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“I need more help, but everyone expects me to know it”: perceived mentoring needs of contemporary second-year early career teachers

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ABSTRACT

While there has been theoretical and empirical address of the changing characteristics of teachers as they progress through the early years of their professional careers, much less research has considered how this influences the changing ways in which early career teachers (ECTs) may prefer to experience mentoring during this time. Most ECT mentoring research and in-school mentoring programmes focus on teachers in their first year of the profession, or ECTs in very broad terms. Consequently, the specific mentoring needs and preferred approaches of second-year teachers, in particular, remain unclear. In this paper, we report on data collected via researcher field notes, an online survey, and professional learning activities with 15 mentors and ECTs in their second year of teaching in Queensland, Australia. Using a combination of descriptive statistics and directed qualitative content analysis, findings indicated that second-year teachers identify as having specific mentoring needs that they perceive require a unique combination of directive and co-exploratory mentoring approaches. Critically drawing on theories of teacher development, these findings have implications for schools and systems both in Australia and internationally in the development of policies and programmes for mentoring beyond the first year of teaching.

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Introduction

Teacher attrition is reported at unprecedented levels in numerous countries around the world, with Australia (Caudal 2022), the UK (See and Gorard 2020), and the US (Lambooy 2023) particularly impacted. As a consequence, there has been a focus on the recruitment of teacher candidates into the profession (Allen *et al.* 2019), but without ensuring new teachers entering the workforce are suitably supported it is unlikely to address workforce issues in the long-term. There is already a plethora of empirical research showing that Early Career Teachers (ECTs), those within the first 5 years of their teaching careers, may find the range and complexity of teaching responsibilities overwhelming, leading to their early exit from teaching (Kelly *et al.* 2019) despite the considerable contribution they make to their students, schools, and the profession (Kelchtermans 2019).

ECT mentoring has long been championed among educational researchers and practitioners to provide effective support. Many studies have demonstrated the potential of mentoring to serve as an effective means of emotional, social, and professional support (see for example

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Beutel *et al.* 2017, Kelly *et al.* 2018, Kelchtermans 2019, Goodwin *et al.* 2023), with research indicating that ECTs may feel more professionally connected (Eisenschmidt and Oder 2018), show ongoing pedagogical growth (Vaitzman Ben-David and Berkovich 2021), build further reflective capabilities (Goodwin *et al.* 2023), experience better well-being outcomes (Karanfil and Atay 2020) and remain longer in the profession when provided with a *helpful* mentor (Kelly *et al.* 2019).

However, it is difficult to find a clear definition in the literature of what makes a mentor *helpful*, with mentoring as a practice described as a contested concept (Kemmis *et al.* 2014). This is in part due to the assortment of mentoring approaches proffered, such as directive mentoring (Aspfors and Fransson 2015), relational mentoring, educative mentoring (Wexler 2019) and much more recently, co-inquiry (Kuhn *et al.* 2022) and future-focused mentoring (Larsen *et al.* 2023b).

The research has also tended to focus on ECT mentoring in their first year of the profession (Ingersoll and Strong 2011). However, findings are often presented as representative of the mentoring needs of ECTs more broadly. In essence, there has been little guidance about when these mentoring approaches may best be implemented to meet their evolving needs of ECTs as only a few studies have involved ECT participants beyond the first year of service (Aarts *et al.* 2020, Pomeranke *et al.* 2022, Vaitzman Ben-David and Berkovich 2022). These studies have not, for the most part, sought to understand differences in mentoring priorities. This participant focus may be the result of, or indeed a reason for why, there is evidence to suggest that second-year teachers are far less likely to receive mentoring despite their continuing novice status (Vaitzman Ben-David and Berkovich 2021). Consequently, how the mentoring needs and preferences of teachers across the early years of their careers evolve and change, particularly within the contemporary professional landscape, is currently under-conceptualised and under-investigated.

This paper argues that mentoring needs and preferences evolve across the early years of a teacher's career and that understanding and responding to those changes is critical to providing timely and appropriate mentoring at any given point during those early years. By understanding the different needs of ECTs across the first 5 years, schools and policymakers in Australia and elsewhere may be better positioned to consider how to develop and implement mentoring as a sustained practice beyond the first year of teaching. Thinking critically about theories of teacher development to frame this study, we draw on tenets of Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan's (2019) cyclical and multi-layered model to investigate mentoring for the second-year teacher.

This paper aims to explore what effective mentoring might look like for second-year teachers. This exploration is informed by perceptual data collected via researcher field notes, an online survey, and professional learning activities undertaken with 15 mentors and ECTs in their second year of teaching in Queensland, Australia. Using a combination of descriptive statistics and directed qualitative content analysis to inform our understanding, perceived mentoring needs and preferred mentoring methods are analysed through the lens of contemporary teacher development. Therefore, this paper seeks to conceptualise mentoring specific to second-year teachers, and in doing so, addresses the following research question: What do ECTs and their mentors believe about mentoring in the second year of teaching?

First, key international and Australian literature on ECT mentoring is reviewed. Second, relevant teacher development theory is outlined to conceptually frame this study and its methods. Finally, the findings of the research will be presented and discussed with consideration of their implications for policy and practice, as well as future research.

