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The Early Career Framework: Why Context Matters for Teacher Professional Development

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Abstract: The Department for Education developed the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy in 2019 for state-funded schools in England as a response to increasing challenges in teacher supply. Core to the strategy was a mandatory, nationally funded, two-year Early Career Framework (ECF) of professional development for Early Career Teachers (ECTs) in state-funded schools. The ECF began in September 2021 and provided a nationally standardised programme of professional development for Year One and Two teachers. This paper presents the findings of qualitative research that contribute to the understanding of the ECF for ECTs' professional development. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore ECTs' ($n = 25$) and mentors' ($n = 17$) experiences of the first two years of the ECF (2021–2023). System mapping was used to contextualise data, with primary data examined via coding and theme analysis. Using a complexity theory lens, we conclude that the ECF system affects ECTs and mentors in a non-linear way. Feedback loops that effected change were present, but the ECF's effectiveness was highly context-dependent with tension between structure and flexibility. We contend that future enhancements to the ECF should focus on adaptability, fostering positive feedback loops, and recognizing the context-dependent nature of teacher development.

Keywords: early career framework; initial teacher training; teacher education; early career teacher; teacher development

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1. Introduction

The international context of an appropriate and sustained supply of high-quality teachers is one of great concern [1]. In England, the recruitment and retention of teachers have been an ongoing challenge [2]. The increase in the number of trainee teachers, and resulting teachers, as a response to the economic challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, has not been sustained in England [3]. Teacher retention is below levels of 2018, when one-fifth of ECTs left teaching after 2 years [4]. The Department for Education in England developed the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy in 2019 as a response to these increasing challenges in teacher supply [5].

The Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy [5] outlined four key areas where focus, investment and reform were considered to have the biggest impact on improving teacher recruitment and retention:

1. Create the right climate for leaders to establish supportive school cultures;
2. Transform support for early career teachers;
3. Build a career offer that remains attractive to teachers as their careers and lives develop;
4. Make it easier for great people to become teachers.

Professional development was an attractive solution to teacher attrition, providing enhancement to knowledge and skills that could improve teacher self-efficacy and

retention [6]. The government, therefore, focused on ECT development through a new ECF as the prime reform of the strategy:

> "*At the centre of this strategy is the most significant reform to teaching in a generation—the introduction of the Early Career Framework (ECF).*" ([5], p. 6)

Therefore, the core of the Teacher Recruitment and Retention Strategy was a mandatory, nationally funded, two-year Early Career Framework (ECF) of professional development for Early Career Teachers (ECTs) in state-funded schools [5]. The ECF applies to primary and secondary school teachers in state-funded schools in England. It does not align with independent schools, Early Years or Further Education (post-16 colleges).

The Early Career Framework (ECF)

The ECF sets out what the government in England believes all new teachers need to know and be able to do as they begin their careers [7]. The content of the framework and its underpinning evidence was assessed and endorsed by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) for the DfE. The EEF are a charity that is endowed by the DfE with the aim 'to improve teaching and learning through better use of evidence' [8]. The ECF establishes five core areas identified as essential for ECT development—behaviour management, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and professional behaviours. These five areas are framed within the eight Teachers' Standards [9] to ensure 'congruence' between the two expectations for ECT development; however, the DfE are clear that "the ECF is not, and should not be used, as an assessment framework" ([7], p. 5) and that ECTs will only be assessed against the Teachers' Standards.

The ECF core areas are articulated through two types of content that ECTs are required to learn:

1. Key evidence statements;
2. Practice statements.

This content is prescriptive, underpinned by evidence referenced in the ECF [7] and aligns with the 'golden thread' of teacher development mapped by the DfE from the Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework to the National Professional Qualifications [10].

The ECF provides ECTs with ten per cent out of timetabled teaching (remission) in their first year of teaching to engage in professional development; this is on top of the ten per cent remission all teachers have for preparation, planning, and assessment (PPA) time. In the second year of teaching, early career teachers receive a five per cent remission to engage in professional development activities, alongside the 10 per cent remission for PPA. This additional time has been provided to support the training and mentoring ECTs will receive through the ECF to help them achieve the Teachers' Standards [9].

The ECF mentors are trained in mentoring and coaching and in the content of the ECF to support the ECTs through regular mentoring sessions that focus on accessing the local ECF support programs, the core ECF program, and setting targets for career development and development activities. Mentors will already be teachers working within the school, but it was hoped that they would be different to the Induction Tutor, who is responsible for signing off that the ECT has achieved the Teachers' Standard [9], to avoid any issues that could arise from "judgementoring" [11] that would slow down professional growth. Mentors will also have time allocated to their ECF mentoring role, funded by the DfE.

The ECF programmes were primarily delivered through six lead providers (a Provider contracted by the DfE to lead the delivery of the statutory ECF, sometimes referred to as the Training Provider). The lead providers are University College London, Ambition Institute, Teach First, Capita, Education Development and Best Practice Network. The lead providers were connected to regional Teaching School Hubs (TSHs) (government-funded providers of learning and teaching resources and training), which in turn have liaised with local delivery partners such as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) (groups of schools funded by the government, but with independent regulations) and Teaching School Alliances (TSAs) (groups of schools funded by the government to work together). However,

there were two other approaches offered by the DfE, which included schools and MATS; schools can use resources developed by four lead providers to deliver the ECF themselves, or the school could provide their own ECF programme developed fully in-house. The first two approaches were fully DfE funded; the last was not. It is clear that the DfE incentivised schools financially to choose an approach to ECT professional development that favoured their 'approved' ECF provision [12].

The ECF was intended to support ECTs through a mandatory two-year focused training as part of their induction phase to become fully qualified against the Teachers" Standards [9]. The ECF became statutory in September 2021 following pilot programmes and Early Rollout phases in the preceding two years. The ultimate aim of the ECF was to equip ECTs to teach effectively and develop self-efficacy, thereby enabling them to stay in teaching for the long term (mitigating high levels of attrition among ECTs) [7]. However, in the second year of the ECF in early 2023, the DfE announced a call for evidence on the ECF and the Core Content Framework for Initial Teacher Training (ITT). In response to the evidence reported in July 2023 [13], further reform to teacher development was announced in January 2024. A new combined ITTECF is to be implemented in all state-funded schools in September 2025 [14]. The ITTECF is designed to align trainee teachers and ECT training, support, and development [14]. The national review and first systems-led feedback loop [15] of the ECF reported that ECTs and mentors value the ECF as a framework for professional development but that it challenges the capacity of mentors to manage this additional workload and that the entitlement to time off-timetable for training and mentoring activities places a financial and logistical burden on schools [13]. Issues were also raised by the government enquiry on the repetitiveness of content and the lack of opportunity for ECTs and mentors to adapt the content to their school context.

