

**Cooperating teachers' readiness to support student teachers
within a partnership model in initial teacher education in the
Republic of Ireland**

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Dr Alan Gorman, Prof Catherine Furlong

School of Policy and Practice, Institute of Education, Dublin City University, Ireland

alan.gorman@dcu.ie, ORCID: 0000-0002-5024-448X

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper examines the conditions that shape and constrain cooperating primary school teachers' readiness to take on mentoring roles within a partnership model of initial teacher education (ITE) in the Republic of Ireland. It examines their understanding of policy expectations, the duality of their roles, and the challenges they face, providing insights into how professional learning can address these issues.

Design/methodology/approach: Adopting a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 cooperating teachers (CTs), all of whom had over 5 years of experience supporting student teachers. Thematic analysis was used to explore their perceptions, challenges, and readiness to engage with the Teaching Council of Ireland's expanded vision of their roles in ITE, focusing on their experiences and professional learning needs.

Findings: The findings identify three themes that shape and constrain CTs' readiness to engage with their evolving mentoring role. First, limited policy awareness highlights a lack of clarity regarding role expectations. Second, CTs identified the conflicting demands placed upon their roles as both mentor and classroom teacher to be challenging, often feeling underprepared or unqualified. Third, fragile institutional relationships point to weak communication between schools and higher education institutions, with minimal systemic support for mentoring.

Originality: This paper highlights the critical role of CTs in bridging theory and practice in ITE, emphasising the need for structured professional learning. By foregrounding readiness for change, the paper offers a lens through which to address the challenges faced by CTs. It flags the importance of collaborative efforts in advancing ITE.

Keywords: Cooperating Teachers, Initial Teacher Education (ITE), Professional Learning, Mentoring, Readiness for Change, HEI–School Partnerships, Teacher Education Policy

Article Classification: Research Paper (empirical research)

Introduction

As education systems undergo cycles of reform, schools, and higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly called upon to form closer partnerships to support the professional development of future teachers (Czerniawski *et al.*, 2019; Murray *et al.*, 2019; Skourdoumbis, 2017; Towers and Maguire, 2023). In the Republic of Ireland (RoI), recent policy developments have intensified this agenda. The Teaching Council (2020, 2021) of Ireland has driven a shift towards increased school placements, HEI–school collaborations and an expanded vision for cooperating teachers (CTs). Within policy, CTs are no longer positioned as passive hosts but as Treoraí (guides), with responsibilities for feedback. The extension of school placement to 30 weeks in concurrent initial teacher education (ITE) programmes (4-year undergraduate) and 24 weeks in consecutive programmes (2-year postgraduate) signals a significant shift in expectations, highlighting the increasingly central role of schools, and CTs themselves, in the professional formation of student teachers. While the above policy texts articulate an ambitious model of mentorship, they offer limited insight into how CTs interpret, internalise, and enact these expectations, or the conditions that support such enactment (Farrell, 2020; Gorman and Furlong, 2023; Heinz and Fleming, 2019). In other words, the success of such ITE reform rests on an under-examined presumption: that CTs are ready, willing, and able to adopt new roles without structured preparation, meaningful role definition, or institutional supports. Readiness for change has long been recognised in wider organisational theory as a central predictor of implementation success or failure (Kurian, 2024; Weiner, 2020). Defined not simply as willingness but as a composite of belief in the value of change and confidence in the collective capacity to realise it, readiness is a precondition for deep, embedded transformation. Building on teacher education literature, which focuses on mentorship, professional learning for the role, and boundary crossing from class teacher to teacher educator, this paper brings the concept of readiness to the fore in order to reframe how we understand the enactment of CT roles in contemporary ITE. Specifically, the paper examines how beliefs, identities, and contexts influence the conditions under which CTs in the RoI adopt or resist the role envisioned by policy. In doing so, the paper makes three key contributions: first, it challenges the implicit assumption that mentoring by CTs can be implemented without cultivating readiness; second, it demonstrates how insights from organisational change theory can enrich our understanding of enactment; and third, it surfaces the voices and experiences of CTs as critical yet often marginalised actors in the ITE policy–practice nexus.

