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# **Teaching geographical issues in context and developing a professional identity: the challenge facing primary school teachers**

**Mallihai M. Tambyah**

## **Abstract**

Teacher threshold knowledge in geography is an area of concern for many primary pre-service Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) teachers. Primary pre-service teachers enter their tertiary teacher education with fixed intentions of providing students in the early childhood and middle years of schooling with a good general education. Primary teachers' professional identity is often based on notions of caring, nurturing and trust, rather than on specific curriculum knowledge. While such a child-centred approach is valued, the Queensland Studies of Society and Environment syllabus demands that primary educators have mastery of important geographical concepts, particular skills and wide content knowledge such as the management of resources and cultural significance of place. The geographical concepts and skills that underpin many of the outcomes of the Place and Space strand of the Queensland SOSE syllabus are particularly challenging to primary pre-service teachers. This is especially the case when called upon to deliver these outcomes within the context of a unit of work that is both topical and relevant to primary school students. Pre-service teacher education programs that explicitly teach the geographical processes of inquiry and specific geographical concepts and skills will advantage primary teachers. A model for pre-service teacher education is presented which challenges this cohort to widen the scope and depth of their geographical knowledge beyond purely descriptive or comparative attempts to incorporate geography into SOSE units of work. This paper proposes that explicit teaching of the process of geographical inquiry through pre-service SOSE teacher-education courses increases teacher threshold knowledge. Moreover, it has the potential to provide primary teachers with an avenue for developing a professional identity as educators rather than an identity essentially based on nurture and care.

## **Keywords**

Teacher threshold knowledge; geographical issues in SOSE; primary teachers; professional identity; process of inquiry

## **Introduction**

The teaching of geography in primary schools in Australia has long been integrated with other social science disciplines including history, economics, civics and citizenship. The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century states that when students leave school they should "have an understanding of, and concern for, stewardship of the natural environment, and the knowledge and skills to contribute to ecologically sustainable development" (MCEETYA, 1999). Concepts of geography, environmental education and other social science disciplines are incorporated into state-based curriculum such as the Queensland *Studies of Society and Environment Years 1 to 10 Syllabus* (QSCC, 2000). The National Goals also make a commitment to "Enhancing the status and quality of the teaching profession" (MCEETYA, 1999). The linking of educational objectives for students in the compulsory years of schooling with enhancing the professional status of teachers and the development of teacher professional identity is an important policy basis for the work of teachers. The expectation that teachers will have mastery of important content knowledge such as geographical concepts and

skills in SOSE has the potential to provide primary teachers with an avenue for developing a professional identity as educators based on shared knowledge. This paper examines the work of primary teachers in terms of professionalism and professional identity. According to Acker (1987, p. 85), the main task of primary teachers is seen as the socialisation of children and this defines their sense of professional identity. It is proposed that the explicit teaching of geographical concepts and skills in pre-service SOSE teacher education courses provides primary teachers with the opportunity to develop a professional identity as educators rather than an identity essentially based on nurture and care.

## **Professionalism and professional identity**

The relationship between primary teachers' threshold content knowledge and their conception of professionalism and personal identity raises questions for the teaching of geographic issues in context. How can primary teachers' engagement with a curriculum area that incorporates geography provide a means by which to develop a professional identity?

The literature on professionalism recognises that the "aspiration for teachers to have professional lives is not a given phenomenon but a contested one" (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 4) with some teachers ambivalent "whether their identity is that of professionals or cultural workers" (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 1). Primary teachers' professional orientation has been viewed in terms of service and autonomy within the classroom. Their "professional culture, bureaucratized and gendered, provided considerable solidarity and constructed identity" (Menter, Muschamp, Nicholls, Ozga and Pollard, 1997, p. 9). The predominance of women teachers in primary schools has contributed to a distinctively gendered approach to describing the work of teachers and notions of professional identity.

To some extent, caring dominates the public perception of primary teachers' work. The work of teachers is based on "pervasive conceptions of teaching as a calling, and of teachers as adults who do what they do mostly because they care so deeply about children" (Acker, 1999, p. 19).

Women are associated with this image of teachers which has shaped perceptions of teaching as an occupation and as a profession. "Thus an emphasis on teaching as 'work' serves not only to highlight the tension between 'work' and 'profession', but also speaks to a difference between work and non-work, the latter associated with the notion of women doing 'natural', quasi-maternal 'caring' " (Acker, 1999, p. 19). Clearly this perception of the work of teachers, particularly in the primary school where the care and socialisation of children is of great importance has implications for teaching practice and, correspondingly, for the professional satisfaction and identity of teachers. Ben-Peretz' work on the recollections of retired teachers supports this portrayal of teacher identity based on gendered notions of care rather than cognitive development: she cites a teacher who recalls "In the first elementary grades teachers' knowledge is less important than their character and empathy with students" (Ben-Peretz, 1996, p. 180). Such experiences support Acker's observation that "Although all teachers clearly attempt to teach skills of some sort, many commentators see the main task of the primary teacher as socialization" (Acker, 1987, p. 85). Thus caring, rather than teaching appears to be the main characteristic of some primary teachers' sense of professional identity.

