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## **Teachers' knowledge for social education: perspectives from the middle years of schooling**

### ***Abstract***

Social education in Australia is a divisive educational issue. The last decade has been marked by the controversial integrated social studies curriculum, Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) where history, geography and environmental studies were integrated with civics and citizenship. The introduction of a compulsory K-10 Australian Curriculum from 2011, however, marks the return to history and geography and the abandonment of SOSE. Curriculum reform aside, what do teachers think is essential knowledge for middle years social education? The paper reports on a phenomenographical exploration of thirty-one middle school teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge for SOSE. Framed by Shulman's (1986, 1987) theoretical framework of the knowledge base for teaching, the research identified seven qualitatively different ways of understanding essential knowledge for social education. The study indicates a professional practice-based theorisation of social education that justifies attention to discipline-based knowledge and teacher identity in the middle years.

### ***Background to the study***

The proposed Australian Curriculum to be adopted from 2011 is a radical departure from current practice and raises questions about how the teaching of the humanities in Australia may best be achieved. Currently schools teach Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE), a curriculum which integrates the humanities and social sciences in the primary and middle years of schooling. SOSE was mandated by *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* (MCEETYA, 1999) as one of eight Key Learning Areas (KLAs) in the compulsory years of schooling. SOSE is taught from years one to ten across all states and territories in Australia, but notably, Victoria and New South Wales teach History as a separate subject. However, the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) set new policy directions for Australian

education and SOSE was replaced with Humanities. While the national curriculum sets out to achieve the new Goals, Reid (2009) questions whether the national curriculum meets its stated aim of meeting the challenges of the future as it is quite traditional, comprising separate discipline-based subjects such as history and geography, supported by 'general capabilities'. Further, in relation to teaching history, Sim (2010) argues that the personal and educational backgrounds of new entrants to the profession will be critical to the future implementation of the national history curriculum. The proposed introduction of a national curriculum in history (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) and geography (ACARA, 2010b) will impact middle school teachers, raising questions about their knowledge base for the new curriculum.

In Queensland, where this study was conducted, SOSE has been taught from years one to ten as an integrated subject since 2000, first as an outcomes-based curriculum (QSCC, 2000) and since 2008 in a revision of the curriculum through the Queensland *SOSE Essential Learnings* curriculum framework which set out Learning Statements and standards for years three, five, seven and nine (QSA, 2007). The Queensland *SOSE Essential Learnings* comprise four curriculum organisers which are loosely based on the disciplines of history, geography, sociology, cultural studies, economics and government. The implications of the national history curriculum for Queensland social education teachers in middle and secondary school will be significant. For example, examination of the draft *K(P)-10 Australian Curriculum: History* (ACARA, 2010a) revealed a content-heavy curriculum which detailed core content and concepts and historical inquiry processes for each year level. Indeed Queensland's response to the draft curriculum (QSA, 2010b) contends that both beginning and experienced teachers may need significant guidance and professional development to teach the historical inquiry approach and high level of content prescribed. Given that under the Australian Constitution, implementation of the national curriculum rests with the states and territories (Reid, 2009), the enacted national curriculum will be influenced by what is already being taught. The proposed curriculum is a challenge for generalist teachers and

raises questions about the educational value of discipline specialisation in the humanities for middle school students.

This study examines what constitutes knowledge for middle school social education teachers by investigating this research question: *What are Queensland middle years teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge in social education?* To clarify the use of terms used in this paper, "middle school" is used to describe education in the middle years of schooling, *i.e.*, students aged ten to fourteen years. The term "social education" is used to describe the integrated, humanities-based learning area of school study in Australia known as Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). Under SOSE, history, geography, economics, environmental education, civics and citizenship are integrated into one learning area. Internationally, social education is often referred to as "social studies", following the lead of the USA (Diem, 2002). The following section explores the original theorisation of SOSE and the rationale for social education.

### ***Theorising the curriculum***

The theoretical basis for curriculum defines the scope and sequence of the teaching and learning that will be undertaken. In the original development of the KLA in the 1990s, SOSE drew on single-discipline studies such as history, geography, economics and sociology, multidisciplinary studies such as studies of Asia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies, global education and peace studies, and integrated studies such as citizenship education (Marsh, 2008; AEC, 1994). Discourse analysis of national and state-based SOSE blueprints and policy documents has revealed that, on one level, SOSE derived from the academic disciplines and on another level, reflected broader trends in social education and promoted a multidisciplinary approach (Dowden, 2007; Johnston, 2007). Kennedy alludes to the "multidisciplinary approach to curriculum organisation" (2008, p. 9) that characterises SOSE across different jurisdictions.

