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# Geography teacher educators' perspectives on education for sustainability: identity and agency in a period of rapid education policy change in England

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## ABSTRACT



Initial Teacher Education in England is in a period of rapid policy change. This is happening at a time when discourse about humans' relationships with nature is changing, and there is increased recognition of the impacts that people have had on the Earth. Through a questionnaire and focus groups, we engaged with geography teacher educators' experiences of, and perspectives on, Education for Sustainability (EfS). Using Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson, using the key dimensions of teacher agency model to analyse focus group data, we found that EfS was not consistently engaged with in geography teacher education, and where it was, it varied in the amount of time given to it, and the nature of the ideas, debates and knowledges engaged with through it. Whilst national education policy in England is constraining in some areas, its failure to truly engage with EfS has led geography teacher educators—in their own words—to “navigate” and “subvert” state-imposed policy. The article concludes by arguing for dialogue between geography teacher educators and policy makers to inform teacher education about EfS that supports the agency of young people, teachers and teacher educators in making informed decisions about education practices, as well as their lives and futures.

## KEYWORDS

Geography education; agency; education for sustainability; education policy; geography teacher education; teacher education

## Introduction: geography teacher education in the new climatic regime

The work of geography teacher educators is varied, but often includes recruiting, teaching, supporting and assessing (student) teachers, as well as supervising practitioner enquiries and/or research. Teacher education is important work, and geography teacher educators support beginning teachers to develop knowledges that enable them to make intellectual, ethical and practical decisions about what to teach about the world, how and why, often whilst working within complex policy- and place- based contexts. Engagement with geography teacher educators can develop our knowledge of their identities, ideas, practices and values, and the multi-scalar

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social and political infrastructure that supports, or indeed constrains, them. The value of which ultimately lies in envisioning futures for geography (teacher) education and considering the steps that can be taken towards realising these futures in (inter)national and institutional policy, as well as in research and practice. However, whilst teacher education is a rich and established field of research, relatively little has been written about geography teacher educators/education (Catling, 2023; Hammond et al., 2024; Hammond & McKendrick, 2020; Rawlings Smith & Rushton, 2023;).

In this article, we examine geography teacher educators' experiences of, and perspectives on, Education for Sustainability (EfS). We focus on EfS as the climate and ecological crises pose threats of violence for humans and more-than-humans alike (Ghosh, 2017). The Anthropocene has changed academic and everyday discourse about humans' relationships with the Earth, with Latour (2017) arguing that we have entered a "new climatic regime." In the current period, land is changing and some places will become uninhabitable, inequalities and migrations will increase, and Western social and political stories and understandings of human-nature relations are increasingly questioned (Latour, 2017).

We write together as colleagues who have worked in geography (teacher) education in universities for over 40 years between us. We believe that geography makes an important contribution to a (young) person's education and can support them in thinking about the world in different ways and contributing to debates in a range of spaces (Geographical Association, 2009; Maude, 2016). We are committed to educating, supporting and empowering the next generation of teachers of geography and geography teacher educators. From 2010–2024, there was a Conservative led coalition from 2010–2015 in the UK and Conservative government from 2015–2024. During this period, we were struck by the rapid changes to education policy in England. We begin the paper by engaging with two dimensions of this policy context:

- First, following sustainability being removed from the most recent national programme of study for geography in Key Stages 1–3 (children aged 5–14 years old) (Department for Education [DfE], 2013), in 2022 the Department for Education (DfE) launched a "Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy" (DfE, 2022) that applies to all education settings across England.
- Second, ITE is undergoing a period of policy-led structural transformation, which is considerably changing the nature of teacher education (Daly, 2021; Ellis & Childs, 2023; Hordern & Brooks, 2023).

We situate our examination of the policy context in the present time-space to support critical reflection on how policy engages with (issues in) the world, before introducing the research.

