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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Tambyah, Mallihai Mary](#) (2009) "I am a secondary teacher and I teach history and SOSE" : negotiating pre-service teacher identities in times of curriculum change. *Social Educator*, 27(2), pp. 13-20.

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“I am a secondary teacher and I teach history and SOSE”: Negotiating pre-service teacher identities in times of curriculum change

Abstract

Secondary social education in Australia is set to change with the new national history curriculum but integrated social education will continue in the middle years of schooling. Competing discourses of disciplinary and integrated social education approaches create new challenges for pre-service teachers as identification with a teaching area is an important aspect of developing a broader teacher identity. Feedback on a compulsory, final year curriculum studies unit revealed the majority of secondary pre-service teachers identified with at least one social science discipline. However, only a small number listed the integrated social education curriculum of Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), even though SOSE was an essential part of their brief. More complex identities were revealed in post-teaching practice interviews. In times of curriculum change, attention to pre-service teachers' disciplinary knowledge is critical in developing a stable subject identity.

Introduction

Change is imminent in secondary social education in Australia as the new national history curriculum to be implemented in 2011 mandates units in world history, with a strong emphasis on Australian history including Aboriginal history (National Curriculum Board, 2008). The new disciplinary focus confirms that the core integrated social education key learning area of Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) will be abandoned and replaced under the umbrella of Humanities and social sciences (including history, geography and economics) (Council for the Australian Federation, 2007; Ministerial Council of Education, Employment and Youth Affairs, 2008). The importance of adequate teacher preparation in history to successfully implement the new curriculum has been noted (National Curriculum Board, 2008); however, the emphasis on historical understanding and inquiry, which are defining features of the discipline of history, is only one aspect of the overall social education program of secondary students. Secondary social education teachers need to teach a range of topics in history, geography, civics and citizenship and environmental education, some of which will be discipline-based, and others which will be “integrated” through interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches. For example, in Queensland, SOSE will continue until Year 9 and the national history curriculum initiatives will be implemented within the Queensland Essential Learnings framework (The State of Queensland (Queensland Studies Authority), 2007). In this context, teacher–educators need to prepare teachers who are knowledgeable and flexible enough to manage the changing curriculum agenda while addressing the broader issues of developing teachers' sense of educational purpose, pedagogical practices, teacher identity and agency (Day, 2004). Social education teachers' professional identity will need to reconcile competing discourses of disciplinary and integrated approaches to social education.

This paper examines the following question: how do secondary pre-service teachers' views of the Queensland SOSE curriculum shape their identity as social education teachers? First, the issues of core content and expertise for social education teaching are considered.

Second, concepts of activist identity (Sachs, 2005), postmodern professionalism (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996) and the knowledge base for teaching (Shulman, 1986, 1987) are used to theorize subject identity in pre-service education. Third, data from over sixty participants from a final year social education curriculum unit at Queensland University of Technology are analysed for expressions of emerging professional identity. Although the term *social science teacher* is commonly used in Queensland schools, the term *social education teacher* is used in this paper to describe teachers of SOSE and the disciplines of history and geography. The paper adopts a conceptualisation of SOSE as *social education*, incorporating both disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives (Reynolds, 2009).

The study illustrates some of the contradictions and uncertainties that currently beset social education in Australia. The following vignette highlights the challenges and frustrations confronting some novice social education teachers.

Leanne's case

The issues that face secondary pre-service education teachers emerge after they have completed curriculum studies in SOSE and in their chosen discipline area such as geography, legal studies, or history followed by teaching practice. Leanne's email raised significant concerns about subject knowledge for SOSE:

...im afraid my subject knowledge will be limited for teaching SOSE. For example, my special interest is Asian studies and international relations. I am also very keen on things that affect our everyday lives especially the politics of "green". So what is exactly should i KNOW. should i be studying up on all sorts of social issues or keeping abreast of current and world affairs etc etc? Or is the main concern of social science teaching students how to think and get them thinking about the world around them without too much content involved? I noticed l[a]st year that M[ary] was very good with her history and obviously this is her thing. Does this mean that she would be looking at teaching history rather than SOSE or would merely have a different approach to the curriculum. That curriculum...seems so broad yet lacks direction, for the teacher. (Leanne, email communication, February 21, 2008)

