



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

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Introduction

International evidence points to a recruitment and retention crisis in teaching, with a significant number of teachers leaving the profession early in their careers (UNESCO, 2024). The situation in Wales is no different, as a significant number of early-career teachers (ECTs) are leaving the profession, and this trend looks set to continue (Senedd Cymru, 2026)

The reasons for the untimely exit from teaching in Wales, and in other contexts, are varied and originate from an amalgam of personal and professional factors (Pressley et al., 2026). Early-career teachers can feel especially overwhelmed and isolated without dedicated professional support. Evidence suggests that the pressures ECTs face in this early phase of their careers can negatively affect their well-being and mental health (Admiraal et al., 2023). Consequently, many ECTs decide that teaching is not for them.

Many other factors influence decisions to leave the profession; in particular, remuneration is a common concern. Compared with private-sector roles, especially for early-career teachers with STEM qualifications, teachers' salaries remain relatively uncompetitive, and progression can be slow (NASUWT, n.d). An early-career teacher may take years to secure a middle leadership post and then receive only a modest salary increase. In summary, the financial incentives to remain in a job that brings relentless daily

pressures are often insufficient to retain early-career teachers within the system.

While there are no ready-made answers to this problem, an international scan of professional learning and support for ECTs conducted by the Wales Centre for Public Policy offers useful insights into the recruitment, retention, and development of early-career teachers. There is, however, an important caveat when undertaking any international comparisons, especially in education.

Countries differ so widely in culture and context that making simple and superficial assumptions about 'what works' is both unreliable and unwise. While borrowing 'solutions' from another country may seem a simple proposition, the reality is fraught with difficulties and pitfalls. The alternative, therefore, is to draw on international comparisons for policy learning rather than policy borrowing.

The next section examines what can be learned from the international cases included in WCPP's research into the effective practices and key principles of professional learning for early-career teachers. It also considers how this case study information might be useful and relevant to the Welsh context.

Practices and Principles

The international case studies from Australia, the Basque Country, Finland, New Zealand, Norway, and Singapore offer rich and diverse

accounts of the training, support, and development of early-career teachers. All the cases emphasise the need for a clear developmental pathway from initial teacher education through to the induction phase. In all case-study countries, initial teacher education is a clearly demarcated, quality-assured, and rigorously assessed threshold stage.

Case study evidence also suggests that support for early-career teachers during induction is less well defined and more variable than during the initial teacher education phase, with a heavy reliance on the school. In most of the countries considered, once ECTs are employed, the level of professional support they receive depends on the resources, expertise, and professional learning opportunities available at the school level.

Inevitably, early-career teachers quickly become accustomed to their school's culture, norms and support processes. Across the international examples, induction provision for early-career teachers varied, and in most cases, professional learning entitlements for ECTs were less clearly defined than during the initial teacher education phase. In some jurisdictions, however, national, standardised expectations for early-career teachers, along with clear expectations for performance and support, did exist.

All the international cases emphasised the need for effective professional support for early-career teachers that extended beyond the routine, technical demands of classroom teaching. There was general cross-case agreement that professional support for ECTs needed to focus on the intellectual, social, and emotional requirements of teaching.

Examples of effective professional learning for ECTs included professional learning communities, expert mentoring, enquiry-based or research groups, and learning networks. Such experiences afford early-career teachers the opportunity to work with other teachers (including ECTs) to develop professional expertise and knowledge through activities that

extend their thinking, build their confidence and enhance their reflective capabilities.

The critical importance of mentoring for early-career teachers was also a consistent finding across all the international cases. However, the specific mentoring models were far less important than the routine availability of expert support for ECTs. Across the international case studies, the presence of an expert mentor with significant mentor training and experience was considered vital to the development, progression and retention of early-career teachers.

