

The positioning tensions between early career teachers' and mentors' perceptions of the mentor role

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Abstract

Early career teacher (ECT) mentoring has never been so important with escalating levels of attrition reported in numerous countries, including Australia, the US and the UK. However, inconsistent understanding of what a mentor can or should do continues to compromise the ways in which early career teachers experience this support. While previous research has reported on mentors' differing perspectives on their role, we take a unique approach to this issue. In this paper, we explore the ways in which both mentors and ECTs understand the mentor role. We argue that where mentor and ECT understandings are in tension, the productive outcomes of mentoring for both the mentor and ECT are undermined. Drawing on Positioning Theory we report findings from the thematic analysis of 31 online interviews with 16 mentors and 15 ECTs in Australia. We found that while ECTs and mentors hold some common positionings, some significant differences were noted. These findings highlight the need to extend opportunities to learn about the mentoring role to include ECTs.

KEYWORDS

early career teachers, mentoring, mentors, Positioning Theory

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Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper explores the ways in which both mentors and early career teachers perceive the role of the mentor and notes where the main differences occur.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Where understandings of the role of the mentor are not aligned, productive outcomes of mentoring for both the mentor and the early career teacher are undermined, thus highlighting the need to extend opportunities for early career teachers to learn about the mentor role alongside the mentor.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher retention is an escalating concern in Australia and a problem worldwide, with high rates of teacher attrition, burn-out, stress and emotional labour (Sims & Jerrim, 2020) reported among early career teachers (ECTs) in particular. ECTs are most commonly defined as those within the first 5 years of their careers, and therefore, considered to be vulnerable to significant challenges as they enter an increasingly demanding profession (Larsen & Allen, 2023). While ECT attrition rates vary around the world, many countries are experiencing teacher shortages compounded by their departure. ECT attrition has been reported in Australia (Heffernan et al., 2022; Lambert & Gray, 2020), the UK (den Brok et al., 2017) and the US (Ingersoll et al., 2018) to be between 40 and 50%. With findings such as these, countries such as Australia, the US and the UK in particular, have adopted teacher induction as a major imperative in schools and systems, with mentoring by a more experienced teacher an integral part of this support (Shanks et al., 2022).

Mentoring has been reported to increase ECT retention (Maready et al., 2021); cultivate ECT wellbeing (Collie & Perry, 2019), improve job satisfaction and commitment (Auletto, 2021) and support a collaborative culture within school settings (Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018) by mediating the effects of an oftentimes challenging transition into the profession (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Despite this potential, research has also shown that ECTs may experience mentoring of vastly varying quality (Aderibigbe et al., 2022; Burger et al., 2021). Among the reasons for this inequity is a lack of understanding about the role of the mentor among mentors themselves (Burger et al., 2021; Clarke et al., 2013). According to Kemmis et al. (2014, p. 155), mentoring is a 'contested practice', understood and enacted in different ways.

Given that mentoring is 'a form of socially established cooperative human activity' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 154), it is critical that we also address inconsistencies that may exist, not just among mentor understandings, but also among ECTs. As explained by Shanks et al. (2022, p. 758), 'mentoring activity is enhanced when actors understand their roles and responsibilities within a collaborative relationship'. Limited research, however, has been undertaken with regard to ECT perspectives on the mentor role, and how that compares with mentor understandings to date. We argue that where mentor and ECT understandings are in tension, the productive outcomes of mentoring for both the mentor and ECT may be undermined.

In this paper, we explore the ways in which both mentors and ECTs perceive the role of the mentor. In doing so, we extend the notion of mentoring as a contested practice (Kemmis

et al., 2014) by considering the tensions between beliefs held by mentors and those held by ECTs with regard to the role of the mentor. Drawing on Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), we report on our findings from a thematic analysis of 31 online interviews with 16 mentors and 15 ECTs conducted as part of a mentoring project undertaken in Queensland and New South Wales, Australia. In doing so, we respond to the following research question:

1. How do ECTs and their mentors perceive the mentor role within mentoring?

In the sections that follow, we firstly provide an overview of the Australian context, followed by a review of the extant literature about the three key mentor positionings regarding the mentor role. Next, we detail the theoretical framework for this study and its relevance to answering the research question, followed by the presentation of findings. We proceed to a discussion of findings and conclude the paper with implications and recommendations for future mentoring practice and research.

THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

In Australia, upon graduation from an Initial Teacher Education degree, ECTs apply for provisional teacher registration in their state or territory. In order to transition to full teacher registration, ECTs will, usually as part of their induction, be assigned mentor support to assist them in preparing their portfolio, which illustrates their practice in meeting the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers as they progress from the graduate standard to proficient standard (AITSL, 2017). The Professional Standards have been implemented across all Australian states and territories since 2013 and 'describe the expected development of teaching skills' (TEMAG, 2014, p. 40). All state and territory education departments have induction policies aimed at supporting ECTs as they transition into the profession, but these vary widely not only across states and territories but also across systems with state (government) schools and independent schools also offering differing support (TEMAG, 2014).

While it is strongly recommended that beginning teachers (teachers in their first year of the profession) are provided with an experienced mentor who has received specialised training and release time for mentoring (Beutel et al., 2017), in reality this does not always occur. In Queensland, the Department of Education has an induction strategy that is conducted over 90 days for all school employees that may include mentoring (Department of Education, 2023). Similarly, the New South Wales Department of Education also has a Teacher Induction and Probation strategy that may include mentoring, depending on the 'size and resources of the school' (NSW Government, 2023). Realistically, the majority of schools, regardless of school sector, will aim to provide each beginning teacher with a mentor to support their 'move from provisional to full registration' (AITSL, 2017).

