

Reflecting on the findings of the mentoring in geography education survey

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This article reports back on the survey of geography mentors launched in the spring 2019 edition of *Teaching Geography* (Hammond et al., 2019). The survey aimed to provide mentors, who we conceptualised as an under-used and under-represented community in geography education, with an opportunity to share their ideas about, and experiences of, mentoring. It posited that although mentors are increasingly recognised in policy about (initial) teacher education (Carter, 2015; DfE 2016; 2019), there has been relatively limited consideration of the role of the subject in mentoring. This raises concerns about mentoring potentially becoming over-focussed on technical and managerial elements of teaching, thus neglecting the complex process of 'curriculum making' (GA 2009; Lambert and Morgan 2010). This requires the teacher 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 gather data from mentors, to gain a more nuanced picture of mentoring in geography education, and was structured around three questions:

- Who are geography mentors (and who do they mentor)?
- How do geography mentors currently mentor (and why)?
- What development and progression opportunities would geography mentors like (and why)?

In this article, we argue that by drawing on the disciplines of geography, and education through the notion of 'educative mentoring' (Langdon and Ward, 2015), mentors could be further developed whilst supporting trainee, and early career, teachers.

Who are geography mentors, and who do they mentor?

In addressing this question we focus on examining the academic and professional backgrounds of geography mentors. We suggest these are pertinent concerns as teacher education becomes increasingly school-based (DfE, 2017) moving away from what Bernstein (2000) terms the 'reservoirs' of knowledge that are academic disciplines. We also draw on data on mentees, focussing on both the phase and programme they are training to teach in.

There were 87 respondents to the survey, 77% of whom had an academic background in geography holding an undergraduate degree in the discipline, with a further 18% holding Masters level qualifications. Almost all of the mentors were qualified teachers with 95% holding a PGCE or equivalent qualification. Drawing on Brooks' (2016) list 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 'repertoire' of practice as a geography teacher (Bernstein, 2000).

42% of mentors had been teaching for 10 years or more with 9% teaching for less than two years. It is difficult to suggest at what point a teacher is experienced enough to be a school-based mentor, but the data helps to paint a picture that mentors in geography education have varied levels of experience of teaching geography. Tapsfield (2019) defines mentoring in the context of early career teachers and ITE, as ‘when an experienced teacher helps to train new geography teachers for the profession’ (p.3). At present, the decision about when a teacher is ready to mentor will likely be subjective and context specific.

We asked mentors to indicate which teacher education programmes they worked with. Figure 1 shows the percentage of mentors who work on each route into teaching. There were no respondents to the survey who mentored in the primary age phase with most of the respondents based in the secondary age phase.

