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Geographical Education in Northern Ireland: past, present and... future?

Abstract

In Northern Ireland geography is taught in primary and post-primary education, where it is a compulsory subject to age 14. Thereafter, students decide if they wish to continue to GCSE (age 16) and to A-level by age 18. Mirroring geography in the school sector, geographical education also features within initial teacher education programmes in Northern Ireland. However, the configuration of the subject, its place within the local educational landscape and its popularity with students has changed in significant and profound ways. This paper reflects on recent trends and considers the implications for geography and geographical education in the years ahead.

Key Words: Geography; geographical education; initial teacher education; Northern Ireland

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Introduction

As part of a special issue marking the 30th International Geographical Congress in 2004 Hourihane and Keane provided a comprehensive overview of the state of geography in the island of Ireland (Hourihane, Keane, 2004). Almost a decade and a half having passed since that publication, this paper represented a timely opportunity to reflect on some of the changes that have taken place with regards to geographical education in Northern Ireland. Irish geographers have long been passionate about their subject and what it has to offer. Historically speaking, geography has a strong tradition within public education in Northern Ireland, initially as a school subject in the nineteenth century, where it featured alongside reading,

writing and arithmetic as part of the curriculum for boys and girls (Irvine, 2018). Today a reconstructed classroom in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum at Cultra, Co Down (part of the National Museums of Northern Ireland) shows a map of Ireland adorning the walls of an otherwise stark classroom, where the typical daily routine of learning involved the acquisition of location knowledge by rote (Hourihane, Keane, 2004). By the early twentieth century geography had found its way into the programmes of study on offer in the newly founded teacher training colleges. In 1928 the first Geography Department was established at Queen's University, Belfast and later a Geography Department was established at the 'new' University of Ulster (Hourihane, Keane, 2004).

Contemporary school geography in Northern Ireland is very far removed from the rote learning roots of its past. In keeping with international charters on good practice, geographical education in the Northern Ireland Curriculum aims to provide learners with dynamic, inspirational and relevant ways of understanding the world in which they live (Butt, Lambert, 2014). Against a backdrop of intensive globalisation and 'glocal' interdependence the Northern Ireland Curriculum recognises the very specific contribution school geography can make to the education of young people (Swyngedouw, 2004; Fogele, 2014). It is taught in primary and post-primary education, where it is a compulsory subject to age 14. Thereafter, students decide if they wish to continue to GCSE (age 16) and to A-level by age 18. Mirroring geography in the school sector, geographical education also features within ITE (initial teacher education) programmes in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the configuration of the subject, its place within the local educational landscape and indeed its popularity with students has changed in quite significant and profound ways since the Hourihane and Keane review of 2004.

This paper reflects on those trends and considers the implications for geography and geographical education in the years ahead. Methodologically it draws on recently published material which is used to inform a contextual reading of how policy and pedagogical change have impacted on geographical education. For the most part the position of and the outlook for geography and geographical education in Northern Ireland in 2004 was fairly positive. It was certainly not as 'ominous' as other parts of the UK. In 2002 Nigel Thrift suggested that school geography in Great Britain was in a fairly ragged state having been diluted by environmental studies, as well as having to compete with other subjects for space in the school timetable (Thrift, 2002). At that time, Thrift warned that without geography in schools there will simply be no geography and called for the subject to be buoyed up in the school sector. Rawling's (2004) contribution to *Geographical Education – Expanding Horizons in a Shrinking world* also focused on geography's uncertain place in the school curriculum (particularly within primary education), the threats coming from the growth of integrated subjects and the shift in education policy towards a 'skills-based' education at the expense of a subject-based philosophy (Kent, Rawling, Robinson, 2004). She warned of the declining opportunities for high quality teacher education in geography and urged that action be taken ensure its potential as a school subject was fully recognised by students, policy-makers and the public at large (Butt, Lambert, 2014). Thus, the early years of the new millennium initiated a period of soul searching regarding the future of the geography, particularly in England and Wales.