SOCIALISATION

The deployment of a mentor to support ECTs has been shown in many research studies to be based on the notion that ECTs need socialisation into the profession. Eisenschmidt et al. (2013) noted that teacher socialisation in the first few years of entering the profession, whereby an individual becomes an active participant as a member of that society, is important. Their research was conducted first with ECTs in their first-year induction programme and second in those ECTs' fifth year of teaching. They claim that this provides ECTs with a sense of belonging, of being part of a common cause, and knowledge that they can make a difference in the lives of students and to the profession of teaching (Eisenschmidt

et al., 2013). Socialisation through mentoring can also be used as a way of combatting the isolation that many ECTs may feel (Shanks et al., 2022). The use of mentoring as part of an induction process is a common practice where introducing a beginning teacher to a specific school's culture and context is seen as important (Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018). Studies have also demonstrated that mentoring supports ECTs' professional identity development (Kidd et al., 2015), professional commitment (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2021), professional learning (Aderibigbe et al., 2014), confidence in their own practice (Nolan & Molla, 2018; Shanks et al., 2022) and sense of empowerment (Nolan & Molla, 2018). All of these studies collected data from ECTs with two of the studies (Nolan & Molla, 2018; Shanks et al., 2022) also collecting data from the mentors. With such an array of espoused benefits, it is unsurprising that the role of the mentor is explicated in multifarious ways across the extant literature.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

The social-emotional aspect of mentoring has received much attention in the research literature with scholars highlighting positive results for ECTs including improved self-efficacy (Caspersen & Raaen, 2014), self-satisfaction and pride (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009), increased confidence (Hobson et al., 2009) and improved self-reflectivity (Davies et al., 1999). A recent Israeli study found that ECTs want their mentoring to include 'support and warmth' as well as a 'harmonious and frank connection' (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2021, p. 291), showing the importance of the relational and emotional in the role of mentoring. These same researchers later showed that the main perceived mentoring function favoured by second year ECTs was psychological support, empowerment and confidence with 71.4% of participants citing this (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2022). Other research has shown that mentoring has been used as a way to cultivate ECT wellbeing and improve their social-emotional competence (Collie & Perry, 2019).

This collaborative style of mentoring requires a strong and successful relationship with a reciprocal commitment in terms of professional development and professional learning (Ferrier-Kerr, 2009). This collegial mentoring is vital for new teachers' successful assimilation into the school and profession (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2022), as well as contributing to enhancing student outcomes (Nolan & Molla, 2018). A UK study found that effective mentoring relationships fostered a culture of professional development, which in turn, increased workplace satisfaction (Moor et al., 2005). A more recent Estonian study reached similar conclusions, finding that mentoring ECTs for a minimum of the first five years in the profession was found to improve the whole school collaborative culture (Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018). While all four of these studies examined the mentoring relationship between ECTs and their mentors, two (Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018; Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2022) only collected data from ECTs and the other two (Moor et al., 2005; Nolan & Molla, 2018) collected the perspectives of both mentors and ECTs.

PEDAGOGICAL CAPACITY BUILDING

A key role expected of teacher mentors revealed through the literature is to continue to assist the ECT to build their pedagogical capacities. An Israeli study, from the perspective of ECTs, showed that they want professional growth—content knowledge and professional growth—pedagogy and discipline knowledge and advice from their mentor (Vaitzman Ben-David & Berkovich, 2021). The aim of this type of professional support provided in the mentoring relationship is to provide a bridge between initial teacher education and continuing professional

development, as well as to develop the individual professionalism of the ECT. Interestingly, in a recent Austrian study, ECTs were surveyed about the satisfaction regarding the mentoring they received; the least positive findings were related to professional support, with only 38% indicating that they were satisfied with professional development activities and exchanges of practical knowledge with their mentors (Symeonidis et al., 2023).

Educative mentoring has been strongly reported in the literature to provide the ECT with a highly reflective and participative mentoring experience for the purposes of pedagogical capability building. With many ECTS citing mentoring as a key impact on their learning (Clarke et al., 2013), the practices that mentors enact and the way they enact these matter in terms of the ECTS' learning. These mentoring activities, done in an educative way, can positively impact on ECTS' professional growth and have been conceptualised as 'a role, a relationship and a process' (Feiman-Nemser, 2012, p. 241). According to Wexler (2020, p. 213), 'an educative mentor takes a stance of a learner, seeing him/herself not only as a holder of knowledge but also as a receiver', thus forging a relationship intended to be mutually beneficial in terms of further developing professional practice. Langdon and Ward's (2015) research collected data from 22 participant mentors and suggested that for educative mentoring to be successful it requires: sustained time to inquire into and develop mentoring expertise; a language for deconstructing practice while explaining and facilitating learning; attributes of an accomplished teacher educator combined with highly skilled professional; and a willingness to become a learner.

The literature reveals that mentors are positioned in a variety of ways, for different purposes with a range of goals. Unlike previous studies, this paper aims to contribute to the extant understanding of mentoring as a potentially contested practice by exploring the ways in which both mentors and ECTS may perceive the role in different ways.

CONCEPTUALISING MENTORING THROUGH POSITIONING THEORY

In this study, we draw on Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) to understand the role of the mentors from both mentors' and ECTS' point of views. Positions are defined as 'clusters of beliefs about how rights and duties are distributed in the course of an episode of personal interaction and the taken-for-granted practices in which most of these beliefs are concretely realised' (Harré et al., 2009, p. 9). Positioning Theory focuses on the meaning of social actions via the analysis of storylines which unfolds the role of rights, duties and obligations in the management of human actions in a particular moral landscape (Harré et al., 2009). Positions can manifest themselves in three aspects: patterns of acts or expectations, shared presuppositions and a system of beliefs (Harré & Slocum, 2003). We argue that it is critical that we better understand the positional expectations, presuppositions and belief systems held by ECTS, and their mentors, so that positional tensions can be better understood.

Positioning Theory foregrounds the central role of social and structural discourse in understanding human actions and development (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999). That is, positioning is inexplicably linked to interaction, such as that which occurs during a mentoring conversation, and through that interaction, positioning is both articulated and influenced. It provides a framework for 'exploring and explaining how people construct themselves and their worlds—and are constructed—through discourse' (Green et al., 2020, p. 121). One's self-positioning 'guides the way in which they act and think about their roles, assignments, and duties in a given context' (Yoon, 2008, p. 499). In fact, 'positions are relative to one another' (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 128), meaning that when people position themselves (reflexive positioning), they are, at the same time, implicitly positioning (interactive positioning) others and vice versa, often through the use of language. According to Harré and van

Langenhove (1991), '[d]eliberate self-positioning occurs in every conversation where one wants to express his/her personal identity' (p. 400). They argue that there are at least three ways to perform deliberate self-positioning: 'by stressing one's agency (that is presenting one's course of action as one from among various possibilities), by referring to one's unique points of view' or 'by referring to events in one's biography' (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991, p. 400). Deliberate positioning moves enable a person to exercise his/her agency to achieve a particular goal. In the context of this study, we argue that where positional misalignment is present, mentoring as a process is potentially undermined.

