education sciences

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The Hidden Work of Incidental Mentoring in the Hardest-to-Staff Schools

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Abstract

In a climate of pervasive teacher shortages, initiatives have focused on attracting new teachers to the profession, with hardest-to-staff schools more likely to fill vacancies with early-career teachers, including those with conditional status. In Australia, workforce policy prioritises induction and mentoring to support transition to the profession and improve retention. This paper aims to understand mentor teacher experiences in hardest-to-staff schools, where a growing cohort of inexperienced teachers increases the need for mentoring. The analysis is based on data from semi-structured interviews conducted with teachers in six schools across two Australian states, as part of a larger project exploring work experiences of teachers in hardest-to-staff schools. In addition to formal mentoring, our findings illustrate that in these schools, informal and incidental mentoring is widespread. Further, the iterative nature of novice teacher induction creates a sense of ambivalence in longer-serving teachers. While experienced teachers find reward in supporting early-career colleagues, the hidden labour inherent to constant incidental mentoring encroaches on the time available to manage their own workload, sometimes leading to frustration and even resentment. We conclude that while mentoring is crucial with so many new entrants to the profession, policymakers should be aware of the labour associated with increased incidental mentoring to avoid unintended consequences for teachers who find themselves in the position of supporting growing numbers of new staff.

Keywords: teacher shortages; teacher attrition; mentoring; early career teachers; teachers' labour

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Academic Editors: Donna Pendergast and Susanne Garvis

Received: 7 May 2025
Revised: 23 June 2025
Accepted: 23 June 2025
Published: 24 June 2025

Citation: Lampert, J., McPherson, A., Casanueva Baptista, A., & Hawkins, A. (2025). The Hidden Work of Incidental Mentoring in the Hardest-to-Staff Schools. *Education Sciences*, *15*(7), 809. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15070809

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1. Introduction

The Australian Government, in its National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, has acknowledged that teacher workforce shortages, exacerbated by the pandemic, are an issue of national urgency (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). These teaching workforce shortages have required quick responses from various sectors, including initial teacher education (how teachers are recruited and prepared), teacher workforce policy (including, in Australia, both Commonwealth and state responses), and school-based initiatives to cope, including implementing quickly designed policy solutions to resolve these urgent workforce gaps (Lampert & Dadvand, 2024). Policies include offering financial incentives for teachers in hard-to-staff or disadvantaged schools, schemes to attract new teachers to the profession, and, significant to this research, policies to provisionally accredit preservice teachers or non-teaching staff (such as education support staff or people

with skills such as woodworking) to enable them to teach without full teacher registration where schools can argue a need. Following new policy pressures, initial teacher education programmes across the country are now offering fast-track teacher education programmes (some as short as 6 months of online coursework followed by placements) to attract new students to their programmes and satisfy staffing shortages. Though fast-track programmes such as Teach for Australia have been criticised for their high costs and low teacher retention (Thomas et al., 2021), each graduate still requires mentoring no matter how long they remain teaching. In fact, fast-tracked, under-credentialed teachers, for obvious reasons, demand *more mentoring*. This creates a dual strain as, increasingly, teachers entering the profession have less preparation and need more support, while at the very same time, many experienced teachers are leaving the profession.

Australia is not alone in experiencing extreme teacher shortages—the US, Canada, England, and New Zealand all report declining teacher education enrolments, high levels of teacher attrition, and difficulty retaining (or replacing) teachers (Gorard et al., 2024), and the United Nations International Labour Organisation (2024) has identified the need to address this issue as a global imperative. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Education Outlook Policy document (OECD, 2024) highlights teaching shortages as an urgent concern across OECD countries. Although teaching workforce issues across the OECD have things in common—an ageing workforce, the low status of teaching as a profession and lack of respect for teachers, high workloads, poor student classroom behaviour, and the loss of professional autonomy—teacher workforce policies are formed under different governments and systems, and responses vary. In Australia, urgent and concerted efforts are being taken to attract new teachers to the profession. Much of the policy response to shortages has been to increase the teacher supply pipeline, that is, to bring more new teachers into the profession (McPherson & Lampert, 2025)

As some indication of the urgency of the situation, the Australian Education Union predicted a shortage of over 4000 teachers in 2025 (Australian Education Union, 2024; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022). Staffing shortages are also a social justice issue, since the challenge of securing enough teachers is particularly critical for regional, rural, and remote schools, as well as low socioeconomic public schools in urban locations. There is ample evidence that the consistency of teachers is one indicator of student success for students from low socioeconomic and minoritised backgrounds (Lynch et al., 2024). Equally, it is well documented that teachers in historically disadvantaged schools need the most knowledge and critically reflexive preparation in understanding students with backgrounds that may be different from their own (Li & Lu, 2025).