Curriculum studies in SOSE and teaching practice had not resolved concerns about the scope of SOSE and what Leanne was expected to "know". She was confused whether SOSE was concerned with the development of thinking skills rather than content. Moreover, concerns about personal subject knowledge and the status of SOSE in schools were affecting her purpose for teaching, specifically her subject identity as a SOSE teacher.

SOSE: An image problem?

The broad scope of SOSE presents teachers with some challenges. Stodolsky and Grossman (1995) argue that "Subject matter is one of the primary organizers of the professional life of secondary teachers" (p. 228). SOSE is taught throughout the states and territories of Australia in the compulsory years of schooling, although in Victoria and New

South Wales history is taught as a separate school subject. In Queensland, SOSE is taught from years 1 – 9 and integrates the disciplines of history, geography, economics, sociology and politics. In addition, SOSE includes environmental studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, Asian studies and civics and citizenship. The concepts, processes and values of the Queensland SOSE syllabus are drawn from the disciplines of history, geography and economics (Queensland School Curriculum Council, QSCC, 2000); the recent Year 9 SOSE Essential Learnings stipulate that students will be able to “plan investigations using discipline-specific inquiry models and processes” (The State of Queensland (Queensland Studies Authority) 2007, p.2). The disciplinary basis of Queensland SOSE is evident, yet links are made between the respective subject areas.

The nature of “integration” in SOSE requires further clarification. Integrated curriculum frameworks such as multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning appear to reduce the fragmentation of knowledge by drawing on common themes and connections (Lopes & de Macedo, 2006 cited in Harris & Marsh, 2007). Curriculum integration in middle schooling is generally based on Beane’s (1997) student-centred integrative model or Jacob’s (1989) subject-centred multidisciplinary model; SOSE may be considered multidisciplinary because subject areas are absorbed without regard to subject boundaries (Dowden, 2007). The conceptualization of “integration” in SOSE remains a matter for debate. While SOSE draws on disciplinary frameworks it promotes a multidisciplinary approach where the distinctive elements of the disciplines are brought together in the one KLA (Johnston, 2007).

Yet, it requires experience teaching across the disciplines for teachers to become familiar with the broad knowledge base required for SOSE. Research on conceptions of subject matter in school subjects found that social studies, English and science (in comparison with maths and foreign languages) represent subjects at “the less well-defined, less sequential, and more dynamic end of the spectrum” (Stodolsky & Grossman, 1995, p. 243) giving teachers much greater autonomy and high levels of curriculum control over what they teach. However, SOSE may suffer an image problem due its broad scope, impacting on secondary teachers whose professional identity is bound to their subject area (Beijaard, 1995).

Teacher identity

The concept of identity broadly refers to the meanings one attaches to oneself or are attributed to one by other people. Teachers have a strong sense of professional identity (Sachs, 2005). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) describe teachers’ professional knowledge in terms of the “personal practical knowledge” held by “teachers as knowers: knowers of themselves, of their situations, of children, of subject matter, of teaching, of learning” (p.1). This personal and professional knowledge is demonstrated in teaching practice and can be understood in teachers’ individual stories as they seek to know who they are. The storied dimension to understanding teachers’ professional identity can be linked with Sach’s (2005)

definition of professional identity as “the way that people understand their own individual experience and how they act and identify with various groups” (p.8). The concept of teachers as “knowers” and how they understand their own teaching experience can be contextualised to the knowledge base that teachers bring to their work. However, drawing on work with primary science teachers Smith tells us that “building and using...a knowledge repertoire occurs along the marshalling of other sorts of knowledge and experience by the students as they are constructing their identities of themselves as teachers” (Smith, 2007, p. 378). He concludes that focusing on teachers’ identity is connected to knowledge growth and should not be seen as an alternative.

