

Becoming a geography teacher in a primary school: Reflections on the value of HEIs in ITE

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Introduction or Caveats and excuses

I write this chapter conscious that I feel like an impostor to be contributing to a debate on primary education. My teaching experience was as a geography teacher and head of geography in a secondary school. My higher education teaching experience has been with secondary geography PGCE, and latterly the MA in Geography Education and PhD supervision. Even my current role as an academic Head of Department, and Co-Director of Initial Teacher Education [ITE] at UCL Institute of Education is with a department that is both shaped and structured like a secondary school. Although one of my EdD students is a primary geographer, this is the extent of my experience and expertise in primary education. I also admit that 2017 is my first visit to the Charney Manor Primary Geography Conference.

But my experience and my expertise do permit me to write something that I hope is of interest to primary geographers: that is, the importance, role and function of subject specialist perspectives and research in initial teacher education. This is not a new topic, Simon Catling has been bringing the paucity of geography in primary initial teacher education to the attention of the academic community for some time now (Catling, 2006, 2012, 2013; Catling, Bowles, Halocha, & Martin, 2007). It is true to say, though, that the world has failed to listen, and despite Catling's (and others') well-argued contributions, time devoted to geography within teacher education has declined rather than increased (Catling, 2016).

My own work has highlighted the significant contribution that subject identity has for geography teachers. In times of conflict or change, teachers in my study reported returning to the subject as a means of support and guidance to help them navigate these troubled waters (Brooks, 2016). It is for that reason that I likened this to the metaphor of a professional compass, like a moral compass, helping teachers to navigate what Clandinin & Connelly (1995) describe as the professional knowledge landscape. I acknowledge that this knowledge landscape is more complicated for primary colleagues, where knowledge plays a different role in both curriculum and pedagogy than it does in the secondary school context. At some point there is a shift between a concern for child development and induction into disciplinary ways of thinking. Within England, that seems to take place in Upper Primary or in the transition to Secondary school, but the transition is more structural (perhaps in response to the National Curriculum requirements) than being grounded in a theorized rationale. I avoid making any claims as to when the shift between development and disciplinary concerns should (or does) actually occur, as I am only too aware that I am not an expert in this field.

On a practical level, and as a secondary specialist, it never ceases to amaze me about the demands that we place on primary teachers, expecting them to be sufficiently expert in such a wide range of fields. Whilst at the same time, the degree to

which the depth and extent of this knowledge is dismissed, as though primary level education does not require a great deal of subject specialist expertise. So whilst we expect teachers to teach ten subject areas, our initial teacher education provision focuses on only a select few. I am not surprised that within such an array of demands that some subjects, and even geography, can become peripheral, and this reflects EAUDE's notion of what the expectations are of a 'primary expert' (2012). This is all the more likely as exposure to good quality subject specialist support for trainee teachers is becoming less and less likely (see: Catling, 2016, for a discussion around primary, and Tapsfield et al., 2015, for secondary) under the current shifts and trends in teacher training and education. In addition, I understand much of the focus on continuing professional development targeted for primary educators continues to be around the issues of literacy and numeracy.

Without subject specialist support, teachers are less likely to take a geographical perspective in their teaching, and the quality of teaching generally will suffer as a result. The concerns of primary and secondary geography teacher education are not so far removed, and share many similar characteristics. Much can be learnt through greater communication between the two sectors.

A grave danger to the education and development of new teachers in both the primary and secondary sector, is the reduction in the role for Universities (or Higher Education Institutions HEIs) in the preparation of geography teachers. New teachers need HEI input as part of their initial teacher education, combined with the support and opportunities afforded by a good quality school placement. The discussions around who "leads" that process, and what are the best ways for HEIs and schools to work together, are, I think, predicated on what we understand to be the best way that new teachers can learn to teach geography – it is grounded in our understanding not just of the pedagogy of geography education, but also in the pedagogy of geography teacher education. In the remainder of this chapter, I wish to highlight what I consider to be important considerations of that pedagogy of geography teacher education, and in particular the important role that HEIs play within it.

The pedagogy of geography teacher education

Three forms of pedagogy in teacher education are generally recognized: an apprenticeship model, where new teachers work with experienced teachers, copying and trying to emulate their practice; a competency model, where new teachers work through a list of specified competencies that together define the features of effective practice; and a reflective practice model, where teachers are encouraged to oscillate between practice and theory using a process of critical reflection to consider their own professional development. In reality, learning to teach is probably made up of aspects of each model: new teachers, in whatever route to qualification, will work with experienced teachers, observing and copy-

ing their practice, considering their progress in relation to the Teachers Standards (DfE, 2012) and thinking about their practice and “theory” and how the two might help them to improve.

The material components of teacher education: the teaching practice, the lesson observation, the evidence-based file, and in some cases, the portfolios, assignments and reflective accounts, can all be found in each model of teacher education. The differences between the models are not the mechanisms that are used in teacher education, but how they are used: the role they play in the development of new teachers.

If we take as an example, the work that happens within a school-based practical experience, new teachers will normally be involved in observing other teachers, discussions with mentors, and practicing with a reduced timetable. The difference between the methods above is what the expectations are of those material products from both the mentor and the new teacher. For example, in the feedback of a lesson observation, various approaches can be taken:

- Is the new teacher told what they have done wrong, and how the observer might do it differently/better? (Apprenticeship model)
- Is the new teacher asked to reflect on which aspects of the Standards they demonstrated in that lesson and which requires more work? (Competency model)
- Is the new teacher given an opportunity to discuss what they were trying to achieve, and how the lesson was executed, whilst being prompted by critical questions from the observer? (Reflective practice model).

