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Addressing the hidden labour of mentoring preservice teachers

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Abstract

This study responds to an imperative for increased support and recognition of mentor teachers within Australian initial teacher education (ITE) programs in response to recent reviews highlighting mentor teachers' critical role in preparing *classroom-ready* graduate teachers. By addressing the recurrent challenges faced by mentor teachers, such as hidden labour, this research aims to bridge the discrepancy between the crucial nature of the mentor role and the inadequate resourcing of this work. Through participatory action research (PAR), the paper reports how eight school-based coaches, as participants, instigated support mechanisms to address the recurrent challenges faced by 78 mentor teachers in one ITE–school partnership. Using qualitative methods, the research underscores the significance of dedicating time to enhance effective mentoring practices within ITE.

Keywords Mentoring · Coaching · Hidden labour · ITE and school partnerships · Third space

Introduction

Beyond factors within a student's home environment, evidence shows that teacher quality plays the most significant role in determining student learning outcomes (Glewwe et al., 2020; Hattie, 2012). As a result, governments worldwide are prioritising the development of high-quality initial teacher education (ITE) programs (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2013). In Australia, this priority is demonstrated by the federal government's continual reviews, reforms, and inquiries addressing the quality of ITE (Hartsuyker, 2007; Paul et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2023; Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group [TEMAG], 2014; Ure et al., 2017). The most recent reviews have narrowed in focus to delivering *classroom-ready* graduates, with subsequent emphasis on improving the overall quality of the professional experience

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component of ITE programs. A significant emphasis of the current research was to adopt a more systematic approach and strong mentorship to enhance professional experience (Paul et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2023).

Professional experience, as the workplace integrated learning component of ITE, provides opportunities for preservice teachers to gain classroom teaching experience and to integrate theoretical knowledge of teaching into their practice (Ure et al., 2017). This experience is inherently complex as it is delivered across diverse school settings, is resource intensive, and is time demanding, requiring considerable commitment from ITE providers, schools (Le Cornu, 2015; Ledger et al., 2020), and mentor teachers.

The mentoring role is central to the professional experience, with the quality of professional experience directly correlating to mentoring effectiveness (Paul et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2023; Ure et al., 2017). The mentoring role is enacted by qualified teachers who, in addition to their classroom responsibilities, work with preservice teachers to build their professional learning capacity (Ure et al., 2017). However, mentoring practices are largely self-guided, resulting in considerable variability for preservice teachers, and this raises questions about the role and responsibilities of, and support provided to, mentor teachers (Allen et al., 2017). The recent government report *Strong Beginnings* emphasises the need for additional support and professional recognition for mentor teachers (Scott et al., 2023). In response, the current research directly engaged with school-based educators through participatory action research (PAR) to examine the support provided to mentor teachers working within a school–university partnership with second-year preservice teachers in Melbourne, Australia. The need for mentor support was identified in 2021 and 2022, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic exacerbated existing teacher workforce challenges, including workload stress, unprecedented teacher supply, and retention issues (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2021). Despite such challenges, registered teachers remained essential to ensure a supply of teachers into the profession (Victorian Government, n.d.).

Hybrid school-based coaches (Nash et al., 2022) are lead-level teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017) employed by the ITE provider as 'boundary riders' (Nash et al., 2022) between the ITE provider and their school communities. In this research context, coaching occurs as 'a confidential and collaborative process through which coaches and coachees work together to reflect on current practices, as well as expand, refine and build new skills' (Hollweck & Lofthouse, 2021, p. 400). With each school hosting large groups of preservice teachers (12 to 20), the coaches work to bridge the theory–practice nexus and address practice discontinuities across institutional boundaries (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

In the following sections, the literature surrounding the mentoring role and its inherent complexities are presented, particularly situating mentoring in ITE as hidden labour. Following this, the intersection of ITE–school boundaries is discussed, and the hybrid educator's role is positioned in the 'third space'. Last, the PAR is described, methods outlined, and the findings discussed by applying four mechanisms: (1) identification, (2) coordination, (3) reflection, and (4) transformation (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Akkerman & Bruining, 2016). It is envisaged that the

results reported in this paper will be of value to teacher educators in ITE programs, schools, and policymakers when considering the important role of mentors in ITE.

