Introduction and background

Lesson observation followed by verbal and written feedback is a common feature of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes internationally. This paper by Nicola Warren-Lee from the University of Bristol School of Education and Steve Puttick from the University of Oxford explore geography mentors’ written lesson observation feedback by analysing data from across a one-year ITE programme delivered through a university-school partnership in England. It draws on a wider cross-subject study, selecting 31 pieces of written feedback of geography lessons. There are 2 research questions. In what ways is geography/geographical knowledge discussed in written lesson observation feedback? In what ways does research feature in the written lesson observation feedback given to geography teachers?

Key findings

Existing research on feedback

- There are parallels in the way that feedback (with its interactions between research, theory, practice, and practitioner wisdom) works across education and other professions such as medicine, where specific information about the comparison between a trainee’s observed performance and a standard is given to improve a trainees’ performance.
- Feedback also has distinctly geographical meanings, such as the positive feedback associated with snow albedo in which reductions in snow cover increase further solar radiation absorption which exacerbates the initial warming. These feedback mechanisms within geography mirror the complexity of inter-personal systems involving the interaction between beginning teachers’ previous knowledge and expertise, performative school and departmental culture, power dynamics, and the relationship between different types of knowledge, including research and practice.
- To date, there has been little research on written lesson observation feedback. In the limited research which does exist, the main argument for it is permanence. Bunton et al (2002, p.233) describe written feedback as: ‘a permanent record, unlike speech which may be forgotten or inaccurately heard or remembered’. This observation is mirrored in research on verbal feedback.
- Existing studies highlight a trend to prioritise feedback on generic issues, and an absence of explicit engagement with research-based evidence. Firth (2011, p.312) notes that: ‘in post-observation discussion with trainee teachers and their more experienced teacher mentors about teaching and learning in geography, my experience has been theta geographical knowledge has rarely, if ever, figured in such discussion’.
- Recent analysis of written lesson observation feedback in the context of geography has noted that references to the subject ‘frequently appeared though superficial binaries of subject content being known or not known, rather than any meaningful or critical engagement with conceptual disciplinary understanding’. (Healy et al, 2019, p.15).
- Soares and Lock’s work (2007) sought to enable subject-specific mentors to replace generic comments with subject knowledge and topic specific pedagogy. Their work supports the claim that focusing written lesson observation feedback on geographical knowledge can be highly beneficial.

Research/practice and ITE

- In terms of the second research question (In what ways does research feature in the written lesson observation feedback given to beginning geography teachers?), there are ongoing debates about the nature of teachers’ professional knowledge and the relationships between research and practice.
- ITE supports a vision of and aspiration to, Master’s level criticality. It aims to be steeped in research engagement and premised on close interactions between theory and practice.
- The BERA-RSA Inquiry into Research and Teacher Education concluded that: ‘Teachers and students thrive in
the kind of settings that we describe as research-rich, and research-rich schools and colleges are those that are likely to have the greatest capacity for self-evaluation and self-improvement.

- The above argument was often made at times when university-based teacher education was under threat from those seeking to move it away from universities and into schools. This was based on a mistaken tendency to create what Mutton and Murray (2016, p.70) describe as a ‘conceptual binary around theory/practice’ and a resultant view of the school as the centre of practice and the university as providers of largely irrelevant and disconnected theory.

- The existing literature suggests that both subject-specific feedback, and explicit discussion of research rarely feature in lesson observation feedback.

Methodology

- The research for this study draws on a wider cross-subject study, selecting 31 pieces of written feedback of geography lessons. The written feedback was co-constructed by school and university-based mentors.

- In this study, subject specific feedback comments were divided into 4 categories, according to the depth with which they addressed subject knowledge.

- The first is ‘identifying’, where references to geographical knowledge were made in a purely descriptive manner. The second was ‘naming alongside evaluative description’ (either positive or negative). An example of this kind of feedback is ‘peer assessment for the brownfield/greenfield was a useful activity to help pupils take responsibility for their own work’. The third category is ‘naming in relation to a specific improvement suggested’, such as in this example, situated around students’ locational knowledge: ‘this prior knowledge could have been recapped/quickly revised at the start to help all students to be able to engage well with the subsequent analysis of the map’.

- The final category is ‘prompting reflection’, comments which stand in contrast to those which just tell the teacher what to do. An example of this kind of feedback is: ‘Definition of ‘model’ as something very good that you want to copy: is this the most useful definition I the context of model villages?’

Findings and conclusions

- Across the 31 lessons, 30 per cent of the 341 text boxes (i.e., 103 text boxes) contained some reference to geography or geographical knowledge. This was higher than references to subject knowledge found in other subjects. This percentage is very similar to that recorded by mentors prior to training in Soares and Lock’s work. The post-training figure in Soares and Lock’s work rose to 80 per cent of all feedback.

- Nearly one third of comments about subject knowledge were found under Teachers’ Standard 3 (‘Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge’).

- A large majority of the subject specific feedback came under the ‘naming and evaluating’ (positive) category. Most references were very simple, with a small number engaging at a slightly more complex level. The small number of negative references in this category were not negative evaluations of the teacher’s geographical knowledge. For example, one suggested: ‘Keep making sure that pupils are all clear about the meanings of terms’. It is surprising to see no negative references to subject knowledge, in the light of Dove’s claim (2016, p.52) that ‘imperfections in teacher knowledge and understanding are – as many studies have testified – a source of misconception’.

- In terms of the third category (naming in relation to a specific improvement suggested) there were 2 categories of suggested improvements – those focusing on pedagogical suggestions for the teacher, and those foregrounding suggestions to improve students’ geographical knowledge. Here again, there were no suggestions in the feedback studies for the teachers’ own geographical knowledge.

- Examples of feedback in the 4th category (prompting reflection) consisted of open questions on which the beginning teacher could reflect. These questions moved towards critical questions about the knowledge itself and its representation. They hint at the kind of critical reflection on geographical knowledge which other appear to be calling for.

- The second research question asked how research featured in the written feedback. The analysis only included explicit reference to research. Applying this criterion, no explicit references to research evidence were found.

- Although the findings give some credence to the claim that there is a lack of attention to research in lesson feedback, they also show that there are in fact ways in which ‘the geography’ is given attention across a continuum of references, moving from simper to complex references, and including prompts for reflection.

Bringing together research and practice: priority areas

- In addressing the seeming absence of research-based feedback in geography, the author suggests moving forward with 3 of the key areas of subject-specific feedback in the data – explanations, terminology, and progress. These areas have been selected because of their high frequency in the data sample, and because of the limited attention they have received to date.

- Existing parallels with work on these topics in science education may prove a useful starting point.

- There are several further questions which may be usefully explored in further research, including: What imaginative solutions might ITE partnerships create to facilitate rich engagement with research evidence? How can ITE partnerships support beginning teachers to engage with critical questions about geographical knowledge? What prompt questions might facilitate the most productive engagement with the widest range of knowledges?