Mentors as instructional coaches for new teachers: lessons learned from the Early Career Framework in England

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Submitted to *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education* for publication in the Special Issue 12(3).

Abstract

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews with 37 mentors explored their understandings and experiences of becoming instructional coaches as part of a pilot support initiative to support early career teachers in England. Two rounds of interviews were conducted to generate data related to the first six months of mentoring on the programmes. Thematic analysis identified seven semantic themes which describe manifest content found within the data and identify mentors' perceptions of their role and practice as instructional coaches. Three latent themes were developed from mentors' accounts which indicate challenges in becoming an instructional coach in this context.

Purpose – The paper provides analysis of the use of instructional coaching as a prevalent trend supporting new teachers in the English system and aims to inform ongoing policy development and implementation. The qualitative study examines mentors' conceptualisations and enactment of the role of instructional coach and the readiness of mentors to assume their key stakeholder roles in the professional education of early career teachers.

Findings – Concern to apply instructional coaching 'correctly' according to the programme models was a strong feature among both novice and experienced mentors. A key finding is the lack of explicit knowledge of professional learning pedagogies among mentors and insecure understanding of how new teachers learn. Assuming the role of instructional coach presented both benefits of having a 'model' to follow and disadvantages in fostering limited and over-prescribed concepts and practices related to the learning of new teachers.

Research limitations/implications – The study investigated mentors during the first six months of a pilot programme and the paper reports on analysis of one type of data. The research results may lack generalisability, and a longitudinal study is necessary to further explore the validity of the findings.

Practical implications – Sustained, high-quality professional learning for mentors is crucial to their role as instructional coaches to enable them to develop deep, critical understanding of how instructional coaching might support new teachers and how to exercise professional judgement in working with 'models'. Judicious use of time and resource is needed to enable mentors to fulfil the potential of national mentoring programmes.

Originality/value – The study is timely in its examination of mentors who assume the role of instructional coach as one response to national policy development that makes support for early career teachers mandatory. Such strategies have wide international relevance where the retention of new teachers is a policy priority.

Keywords: mentoring, instructional coaching, early career teachers, mentoring and learning theory, mentoring and education, professional development and mentoring, teacher education

Article Type: Research paper

Introduction

This research explores school-based mentors' understanding and practice of instructional coaching (IC). It was carried out with mentors of early career teachers (ECTs) as part of the government-funded pilot programmes that supported the introduction of the Early Career Framework (ECF; Department for Education [DfE], 2019a) in England, which is a national initiative aimed at providing structured professional development as part of government attempts to improve teacher retention (DfE, 2019b). The study of mentors' conceptualisations and enactment of the role of instructional coach forms part of a wider mixed-methods project that evaluated the pilot programmes (Daly *et al*., 2022; Hardman *et al*., 2020). The analysis is based on qualitative data collected in two rounds of interviews with 37 mentors in 20 case study schools as they became instructional coaches during the first six months of the pilots. The mentor role is a core element of new teachers' entitlement to the ECF as a a 'two year programme of structured training and development' (DfE, 2019a, p. 6), and government funding was provided for mentoring time to support this and for mentor training. Although IC was not specified by the ECF as a requirement of mentoring, both organisations which were contracted to pilot the support programmes incorporated IC, conducted by school-based 'mentors', as a core strategy within their programme designs. Thus, IC became a funded remit of the mentor role and a prime mentor responsibility.

The extent to which the professional learning needs of ECTs are met is widely recognised as key to developing an effective teacher workforce that can provide high-quality education leading to successful outcomes for learners (Kelchtermans, 2019; National Foundation for Educational

Research [NFER], 2018; See *et al.*, 2020), and there is substantial international evidence that 'pedagogically sound' mentoring can make significant impacts on new teachers' efficacy and well-being (e.g. Achinstein and Athanases, 2006; Langdon, 2017). Teacher retention challenges across the world are the focus of instensive research and policy-making responses (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2020). However, the debate is extensive regarding forms of mentoring that can support the needs of new teachers, linked to concepts of how teachers learn, the requirements of wider policy-making and induction programmes, and the cultures of schools in which mentoring is situated (Daly and Milton, 2017; Ingersoll and Strong, 2011).

