# Title: Early Career Mentoring in England: a case study of professional discretion and policy disconnection

## Abstract

This paper considers the practices and experiences of the new school-based mentors for Early Career Teachers (ECT’s), emerging from the UK Government’s new Early Career Framework (ECF) policy (DfE, 2019a). The paper uses Lipsky’s (2010) framing of professionals as ‘street level bureaucrats’ to consider the extent to which the ECT mentors, as new policy actors, exercise *professional discretion* (Lipsky, 2010) in negotiating and aligning the new ECF policy with existing practice. The main aim of the ECF policy is to deliver ‘*a step change in support …, providing a funded entitlement to a structured 2-year package of high-quality development*’ for ECT’s (DfE, 2019a:6). It signals a commitment to provide these beginning teachers with a dedicated mentor, who undergoes specialised training, to support the ECT’s professional development and to complement the existing role of the school-based induction tutor who is responsible for assessing the ECTs progress. The ECF framework signals a new level of policy prescription with the role for a mentor who has followed a defined programme of training in order to then deliver a structured, weekly programme of professional development for their ECT.

Early findings from interviews with a sample of new ECF mentors suggests a disconnect between the intentions of the policy and the reality of its enactment at a local level. The ECT mentors have limited professional discretion, but some are exercising this in relation to their own professional development training, as well as that of the professional development training they are providing for their ECTs. They are not simply implementing the policy but enacting the policy through an active process of interpretation and translation (Skerritt *et al.*, 2021). The findings and the degree of discretion exercised by the ECT mentors alongside the implications of their policy enactment are discussed in the paper.

## Keywords

**Mentor, Early career teacher, policy implementation, policy enactment, professional discretion**

## Introduction

The professional development of beginning teachers is complex work. The nature of how best to begin the professional formation of a teacher, how long this takes, how much emphasis should be spent on theory and pedagogy of teaching and learning and how much on the practice is subject to much debate and variation globally (UNESCO, 2015; Maguire *et al.*, 2015) and nationally within the UK (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2015). There is an increasing consensus, however, that the quality of the induction of the beginning teacher and the role of a mentor are significant and can be beneficial in the early formation of the teacher (Stanulis and Bell, 2017; *et al.*, 2014). The impact of mentoring has been researched by many (Ellis *et al.*, 2020; Hobson *et al.*, 2009, 2013), yet in regard to the preparation and professional learning of the mentor and the development of their professional identity (Andreasen *et al.*, 2019; Aspfors and Fransson, 2015) the field remains under researched (Wexler, 2019; Hobson, 2009). This paper seeks to contribute to narrowing this gap with new knowledge and understanding of the professional development of mentors, arising from a strategic government policy in England aimed principally at supporting Early Career Teachers. Although the context of English policy is particular, the findings are relevant and of wider interest with implications for policy makers and teacher educators outside of England.

Educational policy, on the other hand, has proved a fertile space and in England teacher education has been subject to a series of radical policy reforms (Helgetun and Menter, 2022; McIntyre *et al.*, 2019; McNamara *et al*., 2017). These policy reforms have ramifications for those engaged with Teacher Education and in particular those involved in the professional formation of beginning or novice teachers (now referred to as Early Career Teachers or ECTs in England). The Early Career Framework provides an illuminative example of such policy impact, with its origins stemming from the increasingly international challenge of teacher recruitment and retention (See *et al.*, 2020). Teacher supply is under pressure across the globe, with shortages noted in Europe (European Commission, 2018), Australia and New Zealand (Varadharajan, and Buchanan, 2021) and in the US (Sutcher *et al.*, 2016). A raft of international responses and initiatives to attract and retain teachers have emerged and the ECF is the latest policy solution for English schools. As part of the solution, the Early Career Framework (ECF) creates a new policy actor in the English education context – namely the ECT mentor who is fully trained to support the ECT through the new mandatory content of the Early Career Framework. The ECF policy frames the work of the mentor in a new way, different to the existing role of school-based induction tutor who is responsible for the assessment of the ECT. The framing of ECT mentor aligns with the concept of an educative mentor (Stanulis *et al.*, 2019; Feiman-Nemser, 2001) with a focus on developing the pedagogical practices of the ECT through professional dialogue and co inquiry aligned closely to the content of the ECF.

The ECF requires the new ECT mentors to undertake training and to deliver an agreed weekly programme of professional development to their ECT. In the majority of cases, the ECT programme is provided by one of the six Lead Providers who successfully secured tenders to develop their versions of a training programme. The content had to be based on the ECF itself previously defined by a Department for Education (DfE) appointed working group. This paper focuses on initial research findings arising from interviews with the ECT mentors and in particular the extent to which their practices align with the policy and the degree to which they use their professional discretion to adapt the policy as they enact it at the school level.

##  Policy Context for the Early Career Framework (ECF).

Educational policy is constructed, as all government policies, not in isolation, but as part of larger debates and rhetoric shaped by the external environment (Menter and Flores, 2021; Sachs, 2016). Increasingly in education there are global drivers of improving teacher quality and standardisation, increased accountability and the development of performative cultures (Mayer, 2021; McNamara *et al*., 2017). Although there is commonality in the drivers globally, government responses at a national level become nuanced and more varied (Wilkins *et al*., 2021). England maybe viewed as an outlier (Menter *et al*., 2019), at the vanguard (Wilkins *et al.*, 2021:28) of education reforms, with a school-led system as the underpinning policy solution to many of the challenges (Murray and Mutton, 2015). The impact of the increasing performativity culture on teacher professionalism is well documented (Goodwin, 2021; Mockler, 2020) with a shift from autonomy to accountability (Evans 2006:21). The ECF policy exemplifies many of the characteristics of increased accountability, performativity and regulation of activity seen in English teacher education policy, providing less space for the professional, in this case the ECT mentor, to exercise their discretion.