ITE mentoring role, responsibilities, and inherent complexities

A classroom teacher who hosts preservice teachers during the professional experience component of an ITE program is interchangeably called a supervisor or a mentor teacher. In Australia, AITSL (2015) uses the term *supervisor* to denote support provided to 'preservice teachers in meeting the requirements of professional experience, including meeting the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers at the graduate career stage' (p. 4). However, narrowly focusing on the application of the supervisor role fails to capture the broader complexities (Allen et al., 2017) as beyond operationalising standards, the role must also include facilitating a professional experience that is educative and purposeful. In this research context, a broader application of the term mentor teacher is adopted to include a teacher of teaching (Radford et al., 2018) with responsibilities for supervision and accountability, but also extending to include an interpersonal relationship, high-level interpersonal skills, and the capacity to adapt to the contextual elements of each setting (Ambrosetti, 2014). In this research context mentoring is viewed as 'a complex, social and psychological activity' (Roberts, 2000, p. 162).

Beyond the nomenclature, the complexities of the role also include a lack of targeted selection and preparation of mentor teachers. Given the range of expected tasks the mentor undertakes, it is noteworthy that the mentor teacher's role is not explicitly stated in government policies (Ledger et al., 2020), and this absence of clear delineation contributes to variability in role enactment as well as the limited support and preparation that is provided (Allen et al., 2017). In Australia, the mentor role is undertaken by any qualified, registered classroom teacher, depending on their availability. ITE providers and schools rarely have latitude in mentor selection as despite preservice teachers being mandated to undertake professional experience, schools face little compulsion and financial incentive to host them (Broadley et al., 2019; Ledger et al., 2020). Consequently, mentor recruitment becomes a process of 'woo these individuals through any means necessary' (Moir, 2009, p. 32). However, AITSL (2017) proposes that mentor teachers should hold 'lead' levels of teacher accreditation. The suggested practice of choosing mentors based on their classroom expertise assumes that teaching experience translates to mentoring practice (Wexler, 2020), but mentoring adult preservice teachers requires a distinct skill set compared to teaching primary school students, and being a proficient teacher does not necessarily transfer to being an effective mentor (Evertson & Smithey, 2000).

Effective mentoring demands specific knowledge, skills, and capacity, but there is a lack of evidence demonstrating that mentors consistently receive training or engage in formal professional learning for the role (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016; Nielsen et al., 2017). Without targeted preparation or support, mentors often rely on personal preferences or emulate their own mentor experiences (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021). This can result in inconsistent mentoring practices and structures, which in turn can impede teaching

and learning outcomes for preservice teachers (Le Cornu, 2015; Varadharajan et al., 2021).

It is important to recognise that classroom teachers adopt the mentor role in addition to their regular teaching responsibilities; however, considering the challenge of meeting this increased workload, this complexity is underrepresented in the literature. Maynard (2000) suggested that limited time poses a significant hurdle for mentors to meet the needs of preservice teachers effectively. In their research with beginning teachers, Beutel and Spooner-Lane (2009) found that informal meeting time alone was insufficient to meet the needs of beginning teachers. They reported mentor teachers' difficulties in finding time to meet to undertake mentoring conversations due to timetable clashes and high workloads, and consequently, time constraints hindered mentors in seeking new alternatives or adopting innovative mentoring solutions or strategies. When considering the inherent complexities of teachers juggling mentoring alongside regular classroom duties, the hidden labour of mentoring in ITE becomes apparent, as often this work goes unnoticed. The current research, while acknowledging the broad spectrum of complexities surrounding mentoring and professional experience, specifically focuses on supporting mentor teachers' additional workloads.

The hidden labour of mentoring

In most instances, the mentoring role is assigned without a corresponding allocation of time, leading to what can be termed as *hidden labour*. This term encapsulates the phenomenon where the tasks associated with mentoring are undervalued and concealed within the broader workplace context (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011). Despite the significant investment of time and effort by mentor teachers in preparing preservice teachers to become classroom ready, these efforts often go unnoticed. Their largely unnoticed daily work includes the emotional labour of fostering mentoring relationships, clarifying expectations and needs, and navigating roles and the challenge of taking initiative (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011).

The discrepancy of hidden labour underscores a disparity between the significance of mentors' work and the recognition they receive (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011). Thus, addressing the hidden labour of mentor teachers involves not only providing the necessary time to engage in collaborative activities including professional learning exchanges with preservice teachers and fellow mentors, but additionally acknowledging their contributions and capacity for this work (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009; Le Cornu, 2015). The current research sought to address these challenges by employing school-based coaches to cross ITE–school boundaries and provide support to mentor teachers working within an established ITE–school partnership.

Boundary crossing within ITE–school partnerships

In Australia, following repeated directives, it is common practice for universities to establish formal professional experience partnerships with schools to draw on collective educator expertise (Hartsuyker, 2007; TEMAG 2014; Ure et al., 2017).