The adoption of IC models by the pilots reflects trends, particularly prevalent in the United States, that advocate 'deliberate practice' (Ericcson and Pool, 2017) as a key professional development strategy. Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012) and Sims (2019) link IC models to deliberate practice, which is 'informed and guided by the best performers' accomplishments and by an understanding of what those expert performers do to excel' (Ericcson and Pool, 2017, p. 98). A premise of IC is that the 'coach' explicitly directs new teachers towards recommended teaching behaviours that are largely pre-determined and replicable across contexts and which are promoted on the basis of 'evidence' of their effectiveness. Within the ECF, the mentor is positioned as an 'expert practitioner' (e.g. DfE, 2019a, p. 9) within a hierarchical construct of teacher expertise. Specific models of IC vary, however. Coaching itself lacks consensual definition, with insufficient theoretical foundations in the context of professional learning (Hollweck and Lofthouse, 2021). Throughout this paper, we adhere to Knight's (2019) assertion that IC is not a 'simplistic one-size-fits-all formula for improvement' (p. 7). Coaching relationships can be non-directive and conducted among peers as equals, where the coachee drives their own journey (Hughes, 2003; Thomson, 2013). Contrastingly, in the most 'directive' coaching models (Knight, 2017), teaching behaviours are developed by systematic target-setting, rehearsal and review of practice by a 'coach'. This research identifies lessons to be learned from the pilot studies regarding the adoption of IC as a core strategy. These have implications for future developments in the provision of mentoring as the national initiative matures but also have wider international relevance as education systems seek to address persistent challenges in supporting and retaining ECTs.

In this high-stakes policy context, two key research questions are explored:

> How do mentors conceptualise and enact the role of instructional coach?
>
> What is mentors' readiness to assume their key stakeholder roles in the professional learning of early career teachers?

Context: the pilot support programmes for the Early Career Framework

In the face of persistent attrition rates in England (Long and Danechi, 2022), the introduction of the ECF by the DfE reflects international consensus around the importance of regular and sustained mentoring as a system-level entitlement for new teachers (Spencer *et al*., 2018). The ECF sets out a national-level requirement for new teachers in all maintained schools to experience a support programme of non-accredited professional learning over a two-year induction period, supported by mentoring in both years. Schools must ensure that ECTs engage with five ECF content areas – behaviour management, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and professional behaviours – each of which is linked with research evidence that was 'endorsed' by the Education Endowment Foundation (a government-funded charity that supports teachers and senior leaders by providing evidence-based resources designed to improve practice and enhance learning) as part of a curriculum set out in the ECF.

The role of the mentor is high stakes not only in terms of providing professional support for ECTs in relation to the ECF for a two-year period, but in contributing to wider agendas around improving the quality of teaching and establishing career-long professional learning habits that may help increase teachers' satisfaction with their roles and reduce attrition rates (DfE, 2019b). In effect, the ECF initiative expects mentors to undertake a capacity-building role within schools and within the teaching profession. They are situated as 'expert practioners', alongside others, who mediate government expectations of early career learning and can model and discuss evidence-based teaching as it is conceptualised by the ECF. Inevitably, these are demanding expectations and bring into focus the knowledge, skills and expertise of mentors – as evidence-informed teachers as well as in their mentoring role.

Instructional coaching in the pilot programmes

To introduce the ECF, two providers, 'A' and 'B', were awarded tenders to run three contrasting pilot programmes from 2019 to 2020 (a detailed evaluation of the wider programme components is in Hardman *et al*., 2020). IC approaches were developed by both providers to enable school-based mentors to mediate the learning goals of the ECF and to provide support for ECT mentees towards these (see summary of IC models in Table 1 and Table 2). Extensive further guidance was provided via mentor training regarding forms of coaching dialogue, frequency and duration of mentoring sessions that were dedicated to IC, and the linked lesson observations that were core to the provision. Both IC models included a phased, systematic approach to selecting foci for ECT development, followed by planning towards specific goals; the strategic use of mentor lesson observation to guide goal-setting for the ECT; carefully structured mentor–mentee dialogue; agreed

'action steps' to map reasonable and incremental pathways to progress for the new teacher; practice and/or planning to achieve the agreed goals; and monitoring of progress towards those goals.

<INSERT Table 1 here>

Table 1. Summary of Provider A instructional coaching model.

<INSERT Table 2 here>

Table 2. Summary of Provider B instructional coaching model

There were different approaches to observing new teachers as part of the IC process. A 30-minute 'lesson observation' of the ECT by the mentor was required by Provider B to feed into the IC conversation; for Provider A, this was a 20-minute 'drop-in' to the lesson by the mentor. Provider B included a final stage in mentor conversations around 'AOB' (any other business) giving importance to wider or unanticipated aspects of ECT development that come into focus and lie beyond the scope of IC. Provider A included 'coaching on coaching' as an element of IC development, by which the mentor was provided with feedback from an 'expert' on a filmed episode of their coaching to help them develop fidelity to the model. It is not the purpose of this paper to compare the models, although each provider's model of IC reflects particular assumptions about effective teaching, new teacher learning and the nature of the participants' learning relations. Importantly, both give attention to the fact that the mentor as instructional coach needs to learn how to support new teachers to reflect upon their existing practices, enabling them to look at their current habits and make deliberate changes (Wang, 2017).