Against this backdrop, the remainder of the paper is structured accordingly. The first section situates the study within a broader body of international literature on CTs, mentoring practices, and HEI–school partnerships, while also introducing the specific RoI policy context that has reframed the roles of CTs in recent years. The second section presents the dual theoretical framework, namely, readiness for change and the apprenticeship of observation, which provides a lens for analysing how CTs engage with policy shifts and role expectations in the RoI. The third section outlines the methodological design, including sampling strategy, data collection within the RoI context, and ethical procedures. The fourth section presents the study’s findings, followed by a theoretically informed discussion of these findings. The paper concludes with implications for policy, practice, and future research on how CTs can be better supported as active agents in ITE reform. While this study is grounded in the context of ITE within the RoI, its significance extends well beyond the RoI. Across jurisdictions, the policy turn towards practice-based ITE has repositioned schools and those who work within them as central to the preparation of future teachers (Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2020; Ellis *et al.*, 2020; Murray *et al.*, 2019; Towers and Maguire, 2023). Yet, many systems have introduced these reforms without adequately addressing the readiness of CTs to assume expanded professional roles. By framing CT engagement through the lens of organisational readiness, this paper offers insights that resonate with international audiences grappling with similar reform agendas.

CTs and their roles

Across the international literature, there is sustained recognition of the shift towards more practice-based models of ITE, where the locus of such preparation is repositioned closer to the realities of school life (Czerniawski *et al.*, 2019; Murray *et al.*, 2019; Skourdoumbis, 2017; Towers and Maguire, 2023). ITE policy internationally has embraced the “practicum turn” (Mattsson *et al.*, 2012), which foregrounds field experience as central to developing student teachers’ professional judgement, identity, and capacity to teach. Within this shift, the role of the CT has gained heightened prominence. School placement is no longer conceptualised merely as an opportunity for student teachers to apply HEI coursework knowledge but as a core site of professional learning where CTs play a formative pedagogical role (Clarke *et al.*, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2020). There is now widespread agreement that the CT’s approach to mentoring, through modelling, dialogue, feedback, and scaffolding, exerts a powerful influence on what and how student teachers learn (Chan, 2019; Ellis *et al.*, 2020; Orland-Barak and

Wang, 2021). Mentoring, however, is a complex and relational task. It is contingent on trust, communication, and institutional coherence (Hagenauer *et al.*, 2021; Nesje and Lejonberg, 2022; Waber *et al.*, 2022). Relationship-building, not only with the student teacher but also with HEIs and their tutors, is critical to supporting a coherent and reciprocal placement experience (Farrell, 2020; Young and MacPhail, 2014). Yet, research highlights persistent challenges: limited time, fragmented communication, and a lack of shared professional language or expectations (Glover *et al.*, 2022; Wilson and Huynh, 2020; Wright and Smith, 2000). These challenges are magnified by the broader structure in which mentoring occurs: the HEI–school partnership. While mentoring is often conceptualised as an individualised activity within the classroom, a growing body of literature argues for its repositioning within the broader framework of HEI–school partnerships (Clarke and Mena, 2020; Ellis *et al.*, 2020; Zeichner, 2021). Although partnership in ITE is still a relatively young research field (Andreasen, 2023), several models have emerged to describe how roles, authority, and epistemologies are distributed across institutions (Furlong, 2013). Among these, three dominant configurations are widely cited: the complementary, collaborative, and HEI-led models. The complementary model operates as a “separatist” arrangement (Smith *et al.*, 2006, p. 149), where HEIs and schools retain siloed responsibilities and student teachers are left to bridge disparate forms of knowledge. The HEI-led model is where the ITE provider holds the decision-making power and often reduces the school’s role to that of implementer rather than co-educator (Furlong, 2013). The collaborative model, by contrast, promotes mutual engagement between institutional actors and seeks to position school- and HEI-based expertise on equal footing. While the collaborative model is often presented as an aspirational ideal, much of the literature suggests that mentoring continues to occur within uneven or loosely coordinated structures. This is because mentoring often unfolds amid limited resources, ambiguous role definitions, and weak structural supports (Zeichner, 2021).

Despite growing policy emphasis on partnership in jurisdictions such as the RoI, the integration of schools’ contributions into ITE remains uneven and often tokenistic, hindered by unclear expectations (Elton-Chalcraft *et al.*, 2020; Farrell, 2020; Green *et al.*, 2020; Heinz and Fleming, 2019). In particular, the triadic structure of student–mentor–tutor relationships, which has long been the cornerstone of placement arrangements, is frequently characterised by epistemic dissonance and blurred lines of responsibility (Rakes *et al.*, 2022). CTs and HEI tutors often operate within separate professional cultures, with little understanding of each other’s norms, priorities, or working conditions (Allen *et al.*, 2013). Real partnership, as commentators note,

requires strategic leadership, sustained dialogue, and the development of relational infrastructures that enable joint design, shared ownership, and sustained professional learning (Czerniawski *et al.*, 2023; Parker *et al.*, 2021; Schatz-Oppenheimer and Goldenberg, 2024; Young *et al.*, 2015). Given that many CTs report drawing on intuition, personal history, or inherited models of mentoring in the absence of formal structures (Allen *et al.*, 2013; Green *et al.*, 2020; Zeichner, 2021), there is a pressing need for a framework that can account for how readiness to mentor is constructed, constrained, and sustained in practice. This study begins to address that need by applying a dual conceptual framework, organisational readiness for change (Weiner, 2020) and the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975), to examine the situated conditions under which CTs enact or resist their evolving mentoring role within ITE.