Ideally, these partnerships transcend the limitations of the ITE provider or school to create integrative, immersive, and structured professional experiences (Nielsen et al., 2017; Ure et al., 2017). The review by the Network of Associate Deans of Professional Experience (Ure et al., 2017) attributed the success of such partnerships to the application of integrated third space practices. Third space theory asserts that at the intersection of cultural spheres, innovative ideas and practices emerge (Bhabha, 1996). This occurs by challenging traditional boundaries and fostering a more inclusive understanding of identity and knowledge (Zeichner, 2010).

The Australian Government's Teacher Education Expert Panel reported that employing third space practices facilitates increased communication, knowledge sharing, and the distribution of responsibilities among preservice teachers, mentors, schools, and ITE providers (Scott et al., 2023). In several situations, incorporating hybrid roles in partnership structures has demonstrated to be effective in fostering collaborative approaches and developing less hierarchical professional experience practices (Elsden-Clifton & Jordan, 2016; Kriewaldt & Turnidge, 2013; Nash et al., 2022; Toe et al., 2020). In such examples, hybrid educators work across boundaries, leveraging knowledge from the different communities to create new ways of working and negotiating solutions to problems (Wenger, 1998).

In their examination of the intersection of educational boundaries, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) developed a framework for considering different perspectives within school and ITE partnerships. Their four mechanisms of (1) identification, (2) coordination, (3) reflection, and (4) transformation are shown in Table 1 to describe the way they were applied in this research to examine cross-institutional boundaries and hybridity in this ITE–school partnership.

Viewing partnerships through the four boundary-crossing processes of mutual identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation offers a broader interorganisational structure for hybrid educators to facilitate the alignment of perspectives across settings and sectors (Akkerman & Bruining, 2016). For this research, Akkerman and Bakker's (2011) four mechanisms were applied to examine the school-based coaches' work and to present and discuss the findings.

Materials and methods

Research context

Drawing from a larger PAR project, this research examined school-based coach supports for mentor teachers' practices. Working within a long-established ITE–school partnership, the school-based coaches collaboratively lead the second-year professional experience from their respective schools. Figure 1 illustrates how, when working across ITE–school boundaries in a third space, school-based coaches hold valuable first space knowledge of school practices and relational connections with school staff, students, and the community. Additionally, their brief employment with the ITE provider, in the second space, provides the theoretical perspective, knowledge, and training to lead supports for preservice and mentor teachers.

Table 1 Examining cross institutional boundaries

Stages of boundary crossing	What it is	Impact	Characteristics
Mutual identification	Intersecting professional experience practices are (re)defined	People are concerned with (re)defining the way in which the intersecting practices are different from one another and how they can legitimately coexist	Evident as legitimating coexistence. Previous discussions of 'we vs. you' or 'your responsibility vs. our responsibility' cease. Evident through shared ownership, practices, and dialogue
Coordination	Professional experience procedures are discussed and co-planned	Distributed work allows for diverse practices and cooperative work	Differentiation of practices based on clear communication and connection between sectors Shared dialogue, regular professional development, and clear shared practices
Reflection	Reflection on others' perspectives and practices	Openness to consider and values others' perspectives	Examining own practices. Perspectives emerge as own practices, and positions are considered in relation to others
Transformation process	Shared problems of practice are identified	Shared problems are collaboratively addressed, and a shared identity emerges. Change emerges, and new in-between practices are created	Hybridised positions emerge as previously distinct practices, and perspectives are integrated

Adapted from Akkerman and Bakker (2011) and Akkerman and Bruining (2016)

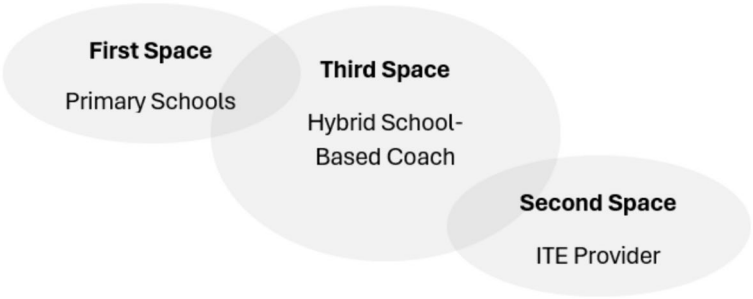

Fig. 1 Position of school-based coach in third space

The school-based coaches serve as intermediaries, bridging the gap between academic theories and practices within the school environment. They conduct weekly workshops and coaching sessions, and scaffold preservice and mentor teachers' practices. From their third space perspective, during the research period of 2021 and 2022, these coaches identified a need to support mentor teachers who faced additional workload challenges throughout and following the pandemic. These challenges included the intensification of teachers' workloads and negative effects on teacher self-efficacy that did not subside with the end of lockdowns (Fray et al., 2023). Such challenges were particularly felt by those mentor teachers who had endured 262 days of lockdowns in metropolitan Melbourne but who were also identified as essential in guiding preservice teachers to ensure a continual supply of teachers entering the profession (Victorian Government, n.d.).