### ***Education for sustainability in England***

Language is imbued with power (Bourdieu, 2012) and shapes space; we, therefore, begin by explaining our choice of term in EfS. Stemming from critical theorisation of environmental education (EE) in the 1970s, three approaches to environmental

education emerged: education *in* the environment; education *about* the environment, and education *for* the environment (e.g. Fine, 1993; Huckle & Sterling, 1996). The transition from EE to education *for* sustainability followed the publication of the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987) underpinned by a conception of education as having the power to guide people in reflection and action as they engage critically with the complexity and implications of sustainability and the economic, political, social, cultural, technological and environmental forces that foster or impede it (Huckle, 1996). While there are criticisms of this approach, for example, that this instrumental view risks developing a “consensus” approach to sustainable development education (e.g. Sund & Öhman, 2014) through which individuals learn knowledge which reproduces the existing, neo-liberal political order (Biesta, 2011), within this paper we use the term Education *for* Sustainability (EfS). This is with the view that it challenges the capitalist paradigm of production and consumption, focusing instead upon the ethics and politics of sustainability to engage in “shared reflection and action on forms of political economy that would enable us to live sustainably with one another and the rest of nature” (Huckle, 1996, p. xiv). Sustainability is an increasingly significant dimension of supra-national education policy discourse, as illustrated through the United Nations *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development* (2004–2015), followed by the launch of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2017 (Glackin & King, 2023). The SDGs represent a global partnership of 193 countries to end poverty, reduce inequality, improve health and education, and encourage economic growth whilst responding to climate change and biodiversity loss (UN, 2015). The importance of education in achieving sustainable development is captured in Goal 4, “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations Education and Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021, n.p.).

Sustainability has been variably incorporated as an important dimension of education policy in some countries, including within the UK. The UK is a multi-state nation and education is a devolved matter with the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland legislating their own education policy and the Department for Education (DfE) legislating for England alone. Whilst we in no way purport to offer a comparison between policy across the UK, we highlight differences to illustrate how conceptualisations and valuing of EfS vary, as policy shapes the spaces educators work within, and what, how and where, young people study and learn.

In Scotland, *Learning for Sustainability* is embedded into the Professional Standards for Teachers (General Teaching Council for Scotland and [GTCS], 2023) and an entitlement for all children (Education Scotland, 2023). It has long been recognized as a priority in Wales through the broader field of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC), and is embedded through a combination of Science and the core purpose of developing ethical citizenship in the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2021). The Northern Ireland Environmental Link (NIEL) published a new strategy and action plan for EfS in 2021 which defines quality EfS as requiring: education about sustainability; education delivered through sustainable practice; and education for sustainability which develops positive attitudes and behaviours towards the environment and sustainable development alongside

action and advocacy for wider change (Northern Ireland Environment Link [NIEL], 2021 p. 7). However, after becoming a prominent part of England's national curriculum in 2000 and remaining in 2008 (Walshe, 2013), explicit reference to sustainability was removed from the national programme of study for geography in its most recent iteration in 2014 (DfE, 2013), prompting concerns about a deprioritisation of sustainability as a concept within education policy.

In 2022, to align with the Conference of Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, the DfE launched a sustainability and climate change strategy for education and children's service systems in England (DfE, 2022). The strategy identified five action areas—climate education, green skills and careers, education estate and digital infrastructure, operations and supply change, and international—which aim to underpin the focus of work around sustainability in education spaces. However, it does not include curriculum change, and criticisms have suggested that it is a “placebo policy” (Rushton et al., 2023), with concerns being raised about the absence of “political dimensions of climate change within the strategy, which is inconsistent with the idea that effective climate change education should include social, ethical and political complexities” (Rushton et al., 2023, p. 2).

Whilst teachers and teacher educators have agency in curriculum making, education policy can shape discourses, practices, and the assessment of teachers and schools,—thus impacting the nature of educators' roles and the decisions they (can) make. A recent survey of primary and secondary teachers in England led by UCL's Centre for Climate Change and Sustainability Education, found that less than 13% of teachers were taught about EfS during their ITE and many teachers were leading their own professional development about EfS (Greer et al., 2023). Concerns have been raised about an over-emphasis on the science of climate change in England, as opposed to “climate change education that is action-based and includes issues of global social justice, enabling young people to learn for the environment” (Rushton et al., 2023, p. 2). It is important for EfS to develop children's knowledges of, and actions in, the social and political structures within which they live (Walker, 2017), with participatory and creative approaches to EfS being highlighted as being particularly valuable in supporting children “to meaningfully engage with entanglements of climate fact, value, power, and concern across multiple scales and temporalities” (Rousell and Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020, p. 192). Opportunities for outdoor learning are also recognized as being important for children's mental health and relationality with both humans and non-humans (Beames et al., 2024; Perry & Walshe, 2023).

