

The findings of the survey of mentoring in geography education

Maria Palombo, Lauren Hammond and David Mitchell

Last year's survey of geography mentors (Hammond *et al.*, 2019) aimed to provide mentors with an opportunity to share their ideas about, and experiences of, mentoring. It posited that although mentors, who we conceptualised as an under-used and under-represented community in geography education, are increasingly recognised in policy about (initial) teacher education (Carter, 2015; DfE, 2016; 2019), there has been relatively little consideration of the role of the subject in mentoring. This raises concerns that mentoring could become over-focussed on the technical and managerial elements of teaching and neglect the complex process of 'curriculum making' (GA, 2009; Lambert and Morgan, 2010). This requires teachers to draw upon geography as a discipline, to inform decisions when balancing student experiences, pedagogical choices and geography as a school subject.

The intention of the survey was to obtain a more nuanced picture of mentoring in geography education, and the data we gathered was structured around three questions:

- Who are geography mentors (and who do they mentor)?
- What is geography mentors' current practice (and why)?
- What development and progression opportunities would geography mentors like (and why)?

Our findings suggest that drawing on the discipline of geography and the notion of 'educative mentoring' (Langdon and Ward, 2015) could support mentors and mentees and improve mentors' professional development – professionalism is a much debated concept in education and there is not the space to examine these ideas here.

Who are geography mentors, and who do they mentor?

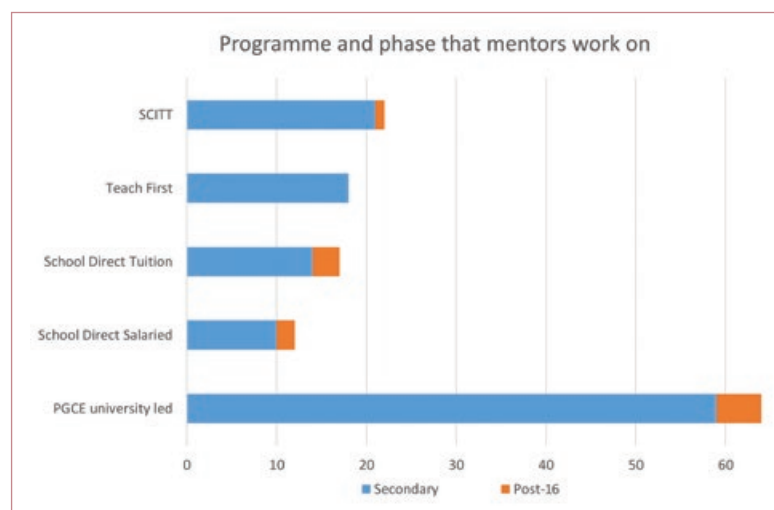
To answer this question we examined the academic and professional backgrounds of geography mentors. These are pertinent concerns, as teacher education moves away from academic disciplines – what Bernstein (2000) terms 'reservoirs' of knowledge – and becomes increasingly school-based (DfE, 2017). We also drew on the mentees' backgrounds, both the phase and the programme they are training to teach in.

Of the 87 mentors who responded, 77 % had an undergraduate degree in the discipline, with a further 18 % holding Masters level qualifications. Almost all were qualified teachers, with 95 % holding a PGCE or equivalent qualification.

Drawing on Brooks' (2016) work on subject identity in geography teachers, we assert that when subject mentoring is strong, mentors draw on their discipline to support the mentee in both curriculum making, and in navigating the complexities of school and classroom life. In short, they support the mentee in drawing on the 'reservoirs' of knowledge that are geography and education, to develop their 'repertoires' of practice as a geography teacher (Bernstein, 2000).

42 % had been teaching for ten or more years and 9 % for less than two years. Tapsfield (2019), in the context of early career teachers and ITE, defines mentoring as 'when an experienced teacher helps to train new geography teachers for the profession' (p. 3). It is difficult to pinpoint when a teacher is experienced enough to be a school-based mentor, but these varied levels of teaching experience suggest that decisions about when a teacher is ready to mentor are likely to be subjective and context-specific.

We asked mentors to indicate which teacher education programmes they worked with. Figure 1 shows the percentage of mentors working in each route into teaching. Most were based in the secondary phase, and none in the primary phase.



Over 60 % of respondents worked with PGCE students, so our respondents did not reflect national trends in ITE: 47 % of trainee teachers choose a university-led route into teaching (DfE, 2017). Furthermore, a third of mentors worked with two or more teacher education programmes. This may reflect the increasingly diverse landscape of teacher education, with more routes into teaching than ever before, and may also be representative of the current issues in recruitment and retention of geography teachers in England (Tapsfield, 2015; 2018; DfE, 2018).