The Irish context

Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education (Teaching Council, 2020) and *Guidelines on School Placement* (Teaching Council, 2021) form a strategic drive to increase the duration and timing of placements within ITE and strengthen HEI–school partnerships. Under these policy standards, concurrent ITE programmes (4 years) must include a minimum of 30 weeks of school placement, while consecutive postgraduate programmes (2 years) must provide no fewer than 24 weeks. A key element of this reform is the requirement that student teachers complete one extended block placement, typically in the final year of their studies. The intention is to provide an authentic induction into the profession, enabling student teachers to participate meaningfully in the full life of the school across a sustained period, rather than through fragmented, episodic engagement.

Both policy texts *expand* the CT’s responsibilities, marking a shift from “place giver” (Coolahan, 2003) to a central role in the partnership model (Furlong and Gorman, 2025; Gorman and Furlong, 2023; Heinz and Fleming, 2019; Mitchell *et al.*, 2023). *Guidelines on School Placement* reflect a significant expansion of the mentoring role, shifting the focus from passive supervision to active co-education. The Treoraí is expected to “introduce the student teacher to: the pupils, the classroom, the teacher’s plan of work for that class, class rules and procedures, and the roles of other staff directly involved with the pupils in the class” (Teaching Council, 2021, p. 20). In addition, they are required to “afford the student teacher opportunities to observe their teaching (and that of their colleagues)”, “inform the student teacher regarding pupils’ needs and attainments”, and “assign the teaching of areas of the curriculum to the student teacher while retaining the primary responsibility for the progress of the pupils”

(Teaching Council, 2021, p. 20). Planning and feedback are also central to the role: the Treoraí should “discuss the student teacher’s planning and resources with them as appropriate”, “observe the student teacher’s practice and provide oral or written feedback to the student teacher in an encouraging and sensitive manner”, and “encourage, support and facilitate the student teacher in: critical reflection on their practice, the use of a variety of teaching methodologies and in engaging with and responding appropriately to feedback from pupils” (Teaching Council, 2021, p. 20). CTs are expected to “allow student teachers to teach independently, as their competence develops (in line with HEI requirements for the particular placement), and as deemed appropriate by Treoraí and the principal” (Teaching Council, 2021, p. 20). Importantly, the guidelines foreground collaboration: the Treoraí should “work collaboratively with the student teacher, the school placement tutor and the school principal” and “advise the principal of any serious concerns regarding a student teacher’s practice or professional conduct” (Teaching Council, 2021, p. 20). The document also acknowledges the workload implications of this evolving role, recommending that CTs “have discretionary time while student teachers teach independently to facilitate engagement with the student teachers at other time” (Teaching Council, 2021, p. 20). Collectively, these directives position the CT as a central figure in the formation of the student teacher’s professional identity and capacity, reflecting an ambitious policy vision that requires significant professional commitment, pedagogical skill, and institutional alignment (Young *et al.*, 2015). Yet, commentators in the Irish context have observed that these expectations outpace the system’s own readiness (Hall *et al.* 2018; O’Donoghue *et al.* 2017). The lack of an implementation plan and meaningful learning for schools “threatens the very essence of the reform agenda” (Harford and O’Doherty, 2016, p. 39). While *Guidelines on School Placement* set out clear expectations for CTs, school leadership, and HEIs, they fall short in addressing the resourcing implications of partnership and professional learning (Gorman and Furlong, 2023). This omission places considerable strain on HEIs, which carry primary responsibility for sourcing, coordinating, and overseeing school placements. Placement organisation involves negotiating with schools to secure availability, matching student teachers to appropriate contexts, and ensuring that arrangements comply with national regulatory standards. In addition to this, HEIs also hold formal responsibility for the assessment of student teachers through the placement tutor role, fulfilled by full-time academic staff or part-time tutors. Placement tutors are tasked with visiting schools, observing lessons, providing formative feedback, contributing to assessment, and liaising with CTs to monitor student progress and ensure pedagogical alignment (Teaching Council, 2020, 2021). A review of school placement in the RoI (Hall *et al.*, 2018) drew

attention to these systemic pressures, due to the absence of a formal HEI–school partnership model and the lack of a nationally coordinated approach to school placement. Without such a structure, the work of partnership remains diffuse, under-resourced, and highly variable across institutions. Furthermore, despite its centrality to ITE, placement coordination and the role of the tutor are often undervalued within institutional cultures that prioritise research output and academic publishing (Gorman and Furlong, 2023; Hall *et al.*, 2018). This reflects a broader international tension, where the practicum component of ITE education programmes must compete for institutional recognition alongside research-intensive disciplines and is often rendered invisible or peripheral (Zeichner, 2021). In this context, the vision of partnership articulated in policy is constrained not only by a lack of national coordination but also by the ways institutional priorities limit the time, recognition, and support needed to build and sustain meaningful HEI–school partnerships.

