



How might Wales strengthen its approach to professional learning for early career teachers?

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The challenge and current foundations

Wales cannot afford to keep losing the teachers it works so hard to recruit. Acute shortages in secondary subjects, falling initial teacher education recruitment, and high early career attrition threaten the delivery of the Curriculum for Wales and the National Mission (Egan et al., 2024; Welsh Government, 2025; Hwb, n.d; Welsh Government, 2023). The early years of teaching are when many teachers decide whether or not to remain in the profession. High-quality professional learning at this stage can make the difference.

Wales already has some established foundations for early career teacher (ECT) professional learning. The statutory induction period (380 taught sessions) includes protected time and an entitlement to mentoring alongside enquiry-oriented professional learning, and Professional Standards that emphasise collaboration and teacher agency. However, mentoring for many ECTs remains largely instrumental and bureaucratic, with a focus on documenting evidence to meet external standards and quality-assurance requirements (Welsh Government, 2020). These requirements can add to ECTs' already heavy workloads and turn mentoring into a tick-box exercise with little room for meaningful dialogue and critical reflection on practice (Holloway et al., 2025). International research evidence suggests that high-quality mentoring needs to be educative in

nature and should involve sustained, collaborative enquiry into teaching and learning, reciprocal professional dialogue between mentor and mentee, and a focus on developing teachers' adaptive expertise and professional agency (Langdon and Ward, 2015; Bransford et al, 2005; Priestly, 2015)

Insights from the Case studies

The case studies provide valuable insights into how professional learning is organised during the early years of teaching across different systems. While they do not offer direct causal evidence that specific approaches improve retention rates, they do highlight features of professional learning that appear to support ECTs' professional development, confidence and sense of belonging. These are factors that wider research has linked to longer-term commitment to the profession.

Two approaches emerge particularly strongly from the case studies: educative mentoring and enquiry-focused professional learning. Both emphasise collaborative, reflective and developmental forms of support rather than compliance-driven or deficit-oriented models. The following sections examine each approach, drawing on the international case studies to illustrate how they are enacted in practice.

Educative mentoring

If Wales wants to improve teacher retention, simply extending mentoring time for ECTs is unlikely to be enough. Evidence from the six

international case studies and wider research literature shows that the *quality and nature* of mentoring, particularly whether it is educative rather than compliance-driven, and the professional culture in which it takes place matter at least as much as, and frequently more than, how long it lasts (Ingersoll et al., 2011; Langdon and Ward, 2015). High-quality educative mentoring focuses on helping new teachers grow as professionals rather than monitoring or evaluating new teachers against external standards. Instead, it focuses on fostering dialogic reflective dialogue and promoting habitual and collaborative approaches to enquiry focused on day-to-day practice, and the development of pedagogical reasoning. It moves beyond compliance-focused or deficit-oriented approaches (which assume new teachers lack competence and need fixing) to empower teachers, building their professional confidence, agency and sense of belonging.

The case studies provide some clear illustrations of this approach in practice:

- Norway’s national framework requires formally trained mentors and promotes mentoring as reflective and developmental. Mentoring takes place individually and in groups, with a focus on observation, reflection, professional dialogue and mutual learning. There are “no formal assessments” because teachers are already fully qualified, and the “Principles and obligations for mentoring” document frames mentoring as part of a continuum of professional learning, supported by university-linked mentor networks and seminars (Ministry of Education, 2025);
- Finland lacks a mandated system but achieves similar outcomes through strong collegial cultures where support is embedded in everyday peer collaboration, reflective dialogue, and shared inquiry, with well-established mentor training during initial teacher education;

- New Zealand explicitly positions mentoring as “educative rather than merely evaluative” in its national guidelines, although the quality of mentor preparation is inconsistent (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, n.d); and
- Australia has educative aspirations for mentoring in ITE, but these are not consistently realised during induction, where mentor training and quality assurance remain weak. Singapore provides a structured, growth-oriented model with dedicated mentor training, though it is closely aligned with national frameworks. In the Basque Country, educative mentoring serves as a bridge between pedagogical enquiry and minority language revitalisation in a complex trilingual context, favouring a collaborative, co-learner approach over hierarchical or top-down instruction.

While none of the cases offer direct causal evidence that educative mentoring improves teacher retention, overall, they suggest that these educative and expansive approaches which build new teachers’ professional confidence, agency, and sense of belonging are more likely to support longer-term commitment to the profession than mentoring focused primarily on compliance or short-term support.

Enquiry-focused approaches

Enquiry-focused approaches move beyond emotional support or directive advice. They engage new teachers in sustained enquiry into their own practice, using classroom evidence to identify challenges, analyse pupil learning and refine their teaching. These approaches treat enquiry as central to everyday practice rather than an occasional project. Teachers actively investigate and improve their practice through questioning, evidence-gathering, reflection and collaborative dialogue, building professional competence. This reduces the isolation many new teachers experience and shifts them from a survival mindset to purposeful growth and

agency, helping them develop expertise and stay in the job.

The case studies from Finland and Norway resonate with this notion most clearly. In both countries, reflection and enquiry are embedded in the regular rhythm of school life through ongoing dialogue and collaboration. New teachers are treated as capable professionals who contribute to collective thinking.

The way enquiry is approached matters. It is more effective when it builds on what new teachers already know and can contribute, rather than focusing on what they lack. In contrast, approaches that are tightly controlled by national frameworks (as in Singapore) or remain largely project-based tend to stay separate from daily teaching and are less likely to become habitual. Australia's Quality Teaching Rounds offer a structured example of enquiry that works well: teachers use a shared framework to analyse lessons together, enabling early career teachers to develop professional judgement through collaborative discussion.