Conceptualising instructional coaching

Studies suggest that IC can be an effective form of teacher professional learning (Kraft *et al.*, 2018; Sims, 2019), but the term describes a range of approaches with little consensus around its most appropriate design and implementation. Importantly, Warnock *et al*.'s (2022) identification of the perceived benefits of IC for teachers emphasised that no particular form of IC was 'imposed' in their study, and coaches were encouraged to choose an appropriate coaching model as part of sustained training. Seminal work by Joyce and Showers (1981) identified teacher learning as goal-oriented and a 'continuing problem-solving endeavor between the teacher and the coach' (p. 170), which is reliant upon feedback that 'stresses the appropriateness of specific strategies to certain goals'. This proposes the importance of coaching as a fully contextualised, negotiated practice, linking strategies with appropriateness and evaluation conducted as mutual endeavour. The reproduction of particular skills or models of teaching is not considered a relevant goal from such perspectives.

Knight and van Nieuwerburgh (2012) reflect this in their assertion that the foundation of IC is 'an authentic partnership between equals and not a relationship between an expert and a novice' (p. 103):

> Like mentors, specialist coaches and collaborative coaches, instructional coaches employ effective listening, dialogical questioning and other communication- and relationship-building strategies. What distinguishes this model from other approaches is that instructional coaches teach others how to learn very specific, evidence-based teaching practices such as formative assessment … or cooperative learning. (p. 103)

This is a crucial distinction from setting out a 'blueprint' for teaching. 'Very specific' practices can be highly complex and be subjected to judicious application, with attention to the complexity of enactment based on increasing professional judgement. There is a lot at stake: 'a teacher who possesses all the competences teachers need but who is unable to judge which competence needs to be deployed when, is a useless teacher' (Biesta, 2017, p. 455).

Contrastingly, more directive models reflect dominant expert–novice relations. While acknowledging a range of models are present in the current education system in England, Sims (2019) defines prevalent IC as

> involv[ing] an expert teacher working with a novice in an individualised, classroom-based, observation-feedback-practice cycle. Crucially, instructional coaching involves revisiting the same specific skills several times, with focused, bite-sized bits of feedback specifying not just what but how the novice needs to improve during each cycle. (para. 2)

There is scepticism, however, around extreme fidelity to models as an appropriate goal for IC. Czerniawski (2020) is critical of the 'atheoretical act' of apprentice-style teacher learning, suggesting that requirements to reproduce practices with fidelity results in techniques 'demonstrated by mannequins' (n.p). Such models reflect the 'directive' end of Knight's (2017) spectrum of coaching models. Knight describes *facilitative* coaches as deliberately withholding their expertise and empowering the teacher to deploy their existing knowledge to achieve their goals. New teachers, or those with gaps in the knowledge required to bring about desired change, are argued to likely need a more directive approach. At the opposite end of the spectrum, *directive* coaching positions the coach and teacher as expert/novice, with the teacher learning to enact recommended or endorsed practices with fidelity. Knight (2017) cautions that directive coaching 'tends to de-professionalize teaching by minimizing teacher expertise and autonomy … frequently engender[ing] resistance'

(para. 11). 'Directive' coaching thus generates dilemmas around key aspects of being a 'professional'.

These debates indicate the range of assumptions that require scrutiny in designing mentoring programmes for ECTs. For example, Geeraerts *et al*. (2018) challenge assumptions that new teachers are less competent than experienced teachers, suggesting that knowledge exchange is a highly valid form of professional learning for new teachers. Similarly, educative mentoring theory emphasises mentor and mentee as learning partners (Langdon, 2017) who collaborate to examine aspects of teaching with a mutual intention to learn, enhancing mentors' own reflexivity (Door, 2015); in expert–novice relationships, there is a danger that the mentor is not challenged to rethink their practice.

A widely cited meta-analysis by Kraft *et al.* (2018) shows large effect sizes of IC on practice but also notes challenges and limited evidence around scaling-up coaching approaches. Any evaluation of their impact on teachers must be considered alongside the conception of expert teaching that the model is being used to effect. In particular, we might consider the importance attributed to 'fidelity' to the practices advocated by an IC model and whether the aim is to support the teacher's fidelity to their overall goal for pupil learning (as with, e.g., Knight and van Nieuwerburgh, 2012) or to specific teacher actions or micro-behaviours in line with a particular model of teaching.