Teacher identity is multifaceted and subject identity is one aspect of core teacher attributes, attitudes, knowledge and professional practices that are initiated and shaped during the pre-service period. Goodson and Hargreaves’ (1996) model of postmodern professionalism and *discretionary judgement* over the issues of teaching and curriculum posits that teachers retain the independence to make decisions about curriculum and practice. In implementing integrated curriculum like SOSE, teachers determine priorities in the classroom. In contrast, subject specific national curriculum guidelines may diminish teachers’ independence and challenge professional identity.

The literature on professional identity has largely focused on primary rather than secondary teachers. Jennifer Nias’ foundational work on primary teachers’ identities argued for the distinction between personal and professional elements in teachers’ lives (Nias, 1989 cited in Day, Kingston, Stobart & Sammons, 2006). She identified the personal, professional, emotional and organisational aspects of teacher identity and the interplay of these aspects with individual agency and structural aspects of schooling. However, the research on secondary teachers’ identity paints a different picture. Beijaard (1995) found the professional identity of secondary teachers derived primarily from the subject they taught. Relationships with colleagues in the same school who also taught the same subject and the status of these school subjects were pivotal to secondary teachers’ professional identity. Changes in the situation for secondary teachers, for example, the integration of subjects impacted negatively on secondary teachers’ professional identity (Beijaard, 1992 cited in Beijaard, 1995; Beane, 1997).

Subject specialisation and subject status are important for secondary teachers and sustaining a stable subject identity may depend on certain life, career and organisational phases (Day, *et. al.*, 2006). The early days of teaching may be one such time. In ethnographic interviews undertaken with twenty-eight Scottish teachers in their first year of teaching McNally, Blake, Corbin and Gray (2008) found few references to subject knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge or the professional standards in the first four months, indicating a bracketing of the cognitive dimensions of teaching. Similarly, pre-service secondary social education teachers

are yet to establish their sense of identity as teachers. Given that secondary teacher identity develops in the context of subject knowledge for teaching, Shulman's (1986, 1987) theorization of the knowledge base for teaching is relevant.

Shulman drew attention to three essential types of knowledge for teaching: subject content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge. This paper proposes that the "teacher identity" of pre-service secondary social education teachers as "subject specialists" develops in the context of these three types of knowledge; furthermore, it is intrinsically linked with teachers' broader professional identity, shaped by both individual and contextual factors. Sachs (2005) describes the *entrepreneurial* and *activist* professional identity of teachers emerging from changing educational policies, government policies and professional development initiatives that shape teachers' work. It is argued that, for teachers, a professional identity provides a broad framework for teachers on "how to be", "how to act" and "how to understand" their work and role in society (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). The study posits that teachers' knowledge is a powerful influence on professional identity and the development of a distinctive subject identity in secondary social education teachers.

Changes to teachers' work posed by education reform and teacher accountability initiatives in Australia create continually shifting contextual factors for teaching. In this climate teachers' views of themselves and their identity cannot be assumed to be either stable or coherent. Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark and Warne (2002) ascribe an 'uncertain' theory of professionalism to teachers as professionals "mobilizing a complex of occasional identities in response to shifting contexts" (p. 117). Teacher identities are fragmented "mini-narratives of identification" of "the recollected pupil, pressured individual, subject specialist, the person/teacher I am" and so on (Stronach, *et. al.*, 2002, p. 116). This research focuses on teacher as subject specialist and considers its role in novice social education teachers' emerging professionalism.

Research participants and data collection

The research cohort comprised seventy undergraduates and nine postgraduates enrolled in a compulsory social education curriculum unit at Queensland University of Technology (n=79). The unit focused on senior curriculum and teachers' professional role. Students then commenced a four week teaching placement. Each student had two senior secondary teaching areas, one of which was a senior social education, for example, History and English or Physical Education and Geography. As all Queensland secondary social education teachers will teach SOSE in the middle years, in earlier curriculum studies the students had examined the Queensland SOSE curriculum and focused on discipline-specific approaches to senior curriculum.