Many of these schools have historically had disproportionate numbers of inexperienced or beginning teachers and experience high levels of teacher transience and turnover (McPherson et al., 2024; Glazer, 2021). In 2022, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2023) reported that 14% of the workforce were early-career teachers (within their first 5 years), and some public schools in the hardest-to-staff, usually low-SES locations have reported that over 50% of their teaching staff are within the first five years of their career. An increasing number of these beginning teachers, due to necessity, are promoted early in their career to leadership positions (Graham et al., 2015).

An increasing workforce proportion of early-career teachers require an associated increase in induction and mentoring, a responsibility that typically falls onto the more experienced staff in schools, who in some contexts may themselves only be early-career teachers. In this paper, we draw on our large-scale research on teacher retention in hard-to-staff schools to explain how these mentoring roles are perceived by the teachers who end up with both or either of the formal or informal and incidental roles associated with supporting beginning staff.

Formal accredited mentorship follows strict guidelines and protocols with the objective of advancing beginning teachers' professional standard to the level of 'proficient', inducting them into the concrete conditions and practices of schooling (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Historically, mentoring has been understood as a practice that educates the novice teacher in matters as diverse as the use of printers or the efficient use of time to successfully perform teaching duties. Mentoring is almost always identified as emotional labour, though sometimes, especially in incidental rather than formalised mentoring, this is hidden work (Byth, 2025).

According to Pennanen et al. (2016), the Australian practice of formal mentorship was a systemic response to the high levels of early-career teacher attrition registered in the country. Mentoring became a formalised response to ensure that novice teachers reach full accreditation by demonstrating a high level of proficiency at work.

Mentoring in its formal dress comprises two goals: to set up mentors as experienced teacher to effectively support beginning teachers; and to socialise and support beginning teachers' socialisation and growth as educators. The human and relational aspect of mentoring is a large motivator for why more experienced teachers take on the role. Historically, the rewards of mentoring (including both the leadership pathways and emotional rewards of helping others) outweighed the fact that mentoring generally can add to teachers' workloads.

2. New Definitions of Early-Career Teachers and Formal and Informal/Incidental Mentoring

While this paper mostly refers to the support of early-career teachers, beginning teachers are now broadly defined. In Australia (as elsewhere), the measures that have been taken to staff schools mean that large numbers of teachers with conditional or limited registration, such as permission to teach, are employed before they have graduated as certified teachers. Thus, there is a large difference between the experience of new graduates (who have not only completed their course but have successfully completed several placements) and conditionally registered teachers (given conditional permission to teach with the requirement to complete their degrees within a certain amount of time). In some respects, the definition of 'new' teachers could go even further to include relief teachers or teachers who have transferred in from different schools, since they are new to the specific school and lack school-specific human capital (Gibbons et al., 2021), that is, knowledge of the school culture and its adopted pedagogical frameworks. The constant teacher churn (Menzies, 2023; McPherson et al., 2025) or teacher turnover (Rajendran et al., 2020) means many schools have very large numbers of teachers who, while not necessarily new to the profession, are brand new to the school. They need support as well, but in order to contain the argument in this paper, we restrict our discussion here to beginning teachers, which includes teachers with conditional status.