With hindsight it can be seen that change was gathering pace too in Northern Ireland: geography's place in the curriculum, its popularity amongst the student body and its future within initial teacher education would be tested by new challenges in the next decade. In 2004 Hourihane and Keane were able to comment positively on the strength of geography in the primary and post-primary sector. Strong applicant numbers for the degree pathways offered by the Geography Departments at the University of Ulster and Queen's University, Belfast and the BA Liberal Arts degree at St Mary's University College (where geography was offered as an academic subject component of that degree programme) were seen as indicators of the subject's general robustness. However, they also cautioned that there was no room to be complacent around geography's future. Their assessment of the then ongoing reform of the Northern Ireland Curriculum suggested plans to introduce a more flexible, integrated and connected curriculum might have implications for geography at both primary and post-primary level. They suggested that proposals to increase the range of courses available to students at Key Stage 4 (from age 14 onwards), including provision for compulsory citizenship education to age 16, might have implications for the subject. As they suggested, compulsory citizenship education would invariably place demands on an already busy school timetable; on the other hand, geographers were well placed to oversee the inauguration of citizenship education within the post-primary curriculum. On balance it would be fair to say that geography's place in post-primary education in Northern Ireland was more robust in 2004 than it was in other parts of the UK. The 'revised' Northern Ireland Curriculum (2007) became statutory in primary and post-primary education in 2007, so what impact did it have on geography in schools? It is to this aspect that attention now turns.

Geography's Place in the Primary Northern Ireland Curriculum: 2004 to 2018

When the first formal statutory curriculum was introduced in Northern Ireland in the late 1980s geography was included as a standalone subject. There was a strong emphasis on the development of geographical skills within clearly defined geography themes. Reflecting broader trends of the time there was a strong issues based approach to geographical enquiry (Greenwood, 2007; Morgan, 2002; Greenwood, Richardson, Gracie, 2017). Proposals for a radical overhaul of the Northern Ireland Curriculum had been put forward in the late 1990s, which aimed to transform a subject heavy and highly prescriptive curriculum into the more flexible curriculum we have today. The revised Northern Ireland Curriculum (2007) is characterised by an emphasis on skills development and the need to encourage greater pupil autonomy in the learning process. It aims to give schools and classroom practitioners far greater freedom to interpret statements of minimum requirements in ways that best meet the needs of their pupils (Greenwood, Richardson, Gracie, 2017, p. 310). As Montgomery et al. explain, the present curriculum represents a shift from an older traditional subject-based model which focused on knowledge acquisition, to one where the emphasis is on the development of generic and transferable skills (Montgomery, Smith, 2006, p. 53). In the revised primary curriculum geography has been grouped with history and science and technology to constitute an area of learning known World Around Us (WAU), while at post-primary up to Key Stage 3 (age 14)

geography and history together make up the area of learning known as Environment and Society. With regard to primary education, the WAU seeks to develop pupils' natural curiosity about the world in which they live by encouraging teachers to structure learning around four inter-related strands intended to connect learning across geography, history and science and technology. The four strands are: Interdependence, Place, Movement and Energy and Change Over Time. As Greenwood explains, these headings to some extent suggest the dominant contributing subject; 'Place' for example could suggest a geography-led focus while 'Change over Time' implies more historical emphasis. The thematic grids developed to accompany the four strands show the efforts made in curriculum design to integrate the geography, history, science and technology content (Greenwood, Richardson, Gracie, 2017, p. 311).

Thus, with just over a decade since the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum became statutory in primary and post-primary education, how has it been received in schools and what impact has it had on the vibrancy of the subject? According to Greenwood many primary teachers are successfully teaching geography content and skills using a thematic, enquiry-focused methodology and utilising geography to develop pupils' thinking skills and personal capabilities (Greenwood, Richardson, Gracie, 2017, p. 312). In research that temporally coincided with the review and reform of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, Greenwood has shown the positive reception given by primary practitioners to subject integration, enhanced cross-curricularity and thematic integration. This has been particularly marked at Key Stage 2 where, traditionally, subject knowledge and skills had been taught within clearly demarcated disciplines. The teachers surveyed by Greenwood have strongly endorsed the WAU reforms, reporting that their pupils are generally more interested, involved, enthusiastic and excited when teaching and learning is connected (Greenwood, Richardson, Gracie, 2017). Nevertheless, fears were expressed regarding the dilution of geography's subject-based knowledge and skills and some unease expressed around how to document progression in pupils' learning when learning was connected across subject boundaries (Greenwood, 2007). Nevertheless, research to date substantiates the view that the very significant shifts in curriculum reform, design and delivery impacting on geography have been very well received in primary schools.