### ***Policy, structure and agency in geography teacher education in England***

It has been argued that teacher education in England is in a period of crises (Ellis & Childs, 2023). Concerns have been raised about the possibility of universities becoming redundant, with a move to “school-led” provision, as well as about the experimental nature of the new ITE policy which will shape everything from recruitment to curricula to assessment (Daly, 2021, n.p.). In recent years, governments have been accused of becoming “increasingly interventionist in teaching,” using “policy documents as their main tool for achieving conformity and compliance to their understanding of what teaching is and how it should be prepared for” (Menter & Assunção Flores, 2021, p. 119). ITE in England has become highly centralised, shaping

the nature and scope of teacher education and the work of teacher educators (Brooks et al., 2024). This political interventionism raises questions about the relationships between structure and agency in teaching and teacher education (Steadman, 2023). Agency is a complex and contested term (Priestley et al., 2015), but in this paper we use it to refer to people's intentions in making decisions/acting, and their capabilities and power to act within wider social, political and economic structures (Giddens, 1986).

This period of increasing state control is situated in a context in which ITE in England is already highly complex. In 2022–2023, there were 226 ITE providers, educating 28,797 student teachers (Education Policy Institute [EPI], 2022). In contrast, there are 11 ITE providers in Scotland, all of which are Higher Education Institutes (Scottish Government, 2022). The large number of providers exists due to the diversification of routes into ITE in England that began in the 1990s, with a multitude of programmes often being grouped into “school-led” and “university-led” ITE to reflect the institution(s) that lead the programme. In 2022–2023, 80% of entrants to the profession chose to complete a postgraduate course—such as a one year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)—as opposed to an undergraduate degree in primary or secondary education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) (Long & Danechi, 2023). 56% of entrants opted for a school-led route into teaching (Long & Danechi, 2023).

Under the last Conservative government, there were several major policy updates to ITE as teacher education was reframed by the DfE as teacher training (Brooks et al., 2024; Steadman, 2023). For example, the introduction of the Core Content Framework (CCF: DfE, 2019) stipulates the mandatory elements of ITE programmes through “learn that” and “learn how” statements (Hordern & Brooks, 2023), and effectively means that the state is attempting to mandate the knowledges that are taught, or not, in ITE (Ellis & Childs, 2023).

It is noteworthy that the CCF does not include reference to sustainability or climate change, meaning that teacher educators across phases and disciplines are not formally required to incorporate EfS into teacher education curricula. Rather, it is left to individual (geography) teacher educators, much like their counterparts who teach in schools, as to whether they engage with issues of sustainability in their teaching. This leads to questions around the nature of national education policy, and how, and by whom, it is shaped, as well as teacher agency in curriculum-making; an area which is poorly understood within the context of ITE. To begin to address this gap, our study aimed to examine geography teacher educators' experiences of, and perspectives on, EfS. The research was underpinned by the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways do geography teacher educators engage with the concept of EfS within the context of geography ITE?

RQ2: What are the factors which shape this engagement?

### ***Introducing the research***

Following ethical approval being granted by IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, we introduced the research through a workshop at GTE 2022. The GTE

conference is self-organized by members of the geography teacher educator community who volunteer to take on this role as an individual or as part of a group. In the past, the conference was primarily attended by university-based teacher educators (Hammond & McKendrick, 2020), although colleagues based in other education spaces, such as field studies centres and learned societies also attended, with there being some international participation. The nature of this network is changing as teacher education evolves in response to education policy, with, increasing numbers of school-based colleagues becoming active in teacher education and associated communities.

GTE 2022 was advertised as a hybrid conference; however, as most colleagues chose to attend in person, GTE was held online. In our workshop, we set out the rationale for the study before providing a brief history of EfS and examining its relationships with geography education over time. There was then an opportunity for participants to engage in group discussion around two questions:

1. What are the relationships between geography (teacher) education and EfS? *Please consider the relationships as they are and as they (in your view) should be?*
2. Do you feel supported and empowered to teach geography teachers in a way you choose about EfS? *Here, we encourage you to consider the factors/literature/systems/policies and/or people shaping your decision making and practices.*

This activity aimed to stimulate conversation between colleagues, but no data was collected as we wanted all attendees to engage with the discussion, even if they did not wish to take part in the study.

### **Questionnaire**

Towards the end of the workshop, we introduced an online, opt-in questionnaire that could be completed up to two weeks after the conference and which we shared with other prospective participants through in/formal networks and *via* X (formerly known as Twitter) following GTE 2022. We designed the questionnaire to be accessible to participants and quick to complete (around 10 min), with the aim being to provide insight into geography teacher educators' experiences of, and attitudes towards, EfS (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2021). The questionnaire was constructed so that data could be engaged with whether respondents chose to take part in the focus groups or not.