Significant variation exists, then, in how expertise in teaching and learning to teach well is understood, not least because of variation in how teaching is conceptualised as a practice. A major influence on the development of IC models is Grossman's work (e.g. Grossman *et al.*, 2009), representing teaching as complex 'relational practice' which can be understood through representations, decomposition and approximations of practice. By decomposing professional practice into constituent parts, novices are able to 'develop a sense of the anatomy of the practice to be learned' and learn 'first to attend to, and then to enact, the essential elements of a practice' (p. 2069). Ericsson and Pool (2017) propose that deliberate practice is the most effective way to develop expertise and that through focusing on practice steps, novices develop the 'mental representations' of expert performers. Novices eventually develop their own more sophisticated mental representations to increasingly self-identify and correct aspects of their practice. However, Ericsson and Pool specify education/teaching as a field in which challenges are presented by the absence of a clear model of what it means to be 'expert' and of the steps required to achieve this status. Bronkhorst *et al*. (2014) draw on the work of Ericsson and others to propose a teacher-education-specific understanding of deliberate practice, by which teachers' 'learning activities' themselves are 'designed, repeated, coupled with feedback and motivated' (p. 21) and are

suggested as manifestations of deliberate practice. This perspective focuses on the 'deliberateness' (p. 21) of teachers' *approaches* to learning activities intended to benefit pupil and teacher learning, rather than the extent to which expertise can be decomposed into well-sequenced activities.

It is necessary therefore to distinguish between Grossman *et al*.'s emphasis on the 'recomposition' of expert practice in order for teachers to conceptualise the relational complexity of classrooms and emphases on teacher learning as mastery and performance of granular features of decomposed practices. For Grossman *et al.* (2009), it is vital to discuss 'what constitutes defensible decompositions of practice' (p. 2093) in order for teachers to learn from them. From an IC perspective, the risk is that the focus emphasises what teachers *do* rather than what or how they *think about what they do*.

The adoption of IC as a preferred strategy for the pilot ECF support programmes in England is thus located in contested theory around its forms and its role in teacher learning.

Methodology

Perceptual and experiential data were collected with 37 mentors across all three pilot programmes in 20 schools (eight primary, 11 secondary and one all-through school). Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore how mentors conceptualised and enacted their role in the first six months in role. A second round of interviews increased confidence in the validity of the data in view of the novelty of the programmes and the need for mentors to grow familiar with the demands of their roles. This round was conducted online after the end of the six-month period due to school closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This enabled mentors to reflect on their understandings and experiences of coaching following a short break from mentoring in situ. The research was conducted in line with approval (University College London Institute of Education [UCL IOE] Research Ethics Committee: REC 1211) granted against the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018), and participant data were collected according to requirements for informed consent, anonymity, right to withdraw and data storage. Further ethical approval was obtained to move to online data collection when the pandemic disrupted the second round of interviews.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was used to identify themes in the interview transcripts, by identifying and analysing patterns within the data. The transcripts were coded by pairs of researchers to form a code book which assembled groups of data based on initial thematic summaries. Shared reading and re-reading of the data in pairs was accompanied by memoing to capture emergent refinements to patterns and links within the codes. The coding pairs summarised the informants' data and identified dominant and persistent patterns in the semantic (declarative)

level of responses amongst the mentors. Thematic analysis identified seven semantic themes which describe manifest content found within the data and identify mentors' perceptions of their roles and practices as instructional coaches. In a final stage, the team scrutinsed the themes to identify underlying latent patterns in the texts and used these to interpret the concepts of teacher learning and mentoring that informed the mentors' accounts of practice. These latent themes form the basis for theorising from the data in considering mentors' readiness to assume key roles in the professional learning of ECTs.

Analysis

Seven semantic themes describe the salient manifest content within the data and give an overview of mentors' beliefs and understandings about the learning of new teachers, their perceptions of IC and their role as a mentor conducting IC in relation to both of these. The themes are:

a. mentors' widely differing conceptions of effective teaching;
b. mentor views about how teachers learn;
c. the need for coherence;
d. the value placed on resources;
e. the perceived benefits of instructional coaching;
f. the conflation of instructional coaching with linear curriculum design;
g. learning as an instructional coach.

Mentors' widely differing conceptions of effective teaching

Mentors had widely differing conceptions of effective teaching. Some, particularly Provider A pilot mentors, understood teacher effectiveness as technical expertise, or the gradual accumulation of specific teaching behaviours as set out in the support programme materials. Those who focused on technical expertise sought to improve ECTs' teaching through focusing on atomised, decontextualised knowledge and techniques, sometimes typified by mentors as acquiring 'tips and tricks' that 'work':

> Every time someone else goes to see [the ECT] teach I say 'if you are going to see him then check his line up and let me know'.
>
> You might want to try this, it's a golden thing that always works.