Teaching in new times characterised by constant change, lack of certainty and common agreement on educational policy and practice has created the need for a different kind of teacher professionalism (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, pp. 19-21). Responding to criticisms by Lortie that there was little evidence of "a shared technical culture of teaching" (Lortie, 1975, 69-70), researchers such as Shulman (1986) maintain that pedagogical content knowledge is a "second kind of content knowledge...which goes beyond knowledge of subject matter per se to the dimension of subject matter knowledge *for teaching*" (p. 9). Such knowledge is unique for it is "the knowledge of how to teach one's subject or subject matter" (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 6). Such knowledge "can make the teachers' intuitive, practical know-how and technique into

visible, codifiable, professional knowledge” (Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996, p. 6). The difficulties of building teacher professionalism on a “science of teaching” have been noted for it “privileges knowledge and cognition above care as the foundation of teaching”, yet “care as well as cognition should be at the heart of the teaching profession and for many teachers is so” (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 9). Goodson and Hargreaves (1996, pp. 19-21) propose a new model of postmodern professionalism where teachers exercise “discretionary judgement” over issues of teaching, curriculum and care. Teachers will engage with moral and social issues in curriculum and assessment. Furthermore, there are expectations of a commitment to collaboration, to share expertise, and to active care, acknowledging “the emotional as well as the cognitive dimensions of teaching” (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, 21).

## **Content knowledge and postmodern teacher professionalism**

The importance of subject specific knowledge as the basis of good teaching practice is widely acknowledged (Pollard, 2002, p. 183). Shulman (1986) suggests there are three categories of content knowledge: subject matter content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge. In terms of the first category, he states that teachers are expected “to understand why a given topic is particularly central to a discipline whereas another maybe somewhat peripheral” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). This view is reflected in the charter for teaching Australia’s teachers which states that teachers’ core work is “developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes of their students” and to do this, teachers “need to have a thorough grasp of the content of what they are teaching” (Schools Council, 1990, p. 60). Clearly this is a challenge for all teachers, and particularly those working in an integrated social science curriculum such as SOSE.

The need to develop subject specific knowledge, especially for beginning teachers, cannot be underestimated. Research into a small group of geography students at the University of London Institute of Education found that although most felt confident about teaching aspects in physical geography, secondary geography beginning teachers did not have a well defined common body of knowledge (Rynne, and Lambert, 1997). It is essential for SOSE teachers to have good content knowledge in order to feel competent for as Rynne and Lambert (1997) inferred, if beginning geography teachers are unable to “overcome any perceived lack of competence or confidence to teach a particular topic, it is likely they will choose not to teach it”. In their view, “Someone who feels confident about a topic is more likely to think of imaginative and interesting ways to approach it” (Rynne and Lambert, 1997). In the emerging Australian context of teaching, primary teachers’ subject knowledge is an important foundation for effective practice and professional identity.

The Queensland SOSE syllabus gives teachers wide choice over topics and issues in geography that may be taught. Yet anecdotal evidence gained from teaching second and third-year students in Queensland primary pre-service teaching courses indicates a lack of confidence in subject knowledge in the social sciences. This is understandable, given that the syllabus draws on several social science disciplines; however, teachers will need a very good knowledge of content and process. For example, in the SOSE strand of Place and Space, the syllabus lists possible topics such as the use and management of natural resources such as water, spatial patterns such as local and global features and climate, the significance of place, stewardship and skills such as conducting field studies and drawing topographic and thematic maps. Key geographical concepts are elaborated by core learning outcomes which make reference to specific content knowledge. For example, PS4.4 (aimed at students aged 11-13 years) states “Students use latitude, longitude, compass and scale references and thematic maps to make inferences about global patterns” (QSCC, 2000, p. 2). Students need the opportunity to learn specific content to apply this knowledge to develop a further understanding of global patterns. To teach this, teachers need to feel confident of their own threshold knowledge.

Anecdotal evidence of a lack of geographical content/conceptual knowledge among Queensland primary pre-service teachers is in line with evidence from the UK and USA (Gilsbach, 1997; Bradbeer, Healey & Kneale, 2004). In their recent phenomenographic study into new geography undergraduates' conceptions of teaching, learning and geography in Australia, New Zealand, UK and USA, Bradbeer et al. (2004) revealed a very general understanding of conceptions of geography. For example, "Roughly two-fifths of these students conceived of geography as the study of people and environment interactions but almost half saw geography in non-relational terms as the study of the world involving a separation of the human and the physical or natural components" (Bradbeer et al., 2004, p. 28). Spatial patterns and processes and areal differentiation were far less well understood as undergraduate geographers discussed the discipline generally in terms of its human-physical split. Further analysis of the data showed that among Australian, New Zealand and British undergraduates, "relational conceptions of geography other than as people and environment interactions are rarely found" compared to the United States where "almost a third hold a conception of geography as areal differentiation and a further fifth as spatial organization" (Bradbeer, et al., 2004, p. 30). In contrast, among first, second and third year undergraduates in the United States, relational conceptions of geography were rarely held. Overall, the study concluded that undergraduate geographers' conceptions of geography lacked sophistication. More than a third of the students in the study viewed geography "as divided into human and physical components" and very few noted it had "any methodological basis, let alone one that is distinctive" (Bradbeer, et al., 2004, p.32).