This paper explores the ECT and mentor experiences of the first two years of the ECF in 2021–2023 and reports research findings that illuminate successes and challenges identified by ECTs and mentors, providing further evidence for the need to reform the ECF [13]. It also provides further considerations for policymakers in the development of the new ITTECF [14] to ensure it provides context for schools, ECTs and mentors.

2. Methods

2.1. Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was used for this research. The experiences of ECTs and mentors of the first two years of the ECF were explored using semi-structured interviews in Years One and Two of the ECF (2021–2022 and 2022–2023). The research design is rooted in an interpretivist paradigm with the aim of understanding the subjective world of human experience [16]. The researchers adopted a subjectivist epistemology [17], interpreting the viewpoints and actions of ECTs and mentors in relation to the ECF through interactions of questioning and recording data with the participants. The rationale for this approach was based on a relativist ontology [18], establishing the assumption that the participants would experience the ECF in different ways. The aim of the research, therefore, was to report on the experiences of delivery and content of the ECF for both ECTs and mentors. The main research question was, 'How have ECTs and mentors experienced the ECF?'. The researchers established additional sub-questions: How has the ECF created opportunities and challenges for professional development? How has practice developed throughout the ECF? How have learning opportunities emerged?' as probes for developing participant's responses.

Collecting qualitative data through semi-structured interviews was considered most appropriate for answering the research questions. This method enabled an in-depth understanding of ECT and mentors' attitudes and beliefs [19] in relation to their experiences of the ECF. ECTs and mentors who had engaged in the first two years of the ECF (2021–2023) were interviewed in Year Two of the ECF (2022–2023). This interpretivist inquiry design was relevant as nothing was known about the experiences of those undertaking

the new, two-year ECF induction programme at the start of the research. The researchers considered the ECF a system of interacting elements [20]. Applying this interactionist approach enabled the complexity of the interacting elements of ECF and interactions between ECTs and mentors to be explored for meaning.

2.2. Participant Population and Sample

The population for the research totalled $n = 47{,}605$ ECTs and mentors in 11,445 schools in England actively participating in the provider-led ECF programmes in 2021–2022 [21]. Mindful of the school contexts in relation to workload and capacity, the population was sampled using purposeful self-selection of participants through calls to participate on social media platforms, including LinkedIn and X (formally Twitter). Respondents were added to a sampling frame that included participants working in secondary schools, primary schools, ECTs, mentors, and lead provider programmes. This enabled the researchers to select a stratified sample of ECTs and mentors from all the lead provider ECF programmes and for all age phases taught. Twenty-five ECTs and seventeen mentors were selected for the sample from the self-selecting ECTs and mentors who volunteered to participate in the research. The total number of the sample represents 0.1% of the population. The qualitative methodology applied to the research allows for depth and validity over reliability.

The use of a sampling frame allowed the researchers to clearly present and record the responses to the call to participate. It ensured that the data collected and self-selecting participants captured all aspects required for a stratified sample, particularly a balance of age phases being taught (primary and secondary) and lead ECF provider programmes.

2.3. Research Methods

The research methods used included secondary data collection in the form of a literature review that included relevant policy documents, as well as wider literature on teacher professional development and complexity theory. The secondary data analysis was used to contextualise and establish the trustworthiness of the themes and considerations drawn from the data for the results. Primary data were collected using semi-structured interviews following ethical application and approval to both universities involved in the research. The research design is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Design.

Phase of Research	Action	Date	Outcome
Secondary data collection	Literature review—including policy documents.	2021–2022	Rationale and context for the study.
Ethical approval	Complete ethics application for each university.	2021–2022	University ethical approval (both universities).
Primary data collection tools	Construct semi-structured interview questions.	2022	Interview questions align with the research questions.
Participant sample recruitment	Identify the population of ECF mentors and ECTs. Ensure all six lead provider programmes are included in the sample. Purposeful sampling applied.	2022	Stratified purposeful sample of male/female, Year Two ECTs and mentors covering all six lead providers of the ECF.
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews.	2022–2023	Total $n = 42$ ECTs $n = 25$ mentors $n = 17$
Data analysis	Systems mapping Thematic analysis (including coding).	2021–2024 2023–2024	Complexity theory applied to consider ECF as system and related subsystems Codes and themes established (cross-referencing CAQDAS generated and manually iterated themes) in response to the research questions.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews provide an opportunity for the participant and the researcher to discuss their interpretations of a social experience [22], in this case, the ECF. Semi-structured

interviews were conducted over Teams, a video conferencing platform, to reduce cost and support ease of access to participants who were located all over England. The interviews lasted from 45 min to one hour. The voices of the participants were recorded using teams and transcribed verbatim. The researchers established a connection with the participants (both having been teachers, then teacher educators) to support authentic responses for accurate and valid data [23].

A semi-structured interview allowed for a clear purpose for the questioning to be established; in this case, the research question and probe questions were used for the interview schedule [24]. The probe questions were modified as needed depending on the participant's answer. The open questions were designed to seek information about the ECF in an interpretative, exploratory, unique way from the 'lifeworlds of participants' ([25], p.30).

2.4. Validity and Reliability

There were six lead providers of the ECF, with multiple partners supporting the delivery of the programmes. Mentor support and experience, alongside ECT experiences, were expected to vary by school and individual contexts. Understanding the ECF from multiple perspectives and through a range of experiences is complex [15]. To address this, a detailed knowledge of the ECF was established through the literature., which included education policy documents. Recognising that the lead provider programmes all had the same content but that delivery may vary was useful for establishing validity for the thematic analysis. Similarly, realising that ECTs and mentors engaging with the ECF programme developed by the same lead provider would have similar experiences of delivery. Aligning similarities between participants was important in establishing themes within the experiences of the ECF. Naturalistic generalisations developed in the research during the two years of interviews, or in other words, a match occurred between the researchers' representation and the participants' 'constructed realities' of the ECF [16]. Interpretive validity is most relevant in ensuring that interpretations are consistent with the participant's understanding. The validity of the data collected from the semi-structured interviews was confirmed by using coding and theme generation (explored in section 2.5).