The focus on deconstructed practices was welcomed by these mentors as supporting their own teaching: 'This [programme] shows you the nitty gritty tiny things that I didn't even think of

sometimes … Now that's affected my teaching because I'm now "Don't stand by your desk all the time, walk around"'.

A contrasting conception articulated a more relational, reflective conception of expert teaching. One mentor described how relationships with students are foundational to effective teaching; another encouraged their ECT to 'make mistakes and reflect on those to get better'. Only one mentor mentioned subject-specific practices as an aspect of effective teaching for ECTs.

Mentor views about how teachers learn

Mentors broadly agreed that ECT learning is aided by structured support, although several indicated unease with over-reliance on formulaic approaches and conviction that ECTs also benefit from consideration of the complexities of teaching in the specific contexts of their pupils' needs.

Within a broad spectrum of mentor ideas about how teachers learn, technicist discourse about how teachers develop dominated the data, within a mostly linear concept of teacher learning. The mentors relied heavily on features identified with deliberate practice to describe their understanding of teachers' learning, such as taking 'small steps', focusing on micro-level practices, repeating actions and observing video material or expert colleagues' 'modelling'. However, few expressed consideration of *how* exactly ECTs learn from these approaches and what might constitute quality in their professional learning. For example, there was minimal reference to knowledge of the evaluative skills that can support the deconstruction of practice and the re-contextualisation to widely differing classrooms. ECTs' observations of experienced teachers were valued in these cases chiefly in order to replicate the behaviours of experienced teachers and mentors. Two mentors spoke about the desire to specifically 'mould' ECTs. Contrastingly, others suggested that the approaches they were using treated ECTs' learning as 'a little bit too straightforward', suggesting dissatisfaction with what one called a 'tick box' approach to development.

Notwithstanding many mentors' general satisfaction with a linear approach to ECT learning, several highlighted concerns about sequential models of teacher development not being a good fit for mentees' diverse individual needs and stages of progression. Some did, however, express quite complex and nuanced beliefs about how dialogue in mentoring conversations can deepen thinking about the complexity and contextualisation of effective teacher practices. Two mentors emphasised their attention to explicitly developing their ECTs' thinking, for example: 'She's got a Year 8 class and she said they're finding it really, really difficult at the moment. I've had to make her think about what's making them find it difficult'.

While four mentors referenced the need for teachers and/or mentors to engage with research in order to develop, they emphasised working out how to implement research into the ECTs' practice rather than engaging critically with the evidence to exercise research literacy (BERA/Royal Society of Arts [RSA], 2014). There were examples of mentors' rejection of the need to consult research with their mentee because they had already decided what the ECT needed to do to improve.

The need for coherence

There was frequently a tension between mentors' conceptualisations of mentoring and the ways they reported IC in everyday practice, and many mentors' interviews contained internal contradictions. These mentors described mentoring in general as a specialised, professional practice requiring a high degree of knowledge and skill as well as training and experience, but often discussed their IC practice as consisting mostly of restricted activity including providing 'helpful tips' and training in basic routines, such as offering support with 'lining up' pupils.

Several mentors were concerned with whether they were 'doing it [IC] right'. Most mentors, though, on all programmes, wanted to adapt their practice for ECTs who were at different stages of learning, criticising a perceived tendency of IC to approach learning to teach as 'one size fits all'. More experienced mentors suggested a differentiated approach was needed and often perceived the IC models as inflexible. As one mentor put it, there is a need for 'some recognition here that teaching is integrated, multi-faceted – that decomposing into individual practices isn't practicable as teachers need to focus on many things at once'.

Some mentors valued the collaborative aspect of their programme as a two-way conversation, with IC incorporating co-construction and collaboration within the mentoring process.

Many mentors reported responding to their ECTs' needs in a flexible way, using their professional judgement in a way they often (but not always) felt was compatible with the IC model. Those who did not adapt sometimes identified the negative effects of sticking to the model:

> It may well have hindered [ECT] and my mentoring of him … I was there for 15 to 20 minutes [observing him] … I may have spotted some of the warning signs of him not passing earlier, if I did the traditional, okay I'm in here for the [full] lesson.

The coaching approaches appeared particularly challenging where ECTs were struggling to make good progress. One mentor chose to leave the pilot as they felt the model 'just wasn't giving us what we needed'. Faced with challenges, mentors tended to fall back on familiar methods of ECT support.

Mentors expressed a wide range of contradictory ideas – for example, believing IC to be a dialogic process but one that is nonetheless geared towards establishing standardised, non-negotiable approaches to teaching. Others described what is an explicitly directive process, with some recognition that this can change according to the needs of the ECT. Different interpretations of IC were thus expressed, some directive and some more facilitative, with some blurring the two:

> I think [ECTs] do need to be given direct instructions about what to try. I still feel that I probably do it a little bit through questioning and trying to get it out of my mentee, but there are moments I can see that he doesn't know the answer, and that's when I make sure that I'm giving this instructional coaching.

