

Geography Initial Teacher Education in three days! The new PGCE 'PE with' EBacc scheme

Christine explores the challenges faced by non-specialist teachers wanting to teach secondary geography as part of the government's new PGCE 'PE with' EBacc scheme.



Figure 1: What does it mean to be a geographer if you are a PE teacher? **Photo:** © GA/ Shaun Flannery

Introduction

In September 2018 the Department for Education (DfE) introduced a new PGCE 'PE with' EBacc subject scheme in an attempt to meet recruitment targets in priority subject areas and avoid oversupply in others, notably PE. Trainees are required to demonstrate that they can meet the Teachers' Standards in their chosen EBacc subject alongside their PE specialism, so they are capable of teaching both subjects. Candidates must have at least a grade C at A level or equivalent subject knowledge in the EBacc subject and, at the discretion of their training provider, may be required to undertake an additional Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE) course (DfE, 2018).

Geography teachers have some of the lowest rates of leaving the profession, but recent reports show that curriculum hours, fuelled by increasing student populations and the introduction of the EBacc, mean rates of departure have risen by 17% since 2011 (Tapsfield, 2015; Worth and De Lazzari, 2017). Shreeve (2018) points out that geography was the only EBacc subject to show a marked fall in the number of specialist teachers between 2010 and 2016. Recruitment initiatives, such as the designation of geography as a priority subject area and attractive bursaries, have had some impact but Tapsfield (2015) warns that the recruitment shortfalls could get even worse if

the discrepancy between recruitment and progression, as a newly qualified teacher, is taken into account.

This article explores the thinking behind my decision to create a new geography programme of study (PoS) for PE teachers wanting to teach geography. I was keen to follow the GA's guidance on secondary geography ITE (GA, 2016), but how is it possible to achieve the outcomes in 20% of the core curriculum time, a mere 18 hours or three days of face-to-face teaching? I consider the challenges faced by non-specialist teachers and discuss how the PoS hopes to address these, in three main areas: what does it mean to be a geographer; what should a good geography programme look like; and what should be included in the taught content?

The intention of this article is to highlight the ongoing teacher recruitment crisis and the impact of non-specialist teaching in geography. It calls into question the DfE's response to sector demands in relation to the introduction of the PGCE 'PE with' EBacc scheme, for trainers and trainees, and the longer term impact on the quality, and depth, of classroom geography teaching and learning. In doing so, I hope to stimulate debate amongst the geography community, and the wider education community, regarding the loss of specialist teaching in geography and the ongoing professional development needs of committed and effective geography teachers.

What does it mean to be a geographer?

What does it actually mean to be a geographer, when you are a PE teacher? There are numerous notions of what geography is and yet no commonly agreed definition.

Geography is a 'fusion of the power of imagination and the hard truths of science'. It is about 'sunsets and eclipses, mountains, dreamlines, dancing dervishes, painted churches'. What could be more important, than exploring 'the living breathing essence of the world we live in' and learning more about the past, present and future. (Palin, 2008, p. 5)

This quotation encapsulates what it means to be a geographer: an awareness and appreciation of our dynamic and vulnerable landscapes; the fascination, awe and wonder; the response of our senses and emotions; the curiosity. However, it cannot be assumed that PE graduates will share these sentiments.

The National Curriculum talks about students becoming 'educated citizens' but being a geographer is much more than just being educated. It is about the development of empathy and personal resilience; the use of thinking skills to gain a deep conceptual understanding of the world and consequent ability to impact positively on society by being responsible and active citizens. The global dimensions of geography and living in an interconnected world play a central role in supporting informed thinking and social action. Morgan (2011) contends that controversial issues and sustainability are essential in helping students prepare for a rapidly changing and unpredictable future.

Brooks (2010) suggests that teachers' individual understandings of geography and their relationship with the discipline play an important role in shaping their teaching and underpin their personal motivation and engagement with the subject. A huge challenge for non-specialist teachers, especially in terms of sustained engagement with the subject, is to be able to arrive at their own interpretation of geography and to establish what it means to be a geographer. Building time into the PoS to explore individual beliefs and values was therefore essential, as was challenging individual thinking by debating the views of geography commentators such as Peter Jackson (2006) and Simon Jones (2013).

What should a 'good' geography programme of study look like?

Many teacher educators have become increasingly concerned by the 'mechanisation' of learning and the rigid three-part lesson structure followed by many schools, regardless of whether they support good subject teaching. Mitchell and Lambert (2015) point out that there has been a clear shift in recent years towards the 'pedagogical adventure', with the teacher as facilitator, at the expense of subject-specific learning.

These sentiments are echoed by Shreeve (2018) who raises concerns about the impact of non-specialist teaching on the quality, and depth, of geography taught.