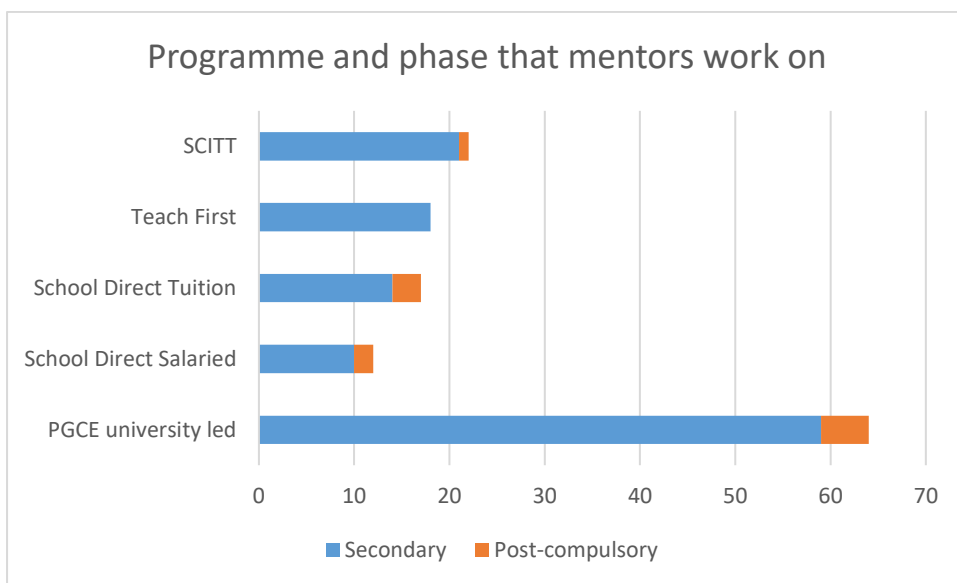


Figure 1: Programme and phase that mentors work on

Over 60% of respondents worked with PGCE students, indicating that respondents are not reflective of national trends in ITE where 47% of trainee teachers chose 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 recruitment and retention issues of geography teachers in England (Tapsfield, 2015; 2018; DfE, 2018)

How do geography mentors currently mentor, and why?

The survey found that the most frequent activity mentors engaged in during mentoring was evaluating, and feeding back on teaching, and critiquing classroom practice (see Figure 2). In the survey, mentors were able to offer qualitative comments and rationales to enrich the data collected. One mentor, who works with a university-led PGCE programme, offered an insight into their philosophy, with reference to the progress of the mentee, stating ‘*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 the analysis of the survey, we examined differences in mentoring practices between routes into teaching. One trend identified is that mentors working on the Teach First programme did not evaluate and feedback on lessons as frequently as on other routes into teaching. Instead, the most frequent mentoring practice amongst Teach First mentors was working with student teachers to develop their lesson aims and objectives. This may be due to the differences in the model of teacher training, where Teach First trainees have a reduced teaching allocation after a six week 'summer institute', 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, offering more opportunities for observation, evaluation and feedback on the mentee's teaching,

With reference to your most recent mentoring experience, how frequently have you been involved in the following activities with your student teacher?

