

Out-of-field teaching

New teachers survive under pressure

It is the nightmare of many early-career teachers: to have to teach a subject that's not your specialism to a class of students who sense your fear. In newly published research, Dr Susan Caldis from Macquarie University in Australia finds that out-of-field teaching is a major issue which particularly affects teachers as they transition from initial teacher education programmes into employment. Not only can out-of-field teaching affect teacher wellbeing and lead to attrition, but it can also affect student learning outcomes.

Managing the transition from initial teacher education (ITE) to a first teaching role is challenging enough, but how much more difficult is it when the academic subject you have studied is not the subject you have to teach?

Out-of-field teaching – teaching a subject that is not your specialism, or teaching an age group you are not trained to teach – has been identified in a new study as one of the main constraints faced by new recruits to the profession.

Dr Susan Caldis from Macquarie University in Australia set out to understand more about the process of transition as students move from being pre-service teachers to early-career teachers. Specifically, she wanted to know how new teachers' experience informs their pedagogical practice in teaching geography.

Although not all universities in Australia offer geography methodology units, geography is still included in Australia's national curriculum. According to

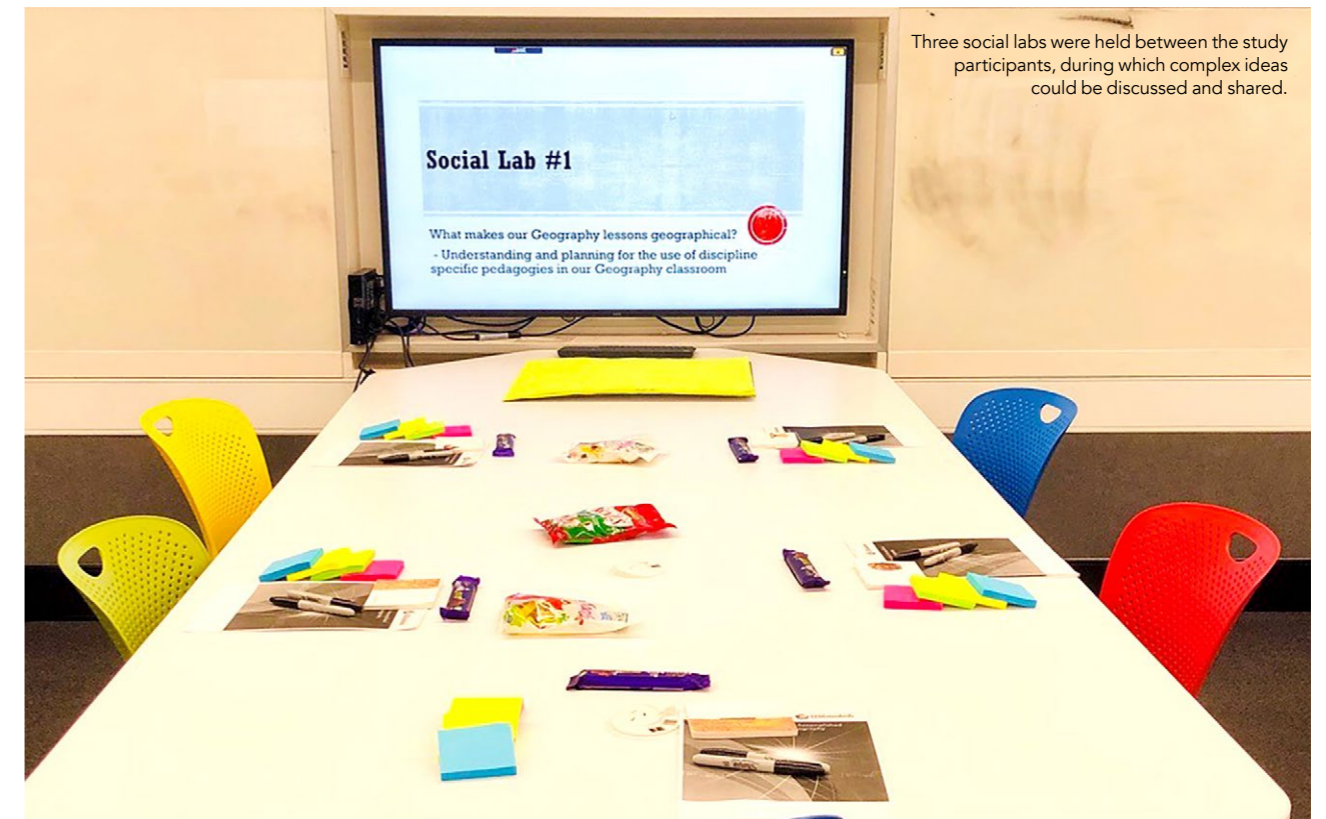
figures quoted in the strategic plan for geography as a discipline, there is also a statistical conundrum: while 40% of Australian teachers of students aged 12 to 16 teach geography out-of-field, the proportion of teachers who have geography as a specialism but do not teach the subject is even higher.