Theoretical framework

As recent Teaching Council (2020, 2021) policies in the RoI have redefined school placement as a structured partnership in which CTs are expected not only to host student teachers but to actively mentor, observe, provide feedback, and co-educate. Against this backdrop, the study examines the extent to which CTs are ready (cognitively, emotionally, and contextually) to meet these new demands. To do so, it draws on *readiness for change* theory (Weiner, 2020), which conceptualises readiness not as a fixed personal attribute but as a multifaceted construct. It also integrates Lortie’s (1975) *apprenticeship of observation*, which accounts for how teachers’ past experiences as learners of teaching continue to shape their assumptions and practices in the absence of formal professional learning. This dual framework provides a means of moving beyond functionalist accounts of mentoring roles to examine the psychological, relational, and institutional conditions under which CTs experience their evolving responsibilities.

Weiner (2020) conceptualises readiness for change as grounded in two mutually reinforcing components: change commitment and change efficacy. Change commitment reflects the values attached to the change: the belief that the change is desirable, appropriate, and worth pursuing. Change efficacy, on the other hand, captures the perceived capacity to implement the change successfully, given their understanding of task demands, resource availability, and situational context. CTs exhibit a commitment to mentoring when there is a shared belief that mentoring is valuable (Hobson and Maxwell, 2020). In such contexts, CTs do not view mentoring as an

imposed obligation but rather as a meaningful professional act, integrated into their identity and legitimised by policy, system, and school culture (Hope *et al.*, 2022). (System) leadership plays a key role here: when mentoring is recognised as highly important in public and policy discourse, it reinforces value attribution (Brennan and Gorman, 2023; Gorman and Hall, 2023; Hobson and Maxwell, 2020; Oh *et al.*, 2024; Relihan and O'Donovan, 2024). Conversely, if mentoring is viewed as an optional add-on to existing work or a professional courtesy extended to the HEI, CTs may therefore participate in mentoring on an episodic basis.

Change efficacy reflects the belief that change can be successfully enacted. In mentoring, this involves judgements about the clarity of the role, the support available, and the feasibility of integrating mentoring into existing working practices and routines. CTs are more likely to express high efficacy when the expectations of the role are clearly articulated, they receive structured support for the role, time is allocated for mentoring tasks, professional learning is contextual and sustained, and they operate in a collegial environment with other mentors (Hobson and Maxwell, 2020; Hope *et al.*, 2022; Mishnick *et al.* 2024). When these conditions are absent, when the mentoring role is ill-defined, unsupported, or perceived as unmanageable, efficacy appraisals decline (Larsen *et al.*, 2023; Murtagh and Dawes, 2021; Shanks *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, Weiner (2020) stresses that readiness is not a static or individual quality but is shaped by the interplay of leadership actions, professional norms, contextual influences, and external supports. This view has critical implications for understanding CT engagement in mentoring. Even in schools where individual CTs are willing and experienced, the absence of collective readiness within the school may constrain their practice.

The suitability of Weiner's readiness framework is enhanced when situated alongside Lortie's (1975) apprenticeship of observation, which helps account for how CTs interpret and perform the mentoring role based on their own socialisation. Lortie's theory does not specifically pertain to the concept of mentoring. He theorised that teachers accumulate tacit pedagogical understandings through prolonged exposure to classroom settings during their own schooling. This "apprenticeship" forms deeply internalised beliefs about teaching, its norms, routines, and identities, before any formal ITE takes place. Crucially, this form of observational learning is unexamined and untheorised: it produces a cemented view of teaching as autonomous, individualised, and technique-focused. For CTs, drawing on the above theory, the paper argues that the apprenticeship experiences can often shape how CTs approach mentoring. CTs may replicate their own mentors' behaviour, whether that was directive, minimal, or evaluative.

