

Mentoring matters: contributing to a more just tomorrow in geography education

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Introduction

Throughout this edited collection authors have stressed, from a range of different perspectives, the importance of mentoring; they have also highlighted the distinctively geographical nature of mentoring in geography education. Mentoring matters because of the ways in which it shapes educational practice, teachers' experiences, the kinds of geographies children and young people engage with in schools, and the futures this makes possible. Morgan's (2022, p.XX) question - 'what sort of mentoring for what sort of geography education?' - highlights the idea of *agency* and the potential for mentors and mentoring to make a real difference to beginning teachers and geography education more broadly. So, as you read this chapter, and in your mentoring, we ask you to critically engage with the question *what kinds of futures do you hope your mentoring will produce?*

Justice, agency and voice in mentoring

As a collective, state-funded service, education has often been shaped by what hooks (2003, p.1) terms 'conservative political underpinnings' which has, at times, resulted in the institutionalisation and (re)production of 'systems of domination' related to class, race, gender and nationalist imperialism. For example, Norcup (2015) describes her attempts to challenge the reproduction of injustices related to gender and race in geography education in London in the early 2000s, and the dismissal she faced from eminent academics, textbook publishers and in her day-to-day interactions with colleagues. She tells of being made to feel like a problem for raising concerns, and how 'through the microaggressions of everyday living, that it was not for me to put my head above the parapet' (p.4). At the time of writing - almost 20 years after the context Norcup describes - in both academic and everyday discourse, concerns shared about

injustices in society and schooling highlight the systemic and day-to-day oppression and racism that still often pervades educational systems and praxis in England (Tomlinson, 2019; Puttick and Murrey, 2020; Hammond, 2021).

The examples of Norcup's reflections and injustices in the current context raise questions of justice, agency and voice, and in this conclusion to *Mentoring Geography Teachers in the Secondary School* we reflect on how, and why, mentoring matters in and for geography education. In particular, we examine how the themes of *justice, agency and voice* have been raised - both implicitly and explicitly - in and through this edited collection, considering why these themes are of critical importance to mentors, beginning teachers and geography education more broadly in developing and enacting a progressive vision of mentoring.

Justice

At the time of writing, global injustices have been brutally highlighted through multiple intersecting crises:

As communities struggled to deal with variegated climate-related events, the arrival of the pandemic compounded crises, wreaking havoc, suffering, and deaths across countries and communities. The connections between climate breakdown and the COVID-19 pandemic expose underbellies of structural inequities and systemic marginalizations across scales and sites. (Saltana 2021, p.1)

Geography education has a vital role to play in understanding and addressing injustices and working towards more just futures.

Justice is a significant idea in, and underpinning of, educational debates across the spaces of policy-making, academic research and educational practice. However, Arthur et al. (2021, p.102) argue that within these discourses the 'underlying social-moral ideal' of justice is often 'fragmented, underdeveloped and badly articulated'. Their focus is on social justice, considering *social justice in education*, and *education for social justice*. As Hopkins (2020, p.382) sets out, 'social justice is about addressing the unfair outcomes that result from both social processes and institutional decision-making'. Hopkins explains that social justice considers fairness, 'the distribution of

society's benefits and burdens', and 'intersects and overlaps with debates and issues relating to equality and diversity and so is a key dimension of anti-discriminatory practice' (2020, p.382). Ideas and ideals of justice go beyond the social, to include the digital, political, economic, environmental and ecological. Interdisciplinary thinking between geography and education can contribute to a more developed ideal of *justice in geography education and geography education for justice*.

We begin by considering *justice in geography education*, and specifically *justice for geography teachers*. We examine three dimensions of *justice* for geography teachers that have been raised through this book; teacher well-being, teacher development, and inclusive and anti-discriminatory policies and workplaces. Following this, we engage with the idea of *geography education for justice*, examining how through mentoring you might contribute to the co-construction of a more just geography education. Here, we focus specifically on critically considering how people and places are represented in geography education.