METHODOLOGY

Our study takes a perceptual stance to positioning (Colahan et al., 2012; Larsen & Mockler, 2023) and thus focuses on 'mapping the participants' understandings' (Colahan et al., 2012, p. 48) and subjective interpretations and beliefs about mentor positioning from their perspectives. In other words, we do not adopt a discourse analysis approach as other studies have done which draws directly on the spoken words or language structures located within interactions between mentors and ECTs to determine positioning (McIntyre et al., 2019). We, instead, are interested in how mentors and ECTs speak about their perceived positioning within interviews because of these interactions. This paper reports on the data from 20 to 30 min individual online semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for the questions) conducted by the four members of the research team with 16 ECTs and 15 mentors ($n=31$) (see Table 1). The two research team members from New South Wales completed their State's interviews and the two research members in Queensland interviewed the Queensland participants.

In Australia, the majority (64.5%) of students are enrolled in government schools (non-fee paying) with the remainder divided between the Catholic school sector (Archdiocesan run) (19.7%) and the independent sector (15.9%), which includes a wide range of contexts such as religious affiliated schools such as Marist Brothers (Catholic), Christian and Islamic, as well as non-religious schools such as Montessori and Steiner (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). All participants worked in one of six independent schools across Queensland (coded as Q) and New South Wales (coded as N), Australia and were recruited as part of a mentoring project, with approval from the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee. The six schools chosen were all from the independent sector as they were the schools the research team was currently working with. It should be noted though that a review of academic outcomes of schools in Australia found that 'studies that adjusted for a range of student and school characteristics show no significant differences between the results of students from public, Catholic and Independent schools in national and international tests and in university completion rates' (Cobbold, 2015, p. 2).

Independent schools represent a geographically, philosophically and socio-economically diverse group of schools. So, while generally research has found that social class is the most important determinant of the type of school attended (Le & Miller, 2003), there are other factors at play, including religion (Vella, 1999), gender, parental educational attainments and intergenerational links (Le & Miller, 2003), as well as the services which are offered by government and private schools (Le & Miller, 2003). The schools in our research study included P-12 and secondary schools (7-12) and participants were drawn from early childhood, primary and secondary settings within these schools. The six participating schools, while all being in the independent sector, represented great diversity in terms of: socio-economic status, ranging from a school with an ICSEA percentileⁱ of 34 to one with an ICSEA percentile of 99; size, ranging from less than 400 to over 1600 students; and location, ranging from major cities to outer regionalⁱⁱ (ACARA, 2023). Mentors ranged in mentoring experience

TABLE 1 Study participants.

School	Participant code	Type
A—Queensland	Q4	Mentor
	Q9	ECT
<i>P–12 co-educational school</i>		
B—Queensland	Q10	ECT
	Q3	ECT
<i>K–12 co-educational school</i>		
	Q8	ECT
	Q15	ECT
	Q1	Mentor
	Q7	Mentor
	Q19	Mentor
C—Queensland	Q11	ECT
	Q2	ECT
<i>P–12 co-educational school</i>		
	Q6	ECT
	Q23	ECT
	Q14	Mentor
	Q5	Mentor
	Q18	ECT
D—Queensland	Q12	Mentor
	Q16	Mentor
	Q21	ECT
	Q22	Mentor
<i>P–12 co-educational school</i>		
E—New South Wales	Q13	ECT
	N6	ECT
	N3	ECT
	N4	Mentor
<i>3–12 all boys school</i>		
F—New South Wales	N2	ECT
	N5	ECT
	N10	ECT
	N8	Mentor
<i>K–12 all boys school</i>		
	N1	Mentor

from 1 to >10 years, and ECTs were, as their name suggests, in the first 5 years of their teaching careers. Each school's participants were the mentors who were working with the ECTs currently employed at that site.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed and coded as the state N for New South Wales or Q for Queensland and a number (simply the order in which the interview was transcribed), so a quote from a Queensland participant whose interview was transcribed first was Q1. These transcriptions were then analysed using Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach to thematic analysis, using both deductive and inductive coding, as it is an approach particularly suited to studies with a clear theoretical/conceptual underpinning (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). We commenced with the development of an initial deductive coding frame drawn from Positioning Theory as well as research literature. As analysis

proceeded, inductive codes were added, and transcripts revisited. Through this process redundant codes were removed, and others refined and revised. One of the research team coded the ECT interview data and another coded the mentor interview data. Credibility of the data analysis was ensured through a process of dialogic reliability (Åkerlind, 2005). A third researcher from the team independently coded both, and where there was disagreement, met with the other researchers to discuss until agreement was reached (Åkerlind, 2005). After all coding was completed, similar ideas were aggregated to create broader themes, which were then cross-checked by a third team member. Care was taken to ensure coding emerged from the data; however as Braun and Clarke (2006) note, the researchers' pre-existing understandings still played a role in the ideas observed.

FINDINGS

We now present the findings from this analysis. First, we present the four mentor positionings that we have surmised as being perceived by ECTs as connected to a mentor's role. We then present the two mentor positionings that we have surmised as being perceived by mentors in this study as connected to a mentor's role. This does not mean to imply that ECTs and mentors necessarily valued or agreed with these positionings, as will be seen in the section that follows. However, these were positionings they associated with the mentor role.

Early career teachers

The ECTs in this study spoke to four positionings associated with the mentor role. These included mentor as expert, gatekeeper, neighbour and parent. This is not to indicate that these ECTs experienced or valued only one of these mentor positions, but rather that they perceived these positions constituted those that they would, or could, expect a mentor to assume.

Mentor as expert

Many ECTs believed the role of the mentor should be that of an expert. When asked to describe the purpose of mentoring and the role of the mentor (see questions 4 and 5 in Appendix A), many of the ECT participants responded by stating they saw the mentor as being 'an expert in their field' (N2), 'someone who has been doing it for longer than you' (Q23) and 'who has a lot more experience than I would' (Q3). The ECTs valued the 'wealth of experience' (Q8) and the 'wisdom and support' (N6) that comes from 'someone with more knowledge or life experience' (Q10) and considered themselves fortunate to have this level of expertise at their disposal. As N10 stated: 'I see it as a great opportunity where I can just absorb all of her knowledge and wisdom'. ECTs appeared, in some cases, to also be motivated by their positioning of the mentor as expert, with N10 explaining that 'it is really powerful to have someone senior, you know, recognise you and give you, you know, support and acknowledgement'.