They may fall back on implicit knowledge, resisting structured models of feedback or dialogic engagement (Clarke and Mena, 2020). When combined with Weiner's model, Lortie's theory provides an account of how cognitive constraints on mentoring behaviour may persist even in high-readiness environments. A school may exhibit collective commitment and efficacy, but if CTs reproduce uncritical or outdated mentoring models, the implementation of high-quality mentoring may be stunted. In schools where experienced staff valorise traditional models of mentoring, novice teachers may find their emerging beliefs of effective mentoring unsupported. Conversely, where mentoring is associated with professional dialogue, formative feedback, and guidance, CTs may internally challenge earlier beliefs.

Methodology

This research was guided by a central question: What shapes and constrains CTs' readiness to engage with the evolving mentoring role within ITE? It is grounded in a conceptualisation of readiness as an emergent, multidimensional construct shaped by beliefs, experiences, and contextual affordances (Weiner, 2020). Consistent with Weiner's theoretical framing, readiness in this study is understood not as an outcome to be measured, but as a lived, situated process influenced by institutional, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics. A qualitative design was therefore chosen to elicit rich, interpretive accounts of how readiness is constructed, constrained, and enacted in context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The data gathering and analysis took place in the 2023/24 academic year. A criterion-based purposive sampling strategy (Creswell and Poth, 2016) was employed to ensure that CTs met specific inclusion criteria relevant to the study's aims. Recruitment was carried out through a combination of professional networks and direct outreach to schools. While it was initially planned to recruit up to 20 CTs across different schools, 15 CTs from four schools committed to the study. All 15 CTs were registered primary school teachers, working with children aged 5 to 12 years. They had a minimum of 5 years' experience as CTs and had mentored student teachers under the revised Teaching Council policy. This approach ensured that the CTs in this study had sufficient exposure to the changing demands of the mentoring role and were well-positioned to reflect critically on their experiences and readiness. In addition to meeting the above criteria, a maximum variation approach was employed to capture a broad range of perspectives across various school contexts (three urban and one rural primary school). Additionally, the CTs had varying histories of engagement in school placements. While all had hosted student teachers, the frequency and depth of this engagement varied, with some taking

student teachers annually and others doing so more occasionally. Table I provides an overview of the CTs in the study.

Insert Table I near here.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to provide a consistent structure while allowing for flexibility and depth (Marshall and Rossman, 2014). The interview protocol was designed to probe multiple dimensions of readiness as conceptualised in the theoretical framework, namely, change commitment, change efficacy, and the influence of apprenticeship of observation. Questions were also informed by recent research on mentoring, professional identity, and partnership enactment in ITE. Table I contains a sample of interview questions.

Insert Table II near here.

The data were analysed thematically using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Initial coding was guided deductively by the theoretical framework while remaining open to emergent themes through inductive coding. The research team conducted multiple rounds of analysis and cross-checking, utilising analytical memos to support reflexivity throughout. Although the option for additional recruitment remained open, the data gathered were sufficiently rich and comprehensive, with clear and consistent patterns emerging. The researchers' institution granted ethical approval for the study (DCUREC/2020/258), and all CTs provided written informed consent in accordance with national and institutional ethical guidelines. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. The CTs were assured that their individual views would not be shared with colleagues or school leadership and that all data would be anonymised in publication.

Findings

In responding to the research question, the findings suggest that while CTs demonstrate professional commitment and a willingness to support student teachers, their readiness is significantly shaped and, in many cases, constrained by policy ambiguity, identity tensions, and institutional disconnection. Throughout the findings, these descriptive terms are used to indicate the prevalence of views: “all CTs” (15), “most” (11–14), “many” (8–10), “several” (5–7), “some” (3–4), and “a few” (1–2). The sole purpose of this is to transparently reflect the extent of shared experiences across the sample (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Limited policy awareness and variability in enactment

Despite their active involvement in school placement, most CTs demonstrated limited awareness of the policies guiding their role. While all recognised that placements had increased in duration, few could name the policy documents that underpinned this reform. “I thought it was colleges that made these changes” (James). Regardless of who bore responsibility for the reforms, the CTs predominantly exhibited low change commitment, as they did not appear to attribute strong value to these reforms. The extended placement in many final year programmes of ITE generated significant concern, with many refusing to commit to this placement. This refusal was borne out of a scepticism towards its pedagogical value and practical implications. “It’s a long time, a big chunk of the term. If you have a bad student, it is dreadful” (Sally). Niall explained,

At the end of the day, if the student teacher is not performing and I have to play catch-up, who is going to support me? The college, no? The principal, no. It will be left to me. That, I think, is the biggest worry.

Several CTs expressed concern that if a student teacher underperformed, it could negatively impact children’s performance in standardised assessment tests (SATs). Claire noted,

Parents are watching everything. They are all about how the kids perform in the MIRCA-Ts and SIGMA-Ts [primary literacy and mathematics SATs in the RoI], and their expectations can make it difficult to give the class over to a student teacher.