Caldis argues that the extent of out-of-field teaching in Australia and particularly within geography education, and no doubt elsewhere, is under-researched and a matter of concern for teachers and students alike.

REFLECTIVE LEARNING AND PEDAGOGY

Caldis's study tracks the experience of five aspiring geography teachers from a metropolitan Australian university. In a qualitative, 18-month longitudinal study, these aspiring teachers came together to discuss their experience in 'social labs' – platforms that bring people together to discuss complex issues and exchange ideas. Three social labs were held between the study participants starting their final teacher placement during their teacher education programme and ending their first year of employment.

Discussions were framed against reflexivity theory. Developed by English sociologist Margaret Archer in the 1980s, reflexivity is a process by which an individual examines their feelings, actions, and reactions in relation to a situation or event. As Caldis explains, it involves the 'bending back' of thought to 'stimulate inner conversation and create distance between self, circumstance and the phenomenon requiring thought and action'. In this study participants were asked to examine how they put the theory they learned in their teacher education programme into pedagogical practice in the classroom.



Three social labs were held between the study participants, during which complex ideas could be discussed and shared.

The original aim of Caldis's research was to understand more about how new teachers' experience informed their teaching of geography. Out-of-field teaching was soon identified as the most significant constraint they faced.

'OVERWHELMED' AND 'UNDERPREPARED'

Study participants reported that out-of-field teaching was the most stressful aspect of their transition experience and that their ITE had failed to prepare them for what they encountered.

The teaching timetable of one early-career teacher was 100% out-of-field. This early-career teacher reported feeling so burdened by the workload associated with having to learn and teach new subjects that withdrawing from the study was the only option. Another said that in her first position as a casual relief teacher she had to teach art, commerce, legal studies, and future learning as well as geography. The main additional subjects that other participants were expected to teach were commerce and business studies, despite having no training in

these areas. Some participants also reported that, although they were the only specialist geography teachers in their schools, they were still expected to teach out-of-field and to support other non-specialist teachers to teach their subject.

Most of the new teachers reported feeling 'overwhelmed' by their out-of-field teaching experience and one reported serious levels of anxiety. Not only did they attribute this to the stress of having to be proficient in both content knowledge and delivery, they said that classroom management was a bigger problem

under pressure' and managed 'by just keeping going', despite out-of-field teaching being 'debilitating and draining'.

REASONS AND MITIGATIONS

The reflective learning model helped study participants to identify reasons why they were expected to work out-of-field, as well as what they could do to mitigate the associated challenges. In particular they were asked to focus discussions on the professional standards for teaching geography and the question 'What makes your geography lessons geographical?'.

The early-career teachers attributed their out-of-field teaching workload to school timetabling issues, faculty organisation, stretched teaching resources (including working in a smaller rural school with fewer teachers), and the precarious nature of working as a casual relief teacher.

Despite seeing out-of-field teaching as a severe constraint, study participants found ways to mitigate the challenges they faced. They said that knowing the professional standards for geography helped them to understand their specialist

The extent of out-of-field teaching is under-researched and a matter of concern for teachers and students alike.

in their out-of-field classes, which only added to the pressure.

All agreed that out-of-field teaching diminished their experience as early-career teachers. One said that out-of-field teaching reduced 'excitement about teaching' and raised concerns about not being able to deliver quality teaching expected by the students. Another early-career teacher said that she 'survived



Professional Standards for Geography Teaching

Cultivating geographical imagination and understanding

Accomplished geography teaching engages students in the classroom and is built on thorough knowledge of the discipline, continual planning, evaluation, and renewal of teachers' professional knowledge and practice.



Based on The Professional Standards for Accomplished Teaching of School Geography (Hutchinson & Kriewaldt, 2010; Kriewaldt & Mulcahy, 2010).

subject and transfer the process of reflection and intent of the standards to help them understand and teach other subjects. They also found the question 'What makes your geography lessons geographical?' helpful, in that it provided them with a strategy for approaching new subjects. For example, they inserted the name of the non-specialist subject into this question to help provide direction and focus, such as 'What makes this Commerce lesson commercially focused?'