The most recent comprehensive report on the WAU undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate (January 2015) suggests that geography is as popular today in the primary school as it was in 2004 when the Hourihane-Keane paper was published. In the best performing schools it is deemed by the inspectorate to add significantly to pupils' educational experiences. This report, which was commissioned to examine the implementation of the WAU in primary schools following the statutory curriculum reform, provides some insight into the present state of geography in primary schools. It found that in terms of the WAU contributory 'subjects', schools felt confident about the quality of their provision in geography (Education and Training Inspectorate of Northern Ireland, 2015, p. 2). Almost all the schools (95% of those surveyed) were confident that staff had sufficient knowledge and skills to teach the geography content (Education and Training Inspectorate of Northern Ireland, 2015). The same was largely true for history, but not for science and technology, where school themselves were identifying specific training needs. The ETI report paid close attention to pupils' voices and experiences.

Primary school pupils are clearly enthusiastic geographers who enjoy learning about the world around us, especially when they are supported by equally enthusiastic, committed and knowledgeable teachers. The children enjoy their learning most when it is active and hand-on, when investigative approaches are used and when they feel a sense of ownership by having contributed to planning, working together in teams and by learning from their mistakes. Teachers' enjoyment and enthusiasm was identified as especially significant for the pupils' enjoyment of their WAU learning (Education and Training Inspectorate of Northern Ireland, 2015, p. 20). Significantly for geography, some of the best practice identified in the report involved synergistic partnerships between schools and the local community where efforts had been made to ground pupils' knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values in real life contexts. Going forward, the report recommended strengthening the use of the cultural and physical landscape, (including familiar natural, agricultural, industrial or commercial contexts), noteworthy people – (from the past and present), as well as current issues in the immediate vicinity which provide opportunities for teacher-directed enquiry-based observations anchored in children's everyday lives. (Education and Training Inspectorate of Northern Ireland, 2015, p. 26) Indeed, the best performing schools were already making effective use of the pupils' immediate environments for learning, not only in the early years but through to Key Stage 2, this included the school playground (some with specialist provision for outdoor learning classrooms) nearby parks and accessible 'greenspaces' as well as engagement with the built environment and cultural landscape. The report highlighted that all primary schools in Northern Ireland were now registered with Eco-schools Northern Ireland, a whole-school environmental and sustainability initiative often led by teachers whose subject expertise lies in geography.

Positively, the report found that pupils have good knowledge about a range of issues and topics across the three contributory subject strands and appreciate that history, geography and science are all around them. Regarding geography-led learning, this included a strong emphasis on climate change and renewable energy, the consequences of human use of the world's resources and familiarity with natural disasters. How place influences the nature of life and the interdependence of plants, animals and people was also reported to feature prominently in pupils' geography learning (Education and Training Inspectorate of Northern Ireland, 2015, pp. 29–30). The pupils were able to give opinions on why it is important and interesting to know about key historical, geographical and scientific skills and facts (Education and Training Inspectorate of Northern Ireland, 2015, p. 30). Indeed, one of the perceived strengths of the 'old' Northern Ireland curriculum (at least from a subject-centric perspective) had been the supposed clarity and precision it provided regarding the knowledge and the skills to be developed within defined subject contexts. Some primary practitioners feared the introduction of a more thematic style WAU approach would jeopardise pupils' ability to recognise the contribution that subjects make to their learning. As Greenwood acknowledges "it would be a matter of concern if pupils were leaving primary education and entering secondary education having only heard the phrase WAU and were not clear about the differences among the three subjects in terms of their distinctive content, skills and methodologies" (Greenwood, Richardson, Gracie, 2017, p. 314). Encouragingly, that appears not to be the case. The ETI found that pupils were able to give opinions on