Early career teachers and mentoring

Learning to become an effective teacher is an ongoing and complex process, and the first 5 years of teachers' careers are crucial to establishing themselves and developing positive attitudes and relationships (Aspfors and Bondas 2013). ECTs must deal with the complex nature of teaching and the intensity such work involves, and, as such, there has been much research conducted on their

important professional contributions to this complex work (Kelchtermans 2019) as well as potential concerns and tensions (Aarts *et al.* 2020, Larsen *et al.* 2023c) as they navigate a new context and a new career, while concurrently building capacity and developing their own teacher identity (Schutz *et al.* 2018, Aarts *et al.* 2020).

Schools across the globe continue to work on improving students' access to effective teaching and learning and therefore seek to identify strategies that ensure that ECTs are supported (Auletto 2021). There has been much research into and empirical support for the claim that induction, and specifically mentoring programmes, have a positive impact in supporting ECTs (Shanks *et al.* 2022). As a result, many education systems worldwide now include induction and mentoring as mandatory. Mentoring research has claimed to reduce teacher attrition (Strong 2005); enhance professional learning (Trevethan and Sandretto 2017); contribute to social and psychological wellbeing (Karanfil and Atay 2020); enhance leadership development (Willis *et al.* 2019); and improve teachers' pedagogical capabilities (Kemmis *et al.* 2014, Crutcher and Naseem 2016). Beyond these findings, Kelchtermans (2019) advocates for mentoring in which ECTs' substantial enthusiasm and potential as change agents and innovators in their schools are nurtured.

Whilst, the extant literature demonstrates that mentoring can have a positive impact, there is also research warning against complacency and urging educators and researchers to examine the cultural context of schools and how, or not, ECTs are experiencing support (Schuck *et al.* 2018). Research, such as that conducted with ECTs by Bastian and Marks (2017) in the US and Belgian researchers (Thomas *et al.* 2019) found that the time allowed and the kind of activities that occur during mentoring, matter. Similarly, one case study has suggested that all mentoring is not equal and that specific kinds of mentoring are needed as the ECT develops (Wexler 2020). A recent Australian study supported this view, noting that ECTs found mentoring conversations that were overly focused on Teaching Standards were limiting (Larsen *et al.* 2023a). It would appear, therefore, that while a plethora of mentoring models are accredited with potential benefits for ECTs, ECTs themselves have their own views on what may or may not work for them.

Despite the term ECT most often referring to the teachers in the first 5 years of their careers (Miles and Knipe 2018), a majority of mentoring research, international and Australian, has focused ECTs in the first year of teaching. International studies from Malta (Attard Tonna 2019), Singapore (Hairon *et al.* 2020), Austria (Symeonidis *et al.* 2023), and the United States (Wilcoxon *et al.* 2020) have all focused on only the first year of teaching. Research from Australia and New Zealand has by and large followed this trend, with one Australian idiographic study examining the role of an external mentor in supporting three novice teachers all in their first year of teaching (Ewing 2021). A New Zealand study only looked at the first 6 months of teachers' experiences (Grudnoff 2012). While one study examined a large-scale mentoring programme developed to train over 3000 mentors in one Australian state (Beutel *et al.* 2017) and noted the programme only supported teachers in their first year of teaching. This propensity for mentoring research to be situated in the first-year teaching context may be due to a strong connection between mentoring as a component within induction programmes and to 'give newcomers a local guide' (Hobson *et al.* 2009, Ingersoll and Strong 2011).

Where some studies have included ECTs beyond the first year of teaching, many have not differentiated between where in the early career stage they may be located (such as first, second, or third-year teacher). For example, Aarts *et al.* (2020) study in the Netherlands surveyed 19 teachers in their first year and 16 teachers in their second year of teaching across 18 different secondary schools. Both groups were called Beginning Teachers, which in this case was defined as having no more than 2 years of teaching experience. Whilst the study noted differences between first- and second-year participants, the conclusions drawn by these researchers were not year-specific, and thus any differences were not thoroughly examined (Aarts *et al.* 2020). Recent research from the US and Norway likewise presented aggregated research on teachers who had been teaching between one and three years (Auletto 2021, Pomeranke *et al.* 2022), and in another study, the first 3

years of teaching were seen as a single stage of development characterised by commitment, support, and challenge (Day *et al.* 2007).

An Australian mixed methods study similarly collected data on beginning teachers' perceptions of mentoring (Kidd *et al.* 2015) and surveyed all beginning teachers who had graduated within a five-year period from one university, but there was no differentiation in the study design between teachers in their first or fifth year (Kidd *et al.* 2015). Crutcher and Naseem's (2016) review of empirical research on the effectiveness of teacher mentoring also included a range of ECTs – novices, beginning teachers, teacher candidates, and interns (groups ranging across the first 5 years of teaching). In grouping these teachers together they stated that 'we understand that all these individuals may be at different stages with reference to teaching experiences, yet they all are new to teaching and are involved in the process of learning to teach' (Crutcher and Naseem 2016).

There is only scant literature explicitly on mentoring of second-year teachers. One recent study looked specifically at mentoring in the second year of Israeli teachers' careers to highlight the need to examine mentoring beyond the first year (Vaitzman Ben-David and Berkovich 2022). The findings highlighted the need for policy makers to expand the scope of mentoring 'support and institutionalise extensive mentoring to the second year of teaching' (Vaitzman Ben-David and Berkovich 2022). This study gave further credence to an earlier study (Hobson and Ashby 2012) that showed that while induction programmes assisted in alleviating some of the reality shock faced by first-year teachers, the sudden cessation of these programmes in the second year meant they experienced an additional jolt, termed 'reality aftershock' (Hobson and Ashby 2012); thus, highlighting the need for mentoring to continue beyond the first year.