##  Origins of the Early Career Framework

The origins of the ECF lie within the UK government’s 2019 Retention and Recruitment Strategy (DfE, 2019b). This was a significant development by the UK government with regard to English Teacher Education as the policy drew together ideas of improving retention and alleviating some of the pressures on recruitment. The underlying rationale being as a result of the enhanced induction and support programme not only attrition rates would be reduced but more would be attracted into the profession. The Retention and Recruitment Strategy saw the launch of the Early Career Framework (ECF), heralded by the UK government as the ‘*centrepiece of the strategy’* (2019b:20). The Strategy articulated a commitment to provide those in their first two years of teaching in England, now to be known as Early Career Teachers (ECTs) with a dedicated mentor who was trained to work with them. The ECF policy aim was to drive a systemic change in the early professional development of teachers. The ECF introduced a new content of professional development set out against the existing nationally defined teaching standards (DfE, 2013). The ECF stated that it would ‘*build on and complement’* (DfE, 2019b:5) the work of Initial Teacher Training (ITT). The prescribed content of the ECF is matched by the content of the ITT [1] Core Content Framework now required delivery by Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers as a minimum entitlement for all trainee teachers in England.

## The Early Career Framework Policy

The Early Career Framework (ECF) UK government policy made its way into the English school system via intermediary educational providers. Initially ‘*four expert teacher training providers’* (DfE*,* 2019b) selected through a tendering process, were given contracts to develop Core Induction Programmes based on the ECF content. The intention was that these four programmes would contain high quality materials, to support ECTs and mentors across the ECTs’ first two years of teaching. The content was designed around what the ECT needed to learn under the two headings ‘*Learn that’* and *‘Learn How* to*’.* The ECF explanation for distinction between the two terms is given in the document as the ‘*Learn tha*t’ statements are the evidence-based statements requiring further reading by the ECF and mentor based on ‘*the best available educational research’ (DfE, 2019:9).* This claim is contested by many researchers (Evans, 2022; Russell Group, 2021; Turvey *et al.*, 2019) both in terms of the currency of much of the research and the validity of the research. The later point arises from the dual nature of the role played by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) who are responsible for endorsing all of the evidence base whilst simultaneously linked directly to many of the research articles referenced.The ‘*Learn how to’* statements are the practice statements, ‘*drawn from the wider evidence base’ (DfE, 2019:9),* and included guidance from selected expert practitioners as well as the identified academic research. ECT mentors would be provided with fully funded ‘*high quality training*’ sessions to support their mentees and the delivery of this evidence-based learning. In this way the mentors were positioned as new policy actors taking the main responsibility, on the ground at ‘street level’ (Lipsky, 2010), for enacting government policy with regard to the ECF. The high-quality training claim is also contested, with Lofthouse (2021) amongst others warning of the limited focus on mentoring and mentor specific research needed to support mentors’ development.

There is no explicit acknowledgement in the ECF of the need to adapt the content to take account of the school context in which the mentor and ECT are working. Indeed, as a national policy, at the macro level, it is designed to outline a minimum entitlement for all beginning teachers and the content is therefore a generic outline of a two-year programme of structured training and development. However, at the micro level the local policy actors’ actions and interactions can lead to changes and a flexing of the policy to meet particular needs faced in the reality of their contexts (Marz *et al.*, 2016). This is acknowledged in the Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Childrens Services and Skills) ECF inspection framework which expects leaders to have set up systems to adapt to the needs of the ECT (2022:54). From the sample in this small research study this would appear to be the case, as to varying degrees the ECT mentors are enacting the policy in different ways according to their context and informed by their own beliefs and experiences.

##  Degrees of choice

The ECF policy was initially interpreted and developed by the four successful educational Providers with each creating a set of online materials and resources based on the ECF content. The DfE website stated that: ‘*Although structured differently, each programme contains approximately the same amount of self-study material in terms of hours.’* (DfE, 2019a).These materials were made freely available via the DfE website for any stakeholders to access. Not waiting for the pilot to be completed, in September 2020, the DfE launched a further invitation for additional Providers to tender. This follow-up tendering process allowed other Providers to bid to develop their own Full Induction Programmes based on their selection of one of the existing pilot Provider’s content. As part of their tender the suppliers were required to include ‘*comprehensive mentor session materials’ (DfE, 2020a).* This resulted in two additional Providers for the national roll-out in September 2021.

Schools were given the option to buy into the full delivery model offered by any of the six approved Providers or to access available resources from the original pilot Providers and design their own or to design from scratch their own bespoke programme. It is currently the case that most schools appear to have chosen to align with one of the successful DfE funded Provider- led programmes, recommended by their regional Teaching School Hub (TSH). The Teaching School Hubs are part of the DfE’s new regional architecture replacing a wider network of around 750 Teaching schools with 87 TSHs which form ‘*centres of excellence for teacher training and development’ (DfE,2021).* These TSHs were identified by the DFE as the best schools and multi academy trusts in the country*.* There are several reasons given by schools for their ‘choice’ of the Provider Led programmes; the training is a new as yet unknown quantity and the policy is another new reform which schools are often wary of investing in -until it becomes a proven and permanent change, the work involved in creating their own materials has an additional expense attached for individual schools, those schools that do chose to create their own version of a school-led model will be subject to increased Ofsted scrutiny, and lastly there are funding implications with less money, including for mentor training, given to schools creating their own versions of the ECF training programme. In this study all of the ECT mentors were following a Lead Provider programme of mentor training, delivered by one of the Lead Providers’ chosen Delivery Partners. The ECT programmes they supported were all created by the corresponding Lead Providers. A total of three of the Lead Provider programmes were included in this research sample, representing the coverage in the Northwest region of England as the three regional TSHs had all made a different choice for their preferred Lead Provider.