why it is important and interesting to know about key historical, geographical and scientific skills and facts (Education and Training Inspectorate of Northern Ireland, 2015, p. 30). The evidence thus far regarding geography's weathering of curriculum change in primary school has been a largely positive one. The dismantling of disciplinary boundaries has not diminished pupils' enthusiasm or attainment in the subject nor has it led to a loss of subject identity. Schools remain confident about their provision for geography, while pupils were found to have a good appreciation of the value and relevance of geographical perspectives to their learning and lives. In fact it could be argued that this report endorses what primary geography educators have long advocated – teacher-led, enquiry-based learning is the most powerful way for pupils to experience a sense of place and environmental stewardship and that there really is no substitute for first-hand authentic experiences of learning in the 'real world', when it is delivered by those who are comfortable in their subject knowledge (Wheeler, 2011; Pike, 2011). It also suggests that obsessive policing and introverted guarding of subject borders in primary education is counterproductive; pupils learn best when their learning is connected (Greenwood, Richardson, Gracie, 2017, p. 311).

Geography Place in Post-primary Education 2004 to 2018

Positively, geography has remained a compulsory subject in the Northern Ireland Curriculum until the end of Key Stage 3 (age 14). Endeavouring to gauge the present state of geography in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland has proven slightly more challenging where there has been no corresponding report on the implementation of curricular reform at Key Stage 3 and where Northern Ireland focussed research is limited. At the time Hourihane and Keane published their paper in 2004, geography was still largely regarded as one of the stalwart subjects in post-primary education. It had enjoyed decades of popularity with students and was a secure non-compulsory examination subject. The situation in 2018 is certainly more complex, especially after Key Stage 3 when geography becomes an optional subject for students and fewer students are selecting geography for public examination both at GCSE and A-level. Uptake of geography at Key Stage 4 and 5 in recent times suggests that subject is not as 'numerically' strong today as it was in 2004 when Hourihane and Keane were writing. Even then, the need to ensure that young people were enabled to continue with geography for public examination to GCSE and then be 'persuaded' to retain it for the two succeeding years to A-level had been acknowledged (Hourihane, Keane, 2004, p. 19). This section explores in outline, geography's declining numerical fortunes as a post-primary school subject. And perhaps, as Mark Twain once famously suggested "reports of my death have been seriously exaggerated", might the same hold true for geography's recent numerical decline in post-primary education? It is certainly worthy of closer scrutiny, particularly in light of geography's post-primary experiences in other parts of the UK, where similar declining fortunes have been noted (Weeden, Lambert, 2010, p. 74). Research in England exploring the factors influencing pupils' uptake of geography at GCSE found that, while many pupils enjoyed their learning at Key Stage 3 and felt that the subject had some intrinsic interest in its own right, they were unable to see its wider contribution

to their future lives (Adey, Biddulph, 2001, p. 439). This restricted thinking then deterred them from studying to GCSE and by implication beyond as the one is the prerequisite for the other. More worryingly, perhaps, a recent OFSTED report for England and Wales entitled *Key Stage 3: the wasted years?*, was blunt in linking poor up-take of GCSE geography with less than satisfactory classroom experiences at Key Stage 3, claiming that too often inspectors had found teaching in geography that was failing to challenge and satisfactorily engage pupils (OFSTED, 2015, p. 5).

In the case of Northern Ireland the recent overall trajectory for GCSE and A-level geography has been downwards; the subject is less popular today amongst post-primary students than it was when Hourihane and Keane last reported on the state of geography in Northern Ireland in 2004. To a very large extent this downward shift has been precipitated by changes to wider education policy. The implementation of the Post-primary Entitlement Framework (which came into effect from 2006 onwards) significantly expanded the range of study options available to students at age post-14 (i.e. end of Key Stage 3), both academic and vocational and this has come at a cost to post-primary geography. Today, the Northern Ireland Curriculum and Examinations Authority (CEA) offers a much wider range of study options at GCSE including: leisure, travel and tourism, agriculture and land use, learning for life and work, hospitality, child development, journalism and so on. The list is certainly unrecognisable from the more limited options that were available in the past. Furthermore, post-primary schools in Northern Ireland are not restricted to the local examination body (CEA) but are free to select specifications and training options from other UK-wide recognised providers, extending further educational pathway options for students after Key Stage 3. While the Entitlement Framework policy change has brought significant benefits to the student experience by extending and enriching choice, it has meant that traditional subjects like geography have lost ground. Indeed, when demographic variability is accounted for, the numbers opting to study geography at both GCSE and A-level as a proportion of total examination entries has been falling in Northern Ireland since 2013 (CEA, 2018).

