# NATURE AND EFFECTIVENESS OF MENTORSHIP PROVISION FOR SUPPORTING EARLY-CAREER TEACHERS IN ENGLAND: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

This project aims to assess the nature and effectiveness of mentorship provisions for early-career teachers (ECTs) in schools operating with different management types (faith-based, independent, local-authority and multi-academy) in Hampshire, England. In doing so, this project contributes to the literature by providing novel insights into how these provisions vary by school, and how they speak to the developmental needs (regarding professional practices and career progression) of those who are starting their careers as schoolteachers in the English schooling system.

RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT – MARCH 2025

# Funding statement

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# Ethics statement

This research project received ethical approval from the University of Southampton (ERGO reference number: 86340).

# Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all the participants of this research project for their time and for sharing with us their insights into the topic of this research. We are grateful to Professor Andrew Peterson for acting as a project advisor and providing us with timely guidance and support throughout the course of this project.

# Authors and their contributions

Dr Achala Gupta [Principal investigator or PI] is a Lecturer and Co-Director of the Centre for Research in Inclusion at Southampton Education School, University of Southampton. Dr Gupta led and managed the project and contributed to this report through data collection, analysis, and writing.

Mrs Rachele Newman [Co-investigator or CO-I] is a Principal Teaching Fellow and Director of Initial Teacher Education at Southampton Education School, University of Southampton. Mrs Newman contributed to this project as a co-investigator and to this report through data collection and reviewing its earlier drafts.

# About this report

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# Project Aim

This project aims to assess the nature and effectiveness of mentorship provisions for early-career teachers (ECTs) in schools operating with different management types (faith-based, independent, local-authority and multi-academy) in Hampshire, England. In doing so, this project contributes to the literature by providing novel insights into how these provisions vary by school, and how they speak to the developmental needs (regarding professional practices and career progression) of those who are starting their careers as schoolteachers in the English schooling system.

# Research Questions

To meet this aim, the project responded to three specific research questions.

1. How do the *coordinators* view their ECT mentorship provision?

This question unpacks how school leaders, who are tasked with making decisions regarding mentorship provision, understand the value of this provision and its positioning vis-à-vis school culture.

2. How do the *ECTs* perceive the effectiveness of the mentorship provisions vis-à-vis their professional practices?

This question focuses on identifying the perceived effectiveness of the mentorship provision for its role in developing, enhancing, and supporting professional practices from the perspectives of ECTs themselves.

3. How do *mentors* see the relationship between the ECT support provision to ECTs' career progression?

This question explores how mentors envision the support ECTs are provided with will inform their career progression.

By responding to these research questions, this project aims to understand how policy suggestions to schools for implementing mentorship programmes for ECTs—in the form of the 2019 Early Career Framework (and its revised iteration in 2024) (Department of Education (henceforth, DfE), 2019; 2024)—play out in reality. The analysis of how the perception towards the mentorship provision compares across school types, provided below, speaks to the enduring role of schooling practices, with implications for educational policies concerning teacher recruitment and retention in England.

# Research Approach

A qualitative research methodology was used to address the exploratory research questions, mentioned in section 1 of the report. Fieldwork for the project was carried out in four secondary schools in Hampshire, England, each operating under different management types: faith-based, independent, local authority and multi-academy trust. In each of these schools, four groups of participants took part in the study: coordinators of the ECT mentorship programme, mentors, and ECTs themselves. A range of activities were carried out between September 2023 and August 2024 for this project to ensure its delivery timely and efficiently. These are outlined in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Timeline of project activities and relevant description

