



Tracking the Extent of Out-of-field Teaching of Geography: Issues and Implications for Advancing School Geography

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Abstract

This article reports on out-of-field (OOF) geography teaching in Australia. Participants were 298 teachers who responded to a national survey in late 2019. Findings indicate that OOF teaching remains prevalent in Australian geography classrooms which affects students' experience of learning geography. It also reports on the effects of policies in diminishing the focus on subject specialisms. The article proposes that teachers' capacity to make discretionary judgements about what to teach and how to teach it is challenged when they don't have their specialised expertise in the domain in which they teach, and therefore in-field teachers must be recruited and OOF teachers must be provided with professional development in content and in pedagogy and supported by specialised guidance by in-field colleagues. The prevalence of OOF geography teachers has implications for teacher identity formation and may lead to diminished job satisfaction and contribute to teacher shortages.

Introduction

Teachers are expected to have expertise in the content they teach (Shulman, 1986) and there is strong evidence that specialist teachers offer higher-quality teaching and, consequently, stronger student outcomes (Porsch & Whannell, 2019). Yet out-of-field (OOF) teaching is prevalent in many countries including England, Germany, the United States and Australia (Price et al., 2019). A phenomenon that has been occurring for decades (Ingersoll, 2019), OOF teaching occurs widely across many subjects, including geography (see, for example, Berry & Smith, 2009; Caldis, 2017; Shreeve, 2018). Samuel Brodbelt eloquently called out OOF teaching in 1990, referring to it as a "dirty little secret" in education and attributing its occurrence to a mismatch between supply and demand.

Geographic education is a particular case as it is a complex specialism that draws on the natural sciences and human dimensions using conceptual

tools, including place, space, environment, and interconnection, that are not easily understood. It is difficult to understand geography by its subject matter alone, and understanding of geography's characteristic approaches to thinking using these concepts is important (Maude, 2021).

What do we mean by OOF?

OOF teaching is the label given to those who teach subjects, or disciplines or fields, without having completed specialist training (Du Plessis, 2015, 2019). This training has two dimensions. The first is the study of the subject at university level, usually a sub-major as a minimum requirement[1], and the second is the study of how to teach that subject, usually within their teaching qualification. We do not suggest that primary school teaching is OOF teaching as primary teachers are trained to teach a range of subject areas, though we note that there are specialisms in primary teaching. However, in secondary school, teachers specialise in one or two disciplinary areas. In the United Kingdom, an OOF teacher is often called a non-specialist. For this paper, we use the well-recognised term: OOF.

Why is OOF teaching a problem?

When appointed teachers are required to teach subjects outside their specialist qualifications, the demands placed on them are significant.

Caldis (2017) asserts that OOF teaching will likely lead to greater student disengagement and lower achievement. OOF can lead to professional self-doubt as teachers teach beyond their specialism and may lead to teachers leaving the profession. Therefore, we do not recommend assigning teachers to teach geography without training in the discipline.

Hobbs and Törner (2019) explain that ideally a teacher is prepared to teach by deep immersion in the content and the distinctive disciplinary ways of developing knowledge, and can see and experience core teaching approaches. Teachers

reported that they believed they were better prepared to teach when they received training in content and pedagogy (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019): “At the school level, schools also need to ensure that, regardless of local circumstances, all teachers are equipped with sufficient training in the content and pedagogy of the subjects they teach” (p. 17). It is widely acknowledged that there is a persuasive body of research indicating that the quality of teaching makes a significant in-school contribution to student learning. Yet, this relentless emphasis overshadows the effects of schools, policies, funding and the myriad of other factors beyond school.

Causes of OOF geography teaching in Australia

In Australia, one of the underlying causes of OOF geography teaching has been the organisation of more than one discipline into a broader category. This has diminished the recognition of geography teaching as distinctive, and permitted teachers to be deployed as Humanities or Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) teachers, where their discipline is but one of the fields of study. The move to the umbrella term of Humanities or Humanities and Social Science (HASS) in the Australian Curriculum to describe four fields comprising distinctive disciplines—Geography, History, Civics and Citizenship, and Business and Economics—has contributed to the problem of OOF teaching. This has had a pervasive effect as the Australian Curriculum has been adopted by states and territories, although Victoria and New South Wales have adapted it for their jurisdictions, diminishing the emphasis on the discipline of geography (Casinader, 2016). All jurisdictions now use the term HASS except New South Wales, which has Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) and Victoria, which uses the terminology *the Humanities*. This new nomenclature has been taken up in some initial teacher education courses that train Humanities or HASS teachers. Some graduates of Humanities learning areas feel ill-equipped to understand disciplinary ideas and signature pedagogies in the subjects within Humanities that they find themselves required to teach.