Some mentors indicated highly technicist interpretations of IC with comments such as 'before I went in [to observe the ECT] I read the unit so I knew exactly what I was looking for', so observation was not contextualised by the bigger picture of ECT needs at that time. 'Action steps' were even decided by some mentors before coaching conversations occurred so that ECTs had a negligible role in contributing to their learning goals. There was a clear need for a greater conceptual coherence around IC and its implementation in complex contexts.

The value placed on resources

Mentors felt the provided resources gave relevant, mostly high-quality coverage of the ECF curriculum content and so could be a time-efficient support for IC. Videos, for example, could provide quick demonstrations of teaching techniques. Four mentors also noted the value of resources for wider teacher professional learning in their school. However, working with the resources of their respective programmes was 'too intense' for many mentors, who emphasised a lot of time was needed to process the sheer amount of content and IC process guidance. The importance of ease of use and contextual relevance of resources was clear. Mentors were critical where resources were not well-matched to the needs of ECTs or were 'not like a real classroom': 'I think they're pitched incorrectly if you've got a half-decent [ECT]. I think they are more suited to somebody training than somebody who's qualified'.

Mentors wanted to use resources flexibly to suit their ECTs' needs, 'where you can pick and choose together'. Six mentors praised the research summaries provided by all programmes. They found they were stimulating, recapped their professional knowledge and improved the quality of mentoring by avoiding 'bias' because they stopped mentors 'just giving them what I think is important'.

The perceived benefits of instructional coaching

Mentors appreciated the narrow, granular focus of weekly/fortnightly coaching sessions, with small, quick gains. Manageable targets and achievable goals were seen as one of the most helpful aspects of the IC models 'because it's a drip-drip every week, over a year' and 'focusing on really small chunks at a time that are really manageable and achievable for the [ECT]'. ECTs could understand what was expected of them and 'have something to work for every single time' with 'confidence building' effects. A granular IC approach enabled 'a good win every week. "I can do that … let's tick it off"'. It can generate observable progress in small steps: 'There's not ever been a time where I haven't gone in and seen an improvement in her practice'.

Some mentors valued 'all doing the same thing' across a number of mentees in a school and found that it impacted their own practice, too. Some mentors described this positively as being reminded about the 'basics' of teaching. There was emphasis, too, on the power of theoretical input (from research summaries) followed by discussion and application. Little was said, however, of how research informs practice development in more nuanced ways.

Nine mentors identified positive changes to mentoring practice attributed to IC. Provider A mentors noted the value of rehearsal and practice in developing ECTs' behaviours in a low-stakes environment and of keeping mentoring conversations focused on teaching and learning rather than administration. Mentors also noted how their feedback and target-setting had become more specific and outcomes-oriented. Frequent observations gave most mentors a better understanding of ECTs' progress and needs. They valued approaches with 'discipline and structure' which helped to compensate where mentors felt less confident or lacked experience: 'It gives you guidance as to what you should be looking at and how you should be moving through the year'. While valuing standardisation of processes, several mentors reported the importance of adaptation, drawing on their own experience where they felt that the programme intentions for IC conversations did not serve ECTs' individual needs.

Conflation of instructional coaching with linear curriculum design

IC was tightly linked to the linear curriculum content design of the pilot programmes, to satisfy the demands of the ECF. The pre-determined curriculum for ECTs was inextricable from the IC approach in the views of some mentors, and this was problematic for some 'because you have got a human being in front of you and everyone is different'. Mentors typically intervened to deviate from the programme content 'because there's so many other things [the ECT] has to get right before I can get on track with the programme'. Mentors generally expressed the desire for a more flexible

curriculum according to ECTs' needs, interests, subject/phase, available resources and initial teacher education (ITE) training route, while at the same time, most valued having a structured approach to IC conversations with clear pathways to progress to guide them. Where mentors felt that ECTs' needs were not met, this was partly attributed to the linear curriculum: 'I don't think the needs of [ECTs] are being met through the modules'. Ultimately, mentors were uneasy when they felt unsure of how to reconcile their professional judgement with the ways they felt they had to perform as instructional coaches to achieve pre-determined goals.

Learning as an instructional coach

In relation to the six themes outlined above, it is unsurprising that the final one reflects the substantial variation in mentors' expressed expertise as teachers and mentors and their accounts of learning to use IC as they understood it. Some needed time to 'get used to it'. Some wanted more induction into their programme's IC model to get 'better at it' (training was mandatory and was provided during start-up and also via online resources, with opportunities for regular online interaction with trainers and peers). Some felt 'reinvigorated' by training they found 'upskilling', moving away from 'just doing the same old thing that I have always done' (echoing Warnock *et al*., 2022). Others saw the role as requiring no specific training or expertise, with one describing it as a 'feel good' role, while another felt ready to mentor using IC with no training.