This raises the question, what is the value of an integrated curriculum and what form should it take? For example, is a multidisciplinary curriculum better suited to social education than a disciplinary framework in the middle years? The philosophical foundation for studying the disciplines in a way that connects established bodies of knowledge is attributed to John Dewey (1916/1944). His view, that students should be able to make sense of the curriculum in terms of their own experience (Noddings, 1998), is critical to contemporary approaches to teaching and learning. Advocates of integrated curriculum frameworks such as multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary learning believe they reduce the fragmentation of knowledge across different subject areas, focus on the development of skills over subject matter and develop awareness of the patterns and connections between ideas (Harris & Marsh, 2007).

Curriculum integration is usually based on one of two models: either Beane's student-centred integrative model (1997) or the subject-centred multidisciplinary model (Jacobs, 1989). In Queensland it appears that the SOSE curriculum draws on both these models of integration (QSCC, 2000). Furthermore, Queensland SOSE is underpinned by a socially-critical approach to knowledge derived from the work of Jürgen Habermas (1971), emphasising the implications of knowledge for social justice, democracy and sustainability (Gilbert, 2004). SOSE can be taught through issues-based or thematic units in which the disciplinary perspectives of history and geography are explicitly promoted (Kennedy, 2008). As such, students examine broad social, local, national or global issues with a view to taking action and making a difference in society.

### ***Curriculum in the middle years of schooling***

The middle years of schooling is an area of interest for teachers, academics, teacher-educators and curriculum developers in Australia because of widespread concern that the period of early adolescence is a time of "traumatic transition" leading adolescents to take risks that may affect their future (Carrington, 2006, p. 66). Clearly the curriculum plays an

important role as students make the intellectual and personal transition between primary and senior years of schooling. Proponents of middle school curriculum argue that it should be both integrated across the key learning areas and inter-disciplinary (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005; Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996; Hargreaves, Earl, Moore & Manning, 2001; Jackson & Davis, 2000). In their review of Australian middle schooling, Luke *et.al.* (2003, p. 8) identified the need for “quality and diversity of pedagogy” to improve student learning and increase intellectual rigour in the middle years. Prosser (2008a) affirms that the impact of reform in past middle schooling initiatives in Australia has been limited. While SOSE promotes the ideals of middle schooling (Beane, 1997; Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005), the integration of disciplinary knowledge in SOSE presents significant and hitherto unexamined challenges regarding the knowledge base of middle school teachers.

This study of teachers' conceptions of knowledge is framed by Shulman's theory of the knowledge base for teaching (1986; 1987). Shulman's theorisation of teachers' knowledge and professionalization (Wilson, Shulman & Richert, 1987; Grossman, Wilson & Shulman, 1989; Shulman & Sherin, 2004) has inspired a large research literature on teachers' specialised subject matter knowledge over the last twenty years. Shulman theorized that teachers' knowledge base broadly comprises content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and curricular knowledge (Shulman, 1986; Turner-Bissett, 2001) based on the need for teachers to understand and transform disciplinary subject matter for teaching.

This concern drives the focus of this phenomenographic exploration of teachers' conceptions of knowledge. The study seeks to theorise social education and consider the extent to which teachers' conceptions reflect the Shulman paradigm. Further, it is argued teachers' conceptions of knowledge for middle school social education may articulate a practice-based, theory of social education. Phenomenography was used to analyse and report findings from a study of Queensland middle school teachers' conceptions of “essential knowledge” for teaching social education. The following section is a brief overview of phenomenography before the findings are discussed.

## **Phenomenography**

Phenomenography is a qualitative research approach that emerged during the 1970s from studies of learning in Sweden. Phenomenography is described as a research “specialization that is aimed at questions of relevance to learning and understanding in an educational setting” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 111). The object of phenomenography is to discern the qualitatively different *ways* in which a phenomenon may be experienced in order to identify *variation* in the ways of experiencing the phenomenon (Marton & Booth, 1997). The researcher adopts a second order perspective during the research process to minimise personal subjectivity and to facilitate participants’ ideas or experience of the phenomenon to emerge from the data (Marton & Booth, 1997). The different ways in which a phenomenon is experienced are presented in the *categories of description*. The categories are logically ordered into an outcome space and linked by common dimensions of variation which both differentiate the categories and indicate what is focal within each category.