Assuming a less than comprehensive knowledge base of the EBacc subject, PE graduates may mask their lack of subject knowledge and subject-specific pedagogy by defaulting to the 'pedagogical adventure'. To address this problem, the PoS centres on an enquiry-based approach: we can only learn about the world by actively making sense of it for ourselves (Roberts, 2003). Participation is a core expectation, so trainees are compelled to 'live' through the experience, thus gaining a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding.

Brooks (2013), investigating curriculum making in geography, introduces the concept of 'cultures of influence', emphasising society's role in helping us make sense of the world. Making sense of the world relies heavily on the trainer's skill in developing trainees' metacognition, bringing their thinking into conscious awareness, and nurturing their responsiveness. Time is built into the PoS for thorough debriefs and reflections in the hope that by modelling best practice, recognised by Blankmann *et al.* (2016) as a particularly successful characteristic of teacher training in higher education, students will gain a more powerful learning experience and in turn be able to develop similar approaches in their own classrooms.

What should be included in the taught content?

There has been considerable debate about the lack of subject knowledge development in initial teacher education (ITE) and how this disadvantages prospective teachers (Blankmann *et al.*, 2016; Brooks, 2010; Mitchell and Lambert, 2015; Tapsfield, 2015). Developing a PoS for the PE with EBacc scheme therefore presents an interesting challenge, as PE graduates have not studied geography since A level and even if they complete a geography SKE course before their PGCE they will probably have a limited knowledge base and some big knowledge gaps.

Mitchell and Lambert (2015) found that lacking subject knowledge significantly impacts on trainees' classroom confidence; Shreeve (2018) suggests that many non-specialist teachers have little understanding of the fundamentals of geographical thinking and in order to challenge students to go 'above and beyond' they must first know what 'beyond' is. Although Tapsfield (2018) argues that a lack of subject knowledge casts doubts on students' ability to train as effective geography teachers the issue, as for core geography ITE trainees, is the longer-term provision of high-quality professional development.

A number of authors have also expressed unease regarding subject knowledge being treated separately from its pedagogy; this resonates with Shulman's (1986) views on pedagogical content knowledge (Brooks, 2010; Mitchell and Lambert, 2015). Shulman (*ibid.*) suggests that separating

subject knowledge and pedagogical knowledge does not help teachers; what they need to understand is how subject and pedagogical knowledge are intertwined and help inform each other. This thinking is echoed in a GA report which calls for subject-specific pedagogical teaching and criticises many ITE geography programmes for their generic emphasis (Tapsfield, 2015).

To support non-specialist PE trainees, Shulman's (*ibid.*) notions of pedagogical content knowledge permeated their PoS, through a focus on creative and inclusive pedagogies. The focus being, despite the severe time restrictions imposed, on positive geographical pedagogies as a means of presenting the geography subject knowledge to the learner in an interesting and exciting manner to enhance geographical thinking and learning.

Conclusions

Brooks (2013) suggests that much curriculum making is undertaken by active and autonomous professionals. While this may be true, it was slightly unnerving that the geography PoS began to materialise in relative isolation and was heavily influenced by one individual's values and beliefs about what constitutes a 'good' geography education. Similarly, trainees' understanding of what it means to be a geographer is shaped by their culture of influence and for PE specialists dedicated time to explore, and challenge, beliefs must be a crucial aspect of their training.

To ensure PE graduates could demonstrate that they conformed to the Teachers' Standards in relation to the teaching of secondary geography, an enquiry-based learning approach was

adopted with comprehensive modelling of good practice to support students' metacognition and their development as reflective practitioners. Participatory engagement was also a central premise of the training through creative and inclusive pedagogies, encouraging PE graduates' enjoyment of geography as a discipline. This approach supported their growing classroom confidence which in turn fosters the engagement and learning of the students they teach. While not wanting to ignore debates around geographical subject knowledge, we must adopt a pragmatic approach to the longer-term development of geographical pedagogical content knowledge for 'PE with' trainees.

Although the key areas for consideration have been discussed as apparent individual paradigms it is the balance between them, the fluidity, which is essential in shaping a successful and purposeful programme of study.

Good teachers have more than mere technical mastery of teaching strategies: they have a clearly-developed view of the purpose and nature of their subject and an appreciation of their subject discipline as a resource, which sustains them throughout their career by providing a moral and intellectual basis for their practice (Tapsfield, 2015, p. 5).

With recruitment difficulties in secondary geography set to continue it is left to the geography community, along with wider education communities, to consider whether or not the PE with EBacc scheme offers a small, positive step towards managing the looming staffing crisis and loss of specialist classroom teachers. | **TG**

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