The questionnaire began with information about the research, with participants then being asked to consent to opting in. In the next section, participants were asked about their professional contexts through questions about their role(s), the type of institution(s) they worked in, how long they had been a geography teacher educator and whether they had any research/scholarship time. In the last section, participants were asked about their experiences of, and perspectives on, EfS. Here, questions asked whether they incorporated EfS into their ITE curriculum, and if so, how much time they spend on it; and what philosophies and literature underpin their curricula. We provided participants with opportunities to share wider elements of their practice in greater depth and the final question asked



participants to share copies of either their EfS or GTE curriculum. No participants opted to do this and the reason for this is unclear; it may be because participants did not have a EfS curriculum to share, that they did not have a vision for sustainability in geography teacher education, or simply that they did not have time.

30 participants completed at least some of the survey; 18 of these worked in a school, eight in a university, two were self-employed, one had no affiliation, and one described their affiliation as an “educational charity, providing initial teacher education.” This wide-ranging community can be seen to reflect changes in the professional background of attendees since GTE 2020, when no school-based teacher educators attended, and 41/48 colleagues were affiliated to a Higher Education Institution (Hammond & McKendrick, 2020). Of the 28 participants who responded to the question about length of time working in teacher education, four had over 20 years’ experience, 11 11–20 years, six 6–10 years, six 1–5 years and one less than 1 year’s experience, reflecting a relatively experienced field. Eight participants in the survey expressed they had research/scholarship time, 21 stated they had no research/scholarship time, and one participant chose not to answer. Only 4 participants expressed that they had over 10% research time “reflecting a relatively small proportion of colleagues who are contractually supported to engage in research and, we might infer, contribute to debates” about geography teacher education (Hammond et al., 2024, n.p.).

### **Focus groups**

Participants were also given the opportunity to opt to participate in a focus group, with nine geography teacher educators choosing to do this (Table 1). Two focus groups were available to join and were held in June 2022 on different days and at different times to support engagement by a range of colleagues. Seven participants joined focus group one and two joined focus group two. Focus groups allow participants to share their experiences in their own words (Longhurst, 2015) and facilitate interaction between participants thus enabling them to make connections between and/or challenge ideas and to support one another (Cameron, 2021). They also support researchers to gain an understanding of what a participant thinks and the reason that they have those views (Hoffman & Ponce-Terashima, 2020). This was important, as we hoped to gain a sense of both what participants taught in relation to EfS (RQ1) and what shapes their decision-making about this (RQ2).

The focus groups were led by different researchers and were conducted and recorded *via* Microsoft Teams, which offers an auto-transcription service. The focus groups began with a welcome, with the chair leading a conversation that aimed to mutually agree how the focus group would work, and which considered ethics and data protection, and how to support open and respectful discussions. The focus groups were semi-structured around six questions aimed to stimulate discussion, whilst also being responsive to dialogue and open to other areas being explored (Table 2).

The focus groups were concluded with participants being invited to share a copy of their vision for EfS in geography teacher education *via* email. No participants chose to do this, and no explanation as to the reason for this decision was given.



**Table 1.** Participants in the focus groups, with some of language changed to support anonymity.

Pseudonym and focus group	Location of job (school-based, university based or other)	Job title	Other roles in teacher education	Other relevant experience(s)	Research/scholarship time?	Length of time as a geography teacher educator
Jane (focus group one)	University-based academic	Lecturer in Education	Senior Leadership Team for ITE	Ethics chair; Director of Post Graduate Research in Department	21–30%	1–5 years
Reginald (focus group two)	Charity/ teacher education provider	Head of Geography	ITE Curriculum design	Teacher of geography in a secondary school; teaching undergraduate students	None	Less than 1 year
Lola (focus group two)	University-based academic	Lecturer in Geography Education	PGCE Secondary subject lead	Post doc; geography teacher in a secondary school; Co-I on a research project; Evaluation work for a charity.	11–20%	1–5 years
Lapas (focus group one)	University-based academic	Lecturer	Primary PGCE and geography specialism tutor	Doctoral supervision; Teaching on doctoral modules	11–20%	Over 20 years
Alice (focus group one)	Did not complete survey	Head of Geography and PGCE Geography lead	and emailed and asked to take part in the focus group		None	1–5 years
Catherine (focus group one)	University-based teacher educator (part time), school-based teacher educator (part time)	Senior Teaching Associate/ Affiliated Lecturer	Geography PGCE Lead; working in School Centered Initial Teacher Training (SCITT); In school professional development for beginning and experienced teachers	Secondary school geography teacher and mentor of beginning geography teachers	No response	1–5 years
Graham (focus group one)	Retired, formerly university based academic	Independent scholar	Retired	Previous Geography PGCE and BA lead; MA and doctoral teaching and supervision; Work with subject associations; Write	No response	Over 20 years
Jacob (focus group one)	University based academic	Lecturer in Primary Education	Primary geography lead; primary science teaching	No response	11–20%	1–5 years

