

‘Overwhelmed’ and ‘underprepared’: The realities of out-field teaching in geography during a time of transition into the teaching profession

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Abstract

As pre-service teachers transition into the profession, it is likely they will experience teaching beyond their subject specialisation and/or stage of schooling. This situation is known as out-of-field teaching. Whilst there is a growing body of evidence about the extent and impact of out-of-field teaching occurring in the teaching profession overall, little is known about out-of-field teaching in geography. This article shares important findings from a recent doctoral study that progresses understanding about out-of-field teaching in geography. These findings were initially shared at the 2021 National Summit on Teaching Out-of-Field (<https://oofas-collective.org/toofsummit>) and are written up more fully and more formally in my thesis (Caldis, 2021, *Transitioning into the profession and transformation of pedagogical practice in the secondary geography classroom*) and in Caldis (2022) *Transitioning into the profession with an out-of-field teaching load*. The article showcases the realities of out-of-field teaching faced by five pre-service geography teachers as they transitioned into the teaching profession. ‘Anna’, ‘Emily’, ‘Grace’, ‘Karen’, and ‘Matt’ (all pseudonyms) join the profession expecting to teach geography, however, not only were they asked to teach out-of-field, they were also asked to support out-of-field colleagues to teach geography. The realities are shaped around lived experience, responses to the emerging constraints and the consequences on their practice.

Introduction

Out-of-field teaching can be defined by subject, stage of schooling and also by self-identification of practice (Du Plessis, 2015; Hobbs, 2013). It is known to occur in response to factors such as teacher shortages (sector, subject, locations) and policy decisions about funding, employment and timetabling (Shah et al., 2020; Weldon, 2016, 2018). Out-of-field teaching is reported as a common experience by those who are entering the teaching profession and journeying through their early-career years (Caldis, 2022; Campbell et al., 2019; Du Plessis & Sunde, 2017). It is also reported as something for which initial teacher education programs do not provide suitable preparation. As a result, when this situation is encountered by early-career teachers it has potential to negate wellbeing and disrupt classroom management (Caldis, 2022; Du Plessis, 2020).

The research findings shared are from my recent doctoral research. Findings go some way towards being able to understand the urgency and impact of out-of-field teaching in geography, as called for in *Geography: Shaping Australia's Future* (NCGS, 2018). Focus is on the realities of out-of-field teaching faced by pre-service geography teachers as they transitioned into the profession. My research was a qualitative longitudinal study, conducted in three phases over 18 months and

conceptualised around pedagogy and reflexivity. ‘Anna’, ‘Emily’, ‘Grace’, ‘Karen’ and ‘Matt’ were purposely sampled from a geography methodology unit at an Australian metropolitan university. Out-of-field teaching was not a pre-determined research focus, however, it emerged in research findings as being a prominent part of journeying into the early-career years of teaching,

1. Lived experience, constraints and consequences

The lived experience, constraints, and consequences relate to out-of-field teaching being noted by four participants as a distinct entry point into the profession and characteristic of their first year of teaching. Teaching out-of-field was identified as a constraint to teaching practice due to a lack of preparation from the ITEP, the incidence of precarious employment and whole school timetabling decisions. Feeling stressed and overwhelmed together with difficulties in managing the classroom compared to when teaching their in-field subjects were mentioned as the main consequences of teaching out-of-field.

• 1A An entry-point into the profession.

Anna, Grace, Karen and Matt identified teaching out-of-field as being a distinctive entry-point into the profession and a feature of their first year of teaching.

Grace, Karen and Matt taught in Sydney; they each entered the profession as a casual relief teacher and then quickly gained a short-term contract within the Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) department at a given school (approximately 10 – 12 weeks). Anna relocated to regional New South Wales for employment on a 12-month contract as a HSIE teacher at a Kindergarten to Year 12 school.

As an entry-point into the profession (Phase 2 of the study), Grace, Karen and Matt experienced out-of-field teaching as part of their day-to-day casual relief teaching appointments during Term 3 (July – September) where they were either teaching across several schools or teaching across different departments in one school. Grace, Karen and Matt soon had their casual appointments extended into a short-term contract as a HSIE teacher at a designated school for the remainder of Term 3 and throughout Term 4 (October – December). The short-term contract requirements meant they took on the teaching load of a HSIE teacher who was on leave. Whilst there was a small amount of geography on their timetable, the HSIE subject combination did not match participant subject specialisations. For example, during Phase 2: Profession-entry, Matt taught commerce, business studies and geography yet his subject specialisations were geography, history and modern history. Karen taught “multiple subjects: arts, geography, commerce, legal studies and future learning [but] I’m only trained in one of those subjects”. Anna was hired as a HSIE teacher, yet Anna’s timetable included agriculture, design and technology, Stage 3 (primary), geography and history. As a result, teaching out-of-field beyond HSIE was a dominant component of Anna’s entry into the profession and first year teaching.

Emily did not experience teaching out-of-field in Phases 2 and 3. Due to a vacancy arising in the Social Sciences department, she was hired as a geography teacher at the school where she completed her professional experience. Although her Head Teacher mentioned the possibility of also teaching commerce, Emily, a career-change teacher, had developed a strong subject-identity for geography, and had confidence to cite recent research about the impact of out-of-field teaching to her colleagues. As a result, her timetable remained in-field throughout her entry into the profession and first year of teaching.