Data was collected in two phases. First, anonymous answers to a written questionnaire were obtained in week six. Second, students were invited by email to attend a short interview with the lecturer after they had completed their placement. Interviews were conducted after final grades in the unit were delivered and up to two months after the field placement.

Instruments and procedure

Questionnaire

The questionnaire focused on feedback on unit content and learning activities with an additional section encouraging students to think about their identity as a social education teacher. They were asked to describe themselves by completing the sentence, “ I am.....” and to record reasons for this description. The questions prompted students to consider whether their recent work with their senior social education curriculum impacted on their description, and what other experiences had influenced their subject identity to date. The questionnaires were anonymous and completed as an in-class tutorial activity; responses were collected from sixty-one students.

Interview

The purpose of the interview was to encourage reflective practice through the lens of curriculum knowledge. Collins (2004) argues that reflective practice in teacher education should be informed through “lenses through which practice might be examined, justified and/or changed. These lenses should include ethical lenses, research-based lenses, cultural lenses....to enrich their conceptual repertoire so that they can engage in wide-visioned rather than blinkered reflective practice” (p. 232). The value of investigating teacher identity after field placements is supported by Burnett (2006) whose analysis of the impact of initial teacher education in England on teaching practice found that practical experience has implications for how knowledge is conceptualised. Pre-service secondary teachers tend to focus on content knowledge and the methodology of their subject areas during their teaching practice (Parkison, 2008). Interviews were audio-recorded and further explored the impact of teaching practice on students’ identity as social education teachers. The researcher was not involved in teaching this unit or in conducting interviews; she analysed data from the questionnaires and listened to the audio-tapes to elicit and transcribe significant themes and quotations. Twenty interviewees (identified by pseudonyms) commented on their professional identity.

Summary of data collection

Number of participants:	79
Questionnaire responses:	61
Interviews referring to subject identity:	20

Data analysis

Questionnaire

In response to the question, “Think about your identity as a social science teacher today. How would you describe yourself now?”, students described themselves in a variety of ways incorporating either one or both of their senior subject areas; they said, for example, “*I am a PE and geography teacher*” or “*I am a secondary teacher and I teach SOSE*”, or, “*I am a history teacher*”, or “*I am a Home Economics teacher*”. This modelling was provided to alert their professional identity. Some typical responses were that students saw themselves in the following ways:

- a history teacher who also teaches English*
- a geography teacher who can also teach SOSE if required*
- a history and geography teacher*
- high school teacher – business and history*
- a dance teacher with the ability to teach geography*
- a music teacher and I also teach secondary history & SOSE*
- a secondary teacher and I teach history and SOSE*

These statements reflected the first and second teaching areas nominated by each student for their degree. The cohort was strongest in history reflecting the fact that of the 79 enrolled in the unit, 53% had history as either their first or second teaching area and 20% had geography as either their first or second teaching area.

Students provided a variety of reasons for their self-descriptions. The following are some reasons provided by those who described themselves as history teachers: history was important to know, enjoyment of history, liking history more than the other teaching area, viewing subject matter from the eyes of a “historian”, pride in being a history teacher, passion/interest/love of history, experience developing curriculum units and desire to teach history. Some serious misconceptions of history were also noted: one student identified as a history teacher commenting that history teaching was “straight forward...I don’t have to worry about the values aspect”. Students who described themselves as geography teachers were in the largest minority. Like the history teachers, their reasons were the importance of geography, enjoyment of geography curriculum, love/passion for geography, commitment and “sense of progress” as a geography teacher. One student worried about having to teach in a school that did not have senior geography and another was concerned about difficulties in explaining geography concepts. One listed geography as a teaching area but did not see it as the “first and foremost reason for teaching”.

Questionnaire data reveals that about 73% of this cohort strongly identified with either history or geography. Reasons included familiarity with the subject, curricular knowledge and an

emotional connection to the subject. Students were clearly optimistic and enthusiastic about teaching history and geography.