2.5. Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis extracts the data to "understand, explain and interpret the phenomena in question" ([19], p. 643), in this case, the ECF from the perspective of ECTs and mentors. The researchers were mindful of interpretation and reflexivity when analysing the data [26] whilst remaining aware of the multiple interpretations from participants. The verbatim transcriptions of the interviews represented just over 40 h of interviews, at an average of 2200 words per transcript, totalling an estimated 88,000 words to analyse. The researchers read the transcripts and listened to the recordings multiple times to connect to the data, understand the meaning and establish the codes for analysis.

The researchers applied codes as labels to represent a theme in the data to the unstructured and unorganised data. This is a common process in Thematic Analysis (TA) [27]. NVivo was used to code the data, with codes being assigned to words or phrases to capture each response. The codes were considered 'building blocks' for the themes [27]. Once the codes were in place, the emergent themes were identified and represented the features of the participants' accounts that characterised their particular perceptions or experiences of the ECF relevant to answering the research question.

The creation of codes and themes was supported through the use of system mapping, which was used as a tool to create a visual representation of the complex relationships between and across the ECF system components [28]. These relationships established in the system map supported the identification of recurring patterns and the generation of themes. General initial themes included support, learning and emotions around teaching. System mapping also allowed easy recognition of links and connections between the literature, the ECF as a reform and programme, ECT and mentor experiences, and the research question.

The system mapping of Year One of the ECF can be seen in Figure 1 and Year Two (with additions from Year Three in relation to the review of the ECF by the DfE) in Figure 2.

Common codes for ECTs emerging from the data included levels of confidence, issues with workload, development of subject knowledge, progress, mentor support and availability of time. Codes identified for mentors were directed towards mentor confidence, availability of time, mentor experience and progress. Thematic Analysis was considered an appropriate analysis tool for "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns or themes within the data" (p. 2) to answer the research question [28]. Using thematic analysis added meaning to the codes or patterns found within the data [29].

To ensure consistency of approach during the data analysis process, a model for the data analysis process was constructed using an adaption of phases for thematic analysis [27]. The phases were familiarising data, coding, searching, and generating themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report and findings [30]. The data analysis model can be seen in Table 2.

The experiential orientation [31] of the research was clear from the outset of the research and inherent in the research question. Focusing on the experience of ECTs and mentors of the ECF led the researchers to apply inductive coding initially to allow the data to drive and communicate the meaning directly from the participants [32]. Once the codes were established, a deductive process was applied to map the codes against the emergent themes.

The software used to manage the data was NVivo (version 11), a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). NVivo was used following trials with ATLAS.ti and MAXQDA; however, QSR, the publishers of NVivo, offered better support and resources to enhance the user experience. The data analysis model in Table 1 demonstrates mitigating processes for the limitations in using CAQDAS, such as the distance created from the researcher to data [33]. NVivo was used initially to create word clouds from the rich text data of the interviews. The larger the word, the more potential it offers for a code and a link for emerging themes. Codes were used as labels that represented a theme or pattern in the data. The interview data were tagged with code labels in NVivo to generate more meaning and the "building blocks" for theme development ([27], p. 229). While the data was managed with NVivo, the connection with the data, and more importantly, the voices of the participants held in the data, was supported by the reading and re-reading of transcripts, as well as listening to the interviews. This manual process, alongside the use of NVivo for coding and theme generation, ensured that nuances in the data were understood and that the themes generated were robust.