Another cause of OOF geography teaching in Australia is related to the development and use of teaching standards which have ironically diminished the focus on subject specialisms.

Over a decade ago in 2011, the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership^[2] (AITSL, 2011) released the National Professional Standards for Teachers which was later rebadged as the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) in 2013. These claim to provide

a statement of capabilities and expectations for Australian teachers across three domains—professional knowledge, professional practice and professional engagement—and at four levels: Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher. The APST “are a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. They define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high quality, effective teaching in 21st-century schools which result in improved educational outcomes for students” (AITSL, 2011, p. 2). At that time, the Professional Standards for the Accomplished Teaching of School Geography (Hutchinson & Kriewaldt, 2010; Kriewaldt & Mulcahy, 2010), or colloquially the GEOGStandards, were developed and designed to capture the specificity of teaching geography. However, these specific standards have been overshadowed by the mandatory APST standards.

The widespread and mandated use of APST Standards over more than a decade signifies acceptance by policy makers that they are an accurate and comprehensive account of teachers’ work. Implicit in these Standards is the expectation that Australian teachers have the requisite knowledge in the domain that they teach. Additionally, entry into secondary teaching graduate programs specifies a major study in one teaching area and “preferably” a minor study in a second area (AITSL, 2018). This requirement indicates that prospective secondary school teachers need a body of discipline-based content knowledge and an understanding of what constitutes epistemic quality in their discipline.

Despite an implicit interest in teachers’ disciplinary expertise, the Standards are generic and do not differentiate by disciplinary area. At the same time, AITSL registers teachers without requiring them to specify their subject specialisation (Price et al., 2019). The suppression of disciplinary specificity in the Standards and in teacher registration fosters professional acceptance of teachers as non-specialists. They effectively downplay in-field specificity. Teachers’ expertise is discipline-specific, yet generic teaching standards do not illuminate details of subject-specific knowledge that underpin quality teaching.

We propose that teacher identities can be strongly shaped by professional teaching standards, fashioning what teachers do—and don’t do—in their practices. This has several significant consequences. As influential policies, professional teaching standards could lead to the acceptance that in-field expertise is not essential, particularly among those who must meet standards to secure tenure of employment—as is often the case for early career teachers. Further, in the articulation of standards, teaching is assembled

as a constellation of competencies, and the intellectual work of teacher judgement tends to be downplayed. We claim that teachers use their specialised expertise to make discretionary judgements about what to teach and how to teach it.

What is the magnitude of OOF geography teaching in Australia?

Scholars have highlighted the dismal state of OOF teaching in geography in Australia (e.g., Du Plessis, 2019; Caldis & Kleeman, 2019; National Committee for Geographical Sciences, 2018). Geography has been described as the subject with the highest percentage of OOF teachers across Australia. The 2013 Staff in Australia's Schools (SiAS) survey found that almost 40% of Years 7–10 geography teachers have not studied geography above the first year at university and have not studied teaching methodology for geography (Weldon, 2016). The high percentage of OOF teachers was reported as early as the 2000s by Kriewaldt (2006), who found that 43% of Victoria's geography teachers had not completed a sub-major in geography. It is noteworthy that the SiAS survey additionally found that over 20% of teachers who are qualified specialist geography teachers (studied first year at university and studied methods) are not teaching geography (Weldon, 2015).

Despite the sobering statistics, official authorities appear to have stopped asking about this dirty little secret. Notably, later surveys (e.g., Victoria Department of Education and Training's (DET) 2022 School Staff Survey) do not collect data on OOF teachers, nor do they provide options to indicate that the respondent is a geography teacher, only a category 'Humanities and social sciences (including history, geography, economics, business, civics and citizenship)' (Victoria DET, 2022).

Tracking OOF geography teaching in Australia

We call for the continued tracking of OOF geography teaching in Australia. In 2019, we administered a survey through the affiliates of the Australian Geography Teachers Association asking teachers to report on the number of geography teachers in their schools with university qualifications in geography and in geography methods. The survey collected responses from 298 schools across Australia. An OOF teacher in this survey is defined as one without university qualifications in geography and geography methods. The majority of the respondents were from the two most populous states of New South Wales and Victoria. The following findings are reported nationally; they may not

take into account local variations particularly for the smaller states and territories which have less representation, recognising their smaller population size. Despite limitations, several implications from the findings warrant attention and provide the basis for hypotheses for future investigation.

In Australia, almost one in two (45.9%) teachers who taught geography in 2019 were teachers whose major qualification was in a field other than geography. These figures have remained much the same or are worse since data were collected in 2006 (Kriewaldt, 2006) and 2013 (Weldon, 2016). Across Australia, there were several other significant findings from the survey. First, there are differences across states in terms of the number of OOF geography teachers. Comparing the data from New South Wales and Victoria, there are about three OOF teachers per school in Victoria compared to two in New South Wales. Second, the number of OOF teachers also varied across school types. Government schools across Australia, on average, have more OOF teachers than Independent and Catholic schools. Third, Independent schools have, on average, a higher provision of fully-trained teachers than other school types. Fourth, across the country, schools with more specialist geography teachers (with both university qualifications in geography and geography methods) are more likely to offer the subject at Year 12.