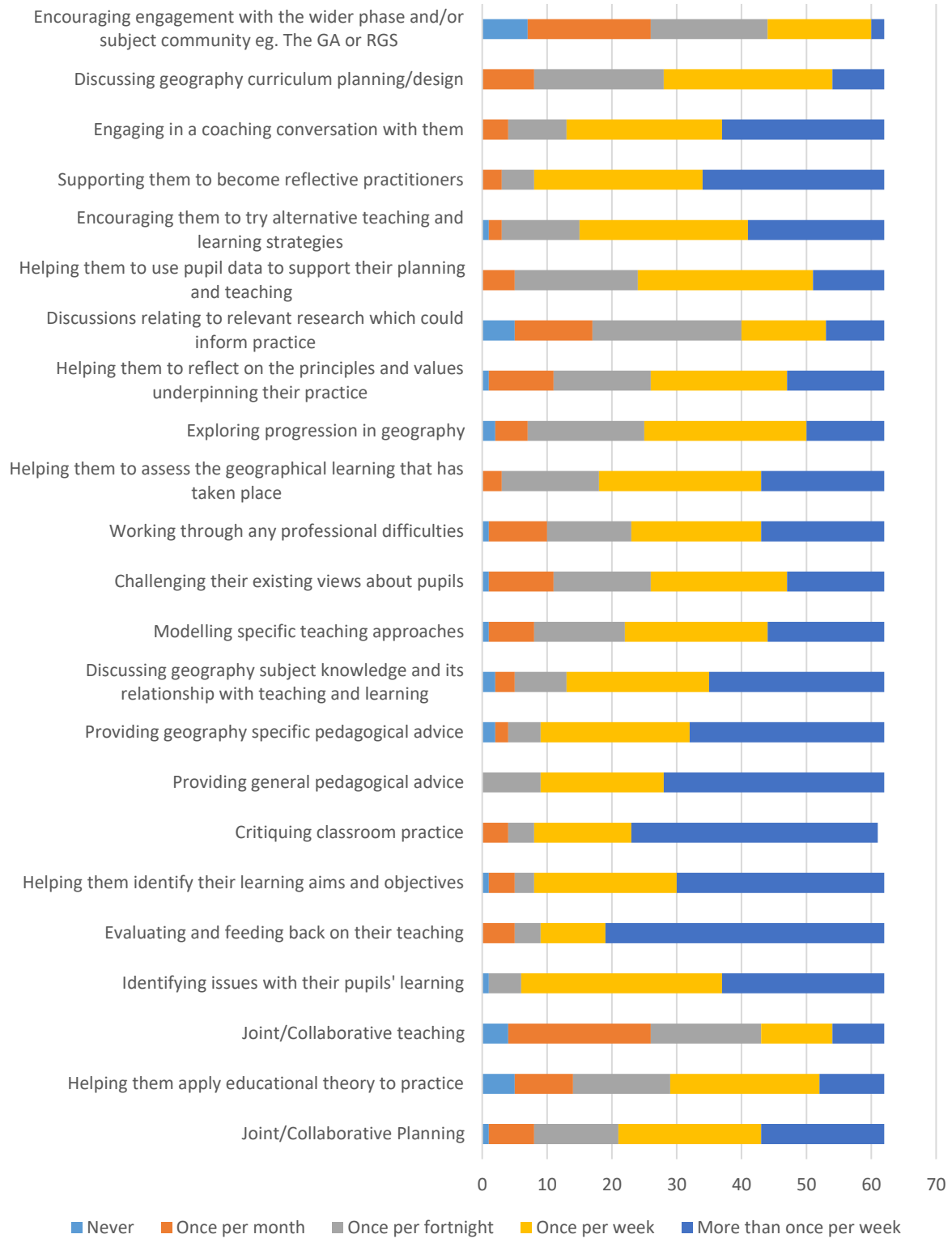


Figure 2: Mentor practices

Other frequent mentoring activities cited by all respondents include supporting teachers to become reflective practitioners, engaging in coaching conversations and providing general pedagogical advice. Tapsfield (2019) highlights the importance of becoming a reflective practitioner for geography student teachers, therefore it is encouraging to see that many of the geography mentors recognise this and incorporate it into their practice.

Analysis showed the least frequent activity in mentoring was encouraging the trainee to engage with the subject community and/or subject associations, with only 32% of mentors doing this once per week. This is a significant trend, as engagement with the subject community can offer professional development opportunities for both the 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 in developing their own practices, with one respondent stating "*I learn so much from trainees.*" This can be interpreted as the mentor taking an educative approach to mentoring. 'Educative mentoring' is mentoring that sees '*teachers and learners and the classroom as a site of inquiry*' (Langdon and Ward, 2015: 243). In this approach, the mentor and mentee are seen as collaborative enquirers who can learn from each other. When considered in relation to subject mentoring, if this approach were adopted, both the mentor and mentee would be encouraged to draw 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 they had received no training as a mentor at all. Analysis of the responses about the content of mentor training showed that there was often a focus on paperwork, details of the course structure, and consideration of the role of the mentor. In addition, 8% of mentors reported that 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.

The results of this survey highlight that mentor training in teacher education is often focused on the technical and managerial elements of training to be a teacher with limited opportunities to consider the role and value of the subject in mentoring and teaching. However, when asked to reflect on development opportunities 63% of mentors selected conferences related to their geography and 65% selected the development of local geography mentor networks. Figure 3 shows that the mentors would most value subject specific input to support their development as geography mentors and teachers.