## Literature review

### Mentor professional development

Mentoring is an ambiguous term in academic literature, the overlap and inter-relation to coaching being a frequent theme (Mok and Staub, 2021; Aspfors and Fransson, 2015; Mullen, 2012). Similarly mentoring of beginning teachers is given different parameters by many researchers, some research is limited to those working with unqualified student teachers or pre service teachers (Wexler, 2019; Stanulis and Bell, 2017; Aspfors and Fransson, 2015), other researchers (Schuck *et al.*, 2018; Richter *et al.*, 2013) only consider those who mentor and induct qualified teachers in their first year of teaching employment (previously known in England as an NQTs and now know an as an ECTs) and a further set of writers who consider both the unqualified and newly qualified all under the umbrella of beginning teachers (Tonna *et al.*, 2017; Shanks, 2017; Hyde and Edwards, 2014). For the purpose of this research, adapting from Aspfors and Fransson (2015:76), in relation to the early career teacher, mentoring is defined as:

*mentoring is an activity, a process and a long-term relationship between an experienced teacher (mentor) and a less experienced mentee (in this case the ECT) that is primarily designed to support the mentee’s learning, professional development and well-being and to facilitate their induction into the culture of teaching and the local school context’*

Generally, the literature focuses on the effects of the mentoring process as part of the induction of beginning teachers into the profession. Langdon *et al.*, (2014) highlight the blurring by some authors between the concepts of induction and mentoring and provide a helpful delimitation. They note induction is ‘*the entire system of policy, resources, professional development opportunities, guidance, and support provided to beginning teacher*’ (2014:93) whereas mentoring is specifically activity associated with an experienced colleague guiding and supporting the beginning teacher. Thus, mentoring may be considered a primary component of an induction programme (Gopinathan, 2008), although Long *et al.*, (2012) noted in their literature review of induction and mentoring, in some cases mentoring is considered to be the induction programme (2012:9). Mentoring literature considers the practices of the mentor (Marciano *et al.*, 2019; Hudson, 2016) the characteristics and qualities of effective mentors (Ellis *et al.*, 2020; Callahan, 2016; Hobson and Malderez, 2013) and the impact of mentoring on both the mentee (Squires, 2019; Gourneau, 2014; Long *et al.*, 2012) and the mentor themselves (Holland 2018; Thornton, 2014; Hudson 2013). Additionally, some literature focuses on the developments in the nature and focus of mentoring practices (Stanulis and Bell 2017; Mena *et al.*,, 2017, Richter *et al.*, 2013) moving from mentors supporting the development of reflective practitioners to an educative stance (Trevethan, 2017; Langdon and Ward, 2015) with the mentor working alongside forming a *‘pedagogic relationship* (Feiman-Nemser, 2012:241)

There are some relevant meta literature reviews (Orland-Barak and Wang, 2021; Ellis *et al.*, 2020; Crutcher and Naseem, 2016; Hobson *et al.*, 2009b) which consider the systematic and narrative reviews of mentor literature. The reviews indicate a degree of consensus around the importance of the development and preparation of mentors which is needed not only for the retention of the beginning teachers (Vaitzman Ben-David and Berkovich, 2021; Shanks *et al.* 2020) but to ensure a stronger, professional knowledge base of interconnected theory and practice (Schuck *et al.*, 2018; Peiser *et al.*, 2017). Not all mentoring is seen as positive, Hobson (2016) provides a useful summary of the potentially negative aspects of mentoring on the well-being and professional growth of beginning teachers. Hobson (2016:91) notes the conditions that dampen potential damaging effects include the characteristics of the mentee and those of the mentor, the identification and selection of appropriate mentors who use a range of common strategies that support and develop mentees. Hobson specifically identifies the importance of mentor preparation and includes the time and opportunity needed by mentors to engage with their professional development as contributing to positive conditions. In earlier research with Maldarez, Hobson had identified some of the macro level issues of national and institutional policies that were not enabling effective mentoring but most significantly at a micro level of individual mentors was the overuse of negative criticism and judgmentoring (2013:93). The term judgementoring was used to describe the overuse of judgmental mentoring approaches often aligned to a limited understanding of the role by the mentor who placed an over reliance on directive advice often focused on assessing negative aspects of the beginning teacher's practice. Judgementoring is seen as a possible consequence of the lack of the mentor’s own professional development and training by Lejonberg *et al.*, (2015). Their findings from a survey of 146 Mentors in Norway suggested that mentor education can reduce the likelihood of judgementoring practices (2015:152). For Hobson and Malderez judgmentoring could also be directly linked to the problematic and potentially toxic model of the mentor as both the support and the assessor, (this is the case in the ECF programme when the ECT mentor is also the Induction tutor).

 Although there is much literature around the mentoring of teachers, little has focused on the development of the mentor or programmes of professional learning for the mentor themselves (Aspfors and Fransson, 2015; Leshem, 2013; Hobson *et al.*, 2009). Frequently mentor practices are observed to be idiosyncratic and unstructured, Sewell *et al.*, (2017) uses the term ‘*haphazard*’ in describing the nature of mentor provision for beginning teachers in New Zealand but this would be indicative of a wider international condition (Pennanen *et al.*, 2016, Sim, 2011; Zeichner, 2010). For Rajuan *et al.*, (2010) the variation in mentoring is a result of the phenomena itself being social and relational; based on the individual mentor and mentee's interactions and these relationships are inevitably unique and complex. Others (Clarke *et al.*, 2014; Jones and Straker, 2006) view disparities arising from individual mentors drawing from their own experiences and personal understandings to support the development of their mentee, leading to the idiosyncratic nature of the activity. Some of the variation in mentoring, for Ambrosetti *et al.*, (2014), arises because of a lack of a clear conceptual framework for mentoring. However, for Kemmis *et al.*, (2014) this lack of clarity stems from a plurality of frameworks and theories which contribute to the contested nature of the term and the activity of the mentor. They identify three main archetypes of mentoring; mentoring as supervision, mentoring as professional support and mentoring as collaborative self-development (2014). In terms of these archetypes the ECF framework places mentoring as a professional support, leaving the Induction Tutor to the formal supervision and assessment role.

