, not a burden. Celebrate the success of the mentors as the ECTs develop and reach milestones.
- Incentivising mentorship: Provide opportunities for mentors to engage in quality training and development and protect their time to do this.
- Equipping mentors with professional learning experiences that go beyond operational or performative training.
- Capitalising on teachers in years 4-6 of their careers as potential mentors as they have relevant classroom experience without the load of additional responsibility.
- Providing opportunities for mentor networking and collaboration. This could be at school, Trust, regional or national level.



“I think the value of it (mentoring) is not really seen enough.

At the end of it the ECT either passes, or they don’t! There’s nothing in there for the mentor to say, ‘Look at this and my career development. Look at one I have done, and I’ve been really instrumental in helping this person get from here to here really successfully.’

There’s no recognition in that. Well, in some schools, there’ll be a pat on the back and a thanks, but for most, it’s just like, ‘Do you want another one?’

Focus group with mentors



3

Frame mentor and ECT development opportunities through a broader lens of wider professional learning.



Key takeaway

School level professional learning programmes can often focus on performative, technique-based approaches designed to enhance teacher pedagogical skill. Whilst this is of value, the knowledge and skills being developed by mentors and ECTs could form a strand of deeper professional learning which thinks beyond surface level performative markers of practice.

As such schools could:

- Design professional learning programmes underpinned by deeper conceptual knowledge about teacher identity, teacher knowledge and teacher development.
- Integrate the ECT programme into the school culture to enhance overall professional development rather than treating it as an additional task for those involved. This will help the ECTs to feel valued and connected to the entire school community, which is critical to the development and retention of ECTs.
- Normalize mistake making and the agency to learn from these mistakes. Encourage reflection more widely in school-level professional learning programmes.
- Slow down the rate of career progression following ECT completion- foster pride and value in being an excellent classroom teacher for its own sake rather than as a stepping-stone to early leadership opportunities.
- Offer wider professional opportunities and exposure to other schools as this is viewed as beneficial to mentors and ECT development.



“being a teacher is not just about teaching... It feels like in the ECT programme you’re improving teaching, rather than improving holistically your job in a school”

Focus group with ECTs



Creating the right conditions for effective mentorship



Our research identified particular conditions in which effective mentorship can thrive. We find that it is important to facilitate the relational aspects of the mentor-mentee interaction as these can be as rich and formative for the ECT as the imparting of practical skills or content.

1

Encourage relational, responsive mentoring



Key takeaway

Effective mentorship can work both ways and produce mutual benefits to a mentor-mentee pairing. Increasing the agency and ownership of the mentor-mentee relationship, and the development that comes from this, can enhance the learning experienced by both parties. It is important to ensure that the mentorship provision is relevant to the level and type of support that ECTs require. Open and ongoing conversations between ECTs and mentors facilitates mentoring which is responsive to the evolving needs of the ECT; even if this does not align with the prescribed progression sequence of the planned programme.

This could be created by:

- Allowing the mentor-mentee relationship to build through a longer lead time in the structured programme. This will allow for more organic, rich conversations that establish bespoke need and priorities before jumping straight into pre-structured sessions on an identified theme. It's ok to flatten the hierarchy a little in the mentor-mentee relationship.
- Develop teacher's personal reflection, agency and control over their development so that their professional learning is not something that is 'done to' them. This lack of agency is a feature prevalent in many generic ECT training packages that don't facilitate a bespoke or responsive programme.
- Review a progression model for ECTs that is rich, deep (not surface level, performative tick box system) and is rooted in concepts of authentic professional learning. This will support mentor and ECT dialogue around what it looks like to develop and progress as a professional teacher.

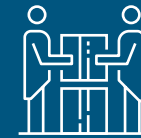


“When it comes to development... instead of just learning being a teacher is X, Y and Z, (I want) that metacognition of how can I assess myself? How do I know my progress and what to look for?”

Focus group with ECTs

2

Build subject specificity into mentoring dialogue



Key takeaway

Our findings suggest that subject and disciplinary specificity is significantly under-represented in formalized ECT programmes, in both the research base and mandated teacher knowledge. Yet, the development of subject knowledge is noted in teachers' top two priorities for professional development (Allen, Menzies & Ford, 2024).