**Table 2.** Questions used to structure the focus groups.

Question number	Question
1	Do you consider Efs in your geography teacher education course? If so, how and why?
2	What terms do you use to discuss Efs in your geography teacher education course? Why do you use those terms?
3	What philosophies/ literature/ policies informs your understanding of Efs?
4	What contribution do you think geography can/ does make to Efs?
5	Are there any barriers to including Efs in your teacher education course? If so, what are they and how do they impact upon your work?
6	What do you include in your Efs curriculum, and how do you structure and organise this?

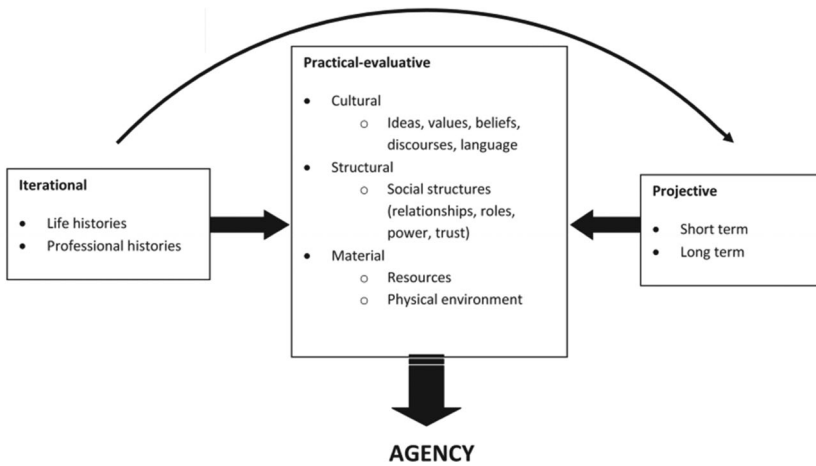
Each of the researchers checked their respective transcriptions for accuracy and made amendments where appropriate. The first cycle of coding was conducted inductively using NVivo, allowing themes to be applied to the data as it was reviewed, rather than interpreting the data using a pre-defined framework (Saldaña, 2021). The researchers who had collected the data coded their own transcript whilst watching a video of the focus group, and then repeated this with data from the other focus group. The three researchers then met and discussed overarching themes and points of overlap between codes, merging codes if they referred to the same theme.

During discussions as a research team, the theme of agency emerged repeatedly in relation to young people, teachers, and teacher educators. Teacher agency is important for informing our understanding of teacher practice, particularly the factors which shape professional decision-making across teachers' careers (Ryder et al., 2018). Within our data, agency was considered by participants in relation to the context of complex education policy landscapes, intersecting crises and their impacts on young people and education, and changing discourses about humans' relationships with the Earth. To explore this further, we deductively coded the data using Priestley et al. (2015) *key dimensions of teacher agency* model (Figure 1).

Priestley et al. (2015, p. 29) argue that agency is a "situational achievement" and "the outcome of the interplay between iterational, practical–evaluative and projective dimensions." The focus on the situated nature of agency spoke to us in the context of rapid policy change and the present time-space. Priestley et al. (2015) model supports critical consideration of the temporal dimensions of agency (reflecting on the life histories and influences from the past and future desires and orientations), and consideration of what shapes agency in the present (Priestley et al., 2015). Agency is emergent and something that people achieve/do, "dependent on conditions and qualities, including cultural, material, relational resources, and people's ability to use them" (Rushton et al., 2024, p. 4). Agency thus focuses on "quality of *engagement* of actors with temporal-relational contexts-for-action" (Biesta et al., 2015, p. 626). Significantly, the model enabled critical engagement with both individual and collective experiences of agency.

## Findings and discussion

Within this section we summarise the nature of geography teacher educators' Efs practice in relation to agency, before exploring factors which shape this engagement. As data from the questionnaire was limited due to participants choosing not to share their curricula or visions in any detail, after a short overview of the data from the questionnaires, we focus primarily on data generated through the focus groups.