Mentors positioned themselves in relation to IC in different ways, in terms of 'doing' it (reproducing faithfully a pre-determined process), 'using it' as one tool amongst many to inform approaches to mentoring and 'being' an instructional coach who embodies a particular identity or practice that brought perceived increases in their confidence and heightened professional expertise. One mentor noted that an experienced mentor 'may feel bogged down by' detailed instruction in how to conduct IC conversations. Others were grateful for being trained in how to coach to achieve specific targets, compared with previous experience of 'teasing it out' of mentees. Many mentors valued videos and 'example scripts' to model approaches to IC conversations and target-setting. 'Coaching on coaching' was viewed positively by those who enjoyed (previously rare) attention to their own mentoring development, 'quite nice to have people observe that'. Two mentors, contrastingly, felt very uncomfortable being observed via recordings of their coaching, expressing strong anxiety about their practice being scrutinised by the provider.

Mentors also described how the IC model required mentors to make nuanced judgements, using research to inform decision-making in guiding mentees: 'What is the right feedback you would give in this situation?' This was described as 'empowering'. Mentor training included using research to deepen understanding of how to mentor 'in the moment' and respond to emerging, contextualised

needs: 'It basically theorised … when is the right time to step in? When is the right time to facilitate rather than manage or direct?' The school context was important in shaping one mentor's perceptions of their own learning:

> We try and encourage all of the staff to be quite reflective, challenging, and not accepting … And I *am* quite challenging of myself and of everyone else … And I would like them all to develop and question *why* we do things.

Discussion

These themes have addressed the first research question: *How do mentors conceptualise and enact the role of instructional coach?* The mentors' accounts of their experiences and perceptions indicate that they inhabited the role in highly variable ways that contained contradictory – even oppositional – features, in line with some heightened awareness of the complexities involved in supporting the learning of new teachers. This might be expected in the context of a highly ambitious policy intervention that called for rapid development of mentors to work as instructional coaches at scale. The discussion is mindful that this was a pilot and therefore of how new the role was for many mentors and that the ECF was a novel context for IC. There are implications for the high-stakes role that has been ascribed to mentors within policy ambitions to retain teachers in the profession. In this context, three latent themes were further developed to identify recurring, underlying patterns in the data that address the second research question: *What is mentors' readiness to assume their key stakeholder roles in the professional learning of early career teachers?*

These latent themes indicate the challenges of a policy direction based on the massification of high-stakes, sustained, professional learning for ECTs:

a. the need for mentors to develop a coherent understanding of their role and expertise as teacher educators;
b. mentors have an underdeveloped frame of reference to help them conceptualise how teachers learn;
c. the lack of mentor agency.

The need for mentors to develop a coherent understanding of their role and expertise as teacher educators

Mentors did not, in general, articulate a well-reasoned conceptual framework that could underpin deep understanding of their role in effecting teacher learning through IC. In this context, some found the IC models in the pilots helpful as a warrant for their practice as they felt that their own judgement lacked authority or expertise in its own right. Others, though, valued the flexibility of

mentoring more fluidly and found the IC model they worked with was unduly restrictive unless they assumed or were given authority to adapt it. The data demonstrate highly variable understandings across the mentors (including on the same programme) of IC and of the related expertise required of mentors. Bearing in mind that training was provided, this may reflect the differing providers' models but also reflects that the implementation of IC is subject to mentors' experience and confidence levels, school cultures and deep awareness of the complex professional knowledge base that can support highly diverse ECT needs. It suggests that Kraft *et al.*'s (2018) caution about the challenges of scaling up IC needs serious attention.