The method

In this study, a PAR approach was adopted to examine how the hybrid school-based coaches contributed to the support of mentor teachers' practices within a school–university partnership. PAR is distinguished by the shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis, and orientation towards community action (Kemmis et al., 2014). Following Kemmis's (1989) PAR model, eight school-based coach participants engaged in a process of design, development, implementation, and subsequent reflection of their third space practices. Collectively, these eight school-based coach participants held 38 years of coaching expertise and had mentored preservice teachers on 88 occasions. The school-based coaches collaborated with 78 mentor teachers who were hosting 78 preservice teachers.

The initial planning phase of the PAR emerged during an annual school-based coaches' professional learning day. On this day, teacher challenges such as increased workload, fatigue, time constraints, and the complexities of mentoring preservice teachers, especially amid the end-of-school-year period, were openly discussed and contextual supports considered. Importantly, these discussions highlighted not only common challenges, but also the unique impacts and restrictions imposed by the pandemic in each school. This recognition resulted in the school-based coaches tailoring

mentor supports within their schools, working in third space to leverage the collective expertise and experiences of educators across sectors.

Ethics approval was obtained and to facilitate the interventions additional funds were allocated for the use of school-based coaches to the value of $250 per mentor teacher. Funding was possible due to the partnership residing within a Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) funded project called a Teaching Academy of Professional Practice (TAPP). Working within this limited budget, school-based coaches implemented actions in their respective schools to support mentor teachers.

Data collection and analysis

A critical aspect of the PAR process was the school-based coaches' documentation of the practices they implemented to support their mentor teachers. For this purpose, a researcher-generated document (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was used. The document, as an A4 template, included prompts to guide the school-based coaches to provide details of their interventions, an overview of their objectives, and an outline of the structure and content of the support they provided for mentor teachers. A reflexive thematic analysis approach was applied using Braun and Clarke's (2022) recommendations for producing and reporting methodological and coherent thematic analysis. The analysis revealed two semantic findings: (1) each school-based coach facilitated additional time for mentor teachers to fulfil their roles, and (2) five of the eight school-based coaches implemented professional learning initiatives to build mentoring capacity.

Additionally, in this PAR phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to facilitate a deeper reflection of the school-based coaches' rationales and interpretations. Questions aligned with Patton's (2002) focus areas of experience, affective information, opinion, values, and knowledge to capture the underlying motivations and perspectives of the school-based coaches' actions. The semi-structured interview data provided thicker descriptions, including more detailed and nuanced interpretations of the interventions in comparison to the researcher-generated document analysis. To manage the larger data set, NVivo data management software (version 12) was utilised. Initially, a deductive analysis was applied using the two themes derived from the document analysis—namely, (1) time and (2) professional learning. However, acknowledging the limitations of this deductive approach, an inductive analysis was subsequently introduced. In this iterative process, reflexively generated codes were used to systematically compare and explain the transcripts of each of the eight participants. The analytical framework adopted for this process was Miles and Huberman's (1994) iterative analysis, incorporating three concurrent activities including data reduction, display, and conclusion.

Findings and discussion

Acknowledging that hidden labour refers to work as an economic system that is devalued or invisible (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011), the findings are presented to convey the voices and lived experiences of the participants. Notably, time was

the distinctive finding in this study and is reported in this paper. The school-based coaches were instrumental in facilitating dedicated time for mentor teachers to actively engage with preservice teachers at the beginning of their professional experience. Importantly, the provision of time was not arbitrary but purposefully guided, with clear direction and tangible outcomes.

Findings are discussed by applying Akkerman and Bakker's (2011) four key mechanisms of identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation. Pseudonyms are used to protect school-based coach participant anonymity. Excerpts are drawn from the researcher-generated documents and interview transcripts, and the source is included in brackets, for example, researcher-generated document (RGD) or interview transcript with timing reference (IT 1:37).