New Zealand promotes reflective and enquiry-based mentoring during the two-year induction period, supported by protected time, but the case study reports that practices often become inconsistent once formal structures end. This suggests that privileging enquiry as central to practice requires ongoing structures and a supportive school culture to be sustained.

Across the case studies, school leadership and cultures seem to make the biggest difference. Even where enquiry is encouraged nationally, it only becomes embedded when leaders actively model it themselves and create the conditions for this way of working (Milton and Morgan, 2023).

The challenges and limits of a Master's module

A Master's module on educative mentoring might appear to be a sensible way to develop deeper understandings of mentoring, but there are significant challenges in making this work

well in practice. To be credible, such a module would need to actively model the practices it promotes. This would mean engaging participants in authentic educative mentoring activities such as structured learning conversations, making reasoning visible, and co-enquiry rather than relying primarily on traditional lectures. Co-enquiry involves mentors and mentees (or colleagues) working together as partners to investigate and improve specific aspects of classroom practice through shared observation, evidence, and reflection. This stands in contrast to more passive, transmission-style approaches where knowledge is delivered from expert to learner. These practices would also need to be firmly contextualised in the everyday realities of schools and current classroom demands. However, many university academics, whilst highly skilled in research and academic writing, do not have recent, first-hand experience of high-quality educative mentoring in schools or of delivering on the national priorities and policies that teachers are currently navigating. Without this grounding, there is a real risk that the module could lack the authenticity and integrity needed to influence practice meaningfully.

Even if these challenges could be overcome, a Master's module would still only reach a relatively small number of teachers. As the experiences of Australia and Singapore demonstrate, even well-designed professional learning has limited system-wide impact unless it is properly embedded within schools. Without substantial investment through Dysgu to develop school-based mentoring and enquiry at scale, a university module would be likely to create pockets of good practice rather than the broader cultural shift required. Given the urgency of current recruitment and retention challenges, relying on an approach that reaches only a minority of teachers, and that is inherently difficult to deliver consistently at scale, is unlikely to be sufficient to drive national change. What is needed instead is a more systemic strategy that supports educative mentoring and

enquiry as everyday practice for all teachers, not only for those who choose to pursue a Master's qualification.

Three priorities for Wales

Drawing on the international case studies in light of wider literature, three clear priorities emerge for strengthening professional learning for ECTs in Wales.

1. **Extend the duration of early career support**

Move from support during a one-year (380 taught sessions) induction period to a longer protected entitlement that runs for at least the first three to four years, as articulated in the Strategic Education Workforce Plan (Welsh Government, 2026). On the basis of the case study evidence, this extension should be framed as additional support for professional learning rather than any extension of a qualification or probation period. Any extension of structured support in Wales should therefore prioritise high-quality educative mentoring and support for enquiry focused on day-to-day practice over bureaucratic requirements. This would give new teachers protected time to focus on the development of their professional judgement and expertise.

2. **Provide high-quality professional learning for mentors that is educative**

Deliver high-quality professional learning for educative mentoring through Dysgu in partnership with universities. Professional learning for mentors should itself model the educative practices it promotes: learning conversations, making reasoning visible, and engaging in co-enquiry. It should help mentors position ECTs as capable contributors rather than novices needing to be 'fixed'. This could move mentoring away from instrumental, compliance-driven approaches and towards developing learning relationships that are reciprocal, building professional judgement and agency for both mentors and mentees. Protecting time and high-quality professional learning support for

educative mentoring will help to establish and sustain valuable mentoring expertise in the sector.

3. **Promote enquiry as central to daily practice in all schools**

Through Dysgu, we should pilot and scale approaches across schools that promote enquiry as a normal, day-to-day feature of teaching and learning practice. This approach should build directly on the Schools as Learning Organisations model and the National Approach to Professional Learning (Milton and Morgan, 2023; Welsh Government, 2019).

Professional learning should support teachers to adopt a questioning stance as routine practice: regularly asking "What is really going on for learners here?"; "How might this be improved?" and using evidence from their own classrooms.

Many teachers currently see enquiry as something separate from their daily work and solely as a distinct project or studies undertaken with or in higher education (Morgan and Milton, 2022).

For enquiry to become established as habitual practice, as a way of being, mentors and school leaders must explicitly model and promote this themselves (Morgan et al., 2024). Mentor preparation and leadership development should therefore build skills in leading reflective dialogic discussions with teachers, creating the conditions for enquiry to become part of everyday school culture (Milton and Morgan, 2023). This aligns with successful Nordic approaches that position new teachers within enquiring professional communities. Dysgu is well-placed to support this in Wales by helping schools develop the shared language and the ways of working needed for enquiry to become embedded across the system as an everyday habit and practice. This will likely represent a significant cultural shift for many teachers and school leaders.

Next steps

Wales already has strong foundations on which to build. The international evidence points to three interconnected priority areas for action: extending the duration of early career support; providing high-quality professional learning for mentors that is educative; and promoting enquiry as central and a habitual, day-to-day feature of practice in all schools.

The rationale for these priorities will be even stronger if shaped by the experiences of mentors and ECTs working in Welsh schools. Their insights, alongside the international evidence, can help ensure that any reforms are practical, context-sensitive and genuinely supportive.

Getting this right matters. It could help retain more teachers at a time when the system can least afford to lose them. It could also help create the confident, reflective teaching profession the successful delivery of the new Curriculum for Wales and our children need. The real question is whether we are prepared to make these changes at scale and to do so in a way that genuinely supports early career teachers rather than adding to their burden.

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