These reactions highlight not only practical anxieties but also a perceived lack of institutional support or risk mitigation strategies, which in turn shaped CTs’ disposition towards placement and their willingness to take students.

This policy ambiguity extended beyond broad awareness of reform to the specifics of role enactment. Many CTs demonstrated only a fragmented understanding of what the CT role formally entails under the Teaching Council’s (2021) *Guidelines on School Placement*. This ambiguity led to divergent practices around core functions such as observation and feedback. Some CTs intuitively viewed these as central to the mentoring process: “They are joining our profession; they all need mentoring” (Joan). Others framed feedback as circumstantial or unnecessary: “Sometimes you don’t really need to give them advice at all” (Richard). In addition, some viewed certain responsibilities as external to their role: “I’d be happy enough

to leave that in the hands of the inspector,” noted Ken, in reference to providing feedback on planning and teaching. These diverse responses point to low and uneven change efficacy, where CTs’ perceptions of their ability to engage meaningfully in mentoring were shaped less by formal role clarity. Compounding this is the influence of what Lortie (1975) termed the “apprenticeship of observation”. Many CTs appeared to enact their role not through engagement with formal guidance, but via deeply internalised notions of what mentoring “looks like”, based on their own experiences as student teachers: “I support students in the way that I was supported on placement. I am there to help them when they need help like getting the class organised or if they need resources for their lesson” (Paul). This was evident in the varied interpretations of mentoring responsibilities. Some CTs described a hands-on, coaching-style approach:

It is important that when I take on a student, I view them as a learner, and I ensure that I am there at all times to help them guide them – not let them sink or swim – but to help them and support them by giving feedback on their lessons – structure, design, delivery.
(Anna)

Others saw themselves as simply providing space for students to work independently: “I leave them to it. It won’t help if I am there watching and commenting on everything. They need to learn and stand on their own two feet. That is how I learned” (Laura).

Emotional tensions and identity struggles in enacting dual roles

The findings also revealed that CTs experienced significant affective and identity-related tensions when attempting to fulfil the dual responsibilities of classroom teacher and mentor. CTs expressed ambivalence and at times anxiety about relinquishing control of their classroom. Concerns about student teachers’ competence, the academic progress of pupils, and reputational risk among school leadership and parents converged to produce a sense of vulnerability. “If you’re giving up control of your class, and it doesn’t go well, you’re the one who has to pick up the pieces” (Andrea). CTs consistently positioned their primary responsibility as being to the children in their class, with mentoring student teachers often viewed as a secondary or even competing obligation. For many CTs, the dissonance between the expectations of mentoring and their day-to-day realities in the classroom contributed to a conflicted internal stance towards the role:

My first and most important priority is the children in my class – their learning has to take priority. Having a student teacher is secondary and sometimes demands that are made, like give feedback or fill out templates, take time that we need to support children with needs in the class. (Sally)

They expressed discomfort with assuming the identity of a “teacher educator”. Many distanced themselves from this label, viewing their input as informal, experience-based, and outside the formal domain of professional preparation: “I just give them advice based on what’s worked for me ... that’s not really educating them, is it?” (Sabrina). Anna felt that “being called a teacher educator is something I am cautious about, as it means that we have a new responsibility to educate teachers, when in fact that is what the colleges do and what they are qualified to do”. Furthermore, CTs’ reluctance to engage in the role of teacher educator highlights a further expression of low change efficacy. While most CTs were comfortable offering informal advice or feedback, they were wary of assuming responsibility for an official part in the student teacher’s progress: “I have no issue giving feedback on classroom organisation but I would not be comfortable assessing the student – that would be a whole new role and more so, where would we get time?” (Ken). This was not a matter of workload; it reflected a lack of confidence in their legitimacy and preparedness to make such judgements. “I’ll give my view, but I wouldn’t want to be the one grading them. That’s for the college” (Evan). This positioning reveals the fragility of role confidence in the absence of clear structures, professional learning, or institutional affirmation, factors which Weiner identifies as central to fostering efficacy appraisals.

Fragile institutional relationships that hinder systemic collaboration

CTs also felt that they received minimal support from HEIs. Communication from HEIs was often indirect, arriving through school principals with little specificity or personal engagement. “Colleges and tutors need to talk to teachers about it [placement] ... sometimes teachers just think they [HEIs] want the class and nothing more” (Ella). Several CTs noted that, even when student responsibilities were outlined, CTs were rarely given guidance on their own involvement. “There’s never really anything for us ... it’s as if our role is assumed, not explained” (Sabrina). Their sense of disconnection from the HEI was compounded by the nature of tutor visits, which were typically short. CTs felt they had limited opportunity for meaningful professional dialogue with the tutor: “A tutor only sees a snippet ... whereas you’re there for the entire day ... a tutor really only whispers to you at the back of the classroom”

(Susan). Several CTs in the research expressed a strong desire for more communication: “It would be good if there were more contact between the teacher and the inspector [tutor] when they come in ... to discuss how the student is getting on overall ... they could take on board what the teacher is saying” (Laura). Notably, the HEI placement tutor is colloquially referred to as the “inspector” in many schools in the RoI, reflecting both a historical framing and the evaluative perception often associated with their visits.