In their chapter, Clarke et al. (2022) highlight that high teacher workloads directly impact upon teacher well-being, the development of meaningful relationships between colleagues, and teachers' decisions as to whether to remain in the profession. As the first point of contact (and more!) for beginning geography teachers, mentors have a vital role in co-constructing working practices that support teacher well-being. Mentors also have important roles in assisting beginning teachers in navigating and addressing a range of professional issues that may arise. As such, it can be seen as a matter of *justice* that mentors actively engage with well-being in their mentoring to co-construct with beginning teachers, and the school more broadly, an environment in which beginning teachers can thrive.

Teacher development is another key facet of *justice in geography education* as it impacts on; teaching practice, the geography education children and young people engage with, and teachers' professional futures. Healy (2022) sets out the value of geography teachers' scholarship in developing their subject expertise, and supporting curriculum thinking in mentors and beginning teachers. Yet, if we situate Healy's

argument in the context of teacher education in England - where Initial Teacher Education (ITE) can be as short as a ten month Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE), and where much in-school professional development is generic (Castree et al., 2007; Cordingley et al., 2018) - engaging with scholarship in education and geography, including with subject communities (Kinder, 2022), is neither guaranteed nor inevitable. The limited funding available to support teachers' professional development also affects the options available. As the Institute of Physics' (2020, p.10) recent analysis of the importance of subjects in schools argues, despite investment in teachers' professional development being 'a common feature of the world's best education systems...investment in teachers' professional learning is a comparative weakness in the UK'. The financial costs of further education - including further postgraduate study, some professional development (for example, the price of membership of subject associations and conference attendance), and paywalls to journal articles, mean that opportunities for scholarship are not equally available to all beginning teachers and mentors.

In considering *justice for geography teachers*, it is also of critical importance to create and foster an inclusive approach to supporting mentors and beginning teachers to be able to access the *communities of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Kinder, 2022) within which they operate. Here, we must consider both systemic and everyday injustices in educational policies, and educational spaces and places of work. For example, Bhopal (2015) describes the racism experienced by Black beginning teachers, just as previous research has highlighted the persistent racism experienced by Black trainees on placements and its impact on their performance (e.g. Basit and Roberts, 2006; Carrington and Tomlin, 2000). Further, Henderson (2017) suggests that where institutional cultures are widely recognised as heteronormative, they can discriminate against individuals who fail to conform to *gender norms*, which can mean that LGBTQ+ identifying teachers face additional hurdles that their heterosexual counterparts may not experience (Benson et al., 2014). As a final example, Murtagh (2019) describes the *othering* experienced by parent-beginning teachers (not a homogeneous group themselves) leading to marginalisation, exclusion and decreased opportunities (Moreau and Kerner, 2015). These three examples highlight why, as a mentor, you might have to reach beyond your own personal experience or identities and reflect on the unique challenges a beginning teacher might face, being mindful of the

intersectionality of identities, including - among many others - race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability and age.

Thinking across *justice in geography education* and *geography education for justice*, geography education is critical to helping children and young people to develop geographical knowledge and skills, and to make decisions about how to act in the world. Through the process of planning, Ahmed et al. (2022) highlight how geography teachers make some ideas, people and places visible and others invisible. The decisions geography teachers make are significant as they represent the world and the people who call it home, and the discipline of geography to children. For example, Brown and Browne (2016) explain how the Demographic Transition Model can be seen to represent 'heterosexual coupledom, parenthood and family arrangements' (p.1). Failing to engage critically with the model would fail to examine with children and young people how (normative) ideas of sexuality vary between people, places and time-spaces (Brown and Browne, 2016), and how inequalities have been (re)produced in, and through, society. Mentors play an important role in supporting beginning teachers to engage critically with geographical data and representations, considering how they might inform and impact on children's geographical ideas, imaginations and futures (Palombo and Daly, 2022).