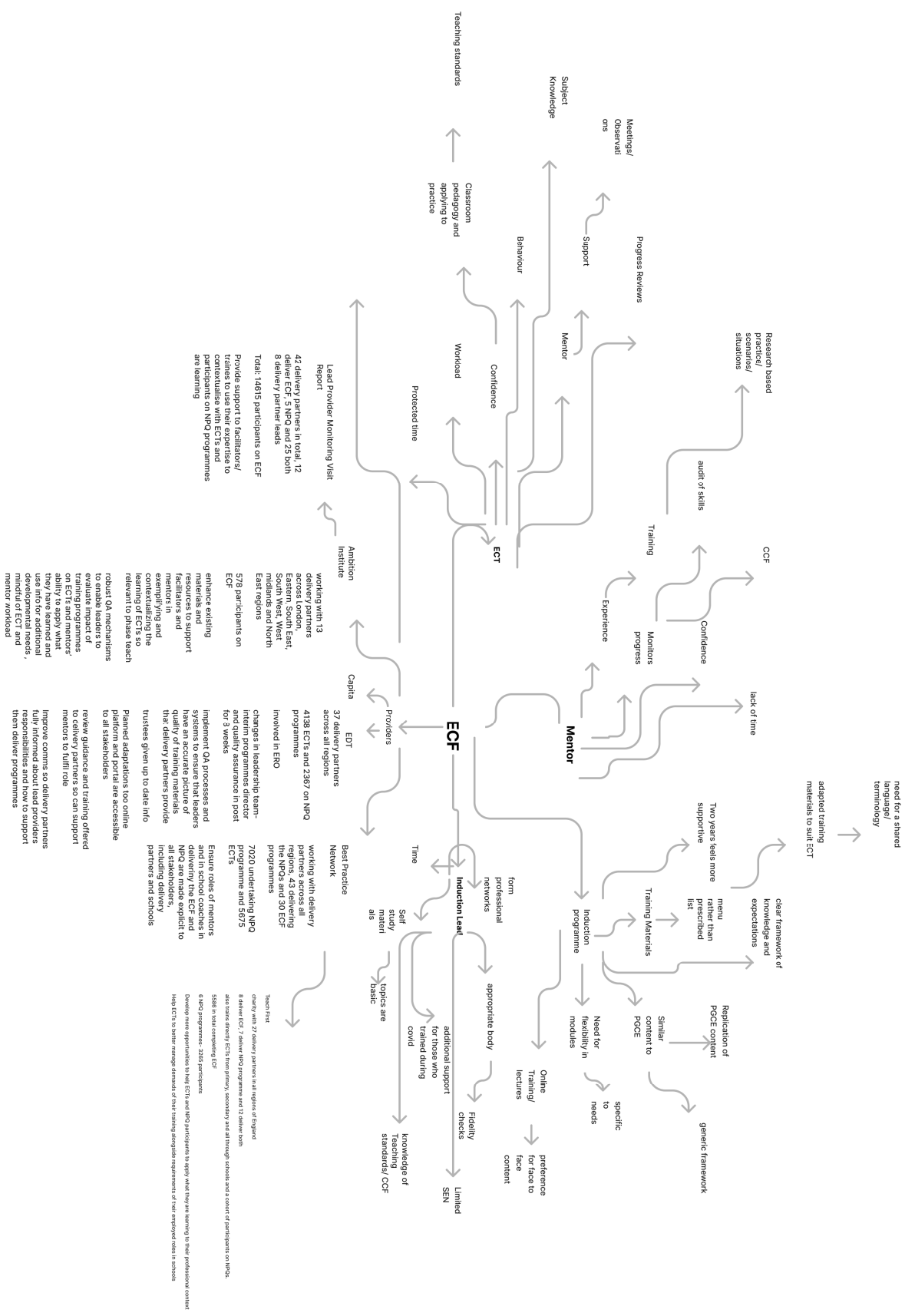

Figure 1. System mapping of ECF—Year One, 2021–2022.

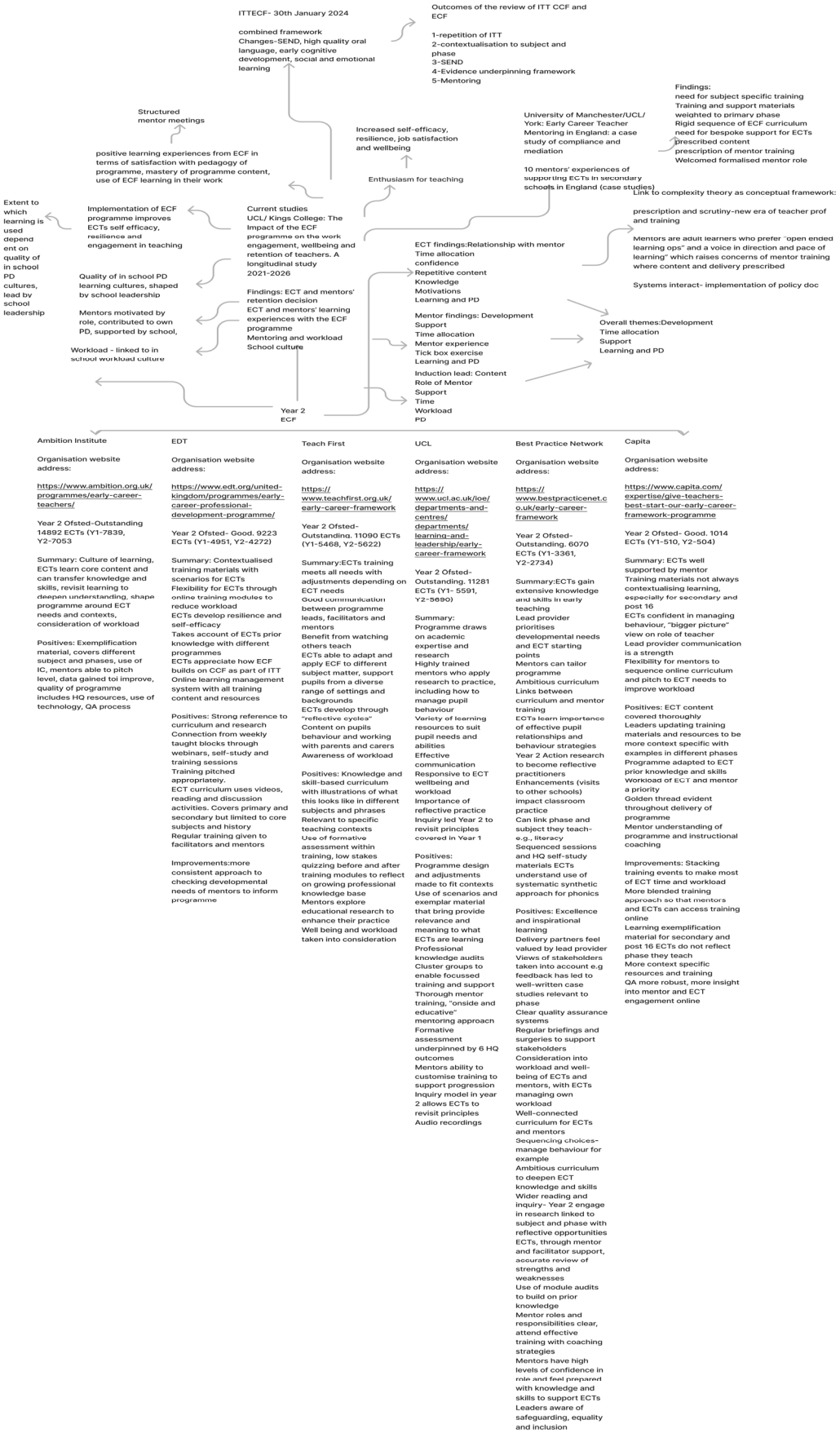

Figure 2. System mapping of the ECF—Year Two, 2022–2023 (including additions from Year Three ECF DfE Review).

Table 2. Data Analysis Model (adapted from [27]).

	Phases	Description of the Analysis Process
1	Familiarising Data	Interviews using Teams online platform. Transcribe interviews verbatim. Read all interview transcriptions. Re-read the interview transcription. Listen to interview recordings. Data input into a system map. Links started to be made to research questions. All interview transcripts were imported to NVivo.
2	Coding	Systematic analysis of data by identifying codes in data linked to research questions using NVivo (including word cloud). Codes are a mixture of descriptive and interpretative to create an overview of data. Code names are clearly identified, and the portion of text highlighted is associated with it.
3	Searching and generating themes	Coding labels into themes. Review the coded data manually and in NVivo to find similarities. Explore the relationship between codes, themes and categories used to stratify the sample both manually and in NVivo.
4	Developing and reviewing Themes	Check themes in relation to the research question manually. Identify the difference between codes and themes based on data volume [31].
5	Refining, defining, and naming Themes	Name each theme.
6	Producing Report and findings	Relate analysis to research questions and literature review and pull all data together to write up findings.