Whilst these studies have contributed to the call for research into mentoring beyond the first year of teaching, their findings did not extend to investigating *how* mentoring can respond to specific and evolving needs across the early years of teaching. This study aims therefore to address this limitation of the research. To do so, we use the lens of cyclical, multi-layered teacher development theory (Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan 2019).

Teacher development theory

Theories of teacher development, such as those of Fuller and Brown (1975) and Katz (1972), have attempted to formulate the capabilities, concerns, and needs of teachers from a stage-based perspective, with a particular focus on the pre-service and ECT years. Drawing on such teacher development theories requires using a critical lens that recognises the important place that such theories have assumed in teacher development research and practice (Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan 2019); while concurrently remaining cognisant that such theories may not necessarily consider contemporary teaching circumstances, and this may impact their applicability to today's ECTs.

Teacher development theories (and their subsequent models) have primarily been posited as hierarchical and linear. That is, teachers move through each stage in sequence with advancing experience of teaching, with each stage demonstrating a higher level of competence as a teacher (Stroot *et al.* 1998). Among the most well-known stage-based models is that of Fuller and Brown (1975). Their theory proposes that teachers will move from a focus on the self as a teacher and their own survival, to the task of teaching, and finally showing concern for the impact of their teaching on learners, in that order.

Similarly, Katz (1972) named four linear stages across a complete career: survival, practice consolidation, renewal (becoming open to new ways of working), and, finally, the mature practitioner. These stages have often been aligned with time in the profession, with survival dominating the first year of teaching. Even more recent studies (Day and Gu 2010, Furner and McCulla 2019) have similarly allocated years of teaching to specific 'professional life phases' (Day and Gu 2010). Furner and McCulla (2019) aligned the 'I need it now' stage with the first three years of teaching, while they claimed that the 'excited learner' stage emerges between four and seven years of teaching

experience. While there is value in this professional life phase approach, the strict linear representation seems problematic.

Concerns regarding such linear conceptualisations have been noted by others who argue that they may inadvertently create a ‘one-size fits all’ approach to understanding ECT development (Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan 2019, Khoshnevisan and Rashtchi 2021). Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan (2019) instead theorise teacher development as cyclical and multi-layered with five ‘blurred’ stages without distinct boundaries: hesitations and doubts; recognition of strategies and techniques; learning new strategies; accumulating experience; and building trust and confidence. It is important to note that this iterative conceptualisation of teacher development was based on pre-service teacher experiences.

Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan (2019) concur that teachers will experience different stages of development, but they argue that teachers at different times and for different reasons will re-enter earlier stages of confidence and capability (cyclical aspect) in some, but potentially not all, aspects of their work, for example as they grapple with new practices or unfamiliar contexts. Further, teachers may simultaneously experience different professional phases of life regarding different areas of their work (multi-layered).

A cyclical, multi-layered conceptualisation of teacher development is, we argue, needed when thinking about what it is to be a contemporary second-year teacher whose contexts are very different from past generations. For example, contemporary pre-service teacher demographics and preparation may alter how these early years of the profession are experienced. An increasing number of ECTs are entering the profession as career-changers (Sioström *et al.* 2023) with significant past life and career experience. Further, the range of initial teacher education pathways emerging in both Australia and in other countries (Mayer 2021) with opportunities for pre-qualification employment may also alter the ECT experience.

The contemporary focus on teacher standards, such as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs), requires that ECTs undertake significant work to show evidence of their practice (often in the second year of teaching) creating a further pressure. Concurrent teacher shortages, now at critical levels across many countries including Australia (Heffernan *et al.* 2022), can see ECTs take on leadership responsibilities in their school contexts sooner than seen previously in the teaching profession, further altering the second-year experience.

With only very limited and most often theoretical consideration previously given to how mentoring may need to respond to different teacher stages of development (see for example Stroot *et al.* 1998), the perspectives of contemporary practicing ECTs beyond the first year – and their mentors – are absent. In this paper, we draw on the voices of these key stakeholders to understand how mentoring can respond to their needs in the second year of teaching specifically.

Methods

Participants for this study were recruited from a series of three off-site professional learning (PL) workshops about mentoring held across 3 months and included ECTs and mentors from five metropolitan schools in Queensland, Australia. Attendee numbers at these workshops varied slightly, with 18 (nine mentors and 11 ECTs), 14 (eight mentors and six ECTs) and 12 (six mentors and six ECTs) present, respectively. Of the original 18 participants, most of the 11 ECTs taught in a primary (elementary) school setting with three ECTs working in a secondary school setting. All ECTs were in their second year of teaching. All but one of the nine mentors had over 4 years of mentoring experience, and of these, four also held leadership positions in the schools.