Mart *et al.*, (2016) note from their research of Belgium policy in regard to beginning teachers, that mentoring was not seen as reflecting particular professional expertise, or more significantly as something mentors needed to develop the expertise for (2016:318). Researching mentors’s efforts in Norwegian ITE, Sandvik *et al.*, (2019) raise the related issue of a lack of persistence and professionalism (2019:577) displayed by many mentors. This is viewed by Sandvik *et al.*, (2019) to be a direct result of constraints in the time available and the increased workload mentoring responsibilities place on the mentors. Thus, there is a doubling down on a potential lack of perceived need for professional development alongside a lack of time to undertake professional development. Clarke *et al’s.*, (2014) research of school-based mentors, (referred to in their Canadian setting as cooperating teachers), similarly suggests that mentors lack any specific preparation and are under prepared for the work they undertake. Largely relying on their intuitive sense of what it means to supervise beginning teachers and often by drawing on their own practice and experiences (2014:164). This leads to a problematic and naïve concept of ‘good mentors are born that way’ (Roegman and Kolman, 2020:110) which is picked up by several authors who argue that not all teachers naturally make good mentors. A requirement of training and development, and an acknowledgement that mentoring is not simply instinctive and often competing with other priorities, is a theme in some of the literature (Hughes, 2021; Grimmett ’s *et al.,* 2018, Marz *et al.*, 2016). Hobson (2002) acknowledged that mentoring beginning teachers is constrained for school-based mentors, who are inevitably *juggling priorities in the face of the “overwhelming demands” of school life … and the administrative demands of [ITE]* (2002:16). This was evident from the interviews with ECT mentors in this study and suggests not only training and education, but the time and space to engage with these, are important for mentors to professionally develop. Orland-Barak, in reference to mentor’s preparation, uses the metaphor of learning a second language, stating when describing learning to be a mentor that there can be elements lost in translation moving from the first language of classroom practice to the second language of mentoring practice (2005:357).

Overall, the literature and research share similar findings in terms of the benefits and importance of induction programmes and associated mentoring for beginning teachers (Clarke and Mena, 2022; Weimer, 2021). The caveat to this statement is also important: the induction programme and mentoring need to be of good quality and adaptive to the needs and context of the ECTs to be effective (Hong and Matsko, 2019; Schuck *et al.,* 2018) and this is not always the case. As Kemmis *et al.,* note:

*different versions of mentoring not only produce different kinds of learning for the individuals involved, they also develop different kinds of dispositions in*

*mentees and in mentors*. (2014:157)

There is an acknowledgement that mentoring is relational and will vary according to the different qualities of the individuals and their own conceptions of mentoring (Richter *et al.*, 2013; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). The contextually situated nature of the mentoring is also acknowledged in the literature (Orland-Barak and Wang, 2021; DeLong *et al.*, 2019). The culture of the schools and the prioritisation given by senior leaders influencing the working environment in which the mentoring practices are located (Zavelevsky, and Lishchinsky, 2020; Orland-Barak 2014). Thornton’s findings from data from 130 mentors showed the school culture to be an enabler but often the main barrier to mentors having a positive impact (2014:25). Similar findings are evident in quantitative research by Hong and Matsko (2019) based on surveys from 1,013 teachers who were in their first or second year of teaching in 322 elementary schools in Chicago. The focus of their study was on the quality and context of mentoring and the impact on the new teachers’ organisational commitment. Hong and Matsko considered *inside* features of mentoring (frequency of interactions, guidance for mentee, engagement with practice) and additionally the *outside of mentoring* features of the school climate set by the leadership. Their conclusions revealed a *compelling role of principal leadership in new teacher mentoring (2019:2396).* Hong and Matsko (2019) argued that school leaders were not only able to create and influence the conditions for high quality mentoring but could mitigate some of the effects of weak or insufficient regular mentoring through the culture and climate they set in their schools.

Professional discretion

The concept of professional discretion was first introduced by Lipsky (1980, 2010) in his seminal work which framed public sector workers, including teachers as ‘Street level Bureaucrats’(SLBs). SBLs work in hierarchical structures implementing external policies on the ground, at the local level. Through their responsibility for the implementation and enactment of national government policy, the SLBs are the face of public policy (Gilson, 2015) and how the public experience the policy. For Lipsky professional discretion was a unifying theme across different groups of public workers, including teachers and therefore, by default teacher mentors. All SLBs exercised some degree of discretion in their interpretation of policy, reacting and making on the spot decisions through the course of their work. Discretion, trust and autonomy are all concepts linked to the notion of professionalism (Zhang, 2022; Hult, and Edström, 2016; Evetts, 2013) As Tschannen-Moran and Gareis note discretion is ‘*at the heart of professional practice’* (2019:211) and defines a professional as someone who can deploy discretionary judgement in non-routine circumstances. In relation to teachers, professional discretion can be viewed as the *‘mechanism through which SLBs applied the rules of a policy in different circumstances’* (Hall and Hampden Thompson, 2022:984). Johannessen outlines in more detail professional discretion as ‘*the capacity and obligation to decide what actions are appropriate and the ability to take those actions*’ (2019:516). These aspects of the capacity to make discretionary decisions and the ability to act are distinguished in early work by Molander *et al.,* (2012:214) as the *epistemic dimension* and the *structural dimensions* of professional discretion. These ideas are subsequently developed by Wallander and Molander’s (2014) into the two dimensions of professional discretion; *discretionary space* and *discretionary reasoning*.