Our research suggests that access and participation in subject specific communities of practice is universally valued across ECTs, Mentors and ECT coordinators.

The importance of subject specific mentoring should not be underestimated. The perceived value of this is high yet there is a paucity of subject specificity in much of the current ECT provision.

Increasing ECT and Mentor access to subject specific development opportunities at regional and national level would increase the ability for sharing good practice in relation to their subject specific teaching as well as increasing access to discipline specific research.

This could be achieved by:

- Encouraging membership of subject specific networks and local communities of practice. Consider supporting scholarly activity through facilitating subscriptions to relevant professional bodies (such as the Historical Association)
- Increase the subject specific development opportunities that are currently under-represented in the Early Career Framework. This might be through attendance at regional subject network events.
- Facilitate opportunities for mentors and mentees to engage in subject specific scholarly work in their subject areas. For example, this could be through relevant shared reading of subject specific material or collaborative planning of units of work.



“Wow, I really love English. It's not just me and my school. It can be other kids, other schools' kids, other ECTs. You want to hear the story of the local picture. For aspiration-raising for ECTs as well”

Focus group with ECTs



Carefully curated, personalised and flexible plan for teachers' professional development



A consensus was established in all three focus groups about the specific ways in which ECT coordinators, mentors, and mentees can work together to achieve an effective mentorship provision and practice in schools.

1

Develop context and phase specific resources and training experiences which go beyond ‘cookie cutter teacher’ techniques.

Develop bespoke, subject and context specific training and development opportunities for ECTs and mentors.



“I need to experiment with (different teaching styles) in my first year... I do not need to have my style chosen for me”

Focus group with ECTs



Key takeaway

Research highlights the importance of teacher professional learning being bespoke and personalized with teachers ‘wanting the autonomy to choose CPD for themselves’ (Teacher Tapp 2024). A key feature of much of the current ECT provision is its inflexibility and rigid sequence that assumes a specific, linear progression in a teachers’ knowledge and skill. This can create stakeholder frustration and the perception that individual developmental needs are not being met.

Materials that are relevant to context carry increased credibility and authenticity and are seen as more valuable and meaningful to ECTs and mentors.

The focus on a narrow set of performative skills in the ECT programme may be seen as reductive.

Effective feedback from ECTs who have completed two years, and their mentors can play a crucial role in shaping the future of the programme. Their insights can help identify areas for improvement, whether it’s enhancing the provision, adjusting the support system, or refining the overall experience for new teachers. This collaborative approach not only fosters a greater sense of belonging and agency for teachers but also ensures that the provision evolves to meet the needs of each new cohort. By actively involving experienced teachers and mentors in the feedback process, the mentorship provision can continuously adapt and improve, ultimately providing a more supportive and impactful experience for new cohorts of ECTs.

This could be mitigated by:

- Creating training experiences that are bespoke, context and phase-specific, developmentally relevant and responsive to the learning of the ECT.
- Increasing the flexibility of the training and the opportunities for personalization around the current rigid and linear training sequence. This would allow ECTs to move through the programme at different rates.
- Facilitating ECT links with teachers

in yr 3-6 of their career so that a clear sense of progression can be witnessed.

- Enabling ECTs to explore how different schools deal with curricula design, whole-school priorities such as literacy or system wide approaches such as managing pupil behaviour.
- Avoid the perceived repetition experienced by ECTs between their ITE and ECT programmes.
- Streamline the administrative and accountability requirements of the current provision.



“I think all we’re taught is how to teach: you and your learners. Then, everything else outside of you at the front is the planning, the collaboration, the management, the relationships with your staff, the etiquette, the meetings, the expectations... is not covered in the program.

Focus group with ECTs

2

Broaden the scope of the experiences ECTs can have outside their classroom.



Key takeaway

Our findings indicate that ECTs perceive value in their wider professional development as teachers in addition to developing their classroom specific practice; ‘being a teacher is not just teaching’ (focus group with ECTs). ECTs report value in working with a range of colleagues in a range of situations. Observations and professional dialogue with multiple members of staff over a period of time can be incredibly valuable for ECTs to cultivate and enhance their professional practices. Feedback from different observers, and opportunities to observe a variety of teachers, provides a broad context in which ECTs can situate their own reflections on their practice. This is a key component in developing professional agency and ownership over their development.