Three data sources were collected in the form of:

- (1) An individual anonymous online survey in PL3 ($n = 10$, response rate of 83%) comprised of three Likert form questions (Q1-3) consisting of 26 items (Items 1–26). In these three questions, ECTs and mentors were asked to report on the ways in which they felt ECTs

and mentors should engage in mentoring conversations as, and with, second-year teachers using a scale from strongly disagree (1); disagree (2); neutral (3); agree (4); and strongly agree (5). The final question (Q4) required an open response and asked participants to report perceived priority topics for inclusion in mentoring conversations. See [Appendices A and B](#) for the survey questions 1–3 and associated items. Text extracts from survey responses to the open-ended question 4 are coded as S (for survey), E (for ECT) or M (mentor), and participant number (such as 3). For example, SE3 would refer to the survey response from an ECT participant numbered 3.

- (2) A group activity in Professional Learning workshop 3 ($n = 12$) of which a part required mentors and ECTs to collaboratively discuss and record what an effective mentoring process would look like, and what issues would best be addressed, in the second year of teaching based on their experiences and perceptions. They undertook this task firstly as separate groups (an ECT group coded as EG and a mentor group coded as MG) then coming together in a mixed group to synthesise their ideas and create an overarching mentoring statement.
- (3) Researchers' ($n = 2$) reflective field notes, recorded by each researcher separately during and after each professional learning workshop (coded as PL1–3) to capture key noticings and reflections about ECT and mentor conversations and ideas. Text extracts are identified using a code (for example, R1#PL1 refers to Researcher 1 reflective field notes from Professional Learning session 1).

Quantitative survey data from across 3 Likert form questions (Q1–3) constituted of 26 items in total (Items 1–26) was analysed using simple descriptive statistics (Jupp 2006), enabling a quantitative comparison between ECT and mentor responses to like questions, and more specifically, items, about mentoring perceptions. Comparative and/or aggregated frequency counts and percentages are reported in the following section as relevant.

Qualitative data from survey text responses (Q4), group activity, and researchers' reflective field notes were first analysed separately using directed qualitative content analysis (DQCA) (Shava *et al.* 2021) which involved using existing research questions and theory to extract key concepts and ideas regarding the topic of interest from text, in this case, long-form survey response, collaborative activity response and researcher field notes. In a more structured approach than conventional QCA, DQCA creates existing codes, in this case, drawn from the literature and teacher development theory, to extract understandings of interest (Figure 1). According to Shava *et al.* (2021), DQCA enables extension to existing theory, aligned with the aims of this study.

As represented in Figure 1 a priori codes were applied to long-form survey responses, collaborative activity responses and researchers' field notes. Additional codes not represented by the initial coding frame were added as needed. Codes were then grouped into categories from each qualitative data source, compared and integrated. Three key findings were subsequently generated from these categories: reciprocity, phases and topics. In the following section, findings from both quantitative and qualitative data are presented in concert.

Findings

This section presents findings from the online survey, group activity, and researchers' reflective field notes, pertaining to three key findings. Each will be presented in turn.

Finding 1: ECTs and mentors recognise that mentoring should be reciprocal in nature

At face value, it appears that ECTs and mentors acknowledge the need for shared input in mentoring conversations and that the ECT should have some agency and choice in how the conversation proceeds. Regarding responsibilities and participation within the mentoring conversation, the survey demonstrated that both ECTS and mentors (80%) agree or strongly agree that

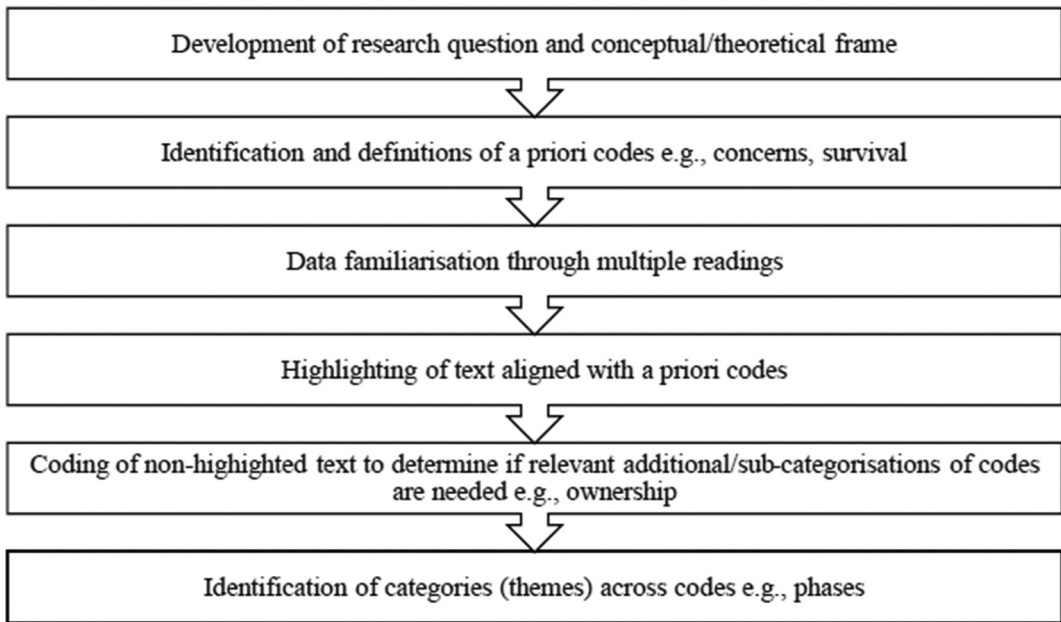


Figure 1. Analysis of data sources, adapted from Shava *et al.* (2021).

during the mentoring process, it is important for the mentor to share ideas with the ECT (Item 1), as well as for ECTs to contribute their own ideas (Item 2), with 100% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Both ECTs and mentors also reported either primarily neutral responses (50%) or negative responses (with 40% disagreeing) to the statement that ‘it is important for the ECT to follow the mentor’s advice’ (Item 7). These responses indicate that both ECTs and mentors consider mentoring as requiring mutually active participation, with ECTs ultimately empowered to critically consider the advice they receive.