3. Results

Approaching the end of the national rollout of the ECF in England in 2023, 25 ECTs and 17 mentors shared their experiences of participating in the two-year induction programme. The themes generated by the analysis of the data collected present the experiences of ECTs and mentors who engaged with the ECF for the duration of the two years. The results consider the ECF as a whole system, using system mapping for Year One and Two of the ECF (see Figures 1 and 2) to position the experiences of the ECF shared by ECTs and Mentors. All experiences were understood in relation to the system itself, as well as to the individual and their school. The findings demonstrate that the three subsystems of teacher, school and learning activity [34] all interact with the system, the ECF.

The contextual environment of the ECF established similarities in experience that were in place throughout the research [34]. These were engagement by all participants with a lead provider ECF programme, the provision of a dedicated mentor to support the ECT through the ECF, and funded time off timetabled teaching to do the work associated with the ECF. There were, however, sub-systems that affected the experience of the ECF, which were the level of mentor experience, the needs of the ECT and the context of the school. Not surprisingly, therefore, ECTs experienced the most effective professional development when applying the content of the ECF to their school context with the help of an experienced mentor. This development was consolidated through discussions with an experienced mentor, networking opportunities at lead provider training days to discuss how to apply learning to subject-specific teaching, and when resources in the ECF programme were adapted to align with the school context, for example, SEND learning.

The results are categorised by ECTs and mentors, with themes emerging in relation to the research question and considered through a complexity theory lens to understand the impact of the ECF as a system on the experiences of ECTs and mentors. The themes represent the majority participant experience and were coded as full majority (all participants), a large majority (32 or more of the 42), or majority (22 or more of the 42) and are identified as such in the findings.

3.1. Early Career Teachers (ECTs)

A total of 25 ECTs participated in the research. Fifteen were female, and ten were male, with no identifiable difference in experience of the ECF based on sex. The ECTs were

aged 21–32 and were enrolled in ECF programmes covering all six lead providers (UCL *n* = 5, Ambition Institute *n*= 6, Teach First *n* = 7, Capita *n* = 3, Education Development Trust *n* = 3, Best Practice Network *n* = 3). There were no discernible differences in the experiences of the participants based on the lead provider programme.

3.1.1. Positive ECT Experiences

The large majority of ECTs reported having positive experiences in their engagement with the ECF programme over the two years. The key themes that emerged and expressed the ECTs' positive response to the ECF were 'The mentor', 'Increased professional confidence', and 'Face-to-face opportunities for professional development'.

The ECT Mentor

> "*The mentor helps you a lot to reflect, so I think that's the most biggest improvement on support.*" ECT 2

A comprehensive review of mentoring research concluded that "beginner teacher mentoring has great potential to produce a range of benefits for mentees, mentors, and schools" ([35], p. 213). The full majority of ECTs welcomed having a dedicated ECF mentor to support them through the ECF programme. The large majority of ECTs recognised that the mentor's experience played a crucial part in the development of their teaching and learning development. The ECF appears most effective for ECTs and mentors when the mentor is experienced, confident in their role, and from the same subject area. The mentor has also adapted the ECF content and delivery pattern to the needs of the ECT and the context of the school.

> "*Mentor is a headteacher and is now a mentor trainer for XXXX [partner provider] and always finds time to give support. I struggled with the content in the first year—it was too broad and weren't specific enough for the early end of primary. My mentor gave me extra examples, which were great, as the ECF examples were not the language you could use with 6–7-year-olds. I gave lots of feedback [on my experience of the ECF], and year 2 is much better.*" ECT 18

The ECF demonstrates emergent properties that arise from the interactions between ECTs, mentors, and the framework itself [36]. ECTs and mentors often adapted the ECF content to suit their specific contexts, showing self-organization within the system. The effectiveness of the ECF emerged from the quality of mentor-ECT relationships rather than solely from the prescribed content. The research revealed several feedback loops within the ECF system, which Davis and Sumara [15] describe as the 'recursive elaboration' characteristic of complex systems in education. Mentors' experiences with the ECF led to adaptations in their approach, which in turn affected ECT's experiences.

> "*Brilliant relationship with mentor. They are a positive person with lots of experience and, have been at the school a long time and know the systems. They are very supportive and give constructive feedback.*" ECT 22

Increased Professional Confidence

> "*I think there's been a massive sort of increase in confidence and sort of knowledge and quality of the teaching that I'm delivering because I just feel like I know a bit better and also the reasons behind doing it in a certain way. As well, like obviously through the readings and through the support of my mentor and tutors, etc.*" ECT 12

The full majority of ECTs appreciated the two-year support structure of the ECF, with the additional year continuing their professional development, giving time for the consolidation of learning and the embedding of skills. The full majority of the ECTs had a better experience of the ECF in Year Two as they were more familiar with content, process, and terminology. The large majority of ECTs reported that their confidence in teaching and subject knowledge improved during the two-year ECF period. The ECTs expressed how their familiarity with the ECF and the programme expectations and contents, e.g., the

weekly tasks and readings, enabled them to develop their practice to become the knower, learner, and generator of knowledge [37]. The large majority of ECTs commented on how ECF professional learning experiences promoted and supported the development of their self-efficacy, which in turn enabled them to feel secure in taking more risks with their practice [38]. The ability of the majority of ECTs to work with mentors to apply the ECF and explore new ideas grew by Year Two. The ECF programme provided useful tips and sparked reflective conversations between ECTs and their mentors.

> "*I think I feel a lot more confident than I did at the start because I know what the framework looks like, and I know what's expected of me. To give you some concrete example, when you get given the evidence tracker for the ECT, it seems as kind of flashbacks to PGCE, and you're worried it's going to be a huge amount of work. It's quite nerve-wracking. But then, as you go through the process, and you're taught, actually doesn't need to be like that. It's just a much shorter document. One or two notes at a time. You've got to build in confidence that actually it's a more manageable process.*" ECT 12

Effective mentoring and induction programmes have been found to contribute to increased teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction over time [39,40], and therefore an attractive solution to government challenges with teacher supply. It is therefore not surprising that ECTs engaging with the ECF and having a dedicated and trained mentor experienced a growth in confidence. Well-structured induction programmes have been found to lead to improved teaching skills and classroom management over the first two years of teaching [40]. The ECF, while standardised in its content and structure, was experienced by the ECTs as supportive of their confidence and growth as teachers. The multiple interactions of the subsystems within the ECF (See Figures One and Two) enabled non-linear [41] enhancements in the ECT experience that sustained development.