The perception that second and third-year students in Queensland primary pre-service teaching courses lack adequate threshold knowledge in geography supports the findings of Bradbeer et al. (2004). Pre-service teachers worry about their grasp of geographical subject knowledge. They anticipate difficulty in teaching the core concepts because their own knowledge of human-environment relationships or spatial patterns is quite general. To engage students in deep learning and higher order thinking, rather than purely transmission of information, pre-service primary teachers need foundational knowledge in key aspects of geography as well as in the process of investigating and teaching geographical issues. In this way primary teachers have choice and can "exercise discretionary judgement over the issues of teaching, curriculum and care" which characterise postmodern teacher professionalism (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 20).

### **The inquiry approach**

The teaching of geography concepts, processes and skills can be achieved both through the process of inquiry and through methods of direct interaction with the teacher or textual materials (The Royal Geographical Society of Queensland Inc, n.d.). The Queensland SOSE syllabus endorses a learner-centred approach using "various traditions of inquiry" (QSCC, 2000, p.8). There are many models of inquiry learning based on inquiry processes and constructivist teaching approaches (Marsh, 2005, p. 197). Typically, inquiry learning will "involve students in a range of activities through which they investigate a meaningful question" (Hoepper & MacDonald, 2004, p. 29). These activities are organised into an inquiry sequence which guide the students through the inquiry and helps develop students' metacognitive skills. Queensland SOSE teachers exercise a great deal of choice over what topics they choose to teach their students as long as they fit the core learning outcomes selected and relate to the Foundation level statement. Analysis of the Level 4 statement (intended for 11-13 year olds) for the Place and Space strand reveals the complexity of knowledge and process aspects in geography expected at the primary school level:

Students understand how decisions of resource use and management affect environmental and economic sustainability and can use local field studies to identify how a place is valued and cared for. They also understand how to use a range of maps to analyse global

patterns and can consider local and global factors to make decisions about resources. (QSCC, 2000, p. 20)

Higher order learning is clearly expected as students will use maps and gain knowledge of local/global factors to make decisions about the use of resources. When using a process of inquiry, students identify the issue to be studied, develop questions for consideration, identify, collect and analyse evidence and draw conclusions. They may also take action on the issue that was originally identified.

In order to develop their own core content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge it is helpful for pre-service teachers to develop units of work that explicitly use an inquiry approach. Key questions in geographical inquiry include:

- What and where are the issues or patterns being studied?
- How and why are they there?
- What are their impacts or consequences?
- What can be done to improve the situation?

(The Royal Geographical Society of Queensland Inc, n.d.)

These key questions can be linked to the processes of inquiry and skills in the SOSE syllabus, and enable primary teachers to structure a unit of work that will develop students' higher order thinking and deep learning about the topic. The importance of developing critical thinking has long been recognised, helping students to deal with a changing world and become lifelong learners (Hoepper & MacDonald, 2004, p. 35).

Pre-service teacher education that builds on a strong foundation of geography concepts, issues and the geographical inquiry process will advantage primary SOSE teachers. Anecdotal evidence from Queensland primary pre-service teachers indicates that preparing an inquiry-based teaching unit that builds on a foundations course on geography concepts and issues increased their sense of personal competence. Developing an inquiry-based teaching unit based on core knowledge and concepts gained from previous tertiary study gave greater confidence and enhanced subject specific knowledge because the pre-service teacher was visiting the geography concepts and processes first, as a student, and second, as a prospective teacher. While it is clearly not possible to develop in-depth knowledge of the full range of possible topics, this approach will graduate primary teachers who have some mastery over core concepts and skills in geography. It helps increase the confidence and competence of primary teachers and provides the basis on which to build a professional teaching identity based on teaching rather than care.

## **Conclusion**

Many primary pre-service SOSE teachers are concerned about their threshold knowledge in geography. The geographical concepts and skills that underpin the Place and Space outcomes in the Queensland SOSE syllabus are particularly challenging for the main task of primary teachers is held to be the socialisation of children. For many primary teachers, their work and professional identity is based on gendered notions of caring and nurturing rather than expertise in particular curriculum areas or subject specific knowledge. Postmodern teacher professionalism incorporates notions of "discretionary judgement over issues of teaching, curriculum and care" (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 20) where both cognitive and emotional aspects of teaching are acknowledged. In this context, primary SOSE teachers have the opportunity to develop a professional identity by using the process of geographical inquiry, leading to deeper content knowledge and competence. There is potential here for primary teachers to develop a professional identity based on a shared knowledge base, and exercise discretionary judgement over issues of curriculum, learning and care that affect their students. Further research into primary teachers' views of particular curriculum, their grasp of subject knowledge and how to teach it as the basis for developing professional identity as educators is warranted.

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