Yet in the face of increased choice and competition as just outlined, it is difficult to conceive how it could have been otherwise. According to Cambridge Assessment, in the period 2004–14 geography continued to be in the top 15 most popular non-compulsory GCSE subjects in Northern Ireland (Cambridge Assessment Data Bytes, 2018). However, it no longer ranks amongst the most popular A-level subjects; in recent years that accolade has rested with subjects including: maths, biology, history, religious studies and English literature. More worryingly, perhaps, is the fact that geography now sits alongside subjects like psychology and physics that have witnessed steep falls in the number of candidates studying to A-level (Meredith, 2017). One strong indicator of confidence in geography's A-level academic credentials can be seen in the backing given to the subject by the UK's elite Russell Group of Universities who have named geography as one of eight 'facilitating' subjects deemed to be advantageous when applying for their undergraduate courses (Russell Group, 2018). Thus, consistent grade achievement by students and its ranking as a Russell Group facilitating subject are positive signs that geography is holding its own in a much more competitive post-primary educational environment. Indeed, when all of the aforementioned factors are accounted for, a case could be made

to suggest post-primary geography education in Northern Ireland is in a reasonably good position.

However, this should not obscure the fact that stiff competition, much of it from geography's cognate disciplines, has dissuaded students from studying the subject, suggesting that many post-primary students are failing to perceive the benefits the subject has to offer at a time when there has seldom been a greater need to understand global issues. In this they are not alone. As Rawling (2004) and Thrift (2002) both pointed out well over a decade ago, geography had been suffering from something approaching an identity crisis, not only amongst post-primary students but policy-makers and the public at large (Kent, Rawling, Robinson, 2004; Thrift, 2002). Since then professional bodies, including the Geographical Association and the Royal Geographical Society, have worked to alter perceptions by actively promoting Geography and its contribution to education, the economy, culture and society. There are signs, certainly in England and Wales at least, that this approach might be working. An editorial in *The Guardian* newspaper (2015) hailed geography's revival in England and Wales at A-level as remarkable, showing how geography made the biggest jump of all major subjects that year in terms of student uptake (*Guardian*, 2015). While it would be unwise to get too distracted with media reporting of a subject's 'ups and downs' this upturn does suggest that geography can still resonate powerfully with learners' provided they can 'see' the subject's relevance to their lives and future career prospects (Adey, Biddulph, 2001, p. 439). Of course the quality of teaching and learning is also vitally important as a wide range of factors, including the relationship students have with subject teachers, can influence subject choice. It also needs to be acknowledged that a perception exists amongst some post-primary students that geography is a very demanding subject and one in which it is difficult to obtain a higher grade. A rudimentary review of the local CEA Geography specifications at GCSE and A-Level will confirm it is content heavy and intellectually demanding, requiring the acquisition of knowledge and understanding across the physical, natural, social sciences and humanities as well as the capacity to apply knowledge and understanding through higher order thinking (CCEA, n.d.). When it comes to subject choices after Key Stage 3, fourteen year olds can also be swayed by popular culture and what they see and experience via visual and cultural media. In the UK, a wealth of history-inspired out-put is available 'free' via television channels like the History Channel, whereas specialist geographical output tends to require a costly subscription. History, it would seem, has gained a ubiquitous presence in the lives of young people, communicated through everything from the ever popular 'Horrible Histories' books, television, films and box-sets, advertising and even history-inspired adventure rides in theme parks – the power of the past is everywhere, while, ironically, geography has become something more akin to the background noise of their lived experience.