Where mentors were not perceived by ECTs as experts, some ECTs showed a level of disappointment and frustration. Participant Q23 spoke of a mentor she had at a previous school and noted that 'she was young and fresh' and she learnt from this young mentor 'what I didn't want to do'. This participant clearly valued experience and expertise. One ECT indicated that they felt that they found value in the mentor taking more of a facilitatory role by asking reflective questions which gave opportunity for them to share their own thinking and ideas. However, the vast majority of ECT participants echoed the sentiments of N10, who stated, 'I'm there as the learner rather than be the imparter of wisdom'.

This position of expert also related to context-specific experience. ECTs spoke of the importance of a mentor being able to provide 'insight into the school context, you know that this particular school has certain ways of doing things or ways of being' (N6). There was an acknowledgement that 'schools are unique' (Q9) and that again, if a mentor is new in the sense of being new to the school, although even an experienced teacher, it is not helpful for the ECT:

I also taught with a brand-new teacher that wasn't familiar with the school, so it's like a new teacher with a new teacher. But she was an experienced teacher, so there was ... I'm not trying to complain, but there was a lot of things that just didn't sit well. (Q18)

In the case of these ECTs, the mentor should be able to assume the position of one who knows not only about teaching as a profession, but also about the context in which they found themselves.

Mentor as gatekeeper

All the participant ECTs had been assigned a mentor for some of their early career; however, their experiences were mixed. They saw formal mentoring as occurring when they, as ECTs in their first few years of teaching, were provided with an official formal mentor. The formal mentor and ECT would meet, usually every few weeks, but in some cases only a couple of times a term. The purpose of these formal conversations slightly varied between schools, but generally they were less 'conversational' and less 'natural' (Q15). Some ECTs were provided with a booklet with set questions (Q3). For others, mentoring seemed to be very focused on transitioning from graduate to proficient and linked to full teacher registration (N2, N3, N6), with N6 explaining that mentoring occurred 'in the context of fulfilling the proficiency requirement'. Another participant saw this as being highly 'transactional' (N3), too fast moving and 'very very very structured' (N3). They felt that once they achieved full registration, the relationship would cease as there was 'not really any[thing] beyond the proficiency' (N3).

The positioning of mentor as gatekeeper was also seen when the ECTs noted that their mentoring conversations were all about the standards and moving from graduate teacher to proficient. Indeed, one participant even noted that the only reason she was given a mentor was because of this, stating: 'At the moment I'm moving to proficient teacher, so that's why I have a set mentor' (N2). In this type of mentor relationship, the ECT felt that the mentor was only there to 'have a look at your lessons and the standards and the descriptors that it's going towards' (N2). A few ECTs (N2, N3, N6) perceived the mentoring relationship to be solely related to the Standards—'the mentoring process is aligned with achieving proficiency' (N6).

As such, ECTs felt that the mentor assumed the position of gatekeeper. Furthering this perception, some ECTs commented that their formal mentor was not someone they usually had much to do with, perhaps someone from a 'different year level ... who I just happen to not see much, we don't really cross over in the staffroom or anything like that' (Q15). Another participant commented in regard to her formal mentor:

I haven't had much to do with her being sort of in the other staff area, like we just pass each other. We haven't really had much to do with each other, so I get all the paperwork side from [Deputy Principal] and then all of the classroom side from X [other prep teacher]. (Q23)

Mentors perceived by ECTs as assuming the position of gatekeeper suggested a mentor's role and responsibilities associated with an administrator and evaluator.

Mentor as neighbour

The ECTs indicated that informal mentors probably played a substantial role in supporting the ECTs, with many ECT interviewees noting that what they most often appreciated was the informal mentoring from colleagues in the same staff room and/or teaching the same year level or subjects. Participant N2 noted, for example, how 'in general, chats with other teachers ... has been quite positive, touching base about content'. Participant Q15 stated that she is 'definitely getting more out of my informal mentoring than my formal. It's more natural. Yeah. More conversational'. Another responded, 'My best mentor is my next door, the teacher in the classroom next to me. She has been here for 7 years and she's my go to person, so I would consider her as a mentor, helping me through' (Q23), again highlighting the neighbourly positioning.

This positioning of mentor as helpful neighbour showed ECTs' valuing of a mentor's availability (Q23), with other ECTs commenting on the value placed on 'having easy access' (Q21) to the mentor, being able to 'run ideas by and just for support' (N9), having someone to 'chat with about anything' (Q21) and having someone close by to ask 'clarifying questions' (N9). Mentoring is about just-in-time support, with the focus being that 'it's just to ask questions, ask questions' (Q15). Participant N3 captured this positioning of mentor as neighbour in the following statement:

There were these, these occasional really simple, small questions where you just go, I just need someone to ask this and to give me an answer. And I think that's what I would value in a mentor, is that that person you can just reach out to and just say, 'Hey, what do you think of this?' or 'How do I negotiate this situation because ...?' (N3)

This neighbour position in being available as a constant who the ECT could 'touch base with all the time' (N2), contactable '24 seven' (Q2) was highly valued by the ECTs, as was the need for a mentor to be 'like a sounding board for ideas, concerns, tricky emails ... just that person to go to' (Q21). Unlike the expert and gatekeeper, this mentor position was informal and ever-present.

Mentor as parent

Guidance and support, not just professionally, but personally on an emotional level was also highly valued and seen in the positioning of a mentor's role from the ECT perspective. The ECTs noted it was important for mentors to be caring: 'showing care in my well-being' (N10). For others, the mentor was there to 'provide guidance' (N9), alongside promoting 'a sense of belonging' (N6) and 'helping them find their feet' (N9). This positioning of the mentor as someone who made the ECTs feel 'like there's a genuine care and interest in wanting to help' (N10) was likened, in some cases, to that kind of protectiveness usually associated with a parent or family member. Some participants really spoke closely to that image of a parent figure, such as Q2, who explained how 'she's [Mentor] very protective of me ... I'm definitely able to get in under her wing'. That analogy and mentor positioning was also demonstrated by N10, who stated:

she [Mentor] often says to me if I'm still working away on it marking or whatever it is and she sees me, she'll come and she'll be like Mummy, 'You need to go home. You need to just go home. Like stop! You need to find a balance because at the moment you've pushed too far and it's not sustainable.' So having someone to continually remind you of that, I think is really important. (N10)

Others spoke of appreciating the 'times where she [Mentor] will just listen and let me talk' (Q3) or taking the ECT for coffee and a chat (N10). Interestingly, in some ways this positioning of mentors as a parent also linked back to the value of being able to ask questions and having someone who was genuinely interested in the progress of the ECT:

You know, if it was just my Head of Department and they were just supporting me, of course there's an agenda there and that agenda is very much about how they can improve their department or how they can improve. You know, the marks or the grades for that subject, whereas having a mentor that doesn't have an agenda I think is incredibly valuable. (N10)