Phenomenography adopts a non-dualistic view of the world, meaning that the inner and the outer perceptions of the world (or phenomenon) are not formally distinguished but relate internally to each other. Conceptions of the phenomenon are presented through a structure of awareness which describes the *variation* in the different ways of experiencing the same phenomenon or conception. Different parts of the whole may or may not be discerned or be an object of awareness at the same time. While the categories of description describe ways of perceiving the world, according to Marton and Booth (1997), “as a rule not all the relevant aspects of a phenomenon and of the situation in which it is embedded are discerned and present simultaneously in focal awareness” (pp. 112-113). As such, the discernment of the categories of description is core to phenomenography:

It is the goal of phenomenography to discover the structural framework within which various categories of understanding exist. Such structures (a complex of categories of description) should prove useful in understanding other people’s understanding. (Marton, 1988, p. 147, cited in Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002, p. 340)

The identification and 'discovery' of the categories of description constitute the original findings of the study (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002) and manifest middle school teachers' understanding of essential knowledge for social education.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

Semi-structured interviews were conducted from September - December 2008 with thirty-one (n=31) middle school SOSE teachers in the Brisbane metropolitan area following ethical clearance from the researcher's affiliated university. Participants volunteered from a range of primary, middle and secondary schools, both co-educational and single-sex institutions, run by the state, independent and Catholic education authorities. They comprised beginning and experienced SOSE teachers and five Heads of Department, including twenty-four women and seven men. To bracket researcher subjectivity at the time of data collection and preliminary analysis the researcher was not engaged in teaching SOSE (Harris, 2008). Each interview was conducted using eight open-ended questions such as, "Tell me about a time when you felt really knowledgeable about teaching a SOSE unit?", "Tell me about a good teaching experience" and "In your experience can you describe what makes a good SOSE teacher". Questions were asked in the same sequence and participants gently prompted to expand on their initial responses to the question by describing examples from their teaching.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and read several times. An iterative process was then undertaken to select utterances which captured the participants' understanding or ideas about the phenomenon. During data analysis, the use of letters preserved each participant's anonymity, for example, R.N., D.B. and S.L., and selected utterances referred to page numbers from their interview transcript. In this study, the three criteria used to judge the importance of a participant's ideas were frequency, position and pregnancy (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002; Harris, 2008). Utterances of each idea were selected firstly on how frequently they were expressed in the interview, secondly, where the statement



was positioned in the interviewee's response to the question and the context in which it was said, and thirdly, the level of emphasis the interviewee ascribed to the idea within the interview. Utterances from all the interviews were colour-coded for similarity and carefully examined as being representative of the conception of essential knowledge before being extracted from the original interview and grouped into a *pool of meaning* (Marton, 1986; Marton & Booth, 1997). Twenty-nine pools of meaning or Essential Knowledge (EK) were discerned, then compared and contrasted for fine similarities and differences (Marton, Runesson & Tsui, 2004) and coalesced into the *categories of description*. For example, utterances in Knowledge of facts or discipline-based factual knowledge (EK5) were similar to Knowledge of disciplinary process (EK7), but conceptually different from Integrated learning with identifiable discipline-based components (EK3). Following fine comparisons of intent, the utterances in EK5 and EK7 coalesced into Category one: Discipline-based knowledge, while EK3 formed part of Category five: Integration of learning through concepts and skills.

### ***Findings***

This study found seven qualitatively different categories of description for social education:

- Discipline-based knowledge
- Curriculum knowledge
- Teaching and life experience
- Middle years
- Integration of learning through concepts and skills
- Currency of knowledge
- Teacher identity

The first three categories are focused on *Knowledge of the epistemology of the learning area* and the role of the teacher. The second three categories reflect *Knowledge of contexts*,

focusing on students rather than the teacher. The last category builds on previous categories and reflects the personal and professional domain of the teacher as *Knowledge of self as teacher*. The categories of description are logically and hierarchically ordered with higher categories building on some elements of teachers' knowledge in lower categories (Harris, 2008). Three *dimensions of variation* (DoV) evident across the categories are (1) the role of content, (2) inquiry learning and (3) teacher professionalism. Each provides a unique perspective on each category, uniting them in the structure of awareness of the phenomenon. This table summarises the structure of awareness of the phenomenon of essential knowledge for SOSE:

Table 1  
*Phenomenon of middle school teachers' essential knowledge for SOSE*

	Knowledge of the epistemology of the learning area			Knowledge of contexts			Knowledge of self as teacher
Categories of description	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7
	Discipline based knowledge	Curriculum knowledge	Teaching and life experience	Middle years	Integration through concepts and skills	Currency of knowledge	Teacher identity
<b>Focus of awareness</b>	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher	Student	Student [& teacher]	Student [& teacher]	Teacher
<b>DoV 1</b> Content	Content as facts; content as disciplinary knowledge	Curriculum & policies determine content	Experience supports teaching content	Holistic education rather than content	Broad concepts; personal development concepts	Current affairs & issues makes content relevant	Content knowledge expands through teaching
<b>DoV 2</b> Inquiry learning	Skills more important than factual knowledge	Inquiry learning provides depth	Knowledge of teaching resources facilitates inquiry	Life-long skills	SOSE 'processes' of inquiry learning	Current affairs as a context for inquiry learning	Personal attributes influence teaching inquiry
<b>DoV 3</b> Teacher professionalism	Different professional views on importance of skills over content	Discretion to interpret guidelines and core content	Chooses teaching & life experiences to support teaching	Student-centred SOSE pedagogy	Chooses suitable themes & concepts to integrate learning	Determines relevance & significance of current affairs	Defends professional strengths of SOSE teachers

### Category one: discipline-based knowledge

Category one describes core knowledge for SOSE as content and process knowledge derived from the humanities and social science disciplines of history, geography, economics, sociology, politics and government. Teachers distinguished *content as factual information* from *content as disciplinary knowledge* but often refer to each simultaneously:

a good SOSE teacher needs to have an understanding of how the economy basically works. What's the difference between a capitalist economy and a Marxist economy. They need to know, how our political system at its basics works. They need to know the key events. That's always debatable of course but some of the key events in Australian history. (I.N, November, 2008, p. 9)

*Content as disciplinary knowledge* focuses on teaching discipline-based skills within an integrated context. The following excerpt explains the value of explicitly teaching mapping skills in geography, the use of primary sources in history and core economic principles as part of SOSE:

The same with history, perhaps, where it might just be happening in a survey type thing. Give them a secondary document or a text book thing or show them a documentary. Uh, it would be much better to go through the process of them investigating and looking at it from different sources and so on. Now, there are times for surveys, .... **There are also times, I think, you've got to spend time, take time out to look at the various aspects of the discipline** [emphasis added]. I said mapping and geography but that's only one of them. You know, you could look at regional analysis, industry analysis. There's all sorts of different ways in which you could [do] population aspects of geography. All of them have certain ways of working and can lead you to fairly deep understandings of society. Um, the same with economics. There are certain principles of economics. (R.N. November, 2008, p. 7)

Some teachers differentiated content as factual information from disciplinary knowledge.

Others asserted the enduring importance of general inquiry skills:

You can't do without the content. The content is always going to be important, but I think, over the top of the content are the skills that you're trying to get across, whether they be the technical skills of writing or of graphing or whatever it is that you're doing, whether it be the thinking skills that are, I think, work so well with SOSE. (S.L. November, 2008, p. 2)

The ascendancy of skills over content was sometimes also perceived as a professional issue for teachers who separated their views from those of their school or colleagues: "... I've always been -- the process is more important than the content, but here [at this school] the content has always been the issue" (D.B. December, 2008, p. 8).