> "*So, I'm feeling like I'm teaching with a bit more freedom. I've got a bit more confidence to actually explore different ideas from the framework, and if it goes wrong, it doesn't matter too much.*" ECT 11

Face-to-Face Opportunities for Professional Development

> "*Two factors have enhanced my learning-mentor meetings and external training. Learning something and speaking to other trainees in a different environment is mentally refreshing.*" ECT 2

It has been argued that teachers learn by working with others [42]. This was demonstrated in our findings, with the full majority of ECTs expressing that the most valuable learning on the ECF occurred through face-to-face opportunities with other teachers their mentors and networking with other ECTs. Formal learning opportunities were provided by the ECF programme that aimed to enhance ECT knowledge. This learning was undertaken through lead provider online or face-to-face training, in-school face-to-face mentoring sessions and school-based training. The large majority of ECTs reported mixed feelings toward the online lead provider-led training, enjoying the ease of access with online delivery (no time-consuming travelling involved) and in opportunities to revisit knowledge and skills development, but were critical (see below) of lead provider programme delivery style and content.

Teachers' effectiveness has been shown to increase over time when learning in a supportive professional environment [43], and the majority of ECTs have voiced the benefit of the ECF being sustained over two years. The signposting of the ECTs at certain points of the ECF programme to expected progress and development diminished their feelings of isolation and anxiety [44]. The regular reviews and assessment points made ECTs aware of their own progress and development, but the face-to-face opportunities for development and interactions with other teachers made the majority of ECTs feel connected to the teaching profession.

> "*The ECF Makes it feel like you belong to something. The face-to-face when it happened, meeting others, that's when I learned stuff.*" ECT 12

3.1.2. Challenges with the ECF

The majority of ECTs reported experiencing challenges while participating in the ECF, with Year One being more challenging than Year Two. There were several elements with the subsystems of the ECF that ECTs found frustrating, and the key themes that emerged that expressed the ECTs' discontent with the ECF were 'Time constraints for ECTs', Repetitive, generalised ECF programme content with poor sequencing', and 'Ineffective ECF programme content delivery'.

Time Constraints for ECTs

> "*In terms of workload, if you want people to fully engage and invest you need to give people the time to do it. And the reality in my situation is 2 h a fortnight isn't enough. I don't know where people are finding the time to engage with it, and people in teaching are going to burn out. I am a career changer and used to regularly working 60-h weeks.*" ECT 10

The full majority of ECTs identified that time constraints caused challenges for full engagement with ECF materials. Insufficient time within the school day due to their teaching commitments resulted in ECTs not having time to keep up with the ECF programme reading or access the lead provider platforms to watch recordings of training lectures. The majority of ECTs, particularly in Year One, reported that when they did find time to access the ECF programme materials, they only engaged with them as a 'tick box exercise' to complete and sign off on the required reading as quickly as possible.

> "*Realised that it [ECF] is a tick box exercise—you don't have to do the work to check box. In Year 2, you take a recap quiz, go back to last year's resources, look at those, and tick that you're done. Then it's a tick box for seminars, and this was sent prior to doing the seminar!*" ECT 8

The importance of ECTs being given time for their professional development has been recognised by teachers [45], but the workload for beginning teachers is high, creating tensions when additional demands on time are made. ECTs often struggle with workload and time management [46]. Any system, such as the ECF that places additional time requirements on already time-constrained teachers must consider realistic ways to reduce workload elsewhere.

> "*It is true as a teacher you can be lonely at times. People will support you, but at the same time, people are super busy.*" ECT 2

Repetitive, Generalised ECF Programme Content with Poor Sequencing

The large majority of ECTs commented on Year One of the ECF being repetitive in content and too similar to ITT.

> "*First Year was repetitive of ITT year and not as good—it was not applied to practice, just one strategy loosely applied to another.*" ECT 7

This sense of ECT dissatisfaction with the content and sequences of the ECF and lack of context to ECTs' classroom needs has been noted in the literature [47,48]. The prescribed order/timing of content delivered in the ECF was not believed by the majority of ECTs to support their progression.

> "*Timing of the materials in Year 1 were strange, e.g., structuring a curriculum in term 2 as ECT—why are we being dragged into a class and told to structure a curriculum when we are not even doing that? This should come at the end of the experience.*" ECT 9

The majority of ECTs suggested that learning and networking opportunities should be more subject-specific and applied to teaching contexts. The large majority of ECTs believed the ECF would have the most impact if it functioned as a menu for professional development rather than a prescription. The content of the ECF was reported by the large majority of ECTs (and Mentors) as too broad and lacking context (for ECT, phase, subject

and school). The one-size-fits-all approach of the ECF was believed by the majority of ECTs to be ineffective.

> "*The genericness of it really hinders its purpose and you don't get anything out of it. So, then, it feels like an extra workload. We sit there and ponder, and then someone asks 'do you have a reflection journal' —I'm like, I haven't eaten all day.*" ECT 12

Ineffective ECF Programme Content Delivery

> "*Way it [ECF taught sessions] was delivered, you wouldn't teach children like that—the teacher was doing it so wrong. More like a lecture, with materials you need but you can't find and not structured or guided in what to do at all.*" ECT 25

The delivery of the ECF content by lead provider partners taught and online, was reported by the large majority of ECTs not to model best practices. The reliance of providers on PowerPoint presentations and the verbatim reading of these in the taught sessions established cognitive overload for the majority of ECTs.

> "*Death by PPT for training. Forty slides. Not effective CPD. If I was observed teaching like that, I would get an inadequate.*" ECT 15

Feedback loops [15] were felt by ECTs to be ineffective as the providers were aware of the poor experience for ECTs but told ECTs they had not choice but to deliver in this way due to the large volume of content in each session. Several ECTs mentioned that the providers of the training lacked knowledge about what they were teaching, as well as how to teach it.

> "*Felt like I was in a cover lesson [the one-day workshop]—she was 'faking it' til she made it. She didn't understand the subject. Just reading through a slide show.*" ECT 10

The importance of tailoring content to individual teacher needs and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach is well-documented for teacher induction [49]. Interestingly, some lead providers did adjust their approaches to content delivery in Year Two following Year One reviews of their ECF programmes [13], evidencing a feedback look in the ECF system, if not in the subsystems [15], and offering an explanation for increased satisfaction with ECF delivery for ECTs in Year Two.