The mentor was considered like a family member with whom the ECT could be 'honest' (N10) and 'open' (N10) while knowing all the time they would be 'non-judgemental' in return. N3 explained this further, as:

having somebody that you can talk to with no judgement, no consequence, purely just to get things off your mind that you think are a stupid question or a stupid idea or just to have that non-judgement person to bounce things off. (N3)

ECTs showed genuine concern for their ECT colleagues who did not have this kind of mentoring. N10 shared her concerns about a friend who, in the absence of a mentor to show that familial type care, had 'fallen apart so many times that she has talked very seriously about not being a teacher next year because she just doesn't see how it could be ever sustainable'. New to a school in some cases, these mentors provided a feeling of family that was important at a time in their careers that they felt 'would be very lonely' (N6). In positioning the mentor role this way, the mentor is seen as an 'understanding' (Q6) parent, 'empathetic of their [ECT's] situation' (N2) and being that person that they could 'trust' (N10) with their worries, concerns and vulnerabilities.

Mentors

The mentors in this study spoke to two positionings associated with the mentor role. These comprised mentor as expert and mentor as learning partner. Similar to the ECT perceptions, this is not to indicate that these mentors only experienced or valued one of these mentor positions.

Mentor as expert

This positioning of mentors as experts was noted by the mentors as well as the ECTs. Some mentors felt quite challenged by this expectation that they placed upon themselves, for example with one mentor stating: 'I feel like I have to have the answer' (Q12), and in doing so feeling like an imposter (according to participant N5). While some participants, like N5 and

Q12, felt pressured and perhaps even anxious about having to appear as an expert, others felt that they were the experts and became disappointed, and even angry, when ECTs did not always follow their advice. Q22 explained how 'If I'm giving them critical feedback, if they don't take it on board, that's really, really, a low light [time] for me'. Another mentor participant (Q5) expressed a similar view, lamenting the lack of attention his ECT paid to his expert advice following a lesson observation: 'It was as though she [ECT] would take on feedback, but then when I actually went and observed lessons and things like that ... And then I can remember the next lesson. It was just the same'. Another mentor participant, felt conflicted, stating:

Trying to balance, sounding like you're confident and that you know what you're talking about, but being vulnerable as well as being open to new experiences and other ways of doing things, I think is a problem, sometimes in mentoring. (N8)

Interestingly, other mentors reported feeling pressured into being positioned as the expert and having to tell the ECT what to do in order to protect the students, the school's reputation and even the ECT.

There was a reluctance to take on board pieces of advice and then I'm not great at letting an adult who's looking after the learning needs of 26 children catastrophically fail because that's an impact on student learning. And so, I wasn't great at letting him make mistakes. Which would probably have been better for him to have made a mistake and to have fallen a little bit on his face with regard to that. But the consequences of having let him do that would have been parent feedback and would have been discrediting him within his classroom environment. (Q16)

The same participant also noted this meant he felt 'a little bit more like you're doing a bit of telling as opposed to a bit of guiding' (Q16), and while this may feel uncomfortable, he felt that as a mentor, part of his role was to ensure 'that the teacher is in a position where they are set up for success' (Q16).

Mentor as learning partner

While mentors did see that mentors should be, or sometimes had to be, positioned as experts, many also wanted to assume the role of learning partner. As a learning partner, the mentors noted how helpful it was in terms of their own professional growth, with Q1 describing that she 'just learnt so much from the insights that they [ECTs] have or they find and they share with you as well, which is incredible'. Mentors also reported other benefits of being able to assume a partnership positioning as learner, such as improving 'professional dialogue' (Q22), 'building culture in the school' (N8) and gaining 'a fresh perspective' (Q17).

Many of the mentors interviewed also saw personal benefits in terms of mentoring 'being good for my own self-esteem' (Q22), in that they felt 'you're able to make such a difference' (N8) and giving back to the profession through mentoring. However, they did not see this as one-sided relationship, reporting that their mentoring with ECTs reinvigorated them and their career in that 'just being with really dynamic, engaged and younger teachers' (N5) they found 'it's a great way to keep my practise being renewed. It reminds me of things that I might have forgotten to do or brings new things in for me' (Q22). In so doing mentors noted,

'I learn as much from her as she learns from me' (N5) and 'I benefit as much as whoever I'm mentoring' (Q22).

Comparison

Overall, five mentor positionings were determined from the interview data (see [Figure 1](#)). Of those five, only one positioning, mentor as expert, was reported by both the mentor and the ECT. The mentors in the study saw their position as an expert as well as a learning partner, while the ECTS positioned the mentor as an expert, a gatekeeper, a parent and a neighbour. While we discuss these positions as categories, we acknowledge the interactivity and inter-relationships between them (see [Figure 2](#)).

As can be seen from [Figure 2](#), the majority of concepts are singularly seen by either mentor or ECT with not much sharing of positionings related to the role of mentor. This has an enormous impact on how individuals see themselves placed within the mentoring relationship. It is essential that we assist both ECTs and mentors in seeing the power of positioning and understanding this. If they are able to do so though, a truly collaborative and reciprocal partnering could occur which would equally benefit both parties. We will now discuss each of these findings with this in mind.

DISCUSSION

Mentor as expert

Generally, both mentors and ECTs presupposed the mentoring role to be that of expert. This largely common positioning of the role of mentor reinforces a classical view of the experienced teacher as all-knowing sage. This view of mentoring relies heavily on a transmission-oriented approach 'based on a behaviourist concept of learning, in the sense that knowledge

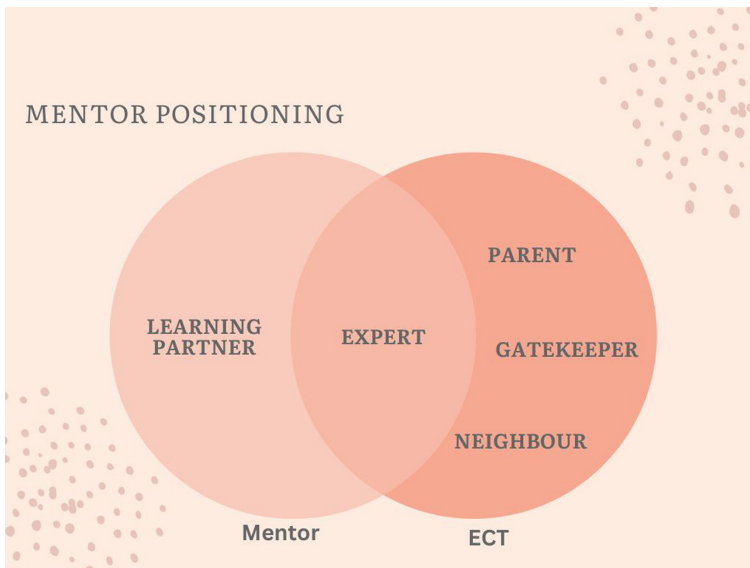


FIGURE 1 Mentor positioning comparison. ECT, Early career teacher.