Despite this notion of shared responsibility, 20% of ECTs agreed ‘the mentor should avoid giving advice to ECTs’ (Item 15), which may reflect the strong focus on building the reflective capabilities and ownership of the mentoring process for ECTs (Beutel *et al.* 2017). Interestingly, 60% of ECTs and 40% of mentors disagreed with this approach, indicating that they felt mentors should provide advice to these less experienced teachers (Item 15). In doing so, it seems that these ECTs and mentors do not necessarily want the mentor to assume control over the conversation, but also not withhold their expertise. Interestingly, some models of mentoring may suggest that mentors refrain from directly providing advice or guidance preferring to instead focus on the active participation of the ECT (Kemmis *et al.* 2014). In our study, ECTs and mentors see their dual contributions as important to their mentoring work.

During the professional learning sessions, both mentors and ECTs supported the idea that mentoring should not be uni-directional, but rather a space in which both parties could share their thinking and ideas, with each remaining open-minded and curious about the experiences and expertise of the other. As R1 noted in her reflections, ‘during the partnered activities today, both the mentors and the ECTs expressed that by the second year, it was important that the ECTs felt they were on an equal footing to the mentors in terms of their place in the profession and that their conversations should reflect this respect’ (R1#PL1).

Finding 2: ECTs appear less ready than their mentors to shift entirely to a co-exploratory approach to mentoring, still wanting opportunities to seek explicit direction and guidance

While the previous finding might suggest a shift towards a genuine mentoring conversation characterised by shared contribution (Larsen *et al.* 2023c) and a co-exploratory or co-inquiry stance (Beutel *et al.* 2017, Robson and Mtika 2017), ECT survey and group activity responses were less resolute. While all mentors agreed or strongly agreed that it was important for the ECT to ask questions (Item 3), only 40% of ECTs agreed, with the remaining 60% recording a neutral response. This response aligns with previous studies that have shown ECTs may feel less comfortable asking their mentor questions for fear of judgement or loss of status (Atkinson 2012, Larsen and Allen 2023), particularly in the contemporary contexts of high accountability and performativity (Sahlberg 2010).

These findings serve as a concern that despite an apparent desire to contribute, and a preference from mentors that ECTs do so, there may be some barrier to actualising this in the form of asking questions. Studies have shown that shared questioning is critical to the achievement of genuine mentoring conversations (Larsen *et al.* 2023c). In the activity, the mentor group again noted that it should be the ECT leading the conversation and ‘ask[ing] the questions’ (MG), whereas the ECTs preferred for conversations to be ‘collaborative’ (EG). These findings give insight into mentors’ and ECTs’ perceptions of conversational contribution which has been shown to influence the kind of mentoring relationship and learning experience that can develop (Gadamer 2004, Larsen *et al.* 2023c).

Further, when asked if the ‘ECT should look to the mentor for answers’ (Item 6), ECTs recorded a mixed response, with two ECTs agreeing they should, one remaining neutral, and two ECTs disagreeing. Mentors, on the other hand, did not record any positive responses to this item, remaining either neutral ($n = 3$) or disagreeing ($n = 2$). When asked if it was important for the mentor to look to the ECT for answers to pedagogical challenges or questions (Item 14), three mentors disagreed, one remained neutral, and one strongly agreed. Interestingly, ECTs were divided (disagree $n = 2$; neutral $n = 1$; agree = 1; strongly agree $n = 1$). Despite this, 90% of the participants strongly agreed and 10% agreed that the mentor should be open-minded towards ideas shared by the ECT. This suggests a level of confusion and disagreement about how a shared mentoring experience can be or is achieved. While ECTs appear to still expect that they may often look to their mentor for guidance, mentors seem to be asking for greater action from their ECTs regarding asking questions while concurrently being less likely to look to the ECTs to answer pedagogical questions.

With some discrepancy and confusion about who in the mentoring relationship should be asking questions, sharing ideas, and giving advice, it comes as little surprise mentors and ECTs were unsure about who should be taking the lead in the mentoring conversation. Twenty-five per cent of participants agreed the ECT should take the lead (Item 4) as opposed to 15% agreeing the mentor should take the lead (Item 12). Notably, half of the participants recorded a neutral response, although this could be interpreted as a belief that leadership or control should be shared. Either way, these findings point to a preferred manner of mentoring that combines both the benefits of drawing on the experience of the mentor when needed while concurrently allowing for opportunities for a more shared experience to emerge. This is further demonstrated by the unanimous agreement of both ECTs and mentors that mentoring should be a learning opportunity for ECTs (Item 5) and the mentor (Item 13).