Discretionary space considers the structural aspects which afford, in this research the ECT mentor, the opportunity and space to make decisions. Johannessen (2019) discussing discretion, cites the work of Dworkin (1978) who viewed discretion as ‘*a space of autonomous decision making surrounded by a belt of restrictions’* (2019:515). This suggests a degree of variation in the space for professionals to exercise their discretion, dependent on factors such as the external and internal culture and contexts in which the SLBs are working (Olbekkink-Marchand *et al*., 2017; Priestly *et al.*, 2015). How much space is afforded to the mentor may differ at the meso level between school contexts and at a micro level within schools, between departments and stages. In their findings on the impact of quality assurance mechanisms, ‘*the new bureaucracy’* (2015:2) on UK SLBs (teachers, nurses and social workers) Murphy and Skillen noted a compression in professional activities and in particular the compression of time ‘*having consequences for the exercise of professional judgement at the street level’* (2015:2). This requirement for time as well as space to act with discretion again echoes findings from the literature around mentor preparation and professional learning.

The dimension of discretionary reasoning for Wallender and Molander, sits within the continuum of practical argument and *encompasses that part of the continuum where the warrants are weakest* (2014:4). In other words, discretionary reasoning comes into play when the SLB (mentor) is faced with weighing up a decision for which there is no obvious, defined or easy solution and may be when the SLB disconnects to a degree from the intention of the policy aims deploying ‘*unsanctioned coping mechanisms’* (Lipsky, 2010:xv). Within teaching there are a myriad of daily competing agendas arising from the different pupils and colleagues they are interacting with, their school and department policies and practices alongside national initiatives and policies (Boote, 2006). All of these factors require teachers to make informed autonomous decisions in the moment with an awareness that they will be accountable for their actions (Molander, 2016; Murphy and Skillen, 2015). This balance between autonomy and accountability is a feature in the literature of teacher professionalism (Larsen, 2021; Oolbekkink-Marchand *et al.*, 2017; Karseth and Moller, 2017) An important element of the informed decision making, and use of discretionary powers is the professional learning and knowledge base underpinning these judgments. As Molander *et al.,* noted, the discretionary powers given to professionals is done on the basis of *certified knowledge (2012:220)* which should form the foundations of the judgements and inform the use of their discretionary reasoning. This suggests the importance of the preparation and education of professionals and highlights the relevance of the mentor training dimension of the ECF. As previously noted, from the literature little attention has been paid to the education and preparation of those who mentor beginning teachers and yet they will be responsible for making many decisions based on their understanding and beliefs of what mentoring requires when working with and supporting their beginning teacher. For this study, Wallander and Molander’s two dimensions of professional discretion are used to consider the ECT mentors as new policy actors and if and how they use discretionary space and reasoning to enact the ECF policy within their own contexts.

## Research Methodology

To research the mentor’s interpretation and enactment of the new ECF policy semi structured interviews were undertaken with an initial sample of 9 mentors and 4 Induction tutors who were also mentors. These came from a range of settings including primary and secondary schools and one special school. (Table one gives a summary profile of the mentors who took part). It proved difficult to get participants to take part. The ethics required approaching the Headteachers as gatekeepers for approval and many were reluctant for their staff to be involved. Not wanting the research to add to the workload of the mentors was most commonly cited. Only one headteacher in a longer discussion admitted they did not want their mentors to discuss the fact that the school was not able to meet the ECF requirements of time and engagement with all of the mentor and ECT training. This response may have been representative of a wider group of school leaders but due to the strong performativity culture and concerns for any implications in future Ofsted inspections (Wilkins *et al.*, 2021; MacBeath, 2016) the researcher did not expect many headteachers to openly admit to any level of non-compliance with the ECF policy.

The semi structured interviews were generally held online, lasting around 50 minutes. This method of research was largely a pragmatic decision as the study started during a period when schools were still cautious in terms of Covid and any potential implications of face-to-face visitors to school. Although the benefits for the interviewer experiencing the culture and context in which the ECT mentor was situated were lost, offering this online interview was helpful in securing mentors’ time. The zoom meetings could be arranged at a convenient time for the interviewee, often between teaching lessons and this concurs with findings by Gray *et al.,* (2020) as one of the benefits afforded by online interviews. All of the mentors who were interviewed online expressed this as their preference and appeared at ease in the virtual space during the interviews. Increased familiarity over the time period of Covid restrictions had made all of the mentors more fluent with the technology for example most stated they were using online platforms increasingly for many of their staff meetings and most of their ECF training had been online through synchronous and asynchronous sessions.

## Participants

According to a recent DfE (2022) initial evaluation of the first term of the National rollout programme, ECT mentors are typically aged between 30-50 years with an average of 13 years of experience and more than 70% holding a leadership role either middle (ML)or senior leadership (SL). The sample in this study had a similar profile with an average of 16 years teaching experience ,79% holding ML or SL posts. The majority of the sample had previously mentored with an average of over 8 years of mentoring experience. Two of the mentors in the interview sample were responsible for mentoring two ECTs. Over 70% had previously mentored NQTs as part of their school induction programmes and four had been, and continued to be, the Induction tutor as well as the mentor. These four representing around 30% of the sample, (in line with 28% from the DfE evaluation data), were aware that it was recommended the two roles were held separately.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mentor | Gender | Phase | Additional leadership role  | Time in teaching(yrs) | Time mentoring(yrs) | Time as Induction tutor (yrs) | NQTmentor |
| A | F | Special | SL | 15 | 6 | 4 | x |
| B | F | Special | ML | 10 | 3 |   | x |
| C | M | Secondary | ML | 17 | 9 | 3  | x |
| D | F | Secondary |  | 4 | 3 |   | x |
| E | M | Secondary |  | 4 | 2 |   |   |
| F | F | Secondary | ML | 18 | 11 |   | x |
| G | F | Secondary | ML | 34 | 20 |   |   |
| H | F | Primary | SL | 22 | 17 | 8  | x |
| I | F | Primary | SL | 17 | 12 | 7  | x |
| J | M | Primary | SL | 13 | 5 |   | x |
| K | F | Primary |  | 3 | 2 |   |  |
| L | F | Primary | SL | 28 | 16 |   | x |
| M | F | Primary | SL | 23 |  14  |   | x |
| N | F | Primary | ML | 16 | 4 |   |   |