Geography Valued?: Reflections on Geography in Initial Teacher Education Primary Northern Ireland

Commitment to geography in the school curriculum has long been matched by a commitment to specialist provision for geography and geographical education

within higher education and especially within initial teacher education in the north of Ireland. The latter is of particular significance as it has traditionally been seen as bridging the gap between school geography and the subject as it is experienced as a university subject. Initial teacher education providers have a long tradition of nurturing students' passion and enthusiasm for the subject while simultaneously developing their competence to teach that subject in schools. The first university department of Geography in Ireland was established at Queen's University, Belfast in 1928. The subject continues to be taught there as well as in University of Ulster and until relatively recently, formed an integral part of the four year initial teacher education (BEd Hons.) degree programme at the two university colleges: Stranmillis University College, Belfast and St Mary's University College, Belfast (whose core business is the provision of initial teacher education). It also featured as an academic subject in the BA (Hons) Liberal Arts degree offered by St Mary's University College. As Hourihane and Keane (2004) pointed out when the teacher education colleges were established in the early twentieth century, geography was a core subject for trainee primary teachers, a tradition that remained until the end of the twentieth century.

In one of those oddities of timing, the writing of this paper on the present state of geography and geographical education in Northern Ireland coincided with the graduation of the last cohort of primary trained student teachers from St Mary's University College to have 'geography' as a main subject specialism of their BEd degree. Until early 2000s the BEd degree programmes offered by the two university (teacher education) colleges were broadly similar, based in part on the study of one academic 'specialist' subject that underpinned the Northern Ireland primary school curriculum. Thus, year on year, a requisite number of newly qualified primary teachers entered the profession with a strong subject background in geography. In recent decades the two university colleges have diverged in terms of how they structure and deliver ITE for primary teachers. The place of academic subjects remains strong within initial teacher education provision at St Mary's University College, Belfast. However, Stranmillis University College, Belfast took the decision to re-orientate its provision away from a subject-focused degree, thus signalling the end of academic study of geography in their primary teacher education degree programme. At that time the loss of academic geography in Stranmillis University College reflected broader trends amongst other ITE primary providers in both the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom to drop subject study. It also foreshadowed what was to happen to academic geography in St Mary's University College almost two decades later. Under severe financial pressure and faced with the need to create efficiency savings to its operating costs, the decision was taken in 2015 to suspend and then to close admission to geography as a subject option with the BEd. The last cohort of BEd geography 'primary' subject specialists graduated in July 2018.

When the initial decision to remove geography from the subject options in St Mary's was announced it was met with deep disappointment, particularly for would-be applicants (and no doubt their teachers) who had been looking forward to fulfilling ambitions of studying geography as part of their BEd degree at the college. Geography had been a much sought after, indeed over-subscribed subject, requiring high A-level grades entry for admission and its loss is felt by those who worked in the department and by the many committed geography students who went on

to teach and become subject specialists co-ordinators in primary education. These graduates brought their geographical knowledge, skills and passion for the subject into primary (and many instances post-primary schools too) in the north of Ireland and much further afield. On the other hand, when set in the context of the loss of Geography within ITE provision more widely, it is perhaps the longevity of geography as a subject in St Mary's that is more remarkable (Marden, 1997). It is a truism worth repeating that little in education stands still, priorities and policies evolve, the curriculum evolves and subjects, even longstanding subjects like geography, can feel the pressure points of external change. On a positive, note the universities (and university colleges) in Northern Ireland retain their specialist status as recognised providers of initial teacher education. The same is also true in Scotland but not in England. Following changes to government policy, initial teacher education programmes in England have undergone significant change in relation to structure, content, duration and fundamentally to where that teacher education takes place. In 2018 a Geographical Association report pointed out that around half of the places for training geography teachers in England now reside outside of the control of the universities in what is termed 'school-led' settings. This has led to considerable debate regarding the nature and quality of provision, where the 'subject' element has not only been lost, but a concomitant weakening of the role of universities as front line providers of high quality initial teacher education has also taken place (GA, 2018).