3.2. Mentors

The mentors all experienced the ECF differently based on school context, the experience of mentoring, and the ECT being mentored. There were, however, similarities in the way mentors reported positive experiences and challenges with mentoring ECTs in the ECF. A total of 17 Mentors were interviewed for the research, of which 10 were female, and seven were male, with no identifiable difference in the experience of the ECF based on sex. The ages of mentors were between 28 and 67, and they were mentoring across the range of ECF programmes covering all six lead providers (UCL n = 2, Ambition Institute n = 4, Teach First n = 5, Capita n = 2, Education Development Trust n = 2, Best Practice Network n = 2). There were no discernible differences in the experiences of the participants based on the lead provider programme, but age did appear to align with mentor experience, which was commented on by ECTs as a positive feature of the ECF.

3.2.1. Positive Mentor Experiences

The full majority of mentors expressed positive experiences in relation to their mentor role for the ECF. The key themes to emerge that demonstrated mentors benefitted from engagement with the ECF were 'Supporting ECT development' and 'Mentor professional development', and 'More teaching-related conversations and reflection' for mentors.

Supporting ECT Development

> "*The two-year programme allows so much more support and will ultimately lead to better retention.*" Mentor 8

The full majority of mentors saw their primary role as providing support and development for ECTs, which the ECF was considered to enable as a consequence of its two-year structure and funded time for mentor engagement with ECTs.

"*The best thing about the ECF is having timetabled time to talk with your ECT.*" Mentor 6

The mentor role within the ECF is tasked with the compliance requirements of the ECF alongside providing support for ECTs [10]. The large majority of mentors welcomed the formalised role of the mentor within the ECF and saw the benefits of a structured programme with access to resources to support the ECTs' professional development.

"*You're holding their hand and standing next to them to support them as they move forward and grow in their confidence, and the more their confidence grows, the less support and framework you need to put in place and the more it becomes a process where you're supporting their learning journey.*" Mentor 11

Mentor Professional Development

"*I think it's an opportunity to stay ahead of your practice and continuously stay at the forefront of your practice and just finding out more exciting ways to deliver the curriculum, but also see the development of another person.*" Mentor 13

The full majority of mentors used their role for the ECF to improve and develop on their own practice. All mentors reported engaging with initial training (of varying quality) but that continuing professional development of their mentoring role included attendance at provider-led training, which allowed networking opportunities that supported reflective practice and sustained development. The majority of mentors found the experience rewarding because of the improvement they saw in their teaching, which aligns with the DfE reporting that 46 per cent of mentors undertook the ECF role to improve their own teaching [14].

"*A massive positive in being involved in the ECF as a mentor is one's own professional development because you can pinpoint areas that you can reflect that you are lacking and maybe weaker in certain areas.*" Mentor 17

Mentoring has been demonstrated to result in professional growth for both mentors and mentees through the experience of 'reciprocal learning' [50]. Mentors often experience increased reflection on their own practice and professional development through the mentoring process [51].

"*It has sparked more teaching conversations than I've ever had.*" Mentor 4

The complexity of the ECF for those interacting with it and the connections the ECF has with the subsystems [41] is evidenced in the benefit felt by mentors who participate in the ECF to enhance their own careers.

"*I've been able to take a day off to visit other schools with ECTs and a science department, which has helped my practice as a mentor and head of Science no end.*" Mentor 8

3.2.2. Challenges with the ECF

The majority of mentors reported experiencing challenges while participating in the ECF, and like the ECTs, they found Year One to be more challenging than Year Two. There were several elements with the subsystems of the ECF that mentors found frustrating, and the key themes to emerge were very similar to those of the ECTs (see 3.1.2) 'ECF programme content not contextualised', 'Ineffective sequencing, delivery, and progress measures within the ECF programme', and 'Time constraints for mentors'.

ECF Programme Content Not Contextualised

"*I found the training we did with ECTs a little bit generic and some of the early programmes study too basic. It wasn't challenging enough, and both my ECTs said we had already covered this.*" Mentor 13

The majority of mentors commented that the content of the ECF was not contextualised for the ECT by either subject, phase, or school. Experienced mentors demonstrated that they were able to adapt ECF content to suit ECT needs and school contexts. There is a sign of tension between structure and flexibility in the ECF that placed it on the 'edge of chaos' [41]. The responses expressed by mentors to the rigidity of the ECF content offer an insight into the complexity of the way the ECF was experienced in teacher development.

In Year One of the ECF, a large majority of mentors operated with rigid adherence to the content and process.

> "*Online resources aren't reflective of the ECT you may have—can't adjust the programme to reflect this, which makes for a poor experience [for the ECT].*" Mentor 7

By Year Two, the majority of mentors had developed innovative approaches to integrate ECF content with school and ECT-specific needs.

> "*The overly generic nature of it [ECF] can seem clunky and inflexible. I add examples to show how it can be applied, with more subject-specific studies as subject specificity is not there*." Mentor 17

However, the majority of mentors agreed that a more contextualised ECF could flex to the needs of the ECT, and the school would enhance the teacher development experience.

> "*There needs to be a move to a more flexible model where you have a set of modules you've got to work through, but you choose which ones and how long you spend on them. So, I think it would be a better model than the current one because mentors spend some time in mentor sessions discussing stuff with the ECTs about what they need to do rather than what's been allocated as what we should be doing*." Mentor 4

Ineffective Sequencing, Delivery, and Progress Measures Within the ECF Programme

> "*Ensure the timing of delivery is in keeping with the school running it so that it doesn't overwhelm the ECTs—got it wrong in Year 1. Content needs to be slimmed down, too. The whole point [of the ECF] is to support, not destroy them*." Mentor 16

The large majority of mentors expressed concern with the sequencing and delivery of the ECF. They felt that supporting a prescribed content delivered at a specific time and in a specific way was not supportive to the ECTs' professional development. Indeed, a majority of mentors put forward that the ECF, particularly in Year One, had negative effects on both ECT and mentor experience because of the rigid standardisation of practice.

The majority of mentors commented on aspects of the ECF being too basic, repetitive of ITT and poorly delivered. This mirrored the ECT perceptions of the ECF content delivery noted above and has been argued in recent literature [52].