Other strategies included engaging with experts – either with colleagues in school, joining a professional association, or using social media to talk to and/or learn from other teachers online. Study participants also drew on their personal values and beliefs about the importance of their role and their responsibilities as teachers. In addition, they reported that taking part in the study provided a valuable 'safe space' for dialogue and served as a 'mentoring programme', helping them to focus their ideas and interpret their experience.

TEACHER EXPECTATIONS AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

There is a growing body of scholarship on the experience of pre-service teachers as they transition to early-career teachers. Caldis's research adds to the literature by focusing on aspiring geography

teachers and using reflective practice to identify out-of-field teaching as a major constraint, as well as reasons and mitigations for the challenges it poses.

Caldis finds that, while teaching out-of-field is a common experience and a 'distinct feature of transition', it is something for which study participants are underprepared, and which has a negative impact on their wellbeing, confidence, and professional expectations. In addition, she suggests that early-career teachers who teach in less-populated regional areas and/or teach humanities and social

sciences are more likely to be expected to teach out-of-field.

She concludes that out-of-field teaching is a significant problem which merits further investigation with a larger cohort of students. The risk to education authorities – and to society – is not only that a heavy out-of-field workload may result in early-career teachers giving up teaching altogether, but that it also affects subject integrity and disrupts classroom

management, which can in turn affect student learning outcomes.

While the research was conducted in Australia, the findings are relevant to education systems elsewhere. To lessen the risk of attrition, Caldis recommends that measures are taken to reduce the amount of out-of-field teaching teachers are expected to undertake as they transition from pre-service to early-career teaching. In addition, new teachers should only be granted qualified teaching proficiency status if they have been assessed in a fully in-field teaching context.

Out-of-field teaching was the most stressful aspect of new teachers' transition experience and one for which they felt underprepared.



Behind the Research

Dr Susan Caldis

E: susan.caldis@mq.edu.au T: +61 437 897 993

Research Objectives

Dr Susan Caldis researches the effects of out-of-field teaching on early-career teachers in Australia.

Detail

Address

Macquarie School of Education
Macquarie University, Wallumattagul Campus,
Balaclava Road
North Ryde, NSW 2109, Australia

Bio

Susan Caldis is a lecturer in secondary social science in the Macquarie School of Education, Macquarie University, Australia. Susan's teaching and research is contextualised within geography education. Her research explores how experiences associated with transitioning into the teaching profession, such as out-of-field teaching, can have a transformative influence on pedagogical practice.

Collaborators

- PhD Supervisors: Associate Professor Michael Cavanagh, Professor Mary Ryan and Associate Professor Rod Lane
- Associate Professor Linda Hobbs, Dr Anna Du Plessis, Associate Professor Greg Oates and the Out Of Field Teaching Across Subjects (OOFAS) Collective



References

Caldis, S, (2022) Transitioning into the profession with an out-of-field teaching load. In: Hobbs, L, Porsch, R, (eds) *Out-of-field teaching across teaching disciplines and contexts*. Springer, Singapore. doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-9328-1_13

Caldis, S, (2022) 'Overwhelmed' and 'underprepared': the realities of out-of-field teaching in geography during a time of transition into the teaching profession. *Geography Bulletin*, 54(2).

Hobbs, L, Du Plessis, AE, Oates, G, Caldis, S, et al, (2022) National summit on teaching out-of-field: Synthesis and recommendations for policy, practice and research. oofas-collective.squarespace.com/s/TOOF-National-Summit-Report.doc

Personal Response

How might teacher education programmes be amended to address the negative experience of out-of-field teaching and better prepare pre-service teachers for entry into teaching?

/// To better prepare pre-service teachers for out-of-field teaching upon entry to and transition into the profession, teacher education programmes could provide opportunities for exposure to the out-of-field teaching phenomenon. For example, as part of professional experience pre-service teachers could shadow those who are teaching out-of-field in relevant subjects. Alternatively, there could be coursework components or explicit theory-practice reflection models about teaching to be adopted prior to, during, and post professional experience. Teacher education programmes could also be part of formalised school-university-professional association network and resource creation support structures to assist pre-service and early-career teachers to manage and respond to the out-of-field teaching experience. ///