**Table One Profile of Mentor participants**

## Findings and Discussion

### Professional discretionary space.

The issue of space in practical terms such as timetabling the required meetings was raised by several mentors. It had influenced why many of the mentors were ML or SL staff, as they had more flexibility in terms of less, or in two cases no, teaching commitments on their own timetables. This was not the case for all of the mentors in the sample and the secondary mentors particularly appeared to struggle to find space within their working days to undertake all of the required training for themselves and with their ECT. One mentor (D) was meeting with their ECT after school as they had no common time free to meet during the school day. Similarly, another primary mentor (F) who had struggled to find the time to work with the two ECTs she had been asked to mentor felt she had been supported by her SL colleagues. They had rearranged her timetable to enable a day a week to undertake her commitments. These findings align with Hong and Matsko (2019) indicating the importance of the school leadership team in enabling the space for mentors to undertake the required policy activity and additionally afford the possibility for mentors to exercise their professional discretion.

One mentor highlighted the impact of the school’s involvement with ITE on the capacity to implement the ECF. The commitment of staff to mentoring ITE students meant that a new group of SL colleagues were required to pick up the ECT mentoring. This was also cited as the reason, or part of the reason given by those ECT mentors who were also undertaking the Induction tutor role: *‘it keeps the pressure off other staff’ (Mentor F)* and *‘in a small primary like ours it isn’t possible, we don’t have the capacity ‘(Mentor H)* (to have separate staff members for Induction tutor and ECT mentor).

In terms of undertaking the two roles of mentor and Induction tutor, which is not in line with the ECF guidance (DfE, 2021) only one ECT mentor viewed it as a concern:

 *I made the mistake this year because we didn't really understand the program. I was the induction tutor and mentor for one of our ECTs. And actually, I think moving forward, I will just be the induction tutor and I think that's a better way of working. …..I feel like it's quite different to different roles (Mentor A)\*

The other school leaders undertaking both roles were confident they were doing both roles well and saw no conflict and no concerns about the dangers of *judgementoring* (Hobson *et al.,* 2009). As the quote above reveals, several mentors found the speed of the introduction of the ECF policy had restricted some of their decision making. Several commented on not knowing what was expected and were restricted in their decision making from the start. Here it was perceived that external pressures rather than the leadership culture which were seen to limit their professional space (Olbekkink-Marchand *et al.,* 2017). Looking forward as the policy and programme implementation expectations became clearer, some mentors felt they may be able to make more informed judgements with a greater ability to use their professional discretion with their individual ECTs and training. The suggestion was that their school leaders would be more confident to create the discretionary space

  *I do wish we had done the ‘do it yourself’ (School led programme) where we could have tailored it to them. Because one of the ECTs was weaker and needed a lot more work on behaviour management, but one week had to still spend an hour and a half on whatever it was but it wasn’t what she needed.* (Mentor N)

As mentioned by Hong and Matsko (2019) culture set by the leaders influences mentoring and can create boundaries, restricting the level of discretion. The prevailing external accountability culture creates a tension for school leaders, identified by Larsen (2021:2) in ensuring policy implementation has the required fidelity but does not undermine the autonomy of the professionals. This mentor felt he had a supportive Head teacher but as a relatively new Head teacher, he had been clear that the mentor should stick to the programme and not make any changes:

*I mean, I suppose the usual threat is hanging over as well, isn't it? We're not due to be Ofsteded (sic). But if Ofsted come in and you're not offering a robust enough package, then obviously that will be something that they will investigate. (Mentor N)*

This contrasted with another primary mentor who indicated the positive influence of her school leader on her mentoring:

*I just feel like I am trusted and I am left to get on with it. If it had been the previous head, and it would have been very different circumstances, I would be telling you a very different story (Mentor L)*

The choice of the training programme and the quality and design of the content had implications in terms of the discretionary space they afforded and in turn how much space was available for discretionary reasoning to be exercised. The policy interpretation offered by the Provider Lead programmes contributed to the *belt of restriction* (Johannessen, 2019), around the ECT mentors’ professional discretion, prescribing weekly, what the mentors and ECTs should be reading, researching and practising. This did not always align with what the mentors felt they should be doing:

*It’s very rigid. It's, it's prescribed every week. And that's, again, that was sold as an advantage for the mentors. The mentors wouldn't have to do any preparation to use it.* *But because it's so scripted, there's not really very much opportunity, to kind of follow a different path* (Mentor C)

*But they (ECTs) would like more time, if they're sitting with their mentor who tends to be their head of department. They want to talk about subject specific stuff. You know, what are they teaching next? Problem pupils, but there's no time built in for that.* (Mentor F)

*They are better than the materials that have been set up. I found it was a little bit insulting to their intelligence -some of the materials. Its treating them like they were first year trainees* (Mentor I)

Overall, most of the mentors viewed the aims of the ECF policy as a positive development, providing more support for their ECT and for themselves. However, there were varied opinions expressed by mentors in terms of how successfully the aims were being met, particularly in terms of the interpretation of the policy into the ECT programmes offered by the Providers. A typical comment from one mentor (N) indicated a degree of disconnect felt between the ECF aims of support and retention of ECTs, and the interpretation and implementation via the Provider-led programmes of the professional development:

*I think the policy does (meet the aims) however the Providers don’t. I would prefer to tailor support to our school and the ECTs needs, however there isn’t much scope for that on the programme. (Mentor N)*

 *The way I see it, at the moment, is a good idea. poorly executed (Mentor C)*

There was some qualified sympathy for the Providers in terms of the speed with which they had had to develop materials:

*they haven't had a lot of time to develop the material. So everything has been done so fast. But it feels like it hasn't really thought through the needs of different groups (Mentor A)*

However, in two cases the notion of moving from the Provider-led programmes was already being considered. This belt of restriction (Johannessen, 2019) was also generated by policy architecture which required the Teaching School Hubs (TSH) selected by the government to direct their schools to their choice of Provider-led programme:

*There's a lot of the TS hub influence, the TS hub chooses for you basically. Right? In theory there are three options: one which is run your own way, but you have to get it off on schedule and the time isn't enough. And then the other option was to kind of go direct to a Provider so leapfrog the idea of the local Teaching School Hub, and pick your Provider materials, which again, just seemed wrong if there was going to be any collaboration locally*. (Mentor C)

*The reality very much was you don't really get a choice, if you want to, if you want an easier life. Yeah, I mean it's hard enough anyway, with the workload. That, you know, anything extra was never going to be manageable you go with the TS Hub partner* (Mentor H)

For those schools who were TS Hubs or working in close collaboration this was not a restrictive choice. Two mentors knew their schools had chosen their ECF Provider-led programme because of existing relationships with these organisations. In both cases the mentors were also involved as facilitators for other professional development programmes known as NPQs (National Professional Qualifications) and were optimistic about the partnerships and saw the ECF programme as an extension of these existing relationships. Using Ball *et al*’s typology these are the *policy entrepreneurs and enthusiasts* (2011:626); the advocates of policy. In these schools the mentors were the most positive about the ECF programmes and had additional involvement as facilitator for the Provider as well as being an ECT mentor, creating greater buy-in to the positive successes of the programmes.

### Professional discretionary reasoning

Although space and time are critical mechanisms for professional discretion and may restrict the degree to which a mentor can use their discretion it does not automatically follow that given the space, the mentor will apply discretionary reasoning to their practice. Several factors appear to impact this dimension as noted in the literature (Molander, 2016; Murphy and Skillen, 2015, Wallender and Molander, 2014) the mentor's own cognitive and critical capacities need to have been developed through education and professional learning, as well as a school environment which facilitates and trusts the mentor to use their discretion. The culture of the schools came through as a factor in providing mentors with a degree of space to reason and work flexibly with the programme.

 *The focus is very much on pedagogy, isn't it? It is teaching and learning. Whereas in the past, maybe mentoring was a bit more pastoral. I'd call it more pedagogic. It's much more focused, isn't it? So, if you are in that kind of school anyway, where you're having those kinds of teaching and learning conversations, then it's sort of fitting in quite well.* (Mentor F)

Prior experience of mentoring in ITE gave some of the mentors increased confidence and expertise that they were using to inform their reasoning in terms of what was needed by their ECT. These more experienced mentors spoke more about exercising their professional discretionary reasoning to make decisions about what to do in their meetings each week, not necessarily sticking to the programme closely:

*I start off with a health check -how you getting on? Go through any problems I may team teach, sort out all day to day issues –then we talk about where do you need to develop next? We have the ECF have the 5 areas and have the Teaching standards so we know what she (ECT) needs to be working on so we have gone on what she needs rather than what the Provider says* (Mentor H)

“*depending on the stuff that's going on within the department it (the ECF programme) could get pushed to the side a little bit*” (ECT Mentor F)

*We've deviated a lot from the materials, because our ECTs joined us last year through the COVID Catch up money. We thought wow you are fabulous, both of them, so we knew what we were inheriting…... So, then this year, we gave them full time jobs, we already knew that they fitted in with the staff and things like that. So, they were ahead and needed better materials.* (Mentor I)

*So the issue would be that it was very hard to follow the program to the letter. I think that's what we found the hardest. you know, when it's a behaviour focus behaviour for a mainstream school is so, so very different (to Special schools). We kind of include elements, you know, all of the sensory and all, the regulation.* *I think what we try to do is we look, obviously, we read through what we're supposed to do each week, don't we, and we just take any bits that we can that we can relate our practice into that particular class, then we do what we do in our own way. So, it's loosely based (Mentor A)*

The last quote from the ECT mentor in a special school illustrated some of the problems at the early stages of the national roll out as the materials are generic and not bespoke to different phases. Other primary mentors also felt the ECT and mentor materials were not directly relevant and required adapting to make them work in their contexts. This suggests a weakness in the programmes as they fail to take account of mentoring as a social practice (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014) ‘*anchored within and prefigured by the specific contexts’* Pennenan, 2016; 28).