Where the social education subject was the second teaching area, the data indicated it was a valuable context for the first teaching area. A drama/legal studies student valued legal studies because it provided issues for “provocative performance work”; another drama/history student thought the two areas could “meld” together. Four students described themselves as a “social science teacher” based on a desire to teach philosophy, interest, self-belief in being able to teach “most of the social science subjects”, and awareness that history was applicable in all areas of study. For these few students social science was part of their identity, yet there was no strong allegiance to a particular subject or to SOSE. Rather, their identity was a pragmatic one, reflecting life choices and the reality of teaching in schools.

Surprisingly, only 5% of these students professed a strong identification with the general role of teaching. One student wanted to “consider myself a teacher” with leanings towards subject areas varying from time to time. Another student said that being a teacher “is more important than what I teach”, views echoed by a fellow student who said “I am a teacher first and foremost. History is my passion... But one ...must be able to teach across multiple fields”. One student wanted students to “excel within the wider community” and thus “the content is not as important as developing solid life skills”, while another admitted to being “a confused teacher” and ambivalent about teaching as a career.

Of the sixty-one responses received, only 22% of students identified SOSE as their subject area, and in all of these cases, SOSE was listed second in their personal description. Positive views of SOSE reported by these students included a good high school SOSE/history experience, the likelihood of having to teach SOSE due to job availability, it was their choice of teaching area, enjoying teaching SOSE and strong feelings in favour of SOSE. One student was ambivalent saying “a lot of what SOSE entails is broad and I feel like there is a lot of ground to cover” and others had negative perceptions. These students found SOSE was “so mixed and matched; no real continuity” and the syllabus “seems a little too flexible”. Poor background knowledge and a lack of university-based education to teach SOSE were acknowledged.

Interviews

One question asked during the interview was, “Has this unit had an impact on your subject identity as a social science teacher?” In response to this question, it seemed that many interviewees had only started thinking about their professional identity in their final year. For example, Judy expressed satisfaction saying “I’ve walked away from these subjects feeling better about myself as a developing teacher and a professional”. Acceptance of the general

teacher role was noted by students who did not venture a subject identity. Eliza said “I consider myself to be a teacher of youth” and Nicole noted “I teach teenagers”.

The issue of subject matter proficiency in history, geography, legal studies and SOSE was mentioned by the majority of interviewees. Dawn, a geography and Physical Education (PE) teacher, emerged from prac “thinking a lot more about curriculum content in Geography and now the Essential Learnings [a new curriculum initiative]”. Teaching practice had alerted her to the need for both subject matter knowledge and curricular knowledge. Jan identified strongly and passionately as a history teacher having “discovered a natural aptitude for history”. George was confident based on a wide-ranging teaching prac: “I teach social sciences and English...I see myself as being able to teach all the different social sciences”. Subject expertise and recent teaching had impacted positively on these students’ perception of their ability to teach their senior social science. Quiet confidence with the respective senior curriculum areas was a distinctive feature of these interviews. Furthermore, teaching practice was critical in confirming teacher identity. James drew on his recent teaching to confirm his decision he did not want to teach legal studies: “For me...my identity is as a drama teacher....If I was teaching legal studies....I would have to go further and find things that would keep me interested in the subject”.

In contrast to the senior subjects, students were critical of SOSE, admitting to a poor knowledge base. For example, while quite confident of her ability to teach history, Jan had not taught SOSE and this lack of experience compounded negative views of the SOSE curriculum. “The SOSE curriculum is very hard to understand....I feel quite ready to go into a classroom and teach history, now, I won’t probably say exactly the same thing about SOSE”. Similarly, Mary admitted to not understanding the SOSE syllabus. She “did a lot of SOSE work on prac which made it easier”, but history remained her passion. Pat lamented her own lack of knowledge for teaching SOSE saying “I wish I had more history...or SOSE knowledge”. Teaching from a geography base, she concluded “SOSE could be such a great subject...it needs more of a foundation to build upon”. James’s negative view of SOSE was influenced by his own inadequate knowledge base: “I don’t like junior SOSE because it is a mix of everything....I don’t feel confident teaching it. I haven’t got a geography background, I don’t have a history background”.

