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Second year teachers: Now I know what I don't know

By Ellen Larsen, Hoa Nguyen, Elizabeth Curtie and Tony Loughland

The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan offers ways to deal with current [teacher shortages](#) across Australia, with a conspicuous focus on rapidly [attracting](#) more teachers to the profession and ensuring that they receive support and mentoring as they transition into their first year of teaching.

However, when we interviewed a small group of early career teachers in their second year of teaching and their mentors, we found these second-year teachers are in just as much need of mentoring as their first-year teacher colleagues.

This raises significant concerns. Schools and systems focus their attention and funding on formal and intentional mentoring for the first year of teaching, believing that by the second year, teachers have found their way in many respects and are not in need of formal mentoring opportunities.

Will recommendations for supporting early career teachers through mentoring and induction in the [National Teacher Workforce Action Plan](#) just continue to focus on teachers as they initially transition into the profession? Will ongoing mentoring needs of teachers as they progress to the second year of their careers continue to be neglected?

We need a well-considered approach to mentoring that acknowledges the ongoing yet evolving professional needs of teachers beyond the first year of teaching. Without that, we risk enticing more teachers to the profession only to [lose them](#) when they don't get adequate support.

Schools face challenges (time, funding) in providing extended mentoring support.

But there is another challenge – understanding what it is that second-year teachers need from mentoring. Much of the research undertaken in the field of mentoring generally occurs with teachers in their first year of teaching or does not seek to differentiate between early career teachers across those first few years.

In being more aware of what early career teachers in their second year of teaching need, and [bring to the profession](#), a targeted approach can be implemented that could in fact save time and money and prevent the loss of teachers from the profession before they have even had a chance to shine.

We collected data from 15 second-year early career teachers and their mentors in Brisbane Queensland, via a survey, field notes, and professional learning artifacts to find out what they saw as essential mentoring for teachers in their second year of teaching. Their insights serve as an important provocation for those involved in the development and delivery of mentoring programs for early career teachers.

These second-year teachers explained that,

While the first year is hard, the second year can be even harder because in first year, you don't know what you don't know, and you get this support. But by the second year, you start to realise what you don't know and you start to see what you are doing wrong or haven't been doing!

These second-year teachers felt that at the very time they needed support to navigate this growing professional awareness and a clearer understanding of what they needed to learn and develop to become a stronger teacher, the mentoring support ground to a halt.

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.

They felt that this was despite more being expected of them as second-year teachers, including the huge workload involved in putting together a portfolio of their practice to move to full registration. These second-year teachers described this year of their careers as “*make or break*”.

Our work showed that these second-year teachers toggle between still wanting explicit and specific support and advice to address immediate concerns and “*solve problems*” and wanting the opportunity to engage with a mentor to “*explore*”, and “*consolidate*” and “*refine*” their [practice](#). They wanted to have [equal ownership](#) over the direction of mentoring conversations and saw themselves as fully capable of contributing their own ideas to mentoring conversations, while concurrently needing access to a mentor for specific guidance.

Mentors seemed to be eager for the second-year teacher to take the lead in mentoring conversations and generally felt that second-year teacher mentoring should be less about addressing immediate concerns and fixing problems. They felt that second-year teachers should be “*challenging*” and “*establishing*” themselves, and “*expanding their repertoire*” of practice.

Even though the early career teachers did not necessarily disagree, and indeed were eager to engage in mentoring that would support them “*to try something new*”, there was still an aspect of

the mentoring that still seemed to be rooted in survival. Early career teaching does not stop being challenging at the end of the first year, and yet, teachers in their second year can easily fall through the cracks. Schools and systems setting up and implementing mentoring programs need to consider beyond the first year of teaching and recognise it as both a time of [ongoing challenge](#) complicated by [accreditation](#) requirements, and pedagogical and professional exploration. Second-year teachers represent a unique group of teachers that unless nurtured in the ways that meet their needs, may end up among the growing numbers exiting the profession.



From left to right: **Dr Ellen Larsen** is a senior lecturer (Curriculum and Pedagogy) in the School of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. She has had a long career as a classroom teacher, school leader, and [mentor](#) in state and independent schools and has developed and implemented research-based professional learning programs across Queensland with teachers at all career stages. With research interests in professional learning, early career educators, teacher identity, and educational policy, Ellen is committed to working with schools to develop quality mentoring programs in the contemporary teaching context. Find her on [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#).

Dr Hoa Nguyen is an associate professor in the School of Education, specialising in teacher education/development, mentoring, and TESOL education. She co-leads the [Teacher Education and Development Research Group](#) in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales. She has experience teaching and training pre-service and in-service teachers in Asia and Australia. How works extensively with teachers to develop their capabilities as mentors and has a strong commitment and passion to develop teachers' professional learning. You can find her on [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter](#).

Dr Elizabeth Curtis is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. Elizabeth's work and research with pre-service teacher education and beginning teachers includes professional experience, mentoring, philosophical inquiry, and values and care in education. Elizabeth has vast experience in not only teaching and researching but also in leading program innovation and change across early childhood, primary, and secondary contexts at two Australian universities.

Associate Professor Tony Loughland is deputy head of school (research) in the School of Education at the University of New South Wales. He is an experienced educator who likes to work with teachers to work with theory in ways that enhance practice. His research interests lie in teacher professional learning across the continuum from graduate to lead teacher. He is currently leading projects on using AI for citizens' informed participation in urban development, the provision of staffing for rural and remote areas in NSW, and Graduate Ready Schools. You can find him on [LinkedIn](#).

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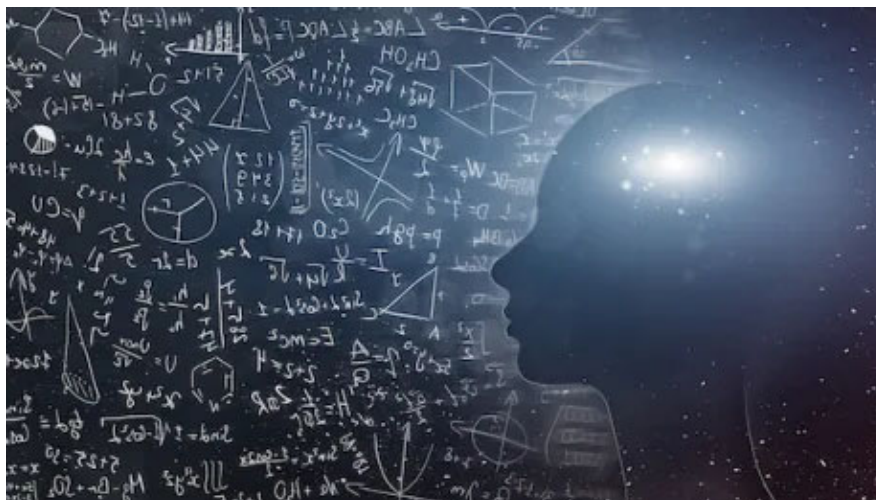
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