To briefly illustrate the large numbers of teachers on conditional status in very hard-to-staff schools, Australia has, quickly and with some urgency, heavily funded a large number of strategic initiatives, including alternative pathways into the profession (McPherson & Lampert, 2025). In most states, final year pre-service teachers are able to work as teachers under limited registration where schools are unable to attract a registered teacher, in order to alleviate immediate shortages. The Federal Government has heavily funded alternative employment-based pathways into teaching in several universities around the country through its High-Achieving Teachers programme, designed to recruit high-achieving university graduates to work in hard-to-staff schools while they complete their teaching qualification (Department of Education, 2025). The programme then supports participants to complete an accredited teaching qualification. One of the programmes it supports is

Teach for Australia, which has grown in numbers since the pandemic. An affordance of these alternative employment-based pathways into teaching has been the increase in the number of people who can be employed to teach (Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Rowe, 2024). This has, at least in part, helped satisfy urgent workforce demands. The risks include the reduction in time teachers have to become classroom-ready before they commence working with young people. Thus, alternative pathways into teaching have the benefits of more quickly meeting workforce demands, while they also risk creating a workforce that is potentially underprepared.

In the State of Victoria, the Department of Education has implemented the Career Start programme (Victorian Department of Education, 2025), which provides mentoring support to government schools in thirteen of the seventeen regions across the state for early-career teachers who have graduated from initial teacher education programmes. This includes reduced time for face-to-face teaching for new teachers to engage with induction supports, a dedicated mentor to accelerate the development of teachers' teaching practice, networking opportunities within local learning alliances, and professional learning to develop professional practice, professional identity, and support wellbeing. These formal recognitions of the crucial role of mentors are welcomed. However, many teachers also tell us of the additional labour caused by both informal and incidental mentoring roles: the unpaid and incidental work some teachers do when new or beginning teachers ask them for technical help (where do I find. . .how do I do. . .), help with curriculum (can you share your lesson planning on. . .), and emotional support. Formal and informal mentoring in Australia are roles both associated with the amount of work involved, that is, its density (Longmuir & McKay, 2024), and the emotional labour or effort involved in the work, that is, its intensity (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). While most teachers are happy (to an extent) to offer their help, these roles are often unrecognised and not included in workload allocations (Curtis et al., 2024). These teachers, some of whom have not been teaching for that much longer than those considered 'new', offer their support, feeling a combination of generosity and, sometimes, resentment.

In this paper, we define mentoring both formally (involving planned programmatic interactions) and informally or incidentally (spontaneous mentor–mentee interactions) (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Often, the terms 'induction' and 'mentoring' are used somewhat interchangeably, with induction being the institutional process of orienting newcomers to the profession, including compliance with policy and development of teaching practice, while mentoring refers to the labour associated with supporting novice teachers through their induction and transition to the role of teacher.

For our purposes, we focus on the relational work of mentoring. In some cases, mostly in middle leadership positions, formal mentoring is part of the job description, providing time release to engage in observations and coaching. Other teachers may take the role of informal mentors, such as learning area coordinators who guide both new and experienced teachers in subject area practices. In many other cases, in schools with so many early-career teachers and leaders, mentoring regularly happens on a more incidental basis, such as when new teachers need help with technologies, curriculum or lesson planning, reporting, or the day-to-day management of their classes. Mentoring, for teachers who have been in the system even for a short time, just becomes part of the work of teachers in times of unprecedented teacher shortages. Mentoring is (and has always been) also seen as a duty of care exercised by teachers as they integrate newcomers into the teaching community. Teachers often see helping new teachers as a way of giving back. However, this sense of obligation to give back to the profession in the form of mentoring new staff may not be as engrained for teachers who are tasked with mentoring others without having been part of the teaching community for long.

3. Methodology

To understand their perceptions of what we loosely call mentoring, we conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers working in hard-to-staff schools in two Australian jurisdictions, the states of Victoria and Queensland, in the context of the ongoing national teacher shortages. We also work-shadowed teachers for a more immersive ethnographic picture of the day-to-day work of teachers, which they often do not speak of and go unrecorded. In this paper we have taken excerpts from the interviews conducted with both teachers and school leaders to explain how formal and informal mentoring is impacting teachers' work, from the way they view their own ethical responsibility to the experience of mentoring as a burdening activity that happens more often than it should.