In my own experience of giving feedback on lesson observations, I have used all these approaches, and can recall single lesson observations sessions where I have used all three! The point is that each approach is aiming to get a different sort of professional learning outcome, one which the skilled teacher educator has diagnosed as needed in order for the new teacher to improve their practice and understanding of teaching.

It is this flexibility of approaches, tied up with the universality of the techniques used, which emphasizes the undoubted importance of the school-based component of learning to teach. Let me be clear here: being in a school working with skilled, experienced geography teachers, and using the opportunity to experiment and make mistakes, and to learn from those mistakes, is an important part of learning to teach. It is important – but in my view it is not enough.

In each of the approaches described above, there are potential pitfalls that can halt a new teacher’s developments and understanding of how to teach. As Moore outlines (2004) too much of any one particular approach is unlikely to provide the different opportunities and challenges a teacher needs to develop a full range of profession practice. There is a need, then, for pedagogies of teacher education to be used carefully, and in an informed way, but by a teacher educator who has a broad repertoire of skills, knowledge and understanding. Learning to teach requires the guidance of a more expert teacher, particularly one who has sufficient subject expertise to identify weaknesses in conceptual understanding of geography. This recognition of the complexity of how novices learn to teach has implications for the development of mentors and the way that teacher development takes place within a school context. There is a need for teacher educators (at all levels but particularly located in schools) to understand the pedagogical approaches available to them and when it is appropriate to use them.

So, what do HEIs offer?

One of the things that higher education institutions [HEIs], such as university education departments, can offer, apart from a focus and expert knowledge in teacher education, is the opportu-

nity for deep thought about education in general. For example, a recent University Council for the Education of Teachers [UCET] report highlights a number of benefits of a Master’s level education; many of these are important factors about the experience of the university aspect of ITE (Nunn, 2016).

HEI involvement means that high quality graduates are more likely to be attracted to the profession, and the qualification is more likely to be recognized in other contexts and places. The HEI, working with and across a range of schools and contexts can provide quality assurance, particularly in the consistency in judgments made about teachers and in how the Teacher Standards are achieved. These qualities add to the prestige and status of the profession. Moreover, HEIs add something unique to the quality of teacher education and training.

One of the unique preserves of HEIs is the opportunity for academic study. This can have a positive impact on the experience of learning to teach. For example, HEIs can provide new teachers with a cohort of peers with a range of experiences and contexts, and opportunities to compare and contrast the impact of such contexts on practice and pedagogy. This cohort and community of learners also includes academics, specializing in teacher education and in particular educational spheres. Academics have access to national and international research and a range of opportunities and contexts beyond that of individual schools.

Working within an HEI also gives access to a research community in and around education. This is more than access to a well-stocked education library, and also features proximity to insights from psychology, sociology, neurology, and access to the latest research and information, which can be used to expand the knowledge base of teachers. Of course, this access to knowledge is not in itself useful unless the skilled academics support new teachers in considering how to apply that knowledge to their practical experience.

This access to a wealth of knowledge, research and specialist practice has the potential greatly to contribute to the development of high quality teachers. Teachers educated in this way will be able to link research and evidence, to be critical thinkers and to develop a form of professional expertise that will enable them to address professional problems and adapt to the future.

Fundamental to teaching geography

So far, my discussion has been focused on a generic sense of what it means to learn to teach. But in the notion of specialist expertise that I describe above, what are the specific benefits for geography teachers – and indeed primary teachers of geography?

In the sense of specialist knowledge and understanding, one of the essential requirements for all teachers is that they understand subject pedagogy and curriculum development. Integral to this is a deep understanding of what it means to plan for progression in understanding within a subject. For example, assessment for learning strategies are useful in helping learners develop an understanding of themselves and their learning against certain criteria. What it does not do is outline for them what they need to learn next. In other words, the way to support achievement and progress goes beyond pedagogical expertise, but also lies in an understanding of learning processes and most importantly, how they relate to curriculum and progression. Assessment for learning can help a learner to write a better essay, construct a better story, and create a better poster. It does not help them to know what to do after they have done that.

Where does a learner who has just understood the water cycle go next? What extends our geographical knowledge further, once we have understood the difference between near and far? Where does a local area study take us in our understanding of geography, or of ourselves? It is this higher level knowledge informed by the subject that a teacher brings to an educa-

tional encounter. And to do that teachers need to understand the disciplinary structures of what they are teaching, but most importantly how those disciplinary structures, which Dewey described as being organized logically, are developed by learners (or to use Dewey's terms, how they are developed psychologically) (see Brooks, 2009). Geographers should be good at this – it requires relational thinking. How do we connect Australia with Yorkshire? How do you deepen an understanding of place? These questions require specialist geographical understanding, and are key in the development of all new geography teachers.

Much geographical work undertaken in the primary school could be seen as general project work if the focus is generic in nature. What geographical concepts are developed in a study of the Nile and how do we expect a child to further this conceptual development? Therefore, there is need for teachers to give due attention and consideration to the development of subject-based understanding, particularly in the primary school context. Indeed, such attention to subject integrity is at the heart of helping children to make progression in all aspects of their development.

The recent Geographical Association report highlights that the opportunities for this sort of teacher education are being diminished in the current system through reduced cohort sizes and the lack of geography specialist support in some school training contexts (Tapsfield et al., 2015). There are weaknesses to school based training systems too. Moore's work on good teaching, highlights that an over-emphasis on school placement experience can lead to an overemphasis on a skills-based competency approach (2004). As geography educator, Margaret Roberts, has shown this can lead to a discussion about the behavioural aspects of teaching, rather than a discussion off what it means to learn geography, and progression in geography (Roberts, 2010).

What I have tried to emphasize in this paper is that subject integrity is important in all aspects of education, and needs to be of primary concern when we think about how we train new teachers and what sort of teacher education pedagogies we favour.

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