Key Implications for Policy and Practice in Wales

Considering professional learning and support for early-career teachers in Wales, the international case studies highlight some key implications. Firstly, the evidence indicates a need for clearer guidelines on professional learning entitlements for early-career teachers in Wales that go beyond the Professional Standards and routine professional learning. The variability in the professional learning journeys of ECTs is considerable, but it can be mitigated by a clear statement of entitlement that specifies what every ECT should expect from their professional learning experience in Wales.

Secondly, for early-career teachers in Wales, the induction phase can be very uneven (Hwb, n.d). Hence, it is suggested that national guidance be developed that explicitly focuses on the types of expert support, mentoring, and input that all ECTs should expect.

The current information on induction sets out the duration (three terms) that early-career teachers in Wales must complete. It refers to structured mentoring, professional development, and assessment to help new teachers meet the Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership. Schools are required by law to provide an Induction Mentor and 10% non-contact time for induction activities.

Potentially, more professional learning options could be offered to early-career teachers as an entitlement, providing additional opportunities to work with other ECTs on a range of activities (professional learning communities, networks, enquiry groups) that reduce their potential isolation and build professional knowledge. Re-conceptualising the induction phase around a set of professional learning entitlements for early-career teachers could strengthen the professional learning experience in this critical phase.

In summary, for teachers entering the induction phase, there should be a continuum of professional learning entitlements in Wales, i.e., a set of guaranteed forms of support or experiences for early-career teachers that go beyond school INSET, professional learning days, or in-school mentoring. These should be carefully mapped and articulated nationally so that ECTs know what support to expect, wherever they are in Wales, and through this support structure, remain in the profession.

In addition, the international case studies reinforce the importance of early-career teachers refining and embedding their professional practice under the guidance of a dedicated, expert mentor. As noted earlier, both the expectations and the realisation of school-based support are important to the development of early-career teachers.

An effective mentor for ECTs, however, must be more than a guide on the side. International evidence suggests that the most effective mentors are extensively trained, highly experienced, and expert professionals. To retain early-career teachers in the profession, it is imperative that they receive dedicated, timely, and expert mentoring to grow their professional confidence and resilience.

Schools are busy places, and the demands on teachers are extensive and relentless, so the pressures on school-based mentors are significant. In other countries, mentoring is recognised as an important professional role

that requires dedicated time and continuity of professional support.

While Singapore's education system is unique, both in size and in its highly centralised nature, its model of expert mentors, who are paid more to undertake this role, ensures that early-career teachers have the same national entitlement to dedicated, expert support.

For Wales, the policy learning from the international case studies suggests the need for:

- A national approach to the professional learning of ECTs that is high-quality and based on a clear set of national entitlements for ECTs;
- Equity of professional support and learning entitlements for early-career teachers across Wales;
- Professional learning for ECTs that enhances professional learning, growth and community, not just compliance; and
- High-quality mentoring by design, ensuring that early career teachers receive dedicated, expert support from nationally trained mentors.

Of course, mentoring programmes already exist in Wales. Many ITE partnerships offer such support to schools, and there are professional learning programmes available locally and regionally that focus on mentoring. However, there is currently no nationally accredited programme for ECT mentors, which could improve the quality of mentoring support for this important group.

Final Thoughts

There are no quick fixes or easy solutions to reverse the current trend of early-career teachers leaving the profession in Wales. The issues are systemic, so any potential solutions must be evidence-based and informed by effective practice elsewhere.

The international case studies collectively point to the importance of expert mentoring as a potent form of strengthening professional learning for ECTs, delivered equitably and at

scale. To achieve this in Wales, one option is to invest in a nationally accredited mentoring programme that is co-created, co-delivered, and jointly accredited within the existing National Masters programme. A national programme would set an important benchmark and offer mentors (aspiring or experienced) the opportunity to engage in an all-Wales, high-quality, accredited professional learning offer.

The stakes are too high not to invest significantly in the capabilities, professionalism, and ingenuity of early-career teachers. Early-career teachers are the future of the profession and, if they stay, will one day be at the heart of the Welsh education system. For this reason alone, greater investment in the professional learning and expert support for this important group of teachers in Wales is now imperative.

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