Once a school had agreed to participate, the principal sent out a call for expressions of interest open to teaching staff and school leadership to engage in three activities: as interviewees in semi-structured interviews, writing journal entries, and/or being work-shadowed for a proportion of their working day. Everyone who volunteered to participate was offered the opportunity to be interviewed, work-shadowed, or both. All of the information pertaining to the participants has been deidentified and codified to ensure their privacy and guarantee a strong level of anonymity.

The larger study that informs this paper has so far consisted of 36 semi-structured interviews (purposeful conversation) in six schools in the Australian states of Queensland and Victoria. Six more schools have agreed to participate in the study, with full data collection to conclude by the end of 2025. Our overall research focuses on teachers' work lives in very hard-to-staff schools, that is, in schools with a historical and sustained difficulty in attracting and retaining the total of their needed workforce. These have been chosen paying particular attention to the schools' ranking on a scale of socio-educational (dis)advantage, measured in Australia through their ICSEA values[1]. In order to represent the hardest to staff, most disadvantaged schools, the six schools that we visited display ICSEA values lower than the national average of 1000, with the lowest value being 825 and the highest 968. with regard to their geographical location, schools were selected from different areas (regional, rural, remote, and urban), catering to a wide range of communities but with a noticeable low socioeconomic status.

There, we conducted 30 to 45 min long 'purposeful conversations' (Edwards, 1999) with focus questions that prompted teachers to describe their role at present, their views on the current teacher shortages, and their perceived impact on the functioning of the school, as well as how they face challenging situations that concern both their work and personal lives. In addition to these interviews, we also accompanied teachers as they performed their daily work duties by work-shadowing them, with the intended focus of gaining further insight into their everyday work. For this, we met with 12 teachers and followed them from the start of a regular teaching day until its completion. The researchers in the team were sometimes silent observers but also engaged in informal conversations when they were appropriate or welcomed. Work-shadowing, which sometimes involved walking interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011), allowed us to better understand the existent relationships that play a central role in a teacher's work and to contextualise some of the answers provided during the interviews.

4. Discussion

The themes that emerged in our research were reflective of the mixed feelings almost all the teachers and school leaders that we spent time with expressed about mentoring, both for those with formalised, usually middle leadership roles and amongst those who took on or inadvertently found themselves mentoring new staff even when they themselves were very early in their own careers. Unprompted, the labour of 'helping' new colleagues

was one of the most commonly discussed themes and was mentioned by nearly every experienced teacher as a significant impact of high teacher turnover and teacher shortages. This was at the top of the list of things longer-employed teachers[2] mentioned as impacts of teaching shortages and teacher turnover. Both teachers and school leaders told us about their often contradictory and ambivalent experiences. They were both grateful to support teachers who came to their under-staffed school when they are so hard to come by, but also fully aware—and sometimes even resentful—of the extra work that landed on their shoulders as a consequence.

Noting the importance of school leadership in how well mentoring is implemented from school to school, we have found that there is common agreement in the hardest-to-staff schools that mentoring is increasingly complex during a period of such extreme workforce shortages. We begin this section with the most positive perspective, representing the long-standing commitment teachers have to supporting others and giving back to the profession of teaching.

4.1. Pleasure, Empathy, and Duty of Care: The Rewards and Affordances of Mentoring

One oft-noted reason teachers enjoy mentoring newer staff is to pass on their pedagogic and professional knowledge. Teachers also see mentoring as crucially related to a strong community of practice, that is, as contributing to a bonded and collegial workplace. Teachers, in general, rank relationships highly in their lists of things that affect job satisfaction. Demonstrations of 'caring and sharing' are historically engrained teacher identities (Liljekvist et al., 2021), and more experienced educators feels a genuine duty of care to support new colleagues. The educators we spent time with are well aware that the large numbers of new or conditionally registered teachers in their schools are out of anyone's control and that the new teachers should be supported, not blamed or criticised, for their inexperience. They are certainly committed to supporting new staff, both out of care and for pragmatic reasons, such as the belief that stronger relationships may influence whether those staff remain at the school, or as Stacey (2020) more bluntly wrote, 'quit'. Noting that without them the school could not run, Rachel said, *[teachers on permission to teach] don't bring a lot of experience with them, so as experienced teachers, you need to help them, guide them…* and Jason (in another school) echoed the sentiment, saying, *Where I oversee or observe my colleagues and help them get better at those things… I think there's a pretty cool sense of, like, we do this together*. Numerous educators told us they feel pleasure from supporting their new colleagues, gaining, as Ben-Amram and Davidovitch (2024) found in their study, a great deal of satisfaction from the role.