Agency

The constraints of assessment procedures associated with beginning teachers' professional accreditation creates tensions with teachers' agency and autonomy, including teachers' freedom to act on, and in, situations to work towards the kinds of just futures discussed above. Many of the chapters in this collection give explicit attention to the active ways in which mentors might seek to create space for action and to *reclaim* the capacity to act amid bureaucratic, performative systems and institutions that may value standardisation and conformity over individuals' agency. Creating opportunities for acting and taking responsibility for geography curricula is explored through the very practical ways in which mentoring conversations (Rawlings Smith, 2022), lesson observations (Puttick, 2022), and planning (Ahmed et al., 2022) might all

support what Palombo and Daly (2022), following Hodkinson (2009), refer to as *expansive environments*, which:

support enquiry approaches that may question existing beliefs about how geography is taught and how pupils are experiencing it. In other words, educative mentoring can be unsettling. Indeed it should be, because it supports the possibility of transformational professional learning, by which individual beliefs can shift and inform continually evolving practice. (Palombo and Daly, 2022, p.XX)

Ethnographic research on beginning teachers' experiences of school subject departments has highlighted the importance of their subject expertise in establishing their place within departments and providing the basis on which increasing levels of agency might be exerted (Puttick 2018). Throughout these chapters the role and complexity of subject knowledge is emphasised, and there are important connections between *agency* and *subject expertise*. Benefiting from support offered by professional associations and subject communities (Kinder, 2022) and continuing to nurture relationships with academic disciplines (Healy, 2022) are all framed as offering an important basis on which beginning teachers' professional identities and agency might offer support in resisting the negative effects of performative accountability and making space for transformative change.

Healy's (2022) analysis of the ways in which geography and geography education scholarship might function as a mechanism for sustaining mentors' and beginning teachers' subject knowledge and curriculum thinking foregrounds the relationship between subject expertise and agency. She also argues for a social understanding: it is not with individuals holding strong subject knowledge that potential for transformative futures lies, but rather with critical, ongoing and collective engagement. Again, there are obvious tensions between this understanding of subject knowledge and the ways in which assessment may function to constrain and judge subject knowledge in binary terms as strong/weak and gaps/achieved. Navigating the powerful discourses currently surrounding knowledge (Bustin, 2022) adds to the complexity of mentors' task. Yet it is our argument that against generic uses of the idea of *knowledge*, 'engaging with geography and geography education scholarship can contribute to the collective agency

of geography teachers, through which beginning geography teachers can be empowered...’ (Healy 2022, p.XX).

Discussions about the particular situations and time-spaces within which mentoring relationships are formed are developed against a background of the performative nature of (most) mentor/beginning teacher relationships. That is, in most of these situations there is ultimately some external criteria against which the beginning teacher will be judged. There are long-standing debates about the impact of assessment on learners at all stages of education, the negatives of which are captured well by Reay and Wiliam’s (1999) summary of year six students’ responses to (what were then) their Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests: ‘although children’s responses are varied, what most share is a sense of an event which reveals something intrinsic about them as individuals’ (p.343). There are risks that the performative assessment processes beginning teachers undergo impact on their sense of themselves and their agency - negatively. In many of these chapters the Teachers’ Standards (DfE, 2013) in England are given as an example of this external criteria. Some see positive aspects of the ways in which these kinds of standards might be used to facilitate professional development (of mentor and mentee), such as Bustin (2022), whereas others are more critical; for example, Healy and Walshe (2022) discuss the tensions between judgements and support through the concept of *judgementoring* (Hobson and Malderez, 2003). Formal accreditation for mentors, including through Masters level work looking exclusively at teacher education (Childs, 2022) has an important role to play in building capacity across the system to support this challenging work.

Voice

Agency and voice are closely related concepts; agency might be demonstrated or enacted through voice. Being able to voice something is one example of the practice of agency. The discussion of agency above explored some of the tensions that mentors and beginning teachers need to navigate, arguing that increasing beginning teachers’ sense and exercise of agency is an important aim of mentoring. The ways in which the chapters in this volume consider ideas about voice crosscut ideas of agency and justice, raising an important and enduring question to reflect on: *whose voices are shared*,

represented, spotlighted and engaged with in geography education? The roles and spaces given to, and shaped by, the individual and collective voices of children, beginning teachers, mentors, subject communities, teacher educators, researchers and those of academic disciplines more broadly, will have significant implications for the futures made possible through mentoring relationships, pedagogy and curriculum making. In our brief reflection, we critically reflect on the range of voices given space in the chapters in this collection, and the need for geography education research and mentoring to foster inclusive, decolonial futures that actively encourage and attentively listen to a wide range of people.