Maria, Lauren and David report on the findings of the mentoring survey launched in the Spring 2019 issue.



Accompanying online materials

Figure 1: Programme and phase that mentors work in.

What is geography mentors' current practice, and why?

The survey found that the most frequent mentoring activity was evaluating and feeding back on teaching, and critiquing classroom practice (Figure 2). To enrich the survey data, mentors were able to offer qualitative comments and rationales. One mentor who works with a university-led PGCE programme, referring to their mentee's progress, offered an insight into their philosophy:

We run a continual process – lesson planning, observation and reflection – which are done daily rather than weekly. This enables us to make sustained progress.

During our analysis of the data we examined the differences in mentoring practices between routes into teaching, and one trend we identified is that mentors working on the Teach First programme did not evaluate and feedback on lessons as frequently as those on other routes. The most frequent Teach First mentoring practice was developing student teachers' lesson aims and objectives. This may be due to the differences in their teacher training model: after a six-week 'summer institute' Teach

First trainees have a reduced teaching allocation, and are expected to teach in their classrooms alone. In contrast, on a university-led PGCE programme, the school-based mentor usually remains in the classroom with the mentee, which offers more opportunities for observation, evaluation and feedback on the mentee's teaching.

All correspondents cited supporting teachers to become reflective practitioners, engaging in coaching conversations and providing general pedagogical advice as frequent mentoring activities. Tapsfield (2019) highlights the importance to geography student teachers of becoming a reflective practitioner, so it is encouraging that many of the geography mentors recognise this and incorporate it into their practice.

The least frequent activity was encouraging the mentee to engage with the subject community and/or subject associations, with only 32 % of mentors doing this once a week. This is a significant omission, as engagement with the subject community can offer professional development opportunities for both mentor and mentee. For example, through conferences and special interest groups, which often draw upon, and/or contribute to, geography education as a 'reservoir' of knowledge.

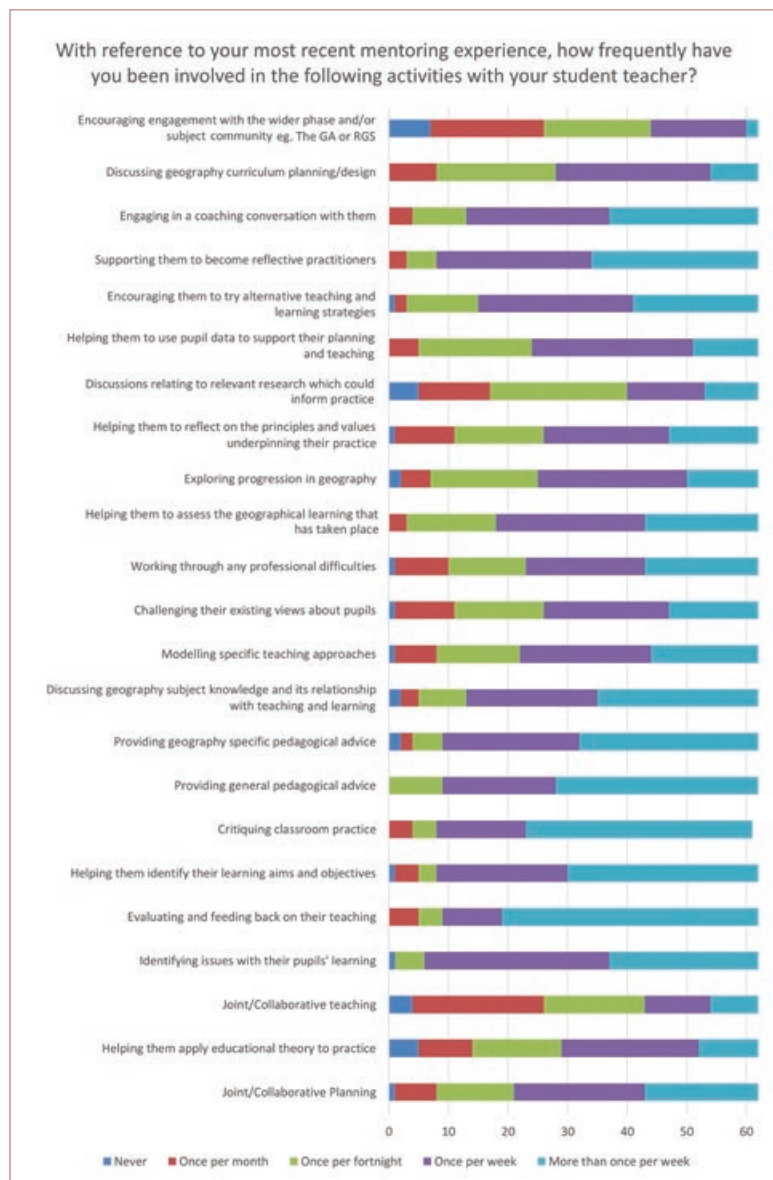
Only three respondents commented on the benefit of mentoring for themselves, with one respondent stating 'I learn so much from trainees'. This can be interpreted as an educative approach to mentoring, which regards '... teachers and learners and the classroom as a site of inquiry' (Langdon and Ward, 2015, p. 243). In educative mentoring the mentor and mentee are collaborative enquirers who can learn from each other, drawing upon the 'reservoir' of geography education knowledge when trying to resolve issues and develop their practice.