For younger or less experienced teachers tasked with mentoring roles when they themselves are new to the profession, mentoring elicits both pleasure and concern. In schools with high turnover, as experienced teachers retire or leave and beginning teachers enter the workforce, the collegial elements of mentoring are layered with some imposter syndrome. Elton, a teacher with less than three years of experience, formerly an engineer, argues that it is becoming more common for early-career teachers to act as mentors of others:

> *There's a lot of being willing to try new things or just sort of get stuck into things. So, they're, like they're a lot of the pros. And so, we feel like a really tightknit team, and working together really well. The cons are just there's no one to turn to if you need advice. You know, and for me as someone who's still kind of figuring out my own practice really, and I'm, you know, a lot more confident that I was a couple of years ago, I've got everyone turning to me as I'm still kind of figuring it out myself* (Elton).

While the collegiality of peers is still present and makes Elton feel like teachers are a *tightknit team*, it is also true that he struggles keeping a balance between still learning how to do his own job and supporting his 'team'. Going as far as letting other beginning

teachers stay with him while they sorted living arrangements, Elton sees it as his role to extend a helping hand:

> *Our lab tech is also the librarian, so she's really struggling. So, I will do a bit of the lab tech-ing as well for my own classes. I picked up on a need. Like, and I'm also not necessarily organised enough to give her the notice that she needs at this point in time, because I'm kind of just trying to maintain things on a week-by-week basis* (Elton).

Common to all mentors is the view that new teachers, and sometimes new school leaders, bring positive energy but sometimes lack experience. In this empathy, we find mentors' greatest tool. A clear example can be seen in Meredith's testimony, when she pointed out one aspect that new teachers struggle with, that is, becoming familiar with and using whole-school approaches to classroom management:

> *There are issues with new staff. Like, just getting consistency in your induction and like, consistency in what the expectations are as far as how we want a lesson at [our school] to be run. Right now, a lot of new teachers are struggling with strong start, strong finish. So at [our school] we do something . . . where the students line up outside, go in and stand quietly behind their chairs and listen for instruction. A lot of the brand new teachers, like the pre-service teachers, are struggling with that kind of structure. So a lot of us right now are working on helping them get a strong start so the rest of their lesson goes well* (Meredith).

In thinking about what sort of advice can be most useful and welcome, mentors draw from their own memories as early-career teachers. Their mentoring extends beyond formal programmes by enacting what they would have wished had been different in their mentoring, in the hopes that mentees will profit from the present landscape. When asked a hypothetical question about what they would teach incoming educators, Peter focussed on helping them understand that seeking help is desirable, instead of sorting things out oneself:

> *I'll probably tell them that just be, like we said about, you know, talking about issues that they're having. I think just being open about it and not trying to keep any difficulties to yourself* (Peter).

Against the backdrop of a competitive job market, Peter argues that his school has a marketing advantage in demonstrating how well they support new teachers. Under the present conditions of teacher shortage where a 'teacher's market' means jobs are readily available and prospective staff can turn down jobs at so-called challenging schools in favour of 'easier' schools, both formal and incidental mentors find that part of their job is convincing new teachers that they can cope in more challenging schools. When teachers mentor their newer colleague, they often do it with pleasure and pride in their work. They share their knowledge, their ideas, and their experience in the spirit of good will and generosity. They see the capacity for good mentoring as a marketable selling point for the school to attract good new teachers.

Vicki sees mentoring as a necessary investment and can see the reciprocal benefits of supporting or mentoring new staff, whether they stay or not. Mentors assist beginning teachers *to actually cope in the situation* whilst mentees come into the school *with their pedagogy, and a lot of their ideas are brilliant,* from which mentors like her can learn. The concept of a bonded staff who share ideas and help each other constitutes a well-established community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002).