We suggest that, in addition to developing classroom practice, there is benefit to exposing ECTs to experiences that enhance their knowledge of school culture and context as well as policy, progression and leadership.

This could be achieved by:

- Providing opportunities to shadow more senior colleague such as the SENDCo or a Pastoral Lead.
- Initiating discussions about the career progression of ECTs in the second year of their training. This provides valuable guidance, motivation and support which are crucial for new teachers navigating their early years in the role and help them understand the pathways available to them within your school community.
- Supporting peer professional networking for ECTs in your region.
- Enabling ECTs to experience another school to deepen their understanding of their own school context within the sector.





3

Review a progression model for the ECT induction phase across the two year provision which builds on a wider evidence base for exploring teacher knowledge and development.



Key takeaway

Our findings indicate a lack of consideration of holistic teacher development in the current ECT programmes, which favour a focus on atomized skills and techniques. We suggest there is a perception of a narrow curriculum which reduces scope and opportunities to explore alternative approaches.

“our programme is really, ‘In order to be a great teacher, this is what you do.’ It’s one option. You’re like, ‘Right, but that person next door is a really fantastic teacher, and I’ve never seen them do that in my entire life.’ So maybe some different options...”

Focus group with ECT Coordinators

ECTs report a sense of disconnection in the ECT provision curricular sequence which doesn’t recognise authentic starting points or prior learning. Our research suggests that there is a lack of clarity in ECTs and mentor understanding of progression during the first two years of their career and how this might be assessed.

“what does it actually look like to get better at this thing called teaching?” Focus group with ECTs

There is a reported sense that to ‘pass’ the statutory induction is a redundant notion when it is unclear how progression is captured. The ECTs have already met the Teacher Standards and been recommended for QTS so on what basis would an individual ‘fail’ the statutory induction period?

There is little discussion given to how ECTs will continue to develop their professional learning once the ECT provision has ended. Focusing on the ongoing professional development of teachers in the early years of their career is crucial for their continued growth, success and retention.

Strategically planning for their transition beyond the initial two years involves providing targeted support, tailored professional development opportunities, and gradual integration of increased responsibilities. Opportunities for further formalised learning, through Master’s level study, for example, are valued by ECTs. This approach ensures that teachers have the necessary support and resources to build upon their experiences and further solidify their professional practices. By emphasising the development of teachers after the initial two-year period, schools can empower them to bring innovative ideas to fruition without feeling inhibited by more senior staff members in influential positions.

- These issues could be mitigated by:
- Allowing a flexible baseline through initial diagnostic reflection which allows authentic, bespoke progression
 - Considering what progression might look like in the early stages of a teaching career once the Teachers Standards have been met (at the end of the pre-service year).
 - Allow this progression model to be flexible and responsive to the ECT baseline achievement at the end of their pre-service year
 - Include rich understanding of teacher professional learning and development to avoid this being a performative assessment model.



“Although you’ve all done a year, and everyone’s ended up at completely different levels, it feels like there’s a bar that may be underneath some people what they’re capable of: it’s almost like, the line is being drawn for everyone at the same level.”

Focus group with ECTs

Research engagement leading to impact: Participants' reflections

We achieved more than we had initially anticipated from this project. Our motivation behind carrying out this project was underpinned by the theory of change (Vogel, 2012)¹, which informed our belief that engaging educators in reflective dialogue would reveal key insights into the challenges and opportunities research participants had encountered in their professional environments.

By fostering open discussions, the project sought to empower teachers to voice their needs, share effective practices, and identify strategies to enhance retention outcomes for the ECTs. As one participant noted,



“...having a shared vision of my progress and professional development with my mentor—following our research—has been imperative for my morale, retention, and sense of belonging.”

Post-project feedback from an ECT

This reflection highlights **the emotional and professional impact of aligning personal growth with mentorship, a key insight from the project**. The participant emphasises how having a clear, shared vision with their mentor—created as a result of participating in the research—boosted not only their motivation but also their likelihood of staying in the teaching profession. This feedback suggests that structured, reflective mentorship practices can significantly enhance the morale and commitment of ECTs, creating a supportive environment where they feel valued and understood.