**Figure 1.** Key dimensions of teacher agency (Priestley et al., 2015, p. 3).

### ***Geography teacher educator and EfS practice***

Of the 30 participants who completed some or all of the survey, only 10 provided detail as to their inclusion of EfS into their ITE curriculum; 20 either explicitly stated that they did not include EfS (3/20), or left responses in relation to EfS blank (17/20). Of these, the majority (11/20) were school-based geography teacher educators or Heads of Department. Of those participants who included EfS in their curriculum, two stated this was 1–2 days across the programme, one 3–5 days, one 6–10 days and five over 10 days with “sustainability [underpinning] the whole programme in terms of the literature we consider, the choice of visiting speakers, the fieldwork & trips” (Lola). The range of information participants shared as being incorporated into their ITE curriculum varied considerably and with little overlap, including areas, such as; territory and food security issues, environmental justice, the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), feminist geographies and Kate Raworth’s Doughnut Economics. This may reflect broad understandings of EfS, varying research and teaching interests, and limited engagement with EfS in national education policy pertaining to ITE. Participants expressed that policy did not influence their inclusion of EfS within their practice, with one participant commenting on the relative freedom afforded to teacher educators within university settings. The majority of participants did not identify any barriers to EfS beyond time (which was an issue raised by four participants). The final survey question asked participants to describe their vision for EfS. Only four participants responded to this question, and responses varied widely:

...a vision for education for environmental sustainability where school classrooms, sites, communities are spaces for teachers and pupils to learn and live sustainably. (Lola)

An understanding of sustainability is of paramount importance. By threading this throughout the curriculum we embed the importance of this strategy with the next generation. (Laurie)

Rather than teaching our children the technicalities of fronted adverbials, Shakespeare and quadratic equations, we should be devoting time to giving them understanding of

the importance of community, ecological care and personal accountability for our planets future. (A)

Aim to ensure students THINK LIKE A GEOGRAPHER. (Pen)

These responses begin to illustrate the variation in factors which shape geography teacher educator practice in relation to EfS, which is further developed through the discussion of the focus groups that follows

### ***Shaping geography teacher educator engagement with EfS***

Whilst geography teacher educators participating in the focus groups expressed a deep personal and professional commitment to EfS, they often felt that their agency to develop their teacher education in this area was constrained by education policy in England, leading them—in their own words—to “navigate” and “subvert” this policy. In this section, we explore this further.

#### ***Professional knowledge, beliefs and values as motivation***

We begin with the *iterational* dimension of Priestley et al. (2015) model which comprises teacher educators’ professional knowledge, beliefs and values, along with the personal life histories they bring to their work (Biesta et al., 2015; Priestley et al., 2015). Five of the participants reflected on how their personal and/or professional experiences and motivations influenced their teaching of EfS. For example, Jacob explains that sustainability was something he was “enthused by and passionate about” during his geography degree, reflecting that his education has supported his agency in questioning practices he sees when supporting (student) teachers in primary schools:

I think for primary pupils some of these some of these concepts (sic.) in sustainability education can be very abstract until we look through the lens of place. And so when they can make it relevant to a place to people that live there to them, to their locality it becomes relevant and something that perhaps is resonates more with them than an abstract concept (sic.).

Here, Jacob can be seen to be using geography as what Brooks (2017) conceptualizes as a professional compass. Jacob’s agency—capacity to act—can be seen to have been enriched by his degree and contributed to what Priestley et al. (2015, p. 31) term a “broad repertoire of responses upon which they may draw,” with repertoires developing “personal capacity (skills and knowledge), beliefs (professional and personal) and values.”

Alice also reflects on her deeply personal commitment to developing EfS in her institution:

It’s been my absolute own personal journey...that’s not to say people don’t welcome it... but it’s it does tend to be an individual who, who, feels the sense of urgency and the importance and, and, prioritises this and is often working above and beyond outside job hours.

Alice’s narrative highlights the temporal, intellectual and emotional labour that this work entails, and can be seen to reflect the intertwining of personal and

professional values in the *iterational* space. Alice speaks of her passion for EfS, but also the need for “peer and emotional support”:

I mean, I’m gonna be totally honest here, but sitting deeply with this stuff is is hard (*sic.*). I have moments of paralysis, of tears, of I need to walk away, look away. I’ve gotta put it down for a bit. And if we’re asking teachers in schools to be doing that as a paid and recognized role that they’re having to carry, and how are we gonna support the emotional burden that comes with that?