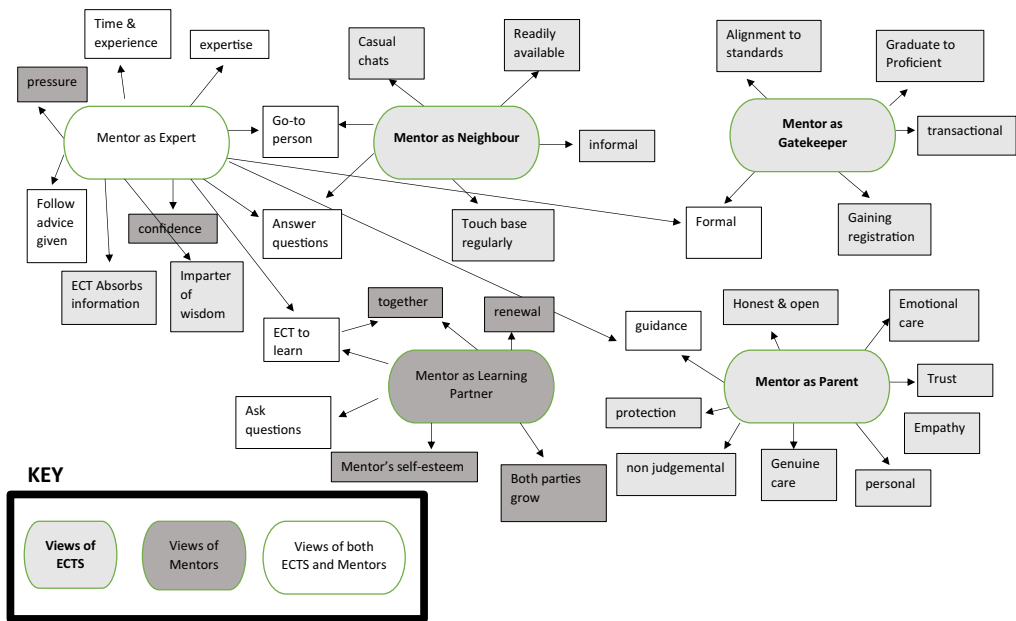


FIGURE 2 Conceptual mapping of mentor positions. ECT, Early career teacher.

is provided by and transferred from an expert to a rather passive novice in a directive, uni-directional way' (Burger et al., 2021, p. 2). This is certainly clearly shown when Mentor Q16 talked about how she found it hard to let go and wanted to tell the ECT what to do and how to do things. So, despite previous research that has warned of the hierarchical privileging of the mentor's experience over the ECT's education, previous experience, potential strengths and values (Clarke et al., 2013), our study has highlighted the ongoing proliferation, and indeed support for mentors as experts by a number of ECTs and mentors themselves.

As Clarke and her colleagues (2013) noted in their Irish study, mentors continually prioritise their experience and their practice, first over knowledge, but then also over an interrogation and reflection with the ECTs of their values. In doing so, the mentor claims the expert position and given that ECTs have also shown that they believe in this positioning, there is every likelihood that such a positioning will concurrently be assumed by and assigned to the mentor and thus be maintained. In this case, the lack of positioning tension between ECT and mentor would, according to van Langenhove (2017), enable and reinforce these 'expert' rights and duties assumed by the mentor with an acceptance of positioning (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) afforded both mentoring parties through their social exchanges.

Mentor as gatekeeper

Previous research has shown that directive and dominant mentoring approaches are prominent during mentor and ECT interactions (Mena et al., 2017) and this certainly aligns with the findings in this study of the positioning of mentor as gatekeeper. This mentor positioning closely aligns with the concept of mentoring being heavily influenced by managerial imperatives, as opposed to being seen in a supportive and nurturing way. It is interesting that the participant mentors did not view themselves as the gatekeeper. Barnes (2004) states that how people position themselves and are positioned by others is influenced by 'the context and community values and on the personal characteristics of all the individuals concerned,

their personal history, their preferences and their capabilities' (p. 3). The finding from this study shows that in this context, the mentors were not aware of their unbalanced power relationship with the mentees and accepted their role as gatekeeper. We propose that mentors may perceive gatekeeper duties as part of the 'expert' ensemble of responsibilities.

A gatekeeper image also shows a power differential between mentor and ECT with the mentor holding the power. This is especially true where the mentor is the same person assessing the ECT in terms of meeting or not meeting professional standards. Efficacious mentoring is predicated on relational trust between the mentor and the person being mentored characterised by confidentiality, openness and honesty (Engvik & Emstad, 2017). Hobson and Malderez (2013) saw this managerial imperative being acted out in practice in the UK where mentors were seen as gatekeepers for quality control as part of a broader policy aim to ensure new teachers met minimum standards, similar to the experience of some ECTs in this Australian study. Mentoring seen within this institutional policy context could indeed do more harm than good as Hobson and Malderez (2013) warned 10 years ago, with mentoring delimited to evaluation in the guise of judgementing (Hobson & Malderez, 2013).

In the context of power imbalance, it is unlikely that ECTs will attempt to contest the positioning of mentor as gatekeeper. According to previous work using Positioning Theory (Larsen & Mockler, 2023), a challenge to or rejection of positioning may be impeded where authority is involved. In the context of this study, there is a risk that technicist competencies that promote a standards-centred discourse of mentoring focusing on product rather than affect (Lambert & Gray, 2020) will be perpetuated in the absence of any 'positioning move' (Harré et al., 2009).

Mentor as neighbour

The mentor as neighbour was a positioning reported by ECT (and not the mentors) and aligned with previous research showing that ECTs particularly value a mentor who: is a good listener (Harrison et al., 2006); is flexible and can meet when and as needed; and can help them reflect (Harrison et al., 2006). Participants, similar to other research, noted that it was valuable to have a mentor with whom they could engage in specific subject-related or year-level discussion so they could clarify knowledge, activities, marking and moderating (Harrison et al., 2006).