Identification

Identification, as a key learning mechanism, involved the school-based coaches demonstrating an understanding of the hidden labour challenges encountered by mentor teachers in the first space and subsequently questioning the core needs of each site. In their hybrid roles, these school-based coaches navigated the third space between the ITE provider and school contexts, drawing on their relational agency with mentor teachers to first allocate the role and then provide follow-up support during the professional experience (Wenger, 1998). An example of this is evident in school-based coach Maddie's approach, whereby she actively sought the insight and opinions of mentor teachers when making choices for her planned intervention.

> After speaking to all the mentors, they felt that, with the school so busy and they had meeting after meeting after meeting, to find the time to actually sit with their preservice teachers and go through things was really quite difficult. So, what we did was we gave each mentor half a day CRT [casual relief teacher] release. In that time, they would sit with their preservice teacher and go through things like individual learning plans, assessments and what they want to cover in planning. They [mentors] thought it was really valuable otherwise they're grabbing 5 minutes here and 5 minutes there. (Maddie IT 0:31)

Maddie's process of identification allowed her to tailor her support based on the specific needs of the mentor teachers. Similarly, Gabrielle's approach to selecting her mentor intervention demonstrates responsiveness as she conducted a survey among her mentor teachers. According to her findings, '80% of the mentors chose the option to dedicate half a day to working with their preservice teachers' (IT 2:15).

This professional experience took place during the final term of the school year, a period when mentor teachers were already time poor due to the additional responsibilities of collecting data on student learning progress, writing student reports, and planning for the upcoming school year. To address these challenges, school-based coaches used the additional funding to alleviate the mentoring workload burden. Recognising the hidden labour involved in the mentoring role, funds were employed to facilitate dedicated time for mentoring to address what Hamel and Jaasko-Fisher (2011) described as the wavering needs of mentor teachers amid their full-time

teaching role. Gabrielle, the school-based coach, reflected on the impact, stating, 'Sometimes it is really hard to find the time to do this, especially at this time of year, and the [additional time] made the whole process of mentoring much easier' (IT 4:17). This strategic use of resources not only recognised the challenges faced by mentor teachers but also acknowledged the value of time in enhancing the effectiveness of the mentoring process.

In the data set, a prominent aspect was the school-based coaches' ability to understand and address the challenges specific to their respective schools. Notably, there were various pandemic-related impacts, such as transmission zones where staff worked within designated clusters and spaces, but beyond such practicalities, school-based coaches recognised the increased workloads and negative effects on teacher self-efficacy were sustained beyond the lockdowns (Fray et al., 2023). These challenges extended to include staff shortages, and school-based coach Jamie explained that one specific difficulty she faced was sourcing enough mentor teachers in her school:

> We did find it really hard to get eight staff [to volunteer to mentor preservice teachers] and I think it was just that they had COVID fog and fatigue, and they just wanted to have their classroom back to themselves and they didn't want to have to do anything else. (IT 20:51)

In their school-based coaching role, Jamie effectively addressed the contextual factors that impacted mentor engagement as a desire for a return to normalcy in the classroom. In doing so, Jamie actively engaged mentor teachers to address previously identified challenges of role selection (Broadley et al., 2019) and provided them with additional time to ease workload pressures.

The data, derived from both researcher-generated documents and semi-structured interviews, demonstrated that school-based coaches, operating in a third space across the different sectors, possessed the necessary expertise and established the relational connections (Zeichner, 2010) required to identify and understand the unique challenges faced by mentors in their respective schools. This was evidenced by the school-based coaches drawing on their already established professional relationships with mentor teachers, in the first space, to respond to their needs (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). In doing so, school-based coaches' hybrid work challenged what Zeichner (2010) described as traditional boundaries, fostering a more inclusive understanding of mentor teachers' needs and creating a 'more egalitarian status for the participants' (Zeichner, 2010, p. 92). This occurred by recognising and valuing the important work of mentors through targeted selection (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2021) and the provision of time as support.

Coordination

Coordination played a crucial role in the third space boundary-crossing practices of school-based coaches as their actions were central to this mechanism (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Coaches leveraged knowledge from the first and second spaces to create new ways of working by negotiating solutions to problems within their

communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). This coordination was evident as differentiation across each of the school contexts. Initially, school-based coaches met as a community of practice whereby they established a common understanding of the problems and considered the required supports before extending their efforts to their respective schools. The data highlighted two main modes of coordination: (1) the organising of additional time and (2) the scaffolding of how mentor teachers utilised this time. Maddie, a school-based coach, explained her rationale for utilising the funding to provide mentor teachers with additional time.