What development and progression opportunities would geography mentors like, and why?

64 % of mentors reported that they had attended generic mentor training, with only 30 % expressing that they had attended geography specific training. A worrying 6 % reported receiving no training at all. Analysis of the responses about the content of mentor training showed a frequent focus on paperwork, details of the course structure, and consideration of the role of the mentor. 8 % of mentors reported that mentor training had offered support and/or an opportunity to discuss issues that might arise when mentoring (e.g. having a difficult conversation about student progress). However, very few mentors referred to any geography-specific training in their qualitative responses.

Mentor training in teacher education is often focused on technical and managerial elements, with limited opportunities to consider the role and value of the subject. However, our respondents would most value subject-specific input to support their development as geography mentors and teachers (Figure 3): 63 % selected conferences related to their geography and 65 % selected the development of local geography mentor networks.

Figure 2: Survey responses on mentor practices.



In support of your role as a geography mentor, please rate the following examples of support, training and development from most valuable to not valuable at all.

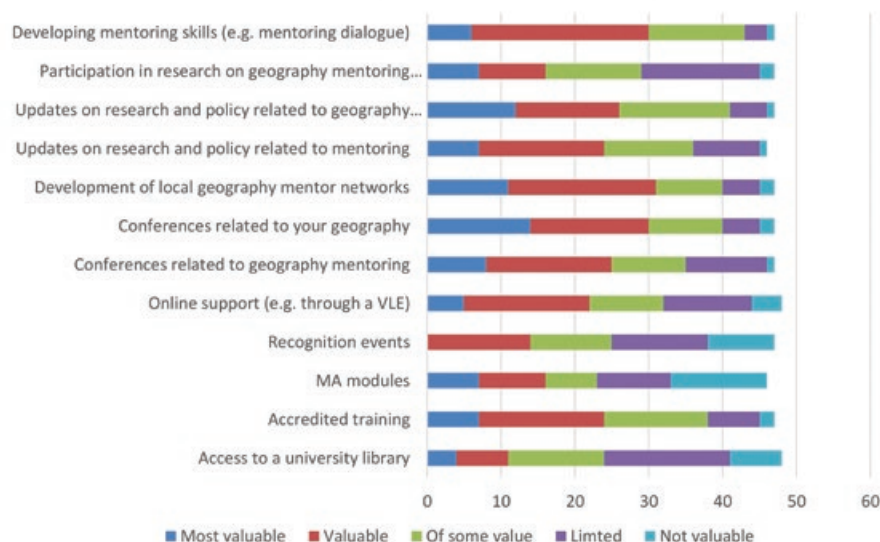


Figure 3: What support would mentors value?

Conclusions

The role of the mentor is critically important to teacher education and is increasingly recognised as such in government policy. It is also a significant professional development opportunity for the mentor. By drawing on both the discipline of geography and the field of education, mentor development can be re-framed as 'educative geography mentoring' to support beginning and early career teachers.

While mentors are generally subject specialists, they have varied levels of experience as teachers. In addition, although mentors would like further training and development focussed on geography,

teaching geography and mentoring in geography, current training does not reflect these aspirations.

The number of different routes into teaching accounts for an increasingly diverse mentoring landscape, and may also reflect current recruitment and retention issues.

Affirming Brooks' (2016) work on subject identity in geography teaching, our survey found that when subject mentoring is strong, mentors draw on their discipline – the 'reservoirs' of knowledge that are geography and education – to help the mentee develop their 'repertoires' of practice as a geography teacher (Bernstein, 2000). | **TG**

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Online resources

A larger version of Figure 2 is available to download. Go to www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Teaching-geography and select Spring 2020.

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