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.

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

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 first 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.

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
Behind the Research
Dr Susan Caldis

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, Wallumattagal Campus
Balaclava Road
North Ryde, NSW 2119, 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 Aiena Du Plessis
• Associate Professor Greg Oates
• The Out Of Field Teaching Across Subjects (OOffTAS) Collective

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

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 to 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.