In the final question of the survey, ECTs and mentors were asked about the purposes of mentoring regarding their practice, with responses for the second year ECTs and their mentors found to be generally similar. The majority of all participants felt that mentoring should be about exploring new and creative ways of doing things (Item 17) (Agree 40%; Strongly agree 40%); improving ways of doing things (Item 19) (Agree 50%; Strongly agree 50%); considering different options for doing things (Item 21) (Agree 30%; Strongly agree 50%); evaluating choices about

practice (Item 23) (Agree 50%; Strongly agree 40%); analysing teaching experiences (Item 24) (Agree 80%); specific goals and actions (Item 25) (Agree 70%; 30%) and celebrating successes (Item 26) (Agree 20%; Strongly agree 80%).

ECTs and mentors were both less likely to agree that mentoring should be for the purpose of learning about how things have always been done (Item 22). Such a finding bodes well for the regeneration and evolution of an innovative profession. However, all but one ECT agreed ($n = 3$) or strongly agreed ($n = 1$) that mentoring should be about solving immediate problems (Item 18), with the remaining ECT recording a neutral response, whereas only two of the mentors agreed. Similarly, only one mentor agreed that mentoring should be for the purpose of ‘fixing what is wrong’, whereas all but two of the ECT participants agreed, again showing some differences. While mentors may generally feel that second-year teachers are ready to move on to less ‘crisis’ or ‘deficit-focused’ mentoring, it may be that second-year teachers feel less ready to do so. Yet, their concurrent interest in ‘exploring’ indicates they reside in a somewhat liminal space, needing both mentoring that responds to ‘survival’ needs and to less immediate concerns, needing ‘support to try something new’ (EG).

The ECT group discussion concerning the second year of teaching revealed that they considered their second year to be the most difficult (R2#PL3). One ECT summed this up when stating: ‘I didn’t know what I didn’t know’ (R2#PL3), ‘you know all of the things you are doing wrong/not doing’ (EG). To add to this complexity, one ECT noted, ‘Yeah, and now [in my second year] I need more help but everyone expects me to know it as I’m no longer a first-year’ (R2#PL3). They explained that ‘in the 2nd year of teaching, ECTs have higher expectations of themselves as they can identify their own strengths and weaknesses. While more is asked of 2nd year teachers, there is less support’ (EG). Consequently, the ECT group noted that ‘personal wellbeing’ (EGE) was of prime importance with the group agreeing that they saw their second year as a ‘make or break’ (R2#PL3) time with one ECT explaining that she would decide before the end of this, her second year, whether or not she would stay in the teaching profession (R2#PL3).

While ECTs noted a preference for regular mentoring support during each term, when creating a shared statement with mentors, the mentor group envisioned mentoring meetings occurring termly. This was ‘interesting given the focus and passion in the ECT group that clearly demonstrated the second year was tough and there was not enough support or recognition of this by schools and mentors’ (R2#PL3). Researcher 2 (PL3) also noted that ‘this seemed to be a reflection of their concerns about time and resourcing to do any more than this’.

Finding 3: ECTs reported a greater preference for mentoring topics with a technician focus while mentors tended to privilege dispositional topics and a focus on ways of working as a professional

Finally, when asked to list priority topics for mentoring conversations between mentors and second-year teachers, topics related to refining practices in behaviour management were specifically mentioned by both ECTs and mentors (ECTs $n = 2$; mentors $n = 2$) along with wellbeing (ECT $n = 1$; mentor $n = 1$), differentiation (ECT $n = 1$; mentors $n = 1$), and managing workload (ECT $n = 1$; mentor $n = 1$). Other comments included the need to address ‘practical topics such as ‘refining a bank of strategies to use in the classroom (pedagogy, inclusion and behaviour management)’ (SE2) ‘general classroom organisation’ (SE3); and ‘building sustainable routines’ (SM1). In this same vein, Researcher 1 noted that ‘as ECTs selected topics for mentoring conversations today, they seemed to be what I would have expected in the first-year teacher. Behaviour management and classroom organisation were a clear focus’ (R1#1). Curriculum and pedagogy (EG) were another focus along with ‘creating portfolios’ (MG-), recognised as another ‘pressure’ (MG) on the ECTs.

Interestingly, despite being asked to report on topics, many responses by mentors described less technician (Mockler 2022) aspects of teaching, such as being ‘sustainable’ (SM1), ‘prioritising’ (SM1), ‘challenging themselves’ (SM1); ‘being open-minded’ (SM2); ‘refining’ (SM4); ‘explor[ing]’

(SM5), and learning how to ‘establish themselves’ (SM5) and engage productively in ‘discussions’, ‘trailing’ (SM2); ‘working collaboratively’ (SM2), problem-solving (SM2); and ‘making decisions’ (SM5). ECT-perceived struggles seemed not to be the focus for the mentor group, perceiving that ECTs in their second year should focus on ‘expanding [their] repertoire’. As Researcher 1 reflected, ‘mentors talked about most second-year ECTs needing to move on from the basics’ (R1#PL2). These latter practices may demonstrate the need to move beyond those practices as outlined in the Standards by the second year of mentoring to include mentoring for those aspects of teaching that are less measurable, but inherent to the work that teachers do (Larsen *et al.* 2023a). In doing so, mentors may be mindful of setting these second-year teachers up for longevity beyond survival. Once again, mentoring needs seem to be in a state of flux, with basic concurrent to more refined practices requiring address through mentoring.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the appropriateness of conceptualising teacher development as a cyclical and multilayered process (Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan 2019), and the importance of ongoing mentoring for teachers in their second year of practice that recognises this complexity. Several key topics for discussion have emerged, including the common aspiration for a shared and mutually beneficial mentoring process, mentoring for concurrent purposes for second-year teachers, and implications for mentors’ work.