The absence of structured professional learning further undermined their readiness for this redeveloped role, and again, they felt that HEIs could be more active in addressing this. While some CTs reported participating in optional workshops or briefing sessions, these were inconsistent across HEIs and not systemically embedded: “Different colleges have different expectations, so it’s hard to keep on top of what each college wants us to do” (Susan). Without systemic structures to build shared capacity, CTs were left to navigate their roles individually: “You’re asked to do more, but you’re not really brought into the fold” (Ella). This speaks to a broader failure of the wider system to cultivate a sense of collective commitment to mentoring as a valued and supported professional act.

While much of the data presented in these three themes reflects concerns, ambivalence, and constraints experienced by CTs, it is important to note that this does not equate to wholesale rejection of the mentoring role. Several CTs expressed a clear commitment to supporting student teachers. However, these positive dispositions were consistently expressed alongside caveats relating to unclear expectations, lack of support, or doubts about legitimacy, which will be examined in the forthcoming section.

Discussion

Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education (Teaching Council, 2020) and *Guidelines on School Placement* (Teaching Council, 2021) call for CTs to serve as Treoraí, pedagogical guides with responsibilities, but the data suggest that these expectations have not been fully realised in practice. Despite the expectation that “all student teachers on placement should be assigned a suitable Treoraí who is committed to working with and supporting them” (Teaching Council, 2021, p. 14), many CTs in this study displayed only partial or inaccurate understandings of their role within the key policies underpinning school placement, resulting in formal responsibilities being unevenly understood. Thus, this impacted CTs’ readiness to enact the reimagined roles within Teaching Council policy. Furthermore, several CTs

interpreted their role primarily through past experiences rather than through current policy guidance. Rather than referring to formal expectations, many drew on what their own mentors had done during their time as student teachers, sometimes decades earlier. While this experiential inheritance can provide a baseline for practice, it risks reinforcing outdated or inconsistent models of mentoring, particularly in the absence of professional learning or structured role clarification (Clarke and Mena, 2020; Lammert *et al.*, 2020; Lortie, 1975). These unexamined traditions led to divergent interpretations of the mentoring role: some CTs believed regular feedback and hands-on guidance were essential. In contrast, others saw mentoring as more passive or optional. The inconsistent enactment of formal duties, such as feedback, observation, or collaboration, suggests that the vision of a Treoraí as an intentional co-educator remains aspirational rather than embedded in practice. While CTs were generally supportive of student teachers, they expressed discomfort with relinquishing full classroom control, particularly during the now-standard extended placement. For some CTs, placements, particularly those of extended duration, posed challenges not just in terms of classroom management or planning but in relation to their own sense of professional responsibility. CTs often cited concerns about their pupils' learning and the reputational risks associated with a poorly performing student teacher (Hagenauer *et al.*, 2021; Parks, 2024). These affective responses suggest low mentoring efficacy: CTs may support the idea of mentoring in principle but feel ill-equipped to address the more complex relational dimensions, as described by Hobson *et al.* (2009), Hudson and Hudson (2010), and Parker *et al.* (2021). Weiner (2020) notes that change efficacy is shaped not only by perceived skill but by organisational support. Here, the absence of professional learning appeared to limit CTs' confidence in guiding student teachers in line with the policy vision.

The data also reflect a profound lack of contextual readiness. While the Teaching Council (2021) encourages collaboration between the student teacher, the CT, and the HEI placement tutor, the CTs in the study described minimal engagement with HEIs. According to Weiner (2020), readiness is not merely a function of individual capacity but of the organisational and cultural conditions that make role fulfilment possible. In the absence of clear structures, sustained communication, and meaningful investment, mentoring work becomes precarious, undervalued, and difficult to sustain (Hope *et al.*, 2022). As Gorman and Furlong (2023) have argued, *Guidelines on School Placement* (Teaching Council, 2021) create expectations without offering the resourcing or infrastructure to support the key partners in meeting them, despite repeated calls for investment in the literature (Hall *et al.*, 2018; Harford and O'Doherty, 2016;