### **Category two: Curriculum knowledge**

Essential knowledge for SOSE included SOSE curriculum, policy documents and other frameworks for teaching and learning which impacted on curriculum implementation:

...the key document that helps us determine what we're going to teach is the *Essential Learnings*. We found that drives our planning of SOSE. However, because the *Essential Learning* document tells us, at the end of Year 7, this is what a student should know and by the end of Year 9, this is what every student should know, it does create a problem in the Year 8 section. (M.N. November, 2008, pp. 1-2)

At the time of data collection in 2008, SOSE had been implemented in Queensland for almost ten years. During this time the Queensland curriculum had changed from an integrated, outcomes-based curriculum (QSCC, 2000) to the Queensland *Essential Learnings* (QSA, 2007). Concern about curriculum change was a recurrent underlying feature of this category as teachers expressed concern about the impending national curriculum. In addition to curriculum, Category two refers to knowledge of learning and policy frameworks such as the Queensland New Basics Project (The State of Queensland, Department of Education and the Arts, 2004), *Scope and Sequence Years 1-9* (Education Queensland, 2008) and Dimensions of Learning framework (Marzano & Pickering, 1997). These learning frameworks shifted the emphasis from a teacher-centred to a student-centred teaching approach:

I mean, and when you read Productive Pedagogies [from New Basics] and the *Essential Learnings* and all the new senior syllabus, they're to me from; it's no longer that transmission model of education, you know? (D.B. December, 2008, p.10)

Teachers perceived the curriculum of SOSE as the reference point for content.

Further, Category two is heavily influenced by the impact of change as teachers were aware

that curriculum for SOSE was moving to privilege discipline-based content knowledge at the expense of the current emphasis on skills. While the curriculum was binding, teachers exercised professionalism and discretion to interpret the guidelines and core content. Inquiry learning provided ways to deliver depth in the new curriculum.

### **Category three: Teaching and life experience**

Category three describes teaching experience and life experience as a foundation of essential knowledge for SOSE. Teachers drew on their teaching experience of teaching SOSE and other subjects, collaboration with colleagues, team teaching and their own professional development:

My knowledge comes in the form of experience I suppose. I've been teaching in the area for my entire career and I studied as an undergraduate in the area so, as well, you know, as I did it at school. You kind of just build on that knowledge all the way through and I think, it's experience in that, what have you done in the different schools you've been in, what knowledge and experience have you gained from the different people that you've worked with and the more experienced people that you've worked with over your career. You know, the professional development that you've been involved in, making sure that you're always involved in what's happening and generally, your own reading and my personal study. Eventually you do have, I think, a fair bit of knowledge and experience and you apply that in the best way that you can with regards to what's actually required through syllabus documents etc. (S.L. November, 2008, p. 4)

Teaching experience involved the use of suitable human and IT-based resources, knowing where to access resources and being able to harness resources for teaching. In addition, the teacher's life experience was also viewed as a source of knowledge for SOSE, for *e.g.*, teachers who had travelled were able to bring a personal connection to knowledge of places and historical events to their students while others brought personal community experiences to their practice.

Teachers perceived their teaching experience and life experience as a source of knowledge for SOSE content and pedagogy. Teachers' knowledge of diverse human, ICT and print-based teaching resources was essential to facilitate inquiry learning. Teachers' professionalism influenced the way they drew on their life experiences to enhance their

teaching: “So through your own experience of life, you tend to channel your interest and bring that to the classroom” (C.T. November, 2008, p. 23).

#### **Category four: Middle years**

Category four describes SOSE teachers' knowledge of middle years students, age-appropriate content and pedagogy suited to SOSE. While the previous three categories focus on the teacher and the learning area, Category four focuses on the student and contexts. The middle years were clearly distinguished from the senior years and a good knowledge of students was vital: “So I think the passion and the children comes first and then on top of that you would add your core knowledge of some sort” (I.N. November, 2008, p. 9). Teachers appeared to have a developmental view of middle school students and the need for life-long education of the whole person. “...it's a lot more holistic. It's not so much about the individual subject matter” (K.R. December, 2008, p. 9), illustrating a clear distinction between descriptions of content in Categories one, two and three which were focused on knowledge of epistemologies of the learning area. SOSE teachers acknowledged a middle years philosophy of schooling, choosing content appropriate to the middle years. For example, units on democracy were linked to Nazism but not to a detailed study of Hitler: “Leave the study of Hitler and whether he caused World War II to a year 11 or 12 class, but certainly not have it in a younger class” (K.M. November, 2008, p. 14). Similarly, teachers' pedagogical content knowledge for SOSE was closely connected with their knowledge of students:

Knowledge of pedagogy. You need to know how to teach that content. Well, that ties in, that's connected with knowing your students. How do I get them switched on in the classroom? (M.N. November, 2008, p. 9)

Acknowledging that middle school students “learn by doing” (K.F. November, 2008, p. 20)

teachers combined student-centred learning activities to teach disciplinary concepts:

So a lot of the things that I do, I encourage them to discuss things. I encourage a lot of group work. In the past I've done very practical activities as learning experiences. The House of Representatives thing was a very practical thing, where people got to get up and move and cross the floor and stand up and have their say and it encourages that movement. And their attention was 100% for 100% of the time. (Y.E. November, 2008, p. 10)

Category four focuses on the middle school student rather than the teacher. The holistic education of middle school students emerged as a significant context for SOSE education. Content for SOSE is shaped by the developmental needs of the learner and certain concepts or topics of study were more suited than others to the middle years. Inquiry learning in this category promotes life-long learning skills, particularly thinking skills and values education. Teacher professionalism is evident as SOSE pedagogy is student-centred and is informed by the middle school context and philosophy of education.

#### **Category five: Integration of learning through concepts and skills**

Category five describes essential knowledge for SOSE as the integration of learning through broad concepts such as democracy and inquiry skills. It also centred on personal development concepts such as trust, reflecting the societal context of Category five. SOSE was taught in integrated, thematic units. The extent to which disciplinary knowledge was made explicit in thematic units depended on the way the unit was written and its purpose:

We have some units that are very much history-based, some very much geography-based and some are combinations. Obviously the *Learning Essentials* [sic] are impacting on what we're teaching now so, we're also trying to incorporate a lot more civics and that sort of thing as well. So, um, there's, you know, each unit is integrated but it has a particular focus especially now that they're talking about us having to do so much more history. (S.L. November, 2008, p. 1)

A knowledge of broad concepts emerged as one way to integrate the disciplines in SOSE. For example, many teachers focused on the concept of democracy as it enabled them to teach the civics and citizenship perspective of SOSE while drawing on history, political studies and government.

A key aspect of Category five is the use of inquiry learning to teach concepts and themes. Inquiry learning was integral to the way students gained knowledge of the concepts:

So, I would then generate lessons and activities that cover some of the concepts. See, I've gone away from you know, a lot of basic factual information. I want them to focus on concepts that are to do with the unit, and then so we would do lesson activities, a whole variety of them, some of them teacher-directed, and many of them students working in groups from sources, resources, you know, stations around the room. (D.B. December, 2008, pp. 19-20)

General inquiry learning skills such as research and investigative skills, skills of analysis, communication and reflection were perceived to be generic and were taught as processes. One interviewee explained that because SOSE crossed the disciplines, general rather than discipline-specific inquiry learning was needed:

I always felt that students needed to know how to process in a social scientific sort of way or to be more precise in a SOSE-y way. But what was SOSE? SOSE wasn't a social science per sé because social science is on about generating laws of behaviour or coming up with generalities compared to history which is on about understanding specifics and the unique. Then what we had here in SOSE was some sort of amalgam of the whole lot. I thought O.K., that being the case, we need to take the best of the disciplines, disciplinary approaches and work up a SOSE inquiry, which we did. (I.N. November, 2008, p. 3)

The "SOSE-y" process was based on general inquiry learning principles aimed at developing thinking skills and integrating the diverse content areas of SOSE.

The emphasis on integration through concepts, themes and inquiry skills in Category five illustrates that teachers' conceptions of knowledge for SOSE are underpinned by a discourse that privileges integration and skills-based learning rather than discipline-specific specialisation. The societal context of Category five focuses on both teachers and students as integration notes the intent of the learning area and the needs of middle school students. In contrast to Category one which was concerned with discipline-based knowledge of facts and skills, content as a dimension of variation in Category five includes teaching broad concepts to promote integration of disciplinary knowledge and personal development. The main aim of integration was to strive towards a holistic understanding of concepts and themes. Integration was also achieved through the SOSE processes of inquiry learning which were used to teach broad concepts. Teacher professionalism manifested when SOSE teachers exercised their professional discretion in making decisions about what themes/concepts to teach and how they were linked to the curriculum.