Mentors were equipped with technical discourse of IC, which lends a form of 'expertise' that can be reassuring that they can master the coaching behaviours required. However, many clearly struggled to accommodate ECTs' learning needs on this basis. They were impressed with IC in certain ways (especially where it fitted with their prior experience in schools that had adopted it). Mentors felt 'upskilled' and 'revived' by the training and the experience of coaching. However, there is a need to clarify the 'expertise' of mentors as instructional coaches in ways that address the relational complexity of their role (Grossman *et al*., 2009). The benefits of collaborative professionalism in such relationships have been identified by Hollweck and Lofthouse (2021), and questions need to be asked about the considerable inconsistencies in power relations between mentor as instructional coach and ECT and how the dialogic dimensions of IC are experienced in different contexts. There is a need to develop a coherent and shared conceptual understanding of the mentor role and the relationship with developing teaching as an expert practice. Although Ericcson and Pool (2017) propose that deliberate practice is the most effective way to grow expertise, subsequent work (Ericcson and Harwell, 2019) proposes the limits of practice on this development in a range of professional domains, linked to the need for coaches and coachees to deepen their conceptual understanding of the long-term development of expertise. They call for coaches and coachees to 'study' this in depth. Our findings add veracity to this, as an example where a rapid, mass adoption of IC at scale reveals vulnerability to surface adoption and creates challenges for mentors as they attempt to create coherence in their role. There are ethical dimensions to these issues – for example, in line with the need to align mentoring with appropriate levels of professional knowledge or competence and the ways that both parties can ensure transparency about the benefits of mentoring and its relevance to the needs of the mentee (European Mentoring and Coaching Council [EMCC], 2016). This is an area that warrants further research in light of the findings.

Mentors have an underdeveloped frame of reference to help them conceptualise how teachers learn

There is evidence in this study of a teaching profession that struggles to own the language of pedagogy and theory of how teacher learning happens. It was difficult for mentors to account for the conflicted and even contradictory positions they held, enjoying the sense of 'upskilling' they experienced by learning about IC and at the same time expressing reservations about its efficacy in the face of actual ECT needs. In fact, on occasion, the focus on upskilling in specific practices masked deeper problems that weaker ECTs were experiencing because the mentor and ECT gaze was directed away from an area of concern that contained inter-connected parts that needed to be understood as a whole. For example, where the linear approach focused on specific steps to manage pupil 'behaviour', this diverted attention from being able to plan and teach a specific topic to engage diverse learners – which impacted on pupil behaviour. Dilemmas like this underpin the wide range of views on the appropriateness of IC, sometimes held at once by the same mentor, identifying strengths and weaknesses. This might be expected as part of any professional evaluative stance. However, mentors clearly need further support to develop deep engagement with the affordances of forms of IC and their potential to support the development of nuanced, judicious professional judgements in complex contexts.

The lack of mentor agency

Ironically, the conferment of the role of 'expert' as an instructional coach had in some ways rendered the mentors insecure in being fully attuned to their ECTs' needs. The mentors' role is dependent on external authority that gives validity to their professional judgements ('getting it right'). The impact is evident in moments of doubt, the dilemma of if/when they can use their own judgement, the desire to adapt in most. Clearly, much of this might be expected during the pilot phase of any programme in which the focus and practice of the role is new to most. This is also, however, to do with the epistemic aspects of teacher learning and how mentors are positioned as mediators and re-creators of knowledge about teaching. There is the potential here for school-based mentors to be deeply engaged with the development of knowledge and practice in the expert field of teacher development. In this case, there needs to be an exploration of the assumptions about them as agentic professionals – what agency should mentors exercise in their role as instructional coach? What models of IC are most appropriate for ECTs? What should mentors' own research literacy look like, as part of engaging with support programmes for ECTs? How can inconsistencies in understanding and practice that are indicated in the data be transformed into a shared knowledge of how teachers learn, with agentive application to IC?

Conclusion

There is a need for mentoring to be recognised as an expert, nuanced, professional practice, requiring mentors to be critically engaged with the models they use. The agency of mentors is an important professional asset. Where IC is to play a part in supporting the ECF, providers need to be wary of rendering the mentors as passive and work to ensure that their knowledge and experience positions them as agentive professionals who adapt approaches to meet the needs of their ECTs to best impact on pupils' learning. Based on our findings, it is reasonable to make the following recommendations:

a. More time needs to be invested in training mentors to carry out their roles and achieve informed buy-in to the practices they are asked to inhabit.
b. Models for coaching need to harness the expertise of mentors, to capitalise on their shared experiences, contextual knowledge and contrasting insights as they become experienced in such a high-stakes role – this applies to all mentors, not just those with less experience.
c. IC models require careful scrutiny to identify their potential for upscaling and the ways in which they can be vulnerable to surface adoption.
d. Mentors' own research literacy should be a focus of professional learning for the role.
e. Fundamentally, school-based mentors as instructional coaches need to be supported to develop fully articulated and sophisticated mental models of how teachers learn, that are capable of addressing the complexity of ECTs' classrooms and avoid the risks of adopting over-simplified or restricted IC practices.

If mentors are to be key stakeholders in fulfilling policy ambitions for the professional learning of new teachers, then the opportunities are great. At the same time, their responsibility is profound, and there is an acute need to support mentors to work towards this.

Disclosure statement

Following this research, UCL IOE was appointed as one of six national providers of support programmes for the ECF. An IC approach has not been adopted by the institution's programme.

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