Most mentors were exercising their discretionary reasoning to varying degrees in adapting the programme for their ECT. In some cases, this involved a considerable additional workload for the ECTs. The two most experienced mentors, both also the induction tutors, had decided that other training programmes they knew and had placed previous NQTs on, were important for their ECTS to experience:

*She's done the ECT science hub training for a full year that has been very good, because it's been a group of 16 ECTs. just looking at primary science and they've had to do a project. She's also done the diocese ECT project so she has had lots of extra support* (Mentor H)

*I know the quality of the training that comes out of the Maths Hub. So straightaway, I put them on the specialist knowledge (programme) for ECTs….. they've been going on that every half term, and then we've got that coming back into school. So, it ties in with everything that we were doing in school, and then got them on some of the literacy stuff next year via them (the Hub), because I think they (ECTs) deserve that sort of quality.* (Mentor I)

The mentor making the last quote had exercised a considerable degree of professional reasoning and judgement as she indicated her direction to the ECTs was to put their efforts into the specialist training and to pay lip service to the ECT online programme sessions by logging in but switching their cameras off to do other work:

*They've (ECT) still done all the zooms. I've been saying to them, put the zoom on and just use the time to get on with other things because you can see everyone else is doing the same, because it's just all blank screens* (Mentor I)

Not all mentors were as confident in straying from the programme agendas, for themselves or their ECTs; the two newest least experienced mentors were sticking closely to the prescribed programme. They were the most positive about the Provider lead materials and the structure provided:

*I* r*eally like it. It's structured with precise actions every week you have to focus on. It would help if you had not mentored it covers a lot on line a lot of video as you can watch they are really useful* (Mentor K)

Some of the most experienced teachers were also more positive about some of the research and materials. Some viewed the additional resources and training as useful professional development for themselves. Implicitly these mentors acknowledged the lack of professional development and support they had previously been exposed which is supported by the literature. As summarised by Pennanen *et al.*, the emphasis had previously been ‘upon the development of mentee practice, with an implicit assumption that mentors did not need or require training’ (2016: 45). For other mentors it was a validation of their existing knowledge of current research, and that held by their schools, reflecting their school’s culture of teaching and learning.

*It develops me in terms of the research, keeping an eye out on what is going on keeps me on top of my game like being and ITT mentor* ………..*before the ECF framework, I wouldn't have necessarily been given ECTs research to look at, to back up the practice, whereas I'm doing more of that now. So when so when we have our mentor meetings, we will talk about research that backs up the practice.* (Mentor H)

*I like the pre reading over the summer, this course is a benefit because it’s a refresher. Teachers like understanding of different concepts and pedagogy, but actually forget, because you've been doing it instinctively for so long* (Mentor L)

*I don't have an issue with (the structure). I thought that would be really good for us, because we've never had that before. I can see why it would be beneficial in terms of the research. I've looked at it and I thought, ‘oh, yeah, I can see the reason why they're doing that’ but have I learned from this programme? No.* (Mentor I)

*The resources keep research fresh in my mind but it is usually something I already have come across in school and most (resources) don’t fit our school or the needs of our ECT. (Mentor N)*

Conclusion

Any national educational policy for ECTs has a difficult balance to achieve, on the one hand ensuring there is a standard entitlement in terms of content for the ECT and in the quality of mentoring support they receive. This has determined a ‘one size fits all*’* response from the UK government at the macro level. On the other hand, at a micro level the policy should meet the needs of ECTs and mentors and be relevant to their school context and these are not the same size or fit, each school and mentoring relationship will have unique features and constraints. Professional discretion can be a bridge between these two sides. The ECT mentors in this study have an understanding of the aims and content of the ECF policy, and they are in broad agreement. They wish to support their ECTs to become better teachers as well as support them pastorally ensuring their successful socialisation into their new school community. The majority recognise the importance of ensuring the ECTs make progress against the standards that underpin the ECF and agree with the destination of the ECF programmes for the ECTs but many are not in agreement with the pathway set out by the Providers to reach it. Most of the mentors are adapting and bespoking the ECT’s professional development journey whilst mindful of the programme requirements. The degree to which the ECT mentors stray from the Provider pathway, in this small sample, was linked and limited largely by their own levels of confidence and experience of mentoring, and to a lesser extent the culture of their schools. Those with many years of mentoring ITE and beginning teachers were exercising greater professional discretionary reasoning to make the adjustments they felt appropriate to meet the needs of their ECTs. The adjustments usually involved supplementing the programme with additional experiences and resources so there are implications for their ECT’s workloads.

The experience of the mentors was an interesting enabling factor in relation to professional discretion, largely the experience was gained from doing the job. Mentors had learned through practice, even those who had been mentoring for ITE providers had not been exposed to many opportunities to engage with the research and theory to critically deconstruct and reflect against their established practice. Most mentors did not raise this as an issue or a concern. Their own preparation and professional development was not surfacing as a requirement, only directly raised by the two mentors recently new to mentoring. In relation to the ECF the engagement with their own training was the area of greatest variance with most exercising a high level of professional discretion and reasoning in judging their training programme less of a priority than that of their ECTs. Most mentors in the sample were not able to find sufficient space and time to engage fully with their own preparation but were not seeing this as significant. The focus of their concerns were on the ECT programme and its implications for their mentees. This is a potential area of concern and one worthy of further research. All ITE and ECT mentors would benefit from high quality professional development which would enable them to improve their practice and support judgements that are made in more informed ways. Mollander *et al.*, (2012) note that discretion is difficult to predict and control. The outcomes may vary across time, space, and individuals. From a policy perspective the need to limit variations and ensure the variance is essential and relevant to the context is supported when those given the power to use discretion do so in increasingly informed educative ways. The preparation of mentors as seen from the literature is a neglected area both in terms of the research itself and its practice. The ECF policy is an important step forwards in acknowledging the need to prepare and professionally develop mentors for the important work they undertake supporting beginning teachers. However, although the destination of a reflective informed mentor is clear the pathway is less clear. The time and most importantly the content of the mentor training has not been given sufficient attention and remains a hugely missed opportunity. Not only is the opportunity being missed but it does not appear to be recognised by either the Policy maker or providers and most significantly and concerning it is not being recognised sufficiently by those mentoring the ECTs themselves. There is an urgent need by the UK government and school leaders to understand the link between the quality of mentor preparation and the quality of those who will be entering the profession and influencing the quality of education in future years.

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[1] (Note the term *training* is the one used by the UK government, but the term *education* is preferred by most university providers and is aligned with the sentiments within this research so the term Initial Teacher Education (ITE) will be used unless directly referencing government documents).