### **Category six: Currency of knowledge**

Category six explores teachers' knowledge of current affairs and social issues as essential knowledge SOSE:

What I also bring to it though is a constant sense of you know, what's relevant, what's interesting, what's topical, and how can we flesh this out so that kids can access that and enjoy studying it.... (T.A. November, 2008, p. 9)

The perception of being up-to-date with current events and social issues as presented in the news media promoted the profile of SOSE as a school subject and student engagement with the learning area. Students, too, were encouraged to consider knowledge of current affairs and issues as essential knowledge for SOSE:

I think that's probably No. 1. Having a really good grip on, you know, not just what's happened in the past but what's happening right now. Probably the best SOSE teachers are the really informed ones, the ones that keep themselves informed.... I think it's engaging with really good quality journals etc and constantly, you know, watching the news, good quality newspapers. That's what I tell the kids all the time, you've got to do that, not just me. You need to do that, because you've got to know what's happening in the world and you can't understand the world unless you keep up to date and you connect with what's happened in the past. (S.L. November, 2008, p. 10)

Currency of knowledge was prompted by the need to meet students' holistic educational needs, indicating the significance of social contexts in Category six. The teacher and the students share the focus: "You are the person who brings in that outside knowledge to the kids" (N.C. November, 2008, p. 7). Furthermore, currency of knowledge was promoted by the nature of the learning area as the "social" sciences. The nature of the social sciences behoved teachers take interest in the world around them and, if possible, be actively involved in addressing social problems:

It's the social sciences. It's social. You need to be applying that knowledge in some context outside of your lounge room and doing something to make the world a better place. Surely the first step in that direction is to understand what's going on around you so an interest in current events. And preferably the second level again, not everybody can get there, that is actively participating in that society. (I.N. November, 2008, p. 10)

Teachers made content explicitly relevant to students by drawing on current affairs and issues. This approach increased the real-world value of studying SOSE and student

enthusiasm and engagement with the learning area. Current events were used as context for teaching inquiry skills. Teacher professionalism is prominent in this category as teachers determined which current events and issues were significant and how they related to topics being taught. Similar to Category five, currency of knowledge in Category six contributed to holistic educational goals, illustrating the dual focus on teachers and students and awareness of social contexts.

### **Category seven: Teacher identity**

Essential knowledge for teaching in Category seven is the teacher's identity and self-awareness as a social education teacher. Focused on the personal domain, in Category seven teachers are aware of the influence of their own education, professional training and teaching experience as a source of knowledge for their own teaching. For example, one participant who was educated in the era before SOSE described herself as, "I am a history teacher and now I'm a SOSE teacher but I am a history teacher first. That's the way I think of myself" (J.A. November, 2008, p. 2) while a younger teacher said, "I think that's why I'm a SOSE teacher, 'cause I always remember SOSE and history as being the things that really caught me as a person..." (E.K. September, 2008, p. 3). As values educators, teachers' personal values were perceived to inform the knowledge base for teaching, "I mean, we've got to be the people we want our kids to be..." (J.A. November, 2008, p. 7).

Teachers' own learning experiences influenced their view of themselves as educators and their practice. One aspect of this self-awareness of professional identity was the acknowledgement that at times their own knowledge was limited and that they continued to learn with their students.

Yeah, I think what would be essential to know is that your knowledge is not um is not um complete. Like I think it is essential to know, in that area in particular, that there are things to learn all the time and things might change or things might stay the same and if you stop .... If you teach only what you know, then you are not teaching all the, you know, the kids are not learning outside of your knowledge base. Which could be drastic in some cases. [Laughter] So I think that it is essential to know that you don't know everything and that you can learn along the way. (J.L. September, 2008, p. 15)

In being open towards learning with one's students teachers perceived knowledge as learning. Despite having considerable more knowledge than their students, some teachers asserted that they always learned something more with their students: "I think I have felt knowledgeable about things but I think I have always come out knowing more at the end than I have at the beginning" (A.N. November, 2008, pp. 4-5). Others acknowledged that it was important to keep learning in order to be confident in the classroom for poor subject knowledge impacted pedagogy. As such, it was asserted that due to timetabling constraints SOSE was often taught by "conscripts in SOSE" (I.N. November, 2008, p. 4), who had no formal education in the humanities and relied on dated subject knowledge and transmissive pedagogy.