Heinz and Fleming, 2019; Moody, 2009). Despite the centrality of school placement within ITE, wider HEI priorities (e.g., research output) often overshadow the work of organising, supporting, and sustaining school placements (Brennan *et al.*, 2024; Zeichner, 2021). This undervaluing has several knock-on effects. First, it reinforces a view that placement is operational rather than pedagogical work. Second, it constrains the capacity of HEIs and tutors to build meaningful relationships with CTs or schools due to time-limited visits and competing priorities. As a result, the relational and pedagogical work required for mentoring, feedback, dialogue, modelling, and reflection becomes disconnected from the HEI-based agenda that is intended to support it (Hall *et al.*, 2018). Thus, the formalisation of the Treoraí role represents a significant cultural change in the Irish education system, a shift that, as Hall *et al.* (2018) and O'Donoghue *et al.* (2017) note, may be too steep without corresponding investment. The notion that CTs will internalise complex new responsibilities without professional learning, time allocation, or recognition is unrealistic. It is only through collaborative structures, embedded professional learning, and HEI support that readiness can become a real and sustainable part of the ITE system (Hobson and Maxwell, 2020; Oh *et al.*, 2024).

Conclusion

This study has interrogated the conditions under which CTs in the RoI navigate their evolving role within a policy and practice landscape. In doing so, it advances an original and much-needed contribution to the field by reframing CTs' engagement not as a fixed professional responsibility but as a dynamic and context-sensitive process of readiness. While the literature has long recognised the importance of the CT, this paper breaks new ground by using the readiness for change framework to disentangle the multifaceted nature of role preparedness. By centring Weiner's (2020) theory of organisational readiness for change, the study offers a fresh lens for understanding how CTs' engagement with mentoring is shaped by belief, efficacy, and systemic conditions. Readiness must be cultivated through deliberate, co-constructed, and sustained professional learning, supported by policymakers, schools, and HEIs (Hope *et al.*, 2022). In terms of future research, the framework advanced here invites empirical explorations in other national contexts and large-scale studies. Comparative studies could explore how readiness is fostered or neglected in systems with differing levels of policy centralisation or partnership maturity. Further research might also examine the interplay between HEI tutor readiness and CT readiness as a means of developing a fuller picture of institutional preparedness for collaborative partnerships. While this study contributes new

insights to the field, limitations must be acknowledged. First, the data reflect the perspectives of a relatively small group of experienced CTs within a specific national context. While the readiness for change framework offers a valuable lens, it does not exhaust the conceptual possibilities for understanding mentoring roles. Further research might usefully explore how this framework intersects with constructs such as professional identity, boundary work, or agency in times of reform.

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Table I: Overview of participants (Source: Authors own work)

Participant	Teaching experience	School name	Profile
Andrea	8 years	Oakhill School	Junior mixed primary school (5–8-year-olds)
Anna	21 years	Sycamorelawn School	Mixed urban primary school (5–12-year-olds)
Claire	7 years	Oakhill School	Junior mixed primary school (5–8-year-olds)
Ella	6 years	Seaview School	Mixed rural primary school (5–12-year-olds)
Evan	13 years	Beechfield School	Senior mixed primary school (9–12-year-olds)
James	11 years	Beechfield School	Senior mixed primary school (9–12-year-olds)
Joan	17 years	Sycamorelawn School	Mixed urban primary school (5–12-year-olds)
Ken	9 years	Beechfield School	Senior mixed primary school (9–12-year-olds)
Laura	18 years	Sycamorelawn School	Mixed urban primary school (5–12-year-olds)
Niall	15 years	Oakhill School	Junior mixed primary school (5–8-year-olds)
Paul	8 years	Beechfield School	Senior mixed primary school (9–12-year-olds)
Richard	13 years	Seaview School	Mixed rural primary school (5–12-year-olds)
Sabrina	7 years	Beechfield School	Senior mixed primary school (9–12-year-olds)
Sally	13 years	Oakhill School	Junior mixed primary school (5–8-year-olds)
Susan	23 years	Seaview School	Mixed rural primary school (5–12-year-olds)

Table II: Sample of interview questions (Source: Authors own work)

Topic	Sample questions
Understanding of role and expectations	How would you describe your role in supporting student teachers during placements? Have you noticed any changes in expectations of this role in recent years? If so, how have you experienced these changes?
Confidence and capacity	To what extent do you feel confident and prepared to mentor student teachers? What challenges, tensions, or uncertainties do you face when taking on this role?
Support structures and communication	What kinds of support, if any, do you receive from your school or the HEI? Can you describe the communication you've had with university tutors or placement coordinators?
Reflections on mentoring practice	Do you mentor the way you were mentored as a student teacher? Why or why not? What do you think makes mentoring successful, or unsuccessful?