A shared and mutually beneficial mentoring process

Much research has argued the importance of conceptualising teacher mentoring as a professional learning experience that seeks to engage both ECTs and mentors in a process of collaborative exploration of practice and co-inquiry (Hudson 2013, Kuhn *et al.* 2022). In our study, ECTs and mentors alike valued and aspired to mentoring that would bring them together in learning (Larsen *et al.* 2023b), with a view to engaging in the kind of genuine mentoring conversation (Gadamer 2004) that could leverage their collective expertise. Our study demonstrated that teachers in their second year of teaching aspire to engage in the reciprocal exchange and exploration of knowledge and teaching experience (Orland-Barak and Wang 2021) with their mentor colleagues. In teacher development terms, this suggests that second-year ECTs may experience at times the shift towards a professional life stage beyond the ‘survivor’, to a stage that Furner and McCulla (2019) might describe as an ‘excited learner’.

Previous studies have also reported on the value that mentors may place on their experiences of mentoring ECTs as an opportunity for their own learning (Hudson 2013, Gallo-Fox and Scantlebury 2016, Robson and Mtika 2017, Karathanos-Aguilar and Ervin-Kassab 2022).

Our study notes that second-year teachers may expect that their mentor will see their interactions with them as a reciprocal professional learning opportunity for their own teaching development. While other studies have focused on increased opportunities for mentors to reflect on their practice as a key benefit of mentoring (Gallo-Fox and Scantlebury 2016), our study indicates that second-year teachers know they have expertise, knowledge, and ideas that are valuable to their mentor in a profession characterised by rapid changes to teachers’ work, ever-evolving pedagogical understanding and societal change that places significant demand on teachers to pivot, unlearn, and relearn (Peschl 2019) throughout their careers.

A state of developmental concurrence

These findings demonstrate that while there is a desire for a non-hierarchical relational mentoring partnership (Larsen *et al.* 2023b), teachers in their second year of practice may still need more directive support from a more experienced mentor. This need is reflective of the ‘reality aftershock’

posited by Hobson and Ashby (2012). This feeling of aftershock seems to co-exist with feelings of wanting to explore things more deeply.

We use the term concurrent intentionally, as these second-year teachers appear to experience the need for these two ways of mentoring as concurrent layers, rather than a linear shift, supportive of Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan's (2019) multidimensional conceptualisation of teacher development. Second-year teachers seem to switch or toggle between a need for directed mentoring and exploratory co-inquiry. This finding challenges the notions of linearity of teacher development (Katz 1972, Fuller and Brown 1975, Day and Gu 2010, Furner and Mcculla 2019), and by association, the idea that mentoring needs to linearly shift from mentor as expert (Stroot *et al.* 1998, Orland-Barak and Wang 2021), to co-inquiry-based mentoring characterised by a genuine learning partnership by the second year (Larsen *et al.* 2023c).

Second-year teachers simultaneously need conversations reflective of direct mentoring support, and opportunities to engage in conversations in which they are positioned equally with their mentor colleagues. These seemingly contradictory needs signal an extension to Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan's (2019) five 'blurred' stages of teacher development, originally based on preservice teachers. Our study shows that this blurring goes well beyond the stage of the preservice teacher finding confidence in their practice and continues to occur for second-year teachers as they move to and fro between what Katz (1972) categorises as survival and consolidation, and at times, what we will call here 'expansion' beyond their first-year teaching repertoire. Consequently, second-year teachers may present as particularly complex for mentors in their work.

Mentors' work

The findings from our study go some way to both highlighting and addressing issues previously well reported in the literature. First, mentoring is a contested concept, and defining exactly what it looks like and involves to effectively support ECTs remains somewhat evasive (Kemmis *et al.* 2014). Second, mentors may therefore find it difficult to understand how to effectively work with ECTs, and their approaches are often informed by their own beliefs and understandings about mentoring (Aspfors and Fransson 2015, Aarts *et al.* 2020). Further to this, our findings indicate that there is some disconnect in the case of second-year teachers between what mentors believe these ECTs need, and what second-year teachers themselves perceive as their needs.

Previous studies have reported ECTs' preference for a more direct, advice-focused approach to mentoring in tandem with a more pastoral approach (Harrison *et al.* 2006). Curtis *et al.* (2024) similarly noted that ECTs preferred to position mentors in the role of 'expert' and 'parent'. While our study showed that second-year teachers identify times when this more traditional approach of close mentoring support better meets their immediate 'survival' and 'consolidation' needs (Katz 1972), this occurs concurrent to their desire for equal and joint exploration of practice that draws on their burgeoning experience and expands theirs and their mentor's knowledge and expertise.

Despite ECTs' multilayered mentoring needs, mentors in this study were more likely to believe that a second-year teacher should be past the need for 'survival' (Katz 1972) or 'I need it now' (Furner and Mcculla 2019) mentoring that responds to their 'hesitations and doubts' (Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan's 2019). This is interesting given that many studies have shown that mentors may prefer approaches that position the mentor as an expert (Aspfors and Fransson 2015); however, this may be related to their focus on the first year of teaching (see for example, Attard Tonna 2019, Ewing 2021). Mentors in this study commented that second-year teacher mentoring needed to 'expand their repertoire' and move 'beyond the basics'. These perceptions are reflective of linear understandings of teacher development and may fall short of recognising the more complex needs of contemporary second-year teachers and the kind of adaptable mentoring that is needed for second-year teachers.