Category seven is concerned with teacher identity as essential knowledge for SOSE because teachers' subject and pedagogical knowledge for teaching was intrinsically bound with their view of themselves as teachers and their profession. Some teachers viewed content knowledge as something that developed all the time. Like their students, some teachers perceived themselves as inquiry learners: "I felt like I was on a learning journey with them and it was really nice to learn with them" (E.K. September, 2008, p. 5). A strong self-awareness and professional identity as social education teachers dominates this category. Teachers argued their professional strengths as social education teachers and defended their territory from those untrained in the area. In Category seven, essential knowledge for SOSE as teacher identity resides in the personal domain of the teacher but incorporates the learning area and societal contexts of the previous six categories. In complete contrast to the previous categories, however, it is the only category that focuses exclusively on perception of self as teacher as knowledge for middle years SOSE.

### ***Discussion***

Middle school teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge for SOSE were mapped in the seven qualitatively different categories of description. This study relies on frequency (Sjöström & Dahlgren, 2002) to numerically order the categories and group them according to perspective. The first three categories focus on knowledge of epistemologies, *i.e.*, what

counts as knowledge of the learning area of SOSE. The second three categories build on epistemologies and focuses on knowledge of the context in which middle years SOSE is taught. The last category focuses on knowledge of self as teacher, building on previous categories from a personal perspective. While the personal domain is associated with the emotional aspects of middle years teachers' work (Prosser, 2008b; Nias, 1996), in this study it alludes to the intellectual sense of self that informs knowledge for teaching.

The dimensions of variation of content, inquiry learning and teacher professionalism evident in each category provide a way to examine the extent to which teachers' conceptions reflect Shulman's theorisation of the knowledge base for teaching. Disciplinary knowledge (Category one) was acknowledged as the basis for content knowledge in SOSE but its implementation was affected by the middle school context (Category four) and the need for integration (Category five). Curricular knowledge was demonstrated in Category two and three while pedagogical content knowledge for SOSE was evident in all seven categories. Content and inquiry learning as dimensions of variation accord well with Shulman's theory of the knowledge base for teaching. The current study is based on the interpretation of the learning area of SOSE in Queensland; as such, minor differences in other jurisdictions may be evident depending on how the nationally formulated learning area has been interpreted. Certainly, there is potential for knowledge of learning area epistemologies, knowledge of contexts and knowledge of teacher as self to be generalised to other integrated school subjects such as science taught in middle school.

Despite the emphasis on skills and process-based teaching, SOSE teachers were attentive to the discipline-based content knowledge that underpinned SOSE. The categories of description resonate with notions of the transformation of subject-matter knowledge. Wilson, Shulman and Richert assert that, "Beyond subject matter knowledge, however, the teacher draws on knowledge of learners, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of context, knowledge of educational aims, and knowledge of other disciplines (1987, p. 120). While teachers in this study considered subject knowledge was paramount, other 'ways of

knowing' were equally important. The use of phenomenography facilitated the exploration of teachers' knowledge from their lived experience of teaching the curriculum; it highlighted the significance of teachers' tacit knowledge in creating a practice-based theorisation and professional knowledge base for SOSE.

Further, this analysis reveals SOSE teachers' perceptions of themselves as teachers and their subject identity as educators are important ingredients of their knowledge for SOSE. Middle school SOSE teachers' professional identity influenced ideas on what they taught and how they should teach it. The personal domain of the teacher and teacher identity intersect to illustrate that teachers' sense of self informs knowledge for teaching. While Shulman's (1987) original theorisation of teachers' knowledge related to secondary education, it is hereby confirmed in relation to teaching integrated social education in the middle years. Further, the significance of teacher identity in this study extends Shulman's original theorisation of teachers' knowledge to the teacher's personal domain.

### ***Conclusion***

Two conclusions can be drawn from this snapshot of middle school social education teachers' conceptions of essential knowledge. First, the seven conceptions of essential knowledge for middle years SOSE extend current thinking on the knowledge base for teaching. While conceptions such as discipline-based knowledge and curriculum knowledge are not unexpected, teachers' identity is significant in embedding the knowledge base for teaching social education. Second, the study theorises social education in middle school as a valuable learning area because, as revealed through teachers' conceptions, it harnesses key tenets of middle years philosophy and student-centred learning to intellectual rigour and discipline-based knowledge. In view of national curriculum reform in Australia, the gains in middle schooling achieved through the study of SOSE should not be abandoned. To conclude, attention to teacher identity and professionalism in pre-service teacher education and professional development programs has the potential to enhance and grow teachers'

knowledge base, warranting further research in this area. This is significant as the nation prepares to implement a national curriculum that prioritises discipline-based knowledge.

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