> The objective was to give mentor teachers a better opportunity to provide time and assistance to their preservice teachers. Following the return from remote learning, we found there were enormous time pressures on mentors and wanted to ensure that preservice teachers were given the benefits of their mentors' full attention. (Maddie RGD)

Maddie's approach demonstrates an understanding of the mentor teachers' needs. She facilitated an environment where mentor teachers could engage in targeted conversations with their preservice teachers. Her scaffolding of this time allowed mentor teachers to collaborate with their preservice teachers in addition to their regular release time for planning, meetings, and administrative tasks. In many respects, her approach highlights the importance of both additional time, as identified by Maynard (2000), to meet preservice teachers' needs and the capacity for mentors to extend their support or strategies when provided with time to do so.

Beutel and Spooner-Lane's (2009) research identified the need for dedicated time when mentoring early career teachers. In support, the current research demonstrated that in every situation, the provision of additional time was most valued by mentors during the first week of the professional experience. The scheduling of time varied across schools to suit mentors' needs and the schools' programs. This included the provision of two afternoons outside of school hours (Linda), whereby the additional AU$250 funds were utilised to pay the mentors directly for their work, to a half day during school hours (Sally, Maddie, and Gabrielle), to the allocation of one hour each week (Briony, Tate, Jamie, and Kaz). In the last example casual relief teachers were paid to teach the mentor teacher's class so they could be released from their classroom responsibilities to attend this meeting.

Importantly, the coordination of time was not ad hoc but was intentionally focused and led by the school-based coaches. This deliberate approach demonstrates the school-based coaches' efforts to situationally address challenges and optimise mentoring experiences by specifically addressing mentor workload challenges. To facilitate direction, the school-based coaches provided targeted guidance and structure for the mentor teachers' meetings. In doing so, they unwittingly addressed the directive for structured mentoring approaches recently published in the *Strong Beginning* report (Scott et al., 2023). Throughout implementation, the school-based coaches scaffolded what Hamel and Jaasko-Fisher (2011) described as the 'dance of initiative' (p. 437) by providing opportunities for both mentors and preservice teachers to lead discussion and questions. This guidance was identified as critical by the school-based coaches who had extensive mentoring and coaching experience, totalling over 126 professional experiences.

Further, this research demonstrates that it was not just the provision of time that mitigated the mentor teachers' workloads but the school-based coaches' capacity to align educators' perspectives. For example, school-based coach Tate implemented a weekly meeting time with a corresponding outline of context to be addressed:

> Mentors received a weekly session of release to meet with their preservice teacher out of the classroom for the specific purpose of lesson planning, data collection and assessment/feedback. I provided mentors with a weekly outline of what they needed to cover in each of these sessions. (RGD)

In her school situation, school-based coach Maddie perceived value in directing her mentors to 'go through things like individual learning plans, assessments and what they want to cover in planning' (IT 0.31). This was particularly relevant given their classroom teaching focus on assessing and reporting, resulting in a shared teaching approach. In a similar context, Briony directed her mentors to provide 'preservice teachers with the data, student cohort information and upcoming program and to consider the preservice teachers' scheduling of lessons, content of lessons and targeted focus for the student cohort' (RGD). Briony identified that providing contextual details were critical to facilitate alignment between the classroom teachers' program and the preservice teachers' lessons. In many respects, these actions were opportunities for mentors to 'pass the baton' (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011, p. 440). This occurred by school-based coaches providing much-needed clarity for mentors' practices (Ledger et al., 2020), resulting in preservice teachers knowing which elements of classroom practice they would take responsibility for.

Beyond the practicalities of program implementation, the deliberate coordination of these meetings was identified as having positive impact on mentors' professional identity and wellbeing: 'It [the meetings] enabled mentors to reflect on the qualities of an effective mentor and provided a better understanding of planning, assessments, and individual student plans' (Briony, RGD). An additional benefit was explained by school-based coach Gabrielle: 'Having a structure to follow within this allocated time was supportive of the preservice teachers experiencing success in their teaching' (RGD). A shift in identity was observed as the preservice teachers transitioned into their new role of teaching; this occurred after the shared opportunities for planning and decision-making focused on teaching and learning.

The strategic coordination in this research reflects a proactive coaching approach to mitigating challenges and optimising the mentoring experience for both mentors and preservice teachers. Recognising the time constraints faced by mentor teachers, especially following a period of remote learning, school-based coaches' participatory actions created intentional practices that allowed mentors to adapt to the contextual elements of each setting. Drawing on Ambrosetti's (2014) research, key components of the school-based coaches' coordination centred on high-level interpersonal skills and their capacity to adapt.