4.2. Reluctance and Resentment: Teacher Turnover, Policy Change, and the Constant Need for Induction

However, in times when teachers are so time-poor (Creagh et al., 2023), generosity can also wear thin. When the time individuals spend supporting others spills out, they find themselves sacrificing the minimal time available to them where they had initially intended to plan their lessons or complete reports. Unable to establish boundaries, their patience is tested, and their emotional wellbeing suffers:

> *For me, it's not too bad because I only have like one under me. When you've got quite a few, and I've had quite a few in the past, it's a lot. It seems like it's nearly too much. But when you've only got one, you sort of feel like you're okay. But yeah, when there's quite a few or when you've got a pre-service teacher on top of, like a first-year teacher, it becomes quite stressful* (Margot).

Coupled with having to mentor too many people at once, teachers in hard-to-staff schools are also required, due to constant teacher churn, to mentor often large numbers of new staff multiple times a year. With high turnover comes the constant need to induct others into the particular frameworks and policies adopted by each school in order to meet the social contract to socialise beginning teachers into the community of practice. In schools with highly transitory teaching staff, this brings some resentment whereby the 'stayers' accuse the 'leavers' of a lack of commitment (Cochran-Smith, 2006) and the school of being unable to find a solution to the problem. Stress gives way to negative attitudes and the emotional labour that contributes to teachers deciding to leave (Bodenheimer & Shuster, 2020).

Earlier we wrote of the challenges related to reasonably new teachers who find themselves prematurely thrust into mentoring roles. However, Vicki provided another perspective—that is, the additional pressure on the most experienced teachers who take on inordinate amounts of mentoring. This leads to some discontent from the more senior teachers who have some cynicism about newer colleagues who come and go, including those from alternative pathways, such as Teach for Australia, who historically do not stay (Thomas et al., 2021):

> *They go, we do all this extra, we support these guys, and then they leave. And there's that whole level of, why are we supporting them and putting an amount of time into actually getting them through, for them not to be even contracted beyond the length of their program. And there is a huge frustration amongst the older teachers that you know, there are a few of them that have said, I just can't be bothered anymore* (Vicki).

Vicki is speaking not just of the formal mentoring roles she undertakes but also of the incidental help she gives colleagues every day:

> *So the numbers of people who have got that level of experience who, you know, have been around for a while. They may have seen a few things. It's diminished really quickly. So, like, I'll give you a classic example. Yesterday morning I'm in my office, I have one of our beginning teachers come and say, can I just talk to you about these kids? And then at recess I had another one, who is a second year, say to me, can I talk about. . .so the workload that's not obvious has significantly increased for those people who are experienced* (Vicki).

Similarly to Vicki, Melanie provided us with an insight into the effect of extreme teacher turnover on both induction and mentoring practices:

> *Last year we had over a hundred Casual Relief Teacher (CRTs). Yeah. We did over a hundred inductions across the two campuses. Here I think it was at about fifty and over at [the neighbouring school] it was about fifty as well. So we would have teachers coming in sometimes for a term, sometimes for less than that and we would have to sort of induct them and work with them to get their head around our teaching strategies, our*

pedagogical methods, and just our standard behaviour management go to, our restorative practice, very quickly. Then they would stay for a few weeks or a term and then they would be out the door and we would have to induct the next person. So at the moment, we have a cohort of students who are very untrusting towards new teachers because they're used to a high turnover (Melanie).

Melanie's comment points towards the extent of additional workload that such drastic teacher turnover can cause for the more experienced teachers. In some cases, the number of teachers who are experienced or long-term enough to play any mentoring role at all is quite small compared to the new teachers at the school.

In another school, Brendan made a similar observation about the sheer volume of teachers flowing through the school:

Now the agency CRT is someone who will come along, will come out of [PLACE] but they're expecting to be paid a significant amount of money. Now last year they were paid around seven hundred dollars a day, okay? This year, because we've made it very clear that we didn't want them coming and going, see last year we did ninety-six inductions of new staff for a staff of eighty, okay? So we had massive turnovers. We had, you know, I was talking to one of the Year Nine students last year at the end of the year, and he said, oh yeah, so I've had five English teachers this year. . . It's affected student management and it's of the whole, it's a downward spiral (Brendan).