These findings suggest complexities to the problem of OOF geography teaching in Australia that are worthy of investigation. If better-resourced independent schools attract more specialist geography teachers, how can we ensure that geography remains accessible to all? If specialist teachers in a school increase the likelihood of students taking geography at higher levels, yet the prevalence of OOF teaching in geography remains high, what else can be done to prevent the downward spiral?

The qualitative comments from geography teachers in the survey further highlight why such surveys need to continue. Teachers shared that specialist geography teachers are difficult to find. In some schools they are often deployed to teach subjects like history instead of geography—echoing findings from the 2013 SiAS survey which found that 20% of specialist geography teachers are, in fact, not teaching geography (Weldon, 2016). Teachers cited some reasons for this phenomenon, including insufficient student interest in geography, and specialist geography teachers being asked to teach year-long HASS subjects in which only a small component of the curriculum is geography-specific.

Furthermore, geography teachers shared that they often feel less supported in departments which prefer to focus on history and commerce subjects, intensifying teachers' lack of interest in championing geography. Teachers also noted that OOF geography teachers lack the knowledge and passion for teaching geography, compounding the problem of low student interest in the subject. Ironically, OOF geography teachers with a passion for the subject then, in turn, find they have limited professional development opportunities to improve their content and pedagogical content knowledge. Another issue teachers highlighted was that the geography curriculum is perceived as being too crowded for teachers to use teaching practices that are more engaging for students but which are more time-consuming.

Our results are in alignment with Casinader's conclusion that the provision of high quality geography curriculum in schools is "likely to be curtailed by the shortage of trained Geography teachers who can both teach the new course with subject-specific understanding, and who possess the intellectual grounding in the discipline to prosecute its cause within school" (2016, p. 272). This is compounded when the curriculum leader in the school who is responsible for geography is also responsible for other areas so their focus and advocacy for geography is diluted or indeed conflicted with their advocacy for other areas in HASS. And it is further at risk when the leader is not geographically trained.

We intend to investigate these findings through a more extensive survey of geography teachers across Australia in 2023 to better understand staffing provisions in schools in this post-pandemic era.

Conclusion

As we wrote this article, considerable attention was focused on the shortage of teachers in Australian schools, with some principals of rural schools reporting there were no applicants for some of the positions they advertised. This matter has been reported in the teacher workforce shortages issues paper and most recently in the *National teacher workforce action plan, December 2022* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). For administrators, the concerns of meeting the duty of care obligations for supervision of all students has become the major staffing issue eclipsing the desire to staff within teacher specialisms as they may not be able to find subject specialists. Yet OOF solutions may be temporary at best. The higher risk of early career teachers leaving the profession when they are given responsibilities outside their expertise, and not aligned with their interests and passions, is concerning given the teacher shortages Australia faces, especially in

rural and regional areas. Given the specifications of accrediting teachers, we can no longer "assume that most teachers begin with some expertise in the content they teach" (Shulman, 1986, p.8).

We call for a concerted effort to educate and recruit in-field teachers who have studied a subject for at least one semester at second-year tertiary level, along with subject-specific teaching instruction. This sets a high standard by requiring disciplinary knowledge and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge. Additionally, if OOF teachers are required to upgrade their qualifications after graduation in order to be approved to teach a new subject, such qualifications must include study of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Caldis & Kleeman, 2019). When there is a shortfall in recruitment, education departments and professional associations must support OOF teachers with targeted professional development (PD) that addresses the discipline of geography, its characteristic modes of thinking and core pedagogical approaches (Kenny et al., 2020). It is well recognised that teachers continue to learn through individual and collegial activities that encompass formal and informal PD throughout their careers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2020). However, these must consider more than "what works" instrumental design to develop participants' understanding of epistemic modes of the discipline. Initiatives such as the Geography Teachers Association of New South Wales' online professional learning program for OOF teachers are important ways to upskill them to improve geography education, but they must provide significant depth to prepare teachers thoroughly.

The analysis and conclusions of this paper have implications that will stimulate school leadership to deploy staff in their cognate areas.

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[1] For example, to train to teach Geography in New South Wales, NESA requires “a major or a minor in Geography including units in physical and human geography” and “will consider units in Earth and environmental science upon review of units for appropriate discipline knowledge” (NESA, n.d.).

[2] AITSL is a public company that is established and funded by the Australian Government. The federal Minister for Education is the sole member of the company.