With regard to the future of primary teacher education provision in St Mary's University College, Belfast the loss of academic geography represents a new challenge, particularly with when it comes to ensuring that a new generation of trainee teachers (who won't have had the benefit of academic engagement with geography to degree level) can be inspired to become torch-bearers for the subject in primary schools. Professional bodies like the Geographical Association have long supported the view that good geographical subject knowledge is a prerequisite for good teaching; Shulman's theoretical contributions (1986) regarding the importance of subject matter *for teaching* and what he termed content pedagogical knowledge has underpinned and validated the role of academic subject provision within teacher education (Shulman, 1986). The BEd degree in St Mary's continues to reflect this philosophy. Unfortunately with the academic study of geography now removed from the BEd programme and unlikely to return, this does raise questions regarding the potential longer term implications for geography especially in the primary school. Claire Brooks (2006), drawing on the work of Gudmundsdottir (1990) and Korthagen (2004) has shown how teachers' values are strongly influenced by their subject knowledge. This affects not only how they teach but influences, at a much deeper level, something akin to a 'mission' close to the core of their being which drives their values, perspectives and ultimately their work in the classroom (Brooks, 2006). Seen in this light, what might the loss of geography as a subject in the BEd programme in St Mary's represent to the primary (and post-primary) schools whom it serves? Looked at from a slightly different angle, what are the potential implications for the subject when teachers don't necessarily have the values around 'geography' derived from strong subject knowledge, competence and identity?

All graduate primary teachers in Northern Ireland are required to teach geography which is a statutory part of the curriculum and geographical education continues as an integral part of the college's WAU Curriculum Studies programme. These

courses are intended to prepare students from other subject backgrounds to teach geography in the primary school and have a strong emphasis on enquiry-based, constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. There is no doubt that many of these students make good teachers of geography / WAU however, they tend to be driven by a passion and enthusiasm derived from their own subject specialism. Recent work by Harte and Reitano confirms my own observations of working for over two decades in initial teacher education, that negative experiences of a subject (like geography) can have an adverse impact on pre-service teachers' confidence when it comes to delivering that subject in the primary classroom (Harte, Reitano, 2015, p. 225). On the other hand, research supports the view that disciplinary expertise in geography does not necessarily confer advantage in relation to teaching. Repeated calls have been made for more attention to be given within ITE programmes to student teachers' personal, everyday geographies as a source from which to build 'better' conceptual subject knowledge, expertise and confidence (Martin, 2008). Research undertaken by Dolan et al suggests that student teachers' capacity to teach geography effectively isn't necessarily determined by prior levels of qualification in the subject, suggesting instead that possessing 'sufficient' knowledge with which to begin developing pedagogical content knowledge is enough (Dolan, Waldron, Pike, Greenwood, 2014, p. 316). Thus, the most recent research appears to be suggesting that of equal or perhaps greater value, especially for those student teachers who feel they don't have a strong geographical knowledge base, is to help them unpack conceptualisations of geography associated with prior experiences – positive and negative – which can help prompt insight for personal and professional development. All students – including student teachers – are geographers because they all live in the world, interacting with a variety of landscapes on a daily basis" (Dolan, Waldron, Pike, Greenwood, 2014, p. 316). Thus, tapping into the students' personal geographies and ethnographies has the potential to nurture the personal and professional competence and qualities so necessary for leading and inspiring good geography teaching and learning in primary schools. Clearly in the absence of subject advocates for geography a new responsibility devolves upon teacher educators to support non-geography specialists on an emotional as well as a cognitive journey helping them to become the committed, passionate, activist, engaging and authentic WAU teachers pupils want to have teaching them (Dolan, Waldron, Pike, Greenwood, 2014). This is not to side-step the fact that creating pedagogical content knowledge will necessitate some reflection on geography per se. Indeed research points to the importance which student teachers themselves attach to having good subject knowledge, which they recognise as key to motivating children's involvement in learning (Dolan, Waldron, Pike, Greenwood, 2014). When student teachers feel confident in their subject knowledge they find it easier to communicate that understanding to the pupils. Thus for those non-geography specialists, especially those who perceive that they don't have strong subject background, an ITE programme, tailored around a constructivist, teacher-directed enquiry-based framework should enable them to develop subject confidence and competency as they become co-learners with their pupils. As Shulman himself suggests pedagogical content knowledge was for the educator to be "transformed by thinking one's way from subject matter as understood by the teacher into the minds and motivation of learners" (Shulman, 1986, p. 10). The mission of teacher education continues in St Mary's University College albeit