- **1B Lack of preparation from ITEP and whole school timetabling decisions.**

Phase 1 of the study focused on professional experience and the final stages of candidature

in an initial teacher education program, at no time throughout this phase did the participants mention or experience teaching out-of-field. Phase 2 of the study focused on entry to the profession and Phase 3 on the first school year of teaching. It was during Phases 2 and 3 that participants spoke frequently about the out-of-field teaching phenomenon in response to feeling “overwhelmed” and “underprepared” from the ITEP. Matt withdrew from the study after Phases 1 and 2 citing that his timetable for the new school year (Phase 3) did not include geography although he was hired as a HSIE teacher, and he would mostly be teaching out-of-field.

Anna, Grace, Karen and Matt self-identified as out-of-field teachers, even within a HSIE context depending on the subject being taught. They reported OOF as a constraint to their feelings of being able to cope with the demands of entering and transitioning into the profession. They also reported the ITEP as not sufficiently preparing them for teaching out-of-field whilst also attributing this experience to timetabling decisions, faculty organisation and precarious employment.

Matt said he “felt constrained by teaching commerce [because] I’ve never been prepared for that ... it comes with a level of stress and expectation so that reduces my excitement [about teaching]”. When elaborating about ‘expectation’, Matt explained the students don’t know you are teaching out-of-field, only you do, but the students are still expecting a comprehensive and detailed lesson for the given subject, and that placed additional stress on him as a teacher who is new to the profession.

Anna had the largest out-of-field teaching load compared to the other participants and referred to this phenomenon as being “indicative of my year in review”. Anna also explained how she felt lack of preparation in the ITEP was a contributing factor to her struggle in coping effectively with the move away from her networks to a regional school and community; also her difficulty in adapting to a co-educational context when all her professional experience placements had been in all-girls schools. Overall, Anna said her transition into the profession was “a LOT”, but she felt she managed the out-of-field teaching experience by just “keep[ing] going” despite it being “debilitating and draining”, and that she “survived under pressure so that is a success”.

There were varying degrees of scale of out-of-field teaching, for example, Grace had a history and geography teaching specialisation which accredited her as a HSIE teacher, yet within a HSIE faculty during Phases 2 and 3, Grace also taught commerce and

business studies. As mentioned previously, Anna taught several subjects beyond HSIE and at the end of Phase 3 when her contract was extended for another 12 months, there was “another twist, teaching languages in 2021”. Grace and Karen often questioned why they had to teach business studies or commerce when there were HSIE colleagues who were teaching geography out-of-field. As Grace and Karen were the specialist geography teachers in the HSIE faculty, they were expected to help and provide advice to their non-geography-specialist HSIE colleagues about how to teach geography. Grace wondered “why can’t I have a full teaching load of geography?” when there were enough geography classes to fill her timetable.

- **1C Stress, feeling overwhelmed, and difficulties with classroom management.**

Anna, Grace, Karen and Matt identified an increasing amount of classroom management problems occurring with their out-of-field classes compared to when they were teaching geography. They also mentioned experiencing heightened levels of stress and often feeling overwhelmed by teaching out-of-field, which affected their wellbeing and also contributed to Anna’s development of serious problems with anxiety.

2 Possibilities for support

There were three areas of support mentioned by the participants which they felt enabled them to navigate the complexities of out-of-field teaching as part of their entrance and transition into the profession. One area of support was the creation of a dialogic safe space through the doctoral study group which provided a mentoring structure using explicit theory-practice reflection activities with a recurring question in every data generation activity in each phase. For example, the use of reflexivity theory to interpret context was noted as being helpful for participants to understand what enables and constrains their practice so that they can develop a viable plan for action to respond to the identified constraint of teaching out-of-field. The recurring question, ‘What makes your geography lesson geographical?’ became a point of understanding what was distinctive about teaching geography as a specialist teaching subject, however, this question also became a point of application for participants to delve into the distinctiveness of other subjects. For example, Anna started to insert the name of other subjects she was teaching into the question, such as ‘what makes this agricultural lesson agricultural?’

Another area of support for learning how to teach an out-of-field subject was related to engaging with

expert others. This occurred through either joining a professional teacher association, or through accessing social media such as subject-specific Facebook groups, or by developing relationships with other teachers in their school or department who teach the given subject as their specialist area.

Participants also drew heavily on their personal values and beliefs about what it means to be a teacher to propel them through the difficult moments of teaching out-of-field. For example, Anna had a strongly-held belief that “country kids should be able to access the same quality of education as city kids ... and this is my responsibility to provide them with the best possible education”.

Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching out-of-field was a prominent experience of entering and transitioning into the profession for five early-career HSIE teachers. Difficulty in responding to and managing the out-of-field teaching phenomenon was attributed to a lack of preparation in the ITEP, school-based timetabling decisions, and precarious employment. Feeling stressed, being overwhelmed, and having to manage an increased incidence of classroom management issues were identified as the results of teaching out-of-field. Support structures to help navigate the complexities of OOF were named as being the use of explicit theory-practice reflection activities within a mentoring structure, engaging with expert others, and harnessing and acting upon the personal values and beliefs about what it means to be a teacher.

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