Vicki made a similar point about the extreme conditions under which many schools are functioning, this time talking about their teachers with provisional teacher status. While grateful for their presence, their lack of experience, even less than graduate teachers, causes additional labour for their longer serving colleagues:

Our maths position has been, for want of another word, plugged with a permission to teach, somebody this week. So [NAME] will need a lot of help. She [has done] less than a year of her Masters but she's gained Permission to Teach. Which is probably, across the board we've got, probably, I'm going to say sixty per cent of our staff at that really beginning teacher stage (Vicki).

Similarly, Katie told us,

There is a little bit of talk from the teachers about, they're grateful to have the Teach for Australia teachers and the teachers who are Permission to Teach, they couldn't do it without but it is a bit of extra work for them, yeah. To coach them and mentor them and answer their questions and, yeah. And do the planning for them and all that stuff.

Current teaching shortages create unusual and somewhat unprecedented conditions, adding extra pressures on teachers who enjoy mentoring, in reasonable doses, but find themselves crumbling under the weight of crisis-level staffing decisions. Some teachers look to their school leaders or teachers' unions to address a perceived unevenness in the collective workload:

I do think the workload is a bit much. Particularly, in like the middle management level. I only have one mentee but I know there are learning specialists that have three or four. That I don't think is good for either of them, the learning specialist or the mentees. They're not getting the full focus. I think sometimes we're not utilising some of the teachers with more experience that aren't necessarily a learning specialist, kind of spread out that load (Meredith).

Resentment, or at the least, reluctance is also an issue for the new teachers requiring mentoring, who themselves already feel overworked. Where early-career teachers are given allotted time for induction on paper, in a climate of such extreme teaching shortages this can

be smoke and mirrors. We heard many stories of teachers, including those on permission to teach, who are also studying while teaching, who are given reduced timetables in theory, but in reality, they are thrown more fully into the deep end much earlier than previously. One principal, Stella, spoke about some reluctance on the part of the mentees to engage in their early-career teaching programme:

> *As teachers are really suffering with burnout, then asking them to stay back and do something else, it's becoming a bit of an issue. With the early-career teachers, we can do that because they get that extra seventy minutes now built into their timetable. We can kind of say, come back and this is good for you. But even new teachers to the school, I'll use the example of [a career changer teacher]. He should be there because he's new to the school but he just said, look at my age, I don't need that. Well, you know, you do need to be inducted in the way that we do things here—our whole school approach to pedagogy, you know what I mean? Just, you know, the procedures, you know. Systemically what do we do here that might be different from [other] schools* (Stella).

4.3. Time and Effort: How Mentoring Changes the Work

Similarly, for the mentors, the time they actually spend helping new staff often does not correspond to the time formally scheduled for mentoring or induction activities. This plays out in different ways. Firstly, mentoring novice teachers or those with conditional teaching status requires a fair amount of work. This includes emotional support, practical support, and support with administrative roles:

> *Most of my role seems to be, at the moment, supporting the new staff because we have such a big new staff here at the school [using the online reporting systems]. Helping them put dates in, doing all our curriculum documentation, helping them with all those minor things that, admin, admin* (Margot).

Furthermore, mentoring is often most time-intensive when the need for support is urgent. It is easier to prepare for mentoring activities that can be planned ahead of time. However, incidental mentoring is often most intense when a new teacher needs help with a challenging class or with a lesson that has not been successful. Inexperienced new teachers can experience these things as crises, but in reality, mentoring is only one of the many hats that the mentor teacher wears, so for the mentor, cries for help can be experienced as disruptions. Once again, many more experienced teachers will support a novice teacher in need out of compassion, understanding their stress. They will also help out their colleagues:

> *I have a . . . [student on Permission to Teach], yes. I have them as my official mentee but along the lines like we always help each other out with all of the preservice mentees. Some of us can't get around to, like, our timetables are exactly matched with our mentees, which we can't go to observe them then so we're helping other teachers by going to observe their mentees and things like that* (Meredith).