This book includes beginning teachers' voices, including through Collins' (2022) examination of the value of beginning teachers' agency. Collins shows that by 'actively involving them in dialogue about their progress we can hear, in their own words, what they need from their mentors' (p.XX). When justice, agency and voice are considered together, mentors and teacher education more broadly can gain richer understandings of beginning teachers' experiences of, and perspectives on, teacher education. As Ahmed et al. (2022) explore, *who* is taught is vital to making decisions about curriculum, pedagogy and purpose. More broadly they argue that bringing colleagues (including those working in different spaces) together offers the potential to: 'develop shared values in education, to challenge one another's thinking, and to stimulate discussion as to how systems and praxis might be improved' (Ahmed et al., 2022,p.XX).

Within the discipline of geography, the range of voices that have been encouraged and allowed has been relatively limited, dominated by White (Esson, 2020) Anglo-American (Muller, 2021) perspectives. There have been increasing calls for the necessity of the debate that is academic geography to 'include voices, ideas, scholarship, and places in the world that have been under-represented in geography's publication venues over the years' (Daley et al. 2017, p.3). Such calls for a more expansive conversation involve '...collecting and unpacking the full range of stories, voice, and experiences necessary for operationalizing anti-racist geography education' (Alderman et al., 2019, p.2). This critique of academic geography adds further

complexity to the calls made throughout this collection (Bustin, 2022, Healy, 2022) for mentors and beginning teachers to be engaged with the subject knowledge of geography. This is also complex because critiques of the discipline (Esson, 2020) show there are important figures that are now more widely questioned: names that may already have been taken down from lecture theatres and other places of honour and authority. For example, in his critical evaluation of the legacy of Halford Mackinder, Kearns (2021) argues that ‘by the standards of his time, Mackinder was an enthusiastic imperialist and a resolute racist’ (p.4). The discipline is dynamic, and so only going back to a geography you once knew is - on its own - not enough (Healy 2022). Decolonising the imperial, racist foundations of aspects of the discipline is an urgent task for all teachers to engage with, replacing colonial domination with more just, sustainable and, in Dorling’s (2019) words, *kinder*, futures. Dorling - whose words bring particular symbolic power in this context as the current holder of the Halford Mackinder chair in Human Geography - has argued for *kindness* as a new kind of rigour for geography:

Turning the lens back on yourself, on ourselves, and arguing for geography to become the kind discipline of the future is not a sign of weakness. We should always apologise; it shows we are still learning and that we know we still have so much to learn. The planet is now quickly warming; its people are hugely divided; Geography should be the academic subject of the kinder future to come. What was once the core of imperial domination can and should be turned inside-out and upside-down. (p.7)

In conclusion...

This book has demonstrated that mentoring matters in and for geography education. It matters to beginning teachers’ experiences and imaginations of teacher education, schooling, school geography and leadership. It matters to beginning teachers’ well-being, workload and induction into *communities of practice* at a variety of scales. Mentoring also matters to mentors in their professional development and growth, and to schools’ success and flourishing. Ultimately, mentoring beginning geography teachers matters to the children and young people who are taught, to their families and to society. This is important work!

In concluding this book, we have argued that *justice*, *agency* and *voice* are central ideas that we - as a geography education community - should engage with. Informed by ongoing engagement with research in geography and education, these ideas can support and inform active engagement with our question: *what kinds of futures do you hope your mentoring will produce?* As you put down this book and step back into the classroom, field, lab, staff room or geography office, we hope that you will draw on the ideas put forward in the chapters, and engage with the suggested *further reading* and *for discussion* questions to support the ongoing development of your *agency* and *voice* for more *just* tomorrows.

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