| Activity and Month | Description |
|---|---|
| **Project set-up and ethics approval (September 2023)** | The research project officially commenced on the 1st of September 2023. The project's PI prepared the project proposal and submitted it to the University of Southampton's ethics committee for approval. The project team ensured that the project met the ethical standards and guidelines for conducting research with human participants. The team also obtained the necessary permissions from the partner schools and set up an MSTeams channel for project operations. The team received the ethics approval (ERGO reference number: 86340) by mid-September and proceeded with the project implementation, starting with liaising further with partner schools. |
| **Liaising with partner schools (September 2023)** | The project's Co-I contacted several schools across the desired pool of school types, in the local area and invited them to participate in the project. The team explained the aims and objectives of the project, the benefits for the schools, and the ethical procedures and safeguards. The team also answered any questions or concerns that the schools had. The team secured the consent and cooperation of four schools that agreed to be part of the project. |
| **Data collection – interviews (September 2023 to January 2024)** | The project team (both PI and Co-I) conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers [Coordinators, mentors, and ECTs] from four schools. The interviews aimed to explore the participants' views and experiences, the challenges and opportunities they faced, and the impact of the ECT provision. The interviews were conducted in person as well as online, depending on the preferences and availability of the participants. Each interview lasted for about 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. The majority of the interviews were carried out in September and October, which we referred to as phase one. Three more interviews were conducted in November and December (phase two) to further strengthen our sample base. Two additional interviews were carried out in January 2024 (phase three). In total, 36 interviews were conducted. Data collection was carried out in full alignment with the University of Southampton's guidance and regulations for pursuing ethical research. |
| **Transcription and data organisation for analysis** | The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed, using the University of Southampton's approved service provider, and checked for accuracy and completeness. The transcripts were anonymised by identifying information about the participants and the schools and they were subsequently organised |

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| **(December – January 2024)** | by school type and stakeholder [Coordinators of the ECT programme, ECT mentors, and ECTs] categories. These transcripts were analysed by the project team. A part of the analysis [participants' response to a policy question asked during interviews] was used for gathering more information from participants during focus groups. |
| **Data collection – focus group (February – March 2024)** | The project team designed a guide and preparation material for and conducted focus groups with selected already interviewed teachers from each school. Three focus groups, one with ECTs, another with ECT mentors and the third with ECT coordinators were carried out, using a participatory approach. The focus groups aimed to develop recommendations, strategies and tools that all three stakeholders can use (at individual, institutional, regional and national levels) to ensure the retention of teachers, especially those early in their careers.<br>The focus groups were conducted in person (with additional financial support from the FSS Impact Fund, provided by the University of Southampton). Each focus group lasted for about 120 minutes and was audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. |
| **Data analysis of interviews and focus groups (February – July 2024)** | The analysis of the data from interviews (led by PI) using a thematic analysis method, was carried out. This involved coding and categorising the data into themes and sub-themes, based on the research questions and the emerging patterns. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, was used to facilitate the coding and analysis of the data. |
| **Preparation of recommendation resource (April – July 2024)** | The data produced through focus groups was analysed (led by CO-I) to prepare a booklet of recommendations. This booklet was created with additional support from the FSS Impact Fund for designing the booklet within the University of Southampton. The purpose of this material was to provide the research participants and partner schools with accessible material that they can use to reflect on their current provision of development of early career teachers. |
| **Preparation, finalisation, and submission of the research project report. (July – August 2024)** | During this period, the focus was on preparing, finalising, and submitting the research project report. The initial draft of the report was led by the PI and contributed through writing specific sections by the Co-I. The report then underwent a thorough review, meticulous editing, and ensuring that all necessary components were accurately presented. |
| **Impact planning: reviewing policy discourse and producing, publishing and launching our research-evidence based Toolkit (August 2024 – March 2025)** | After the research project was completed, the PI worked with the Southampton Public Policy Team to understand more clearly policy discourse —different to although in parallel the academic discourse on the topic. The activities involved hiring a PGR to conduct a review of grey literature to understand the policy developments on the subject matter in the country.<br>A second activity related to impact planning involved producing and publishing a research evidence-based Toolkit (Gupta & Newman, 2024) using the project findings. Following its publication in November, a workshop to launch the toolkit was organised in December 2024. This was carried out with 15 local school leaders—all of whom used the Toolkit to assess mentorship programmes in their schools and came up with a plan to improve their programme as per the Toolkit recommendations around school culture, conditions and a customised approach to mentorship (how to use this Toolkit |

is further expanded on in a collaboratively produced Workbook—see Newman et al., 2025).