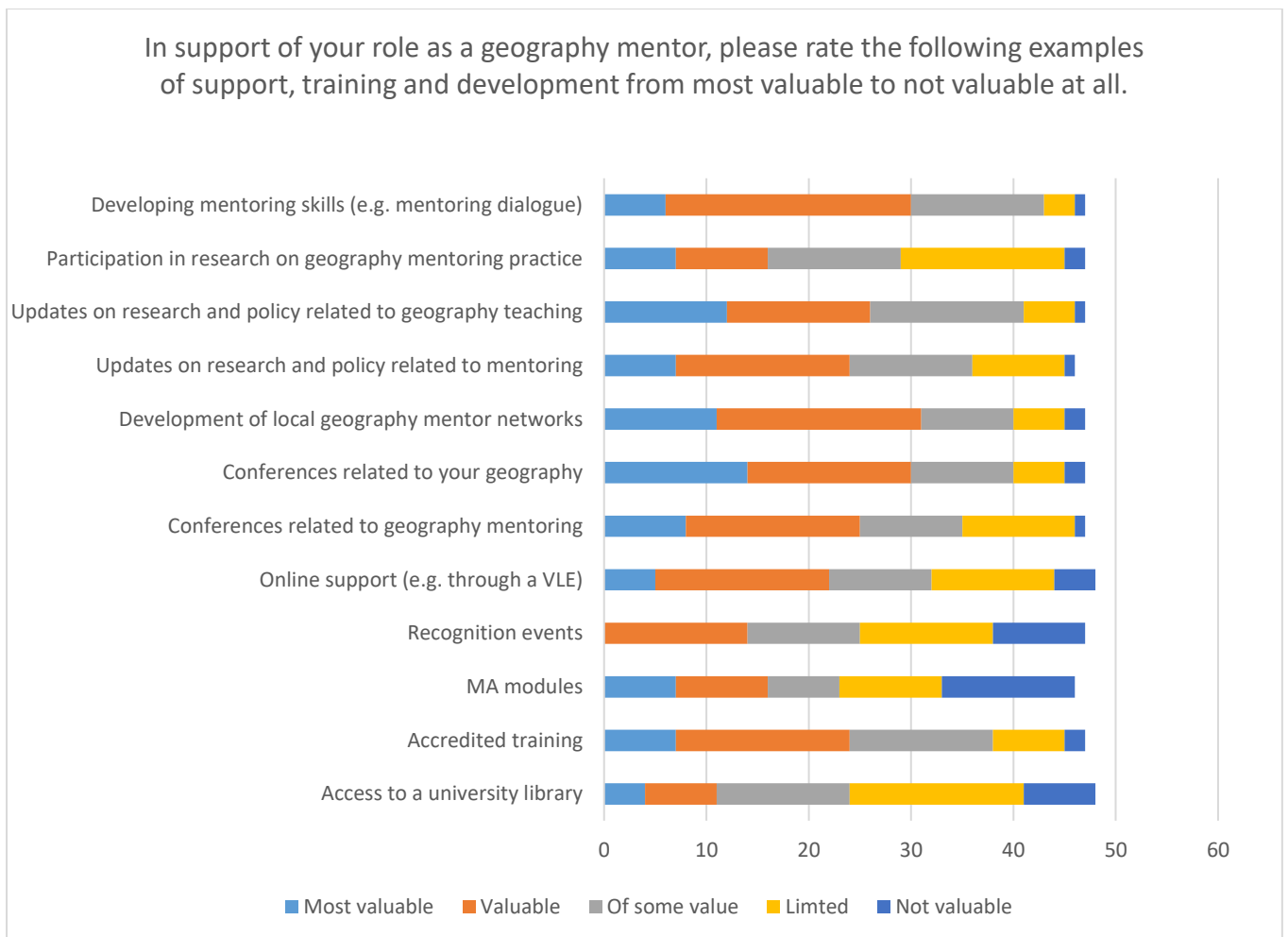


Figure 3: What support would mentors value?

Conclusion

The survey has shown that mentors are generally subject specialists but have varied levels of experience as teachers. In addition, it has shown that whilst mentors would like further training and development focussed on geography, teaching geography and mentoring in geography, current training does not reflect these desires.

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.

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