with the loss of one of its oldest subjects. The loss of academic geography and subject specialists from the BEd primary programme at St Mary's has been a timely reminder that the process of learning to become a good primary school teacher is a complex and multidimensional; all student teachers regardless of subject specialism and preferences are really novices on a journey (Dolan, 2016; Dolan, Waldron, Pike, Greenwood, 2014). Recent research has identified the importance that student teachers themselves attach to the subject matter they teach as well as their own evolving personal relationship with the subject. The challenge for the years ahead will be to ensure that non-subject specialist geographers can be inspired by to become passionate, engaged and inspirational torch-bearers for the subject in primary schools and that an interest in their own personal and everyday geographies can facilitate that much needed dialogue between these forms of knowledge, deepening and improving their understanding of the subject for the good of all concerned (Catling, Martin, 2011).

Looking Forward: some concluding thoughts

This short and timely review has sought to outline the significant and in the case of ITE, the far-reaching changes that taken place with regard to geographical education in Northern Ireland since 2004. The geographical tradition remains strong in the Northern Ireland school sector, especially in the primary school. Primary geography has weathered the storm of curriculum reform and pedagogical change relatively intact. Primary pupils have lent their voice of support with regard to the value and relevance of geography in their learning and lives. Primary practitioners, the research suggests, have embraced curriculum innovation and report high levels of perceived confidence and competency when delivering geography through the World Around Us. Thus, contemporary primary geography is maintaining and perhaps even enhancing its place in an integrated, skills-led curriculum. Recommendations arising out of the recent Education and Training Inspectorate WAU report bodes well for the future of geography; its emphasis on local, outdoor and experiential learning that connects pupils' lived experiences with the wider world will surely resonate well with primary subject co-ordinators. Post-primary geography, on the other hand, has been through very challenging times, with the number of post-primary students choosing to study geography at GCSE and A-Level having declined. To a large extent, increased subject and study options at post Key Stage 3 has dissuaded some students away from geography. Post-primary geography departments recognise the highly competitive environment in which they operate. They also recognise that the future of geography requires a strong commitment to communicating the subject's enormous potential, capturing the hearts and firing the imaginations of students. In this respect, the recent experience of post-primary geography revival in Great Britain bodes well. Nevertheless, the factors influencing students' uptake of geography after Key Stage 3 in Northern Ireland is worthy of closer scrutiny. Without a vibrant post-primary sector it is difficult, in the longer term, to imagine a secure home for geography within the universities. The loss of academic geography as a subject option from the Liberal Arts degree programme at St Mary's should not go unheeded. However, to date applicant numbers to undergraduate geography programmes in

Northern Ireland do not appear to be a cause for concern. Indeed, the confidence shown by the Russell Group in endorsing geography as a facilitating subject might offer some level of reassurance regarding the subject's position at third level. Since the Hourihane and Keane report of 2004, it has been the four year BEd programmes in the initial teacher education colleges that have weathered the greatest storm. The loss of academic geography from the BEd primary and post-primary teacher education programmes had certainly not been anticipated in 2004. Looking ahead, the imperative for St Mary's University College, Belfast and the Catholic school sector which it serves will be to augment geographical education provision within its pedagogical-based Curriculum Studies courses. The extent to which pedagogical preparation courses can become the catalyst for firing the passion and commitment needed to maintain geography's presently robust position in the primary school remains to be seen. Research in this paper offers encouragement regarding the efficacy of tapping into student teachers' personal and ethno-geographies to create powerful geography. With the last graduating class of BEd geography primary (subject specialist) teachers having just left St Mary's University College, Belfast in 2018, a new geographical journey and mission has commenced. Its history awaits another timely journal review in the years ahead.

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