We posit that mentors themselves did not see this 'just-in-time' and informal work to be the remit of an allocated mentor, but rather the role and responsibility of the wider community of colleagues that have proximity to the ECT, such as the nearby teaching partner or year-level team. In this study, the ECT affords these more aleatory and somewhat serendipitous supports as part of the mentor role, and thus, expands this title to those fulfilling these just-in-time needs. From a Positioning Theory perspective, while mentors themselves did not afford these others the role of mentor, ECTs associated these duties and obligations (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018) with those of a mentor. This may account for those ECTs who expressed a delineation between their official, or allocated, mentor, and their informal, somewhat day-to-day mentor/s. The perceived value of informal mentoring has been reported in several studies (Desimone et al., 2014; Du & Wang, 2017).

Significantly, Du and Wang (2017, p. 324) agreed that informal mentoring for 'spontaneous and immediate social and emotional and career-related assistance' is valuable; however, they warn that this support, while generally linked to the mentoring process, lacks rigour and is limited to 'low-level help-seeking' (Du & Wang, 2017, p. 324). Similarly, Desimone et al. (2014) found informal mentoring to be complementary or compensatory in nature, providing in-the-moment advice and information that the formal mentor is unable to do. That said, they also found that such support, while valued by the ECTs, generally did not include

broader pedagogical discussion, active participation on the part of the ECT or any follow-up activity. Given that position is inherently linked with the roles and responsibilities afforded the other as manifested through discourse (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999), the broad positioning of colleagues as mentors may serve to compromise clear expectations, or indeed professional recognition, for teachers taking up these duties. Furthermore, we suggest that where ECTs associate this form of support with the mentor role, the positioning of the mentor as expert is further entrenched.

Mentor as parent

While some studies have identified the most salient qualities in a mentor, from the ECTs' perspectives, as being approachable (Ewing, 2021), non-judgemental (Ewing, 2021), a good listener (Harrison et al., 2006) and open and honest (Engvik & Emstad, 2017; Vostal et al., 2021), there has been limited discussion on a combination of these qualities coming together in a parent-like way. Through the lens of Positioning Theory, ECTs in this study perceived these parent-like qualities to be a valuable part of their mentor's role and appreciated instances where the mentor positioned themselves this way through their actions and language. Interestingly, while ECTs spoke to the mentor as parent, or similarly a close friend, the mentors themselves did not. This presents a potential tension between ECT and mentor positioning of the role as many of the mentors in this study tended to position their role as one based on building pedagogical capacity. The description of the mentor as providing a place of safety and care, as provided by the ECTs in this study, has been noted in the research previously. For example, Vostal et al.'s (2021) study of pre-service teachers found that a positive relationship with mentors was perceived as being one that was psychologically safe. This finding was also supported in a recent Austrian study with ECTs where one participant noted that the conversations with their mentor represented 'psychological support ... in case of emergency' (Symeonidis et al., 2023, p. 7). Our study however has highlighted that such roles and responsibilities are not undertaken by all mentors.

In the light of Positioning Theory, mentor as parent is counterintuitive to other positionings such as mentor as gatekeeper, creating a positioning tension for both the ECT and mentor. In such circumstances, mentors may feel obliged to choose the positioning they will assume. Given that 'positions are relative to one another' (Harré & Slocum, 2003, p. 128) and are influenced by structural conditions and individual attributes (van Langenhove, 2017), mentors may be unable or unwilling to afford the ECT the position of 'vulnerable newcomer' as they focus on the other duties and responsibilities allocated to them at the institutional level. To illustrate, a mentor charged with moving the ECT from provisional to full registration may feel that they do not have the time or space to assume the role of 'parent'. Previous studies have demonstrated that policy, and the compliance inherent within may serve as an alternative discourse that affords some teachers, particularly those early in their careers, seemingly unavoidable positionings (Ball et al., 2011; Larsen & Mockler, 2023; Maguire et al., 2015). Where an ECT expects their mentor to demonstrate this type of care and concern, as a consequence of worry about their workload, their role as a teacher, teaching itself and managing the classroom environments (Aarts et al., 2020), positional tensions will be inevitable.

Mentor as learning partner

In this study, some mentors spoke of the benefits of mentoring as a learning partnership. Significantly, ECTs did not mention this positioning of the mentor as a co-learner in the

mentoring process. Instead, as we have previously discussed, ECTs drew heavily on the positioning of the mentor as expert. This tension is of considerable concern for two reasons. First, there is clear demonstration of the benefits of mentoring as co-learning or co-inquiry for both ECT and mentor (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2016; Karathanos-Aguilar & Ervin-Kassab, 2022). Studies have reported mentors' enhanced reflective practice (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2016), pedagogical renewal (Karathanos-Aguilar & Ervin-Kassab, 2022) and retention and well-being (Hollweck, 2019). Such a mutual approach to mentoring has also reported benefits for the ECT, with opportunities for identity transformation, critical reflection and expanding pedagogical expertise (Stanulis et al., 2019).

Second, there has been considerable effort over the past decade to shift mentoring from its traditional roots as a hierarchical, mentor-dominated approach to one in which both the mentor and ECT take shared responsibility for bidirectional participation (Bressman et al., 2018; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Larsen et al., 2023). Over 20 years ago, at the beginning of this century, there was a call for schools to embrace a collaborative culture of professional learning if they were to retain and attract the vast number of teachers that would be needed as we rapidly approached a teacher shortage (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Since that time, a number of studies specifically related to collaboration and mentoring have been conducted (see e.g. Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018) and note that mentoring as a means for encouraging professional growth for both the mentor and ECT (Hudson, 2013) and as a means for increasing collaboration (Eisenschmidt & Oder, 2018) need to be more utilised.

Previous studies have reported such a transformation of mentoring practice to be challenging, often thwarted by a continued enactment of traditional approaches by the mentor (Beutel et al., 2017). While research has demonstrated that ECTs do have a lot to offer the professional practice of their school and can give meaningful critical perspectives (Attard Tonna et al., 2017) they are often not given a chance. Schools ignore the valuing and input of ECTS at their own peril with the potential result that ECTs just adopt what they see around them (Ulvić & Langørgen, 2012).