Following the launch event, in March, we created a network (in operation on MSTeams) of workshop attendees to provide peer support as they implement their Toolkit recommendation-based plans for improving their mentorship provisions. These plans will be evaluated in Termly network meetings throughout 2025, with an event organised in early 2026 to celebrate the impact arising from this project, where network members will share how our project has positively impacted mentorship programmes in their schools.

# Main research findings

The analysis revealed the following key research findings. Many of these are elaborated on further in forthcoming publications for academic and wider engagement.

## The nature of ECT mentorship provision: coordinators' perspectives

- By nature, the DfE-led two-year mentorship provision for ECTs was perceived by coordinators as a welcome change across all schools. Coordinators recognised its value for new teachers transitioning into a highly demanding profession. They provided support in terms of time allocation for the ECTs as well as mentors (although the nature of this support varied by school) and supervised the provision overall. Their own time was accounted for, for supervising activities as a part of the mentorship provision in their school.
- There were key differences in which programme each school subscribed to as part of their provision. The independent and multi-academy trust schools worked very closely with the broader framework for supporting ECTs that applied to other schools under the same management which was an Independent Schools Association for the former and a multi-academy trust for the latter. In comparison, the faith-based school partnered with another school of its kind in the city to co-create a programme that worked for both institutions. Finally, the local authority school had outsourced the programme from a DfE-approved provider.
- Only the independent school in our sample had not made any significant changes to their programme in the last two years. All others had outsourced their programme, and they felt their programme needed to be changed either through relying more on the management-provided resources (multi-academy trust school), collaborating with another school (faith-based school) or changing the provider (local-authority school).

## Effectiveness of the provision for ECTs' professional practices: ECTs' views

- Regardless of school type, the most effective part of the mentorship provision for ECTs was the feedback they received from colleagues who observed their lessons. This feedback, they said, helped them realise the areas they needed to work on to enhance their professional practices, leading to relevant conversations with their mentors/observers and changes in their teaching approaches and behaviours.
- There were individual-level differences in what ECTs valued in their mentorship provision for improving their professional practices. Some participants valued unstructured conversations with a wider group of teachers, while others found one-to-one meetings with a specific mentor more useful. Additionally, there was a pattern of thinking specific to school types, with ECTs from local authority and multi-academy trust schools valuing one-on-one meetings more than those in other schools. These variations may be due to ECTs' familiarity with their school before starting their employment which may have shaped their perceived need to connect with more colleagues in their formative years.
- The ECTs reported that some aspects of mentorship provision that they found challenging to navigate were: high workload, lack of time management, and limited relevance of online material (especially in cases where schools had outsourced their programme). They reported that they at times struggled to keep up with everything at once and wasted time figuring out how to use the resources supplied by their external provider. Additionally, they found the online resources were sometimes repetitive, too academic, and lacking practical orientation.

## The usefulness of the mentorship provision for ECTs' career progression: mentors' standpoint

- The nature of the mentorship provision impacted mentors' views on its usefulness for ECTs' career progression. Faith-based and independent schools saw it as a route to train ECTs for leadership roles, while local authority schools did not think that discussions on ECTs' career progression were part of their mentorship provision. Multi-academy trust schools had flexibility for such conversations and mentors gave examples of ECTs assuming leadership responsibilities.
- Mentors in different types of schools had varying views on ECTs' school-based career development. Mentors in the faith-based school nudged their mentees towards specific roles, while mentors in the independent school guided ECTs to realise greater independence in making these decisions. Mentors in the multi-academy trust setting involved ECTs in various non-teaching leadership roles and initiatives, but in the local authority school, ECTs found it difficult to assume leadership roles due to, an unspoken yet obvious, experienced teacher hierarchy.

- Regardless of the above difference in practices, mentors across schools emphasised that ECTs *should* focus on developing their professional practices and avoid taking on leadership roles prematurely. They maintained that the first two years were crucial for new teachers to build a strong foundation for their careers. They stressed the importance of utilising the support and resources provided during this period for ECTs' optimal growth and continuation in the teaching profession.

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