Reflection

The data demonstrates the significance of reflection as a key learning mechanism, specifically contributing to the enhancement of the school-based coaches' learning. Throughout the PAR process, the school-based coaches were provided with opportunities to reflect on and examine their own practices and to discuss their learning (Kemmis et al., 2014). During an interview, Kaz provided insight into the significance of the mentor teacher's role in her context:

> If we value it [mentoring], then we're going to give you time to be able to make that happen. Where in the past, it's like another add on—just get it done—and there is a big variance in what your preservice teachers receive. We're saying we really value this program, and we value you growing as a mentor, so we want to give you that time to be able to learn about how to do it and then also give you time to make it happen during the placement. (IT 10:11)

In her reflection, Kaz underscored the potential value of supporting mentor growth by giving them time for development and learning. She emphasised the importance of reevaluating the perception of the mentor teacher's role, noting the transformative potential that comes from attributing value to mentoring. Additionally, Kaz highlighted the often-overlooked aspect of mentoring as hidden labour by advocating for, acknowledging, and accommodating the efforts of mentors. This includes the time that they invest in planning for preservice teachers prior to the professional experience and the time dedicated throughout the professional experience (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher, 2011).

Reflection revolved around the impact of the school-based coaches' role on mitigating the mentor teachers' increased workloads. This particularly focused on the school-based coaches taking responsibility for preservice teacher placement, concerns pertaining to preservice teacher progress, university requirements, and the administration and organisational components of the professional experience. In the researcher-generated document, Gabrielle quoted one mentor teacher as saying,

> Obviously having someone [school-based coach] that we can work with; it takes off our [mentoring] workload. It is a huge pressure for teachers outside of our own teaching time and within the school, so anything that reduces the workload on top of things is beneficial. (Gabby RGD)

Additionally, school-based coach Sally provided a specific example of how, in her role as school-based coach, she alleviated work pressures for one mentor:

> There was concern straight away [with one preservice teacher] so it was easier for the mentor to go straight to me [the school-based coach] who they know personally through teaching with and working with. It is so much easier than it was to call the university and speak to someone you don't know and explain your concerns. (Sally RGD)

Importantly, when mentors encountered concerns, they found working collaboratively with a familiar school-based coach timely and convenient. This contrasts

with the typical process, which involves the mentor identifying appropriate contacts at the university and allocating additional time to contact and discuss concerns with individuals located on campus. In this research, third space practices, facilitated by the school-based coaches, increased not only communication but also the distribution of responsibilities (Zeichner, 2010) to alleviate workplace pressures on mentor teachers.

Reflection played a vital role in this PAR, with the school-based coaches learning individually and collectively with mentors to build new understandings, navigate challenges, and promote effective strategies. While overall, school-based coaches reflected positively on the outcome of their interventions within the PAR cycle, they also identified areas for improvement. Four of the school-based coaches indicated future potential benefit in holding an early collective meeting with all preservice teachers and mentors. Briony explained, 'For me as a coach to facilitate that conversation. Ok, you're working together, what does it look like when you're in the classroom together?' (16:24). This reflection highlights the potential to further establish a culture of shared practice and decision-making, identified by Hamel and Jaasko-Fisher (2011), but would require further dedicated mentor–preservice teacher time early during the professional experience.

Transformation

Transformation in this PAR occurred in the form of boundary-crossing activities and was a key mechanism in the resultant third space practices and learning (Zeichner, 2010). Time was critical for providing mentor teachers and preservice teachers uninterrupted opportunities to discuss and plan shared teaching, especially noting where the preservice teachers' lessons would fit in the mentor teachers' program. Transformation occurred from this practice as 'it allowed teachers to mentor the preservice teachers properly' (Sally RGD). In this instance, the word 'properly' was clarified as 'it removed not only the rush but the need to cram critical mentor–preservice teacher conversations into small gaps of time during the course of a day' (Sally RGD). Hamel and Jaasko-Fisher (2011) discussed how much is demanded and assumed of mentor teachers in their work with preservice teachers. In this research, providing time was a capacity-building mechanism for mentors, resulting in them enacting their role at what they perceived to be a much higher standard.