A significant aspect of the project was its ability to consider—during focus groups—the perspectives of ECTs, mentors, and coordinators of mentorship programmes within schools. As some participants stated:



“It was really good to also share good practice and ideas with other mentors who took part [in the research project]. I feel one of the areas that has impacted most is finding more time to talk and spending less time writing reports.”

Post-project feedback from a mentor



“For me, the main benefit of the ECT discussion was to realise that everyone is sharing a similar experience and there are others that are going through the same things as me, although they might be on different programmes.”

Post-project feedback from an ECT

¹ Vogel, I. (2012). Review of the use of ‘Theory of Change’ in international development. UK Department for International Development (DFID). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a5b40f0b652dd0006bc/Theory_of_Change_Review_Report_Summary.pdf

These quotes underscore the collaborative nature of the project. **The ability to share ideas and strategies among mentors provided a platform for mutual learning and reflective practice.**

Another mentor highlighted the importance of prioritising the needs of ECTs, saying:



“I think for me one of the major benefits was hearing the feedback from the ECTs about what they valued and wanted – I’ve tried to prioritise them feeling empowered previously but have been really mindful of it this year. It cemented as well how crucial the mentor-mentee relationship is for ECT progress and how important it is that ECTs value mentor meetings and see them as purposeful rather than tick box activities.”

Post-project feedback from a mentor

The feedback from this mentor highlights the value of focusing on meaningful dialogue rather than bureaucratic tasks like report writing, suggesting that the **project influenced how mentors allocated their time and energy**. By reducing administrative burdens, mentors were able to engage in more substantive, constructive conversations with ECTs, leading to a more personalised and impactful mentorship experience. This shift not only improved the mentor-mentee relationship but also contributed to a broader cultural change within schools, where collaboration and communication were prioritised. They also stressed that:



“...mentors deserve more valuing than they often receive, we are currently trying to implement some celebration to acknowledge the hard work they do.”

Post-project feedback from a mentor

This comment about recognising mentors’ efforts points to **another outcome of the project—an increased awareness of the need to celebrate and value the often-overlooked contributions of mentors**. By acknowledging their hard work, schools can foster a more positive environment for mentors, which in turn enhances the quality of mentorship they provide. Furthermore, one ECT participant shared how the project broadened their understanding:



“The research enabled me to get a wider view on ECT standards within the local county, including helpful and effective discussions on what productive (and unproductive) ECT mentorship looks like across subjects.”

Post-project feedback from an ECT

This feedback underscores the broader impact of the project in providing participants with a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of what constitutes effective mentorship. For this ECT, the research opened up a wider perspective on the standards and practices used across the local area, which facilitated a richer dialogue about the qualities of effective mentorship.



In summary

The project led to shifts in perspectives that resulted in tangible changes to practices within participating schools. These changes include more focused and effective mentor-mentee interactions, a greater sense of empowerment for ECTs, and increased recognition for mentors.

Subject networks

Association for Language Learning

www.all-languages.org.uk

Association for Physical Education

www.afpe.org.uk

Association of Teachers of Mathematics

www.atm.org.uk

Association of Science Education

www.ase.org.uk

Computing at School

www.computingschool.org.uk

Institute of Physics

www.iop.org

Music Teachers Association

www.musicteachers.org

National Association for Teaching of English

www.nate.org.uk

National Association for Primary Education

www.nape.org.uk

National Association for Teachers of Religious Education

www.natre.org.uk

National Society for Education in Art and Design

www.nsead.org

National Drama

www.nationaldrama.org.uk

PSHE Association

www.pshe-association.org.uk

The Economics, Business and Enterprise Association

www.ebea.org.uk

The Geographical Association

www.geography.org.uk

The Historical Association

www.history.org.uk

The Royal Society of Chemistry

www.rsc.org

The Royal Society of Biology

www.rsb.org.uk

There are likely regional subject communities operating in your local area for example through organisations such as Southampton Education Forum (SEF).



Find out more

For further information on the research project and associated outputs, visit: <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/research/projects/teacher-support-mentorship-provisions-for-supporting-early-career-teachers/>

Or scan the QR code