As can be noted from Meredith's explanation, there is solidarity among peers in challenging moments. It is important to underscore, however, that the availability of incidental mentors does not come without a cost. Take the example of Margot:

> *They wanted me to come and observe their classes all the time, and it just so happens that it doesn't really work. But like, today would be the one day they'd really want me to go and observe their class, and it means I have no planning time. So, that's under the pump* (Margot).

The availability of time is but an illusion of availability, given that it eats away at the regular workload of teachers. Margot continued her explanation of this time poverty

exacerbated by her informal mentoring roles, explaining that while she was officially treated as a mentor, she was given neither time nor financial incentive for this work.

Part of the problem seems to lie in the timetabling of teachers' activities. Whilst the duties of beginning teachers include being mentored, informal or incidental mentors do not have realistic time allotments for the work. For example, referring to her school's mentoring programme, Stella, the principle, noted that mentoring teachers participated in meetings after school, on their own time. While aware that this was an issue, the expectation remained that they would attend.

In schools enveloped in constant turnover of teaching staff, mentoring is proven to be at once a necessary and precarious activity. In part, this is due to the increasing reliance that hard-to-staff schools have on teachers coming from employment-based or alternative pathways to education programmes. The lack of experience of beginning teachers coincides with the retirement or exodus of long-standing or senior teaching staff. As the personnel of the school continues to change on a more accelerated basis, impermanence becomes a serious problem for the time management of mentors:

> *I think the mentoring program works and they're definitely feeling it, but I think even the people who are being the mentors are feeling that pressure of, they've got their own classroom duties to have to worry about, and they're also trying to worry about these people who are struggling. Just because it's a lot of work very quickly* (Elsa).

With all the good will in the world, teachers who are struggling under such well-reported challenges as the weight of their own workload, the declining status of the profession, poor morale, increasing demands, the loss of autonomy, and stress (Cuervo & Vera-Toscano, 2025; Longmuir & McKay, 2024; Heffernan et al., 2022) are understandably less likely to embrace the work associated with helping or mentoring others, both in their formal mentoring roles and as informal, incidental mentors. In this policy dilemma, there is an added burden of mentoring—particularly informal mentoring—that produces a mix of empathy and strength but also burden/burnout/resentment. Moreover, in some schools (as a second contribution), this burden falls on barley experienced teachers.

5. Conclusions

Mentoring of all kinds, both formal and informal, is appropriately believed to be crucial when so many new teachers are required of the profession, especially in historically disadvantaged and very hard-to-staff schools, where effective teachers are needed most. Believed to improve teacher excellence, including the pedagogic competence of beginning teachers (Dewi, 2021), their workplace satisfaction and overall wellbeing (Malderez, 2023; Larsen et al., 2023), and the likelihood of teacher retention, Australia's National Teacher Workforce Action Plan identifies mentoring as a key focus area. Our research corroborates the importance of mentoring but suggests that policymakers understand how complex the job of mentoring is in unprecedent times of teacher shortages and teacher turnover. The incidental mentoring that falls on more experienced (and even barely experienced teachers as well as school leaders) in very hard-to-staff schools should not be undervalued. The balance between the joys and burden of mentoring sometimes has a tipping-point effect. Mentoring, when built into a system in which mentors have proper time and institutional support, has the potential to improve teacher retention, both for mentors and their mentees. On the other hand, when it adds to experienced teachers' over-work, it can have the opposite effect and become, potentially, a contributing factor to teacher attrition. While early-career and under-credentialed teachers are increasingly common and becoming 'the new normal' in this context of workforce shortages, this creates an added burden, even on teachers who are early in their careers themselves, of informal or incidental mentoring that may produce potential for further burnout and resentment.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.L. and A.M.; methodology, J.L. and A.M.; formal analysis, J.L. and A.M.; investigation, J.L., A.M., A.C.B. and A.H.; writing—original draft preparation, J.L. and A.M.; writing—review and editing, J.L. and A.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Australian Research Council DP230100110.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was approved by Monash Human Research Ethics Project 37356, on 15 February 2023.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 ICSEA stands for Index of Socio-Educational Advantage.

2 Which, as we note, includes teachers not themselves that far into their careers. In at least one of the schools we visited, over 50% of staff were in their first 3 years of teaching.

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