Jamie described that an unintentional but beneficial consequence was the professional connection that emerged between the preservice teacher and the mentor: 'In a positive way, it helped to improve the relationship that they had together' (IT 8.32). Specifically allocating a dedicated block of time ensured the effectiveness of their collaborative efforts, creating what Jamie referred to as 'their little PLC [professional learning community] where they sat down and went through everything, including the recommendations from university and how many lessons they should be teaching, and you know building up from small groups to whole classes' (IT 6:04). This resulted in the mentors 'feeling really prepared' (Jamie IT 2:01) as their collaborative work became a platform for them to address their shared teaching focus. Because of these concerted efforts, the mentors and preservice teachers

felt well-prepared, and a successful working relationship was established. Gabrielle expressed, 'The preservice teachers felt respected, and they felt as though, wow, this is, I feel like I'm in a little PLC [professional learning community] here and I'm planning with you. … They felt more organised, confident, and respected' (IT 8:35). In part, the establishment of mini-PLCs addressed what Hamel and Jaasko-Fisher (2011) described as the preservice teachers' perception of burdening their mentors. Instead, in this context, time to meet resulted in a professional connection and a shared sense of purpose.

Equally important in this research, the meetings resulted in an increase in preservice teacher professionalism. Across the data set, this was attributed to the preservice teachers feeling better prepared and supported to navigate the professional experience. Tate commented that she 'found the preservice teachers to be more confident about their work requirements and to have very good understanding of what they would be teaching and how they could deliver the content' (RGD). The mentor–preservice teacher conversations about the program, cohort, and planning proved instrumental in 'reducing their [preservice teacher] anxieties and providing them with a sense of confidence and assurance' (Jamie IT 6:08). This active professional communication reduced what Hamel and Jaasko-Fisher (2011) described as a communicative burden on mentors and mentees. In this research, mentor teachers addressed the resulting tensions and issues by integrating the mentor and preservice teachers' previously distinct practices and perspectives.

In summary, these findings underscore the significance of the PAR process and hybrid school-based coach role to contextually enhance mentor practices that play a critical role in preparing classroom-ready graduate teachers. First, by working in the first space, school-based coaches understood mentor teachers' needs and identified ways to address contextual challenges. Second, aligning with directives for structured approaches and enhanced mentor capacity, school-based coaches optimised mentor experiences by applying third space ITE knowledge and theoretical understandings to strategically scaffold focused mentoring time. Third, school-based coaches' reflective practices, discourses, and leadership facilitated continuous improvement and demonstrated the potential of such roles to contribute value to mentoring. Therefore, transformation for this group of mentor teachers centred on not only the allocation of dedicated time but also the school-based coaches' third space boundary-crossing activities reducing workload burden.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this PAR was to explore support mechanisms that could enhance the practices of mentor teachers in one partnership context. While the catalyst for initiating this PAR was the pandemic, it has become evident that the challenges surrounding mentor recognition and support have existed long before and persist beyond this global crisis. The findings underscore the significance of PAR and the hybrid school-based educator role to contextually enhance mentor practices to prepare classroom-ready graduate teachers within this partnership.

Building on Hamel and Jaasko-Fisher's (2011) research, a pervasive challenge is for mentor teachers to capture adequate time, amid the full-time teaching role, to effectively support preservice teachers. The central findings of this study not only echo this challenge but also demonstrate the impact of providing dedicated and scaffolded mentoring time as a key condition for effective mentoring. This research demonstrates the transformative potential of providing mentor teachers with structured time, preferably early in the professional experience, to work with preservice teachers. This time facilitated improved quality of mentoring and contributed to the wellbeing of mentors by alleviating workload pressures.

This study has limitations, most noteworthy, within the small-scale PAR the school-based coach participants were driven by their own passion to address mentor teachers' workload burden, and therefore, their motivation was instrumental to implementing change. Operating within their critical third space boundary-crossing capacities, these school-based coaches leveraged their cross-institutional relationships, experience, and knowledge. Consequently, the findings are context specific to this partnership and would not be easily generalisable without this hybrid school-based educator role.

A notable limitation of this research is the cost of resourcing such work. As a DEET–TAPP-funded partnership, both the school-based coach role and the mentor teacher's time are not replicable or sustainable without substantial financial resourcing. Finally, data collected was limited to the school-based coaches, and although this data captures a school-based perspective, it would be valuable to extend the scope of the study to include mentor teachers' and preservice teachers' perspectives and their perceived impacts of the interventions.

This research, supported by funding, offers a model to illustrate one pathway for mentor teacher support. It emphasises the ongoing need for substantial financial investment in mentoring roles. It underscores the impact of adequate resourcing to mitigate the hidden labour of mentor teachers. By recognising and addressing this hidden labour, the study contributes to the broader discourse on the essential role of the mentor teacher, and this recognition is vital for sustaining and enhancing the quality of mentorship within ITE programs. Therefore, this study provides a persuasive argument for educational institutions and policymakers to allocate resources specifically to support mentor teachers to provide more sustainable ITE mentorship.

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Data availability The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the author.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that she has no conflict of interest associated with this research

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