Study's limitations

This study has some limitations. First, the participant group is small. While this allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the mentoring needs and preferences of second-year teachers to be explored, the generalisability of these findings cannot be assumed. Second, these teachers were all working in metropolitan schools and therefore it would be essential to undertake research with second-year teachers in other contexts, including regional and remote schools. As an Australian study, it will also be important to extend the investigation of these early career teachers to other countries, making comparative studies an area of particular interest. Finally, longitudinal studies would offer insight into how mentoring may look from the first through to the fifth year of teaching.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that understanding how mentoring needs and preferences of ECTs in the post-first-year career stage evolve is critical to providing timely and appropriate mentoring across the early career years. This research aimed to deepen our understanding of the mentoring needs and preferences of second-year teachers specifically. With ECT mentoring research largely focused on first-year teachers (Attard Tonna 2019, Hairoon *et al.* 2020, Symeonidis *et al.* 2023) or ECTs as a general teaching cohort (Crutcher and Naseem 2016, Aarts *et al.* 2020, Auletto 2021), this study contributes important insights into an underrepresented and under-researched group of ECTs and supports a conceptualisation of teacher development that is cyclical and multi-layered (Rashtchi and Khoshnevisan 2019).

This study has also underscored the importance of continued and intentional mentoring of second-year ECTs. While funding and time may constrain expanding mentoring beyond the first year in Australia (Kidd *et al.* 2015, Beutel *et al.* 2017) and internationally (Vaitzman Ben-David and Berkovich 2022, Symeonidis *et al.* 2023) this study should serve as a caution to stakeholders against prioritising mentoring in only the first year of teaching.

This study has clearly shown that second-year teachers are very much in need of mentoring support and require the kind of mentoring that allows them to toggle between more direct and exploratory mentoring opportunities. From a teacher development perspective, they exist in a space of developmental concurrence, and as such, represent a group of ECTs that require considered and careful mentoring, with mentors supported to better understand their multi-layered needs.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey Questions for Second-year Teacher

Part A: Demographic questions

Part B: About mentoring

Instructions for all these questions were: Please indicate your level of agreement.

(1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly agree

- (1) When participating in a mentoring conversation as a second-year teacher, I believe it is important for me to . . .
 - Be open to the ideas that my mentor shares.
 - Contribute my own ideas.
 - Ask the questions.
 - Take the lead in the conversation.
 - See it as an opportunity for me to learn.
 - Look to my mentor for answers.
 - Follow my mentor's advice.
 - Be open and honest about how I am going.
- (2) When participating in a mentoring conversation with a second-year teacher, I believe it is important for my mentor to . . .
 - Be open to the ideas I share.
 - Contribute their ideas, resources and knowledge.
 - Ask questions of me.
 - Take the lead in the conversation.
 - See it as an opportunity for them to learn.
 - Look to me for answers.
 - Avoid giving me advice and guidance.
 - Be open and honest about their own professional experiences.
- (3) I think mentoring for a second-year teacher should be about . . .
 - Exploring new and creative ways of doing things.
 - Solving immediate problems.
 - Fixing what is wrong.
 - Improving ways of doing things.
 - Considering different options for doing things.
 - Learning about how things have always been done.
 - Evaluating choices about practice.
 - Analysing teaching experiences.
 - Planning specific goals and actions.
 - Celebrating successes.

Part C: Mentoring topics

This is an open-ended response.

1. List 3–5 priority topics that you think second-year teachers need to work on with their mentors.

Appendix B

Survey Questions for Mentors

Part A: Demographic questions

Part B: About mentoring

Instructions for all these questions were: Please indicate your level of agreement.

- (1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly agree
- (1) When participating in a mentoring conversation as a second-year teacher, I believe it is important for that ECT to...
- Be open to the ideas that I share,
 - Contribute their own ideas.
 - Ask the questions.
 - Take the lead in the conversation.
 - See it as an opportunity for the ECT to learn.
 - Look to me for answers.
 - Follow my advice.
 - Be open and honest about how they are going.
- (2) When participating in a mentoring conversation with a second-year teacher, I believe it is important for me to...
- Be open to the ideas that the ECT shares.
 - Contribute my own ideas, resources and knowledge.
 - Ask questions of the ECT.
 - Take the lead in the conversation.
 - See it as an opportunity for me to learn.
 - Look to the ECT for answers.
 - Avoid giving advice and guidance.
 - Be open and honest about my own professional experiences.
- (3) I think mentoring for a second-year teacher should be about...
- Exploring new and creative ways of doing things.
 - Solving immediate problems.
 - Fixing what is wrong.
 - Improving ways of doing things.
 - Considering different options for doing things.
 - Learning about how things have always been done.
 - Evaluating choices about practice.
 - Analysing teaching experiences.
 - Planning specific goals and actions.
 - Celebrating successes.

Part C: Mentoring topics

This is an open-ended response.

1. List 3-5 priority topics that you think second-year teachers need to work on with their mentors.