Our study extends this notion to consider the influence of ECT perceptions of the mentor's role, preferring their mentors to assume, and subsequently affording them, the position of expert rather than co-learner. This supports the positioning theory notion of 'moral order' which is defined by Harré as an organised 'system of rights, obligations and duties obtain[ed] in society, together with the criteria by which people and their activities are valued' (van Langenhove, 2017, p. 4). We posit that, in accordance with Positioning Theory, mentors may need to seek ways of repositioning themselves (van Langenhove & Harré, 1999) during mentoring conversations by rejecting the 'other' positioning proffered by ECTS.

In the context of this study, ECTS seem to be challenged to perceive themselves as valuable co-contributors to the mentoring partnership, and further, are more likely to perceive that it is the mentor's responsibility to 'teach' as the expert, as opposed to learning through the process. In order for a learning partnership to work, in terms of professional development and learning for both parties, there needs to be a common understanding between both ECT and mentor of the purpose of mentoring as a partnership (Stanulis et al., 2019). Our study suggests that from a positioning perspective, the challenge of shifting to a more non-hierarchical mentoring culture may also rest with ECTS.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Curiously, despite a plethora of research and significant advocacy for a shift to a more efficacious mentoring process for both mentors and ECTS, there is still much work to do to overcome barriers. Our study contributes to the field by considering the challenge to reimagining and realising this conceptual shift to mentoring in practice as an issue emanating from,

in part, a tension in the perceived positioning of the mentor role between both mentors and ECTs. We posit that such positioning dissonance impedes the shared vision of mentoring required to change practice.

In our study, five different mentoring positionings were identified, and among these, only one was shared by both the mentor and the ECT, which was the positioning of the mentor as expert. The ECTs also considered mentors to be responsible for working with them to undertake accountability processes of moving from provisional to full registration (mentor as gatekeeper), providing informal and giving just-in-time advice and information (mentor as neighbour) and being that safe, caring and non-judgemental familial figure (mentor as parent). In contrast, mentors, in some cases, also positioned the mentoring role as co-learner, a perspective on mentoring most closely aligned with contemporary thought yet not shared by the ECTs. These findings have several implications for practice, related policy and future research.

First, we argue that current approaches to professional learning for mentors need to be reconsidered. There has been a popular call in the research, both in Australia (Hudson, 2013; Spooner-Lane, 2017) and overseas (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015; Hobson et al., 2009; Wexler, 2020), for mandatory mentor training. Indeed, some studies have demonstrated that mentor training programmes can assist with role clarity and reflective practice (Langdon & Ward, 2015), as well as an acknowledgement of individual mentoring beliefs (Ambrosetti, 2014). We further this argument by calling for the inclusion of ECTs in mentor training programmes. While we concur with the argument for greater mentor training opportunities for mentors, this will be insufficient to make the challenging shift to a shared vision for mentoring whereby it can become a collaborative and relational journey (Ambrosetti, 2014) and potentially reduce the current hold that mentor as expert exerts.

Second, we posit that through a combined approach to professional learning, mentors could be made more aware of the holistic needs (Goodwin et al., 2021) of ECTs and, equally important, ECTs may gain insight into the structural and contextual demands placed on the contemporary mentor, such as in their positioning as mentor as gatekeeper, a positioning of which many ECTs were highly critical. Related to this, our findings from this study indicate that the term mentor is applied to a range of school staff, who each take on very different responsibilities as a means of supporting the ECT. Such diverse application of the term in the school setting, in particular by ECTs, exacerbates the challenge of defining the role. Already described as a contested term (Kemmis et al., 2014), our study would suggest that the mentor is expected to be 'all things' to the ECT. It may be that the development of alternative terms for, for example, positions such as mentor as gatekeeper and mentor as neighbour to clearly define their responsibilities would be helpful in making clear what the ECT should or could expect of mentors and other colleagues endeavouring to support them.

Third, we acknowledge that this study is not without limitations and therefore call for further research to be undertaken that can consider alternative contexts and methodologies. This study involved teachers from a specific schooling context (the independent sector) in two states in Australia. We therefore encourage further research located in alternative school sectors and locations both in Australia and internationally. In this instance, positioning provided a strong theoretical framework for the consideration of ways in which the role of mentor was conceived in practice. It would also be beneficial to consider alternative conceptual and theoretical approaches, such as role theory, as a means of investigating tensions that may be impacting the progress of contemporary mentoring practice. Our use of semi-structured interviews supported our aim to undertake a perceptual study of role positioning. Further studies may seek to undertake observational or discursive methodologies to this end.

Limitations notwithstanding, this study has made an important contribution to our understanding of mentoring in schools through the elucidation of ECTs' and mentors' perceived

positioning of the mentor role, and a discussion of the ways on which these positional tensions may be impacting the mentoring practices currently undertaken in schools. We have put forth a call to reimagine mentor professional learning, based on the premise that where mentoring is intended to be a shared pursuit (Collie & Perry, 2019) for mutual benefit, then positionings such as mentor as expert must be addressed and potentially challenged with both ECT and mentor. In essence, we suggest that mentoring underpinned by a foundation of collaboration and reciprocity requires that this shared approach commence with a unified vision and positioning of the mentor role.

FUNDING INFORMATION

No funding was received for this research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Open access publishing facilitated by University of Southern Queensland, as part of the Wiley - University of Southern Queensland agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Human ethical approval was sought and gained from the University of Southern Queensland's Human Ethics Committee. Approval number: H21REA310.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱAn ICSEA percentile is a measure to help understand the educational advantage, or disadvantage, of a school. 'A percentile of 40 means that the school you have selected is more educationally advantaged than 40% of all schools in Australia (and more educationally disadvantaged than 60% of all schools in Australia)' (ACARA, 2023).

ⁱⁱFive categories of geographic location are used to describe school locations—major cities; inner regional; outer regional; remote; and very remote (ACARA 2023).

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How to cite this article: Curtis, E., Nguyen, H. T. M., Larsen, E. & Loughland, T. (2024). The positioning tensions between early career teachers' and mentors' perceptions of the mentor role. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3974>

APPENDIX A

A.1 | Semi-structured interview questions

Please note that the questions have been developed to be suitable for both the mentors and the early career teachers

1. How would you describe your experience of/with mentoring up to this point?
2. What have been the highlights for you?
3. What have been the challenges from your perspective?
4. What do you think is the purpose of mentoring?
5. What do you see as your role as the mentor/ECT?
6. What do you see as the ECT's/mentor's role?
7. What would a typical mentoring conversation look like for you?
8. What is important for you when you are involved in a mentoring conversation?
9. What influences the way you go about participating in the mentoring process/ mentoring early career teachers? What do you have to consider?
10. What role do you see the professional standards playing in the mentoring process?