Alice’s narratives engage with the relationships between EfS, (her own) wellbeing, and the responsibility she has in educating teachers. Whilst Alice does not state who “we” are when asking how teachers can be supported in this work, she reflects on the importance of cultures and structures of support in the *practical-evaluative* space, also inferring an important temporal dimension of teacher education through reflections on the future. Alice highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships and care when working in EfS. However, as Priestley et al. (2015, p. 33) explain, teachers often have “insufficient time to reflect and to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues” suggesting that the “burden” that Alice mentions is carried alone in some spaces.

The different spaces that geography teacher educators work within and across was noted by Reginald, when he reflects:

I’m grappling with pragmatism of what do I say to trainees .... You can talk about climate justice, you can talk about the climate crisis, you can do all of that and then some if you’re teaching an A level class. You must sort of almost conform with where the specification directs you to. Otherwise, you run the risk of doing your students a disservice.

Reginald can be seen to express that EfS in both schools and (sometimes) in teacher education is being shaped by standardised national assessment systems, as teacher educators support student teachers in their school placements and prepare them for careers in schools. This is echoed by Alice who states, “a lot of the tension is we’re we’re we’re (*sic.*) walking this slightly rebellious line and then they’re going into school and there aren’t opportunities” (for EfS). Biesta et al. (2015, p. 267) argue enactment of agency in the here-and-now of the *practical-evaluative* space may be shaped by what they term “cultural, material and structural resources,” which support or constrain individuals or groups.

Much like Alice, Catherine’s narratives highlight the importance of individuals to EfS. Catherine reflects upon the geography teacher education programme on which she works, and shares that an academic who previously worked at the university used to come back and lead a session on EfS, but has been unable to do so this year, noting “I need to sit down and think about it and I just physically don’t have the time doing the course on my own three days a week.” Catherine’s narratives suggest a commitment to EfS, but reflect challenges connected to roles and structures (e.g. being on a teaching only contract with limited time to engage with scholarship) can shape GTE’s engagement in the *practical-evaluative* space. Analysis found that opportunities for developing communities of practice to support EfS was something that all participants thought was important.

### ***A desire to support, develop and empower***

The desire to support, develop and empower both teachers and young people was a component of all narratives, highlighting engagement with the *projective* dimension of education and agency. As Priestley et al. (2015) explain, the projective dimension is often focussed on long term futures and connects to educators' values and beliefs, and educators may support or actively challenge the policy context. Graham had recently co-authored a book, in which examples are given as to what "sustainability might look running right the way through a school" to support teachers' planning for progression. However, he shared the challenges of doing this, noting "the values we hold and the values society currently holds are really odds (*sic.*) with what we're trying to do, and that's a real problem ... we've gotta be rebels. We have to be rebels. There is no other way forward with this, but it's how, you know, you quietly do that revolution." Here, it is helpful to contextualise Graham's desire to write a book to help teachers to develop practical approaches to EfS, in the space of high teacher workloads and recruitment challenges along with limited policy recognition of the relationships between EfS and geography education.

### ***Frameworks, accreditation and inspection: impact of policy***

Another theme identified through analysis was social structures that support or constrain the geography teacher educators in their work, which connects to the *practical evaluative* space (Priestley et al., 2015). Lola reflects on her work developing a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programme based on her values:

I had the privilege of being able to design as much as you can design a course like that. Obviously, you have to comply with all of Ofsted and all of that. But I was able to establish let's say the PGCE at \*university A\* and I did that from a perspective of wanting to implement environmental justice thinking across the programme.me'

Whilst Lola acknowledges that she works within some constraints and frameworks - such as those set by the Office of Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) which inspect ITE in England—her narrative suggests that she felt that she had a significant degree of power, trust and ultimately agency in course design, which she describes as a privilege. However, later in the focus group, Lola reflects on the reaccreditation process for ITE in England (DfE, 2021), describing how the context in which geography teacher educators' work has become increasingly constraining:

I mean the literal move in language from teacher education to teacher training and the fact that actually um you know the literature that we engage in is gonna (*sic.*) potentially be prescribed and understandings of how children learn comes from a particular perspective rather than having a multiple perspective. So I don't see any, I don't want to be a pessimist, I have very little confidence that EfS will be encouraged and you know valued in teacher education moving forward because there are two mechanisms that governments say are supposed to provide. Basically that the early career framework and the core content framework and sustainability is not a word that features in either document. Now, if you're a driven, confident, empowered teacher educator you can find ways of making it fit...