Despite this ambivalence, a minority had positive views of SOSE. While initially unsure of SOSE, Chris who identified as a history teacher said, “I’ve been teaching it and I’ve been enjoying it now”. Bob had enjoyed his first SOSE class noting that the difference between teaching SOSE and PE was the need to find resources. Joseph who identified as a PE teacher commented he would be applying for Geography and SOSE jobs. None of these students voiced criticism of the curriculum or concerns about the knowledge base for teaching SOSE.

Findings and discussion

The findings from the questionnaire indicate that an emerging teacher identity can be identified through a curriculum lens (Collins, 2004) in secondary pre-service teacher education. Students reflected on curricular knowledge and mainly admitted to a professional identity with the traditional subjects of history and geography (Beijaard, 1995; Day, *et. al.*, 2006). Follow-up interviews revealed that the formation of subject identity was critical to professional identity, influenced by a variety of factors: previous experience at school, curriculum studies at university, industry factors (if applicable), field experiences and personal passion and interest in the subject.

Not surprisingly, pre-service teachers' emerging identity was framed by curricular knowledge and discipline-based subject knowledge for teaching (Shulman, 1986, 1987), strengthened by teaching practice. An activist identity (Sachs, 2005) in terms of what students had taught gained expression and momentum while on field placement. Subject identity for the majority appeared to be relatively stable, with clear allegiances to the disciplines of history and geography. This is attributed to recent engagement with the senior curriculum, and in some cases, as a result of positive teaching experiences (Burnett, 2006; Parkison, 2008). A small number of this cohort eschewed subject identity for a general identification as a teacher with broader responsibilities to students, indicating that a broader, more complex and multi-faceted teacher identity was emerging.

The scope of this research project precluded in-depth exploration of the many factors that influence teacher identity. However, SOSE appeared to be largely invisible in terms of professional identity, propelled by ambivalence centred on the broad scope of SOSE, the lack of foundational knowledge to teach it and difficulty in interpreting curriculum intent. Despite tacit acceptance that SOSE was a necessary part of the teaching job, it was not significant for professional identity

Conclusion

Teacher identity, particularly subject identity, has emerged in this study as an important dimension of secondary social education teachers' pre-service education. The preoccupation with subject knowledge at this stage can be a sound basis for developing broader aspects of teacher identity. Disciplinary-based subject knowledge and curricular knowledge (Shulman, 1986, 1987) are critical influences in shaping secondary social education teachers' professional identity. Pre-service teachers' identity appeared to be relatively stable, and subject identity for some, as a senior history or geography teacher, was secure. In comparison, identification with junior SOSE was weak.

This paper theorises that pre-service teachers' subject identities are powerful professional contexts which will shape the future implementation of curriculum and the perception of

subjects in a school. In times of curriculum contestation, unless pre-service social education teachers consider themselves as SOSE teachers, as well as history or geography teachers, their purpose for teaching integrated social education is likely to be poorly articulated and executed. Since all social education teachers are not history specialists, teachers' subject identities need to accommodate competing discourses of disciplinary and integrated social education approaches. Teacher education programs can facilitate a robust professional identity and purpose for social education by promoting a strong disciplinary knowledge base in one or more of the humanities. Such foundations provide a sound platform for building an integrated approach. Furthermore, this approach will encourage an informed professionalism where teachers' judgement over issues of teaching and curriculum is valued (Goodson & Hargreaves, 1996). While the national curriculum may usher new respect for humanities it will certainly privilege some subjects, possibly creating a hierarchy of school subjects. Future research into how social education teachers' professional identities accommodate, resist or are modified according to the national curriculum, and the impact on professional practice with regard to discipline-based and integrated curriculum is warranted.

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