> "*Online learning needs to be refined—watching a YouTube video for 45 min isn't effective professional development. Have you watched this video—tick box—not good. Online resources aren't reflective of the ECT you may have, and you can't adjust the programme to reflect this*." Mentor 11

The majority of mentors were concerned that ECF task completion was tracked for ECTs by 'ticking a box', requiring no evidence of ECT engagement with the process. As discussed above, the ECTs were fully aware by Year Two that the way their progress was being checked within the ECF was weak. The ability to 'tick a box' without completing the work required was identified by ECTs as a way to reduce their workload. Mentors were aware that ECTs were avoiding tasks considered irrelevant or out of context/pace with where they were in their development. One mentor, recognizing the chaos within the system [41], asked for more direction on what successful ECT engagement with the ECF should look like.

> "*Clarity for the ECT mentor about what success on the ECF looks like. What is valued in terms of output?*" Mentor 21

Time Constraints for Mentors

> "*Make sure that there is time allotted in schools so that the mentors and ECTs are supported to do it [the ECF] properly. Throwing money at teachers through golden handshakes is not the solution to retention—treat mentors and ECTs well—invest in them—this is the answer*." Mentor 13

The ECF operates as a nested system within the broader educational context [15]. The effectiveness of the ECF was influenced by larger systemic issues that exist for schools, such as workload and time constraints. The large majority of mentors (and ECTs see Section 3.1) reported that they had experienced issues with finding the time to engage fully with the ECF requirements, the funded time allowance being appreciated but not being sufficient.

3.3. A Complex System

The large majority of ECTs and mentors agreed that the ECF has the potential to enhance professional development for beginning teachers. They also agreed that this potential could only be realised if the ECF was refined to mitigate the challenges identified, specifically the removal of time constraints, appropriate sequencing, contextualization of content, effective delivery by training providers and authentic ways to measure progress through the ECF.

It should be noted that the ECTs' development within the ECF was identified as non-linear and sometimes unpredictable. This is to be expected of a complex system like the ECF working with multiple sub-system interactions (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014). A large majority of ECTs found Year One content repetitive, but a minority gained new insights, indicating varied outcomes from similar inputs. Timing and sequencing are another case in point, as the content did not always align with ECTs' developmental needs, highlighting the unpredictable nature of teacher progression.

The effectiveness of the ECF for ECTs and mentors was highly context-dependent and interconnected with various factors [34]. The school environment, mentor experience, and ECT background all influenced the ECFs' impact on teacher development. The interconnectedness between ECF content, school practices, and ITT were all identified in the system mapping of Years One and Two of the ECF (see Figures 1 and 2). It is clear that the ECF exemplifies the complexity of teacher development; as a system, it can never succeed with a 'one size fits all' model:

> "*Casting teacher learning as a complex system recognizes that this involves many processes, mechanisms, actions, and elements and that it is difficult to specify exact outcomes in every instance.*" ([34], p. 379)

We conclude that the ECF's implementation and outcomes were not simply linear or predictable. Instead, they emerged from complex interactions between ECTs, mentors, the school, and systems, adapting and evolving over time. Future improvements to the ECF should focus on enhancing adaptability, fostering positive feedback loops, and recognizing the context-dependent nature of teacher development.

4. Conclusions

The ECF will be replaced in September 2025 by a new combined professional development framework for ITT and the first two years of teaching—the Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF) [14]. The new ITTECF was a response by the government to the review of the ECF in 2023 [13]. The review reported on challenges in the ECF for effective teacher development that the new ITTECF would address [14]. The key challenges of the ECF identified by the government review were experienced by the ECTs and mentors in this research—repetition of ITT content, lack of content contextualization by subject and phase, and time constraints for mentors due to workload [14]. ECT workload, the sequencing of the ECF, and lead provider training quality were not mentioned in the review, but the government stated that they would "ensure ECT training lead providers pitch their programmes to support ECT progress" [14] (p. 4).

The government identified in their review of the ECF that SEND resources would be improved in the ITTECF to enhance the development of ECTs supporting students with additional needs. A lack of special educational needs and disability (SEND) support in the ECF was only commented on, and then only in passing, by a small minority of participants (n = 2). This reflects the sample, which did not include participants from SEND schools.

The ITTECF "sets out the entitlement for every trainee and Early Career Teacher (ECT) to the core body of knowledge, skills and behaviours that define 'great teaching'" ([14], p. 4). Trainees and ECTs continue to receive a mentoring entitlement for training and the first two years of teaching, respectively. The government believe that standardizing teacher training and development through one framework will deepen teachers' knowledge and understanding of [14].

The lesson learned from the experiences of ECTs and mentors after two years of participating in the ECF is that the planning, development, and delivery of teacher education professional development must embed context. The ITTECF has been purposefully designed to equip all trainees and ECTs with a shared body of knowledge and skills, irrespective of subject or phase. The government has instead placed the requirement to contextualise programmes to the lead providers.

> "*…in line with the feedback received and emphasis on the need for greater tailoring—that ECTs are able to relate their training directly to their own specific contexts and needs. As such, ECT training lead providers will develop enhanced subject-specific materials designed specifically for their programmes*." ([14], p. 5)

Recommendations for Policymakers

The Department for Education has promised "to listen, learn and adapt ITT and ECT training to make sure every new teacher is equipped to deliver great teaching" in England ([14], p. 7). The findings of this research align with some of the aspects of the new ITTECF. These alignments are important, but more can be done to enhance teacher education development in the future. The recommendations for policymakers are as relevant internationally as they are to England.

1. Maintain a two-year ECT development structure with funded mentor/ECT time each year.
2. Review and revise Year One content to ensure progression from ITT and reduce repetition.
3. Improve delivery methods of ECT development programme content, emphasizing best practices in teaching and learning:
4. Reduce reliance on PowerPoint presentations and passive learning methods.
5. Incorporate more interactive and engaging online learning techniques.
6. Increase flexibility in content delivery to allow for adaptation to individual ECT needs and school contexts.
7. Revise the task completion system to ensure meaningful engagement rather than a 'tick-box' approach.
8. Provide clearer guidance on what constitutes success in completing the programme for both ECTs and mentors.
9. Enhance mentor training and support, promoting autonomy in adapting the programme to specific contexts.
10. Review the timing and sequencing of the programme content to better align with the school year and ECT development needs.
11. Consider ways to address time constraints for both ECTs and mentors, ensuring dedicated time for programme engagement.
12. Develop more subject-specific and phase-specific resources to complement any generic programme content.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can address the main challenges identified in the research while building on the positive aspects to improve its effectiveness for both ECTs and mentors.

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