Lola considers the development of a policy context for ITE that fails to engage with sustainability and the DfE defining *bestness* in education through engagement

with a limited research base (Hordern & Brooks, 2023). Lola suggests that she perceives that there are ways that determined geography teacher educators can find to engage with EfS, but as Byron expresses this involves “trying to navigate a lot of the structures which prevent us doing this work (sic.)” Here, Lola and Byron express that trust has been eroded from social structures in the *practical-evaluative* space of (geography) teacher education that are shaped by policy.

The “need” for geography teacher educators to navigate state-imposed structures and guidelines is further echoed by Jane, who states:

If you badge things correctly and appropriately for you know, the frameworks and those people who have oversight and quality assure, etcetera, you can carry on doing what you want to do, but you have to be aware of how to subvert things to allow you to be able to do that work within the structures that yeah, limit you.

These narratives from Jane, Byron and Lola suggest that geography teacher educators feel their work is being constrained by the education policy context in which they operate. Three of the participants consider that this does not have to be the case. With one participant reflecting on their knowledge of education policy across the UK, and another on their experiences of working in geography teacher education in another country within the UK. This geography teacher educator expressed that they felt the policy context actively tried to support their agency in EfS. Graham recalled a government funded 20 day course for qualified teachers led by the university at which worked at in the past: “the 20 day just courses where we were literally given a group of teachers came and were paid to come....Well.” Here, Graham can be seen to reflect positively on a time when universities in England had a more significant role in (initial) teacher education and teacher educators had more agency in designing and leading courses for teachers and the communities they serve.

### **Conclusions: working together for more just futures in, and through, geography teacher education**

In a recent blog for the Geography Education Research Collective (GEReCo), Catling (2023, p. n.p.) argued that we know “surprisingly little” about initial teacher education in geography. Catling’s provocation is an important one, especially when contextualised in what Lola terms “turbulent times” for teacher education in England. Whilst this research was small scale—meaning the findings cannot be generalized across or beyond England—it allows us to reflect on the ways in which geography teacher educators engage with EfS and the factors which shape this.

Whilst student teachers may encounter EfS in a range of spaces during their initial teacher education—including through professional studies courses, interdisciplinary sessions and/or school-based elements of the programme—geography teacher educators play an important role in engaging students with disciplinary debates and knowledges pertaining to education for sustainability. EfS was not incorporated into ITE programmes by all of the geography teacher educators who participated in this study, and where it was, it varied considerably in terms of amount of time given to it, ideas, debates and knowledges engaged with through it, and the underpinning vision for the purpose of EfS within curricula. This variation can be seen to relate to the complex and rapidly evolving policy context, which is increasingly centralised



in some areas of ITE, and which fails to truly engage with EfS. This has led to an increased diversity of routes into teaching, and backgrounds and positions of those working in ITE (e.g. school- and university- based colleagues), and subsequently a wide range of experience and expertise drawn on by teacher educators in relation to geography (teacher) education and EfS.

This raises important questions about the factors which shape educators' agency, and how (inter)national and institutional policy and infrastructure can be developed to support geography teacher education and EfS. As the research revealed, where geography teacher educators perceive a constraining policy context, they navigate and subvert state-imposed structures as they engage with their own visions for EfS, a process which involves practical, intellectual and emotional labour. As Ahmed (2021, p. 139) writes when reflecting on challenging structures and injustices in HEIs:

You might have to fight for room, room to be, room to do, room to do your work without being questioned or put under-surveillance... that fight can be how we acquire wisdom: we know so much from trying to transform worlds that do not accommodate us. And *trying* seems the right word; it can be trying.

In concluding this article, we argue for active dialogue and space for open communication between policy makers, geography teacher educators, teachers of geography, and young people in England to critically explore the relationships between EfS and geography (teacher) education. Active consideration of how geography education can support, and be supported by, the agency of all of those involved from children to geography teacher educators is vital to supporting healthy debate in education and society, and supporting young people to consider the lives and futures they wish to shape. With Catling (2023), we argue that more research is needed about geography teacher education, but also contend that policy makers and institutions should support this research through time in contracts and the development of social infrastructure to support the development of research(ers) (Hammond et al., 2024). Research across countries exploring the relationships between education policy and (geography) teacher education, and which engages with the experiences and perspectives of geography teacher educators in different places, would also further develop knowledge of their identities and values, and support critical engagement with development of infrastructure that can support geography teacher education.

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